

Call of the wild
The spectacularly
rugged Tombstone
Park features tundra-
cloaked valleys, dense
forests and craggy
rock formations.

northern exposure

More than moose and mounties, Canada's Yukon province is steeped in goldmining history. Now experience-seekers can trace the path of early miners on the river journey of a lifetime.

Words Pat Nourse Photography Julian Kingma



In the Yukon, you'd be well advised to carry bear-repelling

spray. In the Yukon, sunflowers twist their heads off in the summer as they try to follow the endless sun. In the Yukon, amputated human toes make an acceptable cocktail garnish. Extreme and isolated regions are breeding grounds for all sorts of stories, and it's no different north of the 60th parallel. No different, except that only one of those stories is untrue. And it's not the one about the toe.

I'm here on the Great River Journey, the first attempt to sail up Canada's Yukon River, retracing the path of the gold-rush crowds, in some sort of style. There has been nothing stopping you following this trail in the meantime, of course, but you'd be canoeing it yourself as likely as not, and the amenities at the campsites extend to bear-proof food lockers but not much further. An incredible way to do it, certainly, but one that will exclude many would-be travellers on the grounds of experience, capacity and fortitude, if not time and predilection.

This Great River Journey caper is styled in the manner of modern adventure: enough sweat, dirt, campfire camaraderie and absence of WiFi to ensure you really know you're not in Kansas anymore, but with the complement of real beds and hot and cold running water. Designed for small groups of experience-seekers, it takes the path followed by gold-hunters from the railhead at Whitehorse to the upriver mining community servicing the Klondike claims at Dawson City, near the Alaskan border in the northwest of Canada's Yukon province, as its structure and theme, but takes its cues from upmarket adventure tours like those popular on the African savannah.

In its first year, the comfort side of the package hasn't yet reached the level of polish and luxury afforded by the better African and Asian operators, but it's a world away from the trip that faced its originators. Gold was found at Rabbit Creek (renamed

Bonanza Creek shortly thereafter), just north of Dawson, in 1896, but it was a year before the news reached the wider world, a steamship arriving in Seattle from Dawson loaded with a ton of gold the bearer of tidings so sparkling it kicked off the Klondike gold rush, the biggest grab for gold in history. A wave of maybe 100,000 fortune seekers set out for the Klondike, but the massive hardship entailed in reaching the goldfields saw only 30,000 or so reach the claims, many of the fallen succumbing to cold, malnutrition and crime along the way. With so massive an influx of people, starvation over the winter became an issue. The Northwest Mounted Police soon allowed only those carrying a ton of supplies each to attempt the journey. It certainly brings a fresh perspective to ever-shrinking airline baggage limits.

Both trips, modern and 19th century, begin in earnest in the city of Whitehorse. Back in the day, you'd have arrived overland or by rail. Today, coming from Australia, you'll have likely hopped the seasonal direct Sydney-Vancouver flight offered by Qantas, or come via San Francisco and then hopped aboard an Air Canada Jazz flight two hours to Whitehorse International. A stuffed grizzly bear adorns the baggage carousel – the first intimation of the shaggy-coated spectre that is to hang over the trip.

Bear talk never seems far from hand when you're visiting the Yukon. It's not unlike crocodiles and the Northern Territory in that respect and, accordingly, for all the loose talk and laughs there's a real and present danger behind it. This is wild country. Some of the wildest you're likely to see in the First World, and black and grizzly bears are here in significant numbers. One of the first conversations you're likely to have as a visitor will regard 'bear drill'. Naturally, there are differences of opinion on this matter. Black bears are herbivorous but cause more injuries, despite the fact the fish-loving omnivorous grizzlies are more aggressive. One species climbs trees and the other doesn't. The general advice is to not leave food out and to make plenty of noise when you're walking, because the bears are said to be more interested in avoiding you rather than confrontation, and it's not uncommon to see hikers slung with 'bear bells', which would double nicely in a Christmas parade. If you run into a bear, some advise you assume a foetal position, while most suggest backing away slowly, making reassuring noises all the while. Then there's the camp that tells you to make yourself look as tall as possible and yell, "We're not salmon!"

They really do sell bear spray, incidentally. It's basically pepper spray, the same stuff favoured by police forces around the world. Stories of unfortunate tourists trying to use it like bear-Aerogard abound. Moose, apparently, are the ones you've really got to look out for, though. The bull moose is a territorial bugger, a good three metres tall, carrying enough meat on him to supply a family of four's moose-meat needs for a year. When you shoot a moose you aim for the >



You can in the Yukon
Clockwise from far
left: St Francis Xavier
church at Fort Selkirk;
a Yukon relic; DIY skis
at a trappers' hut; the
Shakat; the northern
lights; river gold at
Fortymile Gold store
in Dawson; Yukon
signage; Ben from
Boorowa, a fellow
traveller. Opposite:
Farmer Hugh Bradley
at Pelly Farm.





The bewitching skies and *northern lights* are one of the province's major drawcards.

heart or lungs. Make a point of shooting your moose near a road or the river, because they're too big to dress and carry back otherwise. You don't want to attract bears. Or other moose. There is no moose spray.

We're taking to the water in a beast of a different sort. The *Shakat* is a launch that has been fitted out especially for the trip. It's glass-topped and yes, those *are* old business-class airplane seats. Happily, the journey is structured in a way that gives you a good sense of the river – the enormous Yukon, cold, fast, shallow – without labouring the point. Hours of river travel, sure, but not hours and hours. The *Shakat* is for point-to-point transport, and all overnighting along the way is done at lodges fitted out expressly for this caper. Upper Laberge Lodge is the first port of call, and seeing the river widescreen its way into Lake Laberge and fill the horizon is really something. On the water, when the engines are killed from time to time, there's no sound but the breeze and no scent on it but the river and the trees. The sense of distance is something you feel keenly.

The lodge isn't a lodge in the New Zealand, butlers, teak, full-wet-bar-in-every-room sense, but a series of 'wall tents' – real floors, windows and doors, gas-fired pot-belly stoves, twin single beds, canvas canopies, bathrooms with views of the lake from the throne. Comfortable. There's a central lodge house with a lounge and dining room, but otherwise it's just water and woods as far as the eye can see. Walking, canoeing, boating and fishing for grayling, arctic char, salmon and the savage-jawed pike are the pursuits that occupy your hours here. Taking hoof (armed with bear spray and a guide), you can walk through the deserted village of the Ta'an (one of four First Nations who own the land and indeed half the Great River Journey company), just up from the lodge.

Walking out from Laberge Lodge, we encounter Ben. Sixty if he's a day, he's boating up the Yukon on his own, far from his first time, his 'mistress', a worn rifle, by his side. He's an architect by trade, and lives in Vancouver, but his raconteur routine and accent betray him – he's from country NSW, as it turns out, a Boorowa boy. Later, we pass canoes of Japanese travellers. The northern lights hold a great appeal for the Japanese market, the aurora being thought to bestow good fortune upon conception, decision-making and other milestones. It's pretty amazing, truth be told, and you're completely unprepared for the way it billows across the sky, capricious and then gone.

Spruce and aspen, poplar and willow slide past as we cruise downstream heading north, home to timber wolves, elk, caribou, cougar and lynx. We see almost none of them, man nor beast. No telephone poles, power cables, signs or scree. It's all the more jarring when you come across sights like the *SS Evelyn*. Chocked up a few metres above stream on a bend of the river, she's a largely intact 1908 steamwheeler, testament to the preservative powers of isolation and arid, sub-arctic climes, a hulking, silent thing absurd



among the evergreens. You get the same feeling nosing around a trappers' cabin. The doors are unlocked, but propriety forbids us doing anything more than peeping in the windows. The code of the north says you leave a cabin like this in better nick than you found it, and I'm betting midwinter lows under minus-20 hold people to their word on that score. Outside, among the cranberry bushes, I find bleached bones, ragged makeshift skis, a shell casing and a plastic crab.

The crisp hedged stillness is even more intensely felt at Fort Selkirk. We've cheated a little bit by taking a float plane shortcut past some of the rapids. The trick to flying the 1950s float plane, our German pilot Gerdht tells us, is to fly "higher than the trees but low enough to be able to breathe". Once a Northern Tuchone hunting and fishing camp, Selkirk became a trading post in the 1840s, its heyday as a transport hub coming to an end when roads halted the steamboat trade in 1950 and the community was vacated. The remaining log cabins, shops and caches are well preserved and a little spooky. St Andrew's Anglican still smells like a church, while the brightly painted spirit houses of the First Nations cemetery, a short walk into the trees, provide something of a visual (if not spiritual) counterpoint.

Homestead Lodge is tonight's stop, newly built down the road from Pelly Farm, a property in operation since the gold rush and the oldest viable working farm north of the 60th parallel. It's owned by Hugh Bradley. The Lodge is a simpler affair; the accommodations have been arranged to give the suggestion of travelling back in time as you venture down the river from Whitehorse to Dawson City. There's already been lots of talk about Dawson from the old Yukon hands. It was the place waiting for you at the end of a long>

Dipping a toe in Brave souls can try Downtown Hotel's Sourtoe Challenge: downing a glass of spirit garnished with a human toe. You could pay penance later at the St Andrew's Anglican Church at Fort Selkirk (top). *Opposite:* The night sky at Upper Laberge Lodge.



Pioneer style
Bedding down at Upper Laberge Lodge (top); the main house at Pelly Crossing Lodge. *Opposite:* The jetty juts into the Yukon at Upper Laberge Lodge.

journey or a hard slog on the goldfields, a place where imagination-poor but gold-rich men could slake their thirst for whiskey, gambling and women. Its reputation appears to have faded only partially over the years.

Pelly Farm, on the other hand, is a pretty sober place, but certainly not sombre, its outbuildings interspersed with wandering chooks, several generations of farm equipment and kids' toys in various states of repair. Its softly-spoken owner, 76-year-old Hugh Bradley, takes particular pride in the weather station, where he takes daily readings from equipment old and new for the weather service. For this he receives the sum of a dollar a week, and he's happy with it. A very nice man, and one with a humility borne of years of snow, bears and the work of farming very marginal land etched into his face, Bradley is gentle in telling me that no, the sunflowers don't twist their heads off trying to follow the midnight sun.

Fast-forward upriver to Dawson City. Arriving by boat is dramatic, but for full effect, allow me to recommend a wide, low arc in a vintage Beaver float plane. The mountains part, and you can see the zigzag patterns of tailings in the riverbed like the leavings of some enormous borer, and then the colourful low-rise boxes of the town swing into view. It's a sight for sore eyes. I've only spent a handful of days in the company of my small group out on the river – nothing like the original passage – but already the promise of whores, cards and hard liquor is working its magic. Well, hard liquor, at any rate.

Dawson is a living museum. Many of its buildings survive from the gold-rush era, including cabins belonging to Klondike poets Robert Service ("There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the

men who toil for gold" – *The Cremation of Sam McGee*) and Jack London. Newer buildings are required to match the old as far as materials, design and colour schemes go, and, partly because it's built on permafrost, the streets are all mud, their khaki expanses bracketed by boardwalks. For all that, though, it's a real living city. Gold and other valuables are still being dug out of them thar hills, and with that other boom, tourism, Dawson seems here to stay.

And the end-of-the-line atmosphere remains. On the whoring front, there's Bombay Peggy's. It's not a brothel anymore, but the town's most upmarket accommodation. The rooms have names like The Snug, and I'm in The Sweet. It's like a small hotel or B&B, only in the place of the breakfast room there's a lively bar, with Yukon Gold, my new favourite beer, on tap. I like this town already.

There are plenty of opportunities for historical immersion: Parks Canada runs engaging tours around town led by period-costumed rangers, and just out of town are public claims where visitors can pan for gold or visit the romantically titled Dredge Number 4 ("the largest wooden-hull bucket-line dredge in North America") historic site. The indigenous Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people have set up Dänojà Zho, a cultural centre where you can get some sense of the people through eating bannock and locally smoked salmon for morning tea.

But you could also take the view that a bar crawl and a few hands of five-card stud are of equal historical import. Diamond Tooth Gertie's, for one thing, is Canada's oldest legal casino, dating back to 1910. If the gambling and drinking don't do it for you, the dancing girls just might, with three shows nightly. The can-can is as racy as it gets, but something like this in a town of 2000 is a real lark. Bombay Peggy's is the more soigné of the drinking holes. It's lots of fun and the place where most sessions begin. All of them, however, end at The Pit, an aptly named late-closing dive decorated with awnings bearing the euphemistic 'Beer Parlour' legend.

The Sourtoe Cocktail Challenge could be seen as a remnant of frontier spirit. A tradition at the Downtown Hotel since the early 70s, it involves downing a glass of spirit that has been garnished with a toe. Yes, an actual human toe. For real. "You can drink it fast," the legend goes, "You can drink it slow, but the lips have gotta touch the toe." Being a red-blooded Australian drinker, I jumped at the chance to drink something decorated with what would elsewhere be considered medical waste (here it's dried and kept in salt). A singular experience, and I have the certificate to prove it.

"The only society I like," Robert Service, the poet of the Yukon, said, "is that which is rough and tough – and the tougher the better. That's where you get down to bedrock and meet human people." Whether you're drawn here by the lure of gold or experience, it's never truer than here at the end of the river and the top of the world.*



THE FINE PRINT

The Great River Journey runs during the northern summer from the months of June to September. The eight-day trip starts from \$6060 per person, twin share (land only) including tax. See www.greatriverjourney.com or www.canada.travel for more information, and contact Natural Focus Safaris on 1300 363 302 or (03) 9249 3777 or see www.nfs.travel for bookings.

Getting there

Qantas operates seasonal services from Sydney to Vancouver from 16 December to 27 January. For the rest of the year it codeshares with American or Alaska Airlines from Los Angeles or San Francisco. From December 16, Air Canada will be the only airline to fly non-stop from Sydney to Vancouver. Call 1300 655 767 or visit www.aircanada.com.