

The View from the Skyline

80 years of hiking with Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies

by: Jim Taylor

I'm gasping for breath, planting my feet carefully on the steep slope up to the ridge that rises against the sky. I wonder why I put myself through this grind, every summer.

A few more steps, and I know why. I reach the ridge. On the far side, the rock drops away in a sheer cliff. Before me spreads a panorama of snow-clad peaks, of deep green valleys, of sapphire lakes, stretching away to a cloudless horizon. In a classic paradox, I've seen view like this before, on previous hikes – but I have never seen this particular view before.

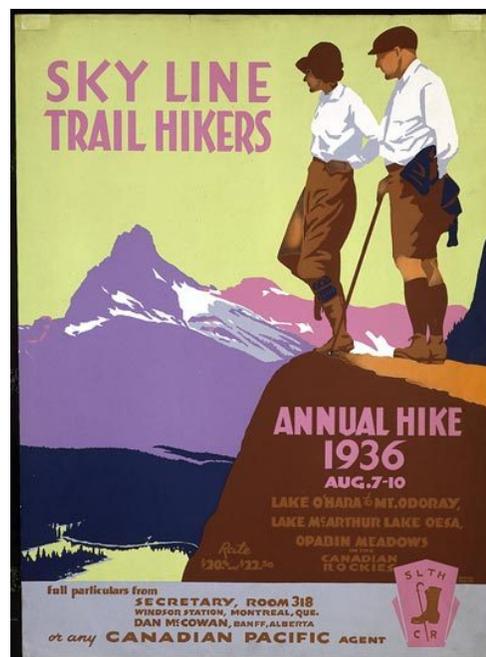
This hike is one of four I take during each week-long camp organized by the Skyline Hikers of the Canadian Rockies. Skyline was founded 80 years ago by the Canadian Pacific Railway as a means of luring tourists to their mountain lodges and hotels.

John Gibbon, head of publicity for the Canadian Pacific Railway, invented two organizations – one for horseback trail riders, and one for hikers. The first hike in 1933 lasted four days, and took 50 international travellers between CPR lodges.

Through the 1930s, these were pioneer camps. The CPR originally used canvas tepees. By the 1970s, the organization switched to prospector-style tents, slung on frames built from the innumerable lodgepole pines that cloak lower slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The hikers' gear and the food went in on pack horses, and it still does. Hikers only have to carry day packs.

Since 1961 the management has come under a non-profit society that took over from the CPR. Even so, a Skyline camp still feels like going back half a century in time. White canvas tents cluster in a meadow, surrounded by tall pines and spruces. Inside each tent, a small wood stove banishes the chill of high-altitude nights.

Skyline organizes five camps every summer, during July and August. Hikers hike in on Monday, hike back out again on Saturday.



Canadian Pacific Railway Poster for 1936 Annual Hike

Every day, the camp organizers offer between four and six optional hikes ranging from easy to strenuous to a variety of destinations. Some climb strenuous ridges or peaks; some lead to azure lakes slumbering in the sunshine; some simply seek out spectacular viewpoints or alpine meadows bright with wildflowers.

Every evening, hikers gather around a campfire to tell tall stories about the day's experiences and hear about the next day's hiking possibilities.

I could go hiking by myself. But I prefer hiking with the group. The base camp brings me anywhere from five to 25 km further into the mountains than I could go from a highway start. A professional cook provides three-course dinners every night in the dining tent and there is hot water for washing up after a sweaty day on the trail. Every hike has at least two qualified trail leaders to ensure that no one gets lost or injured.

I also enjoy the social interaction. Each camp has up to 54 campers. At any camp about half are repeats. They greet each other like the old friends they are. They swap stories; they laugh; and sometimes they grieve together over losses of family and friends.

I have been part of Camp Three since 1991 because it offers the best alpine flora. I've been going ever since. And it's a bargain – under \$160 a day, which includes transportation to the trailhead, pack horses, all meals, tents, medical care, and accommodation.

Because of Skyline's long history of working with Banff National Park, it is allowed to camp in sites that are off-limits to other commercial operations.

To protect the fragile mountain environment, however, camps return to the same location only every ten years or so. New sites are regularly worked into the rotation inside and outside Banff Park boundaries. As a result, I have only twice been back to the same location.

Some might feel that returning year after year to a relatively restricted geographic area is unduly limiting. I don't feel that way. As a journalist, then as a globetrotting retiree, I've spent significant time in 66 different countries by my last count. That leaves me about another 130 I could go to. I probably won't – but as long as I can walk, I expect to return to Skyline. Nothing else offers me the same combination of spectacular scenery, enjoyable companions, and healthy exercise.

Although hikers come from all over Canada, and some from other countries, they always seem to get along. Perhaps it's because they all start with some characteristics in common – a love of the outdoors, enjoyment of physical activity, a sense of adventure...

And, if you're that kind of person too, you and I may someday eat our lunches seated on that peak, looking out over an unforgettable view.

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