

The View from the Skyline

Jim Taylor is now retired after spending over 40 years in the communications industry. This article was originally published in the "Kerby Newsletter", Calgary.

I'm gasping for breath, planting my feet carefully on the steep slope up to the ridge that rises against the sky. I wonder why I put myself through this grind, every summer.

A few more steps, and I know why. I reach the ridge. On the far side, the rock drops away in a sheer cliff. Before me spreads a panorama of snow-clad peaks, of deep green valleys, of sapphire lakes, stretching away to a cloudless horizon. In a classic paradox, I've seen views like this before, on previous hikes - but I have never seen this particular view before.

As the other hikers join me, we gasp in awe together.



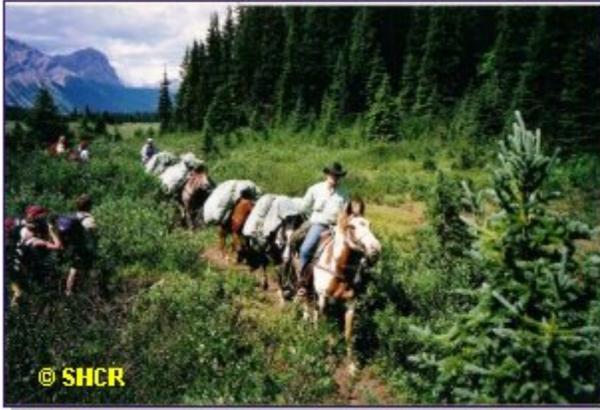
Panoramic View from the Top

This hike is one of four I take during each week-long camp organized by the Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies. Skyline was founded 77 years ago by the Canadian Pacific Railway as a means of luring tourists to their mountain lodges and hotels.

John Gibbon, head of publicity for the Canadian Pacific Railway, invented two organizations - one for horseback trail riders, and one for hikers. The first hike in 1933 lasted four days, and took 50 international travellers between CPR lodges.

That first hike, led by renowned Swiss guide Rudolph Aemmer, attracted some people who later became famous: among them, landscape painters Peter and Catherine Whyte, whose collections later became Banff's Whyte Museum, and wildlife artist Carl Rungius. One man, Ian Somerville, came all the way from Philadelphia to take part.

Through the 1930s, these were pioneer camps. The CPR originally used canvas tepees. By the 1970s, the organization switched to prospector-style tents, slung on frames built from the innumerable lodgepole pines that cloak lower slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The hikers' gear and the food went in on pack horses.



Pack-horse train with camp gear.

The heavy stuff still goes in by pack horse. Hikers only have to carry day packs, containing lunches, cameras, and bad-weather gear. Watching the cowboys lash gear onto the horses with their diamond hitches on departure day always attracts spectators and photographers.

Since 1961 the management has come under a non-profit society that took over from the CPR. Even so, a Skyline camp still feels like going back half a century in time. White canvas tents cluster in a meadow, surrounded by tall pines and

spruces. Inside each tent, a small wood stove banishes the chill of high-altitude nights.

Skyline organizes five camps every summer, during July and August. Hikers hike in on Monday, hike back out again on Saturday.

Every day, the camp organizers offer between four and six optional hikes to a variety of destinations. Some climb strenuous ridges or peaks; some lead to azure lakes slumbering in the sunshine; some simply seek out spectacular viewpoints or alpine meadows bright with wildflowers.

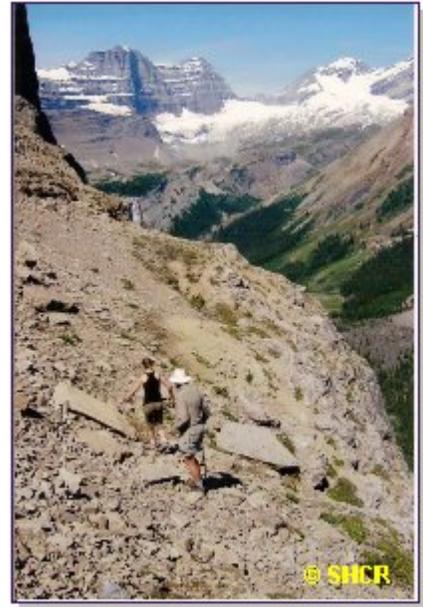
"... a Skyline camp still feels like going back half a century in time. White canvas tents cluster in a meadow, surrounded by tall pines and spruces."

The shortest hike I've taken was barely five kilometres, to spend the afternoon lounging beside a jade green mountain lake. The longest was 30 kilometres, completely circumnavigating Mt. Bolton on the B.C.-Alberta border.

Every evening, hikers gather around a campfire to tell tall stories about the day's experiences and hear about the next day's hiking possibilities.

I could go hiking by myself. But I prefer hiking with the group. The base camp brings me anywhere from five to 25 km further into the mountains than I could go from a highway start. A professional cook provides three-course dinners every night in the dining tent. The camp provides hot water for washing up after a sweaty day on the trail. And every hike has at least two qualified trail leaders to ensure that no one gets lost or injured.

I also enjoy the social interaction. Each camp has up to 55 campers. At any camp about half are repeats. They greet each other like the old friends they are. They swap stories; they laugh; and sometimes they grieve together over losses of family and friends.



Mountain Trail

I have been part of Camp Three since 1991. Like many others, I started going because of a friend. I wanted to spend some time with Dr. Bob Hatfield of Calgary, who had been diagnosed that spring with leukemia. A fanatic wild-flower photographer, Dr. Bob believed Camp Three offered the best alpine flora. I've been going ever since.

Most others also have their own favourite camps, returning year after year.

And it's a bargain - under \$200 a day, which includes transportation to the trailhead, pack horses, all meals, tents, medical care, and accommodation.

Because of Skyline's long history of working with Banff National Park, it is allowed to camp in sites that are off-limits to other commercial operations.

To protect the fragile mountain environment, however, camps return to the same location only every ten years or so. New sites are regularly worked into the rotation. Increasingly, these include sites outside Banff Park boundaries. As a result, I have only twice been back to the same location. Far from being a deterrent, I find those repeats a chance to renew acquaintance with fondly remembered territory. It's startling, sometimes, to compare pictures from ten years before and discover how much mountain lakes and glaciers have shrunk. The effects of global warming are all too evident.

Some might feel that returning year after year to a relatively restricted geographic area is unduly limiting. I don't feel that way. As a journalist, then as a globetrotting retiree, I've spent significant time in 66 different countries by my last count. That leaves me about another 130 I could go to. I probably won't - at my age, I'm finding cost, safety, and time a deterrent. But as long as I can walk, I expect to return to Skyline. Nothing else offers

me the same combination of spectacular scenery, enjoyable companions, and healthy exercise.

At 73, I'm one of the older hikers. But I'm far from the oldest. One leader continued into his 80s, always with a loyal following - he was good company, and he carried a bag of candies for handouts at rest stops! The youngest hiker I can remember was 12. One grandfather brings along a different grandchild each summer.

"The youngest hiker I can remember was 12. One grandfather brings along a different grandchild each summer."

Although hikers come from all over Canada, and some from other countries, they always seem to get along. Perhaps it's because they all start with some characteristics in common - a love of the outdoors, enjoyment of physical activity, a sense of adventure... One hiker sat on the pinnacle of a 2650 m mountain, his feet dangling over an abyss plunging to a shining river winding down a glacial valley. "I'd love to build a restaurant up here," he announced.

The rest of us protested that few customers would be willing to make the effort to climb to his restaurant.

"Maybe not," he agreed. "But I know the ones who were willing to make the effort would get along well together."

Perhaps, if you're that kind of person too, you and I may someday eat our lunches seated on that peak, looking out over an unforgettable view.



Dining Tent



Grizzly Bear