

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

As the helicopter recedes in the distance, silence descends and we're left alone in a white wonderland where thoughts speak louder than words. It's enough to stir religious contemplation - a landscape like this hints at divinity. This, our intuition whispers, can't be the product of chance.

This is the Tantalus range. Comprised of eight serrated peaks on the outskirts of Squamish, the Tantalus mountains erupt from the sea to pierce the northwest horizon like enormous arrowheads. Wide powder fields and blue glaciers descend from 2000-meter peaks before giving way to the rainforest hugging their hips like a scarf -- or perhaps, given the virgin snow it protects, more like a chastity belt.

The range was named after the mythical Greek king condemned by Zeus to spend eternity in a pool of water his lips could never touch; fruit-laden branches hung above him that lifted out of reach each time he raised a hand. Early mountaineers felt similarly frustrated by the sight of such tantalizing peaks, for in the days before gortex and helicopters just getting to the alpine was a tactical nightmare. Water runs ceaselessly down their sides to drain into the three rivers which, together with Howe Sound, circle the range like a moat. Once past that, prospective visitors faced an arduous day of steep bushwacking with all their gear before the fruits of their labor came within their grasp.

These days, however, reality has become fantastic as myth. On a brilliant mid-winter morning we dispensed with gravity and flew like modern Apollos into the sun. The helicopter took us up behind Mount Dione into an impeccable blue sky, and we watched grinning as the green slopes below gave way to rolling glacier, then steepened into granite outcrops stuffed with snow. By the time we crested the final ridge the world had turned white, and six

minutes after leaving the Squamish tarmac we stood gaping on Olympus - or rather, Tantalus.

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If you think heli-skiing is an activity open only to pro skiers and millionaires, think again. A lift in and out of the Tantalus goes for the equivalent of four days at Whistler. That's how long we spent in this deserted alpine island, contented castaways with little more than snowshoes and snowboards.. The lodging, it's true, was spartan, but with eight mountains and four sunny days to ourselves, no one noticed.

Fifty feet from our landing sight sat the fiberglass dome we called home. Perched in a natural saddle two kilometers above sea level, the Red Tit Hut (officially known as the F. J. Green Shelter) is an emergency shelter that earned its nickname for the suggestive design of its architecture. We found it nipple deep in snow with two more feet lining the floorboards inside. Once cleared, however, the shelter made for a great place to light up our camp stoves and hang out after dark. By then, we were too exhausted to miss our beds and dreamed contentedly instead of the pillow fields outside.

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Backcountry riding, as the term tries to imply, is a lot like sex. A mutual seduction takes place between mountain and rider, and in a way each overcomes the other. The fleeting elation of the physical act can lead to a more lasting transcendence if taken far enough. And while you can minimize the risk, you'll never get rid of it altogether. For better or worse, that's part of the thrill.

But the point is to live, and in that respect the coast's infamously wet snowfall is truly a blessing in disguise. The very moisture

skiers and boarders tend to curse acts like glue, strengthening the bonds that hold a snowpack together. Dangerous layers of ice or frost, which in the colder interior maintain a slippery potential for collapse, tend in our warmer climate to congeal into a sticky, solid heap. Coastal snow is consistently the safest on the continent. Statistics confirm this, with the vast majority of avalanche fatalities occurring east of the Coquihalla despite the heavy traffic in the Sea to Sky corridor.

Our biggest threat in the Tantalus came not from weaknesses inside the snowpack but from the sun. It bore heavily down on southern aspects, turning winter mornings into spring-like afternoons in which the crystal lattice beneath our feet loosened up and fell apart. As we peeled our layers so did the mountains. We were treated to a natural symphony of crumbling snow that was anything but music to our ears. Aside from the invisible roar of a few distant slides, however, we witnessed nothing worse than sloughs.

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Like all good journeys, a visit to the Tantalus offers a new perspective on life. The elements of happiness, so easily dissolved by the city's hectic chemistry, regain their shape. Health, companionship, self-reliance, and good food all contribute to a sense of vitality that overrides all other concerns.

But mountain travel also reveals a more literal kind of vista. In this regard, the Tantalus range stands out for the truly unique view it offers of this province's southwest corner. At dusk, Vancouver, Nanaimo, Courtenay and Squamish emerge in the gathering darkness to light their respective horizons. Over a million people are at our footsteps, invisible by day, engaged in a separate reality where events unfold at light speed compared to the slow geology

around us. It's hard to reconcile our sense of isolation with the proximity of all those comings and goings.

When the sun returns it reflects off the Sechelt Arm, which winds through clearcut hills towards the Sunshine Coast and Georgia Strait, with Vancouver Island in the distance. Howe Sound, overhung by a thin film of iridescent smog, reaches in to Squamish like an oceanic fingertip. Its touch just below us marks an intimate exchange between mountain and sea as nutrients are washed down the same streams that salmon swim up. The Squamish Valley opens out of the Sound, a lush green corridor capped in white, and as for Squamish itself... halfway between Granville Island and Whistler Village, with clearcuts in its past and Olympics in its future, a thousand possibilities await this swiftly tilting town.

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Six thousand feet above all that, the only relevant possibilities involve our snowboards. From a rider's perspective, the Tantalus range is a garden of Eden. Powder fields, steep chutes, rolling ridgetops and cornice drops are all just a quick snowshoe away. The terrain's diversity ensures that casual enthusiasts can have just as much fun here as pros.

It's a democracy that applies to most backcountry regions, but not without some corresponding issues. Backcountry cabins can only fit so many, for one, and the prospect of a million Vancouverites gearing up to go touring raises the spectre of a new breed of housing shortage. Crowds were no issue in our neck of the alpine - we were the season's first visitors, and possibly the last until climber's start arriving in the spring - but with Transworld Snowboarding Magazine doing photo shoots here the day before we arrived, it's clear that the red eye of Sauron is looking in.

Far more alarming is the annual increase in avalanche-related deaths. Encouraged by ski hills that fill up and track out quicker every year, along with media reports like this one, more and more people are buying PIEPS instead of passes. The doors to the backcountry have opened wide, but wearing an avalanche beacon provides no diplomatic immunity. Avalanches now claim an average of fifteen lives a year. Last year was particularly horrific, with a brutal snowpack contributing to 29 deaths. This year is shaping up to be somewhat less tragic, with eight deaths reported as of this writing.

The good news is that public awareness is at an all time high. Evan Manners of the Canadian Avalanche Association notes that the rise in traffic far outstrips the corresponding accident rate. "The average user is getting a lot better in terms of avalanche awareness," he says. "There's an annual climb of about two percent in fatalities, but that's nowhere near the increase in activity we're seeing."

The inherent risks of mountain travel were driven home one afternoon when a cornice peeled away six inches from our toes. Staring into the sudden abyss with our stomach in our mouths, there was no question what standing a foot to the left would have meant.

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It was a fate we avoided, keeping well alive and leaving old Tantalus alone in his underworld torment. For four days we lived like kings on a courtier's budget, riding our crowns instead of wearing them. When the helicopter returned at last, we entered and flew back to the valley with the satisfied knowledge that we'd be back.

And in a way we never left. Our line of sight forms a bridge between two distinct worlds; experience brought them together. It seems that unlike King Tantalus, we can reach up and pluck whatever fruit we like.