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# T H E R O C K W A L L T R A I L

GO FOR A HIKE  
ALONG KOOTENAY  
NATIONAL PARK'S  
ULTIMATE TEST  
PIECE





STORY &  
PHOTOS BY  
ADAM  
SAWYER



**I** F YOU CALL British Columbia home you might not know this, but there is a large contingent of outdoorspeople just south of you that consider your backyard the promised land. I'm one of them.

For the last 15 years or so I have lived in Oregon or Washington, and I love it. The culture, food, and most importantly, the outdoors of this corner of the continent is unequivocally my favourite region in the US. But much in the same way a bright-eyed, would-be starlet from the south longingly languishes over the gossip and trends coming out of Hollywood, we gawk in amazement at magazines and Instagram feeds that showcase a landscape that looks like ours—but on steroids: bigger mountains, bluer water, greener trees.

So when a couple of friends from Kimberly invited me to backpack the Rockwall Trail last summer with BCA Tours, I cleared my calendar and waited out spring like a toddler waits for Christmas morning.

**THE 55.6-KILOMETRE** Rockwall Trail extends along the eastern edge of the Vermillion Range in the Canadian Rockies. For roughly half of that distance, the path traces the 900-metre-high limestone feature that is the trail's namesake. Along the way, hikers will be tested by a handful of mountain passes, treated to sprawling technicolour meadows of wildflowers, camp near one of the tallest waterfalls in the country and stand dumbfounded before massive hanging glaciers. It's the pride of Kootenay National Park.

My knees aren't quite what they used to be and neither is my resolve (under less than ideal conditions). So after careful consideration, we chose to take five days to complete the trek and to go in late July. The rationale being that the weather should be good, and we might get wildflowers at their peak while missing the mosquitoes at theirs. Most backpackers make it a three- to five-day trip. With all of the aforementioned attributes of this journey, we weren't in a hurry.

We also decided to hike north to south, starting at the Paint Pots and concluding at the Floe Lake trailhead. There are pluses and minuses to hiking in either direction, but for us, a first day with full packs was better spent gently gaining 285 metres through a shaded forest as opposed to 700 metres of exposed climb. Sure, it makes ▶





Hiking along the Rockwall between Rockwall Pass and Tumbling Creek Campground.



Above the treeline, on the final approach to Numa Pass.



for a longish-day at 15 kilometres, but in a pick-your-poison scenario, it seemed to be the most palatable. Plus, it meant that our last slumber would be at Floe Lake, a highlight of the trip.

So on a picture-perfect summer morning last July, we arrived at the Paint Pots trailhead, made last-minute pack adjustments and started hiking. I instantly felt good about our decision. After the first few kilometres worth of additional modifications and getting past the initial pack-weight shock, things opened up and we were treated to our first wildflower meadow. After lunch at the Helmet/Ochre Junction Campground, the day's final stretch paralleled Helmet Creek before the big reveal just shy of camp for the evening. At 352 metres, Helmet Falls is a monster by any standard. And the campground that nestled up to the creek downstream from the thundering cascade was a welcome sight and home for the evening.

Day two started off just as glorious as day one. After breakfast with waterfall accompaniment, we began the climb toward the Rockwall Pass. We gained elevation greedily through stately stands of larch beset by colourful indian paintbrush and shaggy western anemones. Eventually, we reached the pass and before us the trail began downward toward an endless horizon of imposing escarpment. We had reached the northern end of the Rockwall proper, and it was magic.

Slowed by photo ops, it became increasingly more difficult to keep our eyes on the trail. This would be a problem for me the rest of the trip. After a dip and a rise in elevation, the terrain levelled and the next few kilometres were arguably the most scenic I had taken in from a hiking trail—for the time being, anyway. Flowers of every conceivable hue competed for my attention with craggy, distant peaks being actively etched by prehistoric glaciers. The long set of switchbacks leading down to the Tumbling Creek Campground ensured that I would both sleep well—and require some ibuprofen in the morning.

The next day's trek to Numa Creek would be the shortest hiking day at just eight kilometres. It also happened to be the day that I would set a personal record for photos taken in a single day, so it worked out. We would be losing more total elevation than we gained but there was still a pass to negotiate first, so up we went. The aptly named Tumbling Pass affords a box seat view of the Tumbling Glacier. Punctuated by bluebird skies and the now omnipresent wildflowers, it was a snack break for the ages. But I wasn't done being


gobsmacked for the day. The initial descent out of the pass and into the valley below it was the closest thing to Elysian that I'm sure I will ever encounter. The final drop to the campground was no slouch either, and the rushing waters of Numa Creek proved to be a welcoming white noise for sleep that evening.

Morning four saw us up and on the trail early. We were to gain 750 metres and escape the trees entirely en route to the highest point along the Rockwall Trail. The discomfort of the ambitious ascent was negated by Mother Nature's grandeur. After enjoying a handful of waterfalls and a few bridged creek crossings we launched into

alpine territory, reaching the 2,355-metre summit of Numa Pass. The view was commensurate with the climb. And we were thankful that the incoming weather system maintained its distance for the time being. We were as high and exposed as we cared to be, especially with conditions potentially turning sour. We were also now looking down at Floe Lake.

One of the jewels of the Canadian Rockies, I had been waiting to finally gaze upon her in person and she did not disappoint. After another wildly scenic and photographically fruitful descent, we arrived in camp with just enough time to set up our tents and take shelter before an





Relaxing on the  
shores of Floe Lake.

## IF YOU GO

### Day 1:

Paint Pots Trailhead to Helmet  
Falls Campground (14.7 km)

### Day 2:

Helmet Falls Campground to Tumbling  
Creek Campground (12.5 km)

### Day 3:

Tumbling Creek Campground to  
Numa Creek Campground (7.7 km)

### Day 4:

Numa Creek Campground to  
Floe Lake Campground (10 km)

### Day 5:

Floe Lake Campground to  
Floe Lake Trailhead (10.7 km)

afternoon thunderstorm unloaded on us. This was also where the mosquitoes we had managed to avoid for the entire trip finally tracked us down. After the storm, we watched white clouds transition into orange, red and purple pastels before fading to black. The mosquitoes never did go to bed. Floe Lake giveth, and Floe Lake taketh away. The next morning my friend and I woke up early to photograph the lake by ourselves.

**IT WAS ALL** downhill from there—at least as far as trail elevation. Having consumed all but the final day's snacks, we packed up our lightest loads of the trip on

morning five and began the 11-kilometre, 700-metre descent from camp to the Floe Lake trailhead. It is decidedly different hiking than the previous four days. In 2003, the Hawk Creek fire consumed most of the valley through which Floe Creek drains. Pale snags and fields of almost fluorescent fireweed and a bright blue sky with the occasional stray white cloud provided an eerie colour palate for our final walk out. A forest reborn, while perhaps not as instantly attractive as much of the rest of the national park, possesses its own distinctive beauty. Our five-day hike along the Rockwall Trail concluded with a crossing of the Vermilion River. A fitting end. 🐾