

BMN HIKE REPORT

Stawamus Chief

September 29, 2012

by Mark Johnston



Hikers on North Peak of Stawamus Chief; Copilot (just left of centre) and Goat Ridge (right) visible behind. *Ian McArthur photo.*

Anyone who has driven the Sea to Sky Highway will be familiar with Stawamus Chief. The imposing granite monolith has long been a magnet for climbers and hikers. Climbers like to scale the Chief's sheer cliffs via any number of technical routes; hikers can achieve the same dizzying heights by means of a network of well-built trails on the backside. Although hiking the Chief is one of a handful of classic hikes in southwestern British Columbia, our club, which tends to seek out the less-travelled paths, has up until now avoided the rock mass's well-populated trails. But with the prospect of the construction of a gondola looming, the right-of-way for which would run through Stawamus Chief Provincial Park, we overcame our distaste for mingling with crowds in order to experience the area again before any forthcoming development changes it forever.

Some of our party of eight had not visited the Chief since the rock and its environs achieved park status in 1997. While we have all heard that BC Parks is starved for cash, it was interesting to note how much money has been poured into this provincial park. There is a well-planned, very clean campground at the rock's southern base, and the improvements to the trails can only be described as stunning. Given their steep grades, the trails have always been subject to erosion. But the Parks Branch has mitigated this tendency by putting up extensive wooden staircases lower down and setting in place a seemingly endless series of stone steps higher up. The Branch has also affixed a number of metal ladders and a few chains to the bare rock that must be negotiated on the final approaches to South (First) and Centre (Second) summits.



Hikers on South Peak. Ian McArthur photo.

When we left Coquitlam, it seemed as though the skies were clearing, but as we headed up Howe Sound, we got back into cloud. So on our hike up South Peak, we had limited views, and when we got to the top, we couldn't see much of anything. Occasionally we were able to make out the veiled disc of the sun, but each time, the clouds thickened again, leaving us in a mostly grey world. Although we couldn't see anything, we could hear voices somewhere off in the mist and later figured they must have been carrying over from Centre Peak. Despite the claustrophobic conditions, we stayed for quite some time, sitting on the bare granite and eating a partial lunch, ever hopeful that the clouds might lift. We also spared a few nuts for the two or three chipmunks that were bold enough to approach, no doubt used to receiving handouts.

To get to Centre Peak we had to lose considerable elevation and then regain it again. As we worked our way up a cleft, we might have been tempted to think what was the point. We weren't going to see anything anyway. But by the time we reached the top, we found that the lower cloud was beginning to dissipate. Then, while sitting down and eating the rest of our lunch, we watched as the clouds finally parted to reveal distant views. We could look across the sound to the Tantalus Range and in particular Mts. Murchison and Lapworth; we could look down on the town of Squamish, laid out, map-like, far below;

and we could look over our shoulder to the south and see the length of impressive Goat Ridge, and just beyond its eastern end the striking rock horn known as Copilot. But just as impressive, as the changing scenery all around, was the sky itself, which was becoming a wondrous patchwork of every conceivable kind of cloud—cirrus, cumulus, middle. Although when climbing to a height, one usually wishes for clear skies, we were thrilled to be witnessing such a glorious show of changing patterns and colours.

To the north the third peak, our next destination, seemed a long way off. But once we began to head in its direction, we found that it really didn't take all that much time to get there. As we walked on bald rock toward the summit, our views continued to improve. We looked back over Centre and South peaks, each with a number of parties on top, and then along the sound toward Leading Peak on Anvil Island and Killam and Liddell on Gambier. A ribbon of Sea to Sky Highway was visible just beyond South Peak, and we could see across the water to the old Woodfibre Mill site, the plant now largely dismantled. Looking north, we could see the Squamish-Cheakamus divide and the top of Garibaldi, which poked above wreathing clouds. Other than chipmunks, the ubiquitous ravens, and a lone eagle flying south just below Centre Peak, we hadn't encountered much wildlife, but here on the final summit we were delighted to find a small flock of juncos and a pair of Steller's jays. With much to keep our minds occupied, we lingered long, and only with reluctance tore ourselves away.

Our descent only took an hour and a half. We dropped down a steep gully between Centre and North peaks. As one loses elevation, this gully becomes increasingly narrow. Despite its seemingly unfavourable terrain, we found a number of large fir and cedar growing here. Interestingly, the trees seem to alternate in single file fashion, as if they are so many hikers making their way up and down the trail.

Back at our vehicles, we spent some time gazing up at the cliffs above us and picking out climbers on the sheer rock face. While admiring their skill and nerves of steel, we were happy to have achieved the same destination by a much less demanding route.

As for the gondola: It now appears that the Ministry of Environment is poised to issue a park-use permit for the project. While Friends of the Squamish Chief have filed a complaint with the provincial ombudsperson claiming a "flawed process," it does seem as though the gondola is a *fait accompli*. One wonders what it will be like visiting the Chief and neighbouring Shannon Falls in the midst of an expanded tourist scene.