

At Sky Camp, isolated natural splendour and
luxurious living go hand in hand

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Make a splash as you
arrive in style for a few
days at Sky Camp



ADVENTURING LIKE A KING

YOU'RE CRUISING HIGH

through BC's snow-streaked Coast Mountains in a 1961 De Havilland Beaver floatplane with Neil Young's "After the Gold Rush" echoing through the headset. Sounds like a quintessentially Canadian kick-off to exploring remote wilderness territory, doesn't it? But here's the difference: when you take a multi-day, multi-sport summer trip to Sky Camp with Whistler Outback Adventures, you can experience nature unchained without enduring the hardships that plague characters in the novels of Farley Mowat and Jack London.

Let's rewind a little. Day One unfolds largely in civilized surroundings, with a two-hour drive from downtown Vancouver to the bustling alpine resort of Whistler. That journey is

a highlight in itself, as you admire the sparkling

waters of Howe Sound below the Sea-to-Sky Highway, and stop near Squamish to view Shannon Falls, BC's third-highest waterfall at 335 m (1,100 ft).

Spend the afternoon strolling through Whistler village and shopping for handcrafted jewellery or First Nations art, or warm up your muscles with a bike ride around Lost Lake. After fine dining at Araxi or carb-loading at the Old Spaghetti Factory, don't party too late at popular nightclubs such as Garfinkel's or Buffalo Bills, so you can wake up in time for the 10 a.m. flight north to Sky Camp.

The 50-minute, 120-km (75-mi) flight showcases an incredible range of backcountry



(L) This wood cabin is command central for a Sky Camp adventure. (Below) Kayaking on Crystal Lake offers breathtaking views

terrain for the Beaver's five passengers. Traversing the Lillooet River, you fly over pine beetle-scarred ridges and logging roads in the Pemberton Valley, past extinct volcano Mount Meager and huge (yet receding) glaciers, and above murky wetlands like pea-soup splotches on the landscape. Veteran pilot and tour operator Dale Douglas finally rounds a bend and the destination comes into sight, then the plane circles for a butter-smooth landing on Crystal Lake in the Lord's River Valley.

"These roadless alpine lakes are getting harder to find around the world," says Douglas, who obtained a lease, cleared lakeside property, flew in building materials and opened Sky Camp in 2005. "Most people are just blown away by the peace and quiet here."

The village of Gold Bridge, 60 km (37 mi) away, is the nearest human habitation. Ditch your cell phone and Blackberry; they don't work here anyway. Sky Camp sits at an elevation of 1.37 km (4,500 ft) and nestles between the massive Ts'yl-os and Big Creek/South Chilcotin Provincial Parks.

After unloading your bags on the dock, sample the camp's amenities. A high-ceilinged, two-level wood cabin, featuring an open kitchen, dining area and barbecue deck, is command central for Sky Camp guides, who cook downstairs and bunk upstairs. For guests, six spacious safari-style wall tents boast hand-hewn log beds with Ralph Lauren duvets. Wash up with clean running water and visit

the tidy composting toilet before feasting on a picnic lunch, including pepperoni and vegetarian pizzas served with lemonade and iced tea.

Next, guides Ryan Hamm and Stephan Guentette enthusiastically lead the group on the first of several hikes you'll enjoy in the days ahead. This one takes you to the Heavenly Knolls, and you start by circling around the lake's north end.

Beneath luxuriant spruce and pine trees, you discover purple lupins and fresh bear spoor by the trail (no worries: Hamm's packing bear spray!). While climbing up a ridge, Hamm points out the medicinal properties of aspen trees and yellow arnica flowers. The air is marvellously fresh at this higher elevation, as indicated by the rich growth of lichen on branches.

Pause to snack on yogurt-blueberry bars while gazing at Mount McClure, whose pointed 2,800-m (9,200-ft) summit dominates Crystal Lake's skyline. Then it's just a short hike up to the Heavenly Knolls themselves, where you can gaze



(R) The best part of any adventure? Relaxing afterwards. (Below) The tireless Sky Camp guides rarely need a break



down on Sky Camp far across the lake. On the way back, in the woods near the camp, a grouse feigns injury to distract your hiking party from her little chicks. The entire hike takes about 3.5 hours.

Another day, a shorter hike takes you to No Moose Falls, crossing bubbling streams on little wooden bridges, then pausing for lunch on a granite outcropping before making a steep descent along a pine-laden ridge to view the waterfall's steady thunder up close. Or, with luck, en route to the Ponds of Youth you might spot a mule deer cantering across the meadows. Most of these place names originate with Sky Camp's guides, since the region is so unexplored.

After hiking, plunge into the lake for a swim, followed by a visit to the wood-fired sauna. Then freshen up in the propane-heated showers before your gourmet dinner in the cabin, which might

consist of barbecued salmon and asparagus, with pecan pie for desert, or Japanese dumplings with Thai peanut sauce and an

Asian stir-fry with rice, broccoli and chicken, plus chocolate cream cake.

If, in the middle of an evening Scrabble game, you glance out the window and spot rainbow trout jumping in the lake, consider heading out in the morning in a canoe or kayak to try some fishing. Odds are excellent, especially with Sky Camp's catch-and-release policy.

Even without a rod in hand, Crystal Lake is a genuine Zen experience. Bald eagles perch overlooking the water, while the loons and wolves whose calls you may have heard at dawn are now silent. An almost-hypnotic calm prevails as you paddle back to shore, savouring the sun's warmth. No problem if your watercraft handling skills are less than expert: the gentle breeze that eventually comes up propels you back to shore.

If you crave more of an adrenaline rush, grab a 24-speed Specialized mountain bike and ride around the lake, negotiating tight corners and steep little hills.

There's no shortage of ways to enjoy Sky Camp's isolated natural splendour. When it's time to fly back to Whistler and return to Vancouver, you'll wish this taste of upscale wilderness living could have lasted longer. **W**



IF YOU GO To book a trip or get more details on Sky Camp, visit www.whistleroutbackadventures.com or call toll-free 1-866-455-1601. Whistler Outback Adventures can arrange customized, all-inclusive vacations to Sky Camp. Per-person, per-day cost for these packages ranges from \$200 to \$500 US. An all-inclusive six-day, multi-sport trip to Sky Camp is \$2,698 US.