



The Land of the

Olly Clayfield, Canada Specialist, spends a week travelling the Yukon River as one of the pioneers of the recently launched Great River Journey.



It is 11.30 in the evening and as the starry northern night edges in we sit around the crackling camp fire surrounded by hundreds of miles of pristine wilderness chatting, or rather listening, to the quietly spoken chief Kache, hereditary chief of the Ta'an Kwach'an, as he explains to us how his people still live off the land, retaining the integrity of their traditions and beliefs. The evening sun glints off the lake through the dozen or so spruce trees in front of us. Compared to this, squeezing a ball to relieve stress seems somewhat inadequate.

The Great River Journey, as it is officially known, is a week-long trip from the territory capital of Whitehorse, 500 miles along the Yukon River to Dawson city, centre of the 1897 Klondike gold rush. This is the first trip of its kind, providing unprecedented access to First Nations peoples, wilderness experiences and gold rush history.

We stay each night in cosy and luxurious log cabins equipped with warm comfy beds, glowing fireplaces and claw foot bath tubs. The journey takes you through the heart of the Yukon wilderness. Beautifully wild and untouched it is a warming feeling to know this landscape has barely changed in thousands of years and I am extremely lucky to be on the maiden voyage of this epic journey.

We pass through four First Nations territories and mirror the route of the stampede during the Klondike gold rush, considered the most lucrative the world has ever known to which ordinary people raced from all over the world in the hope that they would strike it rich. Today the territory has a population of around 35,000 people in an area the size of Britain. Humans are outnumbered by bear, moose, caribou, eagles and lynx by a ratio of four to one.

After two nights at Labarge Lodge we again board our boat 'Shakat'; black, long and sleek it has a striking resemblance to the Batmobile! We cruise northerly along the amazingly clear turquoise river as Kris, our excellent guide, points out everything from native trapping cabins to bald eagles perching in the trees. As I soak up the warm sunshine on the deck we pass a little black bear cub. With eyes huge like saucers he boldly looks at us as if to say "What are you?"

Soon after, we moor up at Mustuk Kennels, home of Frank Turner, a legendary Yukon dog-sled champion who lives along the way. We meet him and his 100 or so prime bred huskies and you could hear a pin drop as he recalls his incredible experiences with an infectious sparkle in his eyes. We then meet Bozo, a striking, grey-coated, sleepy looking husky lying in the shade. Over the years



MIDNIGHT SUN

Bozo has pulled Frank over 50,000 miles and now, happy in retirement, looks over the next generation of enthusiastic runners like a wise old grandfather quietly proud of what he has achieved.

We are then flown by seaplane over 90 miles of Tolkien-esque territory to our next lodge, set 3,000 feet above sea-level and 25 miles from the nearest road. Tincup Lodge is beside a lake, surrounded by thick forest and in a valley of sky-scraping mountains. This is as remote and romantic as it gets, truly a “tell the grandchildren” location. My mind drifts to my days living in my central London basement last year and being here is an incredibly liberating feeling. We spend the next two days hiking, canoeing, fishing, relaxing and eating and the wonderful food turns out to be another lasting legacy of the Yukon experience.

After five days we arrive in Dawson City and the history of the gold rush that we have been learning about is suddenly brought alive amongst the dirt streets and wooden side-walks. Dawson was nicknamed the ‘Paris of the North’ and was (and on a smaller scale still is) laden with casinos, saloon bars and dancing girls... just like in the movies. On these streets once roamed such characters as Klondike King Arizona Charley, gun-slinging bandit Soapy Smith and legendary mountie Sam Steele, the Lion of the North. On our final night we head to ‘The Pit’ where we ‘whoop it up’ to live country music bands full of violins and slide guitars, Yeeehaaaaah!

That night I sleep soundly and dream of the abundance of stories that the Yukon has provided me with in just seven days.

Olly Clayfield
Canada Specialist



Lake Laberge Lodge



Shakat



Panning for gold



The steamship Evelyn, abandoned in the 1950s

FACT FILE

An eight day trip operating June to September to the Yukon Territory including return flights and a Great River Journey cruise starts from £4,700 per person. Please call Olly on 01993 838 708 for details.

