

# **MOUNTAIN** **LIFE** LIVE IT UP

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# Pristine Peaks: Heli-Trekking the Remotest Rockies

Teetering on a jagged boulder garden, Wolfgang – a 78-year-old with a propensity for ‘when I was your age’ stories – loses his balance and drops onto his back. His walking stick slips between a crevice and is gone forever. He regains his balance and we continue along the northwest ridge of [Mallard Mountain](#), BC. Far below, a granite rockslide pours into the valley, gobbling up trees in its path. The [Lodge](#) looks like a dollhouse and the evergreen forest like pipe cleaners. Proportions don’t make sense in a place that defies space.



Photo courtesy [www.canadianadventurecompany.com](http://www.canadianadventurecompany.com)





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In a region called [Punch Bowl](#), so named for the days when it was a main [Hudson Bay Company fur trade route](#), the five valleys converge near the two Mallard Peaks on the western slopes of the Rockies. If Wolfgang did hurt himself, a 25-minute helicopter ride to a Jasper hospital is the only way out: there are no roads.

As we step cautiously along the ridge, the wind inflates our clothes. “Can I name this peak?” asks Matt, a New Yorker on his first trip to the Rockies. Most of these peaks are so remote, they’ve never been officially named.



Photo by Melanie Chambers.

The 2,679-metre North Peak was first climbed in 1920, and later named Mallard because the easterly aspect looks like a mallard duck; it is inconceivable for us to climb it, so instead we take photos pretending we're pushing the mountain.

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In the summer of 2003 a lover of backcountry skiing and hiking re-discovered Mallard.

One of the pioneers of snowcat skiing in the 1970s, Derek McManus was looking for a location that had good summer and winter activities; what he and his wife Barb found was beyond their expectations. "We were all immediately struck by



the beauty of that valley, framed by the iconic Rocky Mountain Mallard Peaks on the east side. We landed in the meadows above where the [Mallard Mountain Lodge](#) now sits, and hiked around for several hours...I still get goosebumps when we fly in.” In 2005, the [eco-friendly Lodge](#) was helicoptered in, already built.



Photo courtesy [www.canadianadventurecompany.com](http://www.canadianadventurecompany.com)

On the second day of our trip, we follow the trail from the back of the lodge, tip-toe across a ladder over the creek and duck into a pine and cedar forest that opens into a meadow of shaggy flowers called hippie heads. Matt notices something shiny in the grass: a prospector tag from the 1980s. A rare sign that others have been here.





Photos above and below by Melanie Chambers.





Higher up, Julie discovers a rock garden of white rocks that reminds me of New Age crystals promising eternal happiness if worn around your neck and accompanied with a daily chant. Picking at the ground on all fours, we're silent, intensely looking for that big 'gold mine.' Heading back down, we come across some unknowns: a round flat sticky-top mushroom and another delicate white one with a little sun hat. "Do you know what this is?" I ask Derek's son Paul McManus. Paul has no idea. Death or a one hell of a trip? Best to avoid.

Another day we come across a glacier lake so pristine, rocks are visible on the bottom. Stripping down to the gitch, Julie and I head in; the cold stings. Bursting through the water, I yelp like a wounded dog. "You're the first people I know to swim here," says Paul. We thump our chests Conan the Barbarian-style.



Photo courtesy [www.canadianadventurecompany.com](http://www.canadianadventurecompany.com)

On another hike we all break off and explore; Matt and Julie take pictures on a glacier; I'm exploring purple and yellow alpine flowers. Eventually we convene for a picnic. Afterwards, with full bellies, we coil up for a nap like lost children in a fairy tale. "I haven't slept like that in ages," says Matt, the New York insomniac. "That was nap-a-righteous." With spotty cell reception, no roads, and unnamed mountains, you get an overwhelming sense of freedom and calm up here; it reminds me of childhood and discovering the forest in my backyard with my new best friend.



Photo courtesy [www.canadianadventurecompany.com](http://www.canadianadventurecompany.com)

*With just seven guests at a time, and access only by a 30-minute helicopter flight, [Canadian Adventure Company's Mallard Mountain Lodge](#) is the most private and remote lodge in the Canadian Rockies.*