

## On The Wild Side by Catherine D'Aoust

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Whispers  
Online Magazine for Women  
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The van is waiting at the pick-up point in downtown Vancouver with coffee and low-fat muffins to be enjoyed in tailgate picnic style. They arrive with a daypack of gear, most of which Catherine D'Aoust told them to bring and some she expected them to leave at home. Today, ten women from all parts of the globe will hike the Chief leading up to the massive three peaks.

The van winds through the awe-inspiring landscape of mountains, glaciers and canyons in this remote and magnificently untouched wilderness of British Columbia, Canada, revealing peeks of Gambier and Bowen Island out over Howe Sound. They arrive at the base of the Stawamus Chief, a monolith of solid granite rock known for superb rock climbing and a shelter for many species of wildlife.

The Chief, as it is known to all who have hiked around it or climbed to the top of it, is a rich promise, as much social as it is physical, punctuated on either side by the spectacular waterfall and the creek. The reasons for coming are many, but the result is the same: the adventure has elements of risk and challenge; it is unique and stimulating; and the women are explorers of both an outer world, especially the unspoiled wilderness, and an inner world of personal challenge, self-perception and self-mastery.

The interpretive component of the adventure speaks personally to each woman and resonates with their perception of what the true nature of an adventure feels like. There is a sense of anticipation that each will actually experience well-known landmarks around Vancouver, not simply appreciate them from afar or by others' enthusiastic stories. This fits the desires and needs of women living in the 21 century. As an adventure operator GAIA takes responsibility for a safe operation; a well organized adventure with quality equipment; ethical management practices; good customer care and competent, highly skilled guides to lead these women on their safe journey.

The Chief beckons, rising above all else in their view with its centered, rooted presence. It is as if having surviving the cataclysm that must have made it, the Chief turns its face to wink. The women take up the challenge. They are breathless, amazed at themselves, amazed even more by what's around them—groves of wildflowers and breathing in that cool, clean air. And there's the endorphins. That's another reason why they are here. A day in the wilderness promotes self-esteem, personal achievement, stress relief, environmental and cultural awareness, and good long-term health.

Facing them is Howe Sound; to the right, Mount Garibaldi; and to the left, the Tantalus, the beautiful range of glacier capped mountains. The sound of their boots on the trail sets off the flutter of birds, the hint that something's up—the adrenaline rush followed by bursts of exhilaration, drenched in mindfulness. The special challenge of Hike the Chief lies in what the mountain has to teach. The mountain climb is a powerful metaphor for growth.

Catherine's love of adventure is contagious. She begins to describe "hard" adventures such as mountaineering, mountain bicycling, backpacking, and white water river kayaking. Or, the "soft" adventures: nature hikes, bicycle touring, wildlife viewing, horseback riding. Better than describing it, she encourages them to reach for new levels of adventure. She reminds them it's the climb, the full functioning of mind and body which is the adventure, not just reaching the summit. By the time they reach the summit, one pair of sun glasses will have been left at the lunch spot and hats will have blown away. They will have realized that they have connected with each other and with nature and will begin to ask questions about the things they see. GAIA will point out the Sunshine Coast landmarks, explain the various stages of



rock formation and point out a nest of grouse. They will realize that no one is looking at their hat-heads and they will notice the way the play of light, shadow and colour transforms the calmness of the mountain into a cathedral.

Afterwards there will be a tremendous feeling of exhilaration and a sense that other challenges in one's life are also surmountable. They will say things like "This is a rite-of-passage against which I can measure my fitness quotient," and "To embark on such a challenge, assisted by GAIA and a similarly-minded group of women, makes the experience doable for this middle-aged hiker."

They will find themselves back in Vancouver, feeling centered. They will stand together as new members of the GAIA Alumni, and they will hug one another and exchange addresses with invitations to share mountains in Sweden, England and Australia. Catherine will thank them for their hard work and good company. Each will have opened her eyes to the interrelatedness of everything, including the world and herself.

GAIA Adventures are committed to provide our clients with the highest quality personalized health management services. GAIA Adventures will select only well qualified and experienced female guides and trainers and provide safe and effective workouts and adventures with YOU in mind.

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