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Amazing Kite Surfing brings Richard Branson to Squamish BC

By Gordon Addison

Richard Branson , world renowned adventurer, extreme sports enthusiast and entrepreneur, was

incredibly impressed with his first visit to Squamish BC, The Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada. "This place is amazing! I'm definitely coming back some time to do more kite surfing!" exclaimed Branson after a 40 minute kite surfing ride in strong winds off the Squamish Spit against the backdrop of snow-capped mountains and the monolithic rock climbing playground of the Stawamus Chief.

Of course, this was not only a chance for Richard Branson to get out and have some fun. It was also a media event, with a helicopter circling above and camera crews on shore,. All this provided great photo opportunities for two Virgin Mobile promotional announcements, including the announcement that Virgin Canada has pledged \$100,000 to sponsor a team of extreme female athletes. Virgin Canada Chair Andrew Black said the `Women's Extreme Team' was a good fit and a good opportunity for Virgin, as extreme sports reflected their brand. Female athletes were chosen because much of the extreme sports sponsorship and attention has previously focused on males.

What led Branson and Virgin to choose Squamish BC as the location for this event? It seems there were a number of factors. First, Western Canada was left out of the Virgin Mobile announcements with Branson when the company launched in March. Second, Branson has recently become a very avid kite surfer. He was eager to promote the sport in Canada, where, according to Branson, the levels of participation are below what they are in other parts of the world, and below what they should be, given it is such a great sport, and one "can get into it for a relatively low cost". Voila - a visit to Western Canada's premier kite surfing destination was in order.

Members of the Squamish Windsurfing and Kite Surfing Society rated Branson as "Pretty Good". Given that it is always hard in a new location until a kite surfer gets the feel of the local wind and the waves, Branson put on a great show on his first trip to Squamish. One member noted that it was impressive that he used a 14 foot rig as opposed to a 12 footer, given the strong winds.

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What makes the Squamish Spit such an excellent windsurfing location? The best summary I found was on the

www.flexfoil.com

site, summed up in an article by Cliff Umpleby, a Flexi team rider:

If you're not familiar with the kite scene in Canada or the infamous Spit at Squamish I'll fill you in... With the Stawamus Chief, the second largest granite Monolith on earth as a background, the constant thermal winds of Howe Sound lead to epic conditions with summer seeing usually 6 days a week on the water. The basic rule here is, if it's sunny, it's windy. Warm air inland rising sucks the cool sea air up the valley.

The Squamish Spit is located at very end of Howe Sound on a narrow piece of land that divides the Squamish River from the rest of the Squamish Estuary. While usually best left as a destination for intermediate to advanced riders, it's perfect for learning if the tide is low. The Squamish Windsport

Society charges a fee for access, which includes a Jet Ski on hand in case you go down and can't make it back.

Beyond Kite Surfing, Squamish offers an incredibly wide variety of outdoor recreation opportunities. Over 1000 routes of all varieties on clean granite makes Squamish the premier rock climbing destination in Canada. Add to that an extensive trail network for hiking, running, and mountain biking, and a few class three and four rapids for the kayaks and rafting boats, and one gets a bit of an insight as to why Squamish attracts thousands of adventure sports enthusiasts like Richard Branson all summer. Of course, there are also golf courses, great fishing opportunities and moderate day hikes for the less adventurous.

If you are looking for Squamish Hotels, then The Sea to Sky Hotel (

www.seatoskyhotel.com

) on

Highway 99 is probably your best bet.

Richard Branson famously started his entrepreneurial career selling mail order music, and went on to create a business empire which includes an airline, music stores, Virgin mobile of course, and a fairly good cola that is unfortunately not available in Canada.

Squamish hotels:

www.seatoskyhotel.com

Flexifoil:

www.flexifoil.com/

Squamish Windsurfing Society:

www.squamishwindsurfing.org/

Virgin Canada

www.virginmobile.ca

Gordon Addison lives in Squamish BC and tries to write when he is not out running, climbing, hiking, mountain biking, cycling, or ski touring. He also maintains the website of the Sea to Sky Hotel, Squamish BC [

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www.digitalPR.ca

]

Squamish BC hosts Winter Bald Eagle Gathering

By Gordon Addison

Once again our planet's largest gatherings of Bald Eagles is underway in Squamish British Columbia, just North of Vancouver BC, and just 50 km south of the world class Whistler Ski Resort. Based on population estimates, up to 5% of the world's bald eagles winter in this very accessible area. From one viewing space, often dozens of Eagles can be seen, and a short walk in the right direction will allow you to see many more.

For decades, thousands of majestic Bald Eagles have been gathering on the riverbanks of the Squamish and Cheakamus Rivers, feasting on the ample salmon that either did not quite make it to the spawning channels, or have accomplished their life's goal, and thus have met their subsequent demise. Working to preserve their energy in the winter months, eagles will eat up to a two pounds of this high value protein every day.

The highlight of the eagle-viewing period is the annual Bald Eagle Count, which will take place on

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January 8th this season and is headquartered out of the Brackendale Art Gallery. Using consistent methodology, a count of the eagles in the area on this weekend every year has been kept since 1986. In 1994 a world record 3769 eagles were counted within a few kilometers of the Squamish area and its tributary rivers.

Bad weather can be good for eagle viewing as the eagles tend to stay closer to the riverbanks and closer to viewing areas. When the weather is great, they are more likely to be off for a little fly around the rivers, mountains and forests of the Squamish area.

One of the best ways to see the Bald Eagles in their spectacular surroundings right in their own habitat is on an Eagle Float tour, or Eagle Safari through Canadian Outback Adventures [

www.canadianoutback.com

] A dream experience for adventure travelers, photographers, families,

schools and educational groups, it is the best way to get up close to these raptors without disturbing them. While they usually run white water rafting trips in the summer, in winter, Canadian Outback takes vacationers, school and educational groups on float tours down the rivers in the area in order to see these spectacular birds in their natural habitat, all with stunning mountain and forest backdrops.

The closest Squamish Hotel to the prime eagle viewing area in Brackendale is the Sea to Sky Hotel & Conference Center [

www.seatoskyhotel.com

] on Highway 99 at Garibaldi Way. Excellent eagle

viewing areas are only about a kilometer away. The hotel also offers discount ski packages to those traveling to ski or board at Whistler Blackcomb.

There are other good viewing areas in town, particularly along the river dykes at the end of Judd Road, and around the spawning channels between the Mamquam River and the Squamish Valley Golf and Country Club.

Directions: To see the eagles from arguably the best viewing area, turn west from Highway 99 at Garibaldi Way. This is a left hand turn if you are coming from Vancouver, or a right hand turn if you are coming from Whistler. Turn right again in about 20 metres at the T-junction with Government Road. Follow Government road for just under one kilometer, and you will be at the Eagle Viewing area. There is lots of parking on the right and an interpretive center on the dyke from which you can get a

great view of dozens of Bald Eagles. If you are very lucky, there may also be a few seals around, as well as a variety of other bird species. On weekends from December to mid-February there are often volunteers from Squamish's Eagle Watch program on hand to offer more information and a peek through higher powered telescopes. Other great viewing areas are near the Tenderfoot Fish Hatchery,

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The Squamish Estuary, and near the Spawning channels between the Mamquam River and the Squamish Valley Golf and Country club.

Squamish is an outdoor recreation Mecca with thousands of rock climbing routes, hundreds of kilometers of Mountain Bike trails, a dozen excellent day hikes, some of the best windsurfing and kite-surfing on the west coast of North America, excellent white water rafting or kayaking, and scuba diving in Howe Sound. For the less adventurous, there is fishing, 3 scenic golf courses, walking trails, beaches and lakes, and sailing available. The new Squamish Adventure Center was recently opened on Highway 99.

Helpful Links:

Squamish Hotels:

www.seatoskyhotel.com

Eagle rafting trips:

www.canadianoutback.com

Brackendale Art Gallery

www.brackendaleartgallery.com

Gord Addison lives in Squamish BC and writes when he is not climbing, hiking, mountain biking, running or skiing. He is also the webmaster of the Sea to Sky Hotel, Squamish [

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