

Heli Traverse – Bugaboos to Rogers Pass
April 17-27, 2009



Camp below Snowpatch Spire, Bugaboo Provincial Park

The appetizer of raw tuna slices and a delightfully spicy soup is followed by grilled halibut and an orzo medley, washed down with a crisp Viognier in long-stemmed glasses. Pre- and apre-dinner choices include a massage, hot-waxed skis, souvenir shopping and a Jacuzzi soak alongside a couple of French gals in bikinis. It's day four of the Bugaboos to Rogers Pass Traverse.

This storied traverse is reputedly one of the most arduous in B.C.'s Interior Ranges – covering some 130 kilometres over steep, crevassed, avalanche-prone terrain, with nearly 10,000 metres of elevation gain (all with a 50-pound pack strapped to one's back) and conditions ranging from whiteout blizzards to isothermal snow. Who knew it included a complimentary night at the CMH Bobbie Burns Lodge, an international destination for well-heeled heli skiers?

Actually, it wasn't on our itinerary or mentioned in any of the

typical hair-shirt descriptions of the traverse. But when your guide has connections and you're middle aged and facing the prospect of two days of wallowing with heavy pack in bottomless snow down a narrow, bushy valley with an open stream, it's hard to say no when a European-accented voice on the radio phone offers first to drop off a care box of treats and then to whisk you, for free, by helicopter from potential hell to pampered luxury.

It's our second helicopter ride in five days. The first (non gratis) was the customary drop-off for the traverse's start – the alpine Appleby Campground in B.C.'s Bugaboo Provincial Park. After pitching our tents and erecting snow walls, we brace ourselves for a night of blowing snow and the anticipated hardships of the traverse ahead.

Day 1 – The skies clear overnight, revealing the stunning granite face of Snowpatch Spire rising above us in the soft morning light. Because of the overnight storm, we debate a lengthy detour around Snowpatch but – figuring the accumulated snow is less than five centimetres atop old avalanche debris – decide to tackle the steep, direct route over the Snowpatch-Bugaboo Spire Col.



Steep climb to Snowpatch-Bugaboo Col – the slide triggered where the slope narrows above and just right of the near skier’s head

All goes well on the first two-thirds of the narrowing, steepening ascent. Then, on the second-last switchback, our guide – breaking trail ahead while the rest of us huddle under protective rocks – suddenly yells “Avalanche!” as a small surface slide sends her tumbling, with heavy pack, about 50 metres down the slope. Unhurt, she has nonetheless lost her sun glasses, toque and apparently a ski pole; we later find the latter near the start of the slide. But she hasn’t lost her nerve. After we briefly discuss our options, she cautiously traverses above the fracture line, boot packing the final 100 metres to the thank-God col.



Skiing towards Pigeon Spire

Once over this nasty bit, we revel in skiing towards the sublime Pigeon Spire and then making powder turns beneath the equally impressive Howser Towers and Bugaboo Spire. Then it's across the Vowell Glacier, over Bill's Pass and down the steep, thigh-burning slope into what we call, in my honour, Bill's Hole. It's a long climb up the other side, featuring boot packing up an avalanche-debris gully, before cruising down to the Malloy Igloo.

We had planned to camp outside, but it's early evening, with the wind whipping, so we opt to squeeze ourselves into the tiny fibreglass shelter, with half our group sleeping on the floor, around a sheath of ice. The misadventures continue when Diana, tossing the cleaned remains from a cooking pot, loses the handle on said pot, which goes slithering down a steep slope, never to be seen again.



Cramped quarters in Malloy Igloo

Days 2 and 3

It's blowing snow all day, so we stay put in our little prison – the hours passed by doing Sudoku puzzles, reading novels and digging a mammoth, walled outdoor kitchen. The visibility is somewhat better the next day, so we set out up the Conrad Icefield with rope on, navigating by compass when necessary and, on the downhill sections, doing the awkward snowplow with skins and rope on, looking like a beginner's class on the bunny slope. We traverse the lower icefield and then climb to a saddle, where we're finally unleashed down long slopes with nice turns – though it's considerably more work and occasional heavy-pack crashing for the two pinheads/telemarkers in the group. After a long day, we reach Crystalline Pass in a light rain, which mercifully eases as we set up tents in the trees.



Sweet turns on the Vowell Glacier

Day 4

Unfortunately, the freezing levels are all the way up to 3000 metres, so the steep climb to Climax Col and the subsequent stretch of alpine terrain towards Snowman Lake are out of the question from an avalanche perspective. As we dejectedly descend the slopes above Crystalline Creek, one of Diana's skis comes off and goes shooting several hundred metres down the valley, earning her the nickname Chuck, after the once-famous royal couple Chuck and Di.

We soon reach some open flats and the dismal prospect of a two-plus-day thrash down the isothermal snow of narrow Crystalline Creek. After having already lost a travel day to weather, this energy-sapping detour through the bush could well be a trip ender, even at the cost of a \$1,500 helicopter ride back to civilization.

Suddenly, salvation arrives from the heavens. Heli skiers, often derided by backcountry purists, are skiing the slopes above and, after we describe our predicament to one of their guides by radio phone, a care box of chocolate bars, fine cheeses and fruit is deposited at their nearby pickup spot for us to

devour. Then comes a second gift: the offer of a free heli ride on a refueling flight back to the nearby Bobbie Burns Lodge, plus a complimentary dinner and overnight stay. After briefly debating the ethics of this, we succumb to creature comforts and are soon winging down to a surreal arrival at a four-star, mountain resort. As we're drying our gear on a side lawn – within sight of the arriving, slack-jawed paying guests – one of our hosts surveys the strewn laundry and dryly comments: “We don't offer alcohol to backcountry skiers, because they'd never leave.” Actually, we do imbibe in beer and wine, the only thing we pay for. We toast our moral transgression with a new name for our traverse – Bugaboos to Bobbie Burns to Rogers Pass Traverse, B2BB2R for short.



Unexpected arrival at CMH Bobbie Burns Lodge

Day 5

After a night “camped” in the lodge’s basement exercise room, we’re back on our skis, skiing three kilometres down a frozen access road and then seven km. up an old logging road along Vermont Creek to rejoin our original route. Only old snowmobile tracks make this low-level detour possible (otherwise bottomless snow). So that’s one more motorized recreational group we can no longer harangue – with further humbling to follow.

Our penance for all this luxury is a howling wind that threatens to blow us over as we enter the alpine and don ski crampons. Despite several decades of backcountry skiing, most of us have never used them before, but they save our hides as we gingerly traverse across rock-hard slopes above. In the first of many energy-sapping efforts, our guides remove their upper ski to boot pack down a better track in a few exposed spots.



Blowing snow above Vermont Creek drainage

Eventually, we escape the climb and sand-blasting gusts at a col, with a delightfully-steep run, even with big packs, down to our food cache at Malachite Creek. Though a rodent has chewed through one wooden box and eaten a fair chunk of my and Felix's breakfast food, we still have a surplus of food and fuel, and the gorging on chips, smoked salmon and booze is somewhat muted, given the gourmet meal at the lodge the night before.

Day 6

Finally, a blue-sky morning, with great mountain backdrops as we begin the long climb to Malachite Col, with Felix kicking many triple-pounded steps up the steep final slope. Fortunately, temperatures have cooled sufficiently

to make this crux climb feasible, from an avalanche perspective. A long traverse follows towards a ridge, just below where a guide fell into a hidden crevasse the week before on the same traverse.



Cresting Malachite Col

After much probing in this unsuspecting spot, we gingerly cross on foot and belay down a short ice slope to reach a ridge, where the exposed, shattered shale looks like petrified wood. The skis go on the pack and after I get whacked in the head with said skis by both of the telemarkers (was it something I said?), we walk down the ridge till snow slopes are regained. A fast, curving traverse on hard slopes leads us down to tree line, with a short, climb to the welcome hut in International Basin.

Days 7 and 8

We traverse on firm slopes and, after considerable route finding around cliff bands, find the vital way through – a ski-chattering traverse across steep, icy avalanche debris to gentler slopes beyond. A firm descent to below tree line leads us to yet another cabin – the rustic McMurdo Hut – which we reach in early afternoon, allowing us to laze in the sun and gorge once more on a

food drop (this includes a pot to replace our lost one). And I thought this trip was all about hardships and sacrifice.



International Basin hut, with the previous day's traverse visible on the bench just above the trees

We're fast asleep on our soft bunks, when the whine of snowmobiles startles us awake at 11:30. Jen hops out of bed and out the door, using considerable charm and diplomacy to persuade three Saskatchewan lads, who have the hut booking, to sleep outside rather than kick us out; we do provide them with our unneeded mattress pads. As compensation, we offer them hot pancakes in the morning, last evening's rent and our excess food. They even agree to haul some of our now-surplus gear back to civilization.

We climb up a snowmobile-packed logging road to the ironically-named Silent Pass, the bowls above which are a sledgers' paradise. We watch a couple of them catching air off a ridgeline before they roar down to meet us. It's our new-found buddies, and we unabashedly accept a couple of beers to toast the arrival of noon.

Thus fortified, we climb the last bit to a ridgeline and make a fantastic 1000-metre run down through a scattered burn, with the glaciated Mount Duncan providing a grand backdrop. Reaching the valley floor, delight gives way to dreary trudging down the Beaver River Valley for a couple of hours as we enter Glacier National Park (no more heli/snowmobile traffic... or rescues). The packs feel particularly heavy as we labour up a side valley beneath Beaver Overlook, the tedium relieved by the tracks of a grizzly, heading down into the main valley in search of spring vegetation... or perhaps overripe skiers. Just after the tents go up, wet snow blankets our streamside camp.



Fabulous descent through burnt timber, Mount Duncan in rear

Day 9

This is our second detour of the trip. We're going up this way towards the Grand Glacier, instead of the standard Butters Creek approach, because of the big exposure on hard slopes for a group of seven on the latter route, especially crossing the shoulder of Sugarloaf Mountain. For what it's worth, the two previous groups on the traverse this spring have also avoided this approach; the possibility of thinly-bridged crevasses around the Grand is another risk with this year's lighter snowpack.

Our initial climb towards the Deville Nevé doesn't appear easy or obvious through rock slabs, but a closer inspection reveals a nice snow gully for boot packing. The 25-degree slopes above are thankfully softer, for a change, and the traversing is straightforward up to the magnificent, broad nevé, flanked by high peaks such as Wheeler and the Dawson massif.

We briefly debate spending a final tent night up high amongst this splendour before deciding to tackle the dreaded Deville rappels in late afternoon and thus reach the Glacier Circle cabin that evening. A good thing, too, as the next day's promised high-pressure system instead becomes a whiteout storm.



Traversing between first and second rappels (Jen Olson photo)

It's bad enough as it is, with the three raps taking more than three hours in blowing snow, most of the time spent huddled in tight quarters on small ledges, with heavy packs and skis on aching backs. Things look particularly grim when we can't find the third rap anchors. The problem is finally surmounted with the decision to tie the two ropes together into a long single line, which we rappel down on monster munter hitches, with a short leash

attached to our shoulder straps to keep us from tipping over backwards. It's last light, at 9:30, when we finally reach the cabin, truly well hidden in the trees, its long roof blanketed in a metre of snow.



The end of the rappel from Hell

Day 10

A final sting in the tail. The apparently straightforward long climb out of Glacier Circle turns into steep switchbacks up icy avalanche debris. My old, stiff knees can't make the sharp kick turns, so in the ultimate guiding sacrifice, Felix uses a shovel to dig out spacious platforms for the "grandpa" turns. Beyond, a howling wind reduces visibility to mere metres on the endless climb up the Illecillewaet Nevé, necessitating roped travel for a couple of hours. Finally, we're able to shed skins and make weary turns down the familiar lower slopes of the Illy.



Our young, energetic guides, Jen and Felix

On the final 100 feet of our traverse, we remove our skis to walk down the frozen trail. Slipping on the icy track, I drop one ski, which goes clattering down through the trees, launching itself into the Asulkan parking lot as a final exclamation mark to an adventure full of surprises. Now, after celebratory burgers and fries, it's off to buy scotch and beer as thank-you gifts for our new, motorized friends.

The Details

The B2R Traverse involves a lot of up and down travel, the latter leading to tenting mostly below treeline. Indeed, we only spent four of our nine nights in tents – the rest in cabins and a lodge – though we would have added a couple more outdoor nights without our two detours. Don't expect a true wilderness traverse, with nearby heli skiing in the early days and snowmobile traffic around McMurdo Hut, unless you're travelling in May.

There is some spectacular scenery, particularly around the unsurpassed Bugaboos and Glacier National Park areas, but it isn't the consistent glacial grandeur of something like the South Cariboo Traverse. Much of the charm and popularity of the Bugs-Rogers Traverse lies in its history, diversity of terrain and route-finding challenges.

Because we had to bypass two of the more difficult sections, I can't vouch for all the technical challenges involved. What we did face wasn't all that demanding, though we luckily had firm, good travel conditions for the most part, compensating for some marginal weather. The biggest toll was carrying a 50-pound pack for often longish days, even with two food drops.



Descending the Illecillewaet Nevé

Accumulated ascent and descent, distances and times for each travel day

Appleby Campground to Malloy Igloo – 650 metres up, 650 metres down, 12.7 km., 10 hours

Malloy Igloo to Crystalline Pass – 550 metres up, 1400 down, 17.8 km., 10 hours

Crystalline Pass to heli pickup – 100 metres descent, 1 km, 0.5 hours.

Bobbie Burns Lodge to Malachite Creek – 1768 metres up, 960 down, 13.4 km, 10 hours

Malachite Creek to International Basin – 905 metres up, 870 down, 10 km., 10 hours

International Basin to McMurdo Hut – 559 metres up, 1005 down, 10.4 km., 5-plus hours

McMurdo Hut to camp below Beaver Overlook – 893 metres up, 1235 down, 17.7 km., 9 hours

Beaver Overlook camp to Glacier Circle Cabin – 1202 metres up, 605 down, 15.1 km., 13 hours.

Glacier Circle to Asulkan Parking Lot, Rogers Pass – 1187 metres up, 1630 down, 18.3 km., 8 hours.

Total distance: 115.4 km.

For a more detailed description of the traverse, see Chic Scott's *Summits & Icefields* (Rocky Mountain Books).

Note: One of our participants, Marg Saul, achieved a rare double on our adventure: completing the Bugs-Rogers traverse in both directions, with more than two decades separating the two trips.