

Adventure Trip Report: Canada, September 2016

Sea Kayaking on Desolation Sound

Open Canoeing on the Bowron Lakes Circuit

Hiking on to Wedge Mountain from Whistler

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The flight was easy, direct from Gatwick to Vancouver, with Westjet, and felt like my north-south train journeys in the UK, as time spent between two times rather than places. We watched the Revenant just for kicks. We landed mid-afternoon and made baggage and customs in good time, shuttling off-airport to pick up what was meant to be a VW Jetta but somehow got upgraded to a Chevrolet V6 300S black, shiny, four-door baron-wagon that promised to guzzle but did very well considering the hammering we gave it. It had rear-wheel drive with attitude and leatherette seats built for bigger bums than us, so the driver rammed themselves between the wheel, that left-foot platform that prevents hard braking in automatics, and the highly-adjustable-but-never-comfortable seat; the passenger just got the ragdoll treatment typical of rear-wheel power-induced g-force; not bad in a straight line but corners like a prime hog on casters. We grew into it. Once we'd sorted a few of its odder behaviours we got on well. The first tentative, sensitive drive from strange place to stranger place started by trying to find the 99 from Richmond to Vancouver without knowing we were in Richmond to start with, so the courtesy map of Richmond should have worked to start with, but definitely wasn't working when we hit Vancouver.

The plan was to fly into Vancouver, landing at 14:25, grab the hired VW Jetta, then drive to Westmarine to pick up a chart for Desolation Sound, drive to MEC for bear spray, maps, gas, paddles for Bowron Lakes, then shop for food in Walmart then find Patricia Hotel in Gastown. It didn't go like that; it was Labour Day.

I'd grabbed Google destructions and saved them to Dropbox before leaving the UK, but for some reason only the first few lines of instructions saved, so we navigated blind until we got to West Broadway which is where MEC lives so we drove west along West Broadway without success then had to turn around and go back the other way which isn't as straightforward as it might seem. Eventually Ro plugged into the net and we drove half way round the city to get just up the road. MEC has parking on the roof, which we took advantage of, quickly nipping into the shop as it was only open for a short while longer. We shopped successfully; I personally bought only what I needed; then bailed to find a parking ticket on the windscreen. We then saw all the signs, dozens, that stated we needed a ticket, so it's not MEC parking, its council operated parking on the roof. Bad move MEC. We watched the parking Nazi for a short while; he was like a spider; invisible until the unsuspecting driver had ducked into the stairwell, then he pounced, took pics, plugged the data into the ticket machine and splattered the sticky packet onto the windscreen within moments; obviously well on his way to a hefty Christmas bonus. \$45! Bastard! MEC, for those who don't know, is a wallet-sucking gear-shop of the very best kind; prices are very good, the quality is generally excellent and service is usually quite knowledgeable. They still

had my details on their system after 15 years.

Vancouver is built on a grid system as are many North American towns, so navigation is, in theory, simpler than in European towns and cities, but knowledge of the quarters and road names is pretty essential. It's my experience that getting workable directions from members of the public in Canada or USA is virtually impossible. Mostly they don't know the destination but, if they do, I'm not sure what kind of quirk it is but, distance, time and recognisable features don't feature highly in their directions, scale is often absent and the expectation that you know what they're talking about is presumed, even though you've never met them before and have explained that you're not local. But hey, it might be worth a shot? No! It never is; we tried a couple, with no success. We found Patricia Hotel by following Google and using the grid.

I'd read reviews of Patricia Hotel and reports about Vancouver nightlife etc and had learned of the issue, but driving along East Hastings towards the hotel was an eye-opener. Literally hundreds of less fortunates were lying on or loitering along the street, taking advantage of the do-gooding churches and soup kitchens and, we learned later, the drug stores that dish out their substitute toxin. If you're sensitive to such things, this might be an unnerving experience. The outside of the Patricia Hotel is not shiny and bright, but then I knew that. One of my pet growls is the rates that hotels charge to let us fall over and sleep. I hate wasting money on irrelevant and unnecessary but mandatory service and facilities, and as we were passing through, a cheap, comfortable hotel with good eats nearby is the limit of our requirements. Patricia Hotel was just that. Clean enough, comfortable, with a shower that works well. It's sold as a heritage hotel, with many features as they were in 1910-15 when the hotel was created. I'd booked a slightly uncomfortably-named double queen room. The chap on reception was helpful and pleasant, and recommended Davie Street for eats, though West Hastings has many good places also. What he didn't tell us was that Davie Street is Vanc gay central, not that it matters.

After lugging our 4 huge and two small bags to our room on the 5th floor via a very small lift and an ancient baggage trolley with mobility issues, we drove 20 minutes or so to Davie Street to find dinner. We fed the parking meter and, trawling west, plumped quickly for the Vietnamese Pho Central amongst many other options. It's an excellent place offering very good, pretty authentic Pho food at very reasonable rates in a simple canteen-like restaurant. We ate deep-fried battered prawns and battered silky tofu served with sweet chilli sauce (not as good as mine) and curry soup with vermicelli noodles and chicken (bun ca ri ga), or beef. Ro's beef was apparently not good, though beef in such curries is usually the cheaper, more flavoursome and fatty cuts, which can be off-putting if you're not a fan; the tofu was very silky and my chicken noodle curry soup was delicious; the meal for two was around \$30 plus the tip (under £10 each). Pho Central has a worthy reputation. We ate pretty quickly then departed for a stroll, discovering that the mission-wagons 3-litre V6 engine was still running despite being parked and locked. That was worrying; there's a button on the fob that, if pressed twice, starts the engine, presumably so the car can be warmed up whilst still locked during the seriously-cold winter conditions they have here. But there are no keys for this car: it unlocked if you moved the fob towards it, and engine start and stop are push

button functions.

We switched the engine off and decided to grab a beer in the Fountainhead Pub. I don't have an especially sensitive gaydar and I'm not homophobic though I sensed that this place was overtly gay-quarter and I suspect the village pub. The Freddy mural, large lads holding hand and the welcoming "hello boys" from our host gave it away, but there was another indescribable atmosphere, a noticeable difference, merely that. I drank lager and theirs was very palatable, but since, technically, my mind-time was 4am, one was enough. We drove back to Patricia, parked the car under the camera and crashed after taking pics of the Vancouver night scene on timer.

Tomorrow arrived earlier than it should as it usually does and, after a shower, we breakfasted in the pub next door on reasonable coffee, cereals, toast, etc, taking advantage of pocket-sized packs of porridge oats, sugar sachets, tiny cartons of milk and marmalade to enhance our travel foods. We then trundled our huge sacks into the original historic elevator and hoiked them out at reception; the lift cable has stretched since 1920 so the step up to the floor is significant for a 96-year-old luggage trolley. We checked out with the surly young staff, packed and headed for Highway 1 to Horseshoe Bay.

The trip in short; 19 days long; fly in and shop, drive to Okeover, sea kayak for 3 days around Desolation Sound, see orca and whales, drive for 2 days to Bowron Lake Provincial Park, paddle the Bowron Lakes circuit in open boat for 6 days, see moose, elk, bears and wolves, drive to Whistler, climb Wedgemount in 2 days, see glaciers, 2 days spare or contingent, fly out.

Desolation Sound, Google was telling us, was over 5 hours away from Vancouver along a very beautiful corridor from concrete, steel and ocean-coloured glass, north along the Sunshine Coast to barely manicured Lund, land of the exceptional cinnamon bun. The 139 miles includes two ferries, the first from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale taking 45 minutes.

The BC ferry from Horseshoe Bay was slick, runs frequently and gets extra house-points for free wifi with very reasonable coffee and an opportunity to take in the change of pace and environment. Deeply-green coniferous forest coats the steep mountainsides from sea level to the nearer, lower summits like a deep-pile carpet with bright white, fresh snow on older glacial ice perched below the higher, sharp, granite summits. And the sea; our road for the following three days was calm, cool, jade green until the sky added its blue hue. Originally we'd planned to kayak from Telegraph Cove at the North end of Vancouver Island but there were no hire kayaks left at that time we'd planned to arrive, so we'd found Powell River Sea Kayak in Okeover and plumped easily for the paddle in Desolation Sound, not least for the opportunity to see orca, whales, dolphins perhaps, so I was already training my eye from the ferry. The crossing was quicker than expected and the drive from Langdale to Earls Cove for the ferry to Saltery Bay felt equally short. We had coffee-no-wifi on ferry number two as we approached the wilder country. We drove on easy roads in similar scenery towards Powell River spotting eagles and hawks soaring on tarmac-sourced thermals. We stopped in Powell River to shop for foods and lunch which was a bowl of Thai broth with noodles, fresh but lacking the lovely intensity of good Thai soup and not a cheap experience. The drive from 'town' to Okeover was against the clock as we wanted to find out if we could cadge an option to paddle out that evening rather than in the morning, We arrived at 16:56 to meet Kyle as he was shutting up shop. Our boats were already laid out and they didn't look happy. Straight away it was obvious that these were low grade hire-fleet boats and although we'd

paid more for glass boats, these were going to give us a low value experience. They were loose like a pair of fat mans pants with less connectivity than an iPhone has with a laundry basket. We politely moaned and explored alternatives. They had so many, but not performance boats. This was heavy duty hire for happy tourism and I wasn't feeling the love. I'd half expected this. When an operator's web site doesn't boast about its boats they're not likely to be great. However, they sorted some slim-fit kayaks by the morning so I'd be loved-up later.

After Kyle and the kayaks we headed to pre-booked hotel-heaven in Lund, checking our huge Ortlieb roll-tops into our second double queen room. I'd booked us into the Historic Lund Hotel which is sold as a high-level hotel but is a wooden motel-style basic and comfortable hotel offering a limited menu; we had a couple of beers with fish and chips, in which the beer-battered fish lived up to its tag as the finest around. The pre-cooked, re-cooked, warmed chips weren't a happy experience. It's September 6th and the season for tourists in this fine part of the world is almost over. The ferries cut their schedule and the people don't come; so we're not queuing for the pool table. During the second game, Tabasco was spotted in the bar with the realisation that we had none and a trip to the Lund General Store, part of the hotel, for final bits didn't help as they know how to price to take advantage of needy tourists so we stuck to essentials. We spent the remainder of the evening packing small drybags for the three days ahead, planning to see if breakfast was available in Lund earlier than the hotels 8am sitting so we could reach Okeover before they opened at 8am. I probably slept at some point.

The Lund Bakery opens early so we were ordering breakfast at 7. 30ish and ogling the famous cinnamon buns and breads. I'd FB'd from home asking about provisions and they'd let me know they had sourdough bread. But not on this morning, but they did have other loaves that would withstand impact. We left with buns and bread after breakfast and reached Kyle in Okeover later than intended (Iti). Kyle had sorted better boats and paddles and they were an immense improvement. We emptied the wagon and packed the boats on the beach. Room for kit was ample. These boats had rectangular hatches with neoprene hatch covers bungeed down with glass fibre hard covers. This arrangement has the advantage that large drybags will slide easily into the hull. These had two large compartments, no day hatch; as I normally place the denser items close to the bulkhead at the front of my rear hatch in my boat, doing so in this one meant less of a stern tilt so as I loaded my bow hatch I inadvertently trimmed bow-heavy. I was to discover that my boat edged strongly and was a pig when bow-heavy; paddling after the wind was heavy going requiring stroke-by-stroke adjustments.

After checking latest weather forecasts we paddled off around 11 something (Iti) but fully aware of our options to camp at two or three locations prior to our intended destination if we felt the urge to do so on that first day. We paddled faster than expected with the benefit of a knot of tide draining from Okeover Inlet.

The tidal range between Vancouver Island and the mainland is small, and we were almost on neaps so max range was 2.4m. Desolation Sound floods from the north and ebbs to the north but 10 miles south at Lund the flood comes also from the south, so the tide has similar patterns to those at Menai, and Barrow with high water after slack water though in this case considerably more gentle. Winds in Desolation Sound are generally low, either from the NE

or SW. This afternoon we were expecting SW 10-15km/h or was it mph? Canadians have mixed metric and old-measure as we did post-decimalisation, but they have stopped developing and seem uncomfortably content with their familiarity with such a confusion of measures.

Food: As we'd planned a total of 11 days in wilderness, we'd bought 11 main meals and 4 breakfasts for each of us in dried food pouches (Trek and Eat) from the UK, as the cost benefit paid for an extra bag of luggage. We'd intended to use fresh foods for the first few days then move onto dried later but I have to say, after the experience, that I'd not feed the dried food to a hungry urchin. Back in the 70s the then state-of-the-art dried meals by Vesta were pretty poor but I'd imagined that modern technology and 40 years of culinary evolution would have developed the quality of these freeze dried foods but, sadly, I was wrong. My first trial was a pasta primavera which needed 450mls of boiling water then a 12 minute soak, though I learned that a lot of stirring is also required to mix water and food in appropriate concentrations; mine was pasty and crunchy, tasting of little specific but slightly overly seasoned. As I'd judged that pasta primavera is the equivalent of leftovers in a restaurant, I was not too disheartened especially as my human error was partly to blame for the poor experience.

Chicken masala was the next one we tried whilst on the Bowron Lakes circuit, and it was not as poor but neither would, or could I suggest that it was good. I remember eating hospital food in 1985 and feeling the need to check myself out promptly and the texture reminded me of that experience, and I'm afraid the opportunity to spice up the culinary compromise had been substituted, by the manufacturer, for even more compromise, resulting in a highly seasoned, slightly mysteriously, vaguely-spiced concoction of varying textures; none pleasantly surprising. Next, at Wedgemount Lake hut at the end of a tiring trail-climb rising to 6200ft and falling to minus 6°C was Mediterranean fish stew which I'd chosen as it sounded promising. It wasn't. I was famished but I couldn't get the stuff to chew properly. I felt like a hamster packing the chewed residue into my cheeks as it wasn't swallowing material. The texture was dry, and the juice just not pleasant enough. The fish pieces tasted and felt similar to freezer-burned haddock that I'd once consumed thinking that, as I'd thawed it I might as well eat it, and regretting the experience, but not as greatly as at Wedgemount Lake. I ate a chewy valley bar instead and left the fish stew for the resident mouse that also turned it down (though, to be fair, he/she was spoiled rotten and very able to feed him/herself). The following morning we ate the Muesli; again a poor experience though, to be honest, I've never understood muesli. Ro said it was good, so perhaps it was, as muesli goes. If that's all that can be managed with those ingredients there's something seriously lacking in the cooks repertoire. We tried not to eat dried food for the majority of the trip, and it's back home now, for sale if anyone wants it, cheap!

Route through Desolation Sound: Our planned and very flexible route was this:

Day 1; Okeover Inlet to Sarah Point, west edge of Kinghorn Island to Squirrel Cove on Cortes Island, east to Hope Point on West Redonda Island, follow the coast to Martin Island, camp;

Day 2: Martin Island east to Mink Island, random exploration in the northeast of

Desolation Sound Marine Park, return to the Curme Islands east of Mink Island, camp;

Day 3: Curme Island south to Portage Cove, west to Zephine Head at the mouth of Okeover Inlet, south and a little east down the inlet back to Okeover by 4pm.

On day one we paddled the intended route in light rain and had progressed faster than anticipated so we reached Myrmidon Point where Okeover Inlet widens in good time and crossed directly to Kinghorn Island where we watched a sea-eagle fishing and shared 20 minutes as it sat in a tree above us. Purple starfish limbered around the limited shallows moving over the rock wall, most submerged, some climbing semi-submerged, tangled with the odd pink starfish, 20-25cm in diameter, the bigger ones seeming to dominate the smaller. Intense colour dominates this environment. A few minutes after leaving the eagle alone, we rounded into a bay to find cormorants clinging to the close-to-vertical rock just a few metres above the water. Not being respectful, we got too close, petrified the poor little creatures that regurgitated semi-digested fishy items and flew away.

As we left Kinghorn Island for Squirrel Cove the slight wind died, the rain picked up and we spotted our first porpoise/dolphin which caused us to sit still and watch for more. During the 20 minutes or so that we sat there facing west, the rain ceased then restarted producing millions of uniform bubbles all around us for perhaps 5 minutes, then the particular size and pitch of the rain drops changed and in a short, saddening moment popped the lot, leaving the surface as though they'd never really been there. The remainder of the crossing was a hopeful but unsatisfied porpoise/dolphin-spotting paddle with little other especial interest. Boat-planes growled in the mouths of an inlet on Redonda Island to the north and passed overhead after dropping their passengers, picking up mail, and doing what other tasks they do to maintain communication with the tarmac network. This stimulated thoughts of using them to carry boats for us to more remote locations, later to be enriched with details of the Central Pacific Coast wilderness paddled less often. Motorboat traffic all but disappears in the evening leaving us to paddle with the rains drops and drips and splash, swish, splosh, plonk of lazy blades.

We neared Squirrel Cove stopping on the southern headland at the mouth of the cove perhaps 1km short of the township; oysters covered the shallows although the area has pollution-induced infection of shellfish so harvesting is ill-advised. Now late afternoon, we brewed tea and ate a late lunch of cheese, ham and crackers with chocolate and Chewy Valley bars. Intending to camp on the Martin Islands several kilometres to the east, we set out into a slight headwind rising towards 12 knots, intensifying our focus on paddling and causing us to change from the direct line to a more northerly line to gain the slight lea shelter of the headland, Hope Point, to the northwest of Martin Island, reaching the relative shelter an hour or two before sundown. The wind rattled through the sound between Martin Island and the larger West Redonda Island as we aimed for what is marked on the chart as a gap between two islands. The campsite on Martin Island is well used, as testified by the level of erosion, local damage and a treeful of whittled paddles, though we were uninterrupted. The camp site is located on the lowland neck between the two rocky, forested hummocks marked on the chart as two islands; it's actually just one. The ground was generally rocky, gravelly or rooty, but we found a flat, smooth location alongside a makeshift firepit. After pitching the tent (Exped Andromeda) for us and our largest tarp (DD

3x3) for paddle kit, we brewed multiple teas whilst sat on benches of flotsam planks and cooked dinner on the table made from what looked like part of a caravan or boat cabin; spaghetti and tinned tomatoes with ham or canned \$1 tuna enhanced with fresh onions, garlic and spicy long peppers, (sprinkle Parmesan, don't cook it, as it makes cleaning the pan much more arduous and requiring means beyond used teabags).

I was in bed earlier than I had been for years, ready to test my new earplugs. They worked! In the morning I woke to find Ro absent, he'd gone walkabout with the camera, and I lay contemplating my aches and the sounds of Desolation Sound. I later wandered myself, observing huge quantities of timber washed up in the south bay, not just small lumps of driftwood; some were 15-20-metre long trunks over a metre thick. The handsaws we'd brought were not going to cut it.

The hired kayaking kit was now fairly well tested and working as it should, though getting used to a 40°/-5° feather option was a little consuming as I normally adjust feather finely according to air/water disparity and use Werners which offer incremental variation. This made me wonder further about my uncomfortable reliance on rote and pattern. The boats were sound and stable so falling out was not an issue. The skirt (spraydeck) made of nylon and perhaps once waterproofed was no longer so, but with little challenging action they were ample. The weak element was the PFD which, being almost pocketless (one slim zipped pocket) meant that those essential bits n pieces hang like baubles or clutter the deck or are just not immediately to hand, which wasn't a significant issue given the calm conditions. I wore a Silva deck compass on bungees which fits almost any outfitted deck and is a pleasantly reassuring and informative nav tool even in the high visibility conditions of Desolation Sound. The full hire outfit included kayak (2 hatches, foot pegs, no seat per se just a pad with a tensioned-belt back support which grabbed the kidneys hard, basic nylon skirt, PFD, blades and spares, both low action, spined, plastic blades on fibreglass straight shafts, a pipe pump, a 5m throwline and a mahoosive solid foam paddle float. I added my own long tow and a short tow/tether, knife, slate and sharpie. Other items could be hired such as charts and cases, compasses, etc, but we had everything we needed.

In addition to food, we carried a water bag (Ortlieb 10l?), a variety of smaller water bottles and pouches, and a commercial 4l plastic bottle of water. There's little or no fresh water in Desolation Sound so BYO is mandatory. We planned to use around 5l per night between the two of us plus daytime tea and sips. We judged about right, except for the final energetic afternoon when we could have done with another litre or two.

We were cooking by gas, carrying a single 450g propane/butane mix for my trusty MSR Windpro original. I'd gutted a small Trangia so we had two small pans and a lid/frypan/chopping board. The stove fits inside the Trangia along with two stainless sporks, the panhandle, a tiny tin-opener, a bagged permanently spare lighter, the stove's windshield and foil reflector, a brew kit (6 tea bags n 12 sugar cubes) and a sawn-off spatula. We bunged a long and wide roll of foil in just in case we caught a fish, though fires, for pleasure or cooking, are not permitted on the official campsites in Desolation Sound and that's a good thing.

The following morning, Thursday, was chilly until the sun arrived and the sea state calm, as predicted, with just a few knots of breeze from the south west. We breakfasted on remaining tinned tomatoes on thickly buttered bread and tea and, after striking camp with little elegance, we picked the route we judged with greatest potential for orca-spotting; just

east of magnetic north (magnetic is around 17° east of grid) paddling with a slight breeze over the deepest water towards Homfray Channel, stopping for lunch on the south-western promontory of Melville Island, snacking on sweet oysters (probably a touch naughty but harvesting regs are confusing unless you invest the time to identify which apply and where) while imagining we were being watched by the park ranger whose battleship-grey aluminium boat had been planing up and down the channel in our vicinity. Lunch on most days was tea, crackers and cheese, ham, salami, olives and chocolate or sweet and salty peanut snack bars by Chewy Valley (? best of their range by a long way but I've not seen them in the UK).

After lunch we paddled around the back of Melville, cutting south between Melville and Mary Island, then between Morgan to the west and Eveleigh to the east, turning south east along the mainland into the narrow channel behind Otter Island. These islands are uninhabited and unspoilt, with huge cushions of lichens along the rocky shoreline giving testament to the clean environment. The water is pretty clear but deep and dark in the narrows. We popped through a narrow channel and faced south west towards the Curme Islands where we planned to stay that night. Each island has multiple tent pads though the middle island, East Curmes, also has an outhouse which I planned to take advantage of.

We ended our second days paddle in a timber-lined bay on the southeast side of the East Curme Island which, unfortunately for me, becomes two islands at high tide, with the privy and another group of temporary occupants on the other one. There were also occupants on South Curme and, with no wind, their voices carried easily over the 300 metres between us. Our chosen tent platform was raised by 7m above the bay with a superb view east across the Sound offering excellent orca-spotting and sunrise potential. The camping platforms are provided by BC Parks and are robust wooden-planked square or rectangular constructions that were always too small for my palace of a tent, so creative pitching is required, in this case threading a 2m log through the home-end peg-loops and dangling it over the corner on the diagonal served as the anchor against which the away-end guys could pull when similarly threaded. It's amazing what can be achieved with a bit of tension between two opposing ends. Job done; usually four pegs hold the tent sturdily in all but a storm.

BC Park Authority looks after their customers on a scale that puts our similar domestic services to shame. Things like tent pads and platforms, outhouses, fire pits, catering tables cut from the forest are provided in this and other busy wilderness parks. They are well built but also placed in the most spectacular locations rather than hidden away. Outhouses are sturdy and generally quite clean. Tent pads are prepared with fire pit, picnic bench and relative privacy. There's a \$10 per night per person charge (£5.88) for camping in the park which, given the popularity of Desolation Sound, would probably go a long way towards the cost of creating and managing these campsites.

Dinner was spaghetti with tuna, black olives and tomatoes and at this stage in our adventure journey we still had fresh onion, hot peppers, excellent garlic and a spice, condiment and stock bag to get creative with.

I wandered around the island whilst Ro cooked, contemplated whether I wanted to use the outhouse and taking pics of flora and fauna and as I did so, managed to either walk through a toxic shrub or upset a bug family who took advantage and left me with severely unpleasant bites/punctures, around my ankles and a rash on my legs that demanded scratching. The bites/punctures later developed into yellow-headed blisters around my

ankles. We watched a family of five mergansers methodically scour the bay under our tent looking intently focused on predation; the fish must've been worried. Small birds twittered in the trees but remained invisible. We spotted a raptor passing overhead, landing in close trees to the north west and managed to get a pic but it was too blurred to identify when magnified. The night was quiet with few cicadas or other callers.

With no artificial light and the half moon, the starscape was stunning and got better as the moon shifted towards its set. The Plough is the same as ours, but much larger and Orion seems similarly oversized. As the sky darkens the brighter constellations mingle with the lesser, becoming less distinct amongst the silver dust. We took pics on timers, high ISO and wide open apertures, focusing on infinity. We noted that the moon would be full on the last night of our open boat paddle on the Bowron Lakes circuit the next week.

Sleep during camps on hard platforms or rocky tent pads only comes with well-deflated mats and pillows, a knack that failed me periodically, so waking rigid-backed with aching shoulders was normalish. Before attempting sleep we'd play whist or shithead whilst propped on fully inflated inflatables then deflate to comfortable floppiness or otherwise prior to sleeping. Ro, my paddle buddy, uses an e-book (Pride and Prejudice perhaps?) seemingly on Chapter 22 every evening bar the last, to lull himself into a cacophonous slumber. I used earplugs for the first time. They worked; I slept mostly. Mostly but not always. Ro has perfected snoring to great effect and I do worry about the influence on any neighbouring sleepers, mainly 'cause I have time to! I think it might have been this night that Roland prodded me to tell me, apparently courteously, that I was snoring; I may have been, I do, but I hope I got the point across in explaining the hypocrisy of even polite challenge in such an unfairly balanced arena. I doubted we'd be approached during sleeping hours by bears. A chainsaw would win, just, on sheer volume, but not against such variable and creative pitch. The 7am loco whistling through Squamish later in the month was no competition.

The promise of sunrise from our platform on Curme was realised after an hour or so of waiting in chilly dawn air punctuated with tea. A beautiful cold sun arrived way after the light with little colour and intense clarity, vaporising thin mountain-mist and strands of cloud cover in short time. Cameras used and packed, we breakfasted on expensive but pleasant granola purchased along with tart plums and blueberries from Sunshine Coast Aquaponics, a hydro culture farm on the road from Saltery Bay to Powell River, with still-fresh milk and more tea. Milk is essential for tea. And fresh milk scores highly but requires thought to keep for any descent time. We'd packed half in a thermos after de-bugging with boiling water in the Lund Hotel room, and the other was packed in my new Summit litre water bottle, also similarly debugged. Which would be better? There are few substances more likely to induce binning of kit than rotten milk, so leakage potential is also worthy of much consideration. The thermos leaked later, as never before, but then never again; perhaps it needs new rubber seals. The offended kit was our dry suits, so no likelihood of binning and I think Ro got to them early enough to prevent major and irreversible contamination. We packed a little more elegantly and humped the drybags to the kayaks around the bay, launching around 10.15 (lti).

Being our last day on Desolation Sound we were time-restricted having agreed to return the

hired boats by 4pm. We planned to cross east to explore Tenedos Inlet then head south west to the mouth of Okeover Sound. Watching the main channel for whales and orca, we overshot, crossing from Curmes ending up in Portage Cove encountering signs explaining that the land had been privately owned for over 100 years and we should stay away. It's a shame as the portage, 200m or so, reduces the return to Okeover and allows exploration of another inlet. Whilst Ro explored, I sat waiting, approximately half a kilometre away realising that the planned route was behind us, and not being easily able to, nor wanting to communicate any urgency to retract, I didn't signal to Ro, but instead watched the Sound for whales and orca, with hope, but no joy. I fell asleep. That's a first and uncomfortably strange experience; waking almost toppled me and left me feeling unsure, a little unsteady and unpleasantly aware that my conscious state was not that good. To fall asleep whilst sitting upright in my kayak is a clear indication that I need more sleep, though I thought I was making good progress; apparently not. I fell asleep again. Why did I do that? I started paddling and the adrenaline kicked in a little. I'd been drinking caffeinated tea and the occasional coffee, which I don't normally do; perhaps that was restricting the value of what sleep I was getting?

I reached Ro, 'fessed up and we headed northeastish into the inlet as planned. Oysters tantalisingly carpeted the few shallower areas along the otherwise steep rock shoreline on the north west side, but signs warned of dicky tummy for those who broke the rules. I wondered at the integrity of such signs. For me, the consequences are too dire to risk the pleasure, so the oysters were safe. Did they really have the lurgy? I would have lunched; indeed I collected several handfuls before Ro spotted and shared the signposted knowledge. I was more disappointed than at any other time so far on this trip. I like oysters and those I'd snacked on the previous day had been sweet and juicy and I'd not had a dicky tummy.

We lunched on a rock island with a suitable step for sitting and brewing. Tea first then crackers lumps of cheese and cured sausage, chocolate or Chewy Valley bars.

Lunchtime was also planning and reviewing time. We checked the map and realised our lazy pace and navigation had left us with quite a challenge if we were to meet our obligation to Kyle in Okeover. I like that kind of challenge. How long can we keep up a descent pace in these calm conditions? We had 20 kilometres to paddle. It was 1.30 we had agreed to be back by 4pm. Game on. 8kmph is doable. I hit a wall at around 5km, with a hot flush and crappy feeling, but that passed with a determined effort. By the time we reached Zephine Head at the mouth of Okeover Inlet it was 3:07pm. I had a few mouthfuls of water left; we shared. Ro called Kyle to let him know we might be a little late (there's a mast on Sarah Point a mile or so to the east that serves most of Desolation Sound). We still had 11.5km to go. I steamed on. It was now my mission to get back ASAP. I don't like letting people down. I went aspy for most of the way back, counting strokes, focusing intently on my reach, the blade entry, and exit point, increasing power until the ache set in, then changing muscle set, dropping my action towards the deck which only ever lasted a few minutes before I inadvertently raised the game. I made it at 4:29. Ro followed a few minutes later. On Google Earth that's 11km in approximately 70 minutes against a one-knot ebb tide. That's almost exactly 5.5 knots, plus the tide, whilst on vapour.

That level of focus is rare for me, and takes an hour, a horrible hour, to reach. During that

first hour I feel highly critical of myself, I constantly disappoint myself and feel tiredness creep into my arms and shoulders, then I start changing muscle sets, consciously easing the fatigue by de-stressing aching muscles and using fresher muscles, I slow down, then focus on shorter, more effective strokes whilst maximising torso rotation; I slip into a process that seems incredibly efficient and doesn't overly tire me. It feels strong. I can keep it up for a couple of hours but that initial crappy hour has already tired me. I feel more lengths of Windermere are on the cards.

I started unpacking my boat whilst Ro paddled up to the beach; our hulls were checked for abuse. Canadian/North American customer service is always a shallow experience. We exchanged a very few ritual words with our providers but they showed little interest in the richer experiences of our trip. Then we were "free to go". Ro backed the wagon to the beach and we chucked the kit in, eager to get to the Lund Bakery for cinnamon buns. It closed at 5pm, we made it by 5.11. They'd mopped the floor but sold Ro four blackberry cinnamon buns as long as we didn't walk on the floor. They were so, so sweet. I couldn't eat a whole one in one go. We had a beer in the Lund Hotel, raided their wifi to find a campsite, shopped for tuna and tomatoes in the Lund Village Store then drove up the hill, first right and right again into SunLund by the Sea campsite. For \$34 (£20) we got a pitch, picnic table, fire pit, showers (£3 for 6 minutes) proper khazi, and the promise of breakfast at Lund Bakery. I had a welcome but short half cool, half hot shower after dinner. Second in the queue gets a full 6 hot minutes. The rain started just as we packed away the stove and prepared to retire to the tent. The tree canopy roared 100m behind where I was sitting, and the roar approached rapidly identifying itself as the first drops landed on the stove. Large drops with big gaps; nothing to worry about. Once in the tent, we noticed a leak that I'd mended with McNett Seal stuff that needed doing properly as the drip landed just inside the inner. We played cards. The ground sheet under my mat was very wet; it lets water in under pressure. Then it became squashy; we'd parked the tent in a puddle. It would subside. We played more cards. Less than an hour later I was digging trenches around the tent trying to drain the puddle into another puddle: radial trenches from under the ground sheet to the lower ground, via the higher ground, like the Suez Canal, deep cuts that soon filled with dirt, blocked and needed reengineering. It worked, I retired, the rain subsided and I might have got some sleep.

Today, Saturday, was the sixth day of our adventure and end of part 1. We now had a 14-hour, 600+ mile drive to the Bowron Lakes Park for part 2 with two days to get there. But we're going nowhere without breakfast.

We packed and left Lund around 11 (Iti), retracing our journey to Powell River then SALTERY Bay for the first ferry to Earl's Cove which didn't leave until 3:50, several hours from our arrival. We searched for a ticket we never had, then, after clarification that we couldn't have used it even if we had it, the BC Ferries woman suggested we visit SALTERY Bay Provincial Park to while the time away - "just along the road on the left" - our first turn on the left turned into a tranquil residential cul-de-sac in which a very tolerant young deer showed little fear of our baron-wagon and let us take close pics for several minutes before being spooked by humans getting out of the wagon. Our second turn on the left led into a tranquil

campsite in mature forest with lichen beards hanging up to 40cm from the lower cedar branches. The blue jay and American Robin called and hopped just out of range of our lenses. We brewed tea.

Tea is the most important adventure resource. That's my opinion. The ingestion of a simple hot and sweet, familiar liquid doesn't make everything alright but it goes a long way down that road; the pause in unfamiliar, and exchange for routine activity, coupled with the familiarity of the tactile and positive gustatory sensations, the simple, rapid absorption of sugar and the associated uplift create the few minutes of time, change of pace and change of state needed to place recent and current experiences onto the map of the known world. Consequences and perspective regain appropriate proportions in those few minutes. My stove/cook kit always contains a small plastic bag with tea bags and sugar. On this trip I brought 40ish decaf tea bags, intending to buy another 80 before leaving the UK as good tea sources used to be spread thinly in Canada, but I had an Alzy moment and fortunately we found most Canadian supermarkets stock the Tetley Orange Pekoe or Typhoo standard. We also found Yorkshire Tea in Walmart in Quesnel (pronounced kwe nel). A typical daily intake started shortly after rising, another mug in short time, one for lunch and two or three during the evening. Each mug holds around 450mls so in a typical day we're pouring 2-3 litres of tea into our systems. Who needs water? Not being a fan of milk powder is a bummer; I rarely adventure without fresh milk. Ro has a dash of milk in strongly brewed tea; I have enough milk to prevent the sickly translucent complexion again in strongly brewed tea, so the brew routine includes the provision of service, matching the preferences of the consumer, being sensitive to each other's minor foibles. I use a dark green sawn-off plastic mug, slightly lower volume than Ro's orange plastic MEC purchase, still with wanted handle. The slight differences matter. The colour of mine hides the tardiness of a quick rinse better than the brighter, lighter orange, but the Belisha beacon is easier to locate amongst a spread of cooking, camping, paddling, photography and clothing stuff. Slight water shortages caused by lazy spillage on the way from source to stove and pan to mug create the stimuli for the classically familiar ritual step-ladder quips, as the difference in size makes the shortage more obvious in the one mug. Tea bags must be copiously squeezed. There's appalling waste of flavour otherwise. I'd invested, wisely as it turns out, in a couple of Chinese "titanium" sporks which cost £2 off eBay and stuck to my magnet. At 24g a piece, stainless and only slightly bendy, they were better value than the £8 genuine item and with just a little physical attention fitted around the inner curves of my stripped Trangia. Ro needs to know whose is whose so his had a scratchy patch and a slightly less smooth curve. The curve could have been an inconvenience but with a little technique development, the new-style teabag squashing, squeezing, draining and discarding became familiar. I like teabags. They represent a heap of my favourite principles. They are simple in function, come from and return to their environmental roots having provided an exceptional experience considering their size and relative stature and, unknown to most people, have a host of other catalytic uses. I clean plates with them; they absorb grease quite well and are very slightly astringent. I clean my hands and fingers with them; as they've been soaked in almost boiling water for a few minutes they're one of the more hygienic damp items in my camp. I wipe camp tables with them. I use them to prop up one edge of my stove to level it out, to wipe cooking residue from the inside of pans before washing, as a safe and relatively odourless ashtray (I'm a holiday smoker of rollies) and as a demarcation of functional areas

on the catering patch, e.g. between dry goods and wet area caused by spillage (the cardboard cube-sugar box and spillage don't mix well). They blend into the background and in the garbage bag absorb wet-and stickiness. After leaving my care they become hosts for positively active agents such as moulds, worms, etc. whether in landfill sites or compost heaps. Long live the tea bag.

3:25pm; time to go. We drove back to the ferry terminal, purchased the ticket for both ferries and boarded with little waiting. The scenery had changed from new and exciting to familiar with details we hadn't spotted on the way out. It was a short crossing and we were thinking about the next stage of our journey. We needed to pick up more food and supplies but we could do that in Whistler or Quesnel, but should we plan to stay in Squamish at the Adventure Inn or continue driving and find a motel or camp ground later that night? The short drive from Earl's Cove to Langdale passed with few memorable moments, and we boarded the ferry to Horseshoe Bay intent on taking advantage of their wifi to explore ahead. The coffee is still good, the wifi very slow or non-existent. We left the ferry, turned right onto Highway heading north towards Squamish. We lost the light around Squamish, but drove on, stopping for a burger in Whistler and finding the Longhorn Bar and Grill; we asked for burgers and explained that we needed them quickly; they obliged. Less than ten minutes later I had a regular burger and a glass of water, Ro had something similar with a beer. I doubt if we were there for much more than 35 minutes. In that time Ro had extracted the location of a campsite from our knowledgeable serving girl. That was probably the most expensive burger I've eaten at around £15 but it was very good. Directions gained from strangers in bars are the sort of directions that I expect not to work, but we found out pretty soon that the girl was spot on. After photos on the Olympics rings, taken by another tourist who commented that we "look famous", we drove another 50km further on the 99, aka the Sea to Sky Highway, turning off just before the road headed steeply up into the mountains. We know this because we did the first few miles after missing the recommended turn. We retreated and did 8km east on a dirt track, called the In-SHUCK-ch forest service road alongside Lillooet Lake which is nowhere near Lillooet in UK context but right next door on the Canadian scale. We arrived at the busy campsite after most campers had hit the sack, found an unoccupied pad and quickly pitched, bunged the sleeping kit in, had a pee and zipped the door. I'm not sure if we played cards, we usually did, then started the ritual preparations for sleep. Need a pee? No. Earplugs? Yes. Mat in correct position? Yes. Wriggle further into bag, wriggle further down the mat, lie back and test position of head on pillow, adjust position of me and/or pillow. Sit back up, pull cowl around shoulders lie back down, check position of pillow, adjust, pull zip further up leaving just enough gap for my arm to be free. Earplugs in, exhale deeply a few times, sleep, wake, pee, sleep wake, pee, sleep wake, tea. Occasionally an earplug would lose grip and then it was just wake, pee, tea. No drama unfolded, we struck camp earlyish (Iti) before most other campers were up. One chap had already got a sizeable fire going and seemed intent on asphyxiating himself, his hacking cough not persuading him to stay out of the path of the smoke. I wondered whether he was a first-timer but his fire-building skills denied him that title.

We left, wheel-spinning up the gravelly, eroded track from the campsite, retracing the ground we'd covered the night before, winding into the hills on Duffey Lake Road heading for Lillooet. It's an impressive landscape, steep-sided valleys partly tree-covered, partly bare with the scars of continual erosion. I noticed the difference between the north and south sides of the valley, one considerably more stable with crags, the other looking like loose chossy tilth. We drove alongside Anderson and Seton Lakes, both ice-carved ribbon lakes, originally one, but separated a long time before we arrived at Seton Portage "when the flank of the Cayoosh Range, which is the south flank of the valley, let go and slid into the middle of what had been a single lake". That's some kind of letting go. Seton Portage is over 3km long and 2km wide after ten millennia of erosion. Apparently the wave caused by the landslide washed out the glacial moraine at the eastern end bringing the level of the lake down to its current height and creating Seton Creek which drains into the Fraser River. The lake is 22km long and 450m deep. I wonder if the tilth on the opposite side of the valley was washed up there by the tsunami caused by this land slip.

The glaciated valleys through which we wound our way for the next few hundred kilometres were, at some point in the past, filled with glacial tilth through which the rivers have cut, leaving rich agricultured meadows high above the river gorge, and land-slide-carved valley sides with thin tree cover and the occasional bold crag usually steep and dangling towards the valley floor. After an hour or so we reached Lillooet on the junction of Highway 99 and Highway 12, at a point where a bridge crosses the Fraser River and Seton River. This was gold territory. Pretty much the whole valley floor for 200km upstream was deep tilth with the Fraser river 20-30 metres lower in a seemingly separate ecosystem almost free of vegetation and potentially packed with gold. I wondered about the first prospectors, discovering gold followed by their realisation of the scale of the task ahead. I've seen the size of gold flakes found in the panning process and I wonder if those hardy chaps felt positive or negatively. The Fraser River flows from its sources near Mount Robson and the Great Continental Divide to Vancouver dragging glacial silt and timber for 1375 kilometres; it's BC's longest river and Canada's tenth. Locals offer guided white water rafting trips. But there is little evidence of the importance of this river as an arterial highway through the country. We drove into town seeking breakfast. The first hotel looked open. This was Sunday so we weren't convinced that we'd find anywhere. The Reynolds Hotel has a busy restaurant run by a feisty lady taking no shit from no-one. This place was busy and she knew it. She exhibited that "I'm stressed, don't mess" message as clearly as if it were tattooed on her copper, tanned arms. We waited a few minutes then coffee arrived, followed by menus followed by our hostess. We ordered cooked breakfasts; mine was hash browns aka sautéed potatoes, two eggs sunny side up, bacon and toast. Ro ordered the same with sausages instead of the bacon and we shared. More coffee arrived soon after our mugs were empty. This is my idea of a proper breakfast.

At the time I'd made the mandatory online reservation for the Bowron Lakes circuit, the 9am briefing wasn't available so we'd had to opt for the noon briefing, meaning that we'd be losing most of a day of paddling. As we'd planned to complete the 120km route in 6 days, one of those was a substantial proportion. If we arrived before the Reception Lodge closed we could ask to join the 9am briefing. So we had 500km and shopping to fit it before 4:30pm. The drive was fast and uncomfortable, but through new and thought-provoking

territory. 75km after Lillooet at the Historic Hat Creek Ranch, we turned north onto Highway 97 aka the Cariboo Highway. Villages en route were named after their distance from somewhere further south. Whilst a passenger, I looked for the signposted wildlife spotting numerous hawks, eagles and ravens, but little else. Somewhere along the route from Lillooet to Wells I spotted a black bear no more than 30 meters from the roadside, Ro was driving, braked, reversed and the animal ran scared into the bushes; not even time for a pic. But we'd seen one. It looked just like the ones on YouTube.

Drivers in Canada are aware and courteous; significantly more so than in the UK and Europe. In our entire trip I spotted only one numpty and he was hogging the middle lane. It took most of the trip to relax into that level of security rarely found on UK roads. The road system differs from the UK system in many ways; all the signs are different and not especially intuitive or obvious in their meaning, the use of lanes and lane priority differs especially at slip roads, the speed limits are generally lower but not too dissimilar, and drivers generally stick to them. Bends on the major highways can be a lot tighter and as we were in a hurry to get to our destination, we thoroughly tested the tyre's rubber compound. We reached Quesnel where I knew of three supermarkets, but not their location. We found one on the right as the town starts, and another, Walmart next door. Stocked up with new fresh goodies we headed further into town to find the turn off for Bowron. From here on we were on smaller roads. The Bowron Lake Park was signed from the edge of town and we had just over 100km left to drive. It was going to be tight. The tarmac goes as far as Wells then the remaining 30km is on dirt roads with sign warning of elk, moose and deer, but not today. We made Bowron reception just before 5pm, bagged a 9am briefing and learned that an axe was an important bit of kit and we could hire one for under \$6. We'd forgotten extra loo roll and they had that as well. Result.

We found a camp pad, pitched, brewed, prepared dinner; I forget what it was. It might have been one of the dried food bags as we'd not yet tested them but it could have been tuna with pasta and olives. We prepped for a fire, strung up a tarp, hung up still-wet kit and started sorting the dry kit into go and stay piles. We intended to take two huge Ortlieb roll-top sacks with all our kit in, but the rules allowed only 60lbs to be carried in the canoe during portage to protect the portage tracks, so we bagged by function ready for weighing in the morning. It started to rain so we rapidly bunged the lot in the car and retired to the tent. By this stage in our trip I'd lost count of the days and didn't care what day it was. Tomorrow we started on a 6-7 day open canoe journey in wilderness territory.

We woke early and, after tea and breakfast, we packed some more in readiness for the 9am briefing by the Provincial Park staff. The process of packing actually has two components; packing and faffing, both are essential for a good result. Ro and I are fairly experienced at both components though when I'm tired I'm much better at faffing than packing. At 8:57 we realised we were going to be late so rapidly packed the bags in the car and drove the few hundred metres to the Reception Lodge. After signing disclaimers, waivers, booking forms, rental agreements, etc, we sat in an amphitheatre and watched a 20-30 minute video about the Bowron circuit, bears, garbage, route hazards, etc. it was all known stuff apart from the location of wood piles along the route. Many paddlers cook on fires, although the design of

the fire pits is not conducive without breaking the BC Park rule about 10-inch flames; we'd brought gas so a fire was a dubious luxury chill-cheater. Apparently too many big fires have been lit in the past and the air quality had become unacceptably low, so firewood is now restricted, and it's available on a first-come-first-served basis. Not much chance for us then.

After the briefing I checked the bear sightings map and packed our maps, Ro grabbed the essential axe, loo roll, paddles and buoyancy aid, etc and we retraced to the weighing area. Ro brought the wagon up next to it and we spent 40 minutes or so packing but mostly faffing. We had much more kit than anyone else seemed to have. We'd hired an Old Town 169 which we now found out was heavier than the majority of the hire boats. I admit that I hadn't asked which were lighter or faster. I'd plumped for the robust trusty, familiar Old Town. The hire paddles were either short or long and, as presumed, they had aluminium shafts with square plastic blades. We'd bought otter-tails from MEC at \$49/\$69 which I considered a small price to pay for a more enjoyable experience. The hire paddles stayed in the bottom of the boat until the shallow river Isaac. We chose a few bags that added up to 60lbs and got a laminated ticket that we had to tag on our boat; one black, one yellow, one red drybag. If we were caught on a portage with more than those 60lbs in our boat we'd get strung up and left for the bears or we'd get told off; I can't remember which.

We'd also hired a canoe cart aka portage trolley which was the maximum 30" width with relatively large pneumatic wheels. It squeaked. The Bowron circuit has over 10km of portage, and the first two were bitches. There are ten lakes on the circuit, they're all flat. But the rivers that flow between them aren't. The highest point on the route is at the NW end of Isaac Lake, that's after the third portage, and those first three were the longest and steepest on the route, so on our first and shortest day we had the three longest portage and all the ascent to do. I'm not a fan of portages, even with wheels. The remaining bags of kit that we had to shoulder definitely felt heaviest at the end of each portage, which meant that they felt increasingly heavier all the time we were pushing the boat uphill on muddy, rutted tracks. The first portage was steep initially, then it eased and then reverted to steep, regardless of the actual angle. It hurt. I wasn't ready for it. The information available on the official sources doesn't tell of this part of the challenge, though we'd read a couple of trip reports which did. But you can't judge the pain from a well written trip report. The whole idea of a trip report is to let others know of fantastic adventures that they haven't yet done. My advice to future paddlers is to bring horses.

The first day comprised of the 2.4km uphill portage from Reception to Kibbee Lake gaining 53m but it felt more like 300 with lots of extra wiggles in the track; Kibbee Lake is a quick, shallow 2.4km paddle along a beautiful tranquil lake remarkable for the apparent lack of life underwater; the second portage is 2km with 50m of ascent to Indianpoint Lake, another short paddle of 6.5km again on seemingly sterile water; the third portage is 1.6km which crosses a 30m contour at the highest point on the route but then drops to Isaac Lake. We'd planned to get the portages under our belt on the first day then measure our hourly progress ensuring that we covered the minimum 20km per day so that we completed in 6 days. We had a couple of spare days if necessary but we weren't expecting the route to be particularly demanding. We actually made it to Isaac Lake and then another 3km into Isaac

by the end of the first day, though we'd probably paddled several more kilometres in wiggles and zigzags, plus the campsite lottery at the end. As we got to the end of Indianpoint Lake a helpful chap with another party told us that this portage was only 400m with a campsite and woodpile at the end. It wasn't, but we made good time, with it not being nearly as steep as the first two portages. On reaching Isaac Lake we had one paddle. Ro had propped his against a tree back at Indianpoint Lake whilst hauling the boat onto the trolley, so he did an extra few kilometres retrieving it. Whilst he was away a couple of the smart-arse's party turned up looking for the woodpile, but found it empty. Karma! I sat on the boat and watched the water, collected and bundled dry kindling and checked out Campsite 10 which only had two tent pads and they were taken, so when Ro returned we zigged across to the southern shore to campsite 11 at which we could only see one boat but knew that it had two pads. It was full, so we zagged another 1.5km to 12, which also had 2 pads and, thankfully, there was room at the inn. We'd only done around 18km but smashed the portages.

We shared the campsite with Pete and Hazel, Canadians who we took to be a couple. When we arrived they had a fire going with a pan on the griddle. The fire cans provided by BC Parks are great for containing fires but not great for cooking. They're a 50cm-diameter iron cylinder with a low, cut-away air vent and a cooking rack on one side. As they stand around 40cm deep, a good layer of embers is needed to produce significant heat at that height. We brewed on the stove and pitched efficiently, sharing the now-familiar tasks and sub-tasks. My tent is bigger than most for good reason but, as each tent pad is marked out with split logs, we needed to be creative with the angle of pitch to maximise the chance of a good sleep. The tent pads are not necessarily flat and roots rise to the surface providing challenging conditions. A diagonal line usually worked out best. All campsites on the route have outhouses which are tall square sheds with a simple apex roof under which is a traditional toilet bowl, seat and lid, underneath which is a hole. They were generally pretty clean, and we carried wipes, but regular tea in a forest environment call for a less formal ritual during the night, especially as some outhouses were a frightening distance from the tent pads. I suspect that bears would dislike the smell of human urine, so that was my excuse for peeing in the trees.

We cooked spaghetti and ate whilst sat on the beach propped on mats against a fallen tree, watching the light disappear. The temperature plunged as the sun disappeared, and down jackets were more necessary than luxury items. Earlier, as we'd zagged, we saw an osprey fish; a particularly magical and uncommon sight which made that portion of the day quite special despite our fatigue and eagerness for rest and food. Other creatures swam on the lake, loons called eerily, wolves howled to the south. As we ate, the osprey fished on the far side of the lake.

This first night on Bowron demanded a change to the ritual. All cooking gear, food and anything slightly aromatic or minty had to go in the cupboard as this was proper bear country. BC Parks generously provided a cupboard at each campsite to protect the bears. When I say cupboard, I mean heavy duty steel box approximately one cubic metre, with a double hinged door locked with vertical bolts on each that slip into place as the handles are

rotated. The handles are bear-proofed by being tucked up under a steel box-cover and needing to be pulled out along their spindle to turn. They all squeaked and creaked when opened so late night food stashing was going to wake the neighbours. Ours had gone to bed early, as most North Americans do. We played cards and prepared for bed. Roland won the whist. I had more than enough earplugs for the journey which, once opened, I kept in the tent pocket, but they wouldn't stay together, so as the inner tent was hooked into place, they rolled around the floor and got dusty. Dusting earplugs was another first for me. I was asleep before midnight which is a very rare occurrence. When I say asleep, I'm using a touch of license: I remember listening to the sounds around us, wondering where the bearspray was and getting up for a pee whilst unable to sleep. My throat was dry when I woke so I'd probably got some sleep.

I felt sluggish in the morning, not eager to wake up. It was cold. I fuffed like a hero but eventually got my act together. I had a packing plan, with certain bags in certain larger bags, some at the bottom, others nearer the top and, being the first repacking since we started the journey; I was struggling to remember which of the 20+ drybags went where. I think we breakfasted on granola, then packed the boat too far from the water, as we did most days, resulting in a short boat tugging episode for Roland. Before launching, I'd dug out the Steripen that I'd bought at great expense for exterminating bugs in the water so that we could drink from the lake without fear of contracting giardiasis, which is known locally as beaver fever (very different from the UK version). The Steripen is a battery-operated UV light which messes with the DNA of the bugs leaving them unable to multiply. I'd put freshly recharged LSD batteries into it before I left the UK so they would last for approximately 50 litres. It didn't work. I pressed the button and submerged the light and contacts into my water bottle only to get a total fail and red light warning me that it could not detect any water. This was not good. I tried again and again, changed the batteries out of my head torch plus spares but still got no results. I should have bought a physical filter instead. Another tough lesson learned. We'd have to brew tea at lunchtime. In reality I drink little during the fun and games then rehydrate in the evening and with breakfast and lunch, so, even during the warmer days, dehydration was not a major issue. I topped my water bottle up from the lake anyway. The chance of contracting giardiasis is so small it wasn't worth too much worry.

Our target this day was campsite 21. We paddled the few kilometres to the north east corner of Isaac Lake at an easy pace, then headed south. Isaac Lake is 37 kilometres long and roughly one kilometre wide for its entire length, flanked by native woodland, mostly coniferous behind which protruded the granite summits of the Cariboo range. The forecast was for a clear day with low wind. It was spot on. The sun was hot and so paddling was hotter. For the next few kilometres we stayed on the west side of the lake and, as the sun passed to the west, this afforded us some shade under the trees. We stopped on the shady side for lunch, hacking 20m into the dense forest, through fruit-laden blueberry bushes, balancing up a fallen moss-covered tree to the nearest horizontal trunk dappled in sunlight, to sit on and brew on. It's highly likely that we were the first people to have sat on that trunk. Everything in the forest is wet, so we used our makeshift kneeling mats for sitting comfortably. Lunch was crackers, cheese, cured sausage, olives and tea with bubbly Cadbury's chocolate for pudding. We checked the map; still some way to go and all

campgrounds were on the other side of the lake. Our paddling was getting better, though our synchronised cadence was on vacation. I'd noticed that my paddle power waned in the hours after lunch and then picked up when I could smell the campsite. I suspect that's tied in with the way I work with targets; the closer they are the more focused my attention to the process. I've noticed many times whilst sea kayaking, that my efficiency increases significantly after a few hours paddling, and that once I hit that sweet spot, I can paddle for hours with little reduction in speed and with relatively little fatigue. Once I stop, it takes a little while to get back into the zone. I've not done as many long open boat trips and so I have little to compare with this trip, so pretty much everything about paddle rate, efficiency and endurance was unknown.

We were heading for the campsite lottery again. I think we checked number 19 which was full, but when we got to 20 there was a free tent pad so we opted to stay rather than paddle the next 3km to 21. We shared with a group of Americans who were hanging out their laundered smalls and fly-fishing without results as we arrived. I'd brought trolling gear; spinners that we hauled along behind the boat, ideally at 1-1.5kph, in the hope that a hungry game fish will catch its lip on my hook. There are rules about fishing, which we paid ear-service to. Pretty much every fish in the lake was edible, so we really just wanted anything big enough to eat. During the last few hours of the day I'd tried trolling at different depths by tying various weights onto the line 10m above the spinner, and I tried different spinners, all without success so far. As the depth varied so much, it was easy to forget about the rig and paddle into shallow waters of a headland, snagging the tackle. The bed of the lake was covered with tree trunks and, as there was virtually nothing to disturb it, a green-brown aquatic "dust". Throughout the trip we saw fish rising regularly, and the occasional large fish jump but only caught one, and that got away. Just before it let go I saw it; I imagine it was about 40cm, silvery-grey, and trout-shaped.

We had the option of pitching on a regulation tent pad 10m above the water next to one of the American couples, or pitching just above the lake on flat earth away from our neighbours; Roland was concerned that, if another party arrived and we were in the naughty corner, they would use the regulation tent pad, which meant we'd get fed to the bears if the ranger turned up. We dumped the tent bag on the tent pad to bag it but pitched the tent in our preferred spot later once, we imagined, the ranger had called it a day. Rangers use jet boats to get around the circuit and, as they're the only powerboats allowed, they stick out like a sore thumb. But they have the authority to move us on if we're not acting within the Park regulations.

This campground had a wooden hut or lodge which was occupied by a couple but was meant for sharing (not that we needed to). The couple were cooking on the fire bucket outside the lodge, and I realised that the hut was unheated. A wood stove would seriously increase the value of such a resource, but perhaps the authorities deemed it too much of a fire risk. We'd grabbed a few logs from a woodpile en route and this was an opportunity for Ro to use the axe we'd hired. To this point we'd collected wood but not used it as the fire was already going at the previous two campgrounds, and fellow occupants used the fire to cook, whereas we used the stove. We'd donated our harvest to those in need rather than

humping it on to the next camp, so each day we navigated to the designated wood pile to collect more. These piles were usefully marked on a simple map of the circuit provided by BC Parks at the briefing, and each was marked with a sign; a 'W' on a white square. On arrival at these locations we first had to find the cut wood, which wasn't always straightforward, and the wood wasn't always present. Typically it was chainsawn into 30 by 30cm rounds which needed splitting. Now, Ro, by his own admission, is not an especially physically practical person; such a man, tall enough to rake geese from the sky, wielding a felling axe to split 30cm rounds is worthy of a wide berth. He did a fine job, with little damage. On the subject of woodworking, Ro had taken to heart the task of whittling a couple of spoons/miniature paddles to take back as souvenirs of our wilderness experience for his sons. This had started at the camp on Martin Island in Desolation Sound where we witnessed previous occupants whittling skills posted on the tree of paddles. Bearing in mind my observations about Ro's practical nature, close carving a small chunk of driftwood was probably going to end in stitches. Fortunately, I'd packed a sewing kit.

As we were on the east side of the lake, we benefitted from the sun until it dropped below the high horizon of the McCleod and McCabe Ridges in the Cariboo Mountains. The air temperature plunged as the sun died, and down jackets were donned for the remainder of our time in camp. The low temperatures were above freezing, perhaps 6°C but felt cooler. The cold air dropping off the high hills maintained a chilly draught through camp that made me shudder occasionally and made my shoulders tense.

We brewed, cooked and brewed some more on a felled tree with a 1m diameter which gave it a narrow, roughly flat top edge, just level enough to perch a stove and cooking paraphernalia.

The following morning we were up before 8am and left before 11 (Iti). The party of Americans had left shortly before us, and we'd spotted small several parties passing south along Isaac towards the Isaac River. That was our destination. Isaac Lake drains at its south end through a 20m-wide neck with lateral rock ridges that channel the flow through a 10m-wide funnel called the "Chute" which is a UK grade 2 drop; and our pleasure first thing on the following morning.

Our paddling that day was slightly more efficient, our synchronised cadence appeared for brief periods, and the weather was glorious. We trolled with different spinners (I used a recommended silver spoon that day) but caught nowt. We lunched briefly on a sandy headland decorated with enormous hoof-impressions of moose.

We seemed to cover the distance rapidly and arrived at the end of Isaac Lake with the uncomfortable, back-of-the-mind expectation of full campgrounds. There are three sites in the vicinity; 27, with two tent pads was a few hundred metres before the Isaac River, 28, with six plus cabin and 29, a group site with 5, were at the neck of the lake. We arrived at 27. I can't remember who arrived first but we shared the site with Pete and Hazel. Pete was a forest manager on a patch of forestry he'd bid for management rights on, and seemed like a practical, down to earth chap, with a head-load of knowledge about all sorts of stuff; we briefly covered melatonin, sleep deprivation, skin colour, forest management, etc. Hazel was one of his daughters. What a great adventure for father and daughter to share.

The nightly rituals; brewing, pitching, cooking and preparing for sleep were now honed and slick. Each evening we briefly discussed what we were going to eat, based on our best guesses about what food was left. We cooked simple tasty food. We'd taken a simple spice kit made up of a masala of favourites and a bag of whole spices and we'd purchased salt and black pepper grinders, Tabasco and chicken stock chunks which, combined with fresh onions and garlic are the base ingredients for months of tasty meals, given a few staples. On a previous adventure we'd run out of some critical ingredients, and although we'd improvised and adapted, we'd also learned the critical lessons. We bought cubed sugar as it's much easier to work with than granulated, and we had plenty; we'd bought enough protein for the trip in cans of tuna, cured sausage, ham/bacon and cheese, both parmesans and jaarlberg? plus dried food pouches carefully chosen for their calorific and protein content (but not edibility); we had fresh milk, divided into two containers and it was lasting well thanks to low night-time temperatures; and we had enough tea bags to brew for us and the local population.

The population of Canada is 36 million; it's the second largest country on the planet by land area at nearly 10 million square kilometres. As 98% of the population live in major towns and cities, the country is pretty empty, but then most of it is either impenetrable or frozen. When we first considered taking on this challenge, I'd imagined six days of wilderness experience, but as the plans had developed we'd come to realise that, as the Bowron circuit is posted in the top ten paddle journeys on the planet, we were unlikely to experience wilderness to any great degree. Apparently there were 250 paddlers on the circuit while we were there. It didn't seem like it, but we were far from alone, and this was the quiet, end-of-season time. There is always that dilemma to contemplate when choosing an adventure destination; either it's unknown, exceptionally tough, inaccessible, desperately expensive or it's popular. Bowron Lakes is popular.

We watched other paddlers fishing and catching, and could hear a younger noisier party at the next campsite. I think we lit a fire and took photos, then retired to the whist World Series and sleep.

Our fourth day, as the previous three, started cold. I wore a down jacket until the sun appeared, unless we were ready to paddle before that joyous time, which was rare. Although sunrise was prior to 8am, the mountains to the east blocked the sunlight until after 10am. After breakfast we packed slickly and paddled quickly towards the neck of the lake. We'd watched a video of paddlers in touring kayaks take the "chute" in similar conditions, and it looked straightforward. For me, there's always an element of trepidation as I approach fast water, probably a throwback to my early kayaking days and too frequently swimming very cold rivers. As we approached the Isaac River, I stood to view the rapid, steered the boat to line up with the primary current and, after a brief tactical discussion we paddled down the tongue of water and through the more energetic water, taking in a few gallons on the way. Bugger! I'd not worn my paddle booties and my trainers were now very wet. I was conscious that, when wet, they get very smelly, especially so if they're not dried quickly, and that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. I was going to wear these on the plane home so some suffering was going to be shared out later.

The river turns a ninety right, and the current swaps sides, then, after maybe 200 metres,

there's another rapid called the rollercoaster. I had no knowledge of this so persuaded Ro to pull in on the right so that we could take a look-see. I've learned that prudence in such situations is almost invariably more comfortable than winging it. It looked fine. We'd paddled into position that required an awkward turn to get back into the main flow with room and time to position our boat left of centre above the rollercoaster to avoid loitering boulders. We bounced through and paddled on, keeping to the fastest flow and achieving, perhaps, 10km/h which we'd calculated would help us achieve our 1/6th daily proportion of the journey. Our destination for that day was the far end of Lanezi Lake which lies across the southern side of the trapezium-shaped route. Between Isaac and Lanezi we had the upper half-kilometre section of the Isaac River, then a portage of 2.8km around the "Cascades" and Isaac River Falls, with a short paddle in between the two obstacles. We then paddled a long kilometre across McLeary Lake and into the Cariboo River, a shallow, milky, tree-infested drain with a 3-4km/h current for around 5 kilometres. The Cariboo pours into Lanezi Lake, a 15 kilometre long ribbon lake with magnificent peaks on the southern flanks.

The portage wasn't too bad, especially as we capitulated and chucked our haul sacs on the canoe. The ground was dry and rocky so was unlikely to suffer. The short paddle on the river was gentle and pleasant, meandering through scrubland, ideal territory for moose, and possibly bears, although we'd been told that they'd all be uphill and upstream of us fishing salmon out of the upper tributaries of the Bowron River and other upland creeks.

We paddled in the fastest flow, heeding advice about avoiding dead heads (tree trunks sticking out of the water at various angles) and sweepers (strainers - trees and branches overhanging the edges of the river where the current passes close to the banks). At some point on the river we stopped on a sandy bank, sat on a trunk and brewed tea with our lunch. A couple of largish parties passed, exchanging with us the usual ritual weather reports and sociable trivia. We'd be competing with them for tent pads later in the day.

This was about the first time I really felt fatigued, rather than just feeling a bit not-so-young. It was sunny, the paddling was easy but the non-stop pace of the last 11 days was taking its toll. I had occasional thoughts of dissent and felt a little grumpy. For the following few hours, I was in a paddle zone, focusing purely on moving forwards as efficiently as possible. We passed the largest of the paddling parties and paddled out of the mouth of the Cariboo onto Lanezi in sunshine with at least 12 kilometres still to go which would take just under three hours. We checked camping intentions with another large group who were heading for an early night so wouldn't compete with us. I think we stopped at a woodpile but found none left, then continued with good speed and coordination. Our speed had increased significantly over the past few days, and we were closing on 6km/h. There was a slight breeze behind but not of a helpful strength. We'd passed campground 35 around half way down the lake, which only has one tent pad and were chuffed to be making good time. A short while later, Ro spotted a movement close to the shore, 200 metres ahead and to the right; it turned out to be a bull moose, swimming or wading, they have such long legs that either could be possible. We headed at speed towards it, cameras at the ready. During the next few minutes the bull climbed ashore, shook, walked along the bank, ate a small tree or two and pretty much ignored our imminent presence. I took a few pics, but mainly paddled the boat ever closer so that Ro could get pics with the SLR. I think we got to within 10 metres before we were considered a discomfort and the handsome moose headed magically into the forest. I say magically because this beast is significantly larger than a large stag red deer, with antlers that look as though they were designed specifically for snagging

branches and this forest is full of trees of all sizes and doesn't really appear to have room for a moose. It's a genuine disappearing act. I was made up. I've been to Canada a couple of times previously but not seen moose. It was higher up my bucket list than bears, and getting that close was a top experience.

Towards the far end of Lanezi there are two campgrounds on the northern shore, 36 has one tent pad (why only one, we don't know), 37, three kilometres further has two. We arrived at 36 to find our old best buddies, Peter and Hazel, and being tired, hungry and approximately on schedule; we decided that a night here would be good. We landed, begged space and started pitching. This had the potential to be very uncomfortable. There were two options and one was across the path between Peter and Hazel's tent pad and the loo, the lake and the anti-bear box. The other option was in between trees on a slope, next to the bear box. We chose the latter after consulting Peter. The sloping pitch could be used to our advantage, and it gently curved, so we could have a comfortable night regardless.

After pitching we brewed, fuffed around and eventually cooked spaghetti Lanezi with more tea. From our site we looked south across the water towards an awesome ridge formed above three glacial corries. The breeze had gone and the reflections were clear. As the sun dropped we contemplated and discussed the route; initial access from the water would be a thorough fight through the forest, with the potential to take days to reach the tree line. Were there trails? It was such an amazing ridge line we thought there must be. Above the tree line there were distinct ridges leading up to the summits, with interconnecting ridges and glacial snowfields nestling still in the corries. Which route would be best? Taking in the whole ridge end-to-end would be a fine adventure. The sun dropped, the air cooled, we brewed again and headed for the tent, which turned out to be surprisingly comfortable. We played cards and got told off by Pete for being too noisy. Apparently our sleeping had kept him awake the other night.

Our penultimate day: Destination; Spectacle Lake via the last few kilometres of Lanezi, then six to the end of Sandy Lake, four along the Cariboo River and Babcock Creek, then a 1.2km portage to Babcock Lake (the creek is too shallow for paddling), just under three clicks on Babcock Lake, a 400 metre portage, 800 metres across Skoi Lake and another 400 metre portage to Spectacle Lake. There were wood piles and campsites at the beginning of Spectacle but that left us with 24km on the final day and the weather was turning nasty.

We'd got the forecast when we left civilisation on Monday, it was Friday, we were expecting rain and increasing wind. The sun had hidden behind light grey cloud, the paddling was less inspiring and the light flattened, with less chance of good snapshots.

Peter and Hazel left before us. We struck, packed and paddled well, covering Lanezi and the Cariboo surprisingly quickly. It was cooler and the rain had started, not heavily, but enough to make us get waterproofs ready. Along the Cariboo River there's a post with an orange marker that identifies the much smaller tributary, Babcock Creek. When I say smaller, I mean a glorified ditch no deeper than 50cm with the current going the wrong way. It meanders past a Rangers lodge which we visited briefly. There was, somewhere there, an emergency phone; there were six along the circuit, and the only means of emergency

communication unless you carried an EPERB or satellite phone. Ro carries an EPERB. We paddled as far as it's possible to, then lunched with a welcome brew in a chilly wind at the beginning of the short portage. I noticed that I was feeling the cold more than usual; probably just tired. We hauled the boat onto the trolley and portaged to Babcock Lake. The weather was no longer friendly.

The portage was a relatively easy push with few ups and downs, and Babcock Lake was short, shallow and grey. Shallow lakes make for hard work. We were using ottertails so ideally needed water at least 60-70cm deep for efficient strokes, but the bottom-effect becomes more noticeable and is quite tiring over a long paddle. Perhaps, being tired, I noticed the resistance more.

The deep valleys and steep deep-green flanks with icefields and jagged granite were gone now. Instead we had more distant hills, a greater proportion of yellowing deciduous poplars and birches, rolling humps and bigger sky. The sky wasn't helping my mood. When I'm tired I become more introspective; I'm an auditory-digital introvert so I'm inward facing anyway, but I do occasionally consider what effect that's having on those around me. We talked less in the naff weather, not merely because we had hoods up.

The portage to Skoi Lake was the shortest and levellest yet and Skoi was a mere puddle taking perhaps 15 minute to cross. The portage through to Spectacle Lake was also short, but I felt it. There was a large campground, number 44, with multiple tent pads. We checked the map and realised that the next campground was still a few kilometres away and had only a couple of pads, it was getting late and also getting chilly. We decided to camp there. We lit a fire using wood gathered locally, pitched the tent under a tree, put up the large tarp to cover and perhaps dry our kit a little. I tried using the fire bucket to make a brew but it was going to take ages. The rain stopped briefly. We got our act together and cooked something warm and welcome with more tea.

Another group arrived. It was the five youngsters that had so deviously advised us on the first day. They turned out to be alright. They struggled to get one of their stoves to light; I watched, becoming a little concerned when the operator pumped up the pressure of the gasoline bottle and started to mess with it whilst the stove was still priming. It could have ended messily, but another of the party got his stove going and quickly cooked bangers and mash in a silicon rubber pan which doubled as a bowl. When I say cooked; they made Smash, and handed round salami or chorizo thins. It was dark now and I'd donned my down jacket underneath my waterproof. We sat by the fire a while, chatting, gathering information about Garibaldi Park for our later journey into the hills. I needed sleep. It started to rain more heavily, so we retired. We played whist and shithead, I plugged my earplugs in and fell asleep to be awoken by heavy rain on the tent. It passed but the tree dripped for hours.

It was fair weather when we woke, though the tree was still dripping a little. This was our last day on the water, and I think my spirits were pretty low; I still felt tired after sleep, the

weather was forecast to be wet and the paddling was not as exciting or as pleasant as during the rest of the trip. It felt like the drive home at the end of a holiday.

This was a long paddle; we had 24km to do and we'd intended to get back before the reception closed, so realistically that gave us less than 8 hours. That's only 3kmh, but when we factor in breaks, lunch, inefficient or lazy paddling, it could be pretty tight.

We left shortly after 9:30am, paddling with a gusty breeze at our backs. It didn't take long to figure that we could sail in this breeze, so we lashed one of the spare paddles vertically at the bow, lashed the small tarp top and bottom, then tied the loose corner to my bungee. It was great. We probably had less than a square metre of sail, but it did the job. We tacked on shallow zigs and zags, occasionally paddling, for the first section of Spectacle Lake, then the wind dropped and we needed to paddle. We grounded at one point on silt beds at the narrow neck separating the two parts of the lake. I wondered what had dumped the silt in that location. There didn't seem sufficient current to carry that volume of silt. We backed out with difficulty, paddled round the shallow silt beds and headed rough north west towards Swan Lake and the Bowron River. We'd wondered whether we'd get a descent current on Bowron River to speed our passage through to the final lake, but there seemed to be little flow. The wind was more helpful, and getting stronger as it was channelled between the forests on either bank. We stopped at the end of Swan Lake for lunch, erecting the small bright orange tarp-cum-sail for shelter while we brewed. The group we'd spent the evening with turned up. They commented that we hadn't got very far. It seemed harsh at the time.

The Bowron River meanders through sedge beds for 4 kilometres and eventually opens onto Bowron Lake. We had 7 kilometres left. I was not looking forward to it. If we paddled strongly that would take less than 2 hours, but, being knackered, it was going to be longer. Then the wind strengthened. We re-rigged the sail, and after a short period when it calmed a little, we started gaining the advantage. A few minutes later we gave up paddling as the sail was so effective. I steered and Roland lay down. It was a cold but exhilarating, experience with nothing much to do, so I became more active in steering. We sailed for over an hour, in a force 3 wind, putting in mini tacks occasionally so that we'd stay on target. It was perhaps the best way to end the trip. We were both tired and successfully canoe-sailing almost the entire length of Bowron Lake was a great experience. I knew there was a good reason for taking both tarps. We got back at 3:50pm and the sun was shining.

The rest of the Bowron experience was a logistical process of doing least and achieving most. We had made good time and reception was still open, so we gave the hired kit back, and drove the car round the campground to find an empty and unreserved spot seeking out the one which would keep the sun for longest. We separated wet and dry kit, binned the trash, then it started raining so we packed everything away, pitched the tent and spent the rest of the evening indoors, eating, brewing, playing cards and sleeping.

At this point in the trip I'd not had a shower for eight days, though I'd been wearing wool.

Wool base garments are especially good at regulating heat and reducing personal odour but they have their limits. I suspect that both Ro and I had become unconsciously tolerant as neither of us really noticed the other but then we didn't get that close. I could rarely smell myself, though when in the confined space of my sleeping bag I got a distinct sense that I really needed a shower before meeting anyone other than Ro. There's only so much one can do with baby wipes.

We planned the next 48 hours before sleep. We had over 400 miles to drive from here to Whistler where we planned to head up onto Wedge Mountain which is the highest mountain in the Garibaldi Park at 9527 feet. We didn't know how much snow cover there would be on the higher ridges, so we intended to gather information in town, hire axes, spikes and a rope if possible. Before that we wanted a seriously good breakfast and that meant getting up early and getting the hell outa Dodge.

We'd built in a couple of contingency days so that, if the weather or our paddling was crap, we could take longer to paddle the Bowron circuit and still have time to head into the hills; or we could stay longer in Garibaldi Park. We were in no particular rush, but we did have some urgent tasks to deal with; showering, laundry and drying kit were the most important.

We struck camp after a brew and drove out of Bowron with the wagon crammed with wet kit and smelly paddlers. I was still wearing my paddling booties as my trainers were still wet, and both smelled of wet dog. I arranged my trainers so that the cars hot air blower was trained on them. It's a tried and tested process but it makes the car stink. The nearest civilisation to Bowron is a village called Wells, at the end of the tarmaced road. We arrived there hoping for breakfast and found the cafe open. This was the only day in the year that they opened for breakfast which was just the miracle we needed. This was no ordinary cafe. The breakfast menu looked bleak, but the coffee was pretty good. We ordered frittata. It arrived promptly and turned out to be exceptional. The guy who ran the place was chatty and explained that they were open to feed the racers who, the day before, had competed in a 50km ridgeline race. They'd had all four seasons' weather and all racers were accounted for so it was deemed a success. Apparently this is a pretty unique race on account of its wilderness-ness, the time of year and the location (miles from anywhere). Our host had started the race some years ago and since it had built up a special status amongst extreme runners, who travelled from afar to suffer.

We asked about the ridge we'd been ogling from Lanezi; the top was called Ishpa Mountain; there were once trappers trails but no longer. Few people had ever been up there. There was a snippet of local history that suggested a trapper called Babcock used to live up there having built himself a cabin below the summit. Our host had taken a trip up there with colleagues many years ago and they'd realised there were few places to build a cabin on the steep terrain, but they noticed two forested areas which might hold that accolade, they explored one but found no cabin, but looking towards the other they noticed a waterfall, and though they chose not to explore further, they now reckon the cabin is close to that fall. I started to realise that much of Canada has not yet been explored. The population is so small and the land area so vast and impenetrable that it's likely that the majority of the land area is virgin territory for white settlers. There must be thousands of unclimbed peaks.

I'm a bit of a food snob. I'm not especially interested in posh foods, just well cooked relatively simple unprocessed and very tasty food. I notice my temperament change if I don't get good food. The human race has been cooking for quite a while, and I just don't get the notion of bad food. It's not a tricky process to make good food. The unexpectedly excellent frittata for breakfast had started to cheer me up and the coffee had done its job. I was ready for the journey. We spent a while in the gift shop next door to the cafe, buying gifts for loved-ones, and being talked at by the friendly, well-fed sales assistant.

After less than a couple of hours we were back in Quesnel restocking our fresh food supplies at Walmart. Food in Canada is generally slightly more expensive than in the UK, but more importantly, the range of food available is relatively small. Some basics like chocolate and tea bags are imported, as the Canadians just don't make them. Fresh fish, meats and cheeses are expensive, perhaps half as much again as in the UK, and again range is generally small. We bought genuine Smarties and chocolate covered frogs from the pic n mix bins. We only had three more evening meals to sort, as we'd planned to take dried food into the mountain, and one of those was likely to be in a restaurant. Fresh milk, tea bags and sugar we're the essentials, without which we were unlikely to survive.

After spending too long shopping, we got back onto the Cariboo Highway heading south. Our destination that day was Lillooet, where we knew we could get an excellent breakfast the following morning, and it had a couple of hotels. We stopped for coffee at the Sugar Shack, a middle-of-nowhere purveyor of maple syrup of the every kind and used their wifi to check prices and make a reservation at the Victoria Hotel; another double queen with cooking facilities, so we could brew. The remaining road was boring but the potential to see wildlife was enticing. I didn't see any, but I kept looking. The big river valley running south was seducing my soul. Its life story can be deduced by studying the structure, shape and rocks. The results are amazing landscapes and rivers with huge adventure potential for another day.

We arrived in Lillooet quite late, possibly around 7pm. I was ready for a meal and sleep, but we had work to do. After a checking-in process that took an inordinate time, especially as I needed the loo quite urgently, we carried our entire kit up to the room and started rinsing, hanging and drying. We checked out eats available on a Sunday night, which was quite limited, and after showering, we drove down the road to May Wong's Chinese restaurant which was one of two options. We arrived as they were closing, having run out of food. After quite a few minutes waiting for May Wong to sort out someone else, we got her attention and found out that she could do a takeaway meal for us. Ordering was entertaining, as English is not the first language here, but we got it straightened out more or less. We were going to get some food which was the key matter. We ordered a Tsing Tao beer to sup while we waited. It wasn't too long before we had our takeaway but our beers had to be poured into plastic coffee cups before we left the restaurant. We got back to the hotel and tucked in; it was very good food. To find such a good Chinese restaurant in a lill' town like Lillooet is amazing. After a game of cards, some rearranging of tent, tarps, bags,

boots, and a brew, we slept.

Some hotels are designed with the guests in mind and some are designed with ulterior reasoning. As any travelling adventurer will know, there are rarely enough places to hang stuff in hotel rooms. I'm not talking about hanging clothes; there's an art to hanging; some rooms have cupboard doors over which a tarp, tent or jacket can be draped, or reasonably secure lamps that dangle from the walls or ceilings so a drying line can be strung up between them and the cupboard door handle or wall-mounted television bracket. This room was void of most of the useful attachment points, including wardrobe and door pegs so we used chairs and tables to drape the tent fly sheet, tarps were precariously hung on doors, the shower curtain rail hung our dry bags while they drained then other bits n pieces after we'd showered. A room with a kitchenette is always useful; I thoroughly cleaned the stove, pots pans mugs and sporks for the first time since we arrived in Canada. Most of these items tend not to become unhygienic as they get boiling water treatment every time we cook, though my plastic bowl had been used as a chopping surface and so had deep gouges that were probably now filled with 12-day old food. I'd not be taking my bowl back to Blighty. I cleaned the milk containers thoroughly and applied boiling water. The stainless flask has a push-button top through which the milk is poured and always worries me a little, but I'm still alive. My new super cheap one-litre wide-mouthed PET bottle was now a little cheesy and took a couple of washes in liquid soap and the scalding to relieve it of its off-putting odour. It's amazing how much stuff can get stuck to a heap of kit; pine needles, grass, autumn leaves, the odd squashed spider, a worm, tiny pieces of litter, dried and redried spaghetti, dried and moist mud and bits of granola or Happy Valley bars. It was an impressive pile soon supplemented with cardboard boxes and plastic bags galore from our various food bags once we'd sorted and repacked.

After a reasonable sleep, we repacked kit, humped it down to the wagon and headed for a treat of a breakfast in the Reynolds Hotel before hitting the Tarmac. The remainder of our journey to Whistler was uneventful, but fatigue and the g-force-induced stress started to take its toll and by the time we arrived I needed a coffee and a calm place to chill out.

Whistler is a resort town nestled in the Fraser River valley between several mountain ranges, with a wide range of commercially-harnessed adventure potential, from shock-inducing adventure shopping to heli-hiking, -skiing and -mountain biking. I tend to avoid such places other than to refuel, and that was our purpose. We found a place to sit in comfy chairs, de-stress with a coffee and plan the next couple of days. We used the free wifi to browse for weather and route information and to find kit hirers and a local guiding agency that we could ask about conditions on Wedge Mountain. We also had to register with BC Parks and purchase a backcountry camping permit. We logged on to their site but couldn't get through their system. My attempt led to a page stating that their internet system wasn't working and Ro's attempt ended in similar failure. We gave up. We weren't going to cancel a trip into the hills on account of an IT failure.

We separated to cover different tasks and we met up a little later to combine. I'd been to

the Information Centre and spoken to a young woman who told me that conditions on Wedge Mountain were fine and warm, around 16°C and there was no snow and it was an easy walk to the top and 'no' we wouldn't need axes and crampons. I asked if she'd been up there. She didn't answer that one. I headed along the Stroll to an outdoor toy store and asked about kit hire; I vaguely remember axes and crampons were \$28 per day. I headed over to the Guiding Agency to chat with someone knowledgeable. Although he hadn't been onto Wedge recently, he offered sound advice, expensive kit and would sell us a part-worn recycled 20m rope for around \$50. Result.

We found each other and compared notes, collected boots and headed back to the Guiding Agency to fit crampons. 40 minutes later we had the toys we needed, and headed back to the car. We also needed a canister of gas from wherever was cheapest. We plumped for a smaller 227g canister at \$10 over twice the price we'd paid for gas at MEC. That would be enough fuel for our trip into the hills as long as we didn't cook spaghetti. We probably had enough in our larger half-empty containers but as we'd need more for the following day or two there was advantage in humping a smaller canister up the hill.

I was still pretty stressed from the drive south, and wasn't being especially effective at anything, but we managed to cobble together a plan; we drove 11km north to the turn off for the Wedgemount Lake trailhead and followed the forest track for a few kilometres to the car park. It was close to 5pm. We'd lose the light around 8pm. We laid out the essential kit, divided and shared safety kit, stove, fuel and food. We decided to leave the tent and take the chance that the Wedgemount Lake hut had room for one short one and one long one, instead taking a small group shelter for emergency shelter. On a Monday night in mid September this, we thought, was a safe bet. We left the trailhead at 2550ft after 5pm not really sure how long it would take to reach the hut at 6250ft, as we'd read conflicting reports; 1.5 - 3 hours; the distance was 3 kilometres so I'd calculated around 3 hours. The trail had been re-engineered at some point in the recent past and we had no idea which route was marked on the map. The forecast was for light rain, possibly snow above the treeline, overnight low of -6°C, NW 10-15mph winds at hut level, with everything getting prettier in the morning and for the following 24 hours.

We made the interior of the wagon look undesirable and followed our nose. Shortly after leaving the car park, we met an Englander and another who'd come down from the hut; it was empty at that time which, given that theirs was the only other car in the car park, was positively reassuring. I'd be grumpy if I had to sleep on a table, grumpier on the floor and completely dis-chuffed in an emergency shelter.

Within 15 minutes the trail changed from gentle meandering path to meandering uphill path. The work that must have gone into cutting this new trail, if that was what it was, must've been huge. Either side of the path the forest was cluttered with fallen timber, thick vegetation and boulders, mostly quite small, others the size of half a truck. The work that we were putting in was but a taste of what was to come. I started to realise that the meanders on the trail were necessary to provide a realistic gradient and, whilst, as a general rule, following a watercourse uphill is not a great idea, it's a more viable route than the

steep, broken crags either side. It was going to be tough. Within 30 minutes Ro had removed surplus layers and a short while later I was down to a T. It might be cold on top but down here it was too warm.

The trail-navies had moved few trees, so every 10-20 metres we had root steps, a trunk to cling onto as we climbed the metre or so to gain the next level of the path. Occasional streams cut through the dry packed dirt, eroding any soil, leaving a loose rocky surface. This was a dance-floor. There's an efficiency of movement achievable only through embracing the rhythm, pacing the time rather than timing the pace. We rested more often than seemed healthy, perhaps as a result of long-term fatigue coupled with general lack of fitness. I was leaking and, to add to the discomfort, my trousers, which had been a good fit in England, we're now obeying gravity more than is descent. I was thinning.

My thoughts as we climbed were not especially positive; I don't like walking uphill at the best of times; every now and then we referred to the map to try to ascertain our position. It wasn't easy to do in the dimming light and dense forest. The mapped trail was merely an indication of the general direction but might be the new one, and we were getting closer to the creek. We could just make out a large buttress several hundred feet above to the south, which would put our position about half way. No way! We had to be further than that. Another realisation snuck into my mind; the route didn't show the meanders so we'd been walking a significantly greater distance than predicted. I started discounting the earlier half of the route and counting the path ahead. The mapped trail crossed Wedgemount Creek at 4800ft so that would give me the definitive position I needed to focus my energy. If I have a target and know where I am in relation to it, I can focus on that and rearrange my mind to consider the path as that of least resistance, but without those specific details the path is unclear and my mind wanders.

I'd not got the scale of this trail in my head, so it seemed huge, and time slowed to extend the challenge, and the pain. We lit up and destroyed the last of the light. I'd read that the last kilometre is the most arduous and involved hands-and-feet scrambling. This was the second positive indication of our position. My T was soaked; I was starting to feel the cold on my skin, but was roasting inside. There was a time when I'd remain pretty dry on a challenge of this level but over the years my skin has become more porous and now I leak profusely.

There was a point at which the trail became much steeper and rockier, needing care to scramble on steep bedrock, the wind increased noticeably and the forest opened. We'd reached the treeline at 5800ft. Marker number 3. I was a happy hiker and new exactly what was going to happen now. The gradient would ease, the terrain would become smoother, and within 500 metres we'd get to the hut. I started counting, got to 350 metres and started looking for the hut. The trail led directly to it. I think it was 8.40ish. For the last few hundred metres I'd been conscious that it was very cold and I was wearing a wet T n trousers. As we entered the hut and dropped the sacks, I felt the need for warmth. It was below freezing for sure. I stripped down and donned the wool and down; instant warmth.

The Wedgemount Lake hut is a classic single timber-lined room with two tables, benches, and a sleeping loft. It's rocket-shaped, zinc-coated with vertical ends, one door and two small windows. It was dark and the moon was below the horizon so we had no view of the surroundings. Soon after we arrived I realised that we were not alone; our companion was fat and very short; about two inches short, standing on his hind legs. We'd disturbed his evening and he wasn't expecting us. He departed using his personal escape hole.

This hut had few luxuries, and even fewer leftovers. It's traditional to leave the odd item to excite the next and future occupants; this one needed a log burner, but all we found was a couple of used tea lights with no wick. I soon sorted that. Even a small flame can take the edge off the cold in an enclosed space. I got the stove and gas connected, nipped out to the local pond and got a brew on. We found a pack of cards: correction, part of a pack of cards, which meant a whist duel before sleep. There were 33 cards but I wasn't telling Ro.

We'd brought freeze dried food of the eat-from-the-packet kind, to which we had to add water up to the line. The line is on the outside of the pouch and the water is poured inside so there's a ritual head bobbing to check the two are coinciding. I suspect that some people find this easy and others don't. I'm not sure which I am, as whatever happened, the food was sheer shite. I'm not sure what Ro had chosen, I'd chosen Mediterranean Fish Stew and was looking forward to it. As we'd carried just the one litre pan, we had to brew each meal one at a time. Ro's was first and as he massaged his pouch, I boiled the next pan of pond-water for mine. I filled almost to the line, bobbed and topped it up, closed the ziplock and massaged my pouch, holding it inside my jacket like a hot water bottle - no point in wasting the heat, right? The massaging helps to ensure all the powder gets hydrated, and warms the hands. Ro tucked in to his. After the stated 11-12 minutes, mine was ready. Now, when I say ready, what I mean is, it's probably about as good as it's going to get. It wasn't good. It was like eating old, dry, freezer-burned fish cut into very small pieces and mixed with stock powder, undercooked rice and something fibrous to bind it together. I rarely struggle to eat food. I might be a bit of a food snob but I understand the need to feed and I'll not turn down calories. I was hungry and needed those calories but this was not going down. I had full cheeks and no intention of swallowing. I managed no more than a quarter of the pouch and gave up. We'd paid good money for this rubbish. I'd have preferred a pack or two of 8p noodles. I settled for a Chewy Valley bar and more tea.

We took turns to inflate mattresses and pillows, and arrange our sleeping patch. I carry a short mat which loses 200g, but means my feet need something under them. I used my empty rucksack, the hut log-book, my map and case, waterproof jacket and trousers. That should do it.

We hung the food in a drybag, took a last minute pee and migrated up to the loft. We'd bought a huge board of Belgian chocolate with fruit and nuts for pudding. I asked Ro to pass up the chocolate, and it came by airmail, narrowly missing my head and crashing against the wooden wall behind me. It was seriously hard at these temperatures. After a game of whist and a few chunks of chocolate, we got our heads down. I covered my feet with my down

jacket and pulled my cowl around my head.

Getting up in cold conditions is not, for me, a pleasant experience. I try to convince myself that there's much greater pleasure to be had once I'm up and sometimes it works. If I'm desperate for a leak in the night I spend a while trying to convince myself that I don't need to go, and then the inevitable pressure forces the decision. I was wearing my woollies so the only major hurdles were the loose ladder and the bears. On my way up I'd placed the bear spray on the edge of the table, and on the way down, I grabbed it and headed out shining the beam of my head torch around in a wide arc to let the bears know I was there. I suspect there're not many more frightening encounters than one between a man taking a leak and a shocked and stunned bear, and I'm a considerate chap. I headed round the back of the hut, found a suitable shrub and watered it. The sky was amazing. I briefly switch my light off and stood, head back, taking in the star-scape. At that temperature a short look was sufficient. The door to the hut had a noisy bolt to draw and climbing the wooden ladder and mantel-shelving onto the loft was not a quiet procedure. Nevertheless, Ro's snoring let me know I'd completed this mission without waking him.

I struggled to sleep for the first few hours in such an echoey container, though I imagine I slept soundly for the majority of the night, waking to Ro's prompt and the light. I snoozed for a short while then eased myself out of my warming cocoon, got dressed up and headed for the ladder, stopping to peek out of the window at the new view; it was special. I dropped to floor level and headed outside. Wedgemount Lake, perhaps a couple of hundred feet below the hut, was a deep turquoise, contrasting the lateral granite grey, scant dark green vegetation and the dirty glacial ice flowing into the lake at its far end. Wedge Mountain stood proud of its ridges and glacial skirt, with a fresh, bright white icing. Now I was excited.

We'd bought freeze dried muesli with fruit which turned out to be more inedible than muesli normally is. I ate most of it, swilled down with tea, though it took a while. Inconveniently, I needed the loo for a number two, and even up here, BC Parks had installed a khazi with a view to the glacier. To date, of all the khazis I've ever used, Wedgemount Lake Loo has the most awesome view, *and* it has a hook! It looked like a sentry box on stilts, with a step ladder rising to the door. As digging a hole would be a seriously hard task, the khazi engineers had had the brilliant idea to build the facility on stilts with the shit-tanks sitting underneath, so the only power it needed was gravity and the view from the raised throne was inspirational. However, at minus six degrees, admiring said view is very chilly.

We left enough property in the hut to demonstrate residence, and left anything unnecessary, which wasn't a lot. We probably left later than intended but I have no idea what time that was. As we left, our co-habitant danced along the path a few metres in front of us like the pied piper as if luring us away from his territory. The trail wove its way along the boulders of the lateral moraine toward the receding toe of the glacier just over a kilometre away. We made reasonable time and walked several hundred metres up the side of the icefield intending to cross onto the ice above the lower crevasses. As we were

harnessing up, another couple of people had crossed onto the ice below us and, roped up, were now making their way up the ice. The leader was using sound tactics for avoiding the crevasses and protecting his partner. It made sense to use their tracks which zigged and zagged in square fashion. The ice was hard which meant that the snow bridges across the crevasses would hold. We were roped up, 15 metres apart, with the part-worn recycled rope that we'd been assured would be fine. I was at the back which meant that I had the advantage of being able to see Ro's movements and take appropriate action which involved speeding up or slowing down according to the turns, ensuring that we had little slack in the rope and some good ice between us. We made reasonable progress, catching up with the couple in front until we were mid-glacier when we decided it was lunch time. The wind had picked up a little so we dug defences, insulated our derrières and brewed tea and ate Chewy Valley bars, hard chocolate, cheese and cured sausage possibly in that order.

Our trail-breakers had headed eastwards and we consulted the map to see if we should continue in their footsteps or split. Our intended route was to gain the NE ridge but the point at which we joined the ridge was unclear. Seeing no access further to the south, we chose to use their benefit and join the ridge further north. We edged off the main glacier and up a snowfield leading towards two cols on the ridge; the left and the right, separated by a craggy lump. The snow to the right became steeper and narrower towards the ridge whilst the left was broader, more gently angled and flowed over the ridge. Reaching the ridge on the wider col gave us the option of viewing the route ahead and the possibility of circumnavigating the craggy lump on the far side if the lump wasn't a goer. It wasn't and neither was the far side. We dropped underneath the lump and traversed into the next snowfield leading to the ridge. The snow was in pretty rude health but as it got steeper I became conscious of the length of run-out if we slipped. If we went much further the run-out increased and the path of anything heading down would rip across a boulder field obviously created by falls of debris from the gully we were climbing into. It was time for crampons. We stomped platforms and did a delicate dance to don our spikes. One day a clever person will invent crampons properly.

The traverse and short climb into the ridge was a little exposed but the snow was mostly deep enough to get full penetration with the ace shafts. The ridge had a cover of fresh snow, perhaps two days old, sufficient to make foot placement treacherous, there may have been a trail along the ridge but we were seeing nothing of it. We headed off along the ridge still spiked-up and not moving especially rapidly. The views from up here were spectacular by any standards. The air clarity was excellent and we could see snow covered and bare granite peaks for many, many miles. As we traversed, we occasionally dropped off the ridgeline, climbed over a couple of humps and looked for alternative access and egress routes, though we found none. I was contemplating the larger picture. It was getting late, we lost light around 7:45, we were unaware of the condition of our intended route down the west ridge, and we still had the steeper section of the NE ridge to climb to the summit. I was tired, which didn't help. At the rate we were going, we'd reach the upper neck of the glacier towards the end of the light, assuming the descent path was in good nick. I was getting twitchy. I did the maths: we had just over one kilometre to the summit plus 1200ft of ascent; I made that around one hour at best, then most of two kilometres and 2000ft of descent to the glacier; I made that another hour in conditions similar to those we were on.

With the zig-zags, we had 3km on the glacier, then another click along the moraine to the hut; close to another couple of hours. That was doable. We had lights and spare batteries. We'd carried sleeping bags and a lightweight shelter. What could possibly go wrong? We took a short break to refuel then toiled on. 20 minutes later my internal self was putting the boot in. I started to do the maths again. It didn't matter; the issue was not whether we could get to the top and down, it was whether or not we could get down in one piece. I'm not a spring chicken anymore, but not yet a spring cabbage. I knew I was more tired than I thought; each time we stopped for a rest it took longer to get going again. We had no time contingency. In situations like this, minor incidents are prone to combine with ferocity and trap the unwary. I spoke with Ro. He wasn't having it. Trying to explain logic to Ro is like .., no it's not the explanation, it's the getting through; it's like pushing marshmallows through a pillow. To be fair, heading back at this point, from so close to the summit was a marginal call, but only if everything went our way. I'm acutely aware that, once Ro has something to go for, little else matters, and the consequences are someone else's responsibility, usually mine. Little of what I explained had any importance. Eventually we continued to take a look at the steeper section of the ridge ahead. I'd counted the beads and we had about 30 minutes to the point at which we'd face a compromise on this route. Prudence can be such a butterfly. I was outa there. Wedge Mountain isn't going anywhere.

We retraced our route quietly. I knew Ro was frustrated and disappointed, though I'd made a decision to be respected, not argued with. I tried not to let it get to me. That was harder than the return trip. Eventually I started to enjoy the challenge again. We decided to look at a descent to the far col, but encountered a chasm with a block bridge. It was doable but with risk and terminal consequences. I considered using the axe to create an anchor/handhold above the block on the far side, but the shafts were slippery and perfectly straight with little or no opportunity to grip with gloves. Who makes axes like that?

We retreated to the top of the gully we'd climbed and retraced our steps. The sun had taken its toll on the snow which was now more prone to sloughing and far weaker. I slipped into descent mode, sharing technique with Roland, who's tall enough to make plunging the axe-shaft as low as possible a gymnastic phenomenon. Twenty five metres later we were on less steep snow, after fifty we were yomping and soon cut the corner turning west across the icefield down the quickest route. Crampons still worked although the occasional stumble over a boulder or turf hump punctuated the rhythm. The couple we'd tracked earlier in the day had pitched a tent on ground adjacent to the glacier and had built a magnificently creative enclosing wall with panfuls of snow. It wasn't going to keep them warm though. They'd missed a bit.

We said hello and thanks, enquired about their intentions and left them to it. Earlier in the day the glacier was not a place for crampons so we removed them with the intention of moving faster with greater agility. It didn't work. The further down we got the more we slipped. The top six inches was firm slush which disguised the hard surface beneath. As we descended I started to feel the fatigue at a much deeper level. I stopped being able to anticipate where my feet would slip, and how; my mind wandered and I started thinking about how long it would take to reach the hut, not as a target, just about how long. It wasn't

especially cold although the sun had gone and the wind was cooling, but I was feeling it. We trekked almost to the foot of the glacier then crossed onto the lateral moraine and use the best terrain available. It was dim now and we had around one and a half kilometres to the hut. At some point we must have lit up but I don't recollect when. I started stumbling more often and despite trying to get into the rhythm, counting, changing pace for a shorter more rapid cadence, I couldn't do the dance. I think that's only happened a few times in my life, and on each occasion it's been the result of prolonged fatigue. Not a good feeling. I'd forgotten about the hill. On the way out from the hut we'd happily tripped down the path not taking notice, perhaps, of the gradient. Now, on the way back up it was painful and, for me, unexpectedly steep. I'd not noticed the meanders, the product of the trekking population's boulder-avoidance tactics that disrupted my stride. At one point I stopped. Ro was behind me at this point. I turned to see where he was, but imagined he'd catch me up quickly so I spurred forwards and felt almost immediately, as though I was pushing through mud. I counted. The rough, loose debris of the trail became interspersed with laid slab and otherwise edged with fist-sized blocks and I noticed the first tributary path that lead to a tent pad. Nearly there. I looked back, Ro was still a way behind; I waited. There were voices ahead. A party of people had arrived and were in the hut. We had company. We had shelter and rest.

The new arrivals were medical students intent on walking up one of the lower peaks the following morning. They'd brought tents and, having respected our residence, they'd pitched leaving us to sleep in the hut. As we relaxed, we exchanged the ritual origins, intentions, achievements, names and jobs. They were pretty sound guys. They offered us food, which was an amazing gesture, but we must have looked wiped: Pasta and meat sauce. Bloody fantastic! Otherwise I'd be attempting another crappy pouch of freeze-dried garbage. I got the stove going for the first welcome brew with three lumps and during the second the pasta arrived. I didn't have a bowl handy so I was provided with the meat sauce container stuffed full of penne with a tasty sauce. Ro got a much more meagre portion, as did several of the other guys and, although I realised, I wasn't offering to redress the balance; I needed carbs and we had plenty of chocolate and other food if necessary. We shared the Smarties and chocolate frogs. I wasn't feeling sociable so the next hour or so felt uncomfortable, I wanted to crash but for some reason didn't feel it was appropriate to. Eventually, after the political exploration, Trump-bashing, state-of-the-nation comparisons, etc, the guys started to disperse. I set up the insulation for my feet and headed to the sack after a last bootless pee-trek. It wasn't nearly as cold as the previous night.

Shortly after bedtime, our co-habitant began his nocturnal activities, starting with shifting my stove around, then chewing something rustly, then it went quiet for enough time for me to be able to focus on sleep. I wasn't wearing earplugs but I wasn't going to try to find them. I caught myself dosing but was interrupted by furniture moving close to my head. This was an intolerable disrespect of my need for sleep. I lit up the perpetrator who glanced at the light then let go and ran. He was, as I lit him, standing on his back legs manoeuvring a three-chunk block of chocolate somewhere secret. The block must have escaped from the packet when Ro threw it in my direction the night before. I suspected the mouse was not going to give up on such a bounty, so I picked it up and threw it towards the void at the end of the loft floor, and missed. It landed somewhere short. I wasn't moving. A short while later the

manoeuvring started again. This time he was putting all his might into the job. When we lose our sight, our hearing compensates, and this was a very dark night. Chocolate block percussion on wooden floor courtesy of our housemate, Michel Souris, was a gig too far. I was almost ready to get out of my sack when Ro got up for a leak, so I tasked him with putting the chocolate out, which pretty much guaranteed a quiet night for us. It worked. We both slept soundly with relatively little snoring, neither hearing the other get up to pee.

I remember little about the early part of the following morning, other than mentally and physically struggling to get out of my pit, and finding the ladder descent considerably more of a challenge than previously. I suspect we brewed tea, then started to pack. There was only one plan; to return to the valley. The medics-to-be had planned their routes; half onto Mount Cook and the others were attempting Mount Weart, both summits above the hut to the north east. I wished them a good day as we left for the descent.

We estimated the return to the trailhead was going to take perhaps two to two and a half hours. As we descended, I started recognising key features such as a tree I'd hung onto, or a particular pattern of steps; this wasn't my normal mindset. My legs were tired and not as limber as they needed to be. The trail was most challenging for the first kilometre and it was slow going. I'd started to realise exactly how far we'd walked. I counted the trail for a while at one point, covering perhaps fifty meters in a straight line, but I'd walked 100 metres to get there. The distance from hut to trailhead is likely to be closer to 5 kilometres. Every now and then we stopped, rested and compared physical states. We didn't talk much on the way down. It was a long descent with the pleasures limited severely by the need to focus on the terrain. Every now and then I could see the valley beneath through the trees or I'd recognise a feature that gave me an indication of our progress. We passed other hikers coming up the trail, most had little idea of their proximity to the lake, but knew how long they'd been walking; we swapped knowledge; the further down we got the more positive their news became and the less ours. The further we descended the less out of shape they looked; somewhere around the middle I said hello to a guy probably in his late fifties, who nearly jumped out of his skin, squeaked with shock, and apologised in the same sentence. I nearly wet myself laughing; he'd been in the zone and hadn't noticed me. Three young women, perhaps in their 30s, stopped to share notes further down; it was their first real hike. They didn't know what they were letting themselves in for and we didn't worry them, but wished them a great day and encouraged them to enjoy the challenge. They were game. A party of perhaps twenty teen-something's and their leaders passed, almost all contributing the ritual "hi", "hello", "alright", the penultimate few of them a long way from the leaders and in pretty poor condition, albeit only a short way up the trail; the final couple were intent on not being with the others and looking slightly shifty for it. I guessed they'd recently found love.

These random meetings seemed especially positive for me. I was sensitive to the hikers' plight and knowledgeable about their future. Almost all of them seemed happy to be there. They also gave me the information I needed to focus on the challenge. I knew its size and it was getting smaller. The angle changed, the temperature and smell of the air changed, we passed a couple of enormous boulders that I hadn't noticed on the way up which meant

they were probably near the beginning - that's a pattern thing - and then we were walking through tall shrubbery and short trees rather than tall trees and short shrubs. The path levelled and became sandy; I heard the creek before I saw it, then the car park appeared with our shiny black chariot looking totally out of place. Trailhead joy! We hugged. It had been a good adventure.

We fuffed for 20 minutes, drank cold flat coke, ate trail mix, I finished off the Smarties. We chatted ritually with the locals. One young girl was English; she'd emigrated and was nicking firewood from the forest. A very large American turned up in a massive SUV and said hello. I asked if he was going up the trail; he found that entertaining, as did his wife.

We shoved the kit in the truck, Ro changed footwear and bagged the driving seat. I got in and we drove off while I shed my boots. It was time for lunch. On the short 13-kilometre drive back to Whistler we briefly planned the next couple of days; take hire kit back, shop, lunch, or lunch, shop, then find hotel, motel or campsite. Rinse, wash and/or dry kit, do laundry - this was really important as I'd run out of underwear and cool clothes. I wasn't going to spend the next few days in winter woollies and remain healthy and I'm not comfortable with plum-shaped balls. Head for MEC in Vancouver for toys, find the car rental place and thank them for the joy, pay for hire car, catch airport shuttle, check in, fly out.

We found the free car park in Whistler, and as we turned in I spotted a curry house, The Royal Taste of India, which was going to serve lunch for us later. We filtered the hire kit and headed off to the Guiding Agency. Ro's helmet had cracked so he had an apology to make, though neither of these Petzl helmets had dates on, and judging by the greasy straps and old design and colour they were well past their best. The proprietor wasn't bothered and recognised that it was not a good indication so just binned it without question. Apparently they get squashed under rucksacks, etc. We chatted about our adventure and he talked at us about being guided up harder routes for a massive fee; we said little so he eventually got the hint. We thanked and left. We had curry to eat.

The curry house was empty other than for a couple who were having a romantic lunch, though as I'd been seated in the girls eye-line, she and I were a little uncomfortable; every time I looked out of the window, she caught the turn of my face towards her. She wasn't my type or age (extravagantly painted, possibly revamped and early 20s) but she didn't know that. We were offered the regular patrons Lunchtime Special menu which stated that we had to live locally to take advantage. We did for that moment. I ordered chicken curry and naan and I think Ro ordered the beef with a posh naan. It took a while to arrive. We drank water and spoke little. We probably took advantage of the wifi if there was any. When it arrived, the food looked a little drab, but a minute later I'd have fought anyone who tried to take it away. Canada is not known for its culinary prowess so a curry in Whistler was odds-on to be a bit crap, but we'd hit the karahi at the end of the rainbow. It was very good, but better still was the naan; light and fluffy with enough ghee but not too much. It was heavenly. I'd have eaten twice if I'd had the energy. It cost us less than a tenner each. I'll be eating there next time I'm in Whistler. After lunch Ro went fishing for presents for the family

and I slept fitfully in the wagon for a couple of hours. It was sunny and warm.

We needed shower gel and a few other essentials so we shopped at IGA, a reasonable chain supermarket, and the branch in Whistler was a posh one; the deli counter was especially well stocked. We shopped and left.

We had a shed-load of kit to dry and sort so we needed a cheap hotel, motel or a camp ground with good weather. We weren't going to find that in Whistler. Our next deadline was to reach MEC in Vancouver on Friday with time to buy toys before going home, so we headed south towards Squamish having found a campground with a laundrette. The weather forecast gave us two dry days. It was late afternoon on Wednesday.

Squamish is around 80 kilometres south of Whistler down the Sea to Sky Highway. We made good time and found the Klahanie Campground easily. No one was home but we could book a tent bay by filling in a form and putting \$37 in an envelope and shoving into their slot. We picked a bay that gave us the best chance of early morning sun but to the east of us was a 335-metre granite face that was not going to let any sunlight through. We pitched the tent on the latest ground, got a brew going, and gathered wood for a fire. We could purchase firewood, but taking it from the woodland was not cool. However, every fire pit on the site might have partially burnt wood and we took advantage, finding more than enough wood for a good burn. I gathered tinder and kindling and built a square rack fire, one that's pretty much guaranteed to quickly generate a good bed of embers, give good heat, dry wet wood and burn entirely. It had rained as we arrived and so everything was damp, but the rain was light and short-lived.

After cooking another spaghetti meal, with fresh onions, garlic and peppers, we headed into Squamish to find a pub. We must have driven for 10 miles, criss-crossing on the grid system trying to find the town centre. There was no signage from the main highway, and we had decided to turn back to the campsite before we found it. At the far end of town there was a very large pub cum shopping mall cum restaurant. We went in for a beer. It was a pretty good beer but the pub was a barn-like room with massively high ceiling and several hundred people being serviced. Soulless. Ro ordered a portion of a dish that the medics at Wedgemount Lake hut had told us about. Poutine is a concoction of fries, gravy and lumps of chewy, slightly squeaky curd cheese. This is, to date, the only Canadian dish I've been able to identify. It wasn't good, but it contained calories and I was feeling the need to eat.

It's not often that I feel hungry. Throughout my life, I've occasionally wondered why I don't feel hunger. If I don't eat for a while, I feel weak, but very rarely feel a need to eat. I can recall only four times when I've felt a real urge to eat; each one has been after a prolonged period of challenging activity. During my early years as an outdoor instructor at a centre, I'd put in an 80 hour week and go caving or climbing on my days off. Over the two years I worked there, I lost weight but that meant I could get through smaller passages. The meals that were provided for us were not especially nutritious and getting the calories in was not

easy. In the winter I went, with fellow instructors, on a caving trip to Austria, which involved pretty strenuous activity for a week, during which I constantly felt the need to eat, and so we consumed knoblauch pizzas in the local bar almost every evening after our evening meal (and racked up enormous credit card bills). Here in Squamish, I was feeling a similar urge.

After the beer we headed back to the campsite, lit the fire and played cards on the picnic table; shithead and whist. We also ate stuff and drank tea. I suspect we got an early night again. At home, I usually go to bed in the early hours, so every night this trip was an early night. I used earplugs wisely. I slept through the night waking just before the 8 o'clock freight train whistled through Squamish.

Our penultimate day was clear blue but the sun was climbing the far side of the granite wall and was taking its time. When it did show up, we got 15 minutes of lazy heat then a cloud formed above the wall and we were back in the shadow. I can't remember what we did for breakfast, but it involved lots of tea. Then we emptied the wagon and started sorting. I had my process, Ro had his, and together we made good progress. We needed the sun to dry stuff, otherwise our luggage would be way over the limit. We rigged a couple of drying lines with 3mm cord, and started hanging kit. There was so much. Some kit needed rinsing as it still had saltwater on it from Desolation Sound, other stuff just needed drying. Ro headed off to check out the laundry. I rinsed the final traces of cheesy milk from our dry suits using a large drybag as a washing machine drum, filling it from the on-site taps and rolling it up and down the picnic table. I did the same with paddle cags and trousers to remove the salt. Then they were draped across the car, which was black so, now the sun had rejoined us, was getting hot. Pretty soon every inch of the car was covered with drying kit. Ro had chatted up the site cleaner who'd said we could have some washing powder, and was doing all the laundry like a legend and, with a bit of luck, we'd get it hung in the sun and dried that afternoon. I headed off for a shower; this campground, like the one in Lund, had coin operated showers. This one took loonies and twonies, and was going to be the most expensive shower I'd ever taken but, during the journey into the hills I'd glowed like fat boy and was in dire need of a douche. I was soon clean though the shower was a bit rubbish. It stopped when I was still a bit soapy so I'd had to use the sink to finish off. I shaved for the first time in 20 days. Now I just needed clean clothes.

I headed back to our bay, sorted the last bits of kit, gathered wood for the fire and got a brew on. The site had wifi of sorts but only within a few metres of reception, so I wandered over, sat on the bench outside and called a friend, checked email and took pictures, then went back to our bay, brewed tea, eyed the routes on the granite above and took a pic or two of Shannon Fall; a creek that flows down the wall.

Soon the laundry was done and much of the kit on the lines was dry, so Ro hung the clothes as I sorted the kit. I was starting to think about packing for the flight. Everything we had had to fit into one large hold-all and three large Ortlieb sacks, but only up to the top of the shoulder straps, plus a couple of cabin bags. We also needed to discard leftover food, gas, etc. we still had £150 worth of crap freeze dried food left. That was going back with us. I

could sell it on Facebook. As the sun moved, our drying lines became shadier so I rigged one in another vacant bay that would catch the sun for another couple of hours and moved the cotton laundry across. I shifted the still-wet kit onto bushes and boulders as the car was no longer catching rays.

That evening, once we'd gathered all the kit and clothes, they were stuffed into the car and left 'til tomorrow. We cooked, drank tea and used the last of the gas from two of the three large canisters leaving about half a canister between the last large one and the exorbitant small one; our plan to use three large ones was accurate. I lit the fire, we played cards and I made garlic bread with the remaining garlic, butter, bread and the foil. It was a good idea but it burnt and tasted naff. We retired for another early night.

I felt rubbish in the morning so I wasn't up early. I'd figured that our flight was around 6:00pm so we'd need to check in no later than 4:00, plus a contingency, say 3:30. We had to take the car back and get the shuttle to the airport, so we'd need to be at Enterprise in Richmond no later than 2:30pm. It was 40 minutes from MEC to Richmond, and we'd need at least an hour in MEC, so we needed to be there before 1:00. It would take us around an hour to find MEC. We had to pack and leave before noon.

It was raining lightly so rather than pack on the camp bay, we struck the tent and drove the wagon to the laundry and used the tables to help in the packing process. It wasn't a quick job as the airline baggage rules were very prescriptive, and their overweight and oversize charges were extortionate. We still had to figure out what to do with the wooden paddles we'd bought. They were oversized. Either we'd leave them or not so we decided to see if the airline would accept them. I binned a few bits of kit rather than bring them home; they'd had a good life.

We packed the bags into the car and drove from the campground after having left all our leftovers on the window sill for the cleaner; one good turn deserves another. I hoped she'd make use of them rather than throw them out.

The drive to Vancouver was straightforward but became much busier than we'd experienced to date. My saved travel directions hadn't saved properly so we were back to navigation by grid. That wasn't really a problem as we knew that MEC was on West Broadway, so we just had to travel south following signs to the airport and hang a left or right; that was the question. I vaguely remembered that highway 99 became highway 1 and passed to the east of the city so we'd need to turn right. I was almost right. We left highway 99 and highway 1 but found West Broadway on the grid where it should be.

We parked on the street and fed the meter rather than park upstairs. We had an hour. I had no specific needs other than a good paddling hat so I trawled the store for bargains and eventually found my way to the hat corner where I found that they'd put all the summer

hats away and didn't know where. As I didn't know which hat I wanted, it could take a while. The sales manager was willing to go and find them but as it had already taken 15 minutes just to ascertain that they had been put away, I didn't fancy my chances and went to look at the sea kayaking kit. They didn't have much. I'd found out in the past few weeks that paddling here in the UK is significantly more technically advanced than in Canada. I'd imagined it would be the other way around.

I bought a thermometer to replace the one I'd bought from MEC Calgary in 2001, and a small LED lantern for the tent. I tried to give the bear spray away but the several people I asked were a bit cagey about accepting it. It was probably a bit iffy palming it off for free in a shop that sells the stuff. I thought they had a recycling service but it was denied.

The docs-to-be at the hut had told us that the active ingredient was capsaicin, which totally made sense. It's completely biodegradable, 100% sustainable, hurts like hell and can be used in a curry. No wonder it discouraged the bears.

We checked out and left for Richmond. The navigation for this would be tricky. I knew the address so we used Ro's phone to find the place. Job done. We were on time and just needed to settle up. Not only was the expected bill much lower than we'd been quoted, the actual bill had more discounts. And we'd paid for a full tank of gas at much lower than market prices, with more discount. I'll be using Enterprise again. It took a while to get a proper bill, but eventually we crammed our luggage into the shuttle and headed to Vancouver International Airport for the direct red-eye flight to Gatwick.

Appendix

Trip dates: Depart Gatwick 5th September; Arrive Gatwick 24th September 2016

Maps and charts:

Desolation Sound: 3538 Desolation Sound and Sutil Channel 1:40000

Bowron Lakes: 93 H/2&7 1:50,000 Canadian Topographic Maps

Garibaldi Provincial Park: 92 G/15 1:50,000 Canadian Topographic Maps

Exchange rate: £1 = \$1.65 - \$1.73Can approx. This trip was shortly after Brexit so the pound was screwed.

Airline: Westjet; Direct return flight from Gatwick to Vancouver; £430 per person plus luggage. No additional fee for returning oversized paddles, but this might be just a kind gesture.

Car hire: Enterprise: 19 days, 2 drivers plus a full tank of fuel, V6 Chevrolet 300S 4-door;

£360. The tank of fuel was significantly cheaper than at any fuel station we found. The online reservation guaranteed us a particular price, though the terms offered at the pick-up location were much better.

Fuel: Gasoline \$1.09 -\$1.20 per litre.

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