



Escapism

TORONTO

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[BRITISH COLUMBIA]

HITTIN' THE ROAD

Taylor Newlands discovers the thrill of adventure — and the challenges of van-life — on a winter RV road trip in B.C.

8

Provincial parks in Squamish

1,200

Climbing routes in the Squamish area

200 KM

Marked ski runs at Whistler Blackcomb

THAT'S IT?" I ask nervously as I'm handed the keys to a CanaDream Maxi Motorhome after a surprisingly speedy check-in. I almost want to turn back and just spend our vacation in Vancouver. I've long loved watching van-life romanticized in Instagram reels, but as a downtown dweller born and raised in Toronto, I never thought I would actually live in an RV — even for a week-long road trip. Now, my partner Jack and I are taking an RV through the B.C. wilderness in late winter to snowboard the most challenging terrain we've ever faced.

The staff at the CanaDream rental depot assure us that we're all set to go. We

RIGHT: This motorhome is outfitted with heating and insulation to keep travellers warm even in B.C.'s winter weather



© CanaDream

BELOW: Inside the RV, writer Taylor Newlands can reach the fridge from sitting on the queen-sized bed



already watched an hour of training videos at home before this trip. Going through the provided checklist, we inspect the massive vehicle one last time before climbing up into the cab and starting the engine.

Vancouver's narrow streets aren't meant for a vehicle of this size. The Maxi Motorhome is 29 feet — about two car-lengths — and requires 13 feet of clearance. We stare out the windshield with a laser focus as we weave our way through the heavy traffic, white-knuckling it all the way.

After almost an hour of driving with the silent intensity of a final exam, we make it out of the city. The landscape opens up into a breathtaking expanse of lush evergreen forest climbing white-capped mountains that dip into the ocean. The beauty spreads out endlessly under the crisp blue sky. Jaws on the floor, our shoulders drop and we finally exhale a breath that feels like we've been holding in for years.

Without the chaos of the city, the RV is actually much easier to drive. We cruise along the curving Sea to Sky Highway towards Squamish.

GETTING THERE

Vancouver is an easy five-hour flight from Toronto, with many major airlines offering multiple options per day, starting as low as \$200 roundtrip.

Home to a pint-sized population of about 25,000 people, it's said — by just about every local we meet — to be the fastest-growing city in Canada. While that might not be fact, it must feel that way with the recent influx of condo developments and Vancouverites settling in. Commuting into the city for work is a small price to pay for access to all the natural splendour and outdoor pursuits Squamish offers.

With the RV parked, we zip through the forest trails on electric mountain bikes, surrounded by trees covered in lime green buds — a signal that it's already spring in this tiny town surrounded by mountains. Brent Macdonald, our gregarious guide from Blazing Saddles Adventures, leads us alongside the brackish riverbank, over bridges and through thickets, as he teaches us about the area's flora and fauna.

The pedal-assist bikes make it easy to traverse the bumpy terrain on this lengthy ride — something that would have been extremely challenging for me on a regular bike. But it's almost too easy. Before I know it, I'm speeding way too fast into a rocky patch. I lurch forward and slip right off the bike, narrowly missing the rocks. Embarrassed and startled, I clamber back up onto the bike. After checking that I'm alright, Macdonald regales us with tales of other mishaps.

He's an interesting character brimming with facts and stories about Squamish. Once home to a large logging and forestry industry, the town is becoming more

WHEELS UP

Find CanaDream RV rental stations across Canada, just outside of major cities, from Vancouver and Calgary to Toronto, Montreal and even Whitehorse. The fleet of vehicles ranges in size from accommodating two adults to sleeping four adults and three children. Extra features like winterized motorhomes, and add-ons like WiFi, bike racks, and linen and kitchen kits, make travelling easy. canadream.com



ABOVE: Hike or take the Sea to Sky Gondola to the top of Mount Habrich for epic vistas, mountaintop hikes and dining with incredible views

gentrified. New and old blend together in an eclectic mix of cutesy, modern shops and weathered buildings.

Stopping into Fox & Oak for a break from our ride, the hipster-esque coffee shop is exactly what you'd expect to find in Toronto's coolest neighbourhoods. A quirky selection of items and sustainably focused goods line the shelves while magnificently fluffy doughnuts in unique flavours glisten behind the glass.

Squamish is full of surprises, but the eco-conscious, laid-back, nature-loving vibe is what permeates, bringing together the big-city transplants and the locals who have lived here for generations. The Stawamus Chief, a sky-scraping granite monolith beloved by hikers, bikers, rock climbers and base jumpers, watches over all in this picturesque place.

Sitting inside the Sea to Sky Gondola, our view slowly expands as we glide up to the summit of Mount Habrich. We reward ourselves with lunch and share

a small flight of beer — our first taste of B.C.'s booming craft beer scene — on the Summit Lodge Patio, a sprawling terrace with panoramic views of the ocean and mountains in every direction, as far as the eye can see. Crossing the suspension bridge and hiking the trails at the top of the summit, we encounter snow. It's a stark contrast from our spring bike ride, which bodes well for the second leg of our journey when we'll be snowboarding in Whistler.

It's almost dark when we reach MTN Fun Basecamp, our home for the night. I jump out and guide the RV into our large campsite, surrounded by trees and a picture-perfect babbling brook with a tiny bridge on one side. Nervous about draining the black and grey water tanks, we vow not to use the toilet or the shower onboard. We skip the sewage and water hookups, and just connect the electrical.

With night falling, we have to insulate the RV so it doesn't get too cold. Fabric pads velcro to the windows to keep the heat inside, but the temperature won't drop below freezing tonight, so we leave the heat off and grab a taxi into town.

Squamish has an impressively robust craft beer scene, especially for being so small. At

(Left) Tara O'Grady, (Right) Taylor Newlands



LEFT AND ABOVE: Backcountry Brewing is a trendy spot in Squamish for craft brews and bites

WRAPPED UP IN BLANKETS AND SURROUNDED BY THE SOUNDS OF THE FOREST, OUR COZY DWELLING COULD RIVAL THE COMFORT OF A HOTEL

Backcountry Brewing, we're surprised to hear EDM pumping out of the speakers to a hip crowd of casually dressed beer drinkers. We tuck into a delicious spread of super thin, crispy pizza, caesar salad, and sweet and savoury Golden Dragon chicken wings. It's hard to decide whether we love the food or our beer flights more, but funny names like the "Might as Well Go for a Soda" Sour earn extra points. We grab a few cans to stock up our fridge in the RV.

In an industrial area, Raincity Distillery is so hidden, we almost turn back before we find it. Squamish art lines the walls in the cutesy tasting room where patrons drink delicious and creative craft cocktails made with the distillery's spirits. I'm starting to understand the way old and new are woven together in Squamish.

Down a back alleyway, we stumble upon the dive-y Cliffside Cider. The small-batch cidery feels like a hole-in-the-wall hangout only frequented by locals. Bundled up around a fire on the dog-friendly patio, we're surrounded by other outdoor adventurers basking in the day's accomplishments and sipping well-deserved ciders. I could get used

to this: putting ourselves to the test in the great outdoors by day and cracking a cold one at night. I wear my banged-up knees and sore legs as a badge of honour.

Tipsy from the night's adventures, we stumble into our motorhome and crank the heat. It doesn't take long to warm up, and the small space suddenly feels very cozy. We snuggle into the plush queen-sized bed and have our first sleep in the RV.

At some point in the night, someone (not naming names) breaks our no-toilet pact and the black water tank is no longer empty. We decide we might as well enjoy the comfort

PLAN YOUR TRIP DOWN

Ski hills use shapes and colours to classify the difficulty of the terrain. Green circle runs are for beginners, blue squares are for intermediates, black diamonds are advanced and double black diamonds are expert-level.

of having a toilet onboard and use it to its, ahem, fullest. The foot pedal system of filling and flushing is easier to manage than we had anticipated — we just have to make sure the water pump switch is turned on.

Waking from a deep and glorious sleep in our little home, we peel back our insulation and let the light in, revealing the morning rain tapping against the roof and windows. Wrapped up in blankets and surrounded by the sounds of the forest, our cozy dwelling could rival the comfort of a hotel. We fill the Nespresso coffee maker with a water bottle and make two cups with CanaDream's provided pods. Sitting in our camping chairs (also provided with the RV rental) under the shelter of the tree canopy, we sip our coffee and listen — the gentle gurgling of flowing water in the creek, the big wet drops falling to the forest floor, the trees rustling in the light breeze. We enjoy the serenity of Squamish for one last moment. It's time to head to Whistler.

Driving higher into the mountains, the rain turns to snow. We pass plenty of signs urging drivers to chain their tires, but this late in the season, we're safe from the most treacherous weather conditions.

When we arrive at the RV park, it's nothing like our last spot. Dozens of motorhomes are parked beside each other, with barely a metre of space in between. We're pros at the electrical hookup by now, but we have to empty the black water tank. We attach one end of the hose to the RV and one to the sewage opening in the ground. We pull the lever and the tank empties. It's way easier than we thought and I'm embarrassed we didn't set this up in Squamish.

Next up: the fresh water tank. We attach both ends, turn on the water and fill the tank. It's almost like gassing up a car — except

RIGHT: Newlands and her partner Jack are all suited up for a day on the slopes in Whistler

when it's full, the water sprays out all over me. "Turn it off!" I yell out. Wetness aside, all of the hookups are easy enough, especially with two people. And now that everything is working, we can finally take a gloriously hot (and much-needed) shower onboard before heading into town.

Whistler is the polar opposite of Squamish. Strolling around the village, I can see where Ontario's Blue Mountain took its inspiration from. The walkable, commercialized area is full of gear shops, clothing stores, bars and restaurants. Tourists and seasonal residents flood the area in between hitting the slopes and frequenting attractions like the beautifully curated Audain Art Museum and Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre — a significant Indigenous cultural site and a special experience that should be on every Whistler itinerary.

Of course, the mountains draw the crowds, and we're here to get our fill. Billed as the largest ski resort in North America, Whistler Blackcomb boasts over 8,000 acres of skiable terrain with more than 200 marked runs. As two intermediate-level snowboarders who still take the occasional tumble on Ontario's toy-town-ski-hills, we're intimidated to say the least. This is the big leagues.

To help us tackle the terrain, we opt for a full-day private snowboarding lesson with a guide. A self-taught snowboarder and Canadian transplant, Felipe is effortlessly



impressive on slopes. He manages to check his phone, snowboard and critique our skills all at the same time. Meanwhile, Jack and I are fighting for our lives just to get down the steep runs in one piece.

Challenged by white-out conditions, difficult terrain and attempts to practise my new-learned technique, my head is spinning — and before I know it, so am I. Tumbling down, I fall forward, bashing my hands and already tender knees, and landing flat on my stomach. Snow is more forgiving than rocks though, and I'm determined to keep going.

At this time of year, the bottom of the mountain is too slushy to traverse, so Felipe instructs us to stay on the upper part. Even without ever reaching the highest peak or the lowest runs, there's still an immense amount of terrain to choose from — and get lost in.

Aside from my fall, our first day is a success. After soothing my aching bones in the hot tub at Scandinave Spa Whistler, we turn in for the night in the cozy comfort of our warm little home on wheels.

With the new techniques Felipe taught us, and a bluebird sky on day two, carving the blue and green runs on Whistler feels easier than before. In search of a challenge, we take the Peak 2 Peak Gondola to Blackcomb. Both mountains have designated beginner areas, but the intermediate and advanced runs are closely intertwined. Soon the white-out conditions are back. After a wrong turn,

we're faced with a Black Diamond.

Trying to get down feels impossible and I can't handle another bad fall. Staring down the mountain, it looks like a vertical drop into the white abyss. I plop down into the snow and start to cry. Just like *The Princess Bride* in the fire swamp, my Wesley gives me the pep-talk of a lifetime. He pulls me up on my feet and we slowly wind our way down the run. Finally, we make it to the gondola that takes us back to the village.

Aching, exhausted and thoroughly beaten by nature, we're ready to climb into the RV and say goodnight, but we have tickets to one last experience in Whistler: Vallea Lumina. The night is pitch-black when we arrive at the multi-media experience, a 1-kilometre hike through an old-growth forest.

Snowflakes start to gently fall, reflecting the colourful lights that dance through the trees to the sound of far-away melodies. The story of two hikers plays out in enthralling visual displays as we walk among the towering trees. My eyes fill with tears again — at the beauty of it all, at the epic force of nature that we contended with on this trip, and at just how much we were able to accomplish. We went from city slickers to van-life lovers in a week, and put our bodies to the test with biking, hiking and snowboarding — and came out victorious. Van-life was easier than we thought, teaching us that we're all capable of so much more than we realize. ♦

ALL YOU CAN SKI

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