

Into the Monarch Mine

Three cars, packed with 12 explorers and their kit, follow the twisting road around the feet of towering giants of rock. Nancy Drew was at the wheel of our vehicle, with Nimrod, Lorn of the Dog and myself as passengers. We were trailing behind another car containing Underneath, Techo, Zeke and Defective; Feztaa, along with Rask & Co., filled the third vehicle. The early morning drive, heading out from Calgary into the Rocky Mountains, was the beginning of our expedition into a local legend.

After a couple hours' drive, we pulled into a rest stop area just off the highway. We climbed out of the vehicles, shoes crunching onto dusty gravel. The sole explorer on this trip with previous mine experience, Underneath was our guide. He pointed out mine entrances on the slopes of mountains both north and south of the highway. Focusing on the south mountain, he identified a group of tiny sticks high up on the slope as our entrance point. I assumed he was joking, since there didn't seem to be any visible path leading up- surely we would enter through one of the lower, more easily reached entrances.

We all ducked back into the vehicles for a brief drive down up the highway, pulling into a better parking spot at the base of the target mountain. Three car-loads of excited explorers piles out, eager to gear up and start the climb up the slope. Everyone had been instructed to bring a hardhat, and most were also strapped with headlamps. A variety of clothing and equipment were present- from shorts to back-packs to more eccentric gear. Hiking boots replaced the shoes I'd been wearing for the drive out, and I checked the load in my backpack. I'd made sure to bring lots of water, as well as snacks and sandwiches for lunch; all of this and a pair of blue coveralls went into the pack. Since this was a single-purpose, long-distance mission, I'd also decided to bring my "Army Bra": A load-bearing chest rig constructed of Canadian army webbing and pouches. Despite a few jesting comments from my companions, I had faith that my chest rig would serve well for the mission.



The group gearing up at the base of the mountain.

(Previous Pages) Feztaa takes a photo on our way into the mine.

With some nervousness and much excitement, we began our hike. Forming a couple small groups, we set off at a leisurely pace. Following a rail line, we'd just crossed through a short tunnel when the rails started to ring. Underneath called us into the scrub at the side of the tracks. Sounding its horn as it rounded a bend, a freight train blew by.

The train was a long mix of freight cars, both intermodal containers and flammable liquids. Sitting six feet away in the low bushes, I had to look away from the rail cars as they cruised by at a dizzying clip. I also tried to plug my ears and block out the piercingly loud shrieks and squeaking of the metal wheels as they spun and ground on the rails. The whole train generated a deep, loud roar as it went, and I could feel the ground trembling.

Suddenly as it had appeared, the train went- its roar fading to nothing as the humming tracks fell silent. Yawning to clear my head, I got to my feet and followed Nimrod and the others back up onto the tracks. Our group soon reached the base of an immense rock slide, which was the starting point of the climb up the mountain. We were to ascend on one of the lips of a massive river of rock, at the edge of the treeline where the slope was more stable and less steep.

Excited to finally start the serious part of the trek, I headed right into the field of rock. Donning hardhats and taking directions from Underneath, the group made its way to the lip of the slide. Growing impatience with the slowness of the group's ascent led me to suggest we split into two groups for the hike up. Zeke, Techo, Lorn, Defective and myself took the lead on the path, leaving Nimrod, Underneath, Nancy Drew, Rask & Co. to bring up the rear.

At the front of the lead group, I set a quick pace going up the mountain. The sun shone hot and mercilessly upon us as we scrambled up the slide, and I was glad I'd decided to wear shorts for the climb. The ground was rocks of all sizes, much of which was loose and unstable. Due to the steep angle of the edge we were following, our steps frequently set loose small avalanches of gravel. The falling, bouncing stones would catapult into the large gully, producing loud crashing sounds that echoed up and down the bowl-shaped pit of the slide.

As the climb went on, the footing grew trickier, with nearly ever step becoming a battle to remain standing. It also became a challenge to pick a stable path across the rocky slope that rose at a steep angle. Beads of sweat formed under my hardhat, then dripped lazily down my forehead and across my face before falling to the rocks beneath my feet.

Climbing fairly quickly and only taking short breaks, Zeke and I outdistanced the others. We had broken from the treeline, and were starting a climb up a line of boulders when the others shouted to us from below. We'd gone too far and missed the turn; so we got a taste of what the descent would be like later on as we skated and climbed down the rocky slope.

Joining back up with the others, Underneath met us with some disheartening news. Our expedition was now several members smaller; Nancy Drew had frozen up near the base, and decided not to make the climb, Rask & Co., with prior obligations in mind, had realized they would not be able to continue the trip and had also turned back.

With new directions from Underneath, Zeke and I once again jumped into the lead. After battling through some brush, the trail led in a more gradual ascent across the side of the mountain. We scrambled and slid over rivers of loose stone, until finally reaching a more solid path. Hugging the bare rock, the narrow trail wound around and ever upward. To my left, an endless and varied wall of rock loomed overhead, full of tiny crevices, veins, and crumbling, unstable chunks. The path at my feet was an uneven, narrow shelf fit for a mountain goat. To my right the path frequently fell off sharply before becoming a sheer drop. Picking my way along, I was constantly aware of the rocks under my feet as I stepped carefully; intent on moving quickly but also safely.

On this path we saw the first remains of the mining operation: Metal pegs set into the rock, jutting out and twisted at various angles. I used these as handholds while traversing sections with particularly steep drops; despite their age, they seemed quite solid and gave me a little sense of security.

We came to a tiny, empty room formed in a crevice. Three walls of solid rock closed in by a fourth wall made of rough, weathered wooden planks. Not far after this room, we arrived at the entrance to the mine. Long rusty pipes juttied from the mountain, drawing my eyes to the large entrance itself. The opening into the rock was big, but entirely covered by sturdy metal grating bolted to a frame.



Zeke snaps a photo on the way up the mountain.



Defective and Zeke arrive at the first entrance gate into the mine.



Zeke makes one of the final climbs on the way to the mine entrance.

Stepping up to the grating, I instantly felt a strong, cold breeze blow across my body. The air flowing out of the mine was refreshingly chilly after the long, hot hike up the mountain. Zeke, Defective and I took a short break, sitting in this cool zone before continuing on. The others hadn't caught up to us yet, but I could see them edging along the path toward us.



Just inside the mine, behind the entrance grating.

Ducking through and around some outcroppings, the trail kept us moving up. Just after crossing some more scree slopes and a small creek, Zeke and I finally reached the sticks that Underneath had pointed out from the highway rest stop over an hour earlier. A large, diagonal gash was cut into the rock, and the sticks were actually large tree trunks wedged into the crevice to support the rock ceiling. A small creek trickled steadily out from under the metal grating that barricaded this entrance to the mine.

Standing on boulders at the entrance, Zeke and I admired the view of the surrounding valley & peaks as we waited for the others to complete the climb. Out of breath, excited, and sweaty, everyone slowly arrived. We pushed past the metal grating one by one, until all eight of us finally stood inside the Monarch Mine.

It was the entrance to another world. The walls and ceiling were solid, jagged and multi-hued rock; the sharply sloping floor a combination of rocks and dirt. There were no discernible 'normal' planes in the room- every surface seemed to be at a slant; with the floor becoming a wall then the ceiling. A large patch of ice was still present near the entrance where the creek slowly trickled out. The air was cool, and smelled of dirt. Further in, the light dimmed sharply, hiding the far end of the room in darkness.

Gathering just inside the entrance, we sat down in the shady, cool rock room on the slanted floor. Taking advantage of the break, we relaxed, had some lunch and geared up for the mine trek. I threw on a pair of coveralls and was immediately glad for the extra insulation they provided against the chill air of the mine. I found a dry patch of dirt to sit on, and pulled a very squashed sub sandwich out of my backpack to eat while talking with the others.

Everyone was excited to finally be inside, so we ate quickly. Then, turning on headlamps and flashlights, we walked into the mine's darkness. Nearing the end of the entrance chamber, we walked past a small wooden shack, then through a door in a wooden wall. Behind this was a large junction room with a slanted floor, and tunnels leading left, right, and straight ahead. Underneath directed us into the right tunnel, which sloped upward. Old rail sleepers lined the centre of the tunnel, which was large enough to comfortably walk in. The walls had incredible texture; resembling undulating and curving rows of tightly stacked little bricks.

After several minutes of walking up the slanted tunnel, we came into a small room. Pointing to an old, yet sturdy-looking set of ladders that went up into darkness, Underneath told us we were almost at the area of the mine known as 'The Cathedral'. LornoftheDog went up first, and we spaced ourselves out on the ladder behind him. The way up was a single stretch of climb made up of ladder sections nailed to a wooden frame in the shaft. The wooden structure was many years old, yet still seemed more than sturdy enough to climb starting up- even though each ladder section had a slightly springy feel to it. The wood felt slightly wet to the touch, gritty with sand & dirt, but still felt sturdy. There were a couple missing rungs, and one ladder had a large crack in the frame that flexed disturbingly when weight was applied.

I bumped my head into a wooden brace at the top of the ladders; but luckily my hardhat absorbed the impact. I stood up, a little shaky, and walked over to where Lorn was now standing.

Underneath and Defective shortly after entering the Cathedral.





The Cathedral

A vast space stretched out; a high ceiling rising above and the walls endless on either side. Several giant rock pillars sprouted from the floor in the center of the room, flowing up to the ceiling. The floor itself was sloping, covered in small mounds of rock and little depressions. And the entire thing was lit by wonderful, soft daylight.



Zeke, Techo, and Lorn sitting on the tiny crag of rock.

The immense cavern before me was unlike anything I'd ever seen, causing me to exhale an awestruck, "Oh... WOW". A vast space stretched out in front of the small balcony of rock I was standing on; a high ceiling rising above and the walls endless on either side. Several giant rock pillars sprouted from the floor in the center of the room, flowing up to the ceiling. The floor itself was sloping, covered in small mounds of rock and little depressions. And thanks to four large, uneven holes (dubbed windows) in the side of the chamber, the entire thing was lit by wonderfully soft daylight.

The most amazing aspect of the Cathedral, which stood out in my mind above all else, was the texture. Thanks to the light coming in through the windows, much of the cavernous space was lit up in relief; revealing a beautiful, random rocky texture on every surface.

I stood, awestruck, admiring the sight before me as the others came up and gathered on the ledge around us. It didn't take long for the cameras to come out, or for us to climb down a short ladder to the floor of the cavern. With a warning from

Underneath to watch out for open shafts in the ground, we wandered freely around the space.

The giant pillars were imposing up close, their surfaces a blend of rough, hewn rock. They towered imposingly overhead, smoothly blending into the ceiling above.

The windows were a much appreciated feature, allowing daylight to flow inside the huge underground space. Physically, the windows were just large, jagged holes where the miners had broken through the wall of a cliff face on the side of the mountain. Each opening was covered by chain-link mesh attached to a wooden frame. A single, tiny window on the right was missing its chain link, allowing passage through onto a tiny crag. There was just enough room on this ledge to allow three people to sit together, staring out into space high above the valley floor. Content with snapping photos from safety just inside the Cathedral, I didn't dare venture out onto the dangerous little edge. However, Zeke, Lorn, and Techo made it their favourite sitting spot.

I busily walked around, taking photos and just admiring the Cathedral. There is an incredible atmosphere in this cavern, where size, shapes, colours and texture all combine to form an unbelievable space.

Eventually, the group began to explore again, heading further into the dark recesses at the back of the Cathedral cavern. The room slowly got smaller and slanted uphill, the floor rising up unevenly towards the ceiling- although most areas remained huge, dark, and open. The light from the windows faded away to nothing, and soon our headlamps & flashlights were the only illumination we had. The open shafts in the floor became more frequent, and we had to climb over large mounds of dirt to skirt the holes. There were a few metal items lying about; small metal cans and 55-gallon drums, all rusting into tiny orange & brown flakes. Watching the ground in front of my feet, I smacked my head on a large rusty pipe- one of several occasions where I was very glad to be wearing a hardhat.

Far back in the Cathedral, I stopped to take a photo and fell behind the group. Catching up, I was surprised to see flashlights trained on me from overhead.



**(Opposite Page)
Rocky windows,
arches and pillars
in the Cathedral.**



Underneath standing next to the edge. The black hole behind him drops straight into a large cavern.

Looking up, I saw the others through a large window in the rock ceiling, leaning over the edge of a balcony. The route to this 'balcony' was a large, steeply sloped ramp that spiralled up and over the main cavern. This curving ramp led up to an enclosed ledge. Standing at the top of the ramp, there is a large window where you can stand on an edge and look straight down into the large, open cavern below. Despite encouragement from the others, my fear of heights wouldn't let me lie down and look straight over the drop- which is what they'd been doing earlier as I walked in the cavern below. Instead, I scurried around, trying to photograph this amazing space as the others sat up on the enclosed ledge.

We all scrambled back down, and entered yet another tall cavern. The beams from our flashlights lit up one of the most amazing mine leftovers we'd seen so far. A giant wooden chute came down from a tunnel up near the ceiling, dropping at a steep angle down the side of a slope into a large black pit. Skirting to one side of the pit, which resembled a black hole rendered in stone, we went over to the chute and climbed up alongside it to the tunnel at the top.

There were a couple old, rust-eaten mine cars lying off track at the top of the chute; a numbered tag was attached to each. Apparently, Parks Canada (or some Government organization) has passed through the mine in the 1980s and done an inventory of all the historical leftovers in the mine, tagging each one.

Our group wandered deeper into the mine. We passed through several tunnels, all of them as fascinating and incredible as the last. The rough, rocky texture of every surface and the constant variation in size and shape of each tunnel and room made every next step worthwhile. Tall and narrow spaces, rooms with low



Underneath in the maze of tunnels.

ceiling and uneven floors, and a warren of interconnected tunnels, all sharing the damp air. The lights of my fellow explorers wandered and wove in and out of tunnels, up ladders and ledges, above and below the rooms and chambers. It seemed there was something incredible around every turn.

One room had a small, crystal clear pool of water in it. The water was transparent, and completely still- so much so that it was nearly invisible. I passed, oblivious, right by it on my first walk through the room.

The walls in the tunnels had a varying rocky texture, and were coated by a slimy layer of muck. Some dynamite bore holes remained permanently carved into the walls, as did some old worker graffiti. Small rail sleepers were evenly spaced, embedded in the muddy floor down the length of the tunnels; but in most places the rail tracks themselves were gone. Rotting wooden chutes, plugged with rock debris, jutted through the ceiling in a few places.

We walked down a series of tunnels for about half an hour, turning back at a dead end or two, before we reached the top of another notorious mine feature.

Dubbed the Never Ending Ladder, it was a shaft structure similar to the others we'd climbed- except this one reportedly went on forever. Underneath said he'd been all the way to the bottom before, but stressed that it was a very, very long descent. To reinforce his point, he grabbed a rock and tossed it down the shaft. We all stood silently and listened to the rock bounce down, down, and further down, until one last 'clunk' echoed faintly up to our ears.

Though several of our group wanted to descend the ladder, after some debate we decided to backtrack through the tunnels instead. I stopped to take some photos, and the others moved on ahead. The silence and dark, wet atmosphere of the mine was all around as I set up my camera. Between photos, I kept my lights off and did my best to relax, breathing in the smell of stale, wet rock, reveling in the fact that I was deep underground inside a mountain.

Reduzero lighting one of the many mine tunnels we passed through.



The group examines the clear pool of water.





One of many old wooden chutes, at the bottom of one of many shafts.

When I caught up with the others, they were climbing down another ladder to a tunnel below. Amidst rock and dripping water, the passage slowly grew larger; the remains of rail sleepers pacing our steps in the floor. We passed the bottom ends of many chutes, which terminated in large wooden gate structures.

The tunnel sloped steadily downhill, and in the distance, a pinprick of white light stabbed in the darkness. As we approached, the light slowly grew in size, until we finally emerged once more into the Cathedral. To our tired eyes, it was still huge, open and beautiful, but even more appealing was the idea of sitting by the windows and having a break.

After a time of fruit, granola bars, some daylight and fresh air, and much light-hearted discussion, we got back to on our feet. Walking along, Underneath led us back the way we'd originally entered, down a ladder and through a tunnel before arriving at the main junction room. Instead of leaving right away, we chose to follow another tunnel that led downhill to a chamber that contained another ladder structure. We descended a the ladder, which was divided into sections by landings, until we reached the dim, rocky floor below.



Explorers climbing the ladder from the front door.

Spotting the glow of daylight in the tunnel ahead, we raced forward and emerged in a large, airy chamber. Bright daylight and another nice view of the valley outside could be seen through the large metal mesh grating that covered the jagged mine opening. We realized that we were in the room behind the first grating we'd passed hours earlier on our climb up the mountain. The same chill breeze was still flowing down from a chute at the top of the room, down through the grating and onto the mountain outside. There was a large, wood frame structure at the top of the steeply sloped room, and several of us scrambled up for a closer look. A big platform, made of large wooden timbers, sat between the gates of two chutes, with a large, spoked metal wheel mounted above it all. Probably the remains of a cable car system used to load mined ores, the structure still felt very strong as I walked around on it.



The hub of the large metal wheel.



I wondered about what the room would have looked like 60 years earlier, when the mine had still been operating. Now, the cold breezes and the occasional visitors were the only things that moved through the junk-strewn space.

Backtracking up the ladders, and into the tunnel, we returned to our original entrance. I was slightly sad to be leaving after only a few hours' exploration, aware that we had only covered a minority of the mine's many spaces and tunnels. At the grating where we'd entered, we geared down and prepared for the descent. I packed away my lights and dirty coveralls, and followed the others down the mountain's rocky scree slopes.

The warm, early evening sunlight was much appreciated on the descent, which took about half the time of the morning's ascent. We stepped and slid down rivers of small rocks, before pushing into the treeline. Defective and I passed a large clump of rotting wood timbers on our way down; possibly the remains of the cable car system.

Everyone managed to make the descent uninjured; barring a few minor cuts & bruises. Nancy Drew met us at the bottom of the slide, with fresh water and an eager ear for our new experiences. Shortly after reaching the base of the slope, I looked back up at the mountain, tracing the path along its side and searching for another glimpse of the mine entrance. Sights and sensations lingered fresh in my eyes and my mind, and I was already wondering when I'd be able to make a return trip into the Monarch Mine. ◇

Special thanks to Underneath, Nancy Drew, and UEA.

(Opposite Page)
Zeke, Defective and Underneath in front of the metal grate

(Below)
The group descending the slippery rock slopes

