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Going Really Off the Grid in Canada

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Canadian Adventure Company leads small groups through untouched wilderness in Mallard Valley

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*Excerpts from an article arising from a visit to
Canadian Adventure Company's Mallard Mountain Lodge
in the Summer of 2014.*

For the full article, visit

http://www.travelagewest.com/Travel/USA-Canada/Going-Really-Off-the-Grid-in-Canada/#.VUrDqvm6e_5

"No one's ever been swimming in here," our guide Paul says, and with that, we were wet. It was freezing beyond belief, but as devout members of the "get there first" and "off the beaten path" crowd, it didn't matter. We were first — and there wasn't anyone around for miles.

It all felt like a scene plucked out of a dream. We were at a crystal clear pond that mirrored the sloping spruce- and fir-covered hills funneling into the base of a towering mountain.

The nameless lake is on a protracted ridge in Mallard Valley, which is part of the British Columbia Rockies adjacent to Jasper National Park. It is government land and one of five consecutive valleys that were granted on concession to Derek McManus, who created Canadian Adventure Company and Mallard Mountain Lodge in order to share this untouched wilderness with outdoor enthusiasts like myself.

From June to September, it's a pathless wonder of mountain and valley hiking. From December to May, the company hosts ski touring, a popular kind of downhill skiing that involves strapping traction to skis in order to hike remote areas.

"I knew I wanted to create a backcountry experience for people," says McManus, who still hasn't shaken his love for wild places.

He is a stoic but friendly man in his 60s, known in Canada as one of the founding fathers of snowcat skiing, a form that uses a tractor-like vehicle to give skiers access to remote powder.

“I hired a helicopter, and we literally flew over the land looking for the perfect place,” he tells me during dinner on our first night.

From there, it took five years to get the rights to use the land, and then a few more years to set up Canadian Adventure Company.

Mallard Mountain Lodge opened in 2014. Backpacker Magazine immediately beelined to the area to conduct its 2014 winter gear reviews, a sign of the genuinely rough terrain here. Outside Magazine wasn't far behind, awarding it runner-up in the category of Best New Lodge in 2014.

The only way to get to this remote stretch of alpine land is via a stunning 30-minute helicopter ride over road-less mountain peaks. The flight takes off from Valemount, a small mountain town that is about a four-hour drive from the closest airport in Kamloops (which is a one-hour flight northeast of Vancouver). The closest asphalt is a logging road about 11 miles away and nary a cellular or Wi-Fi signal reaches this far — even if you bring snazzy equipment.

Worry not: There is a satellite phone for emergency use. Everything in Mallard, from the solar panels that provide all the camp's power to the lodge itself was flown in and assembled like a puzzle.

It's the kind of place you go with a group of friends who all share the same passion for hiking or skiing and getting off the grid.

We spent our days ambling over the ancient valley floor, beneath evergreen forests and over wildflower-covered meadows. Sometimes, we would scramble up scree or sloped grassland to reach easy ridges with expansive views. Each evening, I devoured my book, drank a beer and was in bed just after sunset.

One afternoon when lunch had been finished, the conversation lulled and we collectively began to nap. No planes flew overhead, no cars drove below and I was too far from my neighbor to hear any breathing. I pushed my cheek into the soft, green Earth and found the one memory that will stay with me the longest. For the first time in my life, I heard the sound of absolute silence.