

Rocky Mountain high: Heli-hiking outfit brings high-altitude vistas to life (with gallery)

BY ANNE GEORG, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 19, 2013



New vistas around every bend and over every peak in the Selkirk Mountains.

Photograph by: Anne Georg for the, Calgary Herald

As I sorted and resorted the photos I shot at the Durrand Glacier in the Selkirk Mountains, I struggled to choose the ones that would make a slim but stellar final cut. Mission impossible.

I'd just spent four days hiking among some of the most picturesque high-altitude vistas on the planet. Fresh wonders awaited me and my fellow hikers around every bend and over every peak in the alpine wilderness. On some mountain tops we were so close to big sky I felt that I was more part of the air than the earth.

Our base was the Durrand Glacier Chalet, on the edge of the Durrand Glacier system, just below the tree line and a stunning 15-minutes by helicopter from Revelstoke, B.C. No one gets there unless they're with Selkirk Mountain Experience; or they walk through harsh mountain terrain for three days. You won't encounter many other hikers.

The helicopter flight gives you the starting point to the high-altitude hiking. The rest is all self powered. Sturdy legs, boots and hiking poles are de rigueur. Knowledgeable guides lead the adventure allowing guests to safely explore the beauty at the outer reaches of the wilderness.

This is Ruedi and Nicoline Beglinger's backyard — one writer called it 'Ruedi's National Park'. The family's name is synonymous with the Selkirk alpine experience — winter and summer. Originally from Switzerland where he became an accredited mountain guide, Ruedi came to Canada as a young man and fell in love with the Selkirks. In 1985 after securing an approximately 80-square-kilometre leasehold, Ruedi enlisted friends to help him build an environmentally green structure on top of a treed outcrop at 1,946 metres elevation.

There he met and fell in love with a client, Nicoline. They raised their two girls at the chalet, letting them amble among the hills with the mountain goats. Now the young women, themselves as agile as the goats, act as hiking guides while their father guides advanced mountaineers.

Over the years Ruedi and Nicoline have expanded the dormitory-style backcountry hut into a proper Swiss chalet with private rooms, hot showers and a chef who turns out gourmet meals. The rustic elegance of the Durrand Glacier Chalet offers cosy alpine comfort — what the Swiss call 'Gemutlichkeit' — on a remote rocky peak.

On arriving at the chalet we were greeted with homemade cinnamon buns, good strong coffee and a quick orientation by the charming 20-year-old Charlotte Beglinger. She welcomed us to her family home.

The Durrand Glacier Chalet's exemplary hospitality and Ruedi's legendary reputation as a backcountry guide are the reason repeat guests regularly fill roughly half of the chalet's 20 beds. One hiker had joined the Beglingers for eight consecutive years, staying several weeks each time. Many guests were there for their second, third or fifth time, some bringing more friends with them. Some come for winter ski touring and summer hiking.

After our orientation, we hit the trail. We formed two groups for our daily guided hikes: one was faster and went farther; the other enjoyed a more leisurely pace. The repeaters hiked on their own. I joined the faster group and found I could keep up, even though I frequently stopped to catch my breath, marvel at the scenery and admire exquisite wildflowers.

We skipped over rocks to cross streams and followed paths marked with painted rocks and cairns. Using pickaxes and rakes, the family has constructed a network of about 80 kilometres of hiking trails over approximately 90 kilometres.

I've never felt as safe hiking in such remote wilderness. I loved having a guide. As well, Ruedi has built trails that avoid bear habitat; and long sightlines ensure that interlopers won't surprise hikers. Not that wildlife is in great abundance at this elevation. Other than our species, the area is home to about 70 mountain goats and ubiquitous marmots whose whistles often accompanied us on our hikes. Ravens, eagles and hawks are elusive inhabitants of the skies.

Welcome to solitude. It's just you and rocks of all sizes and descriptions, scented spruce trees, rushing streams, waterfalls, cold lakes and alpine meadows strewn with dozens of varieties of multi-coloured wildflowers.

We walked all day — through landscapes that changed with the elevation, stopping frequently for lunches and snacks, photo opportunities and to drink in the expanse that encompassed us. We dove into invigorating mountain lakes and slid down snowy slopes on our bottoms. We sidestepped around timid ptarmigans and thrilled at seeing families of curious mountain goats following us closely before becoming bored and bounding away.

As I watched the goats scamper effortlessly up the rocky cliffs, I wanted to channel them. I climbed challenging ascents slowly, one foot ahead of the other, taking in huge gulps of mountain air. Charlotte's beaming smile was the constant beacon that coaxed me up to peaks as high as 2,500 metres above sea level. The rewards were huge — breathtaking panoramas of mountain tops as far as the eye could see, clouds skittering across the sky at eye level. And not another soul in sight.

When we arrived back at the chalet, tired and exhilarated, we were met with snacks: something savoury like sushi, spring rolls or samosas; and always freshly baked European cakes and jugs of refreshing iced tea. Then we enjoyed hot showers before relaxing on the chalet's deck, watching the day fade over the mountains as we waited for the dinner bell.

Our three-course dinners were invariably delicious. They were made from local Revelstoke produce using herbs grown at the chalet, creatively prepared by our chef, Jenny, and served by Beglinger family members who often joined us for meals.

And the end of each day I tucked myself in under a fluffy duvet listening to the waterfall as it tumbled down from Durrand Glacier. The sensations of the hike were imprinted on my brain and body — the cut of the trail, the meadows dotted with wildflowers of red, yellow, purple, pink, white; the nearness of the sky and clouds and the shock of the brisk mountain lake as I slipped into it.

Now back in civilization, I cherish my one thousand photos as souvenirs of the remarkable days I was enveloped in the spacious atmosphere and gracious hospitality of Selkirk Mountain Experience. They will have to suffice until I can return.

IF YOU GO

- Selkirk Mountain Experience: www.selkirkeexperience.com
- The Beglinger family offers guided hiking and mountaineering in the summer and ski touring in the winter. The helicopter leaves from Revelstoke, B.C.