

## Stein Valley Traverse

Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park  
British Columbia, Canada

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# Introduction

This is my personal diary of my trip on the Stein Valley Traverse. If you wish to have more details on anything feel free to contact me. As English is not my first language I apologize for potential mistakes. If you want to help me improve my English, feel free to contact me. And if you just like my diary, feel free to contact me!

## **0<sup>th</sup> day – getting there ... (Aug 5, 2005)**

Our Day started with some packing at home. My small room in Vancouver was full of what everybody was planning to take along. Finally we were on the road some time after 10 am and arrived in Whistler at noon. It was very hot, the sun was burning down from a clear blue sky and we walked up to the biker-X parcours to see the last couple riders racing in the biker-X qualifying session.

After that we waited for quite a while to see the slopestyle qualifying. But first the track had to be watered to make it less dusty. The slopestyle contest was pretty cool. The riders showed us drops, teeter-totter drops, backflips, 360-ies, wallrides and other cool stunts. After the first qualifying round we were so thirsty that we had to go and get something to drink. We were all drinking more than a liter of water at once. After that it was already relatively late so that we decided not to wait for the next bike show, but head out to Lillooet Lake, to the Stein Valley trailhead, where we were planning to stay for the night. We had a panini at Nester's in Whistler and hit the road afterwards.

After driving about 16 km on the forest road along Lillooet Lake we arrived at Lizzie Creek and the close by campsite. We picked a nice place for our tent and walked to Lizzie Creek. There the 3 European guys undressed and shocked the Canadian wildlife with their first naked bath in the cool stream. It was pretty cold, but I didn't shout at all! We felt very refreshed afterwards. The paninis were so big that we decided not to have anything else for dinner.

We were already cut off the civilized world – no cell phone reception at our campsite. Except some cars still driving along the forest road it was very quiet. We thought we would for sure be the only group among the other campers at the site going for the hike (which turned out to be true). Looking forward to our great tour to the Stein Valley we went to bed early.

Good Night!

# The Stein Valley Trail

## 1<sup>st</sup> day – Lillooet Lake to Lizzie Lake (Aug 6, 2005)

The first night of the trip was very hot. We were sweating even without our sleeping bags and we couldn't even close the mosquito net. In the morning I was accused of cuddling with Martin – maybe I was missing somebody? At about 9 we parked the car at the place we spotted the day before (across Lizzie Creek) and started hiking up the old forest road. After a few hundred meters we had to take the first detour at a washout. We walked up to the left on another forest road a couple hundred meters to a cairn marked with a T-shirt, where a small trail along the slope starts. We then followed the forest road, which from time to time was more like a trail because it was so much accreted. It was extremely hot and we had to walk almost always in the sun since the trees were all logged.

We met a group of six guys coming down. They said that they haven't met anyone during their trip, not even a bear. At 12 we had lunch with smoked ham and bread at another washout. We decided to eat up the ham because it was smelling pretty strong and we wanted to avoid sharing it with a bear. Strengthened we tackled the steep ascent up to Lizzie Lake from which we also saw Lillooet Lake disappearing down at the end of the valley. Arriving at Lizzie Lake was like being in paradise. Some old campsites, crystal clear water and an abundance of logs at the shore. We decided to stay even though it was still quite early.

The only bad thing is that there were many flies and some mosquitos (like the whole day long ...). We decided to wash us in the lake, even though it wasn't that easy with all the logs at the shore. But we found a way out to deeper water by walking along many logs.

Our campsite also had a fireplace, with still some blaze glowing. The previous group was very irresponsible. The forest was very dry and later some gusts were blowing through the forest. I turned the glowing log a bit and it caught fire again. The smoke didn't irritate the insects at all and so we decided to extinguish the fire with liters of water before we went to bed.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> day – Caltha Lake (Aug 7, 2005)

After a calm and quiet night we hit the trail at 8. The trail starts right in between the campsites at the lake. It proceeds along the lake and starts climbing up to Lizzie Creek's

upper valley. Today we fought an endless and hopeless battle against mosquitos and other mean insects which were trying to bite us. My face must look horrible with all these bites and it hurts pretty badly. We constantly were surrounded by a cloud of mosquitos. We passed a very nice campsite just below Lizzie Cabin and we were very confused about where to go right after the cabin. We decided not to cross the second stream but to follow a hardly visible and rarely marked trail up in direction to Arrowhead Lake. After a while we lost it and continued climbing up through the meadows along the stream. At some point we crossed the stream and ended up at the real trail. At Arrowhead lake we had a great view over the alpine for the first time. We then continued along Heart Lake up to the ridge to the place marked with a huge cairn.

Up there we enjoyed the views of glaciers, the mosquitos clouds and we lost the trail once again . . . We hiked along Iceberg Lake to the cliff from where we could see Caltha Lake in the distance. We decided that the only way leading to Caltha Lake would be along the northern ridge. Wolfi was not very enthusiastic about this news, he already was tired and it was obvious that it will take us a long time to get over to Caltha Lake. But finally Martin and I convinced him that it doesn't make sense to stay at Iceberg Lake. (To stay on the trail I suggest to hike from the cairn along the southern slope of Tabletop Mountain instead of going closer to Iceberg Lake, this way you should end up at the ridge which leads to Caltha Lake.) The trail on the ridge is well marked with a lot of cairns. It leads down to a pass and then up again. We've seen a Marmot and we heard many whistles announcing our arrival loudly. Martin spotted one cairn after another with his eagle-like eyes and finally we had to cross some scree with gigantic boulders. Not the easiest task when you are already tired, it took all the power we had left.

Three hours after leaving Iceberg Lake we arrived at a nice campsite at the runout of Caltha Lake. It was already 6 pm and we were really tired. So we took a quick bath in the lake and cooked something. After only eating a few slices of bread in the morning and two cereal bars during the day we all were craving for food. Eating was not that easy because of the mosquitos. We were wearing our rain jackets with hoods closed to protect ourselves. There was also nothing to hang up our food and garbage to protect ourselves from hungry bears. So we decided to take it inside the tent and hoped that our own scent would surpass the one of our food.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> day – Tundra Lake (Aug 8, 2005)**

This night nobody of us sleep well at all. I guess it was the many painful insect bites in our faces. After taking off at 8.30 we did some trail-finding and arrived at the pass and Stein Valley park boundary at about 10. From here we've also seen Tundra Lake for the first time. With it's deep blue water, surrounded by steep slopes, gravel fields and glaciers it looked breathtaking. We started to descend around some probably ever lasting snow fields to the northern shore. We were hoping to arrive at the eastern end of Tundra Lake within two hours, but it took us more than 3 hours and by the time we reached there we were very tired. Walking along the lake was very exhausting. There is no trail but from time to time we came across some cairns. Almost all the way long we had to climb over huge boulders and if it wasn't the boulders we had to walk along

the steep slope over slippery grass. My feet were hurting because of all that. Do I have to mention the mosquitos ...?

At the Tundra Lake campsite (undeveloped) we started searching for water (and also for the trail ...). For Water we went all the way to the runout of the Lake and filtered our water there. Since there were no nice campsites close to that place we went back up to the little ridge and set up our camp at a little pond. At this time we found out that we were not really good prepared for this trip. Our food might not be enough for our initially planned trip over Blowdown pass. We underestimated the roughness of the terrain which made us advance a lot slower than we were planning to. We also realized that we simply forgot to buy the Stein Valley guide book. Fortunately I printed out a simple map of the park's website, which showed us that the trail continues along the northern ridge above Puppet Lake down in direction North Stein River down to the eastern end of Stein Lake. After realizing this I have immediately seen the trail across a sand field leading up to the ridge. (Later I found out that this trail is very obviously marked with a big arrow right at the beginning) Since it was still early (but too late to hike on) I decided to satisfy my curiosity and climb up that trail (without backpack – what a good feeling!). After about half an hour I came to another little lake which had no runout. Fed by melting snow fields it was crystal clear, it should be a good place to fill up our water tomorrow. The cairns and some older foot traces led me up to a place where the trail crosses a big scree. At this point I decided to return to be back at the tent in time. Almost down I've seen a relatively fresh bear paw in the sand. Luckily I had a bear-bell with me – maybe this prevented a close encounter. We then had our dinner some hundred meters away from the tent and it was once again horrible to eat outside with all these mosquitos (luckily this was the last day of mosquito invasion!). By eating outside we tried to keep away the scent of food from the tent. We decided to hike out to the Lytton trail head instead of going over Blowdown pass. This should take less time so that we can for sure make it with our food stock. By this time Wolfi had many blisters at his feet. He was in a mood and really pissed off his shoes and the mosquitos. I got a blister, too, presumably from hiking along the slope all day long.

## **4<sup>th</sup> day – Stein Lake (Aug 9, 2005)**

After waking up I got out of the tent and took some pictures in the morning sun. There were some nice reflections of the snow fields on Tundra Lake. I also realized that mosquitos never sleep, so we decided to have breakfast in the tent. After that we packed up quickly and started to climb up to the freshwater pond which I found the day before. From there we went over some scree and huge boulders. We could not exactly see where the trail climbs up to the ridge, but we were guessing that some stone piles on the ridge were actually cairns and we were right. The trail goes up a steep sandy chimney more or less at the leftmost end of the ridge, before the ridge steepens up to the peak.

On the ridge we found a well marked and clearly visible trail. We followed it for hours – it is a long, long ridge! During the hike we've seen small lakes on both sides of the ridge, Puppet Lake is the one on the southern side. We also got some glimpses of Stein Lake with its turquoise colour. This was our last day up in the alpine where we

enjoyed the great views so much. During the last days we've always been at an altitude of around 2000 meters.

Once again we were lucky with the weather. After a horrible start in Vancouver's summer, July and August turned out to be very sunny. Hence it was again very hot and there is no water supply on the ridge. By the time we came to the descend Wolfi ran out of water. The way down was long and steep, we had to climb over a lot of deadfall and once again we lost the trail . . .

At one point we went back and forth twice and hiked an extra distance of about 700 meters along a trail which very obviously many hikers use unintentionally because of a misleading cairn. We then started searching the trail from the last orange ribbon downwards and found another nail at a tree hidden behind a branch. The rest of the trail was then well marked. Almost down in the valley we heard the North Stein River in the distance. It was like a mirage – we were thirsty but couldn't reach the river. The forest is just too dense to get off the trail. So we hiked all the way around the mountain to Stein Lake and it's cable car crossing. At the river we all drank a lot of water. Wolfi and I felt slightly dizzy and the fresh water was a great relief. We felt better instantly.

After this refreshment we started searching for the Stein Lake campsite. According to our crude map it should be located on the northern side of the lake. So I started crossing the huge scree but couldn't find anything in the forest west of it. I came back and we decided that we should cross the river. The cable car seems to be a bit rusty. It needed all three of us to pull at the cable to make it move. Luckily we found the campsite just some hundred meters away from the cable car at the southern shore of Stein Lake. We were glad to finally find a place to rest after hiking for eleven hours from 8 am to 7 pm!

At first we enjoyed Stein River's cool water and then started cooking a big meal. We had a double pack of German "Reiter Travellunch" each, which turned out to be significantly more than a two servings pack of "Backpacker's Pantry". We also made use of the bear safe to store our food and garbage instead of hanging it up in a tree. During the night there was a thunderstorm. We were too lazy to get out and take down our clothes from the clothesline. There is one more thing to mention: there were more or less no mosquitos at Stein Lake – what a relief!

## **5<sup>th</sup> day – before Logjam Camp (Aug 10, 2005)**

In the morning the weather started to clear up. There were still some fog patches on the mountains, but we were optimistic that the blue sky will eventually break through.

The trail was well marked and went through swampy areas. Unfortunately all the leaves were wet and soon my shoes were soaked. After having no mosquitos at the campsite we met them again in all these swampy regions – what a nice welcome in Stein Valley! We've also seen some bear excrements and bear paws in the swamp. Some of them looked pretty fresh. After two hours we came to the next cable car crossing. This time it was a one-person-cable car and it worked a lot better than our first one at Stein Lake.

Soon after the cable car crossing the trail climbed up over some scree at the northern side of the valley. After a while we were again at an altitude of about 1100 meters (the

cable car was at 960 meters). The ascent over the boulders was exhausting and the air was humid and hot. At this time we entered the area of the 1996 forest fire. Obviously there was no trail maintenance done since then. The marking was very bad and the number of fallen trees over which we had to climb or slip through underneath was uncountable. But the worst thing was the sprawling shrubs. They were very dense, covering the trail, hiding the marking and they were wet so that it was very unpleasant to slip through them. After another two hours of hiking we arrived at the High View Camp. It was not a nice place at all in the midst of the burnt forest. In addition, we could not find fresh water close by, so we decided to go on (according to the park website there should be a creek 100 m east of the camp – I think we heard it dripping). At this time the thunderstorm came back and a rain shower struck us. After some more hiking we heard voices in the distance. Soon we met another group of five hikers who were on their third day of hiking into the valley from the Lytton trail head. This family was planning to do the traverse to Lillooet Lake in two more days but we told them that for us it seems to be impossible to do that.

The bad trail conditions in the forest fire section slowed us down significantly. In the morning we made more than two kilometers per hour (straight line on the GPS). Now we were slowed down to less than one! Shortly after we met the other group the rain came back. At 5 pm we decided to camp at the point where the trail comes back down to the river. That is about half way between the High View Camp and the Logjam Camp. We were completely soaked, the shrubs and the rain made us wet from every side. Right after we built up the tents a deer and a fawn visited us. They were hopping over the shrubs behind our tent. We hung up our clothes and started cooking. We also had some hot tea to warm us up. While we were eating the family came back. They decided to return to Lytton due to a lack of food. After yet another funny make-the-food-and-garbage-bear-safe activity, we soon went to bed. The day was again more tiring than we had anticipated. For hanging up our food we had a carabiner attached to a three millimeter string. It always took several trials to throw the carabiner over an appropriate branch, strong enough to hold all our food and garbage up in the air.

## **6<sup>th</sup> day – Ponderosa Shelter (Aug 11, 2005)**

In the morning the weather was nice and we were on the way soon. After just one hour we were out of the forest fire section and came to the Logjam Camp. There is a huge logjam on Stein River building numerous bridges. And there it was – the bear! On the other side of the river it was running away so fast that we couldn't even take a photo. I always wondered how fast a black bear would be in this dense forest full of deadfall. Now we've seen how easily it was dashing away over this chaotic logjam. It was obvious that you would never have a chance to outrun a bear. After that we hiked through an ever changing forest. From swampy to dry, jungle-like to Mediterranean-like, from cool and moist to boiling hot. Only one thing was common to all kinds of forest – the mosquitos. But luckily they were not as aggressive as in the alpine.

At Cottonwood Creek we took a refreshing bath in the ice cold and crystal clear water. There were some native youths hanging out, too. After that we took the cable car to the other side from where the waterfall in the gorge is visible. A cold wind was

blowing away from it. We decided to go on to Ponderosa Camp so that we can make it out to Lytton the next day. Even though Wolfi was quite tired at this moment he was in strong favor of this idea. His feet were painning because of numerous blisters and he only wanted to "get out of here". At Cottonwood Camp we lost the trail again. Keep left here or you'll end up returning over Cottonwood Creek! From here on the trail was changing between a forest-highway and an overgrown trail in the swamps of Stein River.

There seems to be no reliable water source close to Ponderosa Camp so we walked on to Ponderosa Shelter, which is hardly visible through the dense forest. It is right at the river, a few hundred meters east of the camp. We did about 18 tough kilometers today and arrived at 6pm. Wolfi did not look like he was happy with his decision to walk on. He could hardly walk . . .

Today we also slightly increased the cereal bar ratio from three to four per day. Despite that we've still been very hungry! We found yet another bear-save tree, washed ourselves shortly in the sandy Stein River and went to bed.

## **7<sup>th</sup> day – Lytton, Vancouver (Aug 12, 2005)**

Today we still had about 19 kilometers to go. There were many camps on the way so we were able to count kilometers even without looking at the GPS. The trail was wide and easy and without realizing it we passed through Devil's Staircase. Here we met the first other two hikers. They asked us if we would know how to get from the trailhead to Lytton. Of course we had no idea and that's how our hitch hike started. These two were a bit faster than us so we agreed to meet at the parking lot, which still was some kilometers ahead.

Finally the Stein Valley widened and the trail turned away from the river to the parking lot. We took some last pictures of the river which we followed from it's origin high up at the snowfields and glaciers to it's estuary into Fraser River. After taking a final picture of us in front of the "Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park" another hiker, Paul, and his son came to the parking lot. He also asked us how we're going to make the way up to Lytton and the highway and offered us to give us a ride. This was a lucky coincidence because it turned out that the other car was too small to take the three of us with backpacks. So we split up on these two cars and I asked Paul where his final destination would be. It turned out that all of them would drive home to Vancouver. I almost didn't dare to ask if they would take us all the way there but finally I did it and four hours later we've been at home! At Lytton's gas station we met the family-group again – they were waiting for the Greyhound /textellipsis

# Closing

## 8<sup>th</sup> day – Aftermath (Aug 13, 2005)

Being at home again we only had to get the car back from Lillooet lake. Martin and I took the Greyhound to Pemberton and were planning to hitch hike from there to the car. We arrived in Pemberton at 11 am. But unfortunately nobody offered us a lift so we started to walk along the road. The sun was blazing and there was not the smallest air draft. After we did about ten kilometers in two hours we had a look at the GPS and were shocked that we still had 20 kilometers to go. We did not recall that it was that far! So we again tried to hitch hike at an intersection, but without success.

After a while we continued walking and I stopped a car just coming out of side road. The guy took us along for about four kilometers. He spoke some German and actually we understood his German better than his English (his slang was so bad)! After that we continued on foot until we reached the Lillooet Lake forest road. Once again we tried to stop a car and this time we had more success. Some people stopped but explained that their car would be packed already (which was always clearly visible). Finally a guy with an old van stopped and took us all along the remaining 16 kilometers to the car. He was very interested in what we had to tell him about the Stein Valley traverse because he was planning to do it by himself. Martin had his digital camera with him so we even got to show him some of our photos.

I was relieved seeing my car still standing there. It was a bit dusty but apart from that everything was fine!

The Stein Valley Traverse – seven days of hiking in the wilderness. It was worth all efforts on the challenging and often vanishing trail. We had incredible views in the alpine and we were surrounded by the densest and most pristine forests we have ever experienced. We have seen whistling marmots, chirping chipmunks and squirrels, partridges, deer and fawn, a black bear and last but not least mosquitos. And we have been more or less alone in this wilderness, with only a 30 centimeter wide trail connecting us to civilization. It was a great adventure and I think afterwards even Wolfi would say that he liked it.