

BMN HIKE REPORT

Mt. Artaban (July 29, 2017)

by Mark Johnston



View from the summit, looking east across Howe Sound, the peaks of the Britannia Range etched against the morning sky. *Chris Wright photo.*

When planning a hiking trip that involves boarding a ferry or water taxi to get to the trailhead, there is always some concern that people won't arrive at our meeting place on time, we'll be late getting to the wharf, we won't be able to find parking, and in one way or another we'll miss the boat. As the organizer of our hike up Mt. Artaban on Gambier Island, I certainly worried about all those things and more. But in the end, everything went as perfectly as one could hope for. Those of us meeting to carpool were on time, everyone got to Horseshoe Bay well ahead of our sailing, we had no trouble finding parking that was close to our taxi slip, and we were on our boat and underway even a few minutes ahead of our scheduled 7:00 am departure.

I had been up Mt. Artaban once before. On that occasion we had started our hike in Halkett Bay Marine Provincial Park. In preparing for the present trip, I had read that encroaching development had overtaken a section of the original trail. I noticed that many recent hikes up Artaban had originated from the Fircom dock. So I had arranged for our group of

fourteen to be dropped off and picked up there. But on our thirty-minute trip across the water, I learned from the boat driver that hiking parties were still using the Halkett Bay dock as well. I asked whether we might be able to change our pickup location to Halkett. He said there would be no problem doing that, just let the dispatcher know by 2 pm.

The boat driver said that hikers were still using the Halkett Bay dock. *Chris Wright photo.*



Arriving at the Fircom dock, we disembarked and started up the gravel road straight ahead.

The Fircom dock, and the gravel road. *Chris Wright photo.*

We found our route to be very well marked, with signage directing us, first, left past a row of parked vehicles (islanders'

transportation between the dock and their homes) and, then, around to the right onto Jay Road, on which we passed by a few homes and one derelict truck. We continued on roads for about a kilometre and a half before finally reaching the original trail coming up from Halkett Bay.

Now on trail, we made our way up a relatively narrow draw, which was bounded on either side by rocky outcrops. It didn't appear that the draw had ever been logged, as, running up its middle, there were many, many mature Douglas-fir trees, some with trunks that were a metre to a metre and a half in diameter. The understory consisted of bracken fern and Oregon grape. Upon both ascending and later descending the fairly steep draw, we had several opportunities to pause and enjoy the forest's exquisite beauty.

Toward the top of the draw, we climbed to higher, rockier ground on our right. We left the Douglas-fir trees behind and passed through a thick cover of *Pinus contorta*. A short scramble brought us to the top of the peak and the footings of the former BC Forest Service fire lookout. Growth of pine has blocked views to the west, but there are still magnificent views to the east. There before us, across the waters of Howe Sound, the various peaks of the Britannia Range were etched against the morning sky. From where I sat I could look up and

down the range from Goat Ridge and Sky Pilot in the north to The Lions, Unnecessary Mountain, and St. Mark's Summit in the south. By moving around a bit it was also possible to see some of the Fraser River delta and the San Juan and Gulf islands.



Enjoying the views over an early lunch. *Chris Wright photo.*

We had arrived on the summit at 9:30, so had the luxury of having lots of time. We ended up spending about an hour and a half on top. We poked around for a while, then had an early lunch (maybe not so early, considering that most of us had had breakfast at 4:30 or 5:00), and did a little bird-watching too. There were chickadees and juncos, but our eyes were especially drawn to two other avian species. As the sun rose in the sky and the air began to warm, flies came out in large numbers. Looking up we saw high-flying swifts gliding and banking, no doubt attracted by the feast. They were almost invisible, their black bodies blending with the dark blue sky. Quite a bit easier to see were turkey vultures. We saw four or five of these large birds soaring overhead, and watched while one flew deftly through the treetops.

There was some discussion about continuing on over the mountain, dropping down the other side, and then looping around to Halkett Bay. But as the trail ahead was largely unknown and a loop would probably add distance to the hike, we decided to start back the way we had come up, while still entertaining the option of following the original trail out to Halkett Bay.

Of course, heading for Halkett meant needing to contact the taxi company in a timely way. After descending the draw and just before reaching the road, we tried calling the dispatcher. We didn't get hold of anyone, so decided to wait fifteen minutes and try again. In the meantime we agreed we would take our chances and proceed toward Halkett Bay. We reasoned that should we fail to make contact with the company, we could still choose to take a connecting trail through Camp Fircom and get back to the Fircom dock. We weren't

anxious to travel through private property, but figured we could presume on the campers' understanding. At the end of the fifteen minutes, we still didn't get hold of anyone, but left a message as to what we were intending to do and asked for a call back.

With the question about pickup still looming, we resumed walking, continuing to follow the trail toward Halkett Bay. But we hadn't gone more than a few steps when the trail began to descend very steeply through a previously cleared area. It soon became clear that we were departing from the original alignment. We lost quite a bit of elevation, then levelled out and came to a road. While a sign directed us up the road, we began to wonder: With everything this markedly different, if we needed to go with Plan B, would we even recognize the connecting trail to Fircom? Did it even exist anymore? Heading up the road, we quickly regained most of the elevation we had lost. That was promising. Then, as the grade lessened, we passed through an opening in the forest and found ourselves back on the original trail. More promising still. Finally, as we started along the trail, we received the confirmation we were looking for: Yes, the boat driver would pick us up at the Halkett dock. Breathing a sigh of relief, we could now enjoy the last section of the hike more fully.

Close to Halkett Bay, the trail passes through a deciduous forest of maple and alder. The understory is uniformly sword fern, the plants closely packed and the fronds a metre or more long. We found the forest to be well shaded and just right for walking on a hot day.

**Swimming in
Halkett Bay.**
Chris Wright photo.

We got down to the waterfront with about an hour and fifteen minutes to spare. Half of our group went swimming in the ocean; the rest were content to lounge on the beach.



Our ride back to Horseshoe Bay was yet another highlight in a day that had many of them. Most of us crammed onto the back deck of the boat so as to enjoy the sun and salt air and have an unobstructed view of the sound, islands, and surrounding mountains. On the way back we learned that the cost of the trip would be twenty-five percent less than what we had been quoted—not that the anticipated cost had prevented any of us from signing on. Still, it was a nice little “gift” to end a most perfect day.