

A Yukon State of Mind

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In Dawson City, the Dänojà Zho, or 'Long Ago House', welcomes visitors to discover the heritage of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. The 'Water People' have lived on the land for over 10,000 years with a belief, passed from one generation to the next, that 'respect and reverence for the land' is the key to living in concert with nature. A sign near the Yukon River includes a quote from a First Nation's elder, advising "If you are not close to the river, you are lost".

It doesn't take long for visitors to become amazed, awed, overcome and infatuated with the scenery: the wildlife, canyons, rivers, lakes, mountains, forests and the people of the Klondike. (Klondike, referring to the region around the Yukon River, is thought to have originated as a mispronunciation of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in). One of the locals we met described Klondike scenery as 'ragged, smooth and breathtaking', while another spoke of the "panoramic sense of beauty" that visitors were able to find around every bend in the Yukon River and in every vista.

We found it easily after our arrival in Whitehorse. We checked into the Edgewater Hotel alongside the swift flowing waters of the Yukon River. The next morning, while exploring the area I encountered a juvenile Bald Eagle sitting by the river and the two of us became silent companions for several minutes, while only a few feet apart from each other.

Later on, during a short canoe trip, with the mountains and the 'big' sky reflected perfectly in the mirror-like surface of the river, we spotted over a dozen Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles perched on branches overhanging the river and sitting in trees on the sandy cliffs; preening, fishing, gliding and swooping.

Two hours outside of Whitehorse, in Fraser, British Columbia, we boarded the historic White Pass and Yukon Route Railway. This was built during the Gold Rush in 1898 and the engineering feat of overcoming the harsh weather and challenging geography has been compared to the building of the Panama Canal.

After leaving Fraser the train passed through the "Tormented Valley", a bleak landscape of wind-carved trees, sparse vegetation and a thick fog clinging to the nearby mountain tops. At Bennett B.C. the train stopped so we could explore the area that included information about the Gold Rush as well as a display of a "Ton of Goods". This was a mandatory one-year supply of provisions and tools that the 'stampedeers' needed in order to cross the border into Canada. This also meant that when they made the arduous climb over the Chilkoot Pass, as part of the journey to Dawson City, they sometimes had to make thirty trips up and down the mountain to bring their 'ton of goods' with them.

The Chilkoot Trail ends at Bennett Lake and a short walk from the train station allows visitors to appreciate the trail's steep incline, while also affording stunning scenery of the lake and surrounding mountains. Our train then continued along the shore of Bennett Lake and through a dazzling postcard landscape of islands, inlets, forest and mountains.

At Carcross, our final stop, visitors bought souvenirs at the Matthew Watson General Store or enjoyed the delicious coffee and muffins at Caribou Crossing Coffee, and then explored the town's historic buildings and displays.

Just down the highway, we stopped for photos at the Carcross Desert, really a series of sand dunes, but often called the smallest desert in the world. And then following the Klondike Highway on the way back to Dawson, we stopped at Emerald Lake where the deep, surreal green colour of the water (due to erosion from the limestone mountains) provides yet another beautiful panorama.

There was so much more to see in the Whitehorse area, but with limited time, we took the one hour flight to Dawson City (the return, by car, took about six-hours). We arrived on the Discovery Days weekend, celebrating August 16, 1896 when gold was discovered at Rabbit Creek. The anticipation and enthusiasm of finding more gold led the locals to rename it "Bonanza Creek".

We made a pilgrimage to the Creek to see where it all had happened and then embraced the spirit of discovery by panning for gold at Claim #33 (I found \$4.00 worth), and then watching others pan for gold at Claim #6, which is open to the public.

Back in Dawson City itself, our personal 'discovery days' began at the Sour Toe Cocktail Bar where Sue, the Toe Queen took the real, preserved, blackened human toe out of its box and plunked it into my glass of Klondike Vodka ("the Spirit of the Yukon"). Following proper "toe" etiquette, I drank the vodka and allowed the toe to touch my lips, thereby becoming member No. 75115 of the Sour Toe Club!

Then it was on to Diamond Tooth Gertie's, just a block away, with its lively evening cabaret show, and casino. A view of the Northern Lights, around 1:30 am, was just another perfect 'welcome' to Dawson City.

Later that morning, we enjoyed a lively Parks Canada walking tour of the city to discover the buildings, bars, banks, brothels and the personalities who lived in Dawson in 1898. Discovery Days activities continued with the annual Parade featuring bagpipes, Mounties, horses pulling an antique fire engine, local personalities, and even a few monster trucks who were gearing up to get down and dirty in the Mud Bog competition.

Literally, one of the highlights of our visit was a helicopter trip to the Tombstone Mountains, where we flew in an out of valleys, got up and close and personal with beautiful, craggy mountain summits, and were able to land for a few minutes to enjoy some personal time communing with the indescribable scenery.

For a first visit to the Yukon, this was a memorable experience where every day, one awe-filled adventure and vista was followed by another. The Yukon is THE destination for travellers who love the outdoors, photography, history, culture, fun, adventure and peace of mind.