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ADVENTURES IN WHITEHORSE AND KLUANE NATIONAL PARK, YUKON TERRITORY

BY ANNIKA HIPPLE

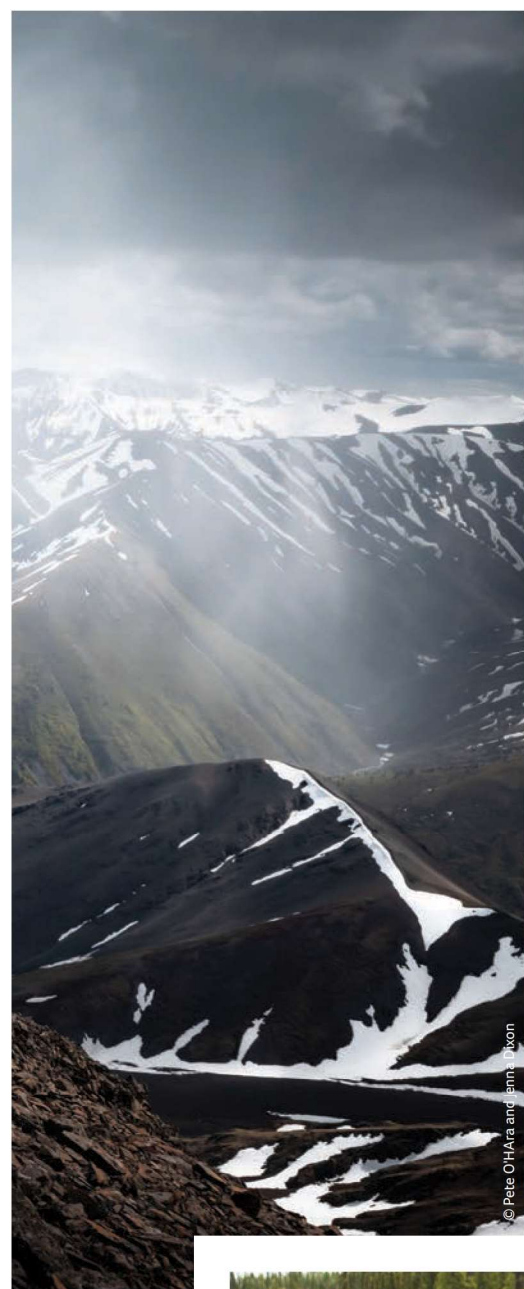
The sky is still light at 11:00 p.m. as I follow a herd of wild horses cantering along the shore of Kluane Lake, the largest lake in Canada's Kluane National Park and Preserve. It's less than two weeks after the summer solstice, and the sun won't set until after midnight here in the southwestern corner of the Yukon Territory.

I've come to Kluane from the territorial capital, Whitehorse, stopping en route for a tour of the Yukon Wildlife Preserve, a 700-acre sanctuary that offers visitors the opportunity to see and learn about moose, caribou, lynx, bison, muskox and other native wildlife.

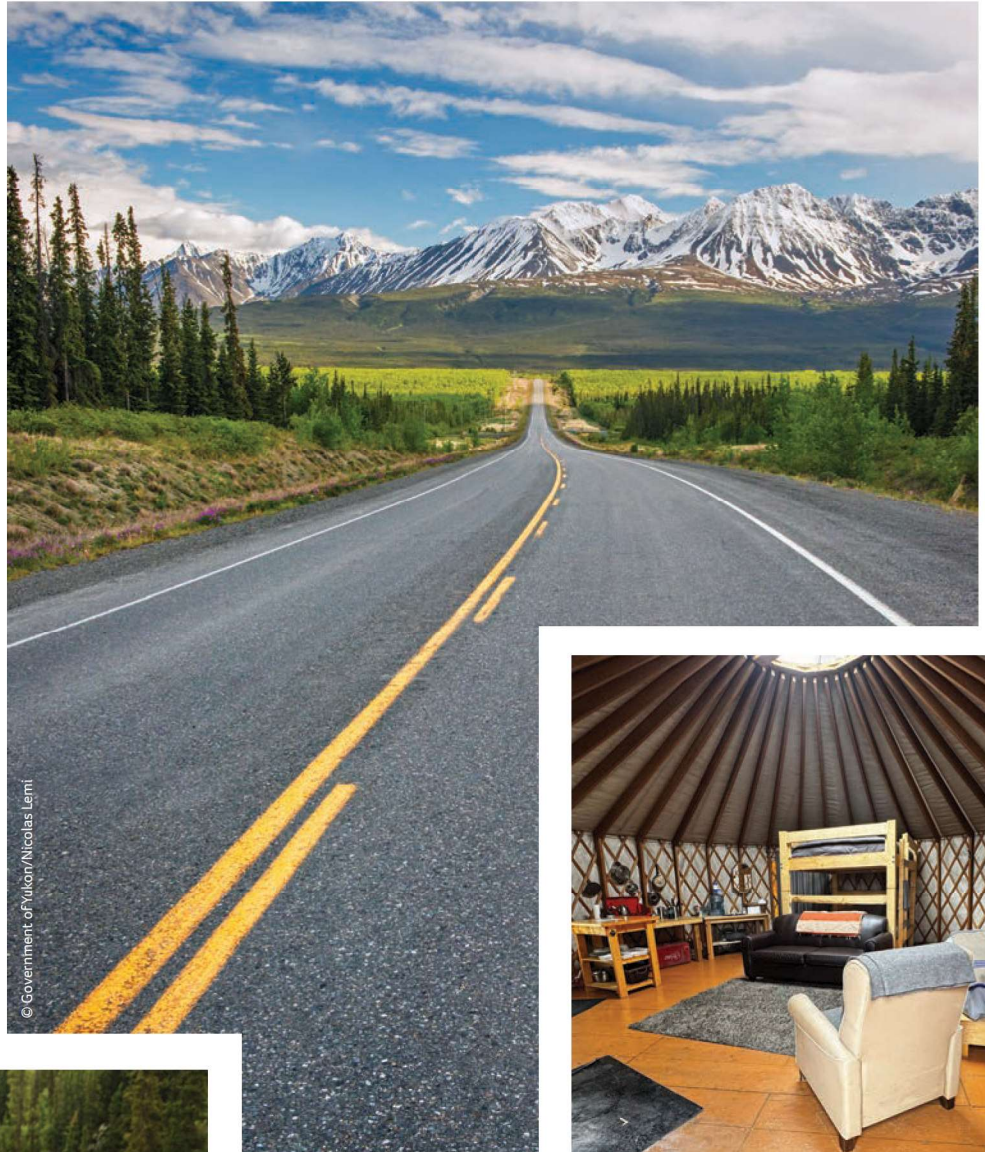
Afterward, I spend a glorious couple of hours at the nearby Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs, a cross between a Japanese onsen and a Scandinavian spa. I revel in the opportunity to soak away aches and pains in the hot springs, alternating with the enveloping warmth of various saunas and steam rooms.

I'm relaxed and renewed on the journey west along the Alaska Highway to Haines Junction, roughly 100 miles from Whitehorse and the gateway to Kluane, a vast wilderness of lakes, boreal forest, subarctic tundra and 17 of Canada's 20 tallest peaks, including the highest of them all, 19,551-foot Mount Logan.





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On the edge of town, I check into the Mount Logan EcoLodge, which, though intimate, has an eclectic mix of accommodations, from ensuite lodge rooms to more basic but cozy options including a yurt, a barrel-shaped pod and a historic Gold Rush cabin. I have time to settle into my spacious top-floor suite and admire the alpine views before descending to the ground-floor dining room for a delicious dinner.

The next morning after breakfast, lodge owner Roxanne Mason takes me into the parts of the national park that can be reached by road. Kluane has the largest grizzly population in Canada, so I keep my eyes peeled for wildlife as we drive along the Haines Road into the national park. We haven't gone far when we spot a black bear ambling along beside the road. At pretty Kathleen Lake we stop for an easy walk along a trail where an array of wildflowers contrasts colorfully with the dense vegetation and pebbly shore. Later we hike up the Rock Glacier Trail, a winding route up a mountainside covered with reddish-brown rocks deposited by a glacier that melted away.



© Matt Jacques

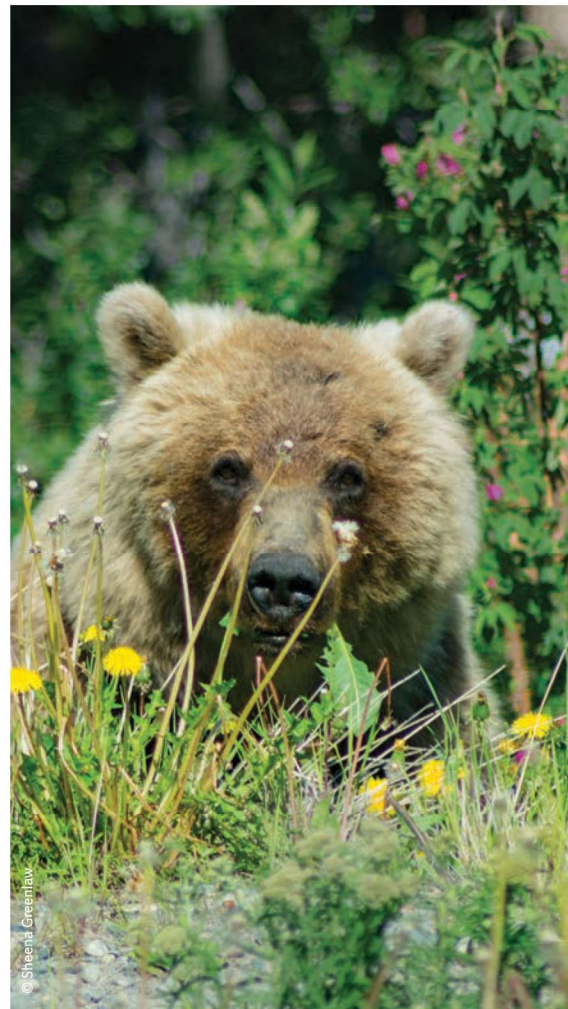
Back in Haines Junction, I enjoy a quick lunch at the Village Bakery and Deli, a popular summer gathering spot, before paying a visit to the Kluane National Park and Reserve Visitor Centre, which has informative exhibits about everything from geology, glaciology and wildlife to history and First Nations culture.

That evening at the lodge, the conversation turns again to bears. Roxanne's 20-something summer staff, Jessica from Montreal and Paul and Victor from Barcelona, mention that they have yet to see a bear. This leads to a late evening excursion back to the national park to see if we can spot this elusive icon in the lingering light. The stop by Kluane Lake with the wild horses is our last before we turn around to head back to the lodge.

On the return trip we finally get lucky. A grizzly with ragged reddish-brown fur suddenly emerges from the forest alongside the road. We're all entranced as the bear takes its time, searching for food. As it finally shuffles back into the denser vegetation, we drive on to the lodge, a happy crew after our close (but safe) encounter with Kluane's apex predator.

The next morning there's enough time for one more trip back along the park's main road before leaving Kluane. Stopping at a field of fireweed against a backdrop of snowy mountains, I take photo after photo, trying to do justice to the glorious sight.

Back in Whitehorse, I check into Yukon Black Spruce, a landscape hotel with four certified sustainable wooden studio cabins nestled in a forest. Though just off the Klondike Highway, it feels like a wilderness retreat.



© Sheena Greenaw



Before my flight home, I have time to walk the riverside trail downtown and visit two of Whitehorse's top museums. At the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre, I peruse exhibits about the ancient land bridge that once connected North America and Asia, marveling at the bones of long-extinct creatures such as steppe bison, woolly mammoths and Beringian lions. At the Yukon Transportation Museum, I discover fascinating stories of local people and events told through the lens of transportation, from dogsleds, stage coaches, and birchbark canoes to railroads, bush planes and modern roads.

As my plane takes off, I reflect on all that I've experienced in just a few days, from the larger-than-life scenery of Kluane to Whitehorse's blend of history, natural beauty and thriving small-city vibe. I've only scratched the surface of what the Yukon has to offer, but it feels like a good start. 🌟

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