



THIS IS THE YEAR I ...

I embraced adventure in Whitehorse, Canada's wilderness city

You don't come to Whitehorse to sit inside: exploring the outdoors is an all-season pursuit

By **Sydney Loney** Special to The Star

Fri., Jan. 20, 2023 | ⌚ 6 min. read




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 Article was updated Jan. 23, 2023

 JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Whitehorse is a capital city that feels like an olden-day outpost. When you walk down Main Street, you almost expect to pass hitching posts instead of parking meters, or to see “Saloon” emblazoned across one of the colourful storefronts instead of “[Mac's Fireweed Books](#).” (Incidentally, a stop at Mac's, which is everything you want in an independent bookstore *and* the best place in town to acquire a topographic map, is a must.)

On my first morning in Whitehorse, I get why it's nicknamed “the Wilderness City.” It is surrounded by boreal forest and windswept peaks — the highest is Golden Horn Mountain at 1,699 metres — and the fifth longest river in North America, the Yukon, rushes along its eastern edge.

Bear and moose sightings are not uncommon. I spot a herd of impressively antlered mule deer grazing beside a stoplight, and a red fox flits across my path as I head across town for some house-made granola at the [Burnt Toast Café](#).

You don't come to Whitehorse to sit inside. This is a place where, depending on the season, almost every car you pass has a canoe or skis strapped to the roof, or a trailer of bikes hitched to the back. It's a place where all the adventure you need can be found just 10 to 30 minutes from town — and adventure is precisely what I'm here for.

My first is a trail ride up Mount McIntyre on Jinx, a sure-footed bay who immediately tests my riding skills, only to discover that this isn't my first time in the saddle and I have no intention of letting him graze his way to the top. My guide is Ashley Casson, a 26-year-old former Winnipegger who came to the Yukon to hike in 2021 and returned eight months later to work at [Sky High Wilderness Ranch](#), just outside the city.

The ranch is home to 10 horses, 121 huskies and a small staff who live off the grid, guiding on horseback in the warmer months and by dog sled in the winter. As we wend our way up the mountain for a dramatic view over Fish Lake, Casson shares why she gave up Netflix to live in a cabin with just a bed, a stove, buckets for washing dishes and no Wi-Fi.

“Living off the land pushes me — physically, mentally, emotionally — but in the best way possible,” she says. “Moving here has taught me things I never thought I’d learn.” Casson arrived a vegan but now knows how to skin and cook a squirrel (boil, then fry). “It tastes like chicken,” she says.

Casson isn’t the only guide I meet who came to experience the Yukon wilderness and had a hard time leaving. Later that afternoon, as I lower myself gingerly into the bow of a canoe (my legs not yet recovered from a final victory gallop on Jinx), I meet Reuben Kikkert and Ginny Anderson, who are guiding me on a three-hour paddle down the Yukon. Kikkert is originally from Smithville, Ont., and Anderson grew up canoeing with her dad in Jasper, Alta. Now, they lead paddling, hiking and biking tours for [Terra Riders](#).

“What I love most about Whitehorse is how you can be in the city one minute and in total wilderness the next,” Anderson tells me as she expertly J-strokes us through the river’s erratic eddies. Pale sandy banks tower on either side, formed by a combination of erosion and glacial silt left behind by the Ice Age.

We spot bald and golden eagles, approaching Kikkert’s record of 20 eagle sightings in one day. He pulls his kayak to within shouting distance and explains that Whitehorse got its name from the river’s rapids, which look like the tossing manes of racing white horses. I’m more accustomed to Ontario’s quiet lakes and find being on the Yukon exhilarating.

When we reach our pickup point, I clamber out of the canoe with aches in my arms and shoulders to match those in my legs. “See you tomorrow!” Kikkert and Anderson exclaim in unison. We had planned on an evening aurora paddle, but the forecast for rain means our next adventure will be a morning hike.

There are 700 kilometres of marked trail around Yukon’s capital, including 85 kilometres of groomed cross-country ski trails. You can stay in town to walk the Millennium Trail, which takes you past the [S.S. Klondike](#) (a sternwheeler that once travelled the Yukon River, and now a national historic site), or find someone with a truck to jolt you up the winding road to the ridge of nearby Grey Mountain. I’ve opted for the latter.

“No matter where you live in Whitehorse, there are trails just outside your doorstep,” Kikkert says as we zip ourselves into an extra layer of protection from the icy wind that builds as we climb. He adds that while many trails are designed for mountain biking, including the Dream Trail that will soon run the length of the ridge, the terrain is also fantastic for fat biking.

From the top of Grey Mountain, we can see all of Whitehorse, Mount McIntyre across the valley, Lake Laberge to the north and the Yukon River threading its way through forest and mountain. We linger a moment to watch an unkindness of ravens, whirling and diving in the wind, then begin our descent.

By now I’m ready for a rest and take it easy that afternoon with a trip to the [Yukon Wildlife Preserve](#), home to more than 150 animals, including an elusive lynx, which roam 350 acres of natural habitat. You can take a guided bus tour, but I walk the easy five-kilometre loop, then treat myself to a soak at the nearby [Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs](#). Built on the site of the historic Takhini Springs, Eclipse is the first spa to combine hot spring water with a full Nordic spa experience.

As with every operation I’ve encountered, sustainability and preserving the pristine Yukon wilderness is paramount — Eclipse was built with local materials and is heated by the springs themselves. I sink into an onsen-style stone pool and gaze through the soft haze of steam over a forest of aspen, poplar and spruce. Every aching muscle relaxes as I plan the final, and most intrepid, outdoor adventure of my stay: a dip in the cold-water plunge pool.

Sydney Loney travelled as a guest of Destination Canada and [Travel Yukon](#), which did not review or approve this article.

If you go

How to get there: [Air Canada](#) operates flights from Toronto to Whitehorse (with a layover in Vancouver). [Air North](#) also offers seasonal service from Toronto to Whitehorse (connecting in Yellowknife).

Where to stay: [The Raven Inn](#) makes an ideal base camp just steps from the city’s river trails and 10 minutes from Main Street. The family-owned property offers both standard and apartment-style rooms.

Where to dine: Stop for some Arctic char tacos at [Gather Café](#) and [Taphouse](#), and stay for a glass-blowing lesson at the adjacent [Lumel Studios](#).

What else to do: At the [MacBride Museum](#), you’ll find everything from an albino moose to galleries devoted to the Gold Rush and the Yukon’s 14 First Nations communities.

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Correction — Jan. 23, 2023: *This article was updated to remove a photo that misidentified a photo of Atlin Lake in Atlin, British Columbia as being Whitehorse, Yukon.*

Read more about: [Yukon](#)

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