



HUG a DOCTOR
in Clearwater, British Columbia

AN ARTICLE FROM MOTORHOME MAGAZINE

Canada's Valley of Fire: Wells Gray Provincial Park

WHAT STRIKES YOU MOST ABOUT THE ENTRANCE TO Wells Gray Provincial Park is the volcano standing guard on the horizon. This is not your average park.

British Columbia's largest park sprawls over one million square miles in the center of the province, too large for an afternoon visit and too huge to be completely covered in this article. Most of the park is virgin wilderness, an exotic mix of extinct volcanoes, lava flows, mineral springs, pristine lakes, glistening glaciers and snow-frosted mountains. Even place names within the park are exotic: Pillpill Mountain and Lickskillet Creek are examples. Four waterfalls plunge over 100-foot-high cliffs, and one leaps more than 400 feet. The highest mountain in the park scrapes the 9,000-foot level.

The park is often thought of as Canada's answer to Yosemite, but without the crowds. The valley floors are not covered with asphalt and there are no lines to endure. Tourist facilities are offered on the main access road north from the town of Clearwater, and that is the route I took on a recent visit. I began my day at the information center located at the junction of Provincial Highway 5 and the park road. Hidden off the right side of the park road, the center is easily missed. I loaded up with maps, topographic sheets and an excellent guidebook before heading off. Six miles north of the information center, I found Spahats Creek Falls, a 200-foot-high waterfall that has carved a deep gorge lined with moss and mist. The trail to the falls winds through feathery hemlocks and soaring cedars, and it is a photographer's dream.

Sixteen miles farther, I entered the park. The entrance is marked only by a sign, with no ticket taker and no entrance booth, a refreshing change from the numerous parks that seem more interested in grabbing your wallet than your attention. The first major waterfall along the park road is Dawson Falls,

a wide curtain of white water formed where the Murtle River plunges over a 65-foot-high bank. In the summer, rangers lead small groups of lucky tourists on a short hike behind the falls, where you can stand open-mouthed, gasping at the tons of water crashing down in front of you.

A few miles farther along the road is the very symbol of Wells Gray: Helmcken Falls, which at 432 feet is the fourth-highest waterfall in Canada. There are two viewpoints: an upper one with easy access, and one at the base of the falls for gung-ho hikers who don't mind an hourlong trek. At the falls' base, centuries of crashing water have created a Dali-like dreamscape of thick fog, through which cliff swallows swoop and glide like tiny black ghosts. In the winter, an ice cone 200 feet high is built up at the base of the falls.

The summit of Pyramid Mountain, the 359-foot-high cinder cone visible at the park's entrance, is attained after a 90-minute hike that starts from the main road just a couple miles north of the Helmcken Falls turnoff. From its peak, you share a panoramic vista with a few scrubby lodgepole pines. To the east, the Murtle River scrambles through Pyramid Rapids. To the north loom high ridges dusted with snow, even in July. And to the south, a small puff of mist hovers over the site of Helmcken Falls. It's a view to remember.

More than a hundred mineral springs bubble to the surface in this park. The most accessible is Ray's Mineral Spring, a short jaunt east of the main road, 12 miles north of the Pyramid Mountain trailhead. At the spring, mineral-rich waters have produced a knee-high cone that sits like a rust-colored pimple upon the earth. On my last visit, I scooped a handful of its water up to my mouth and promptly wished I hadn't; the tart taste made me spit it out immediately. On the hike back, I thought about that cone of minerals and imagined what that water was depositing in my stomach. Just before the end of the road, 18 miles



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from the park entrance, are two large campgrounds, with a total of 73 sites, including many suitable for motorhomes. Both campgrounds are located on terraces above the Clearwater River, which provides the soothing sound of running water to lull you to sleep. Don't miss the evening nature talks given by park rangers in the campground interpretive center. On my visit, a talk on moose, complete with some hilarious stories from the park's early days, kept us all entranced for over an hour. A huge bonfire, with the usual toasted marshmallows, finished off the evening.

Another couple of miles past the campgrounds, you'll come to Clearwater Lake and the starting points to a number of backcountry trails. One of the most unique is the Dragon's Tongue Trail, which crawls along a 6,000-year-old lava bed. The sharp blocks of black lava play havoc with soft sneakers, so hiking boots are an absolute must. Fifteen miles down the trail lies the extinct Kotal volcano, a small and easily climbed cinder cone with a crater more than 300 feet deep.

It is the untouched nature of Wells Gray and the wide range of activities possible within the park that are its main attractions. In the summer, you can go rafting down the Clearwater River or hiking in the extensive backcountry. Or perhaps you'd prefer to tackle the trails via mountain bike or on horseback.

One of the best-kept secrets in Wells Gray is Murtle Lake, where motorboats are prohibited. By no coincidence, it is also one of the best fishing lakes in the park. Canoeists can paddle this deep-blue pool in complete silence and camp along the sandy beaches. Moose, bears and eagles are often spotted along the shore.

Fire and water, lava and ice -- these are the ingredients of one of the most fascinating wilderness parks in Canada, and these are the reasons that those who seek something different seek out Wells Gray Provincial Park.

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