Victoria, on Vancouver Island, is the capital of British Columbia, Canada. Much of its heavy industry shut down decades ago, leaving the city with two main financial activities: tourism and government. Both of these are ingredients for a successful airline, and according to West Coast Air (IATA: 8O/ICAO: YWZ) business travellers comprise some 80% of its traffic to Victoria from the city of Vancouver.

West Coast Air began service in 1996 after AirBC (Airways, September 2002)—once a regional connector for Air Canada—unloaded its floatplane division, which had been created from the amalgamation of several operators, including West Coast Air Services. A year later, Rick Baxter began discussions with Al Baydala, the owner of West Coast, who had been a former business partner, about acquiring a stake in the new venture. The Baxter name was well known in the coastal aviation industry because Rick’s parents, Tom and Linda Baxter, had started a small operation early in the Nineties—aptly named Baxter Aviation—based in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island.

Rick Baxter grew up in Vancouver, and because he knew the city well he offered to develop a base there for his parents’ fledgling airline. “I thought it would be a part-time job, and then I would move on to the next opportunity,” says Baxter, “but it turned into
a full-time position.” In the meantime, Baxter kept working on his Canadian private pilot licence, and then his commercial certificate.

As the Vancouver operation of Baxter Aviation grew, Baxter saw an opportunity for tourist charters. “At the time, much of the charter market was resource-based, and it was dwindling,” Baxter relates. “I once had a summer job driving a tour bus around Vancouver. I love seeing people this beautiful city, but with a floatplane I could show them so much more—the city and its backyard.” Under Baxter’s leadership, a substantial tour program was added to Baxter Aviation’s services.

Baxter was intrigued by the decades-long tradition of DHC-6 Twin Otter service on Canada’s Pacific coast. In acquiring a 40% stake in West Coast Air in 1998—a shareholding renegotiated to 50% two years later—Baxter brought much-needed operational experience. The company was struggling, with only one route and two operational aircraft, one based in Vancouver, the other in Victoria.

While some saw a beleaguered company, Baxter saw only opportunity. Immediately he introduced adventure flight tours, leasing a single-engine DHC-2 Beaver as well as using the Twin Otters outside scheduled flights. With the increased business, the airline needed more aircraft. It had several Twin Otters sitting in a hangar, so an overhaul program was begun to put these into service.

By 2004, Baxter had grown West Coast to an airline that carried 300,000 passengers a year with a fleet of a dozen floatplanes. But with the city playing host to the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games he saw lots more opportunity. That year he bought the Westin Bayshore Hotel to see if the airline could use one of the hotel’s docks during the winter months, when there would be little boat traffic. Despite having to scale back the number of flights it could offer during this time, the airline was still able to operate. Inside the hotel, West Coast used a vacant concierge desk as its check-in counter. “The desk was made of marble,” says Baxter, “and on several occasions, some of our frequent customers would comment to me, while sitting in the hotel’s high-backed leather chairs, that this was the best airport waiting lounge.”

As this was a temporary arrangement, Baxter talked with the owner of Harbour Air—who Baxter describes as a fierce competitor—suggesting that in the interests of both companies they should work together to find a long-term solution. The Convention Centre will house the international media during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Once the Games are over, both West Coast and Harbour Air will move to that location.

Both airlines, along with Baxter Aviation, discovered a sliver of land wedged between residential developments and the Convention Centre and set up a temporary base in 2005. In August 2006, West Coast acquired Sechelt-based Pacific Wings Airlines, which opened up new routes to the Sunshine Coast from both Richmond and Nanaimo. New opportunities for charter flights were also realized with this acquisition.

Rick Baxter still wasn’t finished. A year later, West Coast Air made headlines when he bought Baxter Aviation from his parents on April 20, 2007. For years before the deal was made, the younger Baxter had many discussions with his parents about the future of both concerns, but the deal to buy Baxter wasn’t the usual family transaction. “They put the airline up for sale to everyone, including our competition,” reveals Baxter. “I realized that this would be a strict business deal.” At the end of some very tough negotiations, Baxter Aviation passed into the hands of the younger son. “I was happy that we could offer everyone at Baxter a job, along with pay increases and more benefits,” notes Baxter. “I felt good about that.”

But Baxter underestimated the vastly different cultures of the two airlines. He tells Airways that Baxter was a stable operation that was comfortable with its niche position; on the other hand, West Coast was always looking for new opportunities. “My last name was on those airplanes and I had been a big part of its growth,” says Baxter. “I cared a lot about the business.” Soon, though, the Baxter name was erased from the aircraft and they were integrated into the West Coast fleet.

(continued on page 48)
The road from Vancouver to Whistler, BC, aptly named the Sea to Sky Highway, twists and turns like a slithering serpent. It starts out hugging the mountainside as it follows Howe Sound, before snaking inland and past towering glacier-topped mountains. I’ve driven the road many times. In fact on a recent trip, I almost drove off the road, as I couldn’t stop admiring the scenery. It looked as if the ocean and mountains had been plucked from a postcard.

On this particular trip to Whistler I left the driving—or rather the flying—to Capts Steve Sheehy and Tyler Simpson. West Coast Air operates one of the world’s most scenic scheduled flights with its seasonal service between Victoria and Green Lake Water Aerodrome (YWS/CAE5) at the world-renowned resort town of Whistler.

With four other passengers going to Whistler on the one-hour flight, the cabin of the Twin Otter feels spacious. I’m told that we’ll have a dozen Australian tourists on the return.

Except for a passenger ferry from Port Angeles, Washington, Victoria’s Inner Harbour is void of large marine traffic; however, the water is full of activity with small boats, kayakers, and other seaplanes, which means pilots need to be alert when taxiing to the harbor with small boats, kayakers, and other seaplanes, which are only on the water for 20 minutes. Now, with the takeoff area clear, the pilots push forward on the throttles—which on the Twin Otter feels like a slithering serpent. It starts out hugging the mountainside as it follows Howe Sound, before snaking inland and past towering glacier-topped mountains. I’ve driven the road many times. In fact on a recent trip, I almost drove off the road, as I couldn’t stop admiring the scenery. It looked as if the ocean and mountains had been plucked from a postcard.

On this particular trip to Whistler I left the driving—or rather the flying—to Capts Steve Sheehy and Tyler Simpson. West Coast Air operates one of the world’s most scenic scheduled flights with its seasonal service between Victoria and Green Lake Water Aerodrome (YWS/CAE5) at the world-renowned resort town of Whistler.

The turnaround at Whistler is scheduled for 30 minutes, so to stay clear of inbound and departing traffic we overfly the field. The sparkling glass towers of downtown Vancouver appear on our right. We pass over the iconic Lions Gate Bridge (First Narrows Bridge) as a freighter passes beneath. The 6,000ft (1,829m)-long span, which opened in 1938, links downtown with the communities of North and West Vancouver. Here the dozens of peaks of the North Shore Mountains, some more than 6,000ft (1,829m) rise steeply from the waterway, serving as a natural barrier between the city and the wilderness.

As the mountains loom in front of us, we climb to 6,500ft (2,000m) and pass between Cypress and Grouse Mountains, two of Vancouver’s popular ski destinations. As we penetrate the wall of mountains, it is as if someone has draped a rich, green blanket over the forested landscape.

Depending on demand, West Coast has the option of using the Beaver or Twin Otter on the route, however, Capt Sheehy says the latter type is used almost exclusively. West Coast is the only scheduled operator on this route, and while more and more locals are taking advantage of the service, most of the passengers are from tour groups.

Our airplane crosses the mainland of British Columbia at the Robert’s Bank Superport, a combination coal and container shipping terminal located in the Vancouver suburb of Delta. Not far away is Vancouver International Airport, the water and, after a right turn, overfly the field. The sparkling glass towers of downtown Vancouver appear on our right. We pass over the iconic Lions Gate Bridge (First Narrows Bridge) as a freighter passes beneath. The 6,000ft (1,829m)-long span, which opened in 1938, links downtown with the communities of North and West Vancouver. Here the dozens of peaks of the North Shore Mountains, some more than 6,000ft (1,829m) rise steeply from the waterway, serving as a natural barrier between the city and the wilderness.

As the mountains loom in front of us, we climb to 6,500ft (2,000m) and pass between Cypress and Grouse Mountains, two of Vancouver’s popular ski destinations. As we penetrate the wall of mountains, it is as if someone has draped a rich, green blanket over the forested landscape.

So far our flight has been uneventful, except for a brief period over the Saanich Peninsula, a fertile patchwork of farms stitched together.

As we climb, we fly toward the city and the wilderness. Weathered by time, some mountains are bald and the remaining peaks are covered with a white frosting of snow and ice, dominating in the distance. Coming up with a word to describe this peak, with its summit at 8,700ft (2,651m), is difficult; ‘magnificent’ and ‘glorious’ are a good start. About 20mi (30km) south of Whistler we begin our descent.

The village of Whistler is nestled between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains, which together are perennially voted as amongst the best ski destinations in the world. As we pass the village, we have a good view of the downhill ski run and Whistler sliding center, both venues for the Winter Olympic Games.

North of the village is our destination, Green Lake Water Aerodrome, which from the air looks…well, very green. We pass the lake before turning back for the recommended southbound approach and landing. There is a designated takeoff and landing area, and Capt Sheehy explains that there are few hazards in the lake, apart from boaters and water skiers, both of which are present during our landing.

West Coast Air uses a dock at the Whistler Air terminal, and because the ferry does not have any local staff, the pilots untie the aircraft, circle away from the beach, and taxi down the runway. With the alpine scenery and fresh air, this is the perfect destination, not only for travelers, but also for the pilots. “I shouldn’t tell people how great it is,” admits Sheehy, “pilots are always fighting to get this route.”

The turnaround at Whistler is scheduled for 30 minutes, but because of our delay we are only on the water for 20. With our expected passengers onboard, Capt Simpson unites the aircraft from the dock, pops back aboard, and we taxi out for a northbound departure.

As we climb, we fly toward Whistler’s latest attraction, the Peak 2 Peak Gondola, more than 1,430ft (435m) above the valley floor and strung across some 2.5mi (4km) between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. The gondola is equipped with a warning system that uses radar to alert aircraft to the obstruction.

Mountain lakes, hidden from the mortals driving below on the highway, pool in the most unlikely of places. We push farther north and the mountains become more rugged. Looking to the east, all I see to the horizon are mountains, covered in a white frosting of snow and ice, dominating the landscape. Coming up with a word to describe this peak, with its summit at 8,700ft (2,651m), is difficult; ‘magnificent’ and ‘glorious’ are a good start. About 20mi (30km) south of Whistler we begin our descent.

The village of Whistler is nestled between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains, which together are perennially voted as amongst the best ski destinations in the world. As we pass the village, we have a good view of the downhill ski run and Whistler sliding center, both venues for the Winter Olympic Games.

North of the village is our destination, Green Lake Water Aerodrome, which from the air looks…well, very green. We pass the lake before turning back for the recommended southbound approach and landing. There is a designated takeoff and landing area, and Capt Sheehy explains that there are few hazards in the lake, apart from boaters and water skiers, both of which are present during our landing.

West Coast Air uses a dock at the Whistler Air terminal, and because the ferry does not have any local staff, the pilots untie the aircraft, circle away from the beach, and taxi down the runway. With the alpine scenery and fresh air, this is the perfect destination, not only for travelers, but also for the pilots. “I shouldn’t tell people how great it is,” admits Sheehy, “pilots are always fighting to get this route.”

The turnaround at Whistler is scheduled for 30 minutes, but because of our delay we are only on the water for 20. With our expected passengers onboard, Capt Simpson unites the aircraft from the dock, pops back aboard, and we taxi out for a northbound departure.

As we climb, we fly toward Whistler’s latest attraction, the Peak 2 Peak Gondola, more than 1,430ft (435m) above the valley floor and strung across some 2.5mi (4km) between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. The gondola is equipped with a warning system that uses radar to alert aircraft to the obstruction.

Strobe lights and loud noises over all radio frequencies are used to warn pilots who come too close. We pass over with plenty of room to spare, but I wonder if anyone inside the gondola is unsnared about seeing an airplane flying toward them.

Most of the passengers have their noses pressed against the windows, and while I saw these same mountains on the way up, I still marvel at the stark beauty below. After flying over Vancouver we descend to 100ft (30m) over the Gulf Islands. We zigzag through Active Pass, a narrow channel between Mayne and Galiano Islands, the same route that the ferry between Victoria and Vancouver takes. I see eagles circling above the treetops, and we meet the ferry at the southern end of the pass.

An hour after we left Whistler, our floatplane drops into Victoria Harbour, and as we taxi to West Coast Air’s terminal, I hear a passenger say, “Wow! What a flight…beats five hours on the road!” Indeed it does. Ken Donohue →
Baxter proudly shows me the airline’s route map, which includes flights between Vancouver and Comox, on north-central Vancouver Island. According to Baxter this service has been well received by people and businesses in the Comox Valley, who appreciate the direct link into downtown Vancouver. The airline also offers summer seasonal service between Victoria and Whistler, which passes through some of the world’s most spectacular scenery. “Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes. In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).

Visitors can fly up to Whistler and then choose to take the train or ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes). In contrast, by car and transportation,” says Baxter. The Victoria–Whistler ferry, this trip would take upward of five hours (see flight’s duration is 55 minutes).