

The Ta'an Kwäch'an Council is one of four Yukon First Nations that are partners in Great River Journey. Chief Ruth Massie (left) and Deputy Chief Gail Anderson of the Ta'an Kwäch'an with George Asquith, president of Great River Journey.



Photo: Gareth Aitkenhead

A long-awaited journey

Starting in June 2007, Great River Journey will bring luxury adventure travel to the Yukon River.

For some months now, there have been whispers within Yukon's tourism industry: *something big is coming*. And, on February 7, 2007, rumour turned to fact when Great River Journey (GRJ) was introduced to the community at the company's launch held in the Yukon Transportation Museum.

In a joint GRJ and Yukon Government press release, Economic Development Minister Jim Kenyon said, "This business builds on Yukon's strategic advantages—its people, cultures and geography—and it is an excellent example of diversified economic development." One look at the company's profile and it's easy to see why this business stands out. GRJ is a joint partnership between Great Northern Journeys Inc.—a private-sector investor—and FNIC, a consortium comprised of four First Nations—Kwanlin Dün

First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'an Council, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Selkirk First Nation. What makes GRJ unique is that the company offers five-star, week-long, lodge-to-lodge riverboat tours on the Yukon River.

The man who got the ball rolling is George Asquith, president of Great River Journey. Asquith, who has worked in a number of jobs in Yukon, from road worker to lawyer, knew that he wanted to start a business in the territory, he just wasn't sure what or when, and with whom.

The answers came to Asquith after a great deal of research and good old-fashioned thinking. Market research suggested that the most successful tourism businesses in Yukon were high-end consumptive types—fishing or hunting lodges. The gap that existed in the market was in high-end, lodge-to-lodge touring. Asquith reasoned

that if you were offering tours through First Nations' territory, then Yukon First Nations might just want to be partners. He turned out to be right.

A chance encounter with Judy Gingell of the Kwanlin Dün Development Corporation, on a Whitehorse-bound flight, is where the involvement of the First Nations began. "Judy overheard George talking about the business and she told him if he ever got it off the ground to give her a call," says Claire Festel, director of marketing for GRJ.

The type of tour, lodge-to-lodge, and how the First Nations will be involved in the actual tours are also groundbreaking for the region. Each tour of 10 people will start in Whitehorse and follow the Yukon River for eight days, stopping at three lodges along the way, and ending in Dawson City. Clients will get the opportunity to visit First Nations people as they are going about their normal activities along the river.

The guest accommodations have been designed to evoke Jim Robb's iconic cabin paintings, but the pictures on the company's website—leather armchairs, claw-foot tubs and brick fireplaces—show that the lodges offer full-on comfort in the wilderness. And, the tours will focus on four themes: flora and fauna, First Nations culture and history, gold-rush culture and history and modern-day Yukon.

As a start-up company, GRJ is using its first summer of operations to listen to feedback from clients and stakeholders and to work out the kinks. "It's going to be our teething-and-training period," says Festel.

With everything in place for its first summer, GRJ is definitely a Yukon business to keep an eye on.

Go to www.greatriverjourney.com for more information about Great River Journey.

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