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# Guided mountain bike trips in B.C. break ground in adventure travel

A weeklong adventure in B.C. cured the author of an aversion to mountain biking.



MEC trip participant Don Ball, left, MEC's Stephen Matthews, trip participant Murray Cuff and "Happy" trail in Squamish, B.C. (REUBEN KRABBE)





On day two, participants on the MEC Sea-to-Sky mountain biking trip rode Cheakamus Lake (FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By **KATRINA CLARKE** Staff Reporter

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SQUAMISH, B.C.—I’m flying down a loopy, “bermy” trail and putting my complete concentration on the path in front of me. My brain’s fear switch turns off, and I finally feel it — mountain biking is a release.

Some context: I have a long-standing love-hate relationship with mountain biking. As a teenager, I begged my parents for a bike but barely rode it. In my early 20s, I tried trail riding but was terrible. When my editor sent me an email this spring asking, “Do you bike? Could you go on an

intermediate [guided bike trip in B.C. on a mountain bike with MEC](#) (Mountain Equipment Co-Op)?” I decided to give it one more try.

For seven days in July, I rode some of the world’s best trails, met bad-ass mountain bikers and took in jaw-dropping scenery on a trip easily described as once in a lifetime. It was the first of [MEC’s](#) mountain bike trips along B.C.’s Sea-to-Sky Corridor, part of the outdoor retailer co-op’s foray into adventure travel, and included stops in Whistler, Squamish, Pemberton and the South Chilcotins.

Still, on day one, I didn’t know what I was in for.

I met the other riders at the North Vancouver MEC on a Sunday. My companions for the week were Alan Yeung, 53, a software development director from Ottawa, Dr. Don Ball, 62, a dentist from Ottawa, and Dr. Murray Cuff, 60, a retired military periodontist from Victoria. Ball and Cuff met in dentistry school at Western University and the two met Yeung through mountain biking in Ottawa. Each of them had decades of biking experience.

“Are you intimidated? Riding with us old guys?” Cuff asked me with a wink. I laughed hard and said no, I’d been training for two weeks and liked a challenge.

We strapped our bikes on the back of a truck and hopped in with our guide, Penny Cameron, an exceptionally fit and knowledgeable mountain biking guru in her early 50s who works in Whistler as a professional mountain bike patroller in the summer and a ski patroller in the winter.

After a two-hour drive to Whistler along the winding road carved into ocean-side cliffs, we parked at the [Aava Whistler Hotel](#). There, a “bike valet” helped us with our gear as Cameron laid out plans for the evening: a quick ride around Whistler’s Lost Lake trails followed by a safety lesson.

“Safety lesson; don’t mountain bike,” quipped Ball. The guys then rattled off their laundry list of injuries: Yeung’s broken rib and punctured lung, Cuff’s broken foot and dislocated AC joint, Ball’s cracked ribs and slashed leg.

On our ride through the Lost Lake intermediate-level trails, I rode fast to keep up, gasping for air while the guys and Cameron barely broke a sweat. I felt eyes on me, everyone wondering if I’d last seven days.

At dinner, Cuff encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone.

“Everything about this is out of my comfort zone!” I wanted to say. Instead, I suggested the guys drink a lot that night — hoping for the next day’s hangovers.

Day two of riding stoked a fire in my belly but also drained me. I gritted my teeth and charged over roots and rocks on the Cheakamus Lake trail, following Cuff’s instructions to “Pedal, pedal, pedal!” But then I crashed into a prickly bush, broke out in a rash and fell behind the group. After four hours of biking, I was done. I ate a lunch three times a normal size, failed at lifting my 30-pound bike into the truck and dragged myself to Aava’s pool.

Sinking into the hot tub, I felt my angry-looking rash flare up. Would I last seven days?



On day three, we rode in Pemberton, a place Cameron said is known for its steep climbs, dry soil, rocky trails and lack of options for beginners. Sweat dripped from my face 10 minutes into a tough climb on a trail ironically called “Happy.” Other routes in B.C. are named “Back pain,” “Your mom” and “See colours and puke.”

Pemberton’s trails were a grind, but again, I felt that inner fire burning. I muttered profanity-laden pep talks and swelled with pride when I made it over a steep drop or forced my bike into submission on loose rocks. I felt like a different person — one who liked this.

“Not bad for a two-week-old,” Cuff said at the end of the ride.

I learned more about the guys as the trip progressed. Personality-wise, Ball is a quiet guy who delivers incredible one-liners, Cuff is outgoing and refers to himself as “loud, confident and wrong,” and Yeung is even-keeled and a go-getter who never met a trail he didn’t like. They’re all married with kids, though their spouses and offspring don’t mountain bike. They bonded over their love of riding — and post-ride drinking — and regard their time on trails as sacred, calling mountain biking the greatest stress reliever.

I didn’t quite understand the stress “reliever” part.

Day four was the trip highlight; a stay at [Tyax Wilderness Resort and Spa](#) in the Chilcotins, a flight on a 1961 DeHavilland Beaver float plane, and four hours of riding through remote trails. We cycled through an alpine meadow with snow-capped mountains behind us, a narrow swath of dirt path in front of us and wildflowers all around. Cameron led us through the trails, singing “Hel-lo, hel-lo!” to warn any nearby grizzlies of our approach. At this point, I sped along, motivated by fear of becoming a bear snack. I ended up jamming my tire on a rock, flying over my handlebars and landing face-down in the dirt. “I’m OK!” I yelled from under my bike.

“Now, it’s a real mountain bike trip,” chuckled Cameron when she saw my bloody leg and the huge smile on my dirt-covered face.

Returning to Tyax four hours later, I was high on adrenalin but physically wiped. It took all my energy to walk toward the lake, collapse on the grass, get up 10 minutes later and walk into the shower fully clothed. At dinner, I couldn’t hold a fork and my fingers started twitching; signs of a day spent death-gripping handlebars.

The next day, we took the notoriously bumpy Hurley River Forest Service road to Squamish, where we checked into our hotel and I promptly fell asleep. I’ve never regretted a nap so much when, at dinner, the guys raved about their incredible afternoon ride, Squamish’s fantastic “flow-y” trails and their mischievous bike ride through the hotel hallway.

Luckily, I got a taste of their experience, spending the next two days riding on winding trails through Squamish’s Ferngully-like temperate rainforest and climbing switchbacks to mountain top views of Howe Sound’s turquoise waters.

But it wasn’t until one of my last rides, when I was whipping around berms and whooping with joy down Squamish’s famous, flowy Half Nelson trail, that I realized all my apprehension about this

trip has dissolved.

I finally understood what the guys meant when they said mountain biking clears the mind.

“It’s like meditation,” Yeung said. “When you get into the zone, you don’t think about anything else. Everything goes away. It’s just turn, turn, turn.”

*Katrina Clarke was hosted by MEC and its partners, none of which reviewed or approved this story.*

**Do this trip:** MEC’s inaugural adventure travel trip cost a total of \$3,380. Cost included an expert guide, a float plane ride, accommodation, some meals and transportation throughout the week.

**Next up:** MEC’s four-day mountain bike trip along the Sea-to-Sky Corridor. Participants will ride single-track trails in Squamish, Whistler, Pemberton, and the North Shore. The trip runs from Sept. 14 to 17 and costs \$1,230. Please see [MEC's website](#) or [contact MEC](#) for more details about [availability](#).

**Next year:** MEC’s 2018 trips will take place in B.C. between July and September, lasting between three and seven days. Specifics are yet to be confirmed. MEC is also considering expanding their trips, offering ones outside of B.C.

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