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THE KLONDIKE SPIRIT A PANORAMIC SENSE OF BEAUTY

Steve Gillick

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18 SEP 2017: The Klondike Spirit is not just the name of the Paddlewheeler in Dawson City. The popular attraction takes tourists up the Yukon River, past Moosehide settlement, over to the

Sternwheeler graveyard, and then on to the channel where the Klondike River's dark grey waters merge with the lighter grey of the Yukon River. But when you speak with Brad Whitelaw, the boat's owner, you discover that there is something intangibly moving about 'the spirit' of this place where Golden and Bald Eagles soar over mountains covered in Aspen, Spruce, Birch and Tamarac trees as they track the course of the river north to Alaska and the Bering Sea.



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As if to emphasize this symbiosis, a sign on the Dawson City riverfront carries a quote from Mary Anne Immamak, a Yupik Elder from Alaska, counselling that “If you are not close to the river, you are lost”.

And like many Yukoners, Brad echoed this sense of discovery and awe when he related that even a short trip up the Yukon “shows how easy you can get into nature around every corner on the river”. He spoke about Spring Time when the Wildflowers bloom and “the floral fragrance hits you like a bouquet in the face” and he verged on the poetic when he talked about “the panoramic sense of

beauty in the Yukon that imparts an enlightened sense that you are alive...” and after a pause, he added “It’s a very humbling experience”.

You honestly wonder why in all your travels around the world you are only now discovering the Yukon!



In Whitehorse, a few days earlier, Dave Sharp the owner/aviator with Tintina Air who was flying our small group from Whitehorse to Fort Selkirk, noted that the Yukon was roughly the same size as the State of California, but while California had 38 million people, the Yukon had only 38,000. “There’s lots of elbow room here”, he said.

“People are not offended by anything out of the norm. The only thing that’s not tolerated is disrespect for the land and animals”.

And this respect seemed to flow naturally from the moment we arrived in Whitehorse and checked into the Edgewater Hotel alongside the Yukon River. On the first morning the reflection of a grey, white, pink and blue assemblage of clouds appeared in the River just as the mist was rising. On the second morning a personal encounter with a juvenile Bald Eagle by the rocky shore of the River resulted in 150 photos. And on the third morning, after a beaver slapped the water with its tail and dived under, it resurfaced, swam toward me and checked me out for a few minutes before silently gliding away.



You don't have to look long or far to appreciate the 'panoramic sense of beauty' in the Yukon. On our first day we took the South Klondike Highway to Fraser, BC (about 2 hours) where we boarded the historic White Pass and Yukon Route Railway for the ride back to Carcross, Yukon. The railway connects Skagway, Alaska with Carcross, and Alaska cruisers often choose this as one of their day activities as they immerse themselves in the route taken by 100,000 hopeful prospectors during the 1898 Gold Rush.

Leaving Fraser, the train passes through "The Tormented Valley", a landscape of bare rocks, sparse vegetation, islands, wind-swept trees and low flying clouds that just allow the mountain tops to poke through.

At Lake Bennett a stop provides time to watch a film about the Gold Rush and see a display of the mandatory "Ton of Goods" –a year's supply of food, clothing and equipment that the Canadian Government (enforced by the North West Mounted Police) required every person entering Canada to carry with them, in an effort to prevent hardship.

Across the railway tracks is the Chilkoot Trail, a National Historic Site, where we walked a short, steep path, past the sign warning that "You are in Bear Country", and on to a rock promontory to

drink in the incredible scenery of the lake and mountains.

We disembarked at Carcross for the drive back to Whitehorse with stops at Carcross Desert, said to be the world's smallest desert, and Emerald Lake where the deep green coloured water contrasted perfectly with the sunny deep, blue sky.

And that water and sky combination seemed to define panoramic beauty. On a three hour canoe trip from Whitehorse to the Takhini River we had gorgeous, warm, sunny weather all the way, surrounded by the majesty of the mountains, clouds and trees mirrored in the calm water, and an absolutely amazing number of Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles who willingly posed for our photos.



But what would a visit to the Yukon be without a stay in Dawson City, especially during the

Discovery Days Festival that celebrates the discovery of gold on August 16th 1896 at Rabbit (now Bonanza) Creek, just outside of town.

But a different kind of Spirit was afoot when we visited the bar at the Downtown Hotel. At 9:00 pm sharp, Sue, the Sour Toe Queen, arrived with the toe in hand (actually, in a box). As I was first in line, she popped the dried, black, (real) human toe into my glass of Yukon Vodka and witnessed as I downed the drink and become a member of the Sour Toe Club. It was only appropriate to celebrate with a visit down the street to Diamond Tooth Gertie's for the cabaret, and a few innocent pulls on the slot machines.

Discovery Day activities for us started with a humorous 1898 walking tour of the city's homes, taverns, churches, banks and brothels, before we joined the crowd on Front Street to watch the annual Parade featuring Mounties, the city's new antique, horse-drawn fire engine, local personalities, bagpipes, sirens, and even a few monster trucks.



In the spirit of honouring tradition, we wanted to learn more about the First Nation on whose land the city sits. The Dänojà Zho (Long Ago House) Culture Centre has educational displays about the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and their values that include reverence for the land, the water and the animals (the Klondike Spirit) as well as sacred traditions

(“history, perseverance, pride and hope”) that have been passed from generation to generation. It was a mispronunciation of the word “Tr’ondëk” from which the word “Klondike” originated.

One of the legacies of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in land claim agreement is Tombstone Territorial Park which we visited by helicopter. After deking around and over spectacular rugged mountain peaks and into pristine valleys, we landed for a few minutes to get up close and personal with the mountains and the big sky. Bob Skinner, our pilot, related how visitors were always overwhelmed by “the complete awe factor: ragged, smooth, breathtaking scenery that emphasizes the harsh, rough, beautiful, good and healthy life here in the Yukon”.

The Klondike Spirit has been known to effect travellers in all generations. It’s a perfect fresh air-nature-relaxation-fun experience, perfect for outdoor enthusiasts, hikers, canoe and kayakers, photographers, families, foodies, history buffs, Northern Light-seekers and travellers who just want to escape their routine in a place with lots of elbow room, and natural palettes of panoramic beauty.

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Emerald Lake on the South Klondike Highway



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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