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## BRITISH COLUMBIA



PHOTOS: ANDREW DORAN/RANDY LINKS

South Chilcotin trails offer an excellent variety of loop trips of varying difficulty and distances for horseback riders.

## A Slice of SOUTH CHILCOTIN PARADISE

Accessible wilderness offers outdoor adventure on an epic scale

MARK SISMONS  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

**B**anking steeply, the float plane descends, levels off at the last moment, and then touches down on a lake surrounded on three sides by thick pine forests. As we taxi toward the dock, miniature icebergs bobble on the turquoise water. Beyond the gravelly shore a tongue of ancient bluish ice glints in the sun.

It feels like I've just set foot on an alien world.

Just a little more than 200 kilometres

north of Vancouver, Bridge Glacier occupies the eastern flank of the Lilloet Icecap, one of the world's largest temperate-latitude icefields. Melting at a rate of almost 200 metres per year, it's also one of the fastest-shrinking glaciers in British Columbia.

Bridge Glacier may vanish in my lifetime. But the incredibly durable flying machine that has delivered me here probably won't. Built in 1961, this de Havilland Beaver float plane has transported generations of adventurers to B.C.'s wild places, soaring over huge glacier fields, volcanic formations, alpine lakes and endless fields of wildflowers populated by bears,

moose and mountain goats. She once even served in the British army, bringing home enough stories to fill many a Boys Own book.

"The Beaver is one of the safest planes in the sky," says pilot Paul Skelton as we climb back aboard for another scenic flight. Skelton's employer, Tyax Adventures, runs guided hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding and "flightseeing" tours of the forests, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, glaciers, high mountain passes and snowy peaks that make up 56,000-hectare South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park.



Tyax Wilderness Resort and Spa offers luxurious accommodation and fine dining in a tranquil lakeside wilderness setting.

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MARK SESSONS

Above: One of Tyax Adventures' most popular excursions takes guests to Spruce Lake aboard a de Havilland Beaver. Top right: The Tyax Adventures de Havilland Beaver takes guests on "flightseeing" excursions to Bridge Glacier. Bottom right: Set on the shores of Tyaughton Lake, 200 kilometres north of Vancouver, Tyax Wilderness Resort and Spa offers luxurious accommodation.



MARK SESSONS



ANDREW DORAN/BANDY LINKS

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## A Slice of South Chilcotin Paradise

### Land of plenty

The South Chilcotin range divides the rugged Coast Mountains from the vast grasslands of the Chilcotin Plateau. Because it sits in a rain shadow, this spectacular slice of B.C. backcountry is rich in biodiversity and enjoys a dry, sunny climate that makes it perfect for year-round outdoor recreation.

To its original inhabitants, the Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) and St'at'imc (Lillooet) First Nations, this region was known as the "Skumakun" or "Land of Plenty" for its abundance of fish and wildlife. Grizzly and black bears, moose, wolves, coyotes, deer and big horn sheep still roam free, as do eagles, owls, herons and dozens more species of birds.

Gold fever struck here when prospectors first discovered that most precious of metals in the late 1800s. By the 1930s, thousands of fortune seekers had settled in South Chilcotin boom towns like Bralorne and the aptly named Gold

Bridge. But by the early 1970s, after extracting over 4 million ounces of gold, most of the mines closed and the population plummeted.

With the gold rush also came a huge demand for cattle and horses. Ranches sprang up, including the Gang Ranch, once the largest of its kind in North America. Pioneering outfitters carved out an extensive network of over 150 kilometres of trails that still remains, a legacy now shared by hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders.

### Happy trails

"One wrong turn on one of these trails and you might end up walking all the way to Williams Lake," laughs Tyax Adventures guide Geoff Playfair as we hike to a rocky lookout above alpine meadows abloom with a vast array of wildflowers, including purple fireweed, blue arctic lupine and arrowweed balsamroot.

Playfair is referring to a trail that there are virtually no roads

### Getting there

Located near Gold Bridge, Tyax Wilderness Resort and Spa is about three hours by road or half an hour by float plane from Whistler. Visit tyaxadventures.com for driving routes and fly-in options.

up here. "It really is pure wilderness, with no other signs of civilization beyond the trail network," he says as we admire the view. Far below, the Beaver floats on pristine Spruce Lake, awaiting our return.

A seasoned mountain biker, Playfair often leads long-distance trail rides. "This amazing single-track trail network gives mountain bikers access to high alpine," he explains as we descend toward the lake, adding that it's all about the big cross-country epic riding experience here, rather than hardcore downhill like you might find at places like Whistler Bike Park.

Seasoned riders are certainly

### Where to stay

Tyax Wilderness Resort is a 29-room log lodge with a large dining room and a state-of-the-art spa. Nearby lakefront camping spots accommodating tents and RVs are also available. Visit tyax.com for room rates and seasonal packages.

spoiled for choice, with many routes offering technical alpine ascents and descents, winding downhill single-track runs and leisurely valley bottom cruises through some of B.C.'s most florid wildflower meadows. Some opt to fly into Spruce Lake aboard the Beaver and ride out over ever-shifting landscapes.

Others, like Erin Hartnett, an occupational therapist from Vancouver, prefer to go it alone. For Hartnett, the opportunity to explore this vast South Chilcotin wilderness on a solo ride is particularly appealing. "I love being out in the backcountry and have done a bunch of multi-day hiking trips," she

says. "This is a great way to get that more remote, backcountry feeling on my bike."

### Accessible adventure

The South Chilcotin may offer plenty of backcountry adventure. But you don't have to be entirely rough it in the bush up here. Tyax Wilderness Resort and Spa is a luxurious retreat set on the shores of Tyaughton Lake that's easily accessible from Vancouver and Whistler by ground or air. Once Western Canada's largest log lodge, it was built on the site of an old hunting and fishing camp. Recently renovated, the resort now offers sufficient pampering — including state-of-the-art spa treatments — to help sore muscles recover from those challenging South Chilcotin trails.

But it's the organic, locally sourced cuisine that I most look forward to after saddling up for a horseback trail ride (also offered by Tyax Adventures), followed by a heart-halting dip in the frigid waters of Tyaughton Lake. Designed by French-

born executive chef Sebastian Vickers, Tyax Resort's summer menu features regionally inspired cuisine sourced mostly from local producers and growers.

"This has always been my dream as a chef, that one day I could partner with a local farmer to supply all organic ingredients," explains Vickers, who honed his skills in Whistler's restaurant scene. His signature dishes include Coastal Potlatch, West Coast Halibut, Fraser Valley Double Pork Chop and the Cache Creek Natural Burger, sourced from beef free of hormones, steroids and antibiotics.

After another one of Vickers' delicious dinners, I watch descend upon postcard-perfect Tyaughton Lake and contemplate how much fun life can be when you're in these woods — especially with the indomitable Beaver at my disposal in this slice of South Chilcotin Paradise. I'm no glad she came home from England to this wild place where she belongs.