



# THE ultimate singletrack ADVENTURE

“Seven years ago I raced the TransAlp Challenge, an eight-day stage race across the Alps. It was long, mainly fire road and I hated it. I said ‘never again’ until I heard about the BC Bike Race, a similar format but mostly on singletrack. I’ve wanted to do it for a while and this year I had my chance”

Words: Paul Burwell Photos: Roo Fowler



Upper and lower lines on the Tea Pot Trail

### Day 2 Campbell River

Today we trade dusty gravel for loamy singletrack and grind to a halt at the first bottleneck. Once the field thins out we cross a series of narrow bridges and I'm tight on a rider's wheel — but from his body language he looks hesitant. My wide Easton bars tickle the woodwork on one of the bridges when Mr Nervous suddenly makes a grab for the hand rail and goes down — he's ok but it's not the best start to the stage.

Several kilometres of jeep track and straight-line loam pass quickly before it gets interesting. A blend of rooty and slimy dirt, with lichen-covered rock slabs; the trail a mere scrape on the surface. Suddenly it's 100 per cent riding — everything is red lining, fitness, skill and concentration. I slide both wheels down an off-camber rock, no grip; just a natural stone rut to catch me. A river of roots fans out round a turn like a giant, withered hand, instinct says pedal but there's no grip on the ivory knuckles of exposed bone. I'm annoyed I didn't nail it, but there'll be more (thousands more) opportunities like this.

I try to carry speed, build momentum and flow. I map my route, spotting areas of grip, winging the rest. We pass many walking, struggling; dead eyes drowning in doubt. There's a race within a race here, but it's not the daily timed sections — it's these lost souls, fighting against themselves just to survive. A rider spins up a steep climb, clips a tree and dives head first over the edge, still in his SPDs. Strangers pull him out, bike still attached.

After 35km on this Mobius band of never-ending singletrack, we're at the second feed. We stuff down some gels and fruit. Re-booted, primed and ready for more of the same, it turns out it's the opposite — buff singletrack, devoid of roots, cut into the valley side. A series of back breakers come in quick succession and we grind them out, straining against the gradient. The final descent is a flat-out hammer back to town. ▣

A river of roots fans out round a turn like a giant, withered hand; there's no grip on the ivory knuckles



A ripple of ladder breaks the buff hardpack



Down the spout onto Red Bush

### Day 1 Cumberland

Howard Chang is a BC Bike Race first timer. He's a roadie, but the idea of a seven-day stage race in British Columbia appealed because the miles of singletrack would help develop his mountain bike skills. Come day one, the sheer volume is giving him second thoughts, but he knew Darren Cooke, his race partner and a better technical rider, would help him through.

Darren had trained hard and on the first climb out of Cumberland was chatting away, excited about what was to come. Howard was having a tough time keeping up but he was prepared to put his body on the line. During the day, both guys worked well together with Darren leading in the technical sections. At around 34km, a series of rolling descents snaked through tight scrub, and on a loose sandy turn, Darren's wheel washed out and instinctively he unclipped to steady himself.

Devora Peterson, a rider (and nurse) from Colorado was first on the scene: "I came round

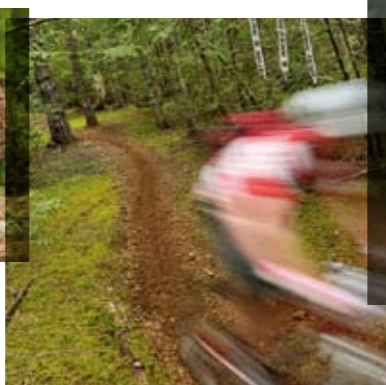
the corner and Howard was yelling and I could see this other guy lying in the trail."

Darren had stomped down onto a hidden tree stump and broken his foot in three places. Devora had never seen a compound fracture before but knew it was serious. Rider after rider, unaware of the incident, began dropping into the chute at speed and struggling to stop in time, including myself and photographer Roo. To me it looked like a run of the mill crash — no blood, no damage — until I saw the unnatural angle of his foot — about 90° out.

Devora and five others took turns to carry Darren on a stretcher over a kilometre to safety. Later, in hospital, seven pins and a plate were inserted around Darren's busted ankle and he was flown home a few days later, his race over before it had even begun. Howard carried on alone, more determined than ever to finish. And he would, collecting his medal at the finish line in Whistler six days later. Welcome to big-time stage racing.



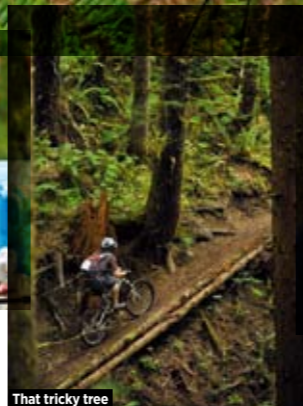
Hacking recommended



Dusty gravel road peloton



A bottle of salt water please



That tricky tree



Bottlenecks were very civilised



1st timers

### Devora Peterson 55, USA

"I'd heard this race was technical and I thought: 'how bad could it be?' My key problem is carrying speed and the bridges (skinnies), or rather, getting up the steps onto them. I've had to push quite a few sections.

"I ride a Yeti ASR5 and I use Stan's Tubeless and Schwalbe Racing Ralphs. My advice is not to wear dark glasses because you can't see anything in the singletrack. Also, take no notice when they say it's all downhill from here; it usually isn't."



Pain or more pain?



Tent City



On the menu for today: more treacherous singletrack

## 1st timers



### Marleah Bevelacqua 42, USA

"I've only been mountain biking a year but a friend encouraged me to enter. That friend was supposed to do the event but he got injured and couldn't compete, which means I'm on my own. I think the trails are wonderful but I haven't acquired the skills to ride them properly so I just get off and walk. I am getting a little bit faster every day. The Specialized 29er hardtail is my first bike — I don't even know the name of it."

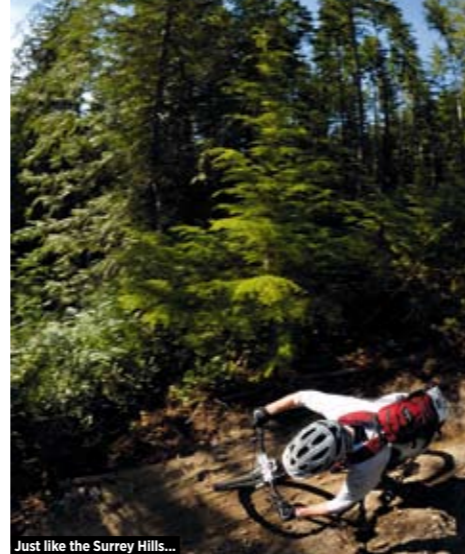
### Day 3 Powell River

We drift to breakfast and bitter coffee, served up to Rod Stewart's 'Maggie May'. A rider shakes salt into a water bottle and takes a drink. The queue for the toilet is long; the seat warm, I don't inhale. We board a Charlie Brown school bus for the hour-long transfer to Powell River. The race is listless, in slow motion, hung over. I listen to the chatter but my mind is elsewhere, trapped in a dark womb of endless singletrack.

Riders stagger from the bus punch drunk onto waiting bikes and the ultimate hangover cure — 50km of pain. We skim over gravel, my Cateye counting down the miles until the first singletrack.

It's a trail of 10,000 roots, a jewel on the Sunshine Coast. A latticework bound together with earth. Life flows through it and it writhes as we pass. We climb 'Heartbreak Hill' and the darkness envelops us. It's eerily silent; the only noise is the pounding in my ears and the ting, ting of a Formula rotor. There is no flow today, just toil. ☹️

## A trail of 10,000 roots, a jewel on the Sunshine Coast. A latticework bound together with earth



Just like the Surrey Hills...

## A SEVEN-DAY ASS KICKING

BCBR first timers Mark Weir and Jason Moeschler ride for team Cannondale-WTB and this year made the call to miss the Downville Classic (which Weir has won for the last 50-odd years) for what both riders are calling a 'seven-day ass-kicking contest'

### Did you have a plan?

**JM:** We wanted to make the XC guys hurt as much as possible, and then heckle them later, once they realized we were on trail bikes.

### Was a trail bike a good choice?

**MW:** Being American, we are not really down for this fuel economy movement. Getting a proper trail bike around BC in a seven-day stage race is not going to bring you to the victory circle. What it will bring is the choice to ride the trail how you want to. I would rather limit my speed uphill than down.

### Squamish had some typical trail bike terrain. Were you looking for a good result there?

**MW:** I think we could have if Jason would stop dragging his kickstand. He was still trying to work the eight weeks in Asia (for work) out of his legs. The track was super fun but I'm not going to lie, that climb was brutal. And just so you know, when a Canuck tells you it's 5km to the downhill, don't believe it for a minute. They are just being nice.

**JM:** I knew I was going to have trouble on the climbs. But I also knew we could make some serious time on the descents. This was one day that I might have a chance to keep up with Weir, because I tend to do pretty well on the long climbs.

### How did the day develop?

**MW:** Jason and I where supposed to ride together but I left him at the start knowing he could find his own rhythm. On the gravel road stuff I seem to be somewhat stalled out. When the trail got steep and technical is when I think we both felt more at home and started passing a lot of guys and making a go for around top 10. That was really the first day I felt having a trail bike was not only more fun but could be the fastest way from start to finish.

**JM:** Mark forgot to mention the part where I caught up to him on a downhill, then towed his fat head all the way to the finish.

### Were the technical parts testing?

**MW:** Depending on the speed you go, these trails can be a handful. I got in over my head a couple times, the bike helped me out of for sure. I'm a big fan of on-sighting a trail as fast as I can. The trail also seemed to be smoother the faster you go. Kind of like a really rough pump



Plc: Raven Eye Photography

A mashing Moeschler



Weir: living legend

track. They are not super steep and the line of sight is good.

### Was passing a problem?

**MW:** No; only when passing guys that think they are going fast because the seat is up their ass. You got two options — get yourself an adjustable post or wear orange kit and call yourself the cone zone.

**JM:** Passing is never tough when you're following Weir.

### Do you follow each others' lines?

**MW:** Who ever is in front is driving. Much better to use one brain than two. The guy in front does have the responsibility to take good lines not just for him but his partner. It sometimes can be stressful when stuff comes at you hard and fast for three or more hours.

### Is there any communication when riding?

**JM:** Mostly Mark reminding me that I would be riding much faster if I didn't waste so much energy chewing my food.

### Do you try to get into a rhythm when riding together?

**MW:** Not really, I think we just try

to hurt each other. Been doing it for over 15 years and I still find joy when I kick him in the nuts on a climb.

**JM:** It is all about making Weir suffer for all of his constant heckling. Neither one of us wants to lose to one another, but even more so, we don't want to lose to other riders. This common goal makes us work together. I'm always happy to lose to Weir, but can't stand losing to anyone else.

### You both used dropper posts?

**MW:** Besides being way more fun and safe, it's a much better way to experience trails you've never ridden, with the confidence to know you can get behind the bike anytime you need. Plus you would have a way better chance of getting chicks by not looking a high-posting knee-flapping fool.

**JM:** The advantage is simple: you can ride real aggressive going downhill, with a lot less risk.

### Would you have preferred some steeper descending?

**MW:** You kidding? When I climb for one to two hours and I get to the top I don't want to pedal again till I cross the finish line.

**JM:** The final descent on Comfortably Numb was nothing short of amazing. Those final bitches [climbs] were just cruel. We got up them plenty fast, but man, did they hurt.

### Did you make an extra effort on the timed sections?

**MW:** I tried but was cock-blocked every time by a guy on a 29er.

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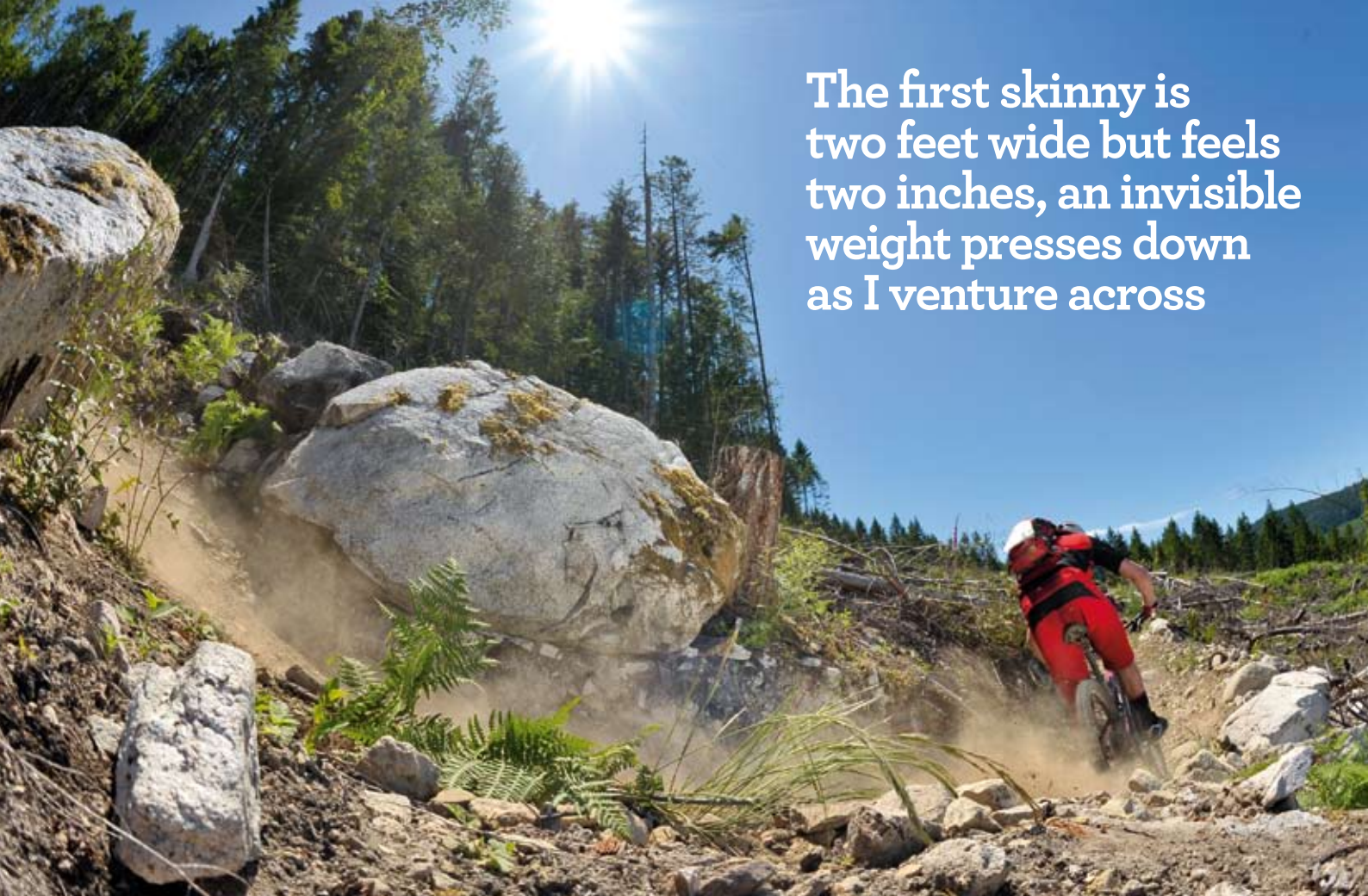
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The first skinny is two feet wide but feels two inches, an invisible weight presses down as I venture across

### Day 4 Earls Cove to Sechelt

Today is hump day. The big one. Everyone is anxious — 65km and over 6,000ft of climbing.

From the ferry port we climb sticky tarmac and dusty gravel. We tripod round a hairpin, awash with pebbles, and onto Power Line doubletrack. In the distance it looks like a strip cut across the forest, rolling lazily along the contours, but up close it's a series of hard transitions and hike-a-bike.



Just like Summer Lightning, Surrey

Coming down, we fly through river crossings and drainage ditches with no regard for pinch flats or slower riders. The trail morphs into virgin, bench-cut singletrack, slick from a constant train of rubber. The first skinny is two feet wide but feels about two inches, and an invisible weight suddenly presses down as I venture across.

We traverse freshly felled hillside — just like Afan Argoed in Wales, except for the views. Dusty switchbacks and more loam, it all starts to blur, what was here and what was there. In our haste we miss a turn and have to back-track. The flinty trail meanders, finding its own course, like a river to the sea.

I'm soft pedalling the climbs, not through fatigue, but because I don't know how long they'll be. I grab back time on the descents. More built trail, this time like Glentress in Scotland. I scrabble for traction in the busted berms; corners far too tight. More Twiglet bridges and gravel road hammer.

"It's all downhill to the finish," we're told at the feed, but I can see a steep hairpin off in the distance. The 'final downhill', at last turns downhill and homes in. It's over seven-and-a-half hours since the ferry, five kilometres longer than claimed and an extra 500 metres of vertical ascent. An epic day and I'm glad it's done — it's all downhill now! ☘

### 1st timers



### Melinda Davie 49, Canada

"I've never done a stage race but I'm good at singletrack and wanted a challenge. I'm also 50 this year, so it's a present to myself. I bought a Trek Superfly Elite 100 29er specifically for this race. I've been using the Continental Race Kings for most of the year, but I convinced myself Kenda Karmas were a better choice the night before the race. Maybe they weren't."



Fresh off the ferry



Fooked at the finish

## Day 5 Sechelt to Langdale

Today's stage has been shortened due to a high river crossing. I imagine scores of skinny racers on lightweight bikes being washed away in the current. I don't have any such problem.

The road climbs, making a beeline for heaven or somewhere. The smooth tarmac soon turns to gravel and a forest of burnt out stumps juts up in the mist. We walk/ride, walk/ride in a tango of traction and effort. My legs are sore from yesterday and I try to spin through the pain. It's cool but I can't explain why I'm sweating.

At the feed it's 16km to the finish, all downhill again! It's a 30km stage today but we've done 24km, so WTF?

The trail steepens and we fly over water ditches, flat-landing flinty track, winging it on our short-travel bikes. We roll a loamy chute, just like home, dragging the brakes through soil like coffee grounds. Then it's firm track with flow and speed but not for long — more skinnies lurk ahead. Their purpose is to provide a path of least resistance but also to keep the streams and waterways, the home of spawning salmon, undisturbed. The first one, an easy straight scoot across a shallow ditch. Twenty minutes and a dozen of these later, I have a moment — my front wheel flirts with danger and I put a foot down. Right now I hate being clipped in.

Skinnies are unique: the man-made and natural blended into the antithesis of a trail. And who puts

angled roots before a ladder? The devil, that's who.

More singletrack, but in reverse, trudging uphill on sweet loam, a trail gone mad? It's all moves and manuals. I follow Roo, picking my line, ignoring his. Moving slowly, silently, we fight our way to the summit. I glance back and see jewels strung out across the battered surface all trying to make the finish line. ☘



Riding through the pain

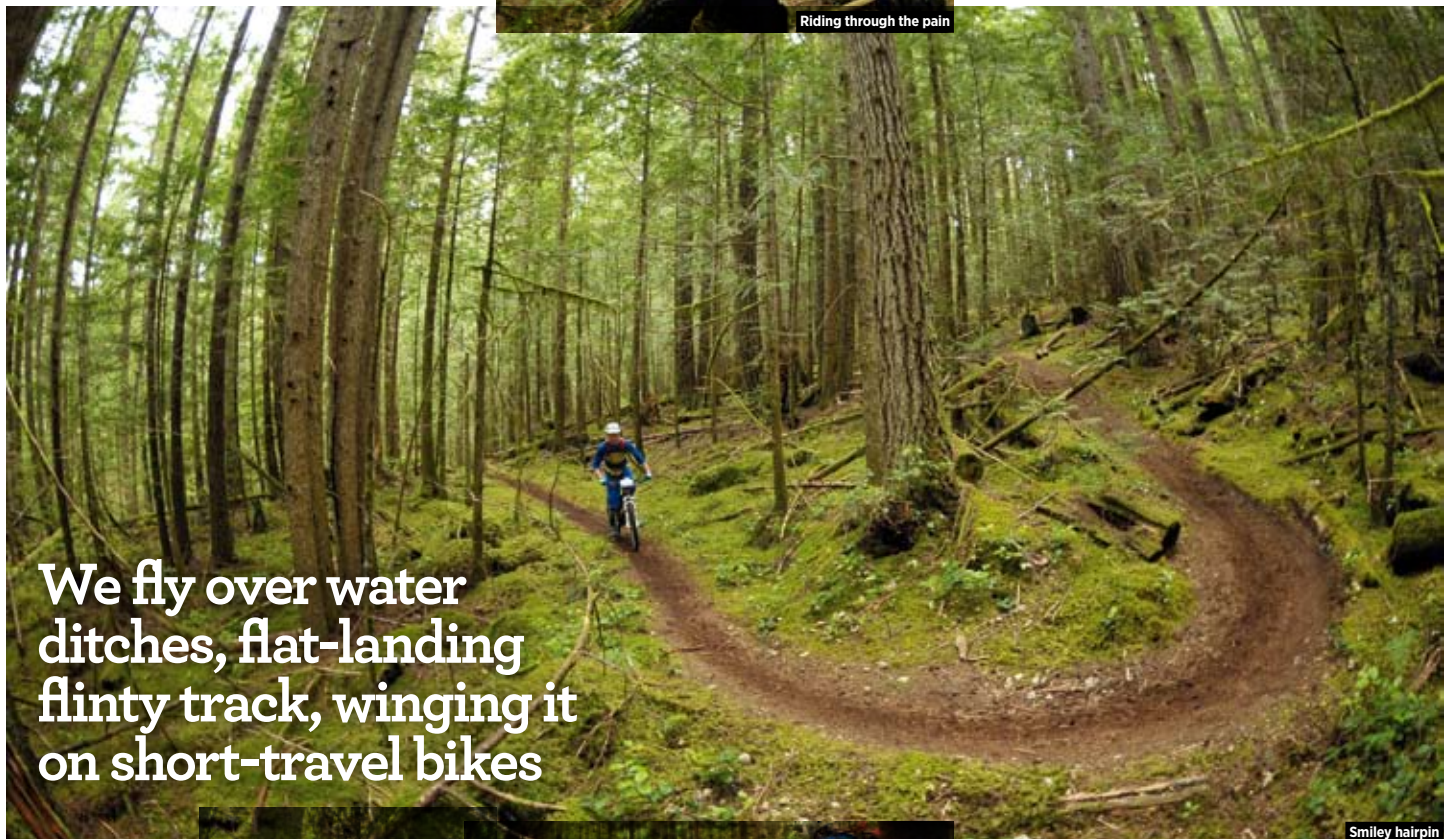
## 1st timers



### Graham Thomson 45, UK Ian Murphy 45, UK

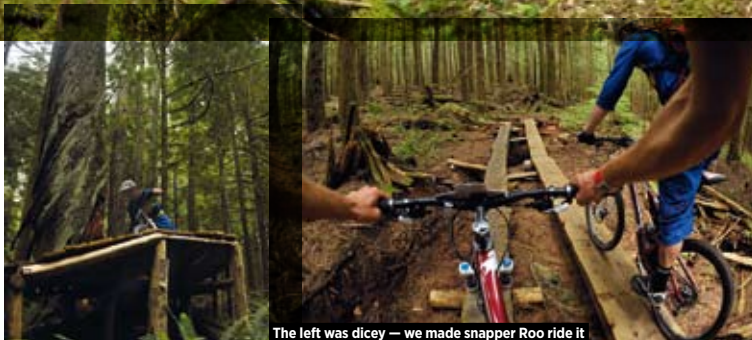
"We're team 2 Young 2 Care," Graham says. I've got a Trek Fuel Ex 9.9 shod with WTB Mutano tyres."

Ian is hammering an Ibis Mojo and Kenda Nevegals and says: "We rode all the usual trail centres and did some big loops as training before the event. We found some of the trails mentally arduous so we switched to the shorter Challenge Event on one day, but overall we've enjoyed it and the scenery is fantastic."



We fly over water ditches, flat-landing flinty track, winging it on short-travel bikes

Smiley hairpin



The left was dicey — we made snapper Roo ride it

## DAILY STATS

Day 1	Cumberland	54km	1,200m
Day 2	Campbell River	50km	1,005m
Day 3	Powell River	51km	1,070m
Day 4	Earls Cove to Sechelt	65km	2,110m
Day 5	Sechelt to Langdale	38km	1,420m
Day 6	Squamish	50km	1,660m
Day 7	Whistler	27km	860m

## Day 6 Squamish

I can hear someone drumming before I see them. Some three-piece lost in the woods, disorientated, looking for the gig and finding only Lycra and pain. They thrash out a rhythm as I drop into one of the groomed trails, railing the corners and carving compacted dirt. It took some steep climbing to get us here but the pay off is well worth it — \$60k worth of handbuilt, zig-zag, switch-back, tabletop, river-valley crossing, jump fun fest.



The birthplace of grunge



Slippery rock n roll

## 1st timers




### Alberto Najera 49, Mexico

"The BCBR is a 50th birthday gift to myself. It's my first stage race ever and probably my last. I questioned myself on the second day but I don't care about the time, I'm just looking forward to seeing my family at the finish line in Whistler. I have a Specialized Camber but I brought the Scott Genius 40 because it has more travel. The dropper post has been very helpful on the downhills."



Squamish — rooty and rocky in places, off the chart in others!

## Day 7 Whistler

My hands are hard from seven days of riding and I notice the ends of the grips are worn. A battle of wills? It's the final day, and the shortest. The Olympic rings cover our departure and we ascend and descend on fire road and push up more singletrack. Everyone feels short-changed — this is Whistler, where's the good stuff? We don't have to wait long. The trail winds down through giant rock slabs and granite crags, jagged singletrack torn from the mountain. We crawl over the carcass of this dying race but it fights back just once last time and pitches me into a rocky overhang, opening an old wound, spilling blood. But I can smell death; the end is near. I see a great inflatable arch like Bibendum with arms outstretched in a welcoming embrace. Riders cross the line and hug each other, all smiles. Most won't come back, but I will. 



Just like a farm in Essex in a year's time



It really was as good as it looks

Riders cross the line and hug each other, all smiles. Most won't come back, but I will



The final run to the line



No, it was this big!



## FACTFILE

The BCBR is seven days but this doesn't include Day Zero, travelling from registration in North Vancouver to Cumberland. This involves a ferry and two bus journeys and takes all day. There are several transfers; either in the morning or afternoon, after the stage has finished.

### Essential equipment

Although you are required to carry several items of essential equipment, not everyone bothers. Mandatory items are a whistle, waterproof matches, emergency food, first aid kit and a waterproof jacket.

### Tent city

Included in the entry fee is a week's accommodation in a tent, which is ready and waiting as you cross the finish line. You pay extra for single occupancy but most nights there were empty tents.

### Daily shuttle

This is available to ferry riders between the hotels and the race start/finish. A weekly pass is around \$100. However, it's often quicker (and sometimes cheaper) to use local taxis.

### Facilities on site

Toilets and hot showers, as well as free internet access, bike storage and repairs/ servicing and a massage tent.

### Tyre choice

Several racers recommended Maxxis CrossMark or Larsen TT as good fast-rolling choices. I settled on a 2.35in Minion up front and 2.25in CrossMark on the rear.

### Camping gear

BCBR provides blue foam-base mats at tent check-in, but I used one of the new lightweight Thermarest Sleep Systems, which consisted of an Alpine Down blanket, LuxuryMap mattress, fitted sheet and compression pillow.

### Food

If you opt for the Racer Meal Plan at C\$350 then breakfast and evening meal are provided. There are two aid stations per day with the usual array of race food.

### Dakine Racer Bag

A Dakine wheelie bag is provided to transport your gear between stages. Your mattress and sleeping bag will also have to fit in this (30x16x15.5in) bag. You get to keep it at the end of the race.

### Entry fees

Entry for the 2012 event opened the day the 2011 race finished. Full price is C\$1,999 but there are three levels of Early Bird entry. Early Bird A is C\$1,499 for the first 80, B is C\$1,699 for the next 100 and C is C\$1,799 for the next 100 entries. To enter, go to [bcbikerace.com/registration](http://bcbikerace.com/registration).

### Flights

Canadian Affair flies to Vancouver from Gatwick and Manchester. Return fares from £318 for Sept/Oct 2011. Prices for 2012 from £338 return: [canadianaffair.com](http://canadianaffair.com), 020 7616 9933.