

# National Post

## Mother Nature's Stairmaster is pure adrenalin rush: 1,000 sweaty bodies a day: The hike is popular way of keeping in shape, getting a date

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Illustrations: Black & White Photo: John Lehmann, National Post / Brad Harris, above left, and Tim Nicholson atop Grouse Mountain after completing the Grouse Grind in 50 minutes on Monday.

Black & White Photo: John Lehmann, National Post / Hamid Tahmasebpour after completing the Grouse Grind in 38 minutes.

VANCOUVER - A steady stream of sweaty bodies emerge on a sunlit rock from the dark hole that leads down a steep forest trail. Some people are bent over, others are spitting, some are choking and I'm so glad I'm not one of them. "There should be a band playing," says one woman as she struggles up the last few feet of the 2.9-kilometre trail. That may not sound like a long distance, but it's a steep 30 to 45 degrees the whole way. It's been called Mother Nature's Stairmaster and when I attempted it last spring, I swore I'd never do it again.

That's probably a good thing, because about 100,000 people are doing the Grouse Grind every year now and the hike has become so popular as a way of keeping in shape and getting a date, that it's often bumper to bumper in the afternoons and on weekends. As I bask in the sunlight at the top of Grouse Mountain overlooking the city, I watch as hikers stagger out of the darkness, 3,700 feet above sea level, each of them citing a time, checking their watches, taking their pulses. Forty-five minutes. Fifty-two minutes. One hour and five.

It took me two hours to complete the

Grind. That's two hours of serious suffering and I'm not in bad shape. It's only supposed to take between 60 and 90 minutes for the beginner hiker so I figured it would be a pleasant day in the mountains.

By the quarter mark sign, I was praying and deluding myself that it meant there was only a quarter of the way left to go. By the half way mark, I seriously considered turning around. And near the end, I wasn't sure if I was alive. I had to stop every two minutes to catch my breath, which I had been wasting on profanities.

It didn't help, of course, that an old man in lederhosen passed me with great and embarrassing swiftness; and then, 30-minutes later, after I had ascended maybe .14589 kilometre, he was already on his way back down smiling and offering words of encouragement. Then there were the muscle men wearing nothing but shorts and weights, yes weights, around their ankles. For them, the trail has become easy; some regulars do it twice a day. Even some of my father's friends do the trail every day, but, then again, they also gamble, so perhaps it takes a certain risk-taking personality.

Whatever kind of personality it takes, I don't have it. Today, as I stare down at the city, the distant ocean like a mirror in bright sunlight, I attempt to convince the hikers I meet that hiking is overrated, that they should take the tram ride up next time. Usually, hikers take the tram down for \$5. So I tell them that for another \$10, they should take the tram up as well. That way they can get to the mountain-top bar in ten minutes, sweat-free.

But these people are fanatics. One woman tells me she lost nearly 16 kilograms last year by doing the trail two to three times a week. This year, she says, she's slacked off, but part of the reason was that the trail didn't open until June due to bad weather.

Incredibly, some people hike this trail in the winter, ice picks and all; but this year, a series of avalanches caught five hikers on their way up, killing one man and leaving the others with serious injuries. It was the second fatality on the trail, the first being a heart attack. Search and rescue workers didn't find the body of the Ontario man until May, when the snow that buried him finally began to melt. But the incident was a wake up call to Vancouverites that the wilderness in their backyards is, contrary to common belief, still wild.

This morning, the trail was closed for two hours because a cougar was on it. Linda LeQuesne, who hiked the trail with her 10-year-old daughter, Jackie, in "an hour-thirty-two," says when she heard about the cougar, she just waited for a large group to gather and proceeded with them. "It's inspiration to go fast," she says. "And anyways, they generally avoid the trail because the human scent is so strong."

One thousand sweaty bodies a day may be

enough to keep some animals away. But there are black bears on the mountain, too, and they don't always stay in the backwoods. Ms. LeQuesne says last week she saw a bear run right across the trail.

People may be taking a cavalier approach to the wild forests of Grouse Mountain because it's only a 20-minute drive from downtown Vancouver. The mountain is also home to the closest local ski hill and there's no better example of tamed wilderness than a ski hill. Or maybe the potential danger is part of the attraction. "It's like being on drugs," says Nadia Budzey, a hairstylist, "without the drugs."

But the more likely reason for her self-proclaimed "addiction" to the Grind is that it's a great social event. "It's a great summer thing to do," Ms. Budzey says. "You meet people on the trail, chat with them on the rocks, in the pub. That's fun and encouraging."

Her hiking partner, Trevor Marlowe, who's on a day off from his job at B.C. Hydro, pinches the fat on his stomach when I ask why he keeps coming back.

There's no glint in his eyes that belies any fascination with danger. They talk about the pub on Wednesday nights and how it's getting ridiculously packed. Wednesday night is singles' night on the Grind and last week, they say, there were long lineups for tables at the pub and a two tram wait to get back down.

While many people hike the Grind to be closer to nature, most of them come to prove to themselves, or to others, a superlative level of fitness; to relieve the day's stress; and to breathe in some clean air. But fitness buffs, overzealous

competitors and casual hikers all feel the same when they reach the summit and they're gliding back down in the tram, through the trees, past the river canyons and down to the city spread out before them like another planet, faraway and inviting. They've got the superman-feeling of conquering nature, in a wilderness that is beyond defeat.

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