



ALPINE GOLD

ROADTRIPPIN' TO NELSON, B.C., ON THE TRAIL
OF THE ELUSIVE ALPINE DREAM.

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There's a local saying in Nelson that those who come, never leave. We gathered in Whistler, a group of friends from all over the world, ready to search for Nelson's elusive alpine and discover the culture and atmosphere that gives rise to the saying, as well as the growing bike scene and captivating lifestyle.

With tales of steep singletrack and hidden alpine trails fresh in our minds, we embarked on a ten-hour drive to the quiet city nestled in the Selkirk Mountains.

The drive from Whistler to Nelson travels the scenic Crowsnest Highway. In the company of a number of photographers and with views crowding the horizon, we made plenty of pit stops to take it in. Arriving late in the evening, Nelson seemed like a sleepy town but the next day it came alive. A farmers' market began setting up and locals started their day opening some of the numerous boutique stores. Nelson's origin dates back to the 1800s and once in the town, you can see its roots in the historical infrastructure. Many cafes and unique restaurants, and an organic co-op, line the main street, exuding a bohemian aura.



"And how would sir like his Singletrack today?"

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE.

Since we were eager to ride and sample the legendary topography of the local mountains, we headed to one of the city's two bike shops, Gerick Cycles, to acquire a trail map. The Nelson bike map is well-designed and user-friendly. It provides thorough information on where to find the riding and trail classification, and exactly what kind of terrain you will be encountering. Gerick Cycles suggested we start our trip off with a zone called Kokanee Glacier, located 19km from the city.

Wasting no time, Mag immediately began questioning if we could access the legendary alpine from this zone. He was determined to start the trip getting a sunrise alpine shot, one he has always dreamed of. With the knowledge of it being a possibility, we sped off to the trails before we embarked on our alpine search.

Reaching Kokanee Glacier, we found an easily accessible trail system, with intermediate to advanced riding. Before we knew it, we were racing down trails and weaving throughout the forest. 'Morning Sickness' was a personal favourite and a technical rider's dream, with sequential rock rolls lining the descent. We couldn't help but look up and notice the light beginning to falter. The photographers in the group made an executive decision that it was time to try our luck at finding the alpine.

All we had was a map and a general idea of where might be a road that would take us into the open space and golden light of the upper mountain. A Forest Service road appeared to be going in the right direction, and making a quick turn onto a 4x4 trail quickly ate up a couple of hours. We found logs blocking the path – Adrian jumped out to move them, but quickly began swearing profanities. The logs were home to a hornets' nest and a sting to the face was how he found out. We all watched safely from the truck as Adrian swatted and cursed his way out of the swarm. On that note, it was time to turn back and we were left thinking that maybe the mysterious alpine was in fact unobtainable.



The danger of our decisions was soon realised and panic began to set in. We had no cell phone service and limited knowledge of the area.

CLOSE TO THE EDGE.

Looking forward to a new day, we awoke early and headed to another zone of trails called Morning Mountain. Morning Mountain has seen some recent improvements, thanks to government funding looking to increase interest in mountain biking, and has been designed with the intention that any level of rider and any type of bike can ride the trails here.

As we were climbing up, glimpses of a smooth jump line kept popping out from between the trees and the first trail of the day was easily decided upon. The name of the trail was Lefty and it had everything from green-level rollers to double-black gap jumps that Ollie was able to get his trail bike sideways on. We reached the bottom and the team agreed to try again at the alpine by travelling to Baldface Mountain: an area with a few lines on the map indicating trails up high.

We arrived at the top of Baldface after a 24km drive up another Forest Service road with just an hour left of sunlight. Since there was little light and I was hurting from an earlier fall, Mag and I drove down while the others took a short hike to see if they could find a trailhead. It was agreed that we would meet the remaining team members at a junction, 15km down the trail.

We took our time driving back, stopping to take pictures along the way. It was soon dark and there was no sign of the other team members. The danger of our decisions was soon realised and panic began to set in. We had no cell phone service, limited knowledge of the area and could only hope that we were at the right meeting point. Time slipped by and it began to rain.

Just as we were about to drive away in search of help, the sound of bikes, yelling and laughter drifted in from the darkness. Trish, Ollie and Adrian had pursued a dead-end trail and as darkness hit, they hiked back to the road to make the visionless ride down. As soon as I caught sight of them, I jumped out of the car enraged, overjoyed, and maybe even a bit jealous of their evening ride. Needless to say, the car ride back to the motel was not quiet as we recounted the adventure.

Our dead-end adventures could not deter us from continuing on with the search. After a dip in the Ainsworth Hot Springs, we went south to Mount Buchanan to scope a trail known as 'The Monster' that had suspected alpine origin. We came around the last corner of the Forest Service road with breath held. It couldn't be as easy as simply driving up a mountain and finding glorious, open alpine meadows... especially after all our previous attempts. As we rounded the corner and the forest opened up, we all let out a sigh. It was not the vast, open alpine we were looking for but, nonetheless, it was still just as beautiful.



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*On this particular day, Mount Buchanan hosted a luminous
view of Kootenay Lake and its surroundings, accompanied
by glorious rays breaking through the clouds.*
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This man owns a bikeshop and builds trails for fun, this woman runs a guiding company. No wonder they both look happy.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

On this particular day, Mount Buchanan hosted a luminous view of Kootenay Lake and its surroundings, accompanied by glorious rays breaking through the clouds. Mag couldn't be separated from his camera and it was left to the rest of us to tackle The Monster. Seven kilometres of steep technical trails stretched before us. Numerous sections required brakes to be locked. We couldn't help but laugh and scream our way down the trail; spraying dirt and clueless of what lay around the next corner. The trail ended on the highway and Mag drove up to an elated, overly zealous group repeatedly high-fiving from the ride of a lifetime.

Our pursuit of the alpine had led us to some incredible terrain, but as we neared the end of the trip without encountering the trails we had fantasised about, disappointment began to set in. Luckily, a quick stop at Sacred Ride in Nelson set us on a new course. Mark Holt, the shop's owner and a well-known local trail builder, knew exactly what we were looking for. A prominent figure in the development of Nelson's trail systems, Holt has personally built at least 40 trails and none of them are for the faint of heart. He is known for crafting steep, treacherous lines that cascade down full mountains. He offered to take the team to Shannon Pass in time for sunrise and show us his trail creations.

With a plan, we looked to how to fill the rest of our day and stumbled across Footsteps Eco Adventures, a well-rounded adventure company run by Leah Brown, a fellow biker and mountaineer. Leah was offering a shuttle up Toad Mountain to an infamous trail named Powerslave, and we scored five seats.

The short drive out of Nelson left us enough time to talk with Leah and gain an understanding of what brings this small city together. Leah explained that Nelson harboured a unique opportunity for niches in the workforce and consequently, created sustainable lives in the mountains. Footsteps Eco Adventures was just that – filling a much-needed void, considering most of the trails can be shuttled.

A majority of the other riders on the shuttle had ridden Powerslave before and had no problem getting us excited about what we were about to encounter. There was some talk of the trail being slightly over-riden, which we quickly realized was not the case. Powerslave is roughly 14km long when connected with other trails, and filled with soft dirt. Hidden amongst the soft, loose dirt are wooden features and small kickers, creating both challenging and adrenaline-pumping lines. With such an incredible ride under our belts, we could call it a night and set out to the Cantina del Centro for post-ride tacos and tequila.





And so is this.



This is Alpine.





And so is this! Spoilt for choice.





The stuff dreams are made of.

DAILY GRIND.

After a night of margaritas, 4:30am is never an easy wake-up call, but with the hope that we might reach our goal of alpine gold, we managed to stumble out of bed just in time to meet Holt. All piled into one truck, we arrived at the mountaintop and began our hike in the dark with Holt leading the way. The air was crisp; early fall frost was already on the ground, making it crunchy underfoot and the sun started to peek from the dark backdrop of the mountain range just as we emerged from the forest. We knew that we had found what we had been looking for.

A gold light blossomed along the brush, creating the effect of the alpine meadow being on fire. Tall hemlock trees, hairy and distorted from moss, perfectly outlined the singletrack from among the red haze. A rider yelled – “Dropping!” – and Mark, with his camera ready, captured the moment. We stayed long enough to see the sun rise before riding down Holt’s trails, through the various mountain ecosystems and back to the outskirts of the city.

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Satisfied and tired from the big mountain trail, we reflected back on our Nelson adventure with a sense of accomplishment. We had found our alpine dream, rode the terrain of the Selkirk Mountains that varied from brake-searingly steep to flowing singletrack, and were introduced to the city through the eyes of incredible locals. Despite feeling fulfilled, we knew that we had just brushed the surface of what Nelson had to offer. Our ride home to Whistler was filled with planning our next adventure back to the seemingly sleepy city of Nelson and its surrounding landscape, filled with big mountain lines just waiting to be ridden. ■

