



• Whistler  
• Squamish  
• Vancouver

THE SCENE

48 HOURS

# 150 Trails and Counting

Squamish offers amazing mountain biking within stunning scenery

story and photos by **Stuart Kernaghan**





**I**t's an early fall Saturday afternoon. I'm sitting on a warm rock outcrop looking down over the Squamish River where it meets Howe Sound a couple of kilometres away, having a mid-ride snack. The sun is shining, but it's low in the sky and not too hot. The mountains that form the Squamish Valley open up in front of me toward the water, framed by a blue sky that is unencumbered by clouds. Tall, thin fir trees move back and forth in the breeze. I can hear the wind moving through the needles, making a thick, sweeping noise.

So far, I've ridden buff singletrack that flows through emerald green ferns, loamy goodness, rough natural lines that skirt stands of mature trees and ripped technical descents with chaotic rock sections and roots the size of your forearm that force you to stay alert. And I'm not even close to being done for the day. This is a perfect moment in time, and an amazing ride already. There is nowhere else on earth that I would rather be. This is mountain biking in Squamish, B.C.

Squamish is a former forestry town of almost 20,000 that's 65 km north of Vancouver and 58 km south of Whistler on the stunningly scenic Sea to Sky Highway. It went through a major downturn when the town's two largest employers shut down almost a decade ago, but the community is bouncing back after a concerted effort to redefine itself as an outdoor sports mecca.

Locals and people who drove through on the way to Whistler always knew what Squamish had to offer mountain bikers, thanks in part to great trails and an epic 67-km race known as the Test of Metal that started in 1994, but the word has been spreading. A recent survey by the Squamish Off-Road Cycling Association (SORCA) found that almost three-quarters of riders in the valley were B.C. residents from outside of Squamish. The same survey also estimated that mountain biking injects more than \$8 million annually into the local economy, which is getting multiple levels of government and Squamish businesses to sit up and take notice.

Mountain biking in Squamish is special for a few reasons. There are lots of trails – nearly 150 on a current map. They're also incredibly diverse: choose from new-school groomed singletrack, old-school technical trails, trails that have natural features mixed in with constructed stunts, massively steep granite rock faces or long climbs with amazing views at the top and high-speed descents. Add to that diversity the ability to connect whatever terrain you feel like on a given day to build a killer ride, and it's hard to beat Squamish.

There are three main riding areas in the valley: Crumpit Woods, the university and Alice Lake. They've been extensively mapped and trails are rated like ski runs: green through double black diamond. Pick up a map and take those ratings to heart.

Most of the trails in Crumpit Woods are generally short and steep, working their way through deciduous

forests that cover several smaller hills near the valley floor. It's possible to put together a good ride in Crumpit, but most people either start or end here. Fartherside or S&M Connector will take you to lots of other options; pay attention to the directional arrows on the map.

The university area is the jumping-off point for some of the newest trails around Squamish. Use the Legacy climbing trail to access more than two dozen trails on the east slope of the valley, including Half Nelson, a sculpted high-speed jump trail with berms, tabletops and a few wooden features. The fact that both Half Nelson and the Legacy trail were funded with public money speaks volumes about the growing importance of mountain bike tourism in Squamish.

Once you pop out of Half Nelson, head north to Fred or south to Somewhere Over There to sample classic Squamish singletrack. From Somewhere, you can loop back to the university or make your way to Crumpit if you have some gas left in the tank.

Alice Lake is a picturesque provincial park at the north end of Squamish that's home to a lot of great beginner and intermediate trails. There are also a few black diamond gems worth seeking out. The trails around Dead End Loop and along the power lines are a good introduction to Squamish riding, while Credit Line or Rupert are solid black diamond choices. The steep granite slabs on Entrails can be a lot of fun if you're a technically solid rider.

Once you figure out the lay of the land, you can link up one riding area with another. Park at Alice Lake, explore some trails there, and then take Northside Connector to the university. Or do the opposite, if you want to start the day with a climb. You can even sample all three sets of trails in one day if you don't mind riding a few kilometres of logging road.

My recommendation is to start your riding in Squamish at Alice Lake. There are plenty of options in a small area and you'll get a feeling for your comfort level on the trails. Head to the university on Day 2 and climb to Half Nelson, and then hit up some sweet singletrack north of the university.

Squamish is a magical place. Apart from the amazing riding, there's just so much beauty to take in. There are more shades of green here than you could possibly imagine. You're enveloped in them, along with the rich browns and rust colours of the forest floor, as you cruise through the trees. And when you emerge from the thick tree canopy, you're graced with the coastal mountains that jut out of the valley. Make sure you stop and take it all in before you jump onto the next trail, even if it's just for a few minutes.

You'll come to Squamish for 48 hours, but it will be hard not to think to yourself, "Now, this is the kind of place I wouldn't mind living." I do every time I ride there.

Lachlan  
Cunningham on  
Credit Line,  
Squamish, B.C.





## Details

### Finding services in Squamish

The Sea to Sky Highway (Highway 99) runs north/south through Squamish. Most services and amenities are off of this main route, either downtown (left at Cleveland Avenue when you're coming from Vancouver) or a few kilometres north of downtown on the east and west sides of the highway.

### Where to find support

There are three bike shops in Squamish: Tantalus ([tantalusbikeshop.com](http://tantalusbikeshop.com)), Corsa ([corsacycles.com](http://corsacycles.com)) and Republic ([riderepublic.com](http://riderepublic.com)). All of the shops have a full complement of mountain bikes, parts, riding gear, trail maps and invaluable local knowledge.

### Where to eat and drink

A post-ride beer and something to eat at the pub is an essential part of the Squamish riding experience, in my opinion. The Howe Sound Brewing Company ([howesound.com](http://howesound.com)) has gastropub-style food, as well as its own award-winning microbrews. The Shady Tree ([shadytreepub.com](http://shadytreepub.com)) has more traditional pub fare. The WaterShed Bar & Grill ([thewatershedgrill.com](http://thewatershedgrill.com)) is situated on a spectacular stretch of the Squamish River that's famous for eagle watching in the winter. You can also find everything from sushi and Mexican to West Coast cuisine if you're looking to mix it up for dinner.

### Where to sleep

The Howe Sound Inn is located downtown above the gastropub, for the ultimate in convenience. There's also an Executive Inn and a Sandman Hotel, both of which are north of downtown. Camping at the full-service Alice Lake Provincial Park campground at the far north end of Squamish is another great option; the park is the starting point for many of the trails at this part of the valley.

### Don't get lost


If you're riding in Squamish, you should carry a map, unless you're a local. There are so many new trails, old trails, abandoned trails, old logging roads and general navigation challenges that you're just asking for trouble if you head into the woods without one. Pick up a plasticized map at one of the bike shops, or use the excellent Squamish trails smartphone app from [TrailMapps.com](http://TrailMapps.com). The [Trailforks.com](http://Trailforks.com) website is another great resource, with maps, descriptions and photos of trails.

### Choosing your weapon

You can ride a hardtail in Squamish if you're old school or a masochist, but most people go for full suspension. It just makes things more fun and takes the sting out of the trail. Four or five inches of travel works well, especially when you combine that with a slightly wider tire – something around 2.3" is perfect. A dropper post is also a very handy item. Pads and a full-face helmet are optional, but a good idea if you're worried about crashing or aren't used to technical trails.


### Non-bike activities

Squamish really is an outdoor paradise. If you want to get off the bike for a few hours or are travelling with people who don't ride, you can check out activities such as hiking, rock climbing, kite boarding, whitewater rafting or kayaking. The recently opened Sea to Sky gondola takes you from the valley floor up to an observation deck and restaurant 885 m above Howe Sound, where you get a mind-blowing view of the whole area. If you're looking for a workout, you can hike up, have a beer and some food and take the gondola back down.


The excellent Squamish Adventure Centre, just after the turnoff into downtown, has information on all of the outdoor-activity options, and can help you organize rentals and tours. Check out [TourismSquamish.com](http://TourismSquamish.com) for links to accommodation, events and activities. 



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A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a vast blue body of water (Squamish Lake) in the foreground, with a small town visible on the far shore. In the background, a range of rugged mountains is visible under a clear blue sky, with the prominent, snow-capped peak of Mount Garibaldi rising above the others.

A view of  
Squamish on the  
drive up from  
Vancouver

A photograph of a mountain biker, Stuart Kernaghan, riding a trail bike through a dense forest. The ground is covered with a thick carpet of green ferns. Tall, moss-covered tree trunks surround the rider, and sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect.

Stuart Kernaghan  
cruises through  
the ferns on  
Dead End Loop