

BRITISH COLUMBIA



MARKS SISSONS PHOTOS

Climbers negotiating their way upwards on the iron rungs, cables, ladders and bridges of the via ferrata are rewarded with stunning views of British Columbia's Purcell Mountains.

No pain . . . but plenty of vertical gain

MARK SISSONS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BANFF, ALTA.—Canada's first *via ferrata* brings mountaineering within reach.

Stepping onto the hundred-foot long plank-and-cable suspension bridge, I feel like French tightrope walker Philippe Petit, star of this year's Oscar-winning documentary, *Man on Wire*.

Just breathe and don't look down. I tell myself, trying to suppress a rush of vertigo. Below my hiking boots, craggy cliffs fall away into a kilometre-deep abyss. Wind gently sways the bridge's taught cables, one of which is attached by carabiners and a safety line to my climbing harness.

I've reached this splinter-tightening point by climbing a needle-like granite spire looming behind me.

On the other side of the bridge, the even-steepier Nimbus Tower awaits.

It's the highest point on Canada's first fully operational *via ferrata* (Italian for iron road), a mountain route equipped with fixed cables, iron rungs, ladders and bridges deep in the heart of B.C.'s Purcell Mountains.

Originally built by the Italian army during World War II to safely ferry large numbers of troops through the Dolomites, *via ferrata* form vertical pathways through mountainous terrain otherwise inaccessible to non-climbers.

Now, thanks to the efforts of guides employed by Banff-based wilderness adventure tour operator Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), average Canadians can experience mountaineering without peril.

In other words, no pain for a lot of vertical gain. Or at least no pain of sudden death. I'm safe as long as I remain secured to cables strung

Like a giant jungle gym, a *via ferrata* puts the summit of B.C.'s Purcell Mountains within reach of non-mountaineers

ence, let alone mountaineering skills.

"I was in total awe standing on the side of a precipice looking over 1000 feet straight down and thinking, 'I can't believe I'm so calm and enjoying this so much,'" says Perry Jongma, a nutritionist. "The opportunity to be helicoptered in and out made the experience that much more amazing."

The Jongmas are among more than three dozen fellow thrill-seekers who are on the 15-minute helicopter from a pad near Radium Hot Springs to the Bobbie Burns Lodge, a five-star wilderness retreat that takes its name from the Scottish poet.

Most are Americans, lured north by the promise of this unique adventure, which offers exclusive access to trails and routes inaccessible by road . . . and for the chance to test themselves.

"For my 40th birthday celebration, I decided to take my friends on an adventure," says Candice Bednar of Greenwich, Conn. "I also came here to prove a point to myself—that as an aspiring mountaineer, I could test the limits of what I could do and I think I did that on the *via ferrata*, which is the hardest thing I've ever done."

The *via ferrata* is among several adrenalin-pumping experiences on the weekend's menu.

After breakfast each morning, the staff divide guests into groups based on fitness level, interests and climbing ability.

When board a twin-engine, 11-passenger, jet-powered Bell 212 helicopter for a spectacular ride into timberline terrain, where we spend the day following seasoned mountain guides along high ridges and glacial moraines, across flowery meadows and through thickly forested

via continued on T6



MARKS SISSONS PHOTOS

Crossing the *via ferrata*'s plank-and-cable suspension bridge, above, is not for the faint of heart, but the iron road lets non-climbers scale heights, right, that were once out of reach.

along the entire route. The worst that can happen if I slip is hanging myself upon the rocks—a price I'm willing to pay for the chance to play in this giant jungle gym, complete with swinging bridges, rappels and ladders to climb amid breathtaking alpine scenery.

According to CMH area manager

Bruce Howatt, who oversaw the route's construction over the previous two summers, climbing the *via ferrata* can also produce a whole range of emotions.

"It's the satisfaction of being part of a group of people working together as a team," he says. "It's also the sense of accomplishment and

JUST THE FACTS

BANFF-BASED Canadian Mountain Holidays offers a variety of heli-hiking experiences, from three-night escapes to six-night lodge-to-lodge adventures. For information, see www.canadianmountainholidays.com or call 1-800-661-0252.

BOBBIE BURNS Lodge accommodates 42 hikers in 24 rooms, all with private bath. There's an outdoor whirlpool, sauna, games room, basketball hoops, shop, and a fireplace in its roomy common area. The lodge also boasts an extensive wine cellar.



exhilaration when you finish it."

Among those who have signed on to unleash their inner daredevil on CMH's popular High Flying Adventure—a multi-day helicopter-assisted introduction to mountaineering—are flatlanders Perry and Alex Jongma from Samia, Ont. Neither arrived with any real hiking experi-

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TRAVEL



MARK Sissons PHOTO

A climber nears the summit of Nimbus Tower, the needle-like granite spire that dominates the *via ferrata*.

‘Exhausted and challenged’

VIA FROM T2

ested ravines. There are also opportunities for mountaineering and rappelling, as well as a challenging high-ropes course and zip lines over raging rivers flowing through some of North America's most pristine wilderness — all of which we have virtually to ourselves thanks to our exclusive airborne access.

"I didn't anticipate the freedom you would have to climb into a helicopter and reach the peak of a mountain next to a glacier in minutes," says Cynthia Rusi, a lawyer from Rumson, N.J.

But that freedom comes at a cost to the environment, say critics of using helicopters to access remote wilderness areas.

Some in the outdoor community also view drilling permanent ladders into mountainsides and installing *via ferratas* as a violation of sacred spaces.

While he is sympathetic to both concerns, Bruce Howatt points out that his team was careful to build CMH's *via ferrata* in a remote area over the top of an old mine where hikers, climbers and backcountry skiers seldom, if ever, venture.

Overall, says this 29-year mountain guiding veteran, the benefits of heli-climbing are lasting.

"By exposing people to a wild place, you bring something out in

them — an appreciation for nature — that makes the world a better place."

By the time I climb Mount Nimbus's highest needle, after clambering up and over a vertiginous rock outcropping along a knife-edge route only continuous from a cliff, I'm equal parts exhausted and elated... until I hear a woman's tense voice calling up from the descent route out of sight around the ridge.

"Holy crap! The bridge isn't the scariest part!"

Descent... invariably the most difficult and dangerous stage of mountaineering.

Not being able to see where you are placing your feet as you inch downward demands constant concentration.

Luckily, veteran guide Mark Hammerschmidt, a transplanted Austrian with the agility of a mountain goat, is waiting with rope in hand.

"You're doing great," he says, as he expertly ties the knot my life will soon depend on during my final 60-meter rappel.

"Just lean way back, keep your legs straight out in front of you, and enjoy the ride."

My final leap of faith ends at the base of Nimbus Tower, where one of my fellow iron roaders, Andy Land, a lawyer from Seattle, is watching, drained yet exuberantly philosophical.

"If you want the experience of climbing without the sheer terror that is sometimes associated with lead climbing, this is a fabulous way to do it," he says before taking a long swig of water.

"You've got terrific guides who coach and cajole you and make you feel moving until you realize you've done something you couldn't do."

An hour later, safely helicoptered back to Bobbie Burns lodge, I join the Jongsims, who are still glowing in the aftermath of their daring day. Perry, a former bartender, has even found the inspiration to invent a new cocktail to mark the occasion that she christens the *Via Ferrata*.

"As a Canadian, I was so overwhelmed by doing this incredible climb in my own country," he says as he reflects philosophically on the adventure.

"Not only by what we accomplished today, but by the majesty of our mountains."

Via ferrata may have been invented in Italy, but it's here in Western Canada's vast mountain wilderness that clinging to the side of a cliff and climbing well beyond your comfort zone seems like an ideal way to spend a midsummer's day.

Don't forget to clip in and not look down when you cross that confounded bridge.

Mark Sissons is a Vancouver-based freelance writer. His trip was subsidized by Canadian Mountain Holidays, Travel Alberta and the Canadian Tourism Commission.

FARE DEALS

Sun, sand . . . and super sales

KATHRYN FOLLIOTT

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sunquest has kicked off its Inventory Clearance sale with deals on sun vacation packages to top destinations like Cuba, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

In Varadero, the four-star Oasis Turquesa is priced from \$490 per person for departures from Nov. 1 to Dec. 13. Another four-star property, the Grand Paradise Samana in

the Dominican Republic is going for \$540 from Nov. 9 to Dec. 7.

And the five-star Riu Bachata in Puerto Plata, offering free weddings and "Stay At, Play At" exchange privileges with the neighbouring Riu Mambó and Riu Merengue, starts at \$590 from Dec. 4 to 11. All of these properties are all-inclusive and the lead-in prices are for one-week stays. Travel must be taken Nov. 1 to Dec. 31. See www.sunquest.ca

PICKS OF THE WEEK

Sunquest: Mazatlan, air and hotel, \$760. www.sunquest.ca

Air Canada Vacations: Grenada, air and hotel, \$2,089. www.aircanadavacations.com

Nolito: Panama, air and hotel, \$799. www.nolito.com

Signature Vacations: Huatulco, air and hotel, \$728. www.signaturevacations.com

Transat Holidays: Western Caribbean cruise, air and cruise, \$689. www.transatholidays.com

Hola Sun Holidays: Cayo Santa Maria, air and hotel, \$398. www.holasunholidays.ca

Bel Air Travel: Jamaica, air and hotel, \$447. www.belairtravel.com

Sunwing: Havana, air and hotel, \$915. www.sunwing.ca

Sell Off Vacations: Rome, air and hotel, \$1,386. www.selloffvacations.com

Travel2000: Ft. Lauderdale, air and hotel, \$776. www.travel2000.com

Sears Travel: Samana, air and hotel, \$760. www.searstravel.ca

Tour East Holidays: Six-night Singapore, air, hotel, tours, \$1,799. www.tourest.com

WestJet Vacations: Cayo Coco, air and hotel (+ \$200 per person travel credit), \$729. www.westjetvacations.com

Goway: 11-night New Zealand self-drive tour, air, hotel, car rental, \$2,699. www.goway.com

Trafalgar Tours: Best of The North of Ireland & Dublin, hotel, some meals, touring, \$1,529. www.trafalgartours.ca

\$300 OFF SOUTH AMERICA: Globus, best known for its escorted tours, has a separate Monograms brand that offers a more independent style of travel. New Monograms itineraries in South America include the 12-day Brazil, Argentina & Chile, the 10-day Amazonia Voyage with Rio & Iguazu and the eight-day Costa Rica Wonders. Globus also has a nine-day Ecuador & the Galapagos cruise with its cruise line Avalon Waterways. All Globus, Monograms and Avalon air-inclusive bookings to South America qualify for a \$300 per person discount if made with deposit by Oct. 13. See www.globusfamily.ca.

BEST BUY OF THE WEEK: bmi's long-haul September Sale includes fares from \$756 to Cairo, \$612 to Moscow and \$686 to Tel Aviv.

Fares for children ages two to 11 are 75 per cent of the adult fare sale cost, and 10 per cent for kids under two.

Bookings must be made by Sept. 30 for travel through March 25, 2010. See www.flybmi.com.

Kathryn Folliott is a Toronto-based freelance writer. Prices quoted are subject to change and availability.



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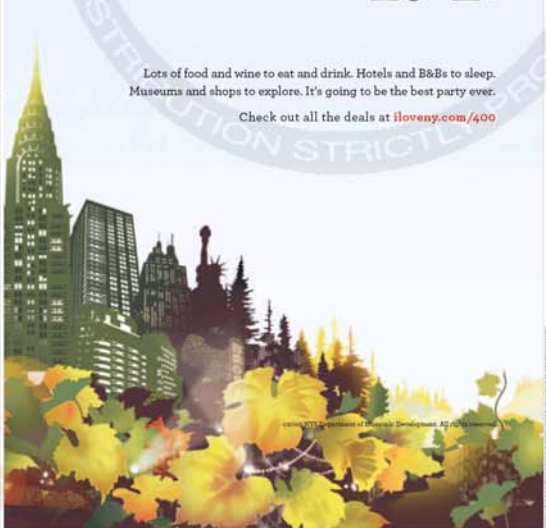
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