

The big backcountry reveal

Summertime visit to Northern Escape Mountain Lodge surprises with its array of adventures

WORDS SUZANNE MORPHET

Sadly perhaps, most of us will never experience a backcountry ski lodge, even though BC has dozens of them. Most are out of sight and out of mind. And with rates for heli-skiing starting about \$1,200 a day per person, we'll happily let well-heeled Europeans carve backcountry bowls for us in winter, while the rest of us make do with a local resort for a tenth of the price.

PHOTO BY SUZANNE MORPHET.



Old Farm Garden Stone
Just south of Duncan next to the Old Farm Market
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PHOTO BY DARYL LENIUK.

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But backcountry lodges are undeniably appealing. And if you could visit one in summer for a fraction of the price, wouldn't that make you think twice?

It's almost like having your own mountain chalet, but with someone else making exquisite meals and cleaning up the dirt you track in after a day in the great outdoors.

A few backcountry lodges offer heli-hiking in summer, but one of BC's newest lodges—Northern Escape Mountain Lodge, near Terrace—is taking a new tack with a surprising assortment of activities.

Last summer I got to do a test run and was smitten with both the concept and the location.

Opened in 2020, Northern Escape is a 45-minute drive from Terrace up a rough logging road (winter visitors fly in by helicopter). While the 10 guest rooms are more functional than fabulous, the rest of the lodge is aesthetically pleasing with a wood-burning fireplace in the lounge, floor-to-ceiling windows and that most essential of lodge amenities—a large, outdoor hot tub—which, in this case, overlooks the aquamarine waters of Treston Lake. And, of course, there's a bartender who checks to see when you need a refill.

But it's the proximity of outstanding adventures that makes this place really special.

“We can access some really amazing places right from the lodge,” owner and general manager John Forrest tells us when we arrive, adding that it's a great place for people who want to try something new.

“If someone wants a seven-day steelhead fishing package, they're not coming here. But the family from Germany who

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shows up here for three days, looks at the adventures they can go on, and says, ‘Hey, I’d love to try heli-fishing, that would be fun,’ they can do it.”

I want to try mountain biking, something I’ve always found a little intimidating. But John was right when he said, “The mountain biking trails here are so easy that, literally, grandma and grandpa and the grandkids can get on a mountain bike and go for a ride.”

On high-end electric bikes, we follow a fern-lined trail through a mixed forest and come to a sandy beach that looks so tropical I can’t believe I’m in northern BC. That afternoon we launch kayaks from this tranquil spot and paddle a gentle section of the Kitsumkalum River, ending at another sandy beach, where I cool off with a swim.

The next day our adventure gets a little—no, a lot—more exciting. We’re going jet boating on the Skeena River. At first I’m skeptical as I don’t care much for noisy boats. But when I see the Skeena—it’s like a 10-lane expressway of fast flowing water—I’m glad we’re in a powerful boat to negotiate its twists and turns.

Bald eagles pick at dead salmon and black bears wander the shoreline looking for their share. Even in August, snow lingers on the surrounding mountains. When we turn up the Exchamsiks River, the mountains get bigger and the waterway narrows until we come to a logjam that even a jet boat can’t outmaneuver. But no problem—a wide sandbar is the perfect spot for a picnic and bonfire with s’mores.

BC is one of the richest mining regions in the world. But visiting a so-called mining ghost town has never appealed to me. Once again, my preconceptions are shattered when we fly by helicopter the following day to not just one, but two abandoned mines located at a deep inlet close to the southern end of the Alaskan Panhandle.



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En route, we whiz past sheer-sided mountains, skimming their craggy tops and dipping low to get a good look at the starkly barren lava bed that formed when a volcano erupted here in the 1700s, destroying two Nisga'a villages and killing 2,000 people.

A little further on, we see the rooftops of Kitsault, a short-lived, company-owned town of about 1,200 people. Our pilot sets down in the parking lot of the recreation centre and for the next couple of hours we're mesmerized by everything we see.

Kitsault was abandoned in 1983 when the price of molybdenum plummeted, but so much is still the same, you'd think people drove away yesterday. The swimming pool in the rec centre has water in it. Library shelves are stacked with books. The menu of the Town and Country Restaurant is still glued on the window (lingcod and chips are \$4.50). In the hospital's waiting room, René Lévesque glares at me from the cover of a Maclean's magazine. The headline? "Showdown in Quebec" and it's dated February 28, 1983.

Perhaps most amazing, the lights turn on and toilets flush in buildings throughout town as the current owner—an American entrepreneur—pays a small crew to keep everything working. He's hoping that one day people will live here again, perhaps to work at an LNG facility.

I'm still digesting this time capsule of a town when we leave to explore another one nearby. Anyox was a copper mine in the early 20th century and closed in 1935. A forest fire later destroyed the houses, but the crumbling industrial remains are architecturally magnificent, especially the arched concrete walls of the hydroelectric dam.

Anyox comes from the Nisga'a word anyoose, which means



"hidden waters" and refers to a small creek where the Nisga'a used to hide from warring Haida, explains our guide, Rob Bryce, who offers exclusive access to Anyox and Kitsault. "The Haida would always go in and try to find them but they couldn't," he chuckles, as we head back to the helicopter and home.

In contrast, I've found more than I was looking for on this trip. The places and experiences I've enjoyed in northern BC are truly second to none.

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