

Leave the paved road behind to experience Kluane's grandeur

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Kluane National Park— From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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By virtue of its location – pressed up against the busy Alaska Highway – Kluane is the most visited of the 10 national parks in Canada's North. Between 50,000 and 100,000 travellers stop at the park's Visitors Centre in Haine's Junction each summer.

Yet only an infinitesimal fraction ever venture beyond sight of the paved road. Which is a shame, for the grandeur hidden in the depths of Kluane defies compare.

Within its boundaries lies Canada's tallest peak and the world's largest non-polar ice cap. The weather that howls off the Gulf of Alaska and across these remote valleys can toss fully loaded expedition rafts like autumn leaves and shred tents with a single gust. Moments later, you may be tanning in the sun. Grizzly prints are everywhere, as common as the yellow dryas and alder that rushed in to colonize the gravel left by receding glaciers. (The size of these prints – as big as a microwave – often causes a spasmodic gulping and repeated glances into the surrounding shrubbery.) It is a landscape littered with peaks and valleys that have yet to see a human footprint.

But to define a landscape through such facts alone robs it of an essential spirit. The three vignettes that follow are no substitute for visiting Canada's North first-hand; instead, they offer glimpses into the park, pronounced Clue-aw-nay, which means “big fish.”

THE MOUNTAINS

“I describe a trip into the St. Elias [range] as the poor person's chance to visit Antarctic,” says Pat Morrow, respected Canadian mountaineer and filmmaker. “The flight in takes one hour, and costs only a fraction of a trip to the South Pole.

“From the moment you land, the feeling of isolation is profound,” Morrow continues. “Everything is white. And the scale, the vertical relief from ice cap to summit, is truly Himalayan.” Storms can plunge the temperature to -40 C even in midsummer, without warning.

Morrow has undertaken four major expeditions in the St. Elias, including a circumnavigation of Mount Logan, and a 1992 trip that accurately measured the peak's height for the first time. The result: 5,959 metres.

A few hardy souls forgo the flight, and manage to get in and out under their own power. But it is no easy task. In 1979, four Albertan climbers set out with 90 kilograms of supplies each. They ferried the gear up rugged valleys, towed it on sleds through knee-deep slush and leapt over crevasses. It took 47 days, travelling through “a fierce and enchanted kingdom of snow and ice,” to reach Logan, climb the peak and get back out.

THE ROADS

Every summer, Sue Thomas and her husband join that great flotilla of RVs heading north. Anyone who has visited the Yukon will have seen this steady brigade steaming down the Alaska highway. Most steer straight on toward Alaska, but the Thomases, hailing from Vancouver Island, always pull off in Kluane.

“It is our absolute favourite place in the world,” Thomas explains. “My husband had never been to the North before our first trip in '93. From the moment we arrived, we both felt like we'd come home.”

The Thomases are boondockers. Boondocking – also known as dry camping – involves staying at primitive sites without electricity, sewer or water, and some of the very best spots are found on the quiet lakes bordering Kluane.

“We meet all types of RV'ers in the backcountry. Many come from Europe during spring or fall when renting an RV is cheaper,” she says.

They've even come in winter – twice. “A few years back, my husband declared he wanted to experience -40 C temps and see Northern Lights. It didn't take long to accomplish both.”

A smattering of RV parks stay open through the dead of winter. When the Thomases couldn't find one, they would pull into a closed lodge or service station and ask to plug in their block heater. “The owners always said yes, and many often invited us in to eat dinner with the family.” Such is the way of the North in winter: extreme hospitality.

“Kluane is the place we come to rejuvenate and restore.”

THE RIVERS

After 15 summers of guiding on the Tatshenshini River, on the outskirts of Kluane, I finally entered the park to lead a rafting trip on the Alsek River in 2006. Running roughly parallel routes and lying just 60 kilometres apart, you'd think the two rivers would be similar. They are not.

Being 60 kilometres closer to the great ice caps makes a world of difference. Temperatures are cooler, vegetation is significantly sparser. The sheer, parched cliffs rising from the riversides are strongly reminiscent of northern Pakistan.

For three days, the winds were too strong to row against, and the guides hauled the rafts downstream, in frigid, chest-deep water. Bears popped up everywhere: We saw 31 in the first eight days. The river steadily swelled and strengthened. When two-storey waves stood my rafts up on end, a 77-year-old British man in the front hollered, “This is the most fun I have had since the wife died.” Hours later, we were playing Frisbee in the scorching sun and sipping daiquiris as steaks barbecued on a driftwood fire. Before midnight, it was snowing.

The Alsek, it seemed to me, was the *Spinal Tap* of northern rivers – with the volume turned up to 11 at all times.

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