

CAPTION TO GO
HERE: This is
someone, but we
are not sure who at
this point

CHAIN GANG

FORGET SKIING AND SNOWBOARDING. WITH B.C. NOW ACHIEVING CULT STATUS AMONG FAT-TIRE TRICKSTERS, A GROWING NUMBER OF RESORT COMMUNITIES HAVE TWIGGED THAT THE NEXT BIG TOURIST CASH COW IS IN MOUNTAIN BIKING

> by **Andrew Findlay** > photography by **Patrice Halley**



CAPTION TO GO HERE: The float plane is at Tyax Lodge and then some of the other stuff and more info to come. And to take up about this much room so it looks good

I'm peering over my handlebars down the precipitous southwest flank of Idaho Peak at one of B.C.'s raw resources. Wind ripples the surface of Slocan Lake far below, and the granite ramparts of the Valhalla Range beyond form spiky silhouettes in the late afternoon sun. I ponder the steep, twisting descent of Wakefield Trail that lies ahead. It's as though somebody had demarcated the trail by simply painting an arbitrary line on a map irrespective of the mountain's topography. Just the thought of falling off the edge of this skinny strip of dirt is enough to make the palms clammy.

The raw resource I'm talking about isn't the type we dig from the ground, or the sort we harvest into logs for the lumber mill. Rather, it's the kind on which we pedal our bikes, scare ourselves silly like over-sized children, and get our hearts pumping like James Brown midway through an extended version of "Sex Machine." It's the natural, rugged terrain essential for mountain biking, and B.C., with its diverse topography and dedicated riding community that has turned trail-building into an art, is a veritable goldmine of opportunities for this adventure sport. Though mountain biking wasn't invented in B.C. – its roots can be traced back to the late 1970s and early '80s in Marin County, California – it's safe to say that the sport shed its pimply adolescent face and truly came of age here in its various incarnations of cross country, lift-accessed downhill and free-riding.

"North Shore" is no longer simply the name of a Vancouver suburb; the term has evolved into an adjective employed by magazines from around the globe to describe a trickster's style of mountain biking that involves steep descents loaded with man-made structures – a genre of riding that was pioneered on the slopes of Cypress, Grouse and Seymour. Now that B.C. has a well-established cachet and credentials in the global mountain-biking community, its aficionados here at home want a little more respect from the powers that be. And it seems, with the provincial government developing new policy around riding and building trails on Crown land, mountain bikers may indeed be close to truly shedding their status as the unwanted stepchild, an afterthought to the ski industry.

So last summer, when I received the invite from Mike Brcic, owner of Fernie-based Sacred Rides Mountain Bike Holidays Ltd., to join him and a handful of other riders on a 12-day odyssey across the province, it took me all of about two seconds to reply. Somehow I would find a way to pencil this adventure into my day planner. Up until now, my idea of a mountain-bike road trip invariably involved sleeping in vans, usually with other sweaty males, and surviving on rations of canned beans and cheap beer. Brcic's trip was to be a prototype of a tour he planned to offer his clients: hard riding by day, fine dining and luxury accommodation by night. It was

adrenaline-charged pursuit and meet some of the players who are working hard to carve out a more prominent niche for mountain biking in the province's tourism spectrum.

Day six of the tour had brought us here to the Wakefield Trail in the heart of the Kootenays – an old miner's path turned Kootenay biking classic. I was quickly realizing that Brcic knows how to have fun on a bike. Since starting Sacred Rides on a shoestring back in 1997, the 36-year-old entrepreneur has expanded his repertoire of tours beyond B.C. to include exotic forays into Chile and Peru. However, Brcic is inevitably drawn back to the mountain-biking nirvana of B.C., and the fact he's offering such a posh mountain-biking experience suggests the sport's disciples have pedalled a long way in terms of buying power. (One of these 12-day luxury tours would set you back \$7K.) Yet Brcic and others involved in selling mountain biking believe the province could do a lot more to capitalize on its off-road riding resources.

"Mountain biking has now been around for over 30 years, and the people who got into it 20 years ago when it started becoming popular are now in their prime money-earning years, and they love to

also an opportunity to take the pulse of this exciting,

travel. The demographic is changing, even in the free-ride world. It's not uncommon to see dads on the lift at the local free-ride park these days," Brcic says. (Free riding refers to TK). "I think the government could start by recognizing mountain-bike tourism as an important and growing segment of the tourism market in its own right, much like golf or skiing."

Martin Littlejohn is a founding director of the Mountain Bike Tourism Association, which was launched in 2002, and he agrees wholeheartedly with Brcic.

"There's a need for a more coordinated approach to mountain biking. B.C. represents so much potential for mountain biking, but I don't think we've done a great job of capitalizing on that potential," says Vancouver-based Littlejohn, a biking fanatic who has worked for Thomas Cooke Travel, among other tour operators, in the past.

Clearly, the sector has economic clout. Ski resort bike parks, races such as Squamish's Test of Metal or the multi-day TransRockies stage race, festivals such as Whistler's Crankworx and bike tour companies together pump millions of tourist dollars into local economies. Although nobody has done an in-depth analysis of how much mountain-bike tourism is worth province wide, a study focusing on the Sea-to-Sky corridor suggests the impact is considerable. The study, by TK, found that in 2006 alone, North Shore-, Squamish-



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and Whistler-area trails generated \$10.3 million in spending from non-local riders between June 4 and September 17 (and that doesn't include Whistler's cash cow of a bike park). Part of the difficulty in quantifying economic impact elsewhere is the illegitimacy of trails and the informal, anarchic nature of the mountain-biking community – qualities that make the sport so endearing. Most trails are constructed and maintained on Crown land by renegade volunteer biking enthusiasts. So even though locals regularly ride these trails, some of which have even become marquee destination rides for out-of-towners, they lack legitimacy and therefore raise questions of risk management, liability, access and responsibility for maintenance. The result: communities are unable to mount an effective marketing campaign around what are essentially unauthorized, de facto illegal trails.

Surprisingly, Littlejohn says, the United Kingdom is leading the way in developing fat-tire tourism. The Forestry Commission of Great Britain has established a series of popular mountain-biking centres around the country. In southern Scotland, the commission created seven mountain-biking centres dubbed the "7stanes," each with a network of trails as well as shops, cafés and other services near the trailhead. The commission confidently boasts on its website that it manages "some of the world's best mountain biking, guaranteed, with great local accommodation, food and fine local ales making visiting the 7stanes a must."

That's the kind of government support for mountain-biking infrastructure that makes Littlejohn salivate.

"The U.K. has put public money into developing these centres, and they attract thousands of riders every weekend. That translates into a very positive economic impact on nearby communities," Littlejohn says.

In comparison, considering the high profile B.C.'s mountain biking terrain enjoys around the world, bureaucrats and politicians have been slow to saddle up and embrace the sport. Trails on Crown land have typically been regarded more as a nuisance than anything else; however, that dated ethos is changing. The Ministry of Tourism, Sports and the Arts is developing a draft policy, known by the rather unspectacular title of Authorizing Recreational Mountain Bike Trails on Crown Land, to legitimize trails on public land and establish protocols around risk management, user conflict, trail standards, maintenance and future trail construction.

"This policy is a response to the proliferation of trails on Crown land. It's a recognition by government that mountain biking is a legitimate sport that has a significant economic impact and that risk is part of the sport. However, we're about 10 years behind the development of the sport," admits John Hawkings, trails manager for the tourism, sports and arts ministry, speaking to *BCBusiness* over the phone from his office in Squamish.

In the fall of 2006, the ministry chose eight pilot communities with burgeoning mountain-biking scenes – Squamish, Chilliwack, Burns Lake, Terrace, Nelson, Invermere, Kamloops and Williams Lake – to road test the policy.

The goal is to sign trail-management agreements with local bike clubs and work with the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) to train club members in the fine arts of trail building and maintenance. So far the thorny issue of liability



and insurance has stalled the launching of community pilot projects, the question being, who foots the bill if a lawsuit arises from a serious injury on a sanctioned trail? To this end, government has agreed to insure local clubs for up to \$2 million in liability specifically for trails lacking man-made structures and tricks. For the more North Shore-esque trails with a higher risk-to-adrenaline ratio, clubs will be on the hook for insurance, which government is aiming to keep

at an affordable \$13 per member per year.

"We're hoping to see the first management agreements signed this summer. Sure, some clubs are skeptical, but I think there will be opportunities coming out of this process to build tourism capacity around mountain biking," Hawking says, "Communities like Burns Lake are looking seriously at diversifying their economies with mountain biking."

This is a positive step forward, and a long time coming, says the Mountain Bike Tourism Association's Martin Littlejohn.

Currently, on this late fall afternoon, the Wakefield Trail and its vertigo-inducing situation in the sky above Slocan Lake has my undivided attention. Indian paintbrush flowers still blossom in the sub-alpine meadows, but it's hard to concentrate on anything but the narrow strip of dirt adhered improbably to the mountain in front of me. With a yawning void to my right, I fight the urge to hug the hillside. The trail passes by an abandoned mine shaft where narrow-gauge steel rails jut

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from the mountainside and dangle in mid-air. Soon I roll into a dizzying series of steep technical switchbacks, surrendering to the flow of the trail. I pause to rest my forearms and, like a kid absurdly dabbing his tongue on a frozen metal gate, reach down to take the temperature of my front disc. It almost sizzles to the touch. After what feels like an endless descent, the trail finally ejects me out onto a logging road and the late afternoon shade of the valley bottom. The air is brisk as I wheel with Brcic and the rest of our group into the sleepy town of Silverton.

Entrepreneurs and community groups haven't waited for government to catch up to the mountain-bike pack. One of the stops on Brcic's tour is Baldface Lodge in the southern Selkirks, where we meet general manager Steve Fisher, a laid-back guy fluent in outdoor dude-speak. Guided summertime mountain biking is a natural progression for Snowcat-skiing operations like this that traditionally haven't generated more than a few dimes of revenue from their expensive capital investments during the snow-less months – a light bulb that went on in the ski-resort industry prompting the birth of lift-accessed mountain biking more than 10 years ago. Now six B.C. ski resorts have summertime biking. The pioneer, Whistler, has seen 400-per-cent growth in ridership over the past five years, to TK today. Fisher would like to see some of those riders, who would rather go downhill than pedal uphill, spend money at Baldface Lodge.

"We're really just starting to see the potential of mountain biking," Fisher tells me, explaining how the company has invested close to \$50,000 in trail building on its high-alpine recreational tenure, with more to come. "Mountain biking has been exploding to the point where the market has enough people with money to make this sort of thing possible."

Baldface's formula is simple, says Fisher: guided riding down technical, free-ride trails in a spectacular alpine setting, with shuttles back to the top of the trail, then finishing the day with a sauna and some recuperation in A-list lodgings. Waking to a September snowfall, we explore freshly built, steep and challenging trails with names like Cherry Tops and Swamp Donkey that Fisher hopes will transform this snowcat-skiing operation into a summer free-riding destination.

Retallack Resort and Alpine Adventures, another snowcat-skiing outfit in the Selkirk Range between Kaslo and New Denver, is drafting behind Baldface's mountain-bike lead. The outfit recently obtained a summer recreational tenure from the B.C. government, enabling it to also add mountain biking to its future product line.

"We know we have great potential here.

We have a 9,000-acre tenure, and there are ridge-top trails that exist already. We're definitely aiming at guided mountain biking," says Halifax native and Retallack's managing director Chris McNamara, who, with partners, bought the operation last year from a cast of Kootenay shareholders.

No legendary mountain-biking road trip would be complete without a stop in Rossland to ride the Seven Summits Trail, named the 2007 trail of the year by Bike Magazine and honoured with IMBA's coveted "epic ride" status. The trail is a masochistic cross-country rider's dream come true that takes anywhere from five to eight hours to complete. Strange as it sounds, it is also a model of what can be done by a small town to generate tourism dollars. It took a massive fundraising and community effort to turn this 30-kilometre dream into a reality says Kim Deane, a director with the Kootenay Columbia Trails Society (KCTS). So far KCTS has spent \$110,000 on the trail, 50 per cent of which came from the federal Softwood Industry and Community Adjustment Initiative, with matching contributions from the Columbia Basin Trust and donations from Rossland businesses and residents.

In Salmon Arm, another stop on our tour, mountain bikers are also dreaming big. Members of the Shuswap Hut and Trail Alliance have just completed the first leg of a multi-use, non-motorized recreation route that they hope will one day trace an arduous 360-kilometre line around Shuswap Lake, complete with public and commercial accommodations along the way for the weary rider.

"A few years ago, three of us started to throw around the idea of a trail around the lake. We started having meetings over beers on the back deck," says Greg Scharf, the gregarious owner of Skookum Cycle and Ski Ltd. and a director with the hut and trail alliance. "The point is to have a legitimate recreational trail that we hope the government will see as a sustainable type of tourism development."

So far the society has raised \$30,000 from the proceeds of an auction and has an ongoing job-creation partnership with Human Resources and Social Development Canada enabling them to pay a trail-building crew. The Salmon Arm Savings and Credit Union has also jumped aboard the project, making a donation to the alliance every time a customer contributes to his or her RRSP.

On a frigid, rainy afternoon, Scharf leads us on the inaugural ride of the first leg of trail, a serpentine route that traverses the highlands above Shuswap Lake between Salmon Arm and Sicamous. That night we kick up our heels in a houseboat on Mara Lake and

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dream about the possibilities of fat-tire tourism, feasting and drinking on a floating palace that makes my house seem like a hermit's cave in comparison. The next day, we are back in the van, headed for the Quaaout Resort and Conference Centre, an opulent hotel resort owned by the Little Shuswap Indian Band. The lodge is also home to Chuck Brennan's Kamloops Bike Camp and Tours. Between rain-squalls, the hyperactive Brennan guides us around his shuttle-accessed labyrinth of trails above Little Shuswap Lake – characteristic Kamloops riding with fast, loamy trails that rip through open forest of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine.

The Resort Municipality of Whistler is definitely ahead of the pack when it comes to incorporating cycling into its future vision. Phone the town office, and chances are you can discuss disc brakes or suspension forks with whoever answers the phone. During the summer of 2006, Whistler's network of cycling trails, the annual Crankworx festival and the Whistler Blackcomb Mountain Bike Park generated \$30 million in spending. (The 2007 numbers were not available.) That same year, town officials worked closely with local businesses and the 1,100-member strong Whistler Off-Road Cycling Association to develop its recreational cycling plan, which identifies 300-plus kilometres of paved and off-road trails. Among this capillary network that spreads throughout and around Whistler Village are more than 70 named trails including: Thrill Me Kill Me, Flank Trail, A River Runs Through It and Comfortably Numb (another trail with IMBA's "epic ride" status). The thrust of the cycling plan is to coordinate future trail building and to better market the area's riding opportunities.

"We're encouraging trail building. We're in the resort business. The resort sees two million visitors per year, and we feel that mountain biking is a significant tourism product," says municipal planner Frank Savage

We're nearing the end of our journey and our last ride on the Gun Creek Trail. It's early on a Friday morning and we're sitting beneath an ominous grey sky next to Tyaughton Lake in B.C.'s South Chilcotin Mountains, roughly 1,000 kilometres as the crow flies west of Fernie, where we started our quest 11 days ago. Dale Douglas, Whistler-based pilot and former mountain-bike racer, ambles down the sprawling lawn in front of Tyax Mountain Lake Resort to greet us.

"You guys ready for this? I hope the weather co-operates," he says, unaware of the biblical deluges and snow we've already experienced on this trip.

We're what you might call "weather-hardened." After loading our bikes into Douglas's Beaver floatplane, we sit waiting for the clouds to lift like caffeine addicts hovering over an idle espresso machine. Surprisingly, the meteorological gods oblige rather quickly and blue sky punches a hole in the clouds. Eagerly, we climb inside and fasten our seatbelts. The 1960s-vintage plane sputters to life, taxis for a few minutes and then skips across the surface of Tyaughton before lifting into the air. Tyax lodge shrinks as we climb higher, following the valley of Gun Creek where I spot a mountain goat, as white as fresh-fallen snow, gracefully scaling a cliff face. Ten minutes later, we swoop down for a landing on mirror-like Spruce Lake. The South Chilcotin Mountains are yet another B.C. off-road riding hotspot: a place that Douglas and his riding buddies helped pioneer some 10 years ago when they discovered the almost endless matrix of old horse and mining trails that distinguish Chilcotin country. Since then Douglas has been offering floatplane access for mountain bikers. Last summer he partnered with TLH Heliskiing Ltd., which has been shredding powder here since 1988 and decided to start exploiting the riding resource in its backyard.

We reassemble our bikes in a grassy pasture as Douglas takes flight in his Beaver for the return trip to Tyaughton. Silence returns to the valley when the plane disappears over the shoulder of a distant mountain. For an hour we navigate slippery, technical trail along the east shoreline of Spruce Lake before emerging into a spectacular meadow. Snow falls languorously and sun shines through a keyhole in a luminescent sky. The view down the valley and beyond to the snow-dusted Coast Range is breathtaking. The track beneath our tires is smooth and quick, contouring across the meadows in graceful arcs. Tires bite into damp and tacky earth, and I feel like I'm carving giant slalom turns. The pitch suddenly becomes steeper, looping through a grove of trembling aspens whose leaves have turned autumnal golden hues. I succumb to gravity, pursuing Bric down the trail and shouting out my joy to whoever might care to listen. We stop for a break and Bric suddenly has a revelation.

"Five-Star Singletrack – that's what I'll call this trip," he says, summing up his packaging of plush lodgings, fine food and wicked riding.

Bric is just one of the entrepreneurs who sees endless opportunities in them there hills, and over the past 12 days we have thoroughly prospected B.C.'s mountain-biking raw resources.

Gun Creek Trail drops, twists and turns before me and I sense the rhythm and flow of the terrain being transmitted through rubber tires and metal frame. My bike squeaks,

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in need of a little tender loving care, as does my aching body. ■