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A photograph of a rustic wooden cabin with a balcony, set against a backdrop of a mountain valley. The cabin features a steep, gabled roof with exposed wooden beams and rafters. The balcony has a railing made of vertical wooden slats. Below the balcony, a large stack of cut logs is visible. The cabin is built on a rocky, forested slope. In the background, a vast mountain valley stretches out, with a range of snow-capped mountains in the distance under a clear sky.

Backcountry Cabins

Lace up your hiking boots for an alpine adventure.

Story & Photos By Matt J. Simmons



The rough hemp rope is all that's holding me back from a long tumble on jagged rocks to the valley far below. I glance over my shoulder and grin; this is amazing. Pulling myself up the last 50 metres onto stable, less-vertical ground, I suddenly see a flash of green aluminum past the black trees that tells me we've finally made it. "I can see the roof," I yell back at Dave, my hiking buddy on this trip. There's a touch of desperation and a lot of relief in my voice; I hope he doesn't hear it. After a few more minutes of dragging ourselves up the path, we collapse onto the deck of Fay Hut, squinting into the sun as it goes down behind the mountains that overlook Prospector's Valley in the heart of the Canadian Rockies.

Fay Hut is one of 28 backcountry huts maintained by the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC). An institution devoted to outdoor pursuits—particularly alpine climbing—the ACC has maintained huts for backcountry users since the 1920s. While the huts are traditionally used by those ascending mountain peaks and travelling on glaciers, they are open to anyone and offer a nice alternative to tenting. In the snowy months, they're used for backcountry skiing and snowshoeing. Fay Hut, nestled in the mountains of Kootenay National Park, BC, just west of the Continental Divide, is the first hut designed and built entirely by the Club. Or, to be more accurate, it was the first. In 2003, a massive forest fire swept through the valley, leaving behind nothing of the original but stone foundations.

"The hut was built in 1927," says Carl Hannigan, the club's vice president of facilities, a retired veterinarian who was once locked in a cage with a lioness. ("Long story," he says enigmatically. "I won't bore you.") Named for Professor Charles Ernest Fay, an American climber who was instrumental in the formation of the ACC, Fay Hut serviced its users for 76 years. Then, fire. "There was a lightning strike on the hill about five or six hundred feet below the hut," explains Hannigan. "The fire just went straight up and that was it." But only two years later—almost to the day—by power of fundraising and volunteer efforts, the ACC completed work on its replacement.

Fay Hut is not the most remote of the ACC's backcountry huts, but it is a bit of a slog. To get there, we park at Marble Canyon (6.5 kilometres west of the BC/Alberta border on Highway 93) and ignore the quizzical looks of the sandal-clad tourists as we heft our bulky packs and clod off on burly boots. Soon, there's nothing but the sound of our footsteps on the little winding trail through black, charred trees, and the gentle burbling of Tokumm Creek. It's not the first time I've walked where a forest fire has been; I've spent many hours wandering around the site of the Okanagan Mountain Park fire. There's something starkly beautiful about that setting; it's quiet and peaceful, but not dead—life is springing back all around your feet, in the grasses and shrubs and saplings. We meet a bull moose as we rest and drink water; he stands and looks at us from the middle of the creek before trudging unconcerned back into the bush. It's a sublime ▶



Above: Dave lights a fire in the cabin's small woodstove.
Right: Fay Hut's mountainous back-drop provides stunning views.

moment. For more than 10 km, the trail gently follows the course of the creek. Then, suddenly, the trail leads straight up a steep gully. The final 2 km to the hut are near vertical and tough-going.

So it's something of a surprise, finding Fay Hut there in the mountains atop a grinding hike out of the valley, 15 km in and 600 metres up from the nearest road. An exquisitely built log house, Fay Hut would look equally at home in a high-class cottage development. While we're happy to find such luxury as propane burners in a beautifully tiled kitchen, a wood-burning stove well-stocked with kindling and firewood, LED lighting throughout powered by a pair of solar panels on the deck and even a pair of cozy slippers for guest use, it all seems somehow out of place. Especially when we sit by the fire later, sipping scotch and playing cards, glancing out the window at a sky bursting with stars.

Fay Hut's sleeping area is tucked under a sloping roof upstairs and the main floor is open and spacious. The kitchen is full-size and, but for the absence of plumbing, could suffice in any modern home. The living area is a perfect balance between rustic and homey, featuring



large picture windows looking out over the deck at the mountains. A big built-in table surrounded by a booth snuggles in the corner by the kitchen, patiently waiting for games and meals.

Outside is a creek that provides drinking water after it's boiled or filtered, and a separate building a short distance away houses the toilet, the contents of which is helicoptered out by the ACC. The guestbook reveals that about half of the people who have come, came exclusively

to Fay Hut, not merely using it as a stopover to some other alpine adventure. And rightly so; it's definitely a worthy destination.

Interestingly, Fay Hut—the new one, that is—is one of the first backcountry huts developed by the ACC where alternative energy is used. “Being that this was a new hut, there was a great opportunity for us to put in solar panels and LED lighting,” says Hannigan. A group of engineers headed by Stuart Torr at Worley Parsons volunteered their time for the

project. “[They] designed the system and they installed it for us, and they did it for free,” adds Hannigan with a note of gratitude. The engineers were flown in to install the solar panels at the same time a work party started building the deck. “They had the solar panels up on the second day charging,” says Karen Rollins, then working with the ACC in energy and wastewater management. “So on the third day they didn’t turn the generator on; they just plugged their power tools in and for the next few days used the energy generated by the solar panels to finish off the deck.” But that was in sun-splashed June and alternative energy solutions are usually harder to come by in the mountains. “It’s the environment,” says Rollins of the challenges. “At high elevations it freezes most of the year, there’s often lots of snow and short hours of winter sunlight. Because it’s cold, composting toilets don’t work!” Rollins is now heading up Backcountry Energy Environmental Solutions (BEES), a non-profit initiative that brings researchers and fundraising together to solve some of the problems that backcountry use creates. Fay Hut won’t be the last hut to use cutting-edge technology; Rollins is hoping to gain approval to test new wind turbine technology as a source for heat, light and energy for cooking at another ACC hut. “About two years ago, research stations down in the Antarctic [started] replacing their diesel

sense of community and collaborative effort is almost ingrained in the wood floors and walls of Fay Hut. One look at the construction photos taken back in 2005 reveals the massive effort it took to create this place, almost all of it by the sweat of unpaid volunteers. “It took a total of six weeks to build,” Hannigan continues, remembering. “The project manager stayed up there for the whole six weeks—he was slightly crazy by the end of it,” he laughs. “They did have a sauna so they could go clean off; working with all the charred wood around, everybody was filthy by the end of each day.” The hut was first built at Strand’s operation just west of Edmonton, then dismantled into numbered logs and shipped down on a flatbed truck. Then it was flown in log by log. “One of them was dropped, and it just turned to matchwood,” says Hannigan. “Because the forest fire had gone through, they were able to find a tree that was the same diameter as that particular log. [Then] they had to shape it exactly to the same shape as the other log. It held up construction for three days.”

Despite minor mishaps, construction continued as planned and the weather cooperated. At the beginning of August 2005, bruised, blackened by the charcoal trees all around, and sweaty but satisfied, the volunteers gathered together. In front of them, the golden log hut—looking more like a lodge than a hut—opened



Two solar panels power the LED lighting throughout the cabin.

generators with wind turbines,” she says excitedly. “I’m thinking there’s not much difference between the Antarctic and the alpine.”

Hannigan laughs when I ask later for his take on the logistics of building in the mountains. “It’s called planning!” he exclaims. The hut was in part originally designed by Hannigan, made into workable plans by a volunteer architect and built by log home builder Dan Strand (who studied the construction techniques of 800-year-old wooden churches in Norway). The

its doors properly for the first time since its predecessor was razed by the fire.

I lock the door and look back wistfully before trudging down the trail. Fay Hut sits there on its rocky patch, at once intriguingly at odds with its surroundings and yet, somehow, perfectly at home. Something tells me I’ll be back, so instead of muttering my customary “good-bye” under my breath, I quietly say, “see you next time,” and turn down the path to home. 🐾

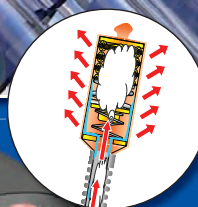


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