

Earthly paradise found; Sol Mountain lodge good for the soul

By Anne Georg for CanWest News Service - September 2, 2009



As a child I described my vision of heaven in my diary: It was a sunny meadow full of wildflowers through which I would meander unafraid and blissful. In my daydream I had long blond hair and I was barefoot, wearing a flowing white gown.

I recalled that long-forgotten fantasy several decades later as I meandered through stunning flower-filled meadow after stunning flower-filled meadow. I was in B. C.'s Monashee Mountains and the scene was uncannily similar to what I'd envisioned as a preteen.

Well, a couple of factors were different: I now wear big hiking boots and unflattering shorts and my hair is short, thin and greying.

I wasn't in heaven, either. Even better. I was at Sol Mountain Lodge with 12 energetic women ranging from 19 to 69 years old, and our affable custodian, Dave Flear, whom we adopted as an honorary member.

Flear is co-owner of the lodge. He told us Sol Mountain is best known as a backcountry skiing facility. This is only the second summer the lodge has stayed open.

An airy, rambling three-storey building, it sits at about 2,000 metres above sea level at the edge of an alpine meadow. It sleeps 16 people comfortably in eight rooms and it even has a yoga room, which I used daily.

A short stroll leads to crystal-clear alpine lakes and sparkling creeks that tumble down steep valleys sprinkled with wildflowers: deep red Indian paintbrushes, yellow and purple asters and white yarrow,

to name a few. Ridges open up new vistas of still more lakes and valleys, more peaks and more ridges. We luxuriated in the Sol Mountain bliss bubble for three timeless days, taking short hikes in Monashee Provincial Park, which was literally at our doorstep. Flear called these walks "wilderness hikes" because the park doesn't have marked trails. It's rare to have such freedom in the alpine and I felt unfettered, even euphoric, as if I'd stumbled upon a Shangri-La.

Flear had placed discreet blue-flag markers to guide us to some of the closer destinations; we ventured forth on our own when those ended, navigating the changing and sometimes challenging terrain. We discovered that our weak orienteering skills limited what we could do.

Many of us are novice hikers, others not as fit as we'd like to be, and some of us are old enough to have sore joints. In spite of our limitations, every year for the last seven about a dozen of us book an alpine lodge somewhere to revel in nature, replenish our souls and enjoy each other's company.

Thankfully, it's difficult to get lost at Sol Mountain. Since the lodge is in the meadow, it's visible from most of the peaks and ridges. Flear gave us walkie-talkies so we could keep in contact. He thought it was common knowledge to keep the walkie-talkies on at all times.

On our second day, several of us arrived back to the lodge after our hike. Flear told us he had lost contact with Pauline, the eldest and most experienced hiker in our group, after she and two companions radioed him for directions.

We hastily assembled a search party, turned on our walkie-talkies and fanned out.

I hurried up to a ridge calling out Pauline's name. My anxiety was short lived. From the vantage point we spotted the group strolling casually toward the marked trail.

Pauline was embarrassed to hear that we'd been worried. That evening we made a pact to take an orienteering course.

Evenings in the lodge were more balm for the soul. Sol Mountain offers a fully catered experience, but my group chose the self-catered option and occupied the entire lodge. We made sure we brought the good stuff in abundance and prepared it in the large, well-equipped kitchen. Having been in several mountain huts and lodges, we voted Sol Mountain as among the best.

Cocktail hour included gourmet appetizers like smoked halibut and a wild boar pate. We dined on lovingly prepared meals, like baked salmon and grilled chicken. We always ended dinner with at least one homemade dessert. Well fed and contented, our games of charades and Cranium disbanded after much hilarity and nonsense. We pushed the couches aside and danced until, one by one, we stumbled to our beds.

Flear not only put up with his boisterous guests, he enthusiastically joined us for meals, games and dancing. He was the last person standing and the first up in the morning to put on a pot of coffee.

When he suggested that he'd like to hike with us on our last day "just to hike, not to guide," we were delighted. We let him lead us through uncharted territory. Against his better judgment, he switched it up and followed our route on a traverse across a rock slide of huge boulders and sharp, shifting rocks. Flear is nimble and reached the other side well ahead of the rest. Seeing that some of us were uncertain in the terrain, he returned to help us get safely across. Mission accomplished, we high-fived and commended each other for our accomplishment in the face of fear and trepidation. That's another reason why we love our mountain experiences: the self-esteem boost.

At the end of each day we met at a tiny, pristine mountain lake. We called it Destiny Lake because on our first day there I'd asked if we'd reached our destination. One of our philosophical companions responded, "You could better have asked 'Have we reached our destiny?'"

As it turns out, we had reached our destination and our destiny. We lolled like alpine mermaids; and as the mood struck us, we dove into the shock of icy cold water. I serenely swam around a small island in the centre of the lake, enjoying this moment in earthly paradise.

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If You Go

- Summer season at Sol Mountain is from July 20 to Sept. 28.
- Self-guided and self-catered trips are \$75 plus GST per person per night. Reduced rates for a group of 12 or more booking the entire lodge. Four-night guided and catered trips are \$820 plus GST per person. Customized trips are available.
- Access on maintained forestry roads requires a 4WD vehicle.

For more information: www.solmountain.com