W O N D E R

Dogsledding, snowmobiling, snowshoeing: On a trip to the Yukon, writer **Debbie Olsen** experiences the beauty and bounty of Canada's westernmost territory—and learns from the locals who call it home.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Kari Medig

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At more than 62 miles long, Tagish Lake stretches from the Yukon into British Columbia. In summer, the lake is surrounded by dark green spruce and formidable gray peaks. In winter, the landscape is frozen as far as the eye can see, asleep under a blanket of downy white. I stand at the shore, and one of the few signs of civilization is the glow of lights from Southern Lakes Resort & Restaurant and its waterfront log cabins behind me.

Then there's the hockey. As I watch a game on the lake's makeshift rink, a player pauses and points. I turn to see glowing waves of green, the northern lights dancing their way across the sky. The Yukon sits directly under the auroral oval, the area surrounding Earth's geomagnetic North Pole where this activity is best and brightest; the lights shine regularly between late August and mid-April. The locals resume their competition, but I keep my eyes upward, watching the lights swirl around the stars. It feels like a window into the cosmos, a celestial postcard delivered in real time.

At 186,272 square miles, the Yukon is almost the same size as Spain, but has just one city, three towns, four villages, and some unincorporated communities for a combined population of roughly 45,000 residents. The territory also lays claim to Canada's tallest mountain, its second-longest river, and the largest nonpolar ice field in the world. Yet it remains mostly known for something else: the discovery of gold near the Klondike River and the gold rush between 1896 and 1899, which brought thousands of people and international awareness to the destination. But the Yukon's story goes back millennia, lived by Indigenous peoples.

As a Canadian, I've visited every province and territory in the country, and I'd been to the Yukon before. I'd loved what I'd experienced but still wanted more—more of its winter. Winter, after all, is legendary here. Newcomers were once called *cheechakos* until they had survived a season—jargon for "new arrivals." Winter in the Yukon is long, dark, cold, and quiet. But I'd also heard it was magical. And so in February, I traveled from my home in Alberta for a seven-day trip with tour operator Entrée Destinations. I was ready for the wonder.

THE NEXT MORNING IS even colder than the night before, and the air burns my cheeks as I walk to Tagish Lake to meet Michelle Phillips of Tagish Lake Kennel for a dogsled ride. A Yukoner from birth, Phillips greets me in a fur-trimmed parka with a warm smile and the flushed face of an outdoorswoman. Phillips is one of the region's best mushers—people who drive dogsleds—and has participated in the Iditarod race multiple times. In 2024, she won the 450-mile Yukon Quest from Whitehorse to Dawson City for the second consecutive year.

Dogs were once vital to transportation in the Yukon. Able to cross frozen rivers, navigate thick woodlands, and traverse challenging terrain, they brought supplies and communication to remote communities. In 1898, less than two years into the gold rush, there were approximately 4,000 dogs working the region. Today, sled dogs have largely been replaced by snowmobiles, but some people here still use them to get around and to show visitors the heart of the Yukon. Phillips is one of them.

The dogs bark, yip, and pull at their harnesses, eager to get going. I climb inside the basket of the sled and wrap myself in blankets. Phillips stands behind me with both hands on the sled handle and one foot on the brake; she releases it and the pack takes off. As we pick up speed, I swear some of the dogs have smiles on their faces.

We glide along, the landscape unfolding at ground level, and Phillips introduces each of the animals: Dougal, Astro, Adira, Lambo, Selene, Waylon. She explains their roles on the team and the guide commands: "gee" for right, "haw" for left, "whoa" to stop. We wind deeper into the forest, trees heavy with snow, the dogs' paws thumping on the trail. I consider how special it is to use a mode of transportation invented by Indigenous peoples and honored for centuries. When we stop for a break, the animals are tended to first. "I love the vastness of the Yukon," says Phillips, who resides near Tagish Lake on 40 acres with 65 dogs. "The light, the peacefulness, the stillness."

A few hours later, after Phillips drops me back at the resort, I find myself crossing Tagish Lake again, but this

Opposite page: During the winter, the Yukon experiences roughly 5.5 hours of sunshine each day, compared to 19 during the summer months.

Previous page: Tombstone Territorial Park protects a diverse range of flora and fauna, including around 150 species of birds.

time on a snowmobile, and this time in the opposite direction, hoping to catch the sunset from higher ground. The sun starts to slide into the horizon, making the snow twinkle orange and yellow, and I think about what Phillips said about vastness.

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YOU KNOW YOU'RE in the far north when you see signs for the Arctic Ocean. The 458-mile unpaved Dempster Highway is the only public road in Canada that crosses the Arctic Circle and is open year-round. Two days after traveling with Phillips, my Entrée Destinations group of four meets Jesse Cooke, founder of tour operator the Klondike Experience to drive the highway to Tombstone Territorial Park. As Cooke explains the day's agenda, the snow glistens off the mountains standing like sentinels along the road.

Cooke is from Ontario but has been in the Yukon since 2005. "We don't have any five-star restaurants, but I like to think that we have these kinds of five-star experiences, in the sense that you come up here and you live something real and you live something authentic," he says.

The 849-square-mile Tombstone Territorial Park was created in 2000 as part of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in land claim agreement, a modern-day treaty between the Yukon Territorial Government and the Indigenous peoples; the park lies entirely within their traditional territory. In summer, its trails and placid lakes are popular with hikers and campers. In winter, the park is a draw for snowshoeing, dogsledding, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing. Year-round, it's home to caribou, moose, Dall sheep, wolves, and grizzly and black bears.

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in call this area Ddhäl Ch'èl Cha Nän, which means "ragged mountain land," and as I strap on snowshoes and follow Cooke through the woodland, I see why. I pad past fragrant spruce, leaving racquet-shaped patterns in the snow, and feel my own insignificance. I am a small speck in a vast landscape; an ephemeral visitor in an ancient place where Indigenous peoples have lived since time immemorial. Except for the sounds of our group laughing and talking as we move along the trail, the only other noise is the flitter of gray jays through the trees. Wondering how deep the drift would be just off the trail, I remove my snowshoes and promptly sink to my waist.

From left: Michelle Phillips has twice been awarded the Iditarod's Herbie Nayokpuk Memorial Award, given to the individual who best exemplifies the spirit of Nayokpuk, a legendary Inupiaq musher.

MICHELLE PHILLIPS

is a born-and-raised Yukoner and a long-distance musher. She runs Tagish Lake Kennel and offers dogsled tours.

I started dogsledding in my late 20s when I met my partner. I went on a training run with him and noticed how incredible the dogs were, how athletic they were. When I was 31, I decided to do the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest. Since then, I've run 21 of those 1,000-mile races. I've been dragged down a mountain, dragged up a mountain on my face. I've been in storms with winds up to 80 miles an hour, and in water up to my waist. A race is never boring, that's for sure. Dogsledding as a sport is really growing, and it truly is one where men and women are equal, which is really neat.

I'll do the Iditarod next year, but maybe it'll be my last hurrah. It's hard to say. I won't stop sledding; I'll keep giving tours. I started my business 21 years ago, but my hope is the same: I hope my guests get the connection between man and animal and the love, care, and respect we have for our dogs. How much they enjoy their work.

After we reach the end of the snowshoe trek, I prepare to take in the landscapes from a different vantage point. I climb inside a helicopter, buckle my seat belt, and put on headphones to hear the pilot. Tombstone Mountain, which gives its name to the park, sparkles in the afternoon light. From the air, the "ragged mountain land" seems even more epic, and I feel my heartbeat quicken as the aircraft dips. The line of a frozen river, the dense forest, wide valleys, and steep summits stretch out seemingly endlessly. Seeing the park's scale, I have even more admiration for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in people who have thrived in this place.

The helicopter touches down outside Dawson City, once known as the "Paris of the North," partially for its grand facades and opera houses. Many of the historic buildings erected during the gold rush remain—part of a national historic site with tours offered by Parks Canada staff, who share gold rush history. In recent years, they have incorporated more information about the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. A few of us from the tour group pop by the Westminster Hotel, in operation since the 1930s, to visit "The Pit," a cornerstone community bar with a canoe hanging from the ceiling. Alongside locals, we toast to a perfect day.

IT FEELS FITTING to end my time in the territory with Jackie Olson, a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in artist and the granddaughter of Joe and Annie Henry, two legendary pioneers who lived near the Dempster Highway. (Locals call the road the "Joe Henry Highway," because he guided the surveyors who marked its route in 1958.)

As the sun streams into her Dawson City living room, Olson sits with a cat on her lap and two dogs at her feet. After traveling the world as a young artist, Olson returned to Dawson City to work on her abstract expressionist pieces, often made with bark and feathers. She has been instrumental in building its community, including championing

JESSE COOKE

is the founder and CEO of the Klondike Experience, which provides guided day tours and multiday experiences.

I've been in the Yukon for nearly 20 years. What keeps me here is the culture, the people, the lifestyle, the pace of life. It's different from any other place that I've ever been.

When I started the business in 2012, it was just me and my wife. Now we have 13 employees. We have guests from all over the world. What I love about hosting sounds cheesy, but it's true: experiencing the awe and the wonder and the beauty of the Yukon through a traveler's eyes for the first time, over and over again. I can feel the excitement, and I love it.

Most people who come to the Yukon are already searching for something off the beaten track. But for visitors, I always like to remind them to experience the place as it is. Not as you would expect it to be, or not as you wish it would be. Really as it is. Get into the communities and get into the culture.

This page, from top: Jesse Cooke first came to the Yukon as a student to study glaciology; Violet Gatensby's artwork is exhibited across Canada.

Opposite page: During winter months, visitors who spend three nights in Dawson City have a good chance of seeing the northern lights.

the designation of Tr'ondëk-Klondike, which is centered on the Yukon and Klondike rivers. In September 2023, it was named the Yukon's—and Canada's—newest UNESCO World Heritage site. With eight parcels of land in the Dawson City area, it examines the effect of rapid colonization during the gold rush on Indigenous peoples—another, different story about the Yukon.

Olson's work is part of private and permanent collections throughout the world; from the Bavarian State Collection for Anthropology in Munich to the Indigenous Art Centre in Québec. Olson is one of 10 Indigenous Yukon artists—along with Carcross/Tagish First Nation artist Violet Gatensby —whose work is now part of the Global Affairs Canada Visual Art Collection and displayed in Canadian embassies and buildings in more than 100 cities. In 2022, she was awarded the Yukon Hall of Innovators Lifetime Achievement Award for her "transformative reimagining of age-old Yukon practices as an inspired new way of creating art."

Now, Olson offers art classes centered on the willow she finds while foraging. "The more you work with willow and cut it back, the stronger [the tree] becomes," she says. "It feels like a good way of instilling care of the land." Her dream, she tells me, is to finish the cabin she's building for herself at the entrance of Tombstone Territorial Park and bring visitors there to help them learn about the Yukon, its willows, and its many wonders. "I have this really strong feeling the land is calling me home," she says.

Debbie Olsen wrote about Canada's Prince Edward Island in Afar's Winter 2023 issue. Kari Medig photographed Jordan for Afar's Fall 2022 issue.

TAKE THIS TRIP

Writer Debbie Olsen traveled with Entrée Destinations, whose "Winter in the Yukon" itinerary is offered February through April. It is one of 16 "Stories of Canada" tours that the company developed with Indigenous community leaders, the Canadian government, and regional tourism boards. The trips are designed to connect visitors to new experiences, places, and communities. "Most people who travel to the Yukon in winter go for the northern lights, but there's so much more to see and do here," says Marc Telio, owner of Entrée Destinations. "The Yukon is exhilarating." *From $7,350 per person for 7 nights.*

This page: Violet Gatensby stands in front of the Haa Shagóon Hídi Cultural Centre in her hometown of Carcross, where her carved artworks are exhibited.

Opposite page: In wintertime, Southern Lakes Resort & Restaurant in Tagish offers aurora borealis viewing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and dogsledding tours.

VIOLET GATENSBY

is a Carcross/Tagish First Nation artist who apprenticed with Tlingit master carver Wayne Price. She designed the commemorative medals used to mark the 125th anniversary of the Yukon becoming a Canadian territory in 2023.

When I first started thinking about being an artist, I was in the process of going to work in a mine. I had dropped out of high school; I needed to make money. While I was at home, I was painting. Somebody who came by to visit my dad saw my paintings and bought one right then and there. It changed the course of everything. I realized that I could make a living doing what I loved.

I went to the Individual Learning Centre in Whitehorse the very next day. I said, "I want to go to art school and I need my tenth-grade diploma. Can you help me get it?" And the person there said, "I'll help you if you promise that you're going to come back and get your full high school degree." So, I went and finished sophomore year. I got accepted into college, finished high school, and completed art school.

One moment made all the difference in the world. And I'm grateful that I was brave enough to follow that gut feeling, because now that I'm here, I would never want to do anything else.