

NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Anna Beiderwieden scales a crack at Copper Mountain outside Terrace.

Clinging to cliffs VERTICAL EXCURSIONS ON THE ROCK WALLS OF THE NORTH

by Matt J Simmons

thewriter@mattjsimmons.com

The granite is cold to the touch. Inside the dark fissure that splits the rock face, it's wet. I shiver involuntarily, but keep my grip tight. Behind me the sun squints through the cedars, those stoic sentinels of the dark, damp rainforest. It warms my back and spurs me on.

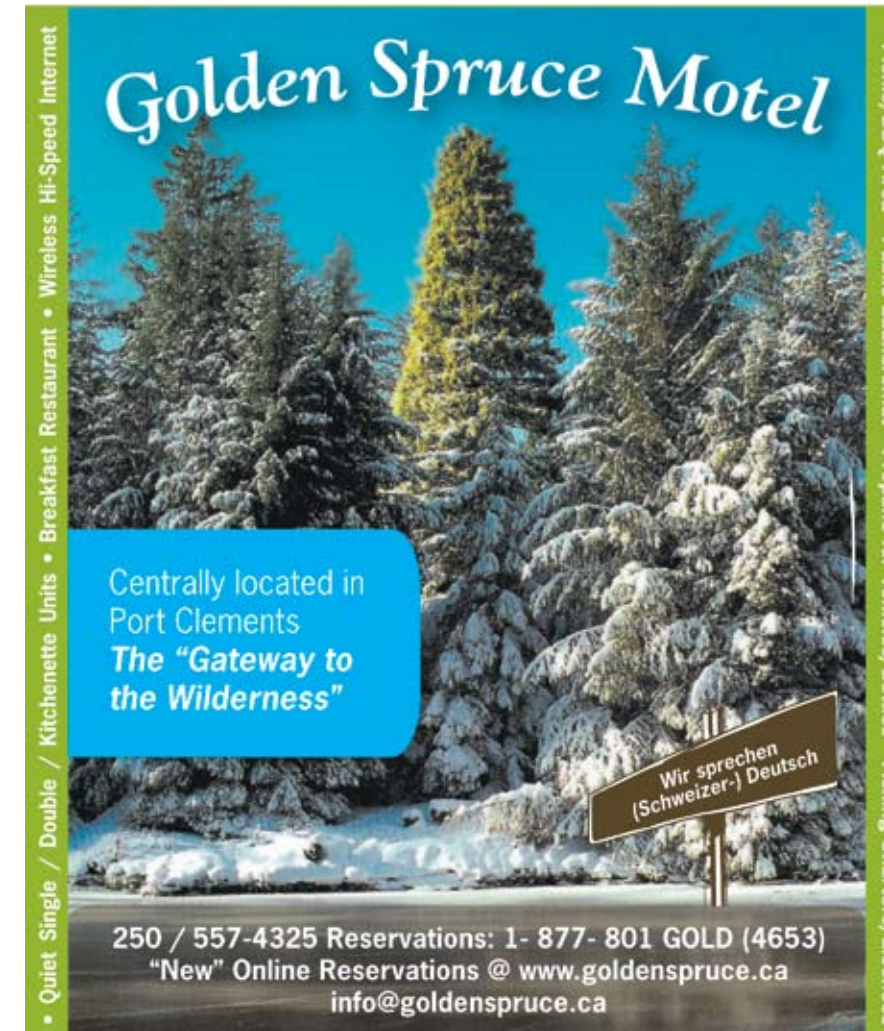
I reach up and search for the next handhold while wriggling my foot into the ugly crack. I look over my shoulder to take in the view, catch my breath and chalk my damp fingers. It is—as usual up here in the north—stunning. An eagle circles lazily above the Skeena; the big mountains across the river still sport snow on their peaks. The sky stretches from one rugged horizon to the other. There couldn't be a better backdrop to an excursion into the vertical world.

Climbing in northern BC is a different game than climbing places like Squamish, Vancouver Island or the famed Skaha Bluffs of Penticton. It's colder up here, more rugged, and the rock isn't as well tended; there are less amenities, fewer folks queuing for a morning coffee at the last stop before the crags, and more bears kicking around the surrounding bush. But isn't that what climbing used to be—an adventure into the unknown?

For experienced climbers, those hardy individuals willing to fill a pack with gear and head out into the proverbial unknown, northern BC is a veritable outdoor playground. As one local climber put it, "There is no climbing 'scene' up here, but you find a good partner, preferably someone who doesn't mind doing some bushwhacking and cleaning, and you set out for adventure." Because this is a truly vast landscape, the golden possibility for a first ascent of some unknown, unnamed face awaits the truly adventurous.

To the uninitiated, climbing is a mysterious and dangerous sport best left to a younger, more foolish generation. But as equipment improves, techniques advance and safety precautions take precedence, this incredible

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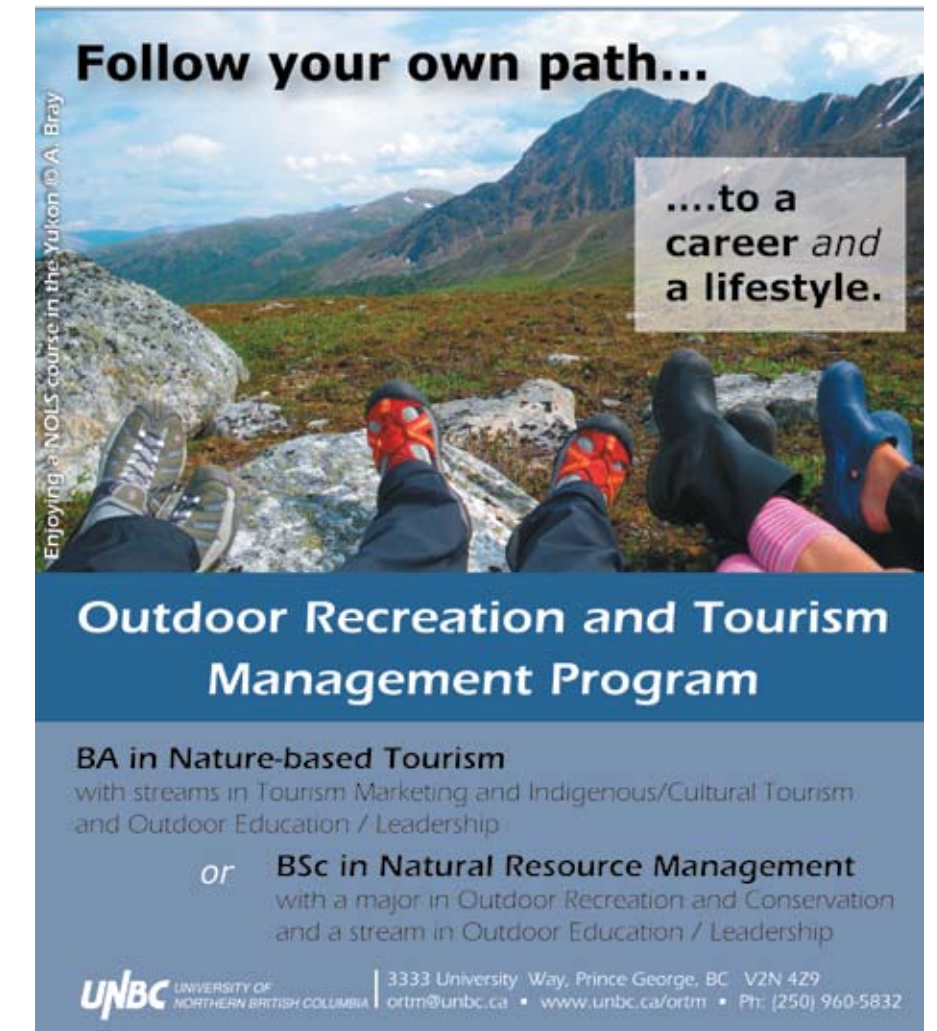


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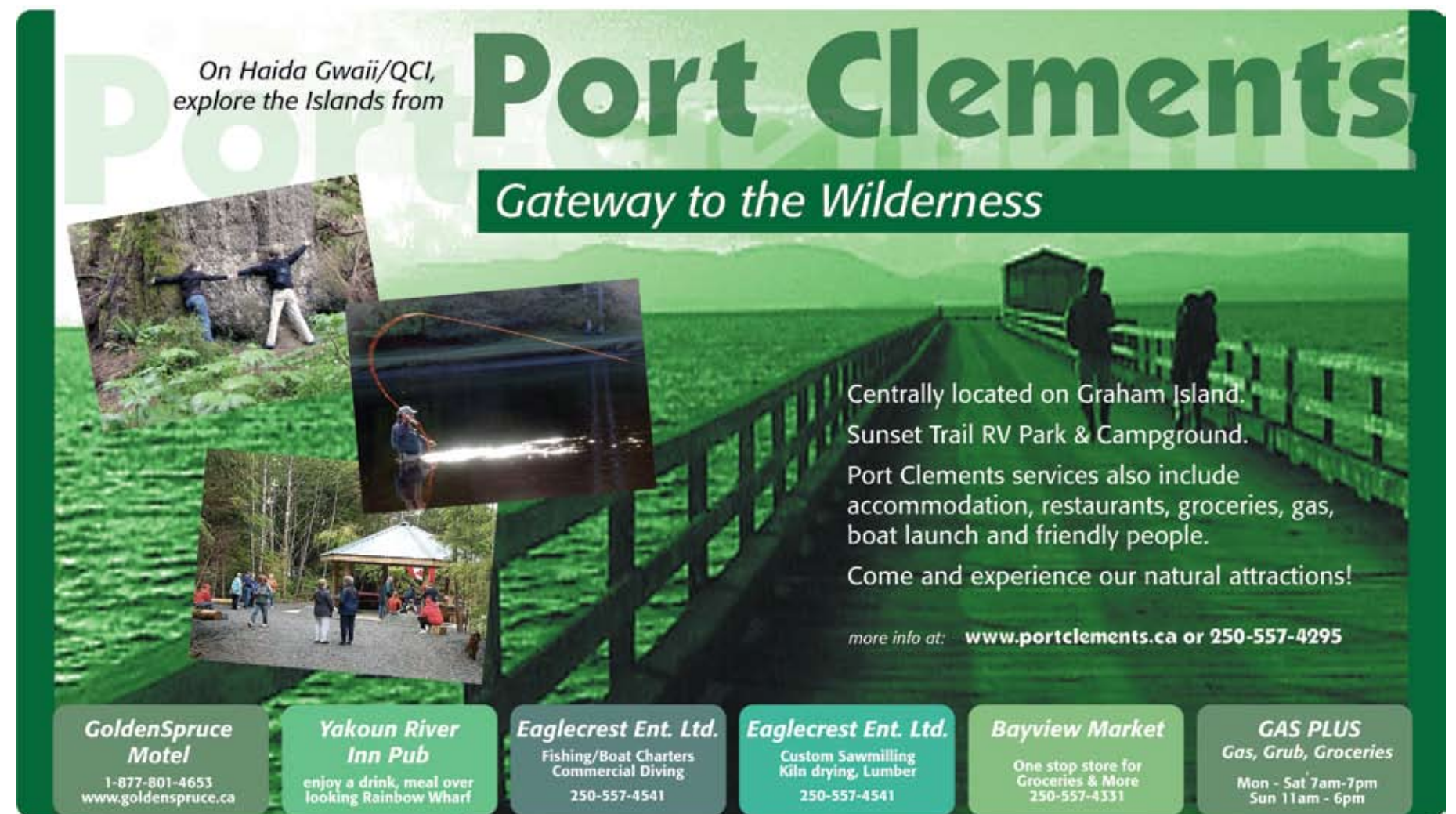
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(above) The great expanse of Hagwilget Peak's angular rock and knife-edged ridges presides over the Hazeltons, offering some long climbing routes with the opportunity to top out at the summit.

(inset at right) Climber Bryan Last contemplates his next move up a dihedral, or 'open book,' on one of the Hagwilget mountain's routes.

(left) Andy Lecuyer ascends a route at Exstew.

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Outdoor sport is increasingly accessible. Far from extreme, rock-climbing is safe and exhilarating not only for the vertical view it offers but for the opportunity to summit a piece of otherwise unassailable terrain. That said, those wanting to get a taste for the sport should first head out with someone experienced, either a local guide or a friend in the know. Or, to simply come to grips with what it's all about and see incredible geologic landscapes, why not check out these amazing places on foot? And if you meet up with a climber when you're out hiking, pick their brains about the sport and the location. Dedicated climbers are almost always passionate about climbing, and more than happy to share their knowledge.

The following is a collection of some of the known locations across the region, places northern climbers have already discovered, tested, and cared for. For more information—access, maps, photos, climbing routes, camping info—on most of these sites, check out Northern BC Rock Climbing at northernbrock.wetpaint.com. When the weather prohibits exploration outdoors, keep your fingers fit by scaling some of the North's indoor walls in Prince George, Prince Rupert, and Smithers. For specific locations, go to www.indoorclimbing.com/britishcolumbia.html.

jonathan lambert

Tyee

The trees that were obscuring the view suddenly drop away and there it is: the majestic Skeena River, widening as it wends its inexorable path to the Pacific Ocean. But my eyes are on the rock opposite the highway from the river. A faded red face is painted on the wall—an ancient First Nations pictograph—and yet, even that escapes my interest. It's the cliffs above that I'm anticipating. Tyee rock climbing is Prince Rupert's golden granite. About 30 kms from the rainy city, set in the scenic backdrop of a beautiful landscape and amazing cultural heritage, the climbing is certainly special. There are two walls that feature several developed climbs. The area is well maintained—lovingly cared for by a handful of dedicated enthusiasts—and fun to climb. The only drawback: there are no beginner level climbs. But practice can be had, when the Rupert rain prohibits outdoor climbing, at the Civic Centre's indoor climbing wall.

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(top and middle) The spectacular views and numerous routes on limestone rock make for good adventure at Mount Pope, near Fort St James.

(bottom) Climber Renny Talbot grapples with some overhanging rock at Tye, not far from Prince Rupert.

submitted

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Exchamsiks

Coming from Terrace, the Exchamsiks wall is impossible to miss. A massive monolith that rises dizzyingly from the river valley, casting a shadow on a good portion of the surrounding landscape, the wall is humbling. At its base, Exchamsiks River Provincial Park serves those just wanting to get a view of the ludicrous size of the cliff, but to get onto the rock itself, park on the highway. There are sport routes—the kind of climbing that requires less commitment, less knowledge, and less gear—just minutes from a pullout on Highway 16. Exchamsiks’ previously explored multi-pitch routes can be reached by hiking and scrambling through the bush. For those who aren’t ready for the commitment of climbing a cliff of this scale, it is well worth stopping for a stretch and a long look at the big wall.

Copper Mountain

“Terrace is the hub of climbing in the Northwest,” says Ray Hawkes, owner of Solstice Rock Guides. A guide and instructor as well as avid climber, Hawkes sees the community benefiting from climbing the same way that Squamish did a decade ago. “Squamish was primarily a resource community and is now a tourist and recreational destination for skiing, mountaineering, white-water paddling, rock climbing and windsurfing,” he says. “Northern resource communities would be well advised to look at similar communities that have turned their economy around.”

If you’re anywhere near Terrace and want to climb rock, Copper Mountain is the place to be. This big, distinctive bump on the landscape east of town—right in front of you if you’re driving toward Hazelton—is the most developed climbing terrain near Terrace. While it might look daunting from a distance, it has been well developed for every level of climber. There are routes for beginners looking to top-rope some fun, easy climbs, and for advanced climbers who want to place trad gear on multi-pitch routes up into the clouds above. The view over Terrace is exceptional—the alpine can also be accessed by a volunteer-maintained trail—and the climbing community is committed and passionate.

Onion Lake/Chist Creek

With some beginner climbs and easy access, this chunk of granite situated between Terrace and Kitimat is the ideal outing for those getting into the sport. While climbers have been coming here for years, the Forest Service recently developed it into a rec site, adding an outhouse, campsites and picnic tables. Everything is short enough to appeal to even height-fearing beginners, but there are challenging climbs as well to satisfy the most advanced.

Exstew

There is a place...a magical place...where the bugs pick you up and carry you up, up, up, past the climbers scaling like spiders on the overhanging wall, their nylon ropes dangling beneath them into the open air. A place where the frequent rain is the only respite from the seething masses of intrepid insects. As one enthusiast says, “Bring bug dope...the mosquitoes here are *evil*.” But it is definitely a magical place as far as climbing is concerned. Not far up the Exstew Forest Service Road, between Terrace and Prince Rupert, is the Lower Exstew Sport Wall, where climbers have camped and put routes up the rock face. An increasingly popular climbing destination, Hawkes describes it as a place of “huge potential”.

Suskwa

This little climbing wall is found along the Suskwa River. Reports of the four sport climbs set on the wall by the river describe it as excellent climbing. There’s a nearby campsite, so this might make for a good summer stopover en route to distant destinations. between Hazelton and Moricetown

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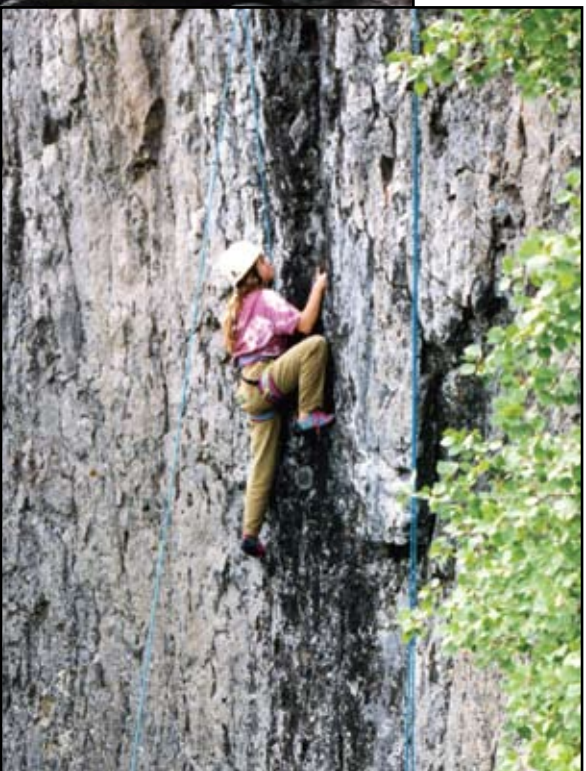


(right) Jonathan Lambert places protection before continuing upward on this climb at Terrace's Copper Mountain.



drew beiderwieden

(below) A young climber learns the ropes on the practice wall at Owen Hat, south of Houston.



paul glover



barb sharp

Erin Hall enjoys the sun and good holds on a route at Exstew, between Terrace and Rupert.

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Hagwilget Bridge

Under the bridge that spans the Bulkley River between New and Old Hazelton are some of the region's human spider webs. Northern climbers have explored the sheer cliffs that drop down from the one-way bridge just outside of K'san. There are several routes on the rocks that are accessed by trails from the road; at the cliff edge, would-be climbers rappel into the canyon then climb back up again.

Hagwilget Peak

The climbing at its namesake bridge is but a shadow of this gorgeous goliath of the northern mountains. There is an easier way to the dramatic summit via Station Creek Trail, but if it's roped climbing you're after, there is a more exciting way.

The climb requires some amount of dedication, but the panoramic view from the peak makes it all worthwhile.

Stewart

The climbs out at Bear's Den Crag are all frighteningly named for the lumbering brown bears that prowl this Stewart/Meziadin landscape. But armed with knowledge, gear, and a passion for climbing, locals hit these cliffs frequently enough to have put a few bolts into the rock.

Owen Hat

A half-hour drive down the Morice River Road south of Houston, Owen Hat looks from a distance like a big scruffy toque. It is a bizarre conglomeration of rock, its lower half comprised

of pillar basalt—strangely textured hexagonal columns—and its upper half a smoother face. With easy access from the road, there are two faces to climb: a smaller one that is good for top-roped training and practice, and the big sheer wall across from it with a number of exciting routes. This little destination, with free camping at its base, is becoming popular not just with the locals but also with people passing through.

Mount Pope

Mount Pope is a scenic outcrop of limestone—yes, the stuff of the Rockies—that overlooks Fort St. James' scenic Stuart Lake. It is a provincial park, with a hiking trail to the summit as well as to the crags. "Thirty-nine climbing routes have been documented," the park website proclaims, referencing Lyle Knight's 1996 book, "Central BC Rock." Pope is suggested as a destination for climbers in the Prince George area; although somewhat out of the way, the rock is high quality and the routes are fun and challenging.

Giscome

The cliffs and boulders at Giscome, about 30 kilometres east of Prince George, are made up of granodiorite—the same rock the Rosetta Stone was carved from. Prince George-area climbers are carving routes up these cliffs overlooking Eaglet Lake at this well-developed area, known both for its roped climbing and its bouldering. The boulders have their own guide sheet, written by Trent Hoover, available online at climbpg.com, a site that offers resources to climbers exploring the region.

Jasper

As I perch precariously on the sheer face of rock above the turquoise glacial river, I look up to see a scruffy mountain goat looking down at me quizzically, as if to say, "What's with the rope, monkey?" Climbing in the Rockies is like arriving at Everest base camp. It may not be what you expected, but the idea of it is so extraordinary that nothing else matters. Jasper's limestone outcrops offer limitless climbing opportunities and an almost unbelievable mountainous backdrop. But, as with all the areas described here, be prepared for every kind of weather: there is nothing regular about weather patterns in the Northwest.



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