

An aerial photograph of a vast, open landscape, likely in the Northwest Territories of Canada. The terrain is a mix of dark, rocky ground and lighter, sandy or silty areas. A prominent, winding river or stream flows through the center of the image, creating a meandering path. The river's banks are irregular and eroded, suggesting a dynamic environment. The overall tone is muted, with earthy browns, greys, and blacks, giving it a stark and remote appearance.

# OUT IN THE OPEN

A trip through Canada's remote Northwest Territories showcases the region's starkly beautiful landscapes and the Indigenous communities whose stories and ways of life have become newly accessible to travelers

By **Sophy Roberts** Photographs by **Chris Churchill**



A Northwest Territories water system as seen on the flight from Yellowknife



Clockwise from top: Inuvialuit dog musher Bruce Noksana; a boat waits out the winter, riverside; Destiny, a teenager in the village of Aklavik; a Swedish military vehicle from Hägglunds, used at Namushka Lodge; Gerry Kisoun wears traditional handmade gloves



# IN

the autumn of 1897, after gold was discovered in the Klondike, my English great-grandfather rode out from a cattle ranch near Edmonton, Alberta, to make his fortune. It was late in the season. He traveled with three Americans, eight pack ponies, a Winchester rifle, a tin billycan for tea, a Dutch oven for making bread, a goatskin coat, and a few light mining implements. But the snowfall was heavier than expected, which made the ground treacherous for the horses. When his companions decided to sit out the winter with some fur trapping, my great-grandfather sold his share of the ponies for sled dogs and hired an Indigenous tracker instead. His pace picked up, but the weather deteriorated. When supplies got dangerously low, he suggested to his tracker that they eat the dogs. Eventually, he was forced to return to England empty-handed. His diary, however, survived.

My great-grandfather's account of his journey is one of the reasons the geography of northern Canada interests me: not just his descriptions of yelping huskies and crusted snow, but also the stories of Indigenous people who possessed the knowledge my great-grandfather lacked to survive. This idea jibes with *Stories of Canada*, a new national initiative that seeks to draw more attention to the country's Indigenous cultural traditions and tour operators, as well as to some of its lesser-known areas, including Manitoba and Nunavut. The project was spearheaded by Marc Telio, founder of the Canadian travel outfitter *Entrée Destinations*, in partnership with regional tourist boards, the federal government, and Indigenous community leaders. Among the 20 tours offered was a winter journey into the Northwest Territories. I wondered if I might see the boreal wilderness my great-grandfather had recounted.

Telio sent instructions to pack light. Winter weather gear would be supplied upon arrival in Yellowknife, the starting point for the trip and one of the world's best locations to see the northern lights. But this would be more than a bucket list experience of a winter wonderland under a celestial spill. The trip was born of the moral necessity to understand the injustices of colonial abuse. My great-grandfather may have acknowledged the Indigenous guide who saved his life, but left unsaid was the question of whose gold he was coming to get. As a modern Canadian with sway in the tourism industry, Telio saw an opportunity to confront such injustices. "I want to put the conversation into the room, which creates healing as well as a way to share the Indigenous culture," he told me.

Telio was alluding to the enduring consequences of the Indian Act of 1876, the legal framework Canada used to systematize racism and facilitate the "assimilation" of its First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. The act encouraged policies that the official Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada acknowledged, in 2015, amounted to "cultural genocide"—a history contemporary Canadians are only just beginning to reckon with: the destruction of Indigenous forms of

government, the expropriation of traditional lands, the creation of contained "reserves," the erosion of Indigenous hunting rights, and the invention of residential schools for children forcibly taken from their families. The effects endure in the loss of languages and the residual trauma of generations of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Between the 1870s and the 1990s, an estimated 6,000 Indigenous children died or disappeared. For Canadians, the question of what really happened—and who gets to tell these stories—is acutely sensitive.

"It's going to be hard for you," said Winfred Gatsi, the Zimbabwe-born tour operator and driver who picked me up at Yellowknife airport: "The Indigenous people say it's easy to talk to me, because they see similarities with the African story of colonization. There's an intergenerational distrust. It's been a history of exploitation." But that mentality is changing, according to Keith Henry, president and chief executive officer of the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. "Tourism can be an incredibly powerful industry to help our communities reclaim their culture. It allows our people to tell the true history and story of this country, on our terms, rather than some museum curators who have decided to reposition history as some sort of glorious adventure." Henry prefers the term "revitalization" to "reconciliation" because the latter implies that Indigenous people share responsibility for their own history of oppression. He spoke of how tourists need to know enough to be able to discern between cultural truth and superficial pastiche. "You'll never see a mass tourism effort by us," he said, "because it's not what our communities want."

**My first night in Yellowknife** I barely slept—a combination of jet lag and restless hope for a glimpse of the aurora borealis from my bedroom window at the city's Explorer Hotel. The next morning, our 20-minute ski-plane flight to Namushka Lodge swooped over forest dotted with inkblot pools and scrawled with tightly folded S bends of river. I wondered what lay within the expanding wilderness: the sacred sites, oral histories, and seams of gold that early prospectors like my great-grandfather came to excavate.

We landed in front of the lodge. Owned by Joseph and Elise Chorostkowski, it felt more like a homestay than a hotel. The lodge was on Harding Lake, pricked with islands dressed in showy hats of spruce, birch, and poplar, their leaves wrapped in folds of icy lace. The shoreline was littered with toppled trunks

blackened from wildfire, each a scratch against the whiteness. (The summer after I visited, Yellowknife was evacuated when wildfires burned a swath across the territories the size of Denmark.) We went ice fishing, peering into a hole Joseph had cored through three feet of lake ice. Among the family's photo albums, I found a 1985 newspaper clipping about a houseguest who'd ventured out alone wearing two cameras and a blue jacket, never to be seen again.

Yet as isolating as this place can be, life can blossom along the lakefronts, even in the cold of winter. We returned to Yellowknife on Sunday, and folks were out on the water barbecuing hotdogs with their kids, their cheeks glowing apple-red from inside fur-trimmed parkas. Others were ice fishing, taking cover from the biting wind in candy-colored shacks that can be rented for the day. In nearby Dettah, a four-mile ride from Yellowknife, we encountered a gathering of young people from the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. According to Donna Lee Demarcke, chief executive officer of Northwest Territories Tourism, members of the Dene First Nation live among the 33 Indigenous communities across the area. "When you use the word *European*, there are many different cultures within that collective noun," she said. "It's the same here with the Indigenous people."

I entered a roomful of teenagers competing in Hand Games, an Indigenous form of gambling traditionally played for furs, dogs, and toboggans. Among the thick buzz of drums, flirting teenagers, and talkative parents, I chatted with councillor Bobby Drygeese, a descendant of multiple Dene First Nation chiefs, who is responsible for the governance and administration of Yellowknives Dene First Nation affairs. He is also the owner of B. Dene Adventures, a tourism and cultural awareness camp that teaches visitors about his people. "Tourism is a positive thing for the Northwest Territories, but we have to set limits," he told me. "I have to seek permission to impart Indigenous knowledge from my parents. The sacred places remain very private. We don't want to bring people into our spiritual sites for them to pinpoint them on Instagram."

That evening, we took a late-night trip to see the northern lights at Aurora Village, a slickly organized Indigenous-owned tourism operation at a lakeside location 20 minutes from Yellowknife. On a busy winter night, as many as 450 visitors are bussed in, warming up with hot chocolate and cookies in the camp's luxury teepees. The showing was undeniably magnificent, the midnight dome transformed by bil-

lowing smudges of light. But I wished I could connect more deeply with the mystery of the aurora. The Dene First Nation people traditionally believe the dance of light represents the spirits of their departed loved ones. The Inuit describe the aurora as a pathway to the heavens. But I was tired and wanted to escape the chatter of other visitors, their phones held up to the sky.

**The next day, we flew** for two hours to Inuvik, the largest town in the Northwest Territories above the Arctic Circle. I was reminded of the three years I spent in remote Siberia researching a book. The landscape and its issues felt similar: the effects of forest fires, the melting permafrost revealing itself in cracks that splice through forlorn buildings, and giant plugs of tundra that collapse like soufflés. Our guide was an Inuvialuit-Gwich'in hunter-gatherer and tourism entrepreneur named Kylik Kisoun Taylor. He told stories about his grandfather, who trapped all along the coast of the Arctic Ocean. Scientists used to tag the beluga whales by shooting pins through their fins. "My grandfather said, 'Why do you do that?'" he recalled. "The scientists said, 'To find out where the beluga go.' My grandfather said, 'Why not just ask me?'"

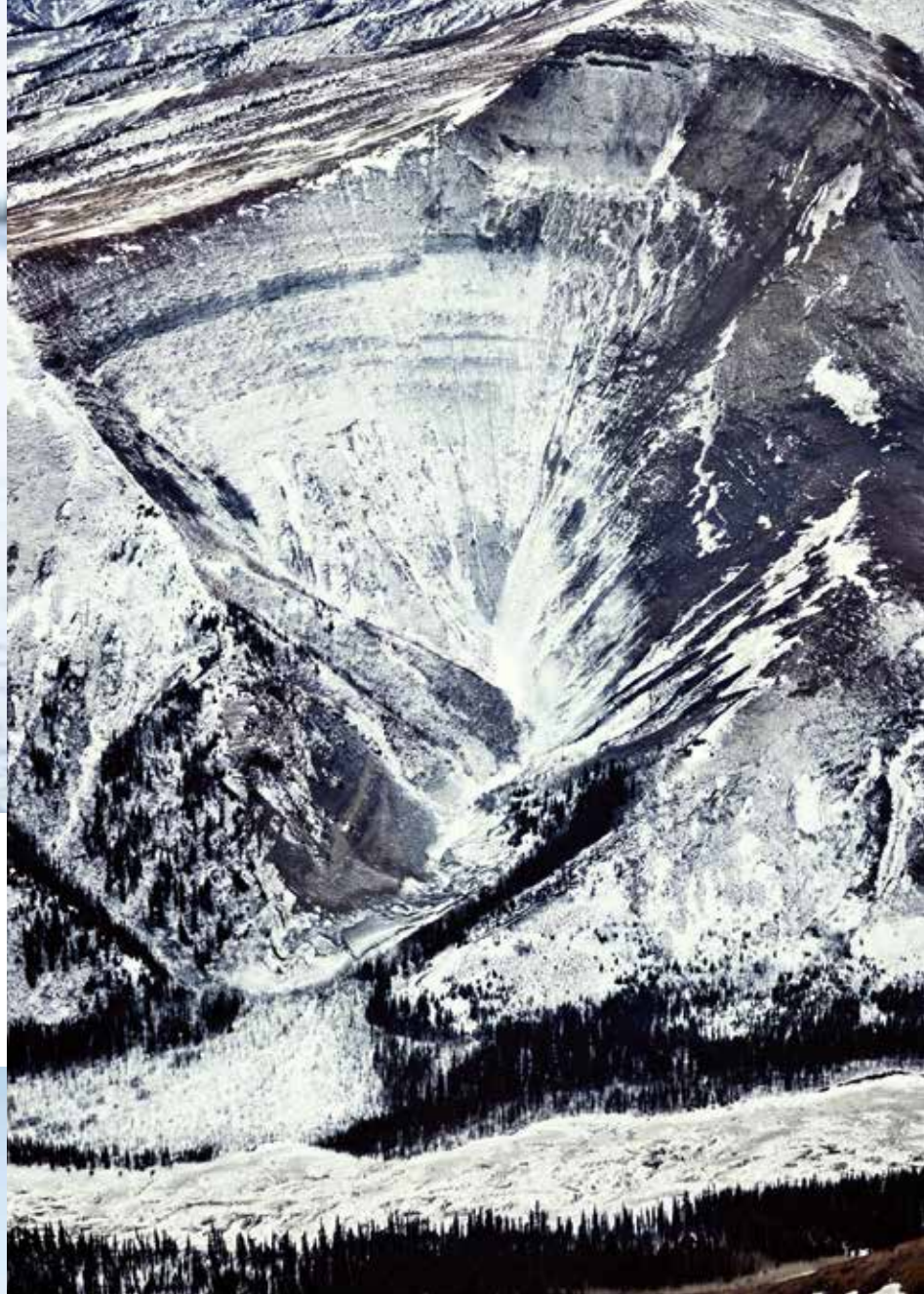
We spent an afternoon with Taylor at his cabin near the Mackenzie River in Okpik Arctic Village, a wooded camp of log cabins, teepees, and husky puppies.

## **I FELT, IN ALL THIS VASTNESS, A CONFUSING MIX OF BEWILDERMENT AND PRIVILEGE**

He told us he'd created it to teach tourists and schoolchildren the traditional bush arts of the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in. As Taylor talked, his cousin cut snow blocks for an igloo while Taylor's 14-year-old daughter showed us how to skin a beaver. Taylor's uncle, Gerry, couldn't speak Inuvialuktun, which the residential school had taken from him. But he acknowledged a shift: Although the government still put English and French first, the Canadian education system was now teaching his grandchildren Indigenous languages.

Taylor drove us from Inuvik along the blue vein of the Mackenzie River, which from December until early April becomes a 75-mile-long ice highway. Our destination was Aklavik, which Taylor loosely translated as "home of the barren-ground grizzly bear." He showed us wooden cabins that had belonged to early fur trappers and the grave of the so-called Mad Trapper, who, after murdering a policeman in 1932, survived the bush in winter for weeks until he was finally shot. In town, local kids thundered around on snowmobiles, except for one: a quiet 16-year-old named Destiny. She sang me a song she'd composed; I could hear the soulful activism in her lyrics, sung in a beautiful birdlike voice. She'd written it as a warning to her peers about the dangers of using drugs.

In all these encounters I found extreme beauty as well as seriousness, which reached its crescendo in a helicopter under the pale orb of the arctic sun. This is the only easy way to reach the Richardson Mountains in winter. We hovered above the blue irises of glacial lakes before landing on a ridge blushed pink by the strange northern light, from which we could glimpse scattering moose. Then we arced up over the tree line and entered a flat white land. Below us, the settlement



**Clockwise from top:** Guide and travel entrepreneur Kylik Kisoun Taylor; a view from a helicopter ride over the Richardson Mountains, which border the Yukon; a scene en route to the airport in the village of Norman Wells; traditional teepees at Okpik Arctic Village



of Tuktoyaktuk looked like a pointed star, as if it had fallen from the sky and lodged at the edge of the frozen Arctic Ocean.

Our host was Bruce Noksana, an Inuvialuit competitive dog musher, and his friend Michele Tomasino. Noksana offered us boiled beluga whale, which we ate in blubbery, creamy chunks at his kitchen table. We talked about the Inuvialuit-Gwich'in traditional diet, and how Indigenous people kill animals such as caribou with purpose and butcher without waste.

Noksana took us out with his dog team and snowmobiles to see Tuktoyaktuk's pingos—strange geological peaks that reach as high as 160 feet, which scientists from Cornell were busy studying. "You find them on other planets," Britney Schmidt, a climatologist, explained. "Inside, there's fresh ice water, which might be good for future astronauts to drink." At some point, we traveled out onto the ocean itself, though I couldn't be sure when I passed the threshold between land and sea.

"Look at the snowdrift," said Noksana. "The wind blows from west to east. Cross the drifts, and you can work out if you're going north or south." I gripped his waist tightly, feeling, in all this vastness, a confusing mix of bewilderment and privilege. I was in awe of this place and Noksana's ease and resilience in the landscape.

On my last night in here, I experienced the northern lights again, in absolute, grateful peace, the greens leaping above my head. A scene like this shouldn't be the only reason you visit. It's a serious place, culturally, politically, climatically, logistically. You will do good by coming here; your journey will inject dollars into the Indigenous economy. Most importantly, you will have a chance to listen to people from whom we all have so much to learn. 📍

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## HOW TO DO IT

As part of its Stories of Canada set of trips, Entrée Destinations offers eight-night Winter in the Northwest Territories tours, starting and ending in Yellowknife, from February through April. Travelers will meet with local communities and engage in activities including snowmobiling, skiing, and northern lights excursions. Trip costs include internal flights, accommodations, guides, and most meals. From \$11,795 per person; [entreedestinations.com](http://entreedestinations.com)



The northern lights in Yellowknife, seen at a pop-up camp from Trail Blazer Tours, a partner of Entrée Destinations



## ETHICAL TRAVEL

*Keith Henry, president and CEO of Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada and president of the BC Métis Federation, on how to respectfully interact with Indigenous communities*

**DO** ask about a community's true history and the impact of colonization and be prepared to listen. However, be sensitive if individuals choose not to engage.

**DON'T** arrive with preconceived notions. Indigenous people aren't homogeneous and their lifestyles are often misrepresented in TV and film.

**DO** inform communities of any previous interactions with other Indigenous people. This will show that you're invested and engaged.

**DON'T** be afraid to ask if it's okay to participate in ceremonies, meals, and other rituals the community may share with you.

**DO** support the communities by purchasing food, crafts, and other items from local entrepreneurs.

**DON'T** take photos without spending some time among the community beforehand. Demonstrate a desire to be meaningfully engaged and then ask if photos are okay.

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[indigenoustourism.ca](http://indigenoustourism.ca)