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NOTE: Photography that appeared as part of this published article is not included in this clip.

# Feminine Wilds

Story and Photography By Doug Pyper

Meet three young women weaving mountain lifestyle dreams.

“If you’re not living on the edge you’re taking up too much space!” -- a freedom anthem the super cool ‘No Fear’ crowd of modern day adrenalin junkies and mountain nomads use to define their existence. Or for many of us a description of a dream-life we could and would aspire to were it not for the day to day monotony of nine to five, car and condo payments, and a boss who doesn’t share our particular vision of nirvana.

## **JULIE-ANNE DAVIES Golden, BC**

No one can accuse Julie-Anne Davies of crowding anyone. She shared living space with only her climbing gear through two months of frigid mountain nights last winter, sleeping in the back of a 4-wheel-drive Toyota pick-up at the bottom of a succession of icefalls in the wilds of British Columbia and the Alberta Rockies. Her place of residence was minute, but her playground was immense. And for her it was just ‘business as usual’ with a routine passion for a lifestyle that she grew into almost naturally.

Julie-Anne was born twenty-nine years ago in the tiny ski village of Kimberley, British Columbia on the eastern slopes of the rugged Purcell Mountains. It was a scenario that she never wasted, embracing mountain adventure sports of every description from whitewater paddling to backcountry skiing.

After graduating high school wanderlust beckoned -- off to Australia and New Zealand for a year, before spending two years at UBC. This was followed by a semester at the Universite Canadienne en France in Nice. Not one to overlook an opportunity, she sampled a little Euro-mountain climbing before returning to UBC for an additional two years, completing a Bachelors Degree in Political Science in 1996.

“I escaped the confines of urban life in Vancouver by climbing in Squamish near Whistler. It was crazy, I returned to Kimberley after finishing up at UBC only to leave again (after working to replenish my finances) on a backcountry escapade with a friend through the western states in a beat up Hyundai Hatchback.”

This summer alone she has roped-up in the Selkirks, Rockies, Valhallas, and Coast Range, but ice –climbing is central to her life above all other endeavors. “ For me it has less to do with pushing myself physically, and much more to do with connecting to nature in an intimate way. The focus is so intense—when you’re 1000ft. up anchored to a wall of ice, you virtually become part of your surroundings. It makes you realize we are all inherently connected with nature, a truth that is so often forgotten in today’s world.”

How does she support her outrageous agenda of self-fulfillment? The proverbial silver spoon in mouth? Not so, Julie-Anne has endured the physical demands of tree planting for eight successive summers – a high paying dawn to dusk labour that could readily be compared to a season long endurance race. There was a potpourri of other outdoor-centered employment as well, such as a Mountain Cariboo Study for The East Kootenay Environmental Society in 1998.

She has recently moved to Golden enjoying a rustic little cabin in the woods while working at the exciting new\_Kickinghorse Mountain Resort. “I’ve always had a acute sense of how short our lives really are in the grand scheme of things. It’s important to find a way to really live it --- whatever that may be”

She’s pumped to make her lifestyle her life work. She has begun groundwork for an Adventure Tour Guiding business catering to women. She will bring to it a Level 1 Canadian Avalanche Association Certification, Occupational and Advanced Wilderness First Aid, a mountain of personal experience, and an enthusiasm that is boundless!

### **HEATHER BOWEN Banff, AB**

When Bruce Springsteen sang, “go for the jump and chase all your dreams ” Heather Bowen was listening with both ears. Her dream was to live in the mountains and she wasted no time deliberating over it when the moment was right --- she left Edmonton to live in Banff three days after graduating High School. It was planned as a year of footloose frolic before returning to the down and dirty business of building a career in the luxury of urban opportunity. It didn’t work out that way. It’s now unfolding into the beginnings of a life journey, which Heather, at age twenty-three, feels is just right.

“My main motivation for coming to Banff in 1995 was to Snowboard, but it was about working hard too. I had already arranged for my job before arriving.” After 15 months as a waitress at the Banff Springs Hotel, allowing ample time to experiment in every form of mountain recreation imaginable, she still managed to save enough to travel to Australia and New Zealand for a year. She returned directly to Banff (it just felt like home) and I walked right back into her job –no burned bridges.

“Mountain living is awesome in all respects, but it was competing in Boardercross that tied it all together for me. It started that winter (1997/98) --- I become a ‘grassroots’ team rider for Solomon. It wasn’t a paid sponsorship, but this local program supported me financially with complimentary sportswear and equipment. The snowboard thing is about fun people and close friendships --- the whole thing’s just a great vibe!” Anyone who has witnessed a Boardercross competition on the tele-tube or otherwise knows it’s also about an insatiable appetite for madness! Heather survived two seasons physically unscathed to travel once more overseas, returning home to Banff in November 1999. She was promoted to Hostess in Fine Dining at the Banff Springs last winter, but her stint in the hospitality industry is coming to an end.

This September opportunity knocked and Heather was there to answer the door. She accepted an offer by Soloman Sports Marketing Dept. and is now the Snowboard Sports Rep for Alberta, scheduling events and traveling to ski resorts for on hill equipment demonstrations. “I love the job, it’s challenging, and it feels like the start of a promising career. It’s a real people industry! I may have to stop competing, but it’s time to move forward. You’re a snowboarder on and off the hill—it’s a lifestyle and this job reflects it.”

She feels competing was a stepping-stone, although not in the conventional way. “Young people often feel pressured and frustrated, searching for some mysterious life plan. “Mapping your future takes thought, but in a sense it’s just about living, setting one goal at a time, and seizing opportunities.” It’s not surprising Heather’s motto is “live to work, not work to live”.

Mountain biking pretty much defines the summer for her. “We’ve been riding Mt. Seven in Golden a lot in the past few years. I enjoy traveling to other small mountain communities because they have a lot to offer in all seasons. There are obvious difficulties in making a permanent home in Banff, eventually I’ll have to live elsewhere --- it’s nice to know there are other choices out there.”

### **KELLY “KEJE” COMISHIN Kimberley, BC**

Her history reads like the profile of a hurricane about to come to shore at Key West. Yet when you meet Keje, her mild manner and soft smile may fool your perceptions into believing she’s less of a dynamo than she really is. She’s on the move big time and she’s arrived at age 24 ‘way ahead of schedule. Graduating in April 2000 from Lakehead University in Thunder Bay she racked up two degrees in 3 1/2 years –an Honours

Bachelor Degree in Outdoor Recreation with B.A. in Physical Geography in her back pocket just for good measure. Accomplishment? – more like a play in progress for Keje!

She was born with a predilection for the natural world and all things alfresco. Raised in the laid-back little snow Mecca of Kimberley she was busy skiing when diaper changes still were the order of the day. “In early grade school ‘liftees’ were like baby sitters. When I worked as a ski and snowboard instructor for a year after high school (1995) it felt like payback. Similar to so many other kids here, the ski hill filled an enormous part of my childhood.”

Her summers were spent in a family cabin on the rugged east shore of Kootenay Lake where lake kayaking like skiing became part of her day-to-day life. “Climbing? Hiking? Mountain- Biking? –I’ve dabbled in them all, but I’m not a super jock in anything. I have been very dedicated to backcountry skiing in the past few years.”

During her frantic university schedule she worked three summers back home – two at an East Kootenay Trout Hatchery and one summer for BC Parks as a Field Naturalist. From February to June of 1999 she broke from school to teach at Earthquest in Vernon BC, an Integrated Curriculum Outdoor Education Program. It combines outdoor recreation and survival skills with regular secondary school courses. “I believe nature is the greatest teacher in life. This program promoted experiential learning, and encouraged feeling safe in a natural environment.”

Her pace certainly didn’t slow up after graduation. First she was off to Ellesmere Island for two months as a sea kayak guide (Whitney and Smith Legendary Expeditions), and then traversed the Purcell Range that autumn from the Bugaboos to Roger’s Pass, before spending the winter in Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan doing a study on the Swift Fox. Come spring she was in Peru and Ecuador, backpacking in the Andes and exploring the rainforest at headwaters of the Amazon River.

Are you getting tired yet? She returned to kayak guiding last summer on the west coast (Coast Mountain Expeditions and Rainforest Kayak Adventures) while simultaneously working in her chosen profession (if it’s possible to get specific) in Nelson BC, as an environmental educator --- teaching basic ecology for two months, grades 4 to 7 in the public school system.

“Simplicity is the secret of happiness in life. I’m ready to be in the Kootenays now. The north fills a large part of my heart, but my roots are here and this is where I’ll invest my energies and make my home.”

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