FEATURE

Here's Your Sign to Visit the Yukon This Year

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2019 marks the 125th anniversary of the Klondike Gold Rush – an event that's being referred with the rise of Indigenous-led tourism.

For some, holidays are about escaping to a different place – and for others, they're about escaping to a different time altogether.

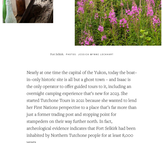
That's the lure of Dawson City, Yukon. Here, it's always 1898, the year stampeders started arriving in droves during the Klondike Gold Rush. You can play prospector and pan for gold, tour it all at **Diamond Tooth Gertie's Gambling Hall** or climb aboard the **S.S. Keno**, a historic steam-powered paddle wheeler. Here, the dance-hall girls are always fun and the miners are always weird. (If you're looking for fun and weird, head over to the **Sourdough Saloon** and try the Sourtoe Cocktail, which comes garnished with a dehydrated human toe.)

Dawson City. PHOTO: TATIANA TIGAN

In 2023 the Yukon is celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Klondike Gold Rush, and it's easy to understand why it's drawn so many in for decades. It's a story of ambition, adventure and perseverance – one that's been mythologized in Pierre Berton's books and Robert W. Service's **poems**.

It's also a story that has long been told by only one narrator. Until now, the tourism sector has focused on the settler experience, marginalizing the voices of **14 Yukon First Nations** – the same people whose way of life was forever altered by the arrival of the miners. But that's now changing with the emergence of new Indigenous-led tourism operators, who are refreshing – and reclaiming – the story of the Yukon and its gold rush.

"People are yearning for more First Nations history," first-time Lunar Mission **Tinthorne Tours** tells me as we wish through **Fort Selkirk** on the banks of the Yukon River. Among newborns of purple flowered, wild strawberries and artsy-ish dozens of abandoned cabins and buildings from the turn of the century, some with furniture and trinkets from the former inhabitants still within.



Fort Selkirk. PHOTO: JESSICA WYNNE LEGGATT

Nearly at one time the capital of the Yukon, today the boar-in-only historic site is all but a ghost town – and Isaac is the only operator to offer guided tours to it, including an overnight camping experience that's new for 2023, the stated Tatchun Tours in 2021 because she wanted to lend her First Nations perspective to a place that's far more than just a former trading post and stopping point for stampeders on their way further north. In fact, archeological evidence indicates that Fort Selkirk had been inhabited by Northern Tutchone people for at least 8,000 years.

"I share stories about the people who lived in these buildings, who they were and what connections they have to my community," says Isaac.

Grassroots tour operators aren't the only ones rewriting the script. In Dawson City – the site of seasonal fishing camp used by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in centuries prior to the arrival of the miners – Parks Canada is also refraining how it delivers programming.

"Traditionally, we told the story of the gold rush through the eyes of the stampeder, which was predominantly male and white," says Janice Cliff, Visitor Experience Manager for Parks Canada in Dawson City. "Our storytelling was out of date."

Dawson City Cultural Centre. PHOTO: PETER MATHER PHOTOGRAPHY

Visiting an exhibition on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) at Dawson's **Dawson City Cultural Centre**, emphasized Cliff's existing belief that she had a "moral obligation" to make changes. It was odd to activate 79, she says, that gave her permission to do so: it calls upon the government to amend the Historic Sites and Monuments Act to include First Nations, Inuit and Métis representation.

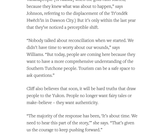
Her team began consulting with elders, hosting community workshops and combing through historical documents, including letters between Anglican Bishop William Bompas and Inspector Constantine of the North-West Mounted Police, which discussed the "problem" of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in.

The result is Parks Canada's new "Red Serge, Red Tape" interpretive program, which takes a critical look at the impacts of colonial government on the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, who were displaced five kilometres downstream by the influx of newcomers. But while the tour runs daily during the summer months, it's not the first to sell out.

"It's a tough sell," concedes Cliff. "People are on vacation. They're not really looking to get top over the head with a hammer about reconciliation."

Even for visitors who are ready to engage, it's easy to get lost in a glamorized version of gold-rush history that's pervasive throughout the territory. In my hood in **Whitehorse**, a statue of a gold miner dominates the lobby, even though I'm more than 300 kilometres from where the action took place. And in the airport's departure lounge, historic photos of steerhouses, mitons, fur traders and RCMP line the walls. In them, nearly every face is white.

All this, for a period that only lasted four years. By 1899, the gold rush was over. Considering that the Yukon's history stretches back to the last ice age (carbon dating of the Bluefish Cave indicates that human habitation of North America may have started here 24,000 years ago), it feels incredibly limiting. But, as I learn, sometimes change starts with the glimmer of something small – not with a stampede.



Long Ago Staples Place. PHOTO: JESSICA WYNNE LEGGATT

On a hot July day, I follow a road lined with purple vetch and yellow lupine to the village of Champagne Landing (pop. 22), about halfway between Whitehorse and Haines Junction. It's home to **Long Ago Peoples Place**, a recreation of a First Nations village that was built in 1990 by Mena Williams and her partner, Harold Johnson.

For over 25 years, they've been sharing how their ancestors lived off the land – and about how the arrival of the fur traders and stampeders changed their way of life. ("The Has people gave all their legends to the upper Tanana people [of Alaska] when the gold rush started, because they knew what was about to happen," says Johnson, referring to the displacement of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in in Dawson City.) But it's only within the last year that they've noticed a perceptible shift.

"Nobody talked about reconciliation when we started. We didn't have time to worry about our wounds," says Williams. "But today, people are coming here because they want to have a more comprehensive understanding of the Southern Tutchone people. Tourism can be a safe space to ask questions."

Cliff also believes that soon, it will be hard truths that draw people to the Yukon. People no longer want fairy tales or make-believe – they want authenticity.

"The majority of the response has been, 'It's about time. We need to hear this part of the story,'" she says. "That's given us the courage to keep pushing forward."

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Guide. PHOTO: JESSICA WYNNE LEGGATT

And, as I learn spending the day with Isaac, history – even the gritty, hard-to-hear bits – doesn't have to be naturally exclusive from fun. As we walk together through Fort Selkirk, there are sobering moments, like when we enter the former Anglican rectory, but there's also plenty of laughter.

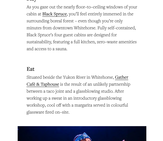
There's also some love. Over lunch beside the river, I ask if she's ever seen a ghost at Fort Selkirk.

She smiles. Last year, she tells me, she camped overnight at the site with family and friends. That night, she had a dream that scenes in long dresses were gathered around her. In the morning, she learned that one of her friends had an identical dream. Isaac believes it was a visitation from her ancestors.

"They were happy to see us here with our families," she says. "They were so happy to see that we'd come back home."

MUCH YOU GO

Yukon



Black Spruce Cabins

Stay

As you gaze out the newly-floor-to-ceiling windows of your cabin at **Black Spruce**, you'll feel entirely immersed in the surrounding boreal forest – even though you're only minutes from downtown Whitehorse. Fully self-contained, Black Spruce's four guest cabins are designed for sustainability, featuring a full kitchen, zero-waste amenities and access to a sauna.

Eat

Situated beside the Yukon River in Whitehorse, **Gaeber Café & Teahouse** is the result of an unlikely partnership between a navy pilot and a glassblowing studio. After working up a sweat in an introductory glassblowing workshop, cool off with a magnetic sewed in colourful glassware bird on-site.

A perfromer at the Adäka Cultural Festival. PHOTO: MANU KEGGENHOFF

Do

Time your visit to coincide with Whitehorse's Adäka Cultural Festival. Held annually at the start of July, the weeklong event features workshops, panels and musical performances hosted by Indigenous artists from northern Canada and the wider circumpolar region.

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LIST

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Overlooking the Thames River, Sea Containers London hotel is equal parts playful and chic. Read our hotel review.

HOTELS

Checking In: The Ace Hotel, Toronto

This warmly modernist new hotel is a hat tip to both the Canadian wilderness and design–forward Toronto.

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