



Wonderland around Whitehorse

Linda Vergnani TRAVELS TO WHITEHORSE, CAPITAL OF THE YUKON,
TO FLY, DOG SLED AND CANOE THROUGH THE WILDERNESS.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDA VERGNANI

CANOEING DOWN THE OLIVE YUKON RIVER between snow-streaked peaks, we spot a strange, figure standing upright on the bank, watching us intently.

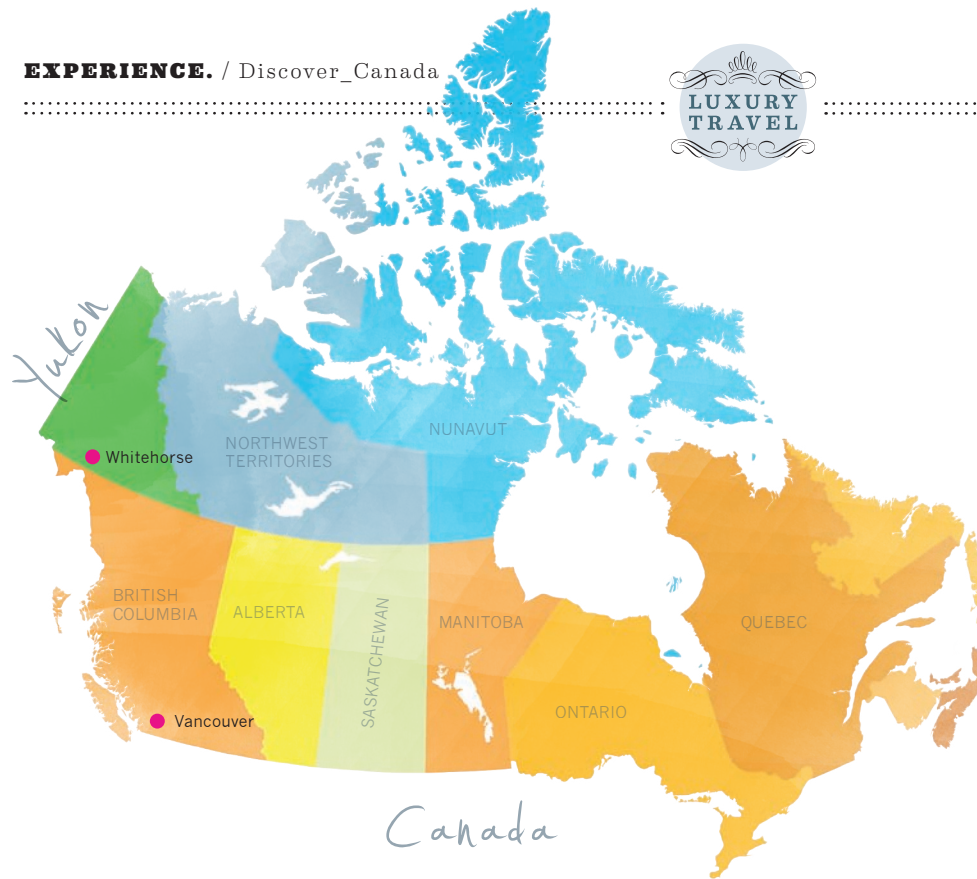
“It’s a bear!” I exclaim. Indeed, as we draw closer the figure drops down on all fours and reveals itself as a charming, chocolate coloured bear. A normal colour variation of the black bear, it sits like an amiable Paddington on the bank, watching us splash-paddling by in a stable Voyageur canoe.

Downstream, we pull up on a bank to a warm, wood fire welcome. Caterer Katie

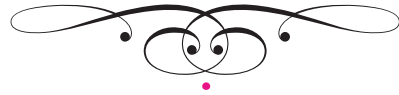
Young has laid out a table laden with king salmon chowder drizzled with truffle oil, cured muskox meat, goats cheese salad and a dessert of huckleberry creme brulee.

Young explains that the supplies were brought up by boat and she picked the berries herself. She and husband Will Young, a professional hunting guide, moved to the Yukon from Alberta six years ago “to get out of the craziness [of the cities] down south”. Like other settlers in this 483,450 square kilometre wilderness territory, they were smitten by the elemental feel of the land. >>





Lucky visitors see the Aurora Borealis or northern lights. It's magical. This February, on Valentine's Day, there were red and purple shimmering lights that went on all night. It was so nice, I was crying.



Stretching from the Arctic Ocean almost to the Pacific Ocean, the Yukon is a Canadian territory where wildlife outnumbers the 36,000 human residents. It is home to 250,000 caribou, 70,000 moose, 16,500 black and grizzly bears plus species like lynx, wolves and threatened wood bison.

With its deep-freeze winters – when temperatures can drop to minus 50 degrees Celsius – its immense boreal forests, jagged peaks, wild waterways and braided glaciers, the Yukon attracts tourists who like to pit themselves against nature. It boasts events like the 1,610 kilometre Yukon Quest international dog sled race and the Yukon Arctic Ultra marathon, the “world’s coldest and toughest ultra.”

For those who prefer luxury, exploring the Yukon can seem daunting. But it has a

gentler side: the “sourdoughs” – as local inhabitants are called – are genial and have a wry sense of humour; the sweep of scenery is stunning and in the long summer days you can start a round of golf at 10.30pm.

History buffs follow the route of the 1898 Yukon gold rush to Dawson City, where they pan for gold, visit the home of famous writer Jack London and watch cancan dancers at Diamond Tooth Gerties Gambling Hall. Ecotourists view wildlife along the highways, and in the far north tundra, may spot the great Porcupine caribou herd. Fishing enthusiasts take floatplanes to places like Tagish Wilderness Lodge, where they land enormous trophy lake trout and northern pike.

I fly into Whitehorse, Yukon’s “wilderness capital”, in late spring. Some parts of the city, with its old wood buildings, have



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A chocolate coloured black bear watches from the bank of the Yukon River.

the feel of a 1950s film set. At the High Country Inn, you can try Grizzly Beer in the atmospheric pub and then dine at Morels Restaurant, which specialises in northwest Pacific dishes, such as juniper berry-crusted elk striploin with cranberry preserve. Some of the hotel's five-star presidential suites have views across the seething Yukon River.

For a more exclusive hotel, try the sustainably run, highly rated Inn on the Lake, situated 55 kilometres south of Whitehorse on Marsh Lake. Stay here in April and you will hear the melodic hoots of hundreds of migrating trumpeter swans, which feed at nearby marshes.

Carson Schiffkorn, owner of Inn on the Lake, says his guests are "people with an adventurous heart" who want the comforts of home. "You can fish, swim or mountain bike and you don't have to be 100 kilometres off the beaten track. In fall, an amazing number of guests go berry picking with the chef."

I am based mainly at Takhini River Lodge, a classy bed and breakfast establishment set in a bucolic landscape and built by French owners Christiane and Jean Marc Champeval. The couple moved here from Alsace in 2007 to establish an equivalent of the *chambres d'hote* and *tables d'hote*, after "really falling in love with the Yukon".

Guests have the whole soaring wooden lodge to themselves. Christiane, a pharmacist, cooks delicious dinners of local produce like Arctic char or caribou sausage to order. She says "I like to keep it small and cosy and offer customised service for people who come here. We can meet them at the airport and plan everything together with them".

Summer activities include horse riding, quad biking and hiking. In winter, guests can rent Arctic gear and are taken dog mushing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing or ice fishing. Lucky visitors see the Aurora Borealis or northern lights. Champeval says "It's magical. This February, on Valentine's Day, there were red and >>



Quad bikers splash through a stream.

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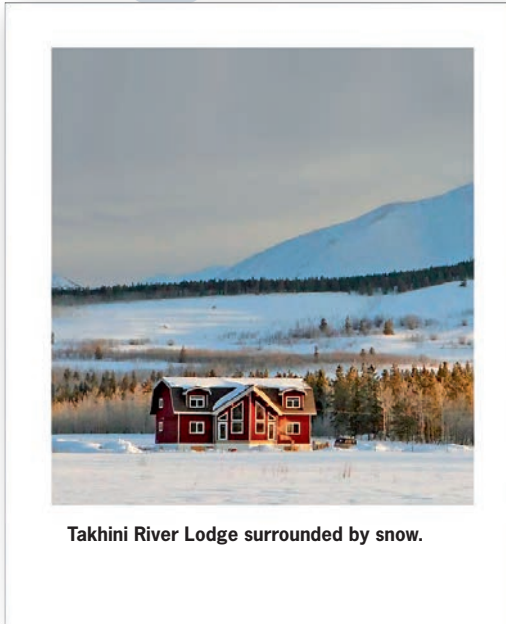


Horses are led through the mountain trails near Whitehorse.

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Christiane from Takhini River Lodge drives the sled dogs in winter.



Takhini River Lodge surrounded by snow.



WHERE TO STAY
Takhini River Lodge

Rates: Rooms from C\$180-220 (about A\$174-213) per night including breakfast. A four-night winter package (available from December to March) including dog sledding, snowmobiling and ice fishing, all accommodation, dinners and breakfasts is C\$1,595 (about A\$1,543) per person plus taxes. takhiniriverlodge.com

Inn on the Lake

Rates: Rooms from C\$189 (about A\$183) per night and suites from C\$229 (about A\$221) per night. A three-night winter package (available from December to April) including all meals, snowshoeing, tobogganing, snowmobiling, icefishing and rental of Arctic gear is C\$849 (about A\$821) per person twin share. exceptionalplaces.com

Northern Lights Lodge & Spa

Rates: Lodge rooms from C\$175 (about A\$169) per night and alpine chalets from C\$184 (about A\$178) per night including breakfast. A four-night active mountain summer package including use of mountain bikes, guided hikes, dinners and a massage is C\$875 (about A\$847) per person. northernlightsyukon.com

High Country Inn:

Rates: Five-star presidential suites from C\$180-200 (about A\$174-194) per night plus taxes. highcountryinn.yk.ca

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies from Sydney to Whitehorse via Vancouver. Return economy fares start from A\$2,100 and Executive First (business class) fares (available only on the Sydney to Vancouver leg) from A\$9,400. Total flight time is around 19 hours. aircanada.com

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit is in summer (June to August), when there are warm, long days (up to 19 hours of sunlight), though weather can be unpredictable. In September, the autumn colours are a technicolour dream. For snow sports and the Aurora Borealis go in mid-winter (December to March). Avoid April to mid May and October to November when the skies tend to be grey and it can get very wet.

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To experience the immensity of the landscape, fly over Kluane National Park, which contains Canada’s highest peak – the 5,959 metre high Mount Logan – and the largest non-polar icefield in the world. You access the wilderness mountains from Haines Junction, a scenic two-hour drive from Whitehorse up the famous Alaska Highway.

Pilot Sandi Henderson of Sifton Air flies us in a Cessna between cinder peaks towards the meeting point of two vast, corrugated highways of ice, complete with “centre lines” of black moraine. Where the tributaries snake together to form the Kaskawulsh Glacier, there is a five kilometre-wide sheet of ice.

As his passengers exclaim and crane, Henderson tells us “this is part of the largest protected area on earth”. Kluane joins up with two national parks in Alaska and a park in British Columbia to form a 2.6 million square kilometre World Heritage-listed mountain wilderness. In 2011, just 107 people went on expeditions to Mount Logan. There is no piste or signs of people.

Following the trail of pioneering prospectors, you can catch a heritage train along the narrow gauge White Pass and Yukon Route Railway, started in 1898. The

train rattles up a winding pass from the port of Skagway in Alaska to CarCross in the Yukon.

We board the train at Fraser, on the Canadian border, and warm ourselves at a wood burning stove in the vintage carriage as the train skirts frozen beaver ponds and through superb alpine scenery. Conductor David Dobbs recounts how when he was inspecting the tracks, he had a close encounter with a black bear. “My heart was all gettin’ adjusted again,” he says ruefully.

Another day, we cuddle blunt-nosed husky pups before going on a bone-jarring dog sled ride with top Canadian long distance musher Michelle Phillips. During the Iditarod Race and the 1,600 kilometre Yukon Quest, she carries all the food and supplies for her dog team, tying booties on the pooches’ paws to protect them from sharp ice.

In summer her “elite athlete” huskies exercise by pulling a heavy metal sled on wheels. The dogs yip and tug as she harnesses pairs to the cart. Within seconds of taking off, the snarling hounds turn on one of their mates, biting him. Phillips brings them under control and the joyous animals hurtle away, pulling us along a forest path with incredible strength.

It is this kind of exuberant experience that draws people back to the Yukon.