

Yukon Adventure

Words and Photography by Alisa Clickenger

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Here Canadian Rockies at our fingertips.

Opposite, top Taking a break close to Chilkat Lake, North of Haines, AK.

Opposite, bottom We traveled through Alberta and British Columbia to get to the Yukon Territory.

The *Call of the Wild* is something I've harbored in my bones since a very young age. Great wilderness, vast expanses hardly touched by man, and living side-by-side with the creatures of the forest, are all ideals that speak to my soul. They must have spoken to Jack London as well, for his book of that title drew its inspiration from the very place we are headed: The Yukon Territory.

It's an overcast day as we set out, Edward on his 2004 KTM 950 Adventure and I on my trusty 2003 Twisted Throttle DR650. We're in synch as we set out from Idaho Falls. Soon on the high desert plains of central Idaho, however, it becomes clear that my 14-tooth-front sprocket is an impediment to running at KTM highway speeds. I beg indulgence from my better half, and continue at a pace I hope won't kill my much-overworked thumper's engine.

We make it to the Canadian border in an easy day and a half. The border crossing is simple with our passports, and we make a mental note to start calculating our speeds in kilometers instead of miles per hour. We enjoy the well maintained roads, and arrive at Radium Hot Springs in under three hours.

We settle in at the campground, and there are bear signs everywhere: How to camp in bear country; How to dispose of your food in bear country; What to do if you see a bear; What to do if you are attacked by a bear. Silly me, until that moment I hadn't considered what motorcycle camping in bear country might really mean.

Clever guy that he is, Edward takes my focus off the bears by suggesting we go have a nice relaxing evening at the hot springs. It's a pleasant distraction. The hot springs themselves are the largest in Canada, and give a nice soak at 103°F. The scenery is spectacular, nestled in a narrow chasm with the Kootenay mountains rising precipitously right in front of our eyes.

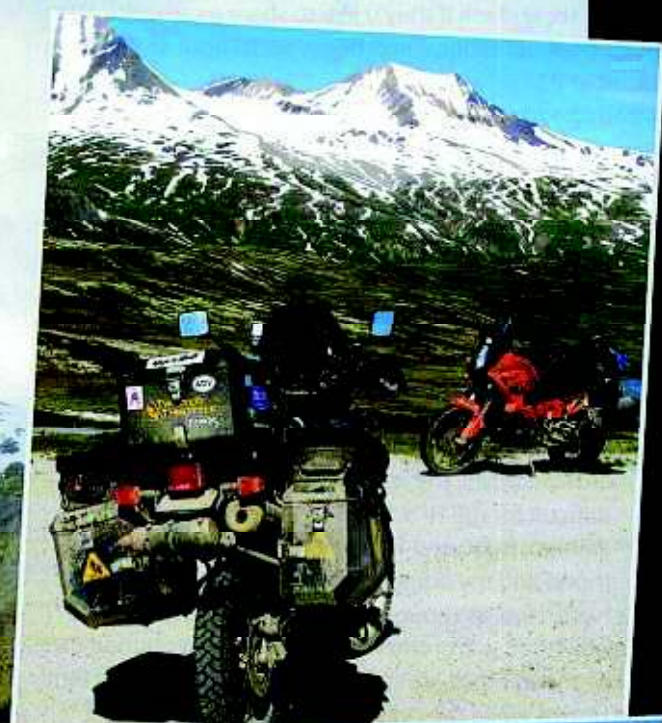
The bears are re-remembered back at the camp site. Edward gathers up all our foodstuffs and hangs them in a tree. When we finish brushing our teeth, he suggests we spit closer to the neighboring campsite rather than in ours. In the close dark of the tent, I get a lesson in bear spray. When terrified by a bear, I'm told, try not to shoot this stuff into your own eyes.

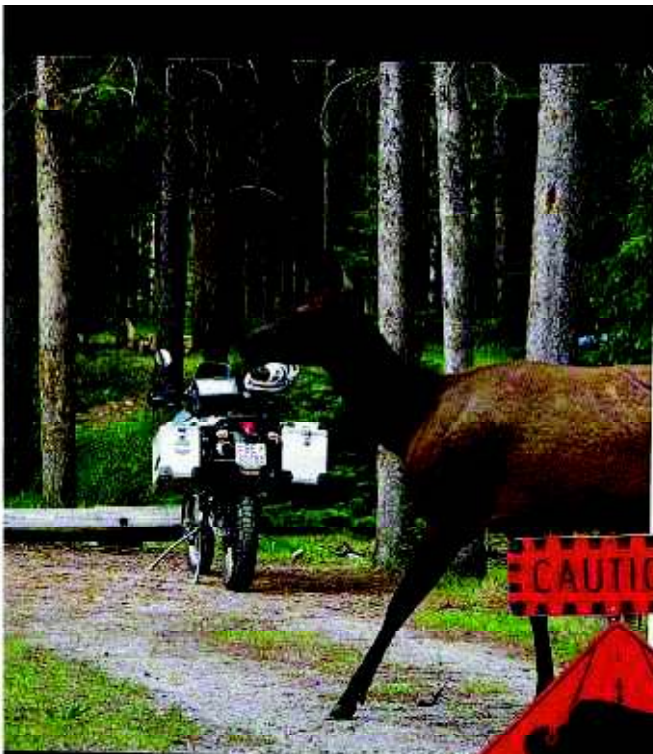
We suffer no bear scares in the night, and the next morning we stop in town for a gas station breakfast. Omelets, coffee and juice for both of us total \$32 US. Yikes! Filling up the fuel tanks costs us another almost five dollars per gallon. I realize I grossly underestimated my budget for this trip.

I forget the bears as we chase each other through the sweeping roads in Kootenay National Park. There's green everywhere and the road is well paved. We see some deer grazing, yet this does not slow our speeds through the sweeping curves. We pass a great many of the ubiquitous RVs, and settle into the brisk pace my 650 will allow.

A wind picks up as we briefly visit Lake Louise and take the standard tourist pictures, then we head to the Icefields Parkway. The jagged peaks lining the valley are still clad in snow. There is no communication through the headsets as our heads pivot from side to side taking it all in. Luckily the road itself takes little concentration as it ambles through the valley.

The Columbia Icefield is the centerpiece of the Parkway. One of the largest accumulations of snow and ice south of the Arctic Circle, it straddles the Continental Divide. The Icefield is about 20





square miles in area and feeds eight major glaciers. We ride another 150 miles along the Parkway, the Canadian Rockies dramatically filling our senses as well as our memory cards.

Elk in the road at twilight bring us to our senses, and we decide to stop for the night in Jasper. There is a long line to check into the state campground, and we worry we will not get a spot. I approach a group of motorcyclists in line ahead of us, and ask if they'd like to share a campsite. We split the camping fees, pool our rations, and begin social hour at Whistlers campground site number 23.

The next morning I make friends with Brandt from a few campsites over, while Edward ferries a fellow with a broken motorcycle into town.

Brandt decides to ride his Suzuki Katana with us a bit, since we are all headed North. His manner is easy and we enjoy his company.

Riding through the Jasper National Park we begin seeing numerous black bears along the road, which is exciting for me (while on the motorcycle). I am a master bear spotter, and I call them out two, sometimes three at a time. It is a fun game, oddly disconnected from the fact that I'll be worried sleeping among them again come night.

Actually, sleep is now an issue for me. The further north we travel, the less "night" there is. It is acutely difficult for me to drift off to sleep with that eerie all-night light, and the lack of sleep is affecting my mood and my riding. I am sure it affects my reflexes as well. I feel as though I am slowly going insane.

Speaking of going crazy, I have not yet mentioned the bugs. The mosquitoes are so bad that we tag-team the tent exits. One unzips while the other dives. We then spend the next ten minutes joyously killing all the unwelcome visitors that have managed to get in. We break camp in full motorcycle gear—including helmets—just to protect ourselves from the airborne terrorists. I become a prisoner of our tent while not riding.

We stop to stretch our legs in Watson Lake at the famous Sign Forest,



Above We wake to elk foraging in the campground in Jasper.

Right We indeed see several small herds of buffalo.

Below The Sign Forest in Watson Lake is a testament to the variety of travelers through here.





and miraculously there are no mosquitoes. The sign forest has been collecting hometown signs since 1942, when Carl Lindley, a homesick GI, first tacked up a sign pointing towards his home. Now more than 70,000 other signs join his. Markers of the important things in people's lives, some signs are funny, some signs are poignant, and all are delightful.

We stock up on gas and supplies, and set off north again this time on the Alaska highway. Also known as the AL-CAN highway, the road connects mainland USA and Alaska, through Canada. The road is paved, except where there's construction, which is considerable given the climatic conditions of the region plus the short season for repairing the roads.

This particular morning I have great trouble getting my motorcycle to start. Is it my imagination, or has my bike been running inconsistently? It's hard to tell. We aren't at altitude, so it isn't the air/fuel mixture, but that is what

it is acting like. I have no choice but to keep moving forward, despite my concerns.

Soon the scenery takes my mind off my bike. There are immense piles of rocks forming long gravel caterpillars alongside the road. The landscape is barren, as if it has survived a catastrophe. Turns out it has survived a calamity: mining. The entire area around Dawson City has been dredged for gold.

The way a dredge works is that it scoops up soil in front, sifts it inside the dredge, pulls out the gold, and then spits the tailings out the back. Even though the dredging stopped in the 1960s, the area still holds the indelible imprint of mining in the form of long gravel worms snaking over the landscape.

The Gold Dredge #4 in Dawson City is the largest wooden hull dredge in North America. One of two dozen dredges that worked the area and left

those gravel tailings. Parks Canada has refurbished it, and now conducts tours. Pretty impressive that the five-story behemoth actually floated, digging its own moat as it worked. The noise must have been terrific as it chewed up the countryside.

Speaking of awful noises, my motorcycle is now making a few of its own. I am glad we are just outside Dawson City where we'll spend a few days at the annual Dust to Dawson event. Adventurers come from all over the map for the gathering, usually held the third week in June. It's close enough to the Summer Solstice and to the Arctic Circle that there is light 24 hours a day, most of which I am awake.

the free ferry at Dawson City across the Yukon River (right).



Dust to Dawson is not a rally. Organizers are adamant that it is simply a gathering of several hundred adventure motorcyclists. We attend the organized dinner on Friday night, and afterwards the games begin. The town allows us to take over the main drag. We amuse and embarrass ourselves with slow races, balloon tosses, and eating hot dogs dangling off strings all while riding motorcycles.

At midnight everyone lines up with their motorbikes, and we take a group photo. Afterwards, we eagerly await being handed our coveted "Dust to Dawson" stickers. Riders have to be present with their motorcycles on Main Street at midnight in order to be bestowed the honor.

Salvation for my cranky motorcycle comes in the form of a rider from a few campsites over. He happens to be riding a DR650 himself, and happens to have the correct tools with him. With a slight reprimand at my never considering this important bit of maintenance, he begins my lesson on how to adjust my bike's valves myself.

Motorcycle fixed, I am able to relax enough to be a tourist. Dawson City was the heart of the Klondike Gold Rush, and it's an iconic western town. From Diamond Tooth Gerties, to the Jack London House to the Robert Service Cabin, there is a lot to see. We spend hours perusing the

motorcycles lined up along Main Street and ogling accessories.

As we cross the Yukon River on the ferry from Dawson City towards the Top

"Thus begins my dedication to finding free camping."

of the World Highway, the clouds close in. The views of the endless mountain ranges are ominously narrow, yet it's still a beautiful thing to be riding the ridge along the hills, looking down into the valleys on either side. We stop in Chicken, Alaska for lunch.

Normally I consider myself a pretty hardy soul. I'll tough out hot, cold, and some rain in the spirit of adventure. But later this afternoon the rain hits us, and it never lets up. Ten. Whole. Days. Of. Rain. Because we are camping, this means there is no drying out at night. We're both in Klim Adventure Suits, so we're bone dry on the inside, but everything else we own drips water.

A hotel just isn't in the budget, so we start getting creative, and aim for campgrounds that offer a lobby or laundry room or a picnic shelter, just to be able to pack and unpack out of the rain. I am cold, I am wet, I am cranky, and I am sure I am no longer a fun travel partner.

At least I am no longer bothered by the prospect of bears or mosquitoes.

We finish our brief foray into Alaska and decide to turn towards home. We ride the Alaska Highway from Tok to Haines, taking the ferry to Skagway, which will enable us to ride the Cassiar Highway on our southbound journey. The ferry arrives at dusk, and we quickly disembark and head for a deserted piece of land, which we hope will offer free camping.

Dyea Road takes us around Nahku Bay, and dead ends at the river that feeds the bay. This we saw on the GPS—a tiny strip of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park which we interpret as available for free camping. We set up camp in the rain, of course, struggling to find spots in the sand where the bikes will stay upright.

Thus begins my dedication to finding free camping. Soddan and miserable, the miser in me decides I no longer want to pay to sleep on the ground. Edward is tasked with finding parks and dead-end roads on the GPS when we are ready to rest, while I visually search for options. Our ingenuity knows no bounds, and we utilize gravel pits and decommissioned roads. We leave no trace.

We have a thousand miles to go before home, and we are enjoying every curve of British Columbia's Route 99's twisty roads. I am following Edward, and pushing the motorbike hard to keep up. There is a truck ahead of me on a big hill.

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I shout "do you smell smoke?" in the headset, then I look down and see my left pant leg covered in oil.

Drat! I immediately pull over, and once stopped my bike smokes like crazy. Edward circles back to see what has become of me, and is relieved to see that I am okay. I am calmly contemplating the situation, which irritates Edward. He asks, rather annoyed, "Well, what are you going to do now?" Annoyed back at him, I toss him a comment not fit to print, then huff to the side of the road and insolently say "I'll hitch-hike."

My technique is simple, and obviously brilliant, because when the third truck goes by (I only stick my thumb out for trucks), the driver actually stops. As luck would have it, the driver is a contractor headed to Vancouver, and is willing to haul my sorry oil-soaked self and motorbike along. Edward follows on the KTM.

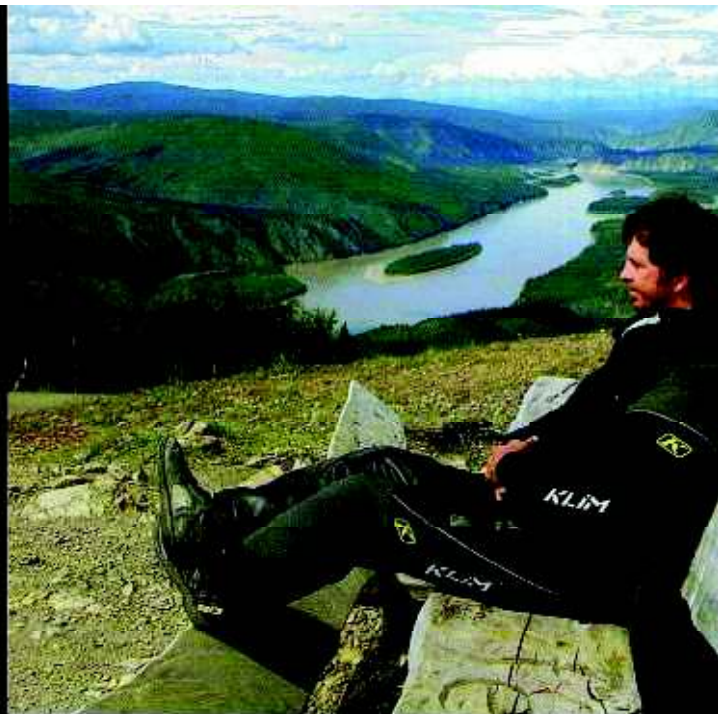
Inspiration strikes when we stop at my rescuer's shop. I post to the ADVrider.com forum saying that my bike is broken down, list the mechanical symptoms, and ask for potential causes. I am amazed to find that by the time I am unloaded in Vancouver two hours later, there are already five responses to my post in the motorcycle forum.

Another rescuer picks me up in Vancouver, and hauls me and my oil burping motorcycle all the way down to Seattle. The kindness of strangers never ceases to amaze me.

In Seattle our friend Tim gives us a place to stay, including the handyman hookup for my bike. I am tasked with cleaning the bike so we can diagnose it. Once the bike is clean, I remove the gas tank, and discover that in my valve-adjustment lesson, I neglected to tighten the engine caps sufficiently. I'm lucky, and I learn important lessons in motorcycle maintenance and proper roadside diagnostics.

The trauma of my motorcycle breaking in such an effusive way has distracted me from the realizing we are back in civilization. I find this shocking, but acceptable. For the moment the call of the wild within me has been answered, although I'm sure that soon it will beckon to me once again.

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Above Camp snugly next to the Yukon River.

Top The Yukon River, which brought most of the gold prospectors to the area.

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