

2007

The three of us from the forum here hiked in to Fortress last year. I'll get this out of the way first: **we did not catch, or even see, a single fish.** Fortress is an ocean - it's a huge lake that is tough to fish without a boat at the time of year we were there. If you want a good chance at fishing, pay the money and go with Dave (Fortress Lake Retreat).

Having said that, it was a great hike to what is easily the most spectacularly beautiful place I have ever been to. The color of the water, the size of the mountains and glaciers, and the ambience of the place is staggering. What follows is a rough account of how our trip went.

Our plan was simple - cycle to the Athabasca crossing, ditch the bikes, and hoof it into the lake. We loaded the bikes up on Harry's Cherokee and headed west, leaving Calgary by about 5am. We hit #93 and the temperature started to drop. By the time we got to the icefields, it was 0 degrees outside and snowing to beat hell.



After a quick check on conditions at Sunwapta, we headed up, unloaded the bikes, and got going. Within 2 minutes I realized the following things:

- a) I hadn't been on a backpacking trip in 3 years
- b) I hadn't been on a bike trail in 5 years
- c) I hadn't adjusted my bike seat in 3 years

As a result, I had a hell of a time keeping my balance on the bike and couldn't stay on for the life of me. Every time I shifted my weight the pack felt like it was pulling me off. After whining about it for the first few minutes, I eventually saddled up and started feeling more confident. That lasted about 15 minutes, until I felt like I could cross a slippery log bridge without dismounting. I got up on the bridge, felt the tire slip, and fell into the small creek under the bridge. Only one of my pedals unclipped and I wound up smashing my ankle into the pedal arm and crankset. To make a long story short, we wound up ditching the bikes in the bushes at Big Bend 6km in and walking from there. By this point we were completely soaked and my ankle was a beautiful shade of purple.

The hike down to the Athabasca crossing was gorgeous. The whole valley opens up in front of you and the view was awesome despite the low hanging clouds and pissing rain.

The small bridge over the river is rickety, shaky, and extremely fun to cross. I have no idea how Dave manages to do this with a bicycle:



At this point you're 14km in and there's no turning back. After the Athabasca you climb a bit, the trail levels out, and you pin it through to a really nice little creek that was rushing like crazy from all the precip. The small bridge over this was slick and slimy and it looked like a fall in would not be very much fun. We managed to make it over without going for a swim and started the kilometer or so descent into the Chaba valley - again, a magnificent view. At this point you're roughly 20-21km from the parking lot at Sunwapta.

The Chaba is a glacial river, and as such, there is almost NO visibility in it. It's like wading through grey milk. The regular crossing point is marked fairly clearly - there's no neon sign, but you can see where people have decided to ford the river. Harry took two steps in there and it was up to his waist and flowing super fast. We decided this was not the best option, and after roughly 40 minutes of checking braided channels and carefully wading with staffs, Calvin found a route and Harry and I followed him through to the other side. This was not pleasant, especially after the day we'd had already. Once you cross the river, you're about 1-2km from the lake. By the time we got there, it was getting dark and cold. We stopped at the first campground and set up shop.

Dave's maintenance of these campgrounds is second to none. Ours had firewood, a nice picnic table, and was extremely well maintained. It was nicer than many roadside CGs I've stayed at. We got a fire going, dried out as best we could, and settled in for the night.

The next day we made the walk to Fortress Creek CG, which is approximately 4km up the lakeside. Again, it is an extremely nice campground that has been well cared for over the years. We got to the whole reason we'd come there - fishing. After talking to a few of the guys and casting for a good hour, it became increasingly clear that our timing was off. There were no fish around, even at the creek mouth we were at. Still, it's hard to complain when the place looks like this:



Harry fired up his float tube and fished a little more while we threw in the towel and headed back to camp. I took pics from the trail:



We relaxed and dried out in the sun, and just took in the beauty of the place.

Dave showed up and gave Harry a ride back to the camp, and informed us that they were catching all of the fish at the other end of lake. At the time of year we were there, you need a motorboat to fish it properly. To cut the story short, a bloody porcupine snuck into the campground at night and chewed the handle on two high-end Sage rods. Had it not been in a provincial park, we would have eaten porcupine stew that night.



The hike out was much easier - fording the Chaba was a snap as it was a good 2' lower than when we came in. It didn't even slow us down. It may have helped that Dave offered to take my float tube out (thanks again Dave 😊).



Long story short, the hike into Fortress would rate as a moderate backpacking trip and the campgrounds in there are spectacular. Having said that, it's not for the faint of heart and it is really wilderness up there. If you don't have backcountry camping experience, **DO NOT GO UP THERE.**

If you don't want to risk going all that way and not catching fish, hire Dave and pay him the money. He runs a very good outfit up there and I think if you had the coin kicking around it would be a great way to spend it. Fishing that place in the comforts of the cabins up there would be a little piece of heaven.

Let me make it clear again, because I am not trying to detract from Dave's business: **This is not an easy hike and it's in a very remote area where if you got into trouble you'd be SCREWED.** We had a great trip, but we hiked a long ways and ate a lot of freeze dried cow dung and did not catch a single fish.

If you want a good chance at big brookies, go there with Dave.