

The Province

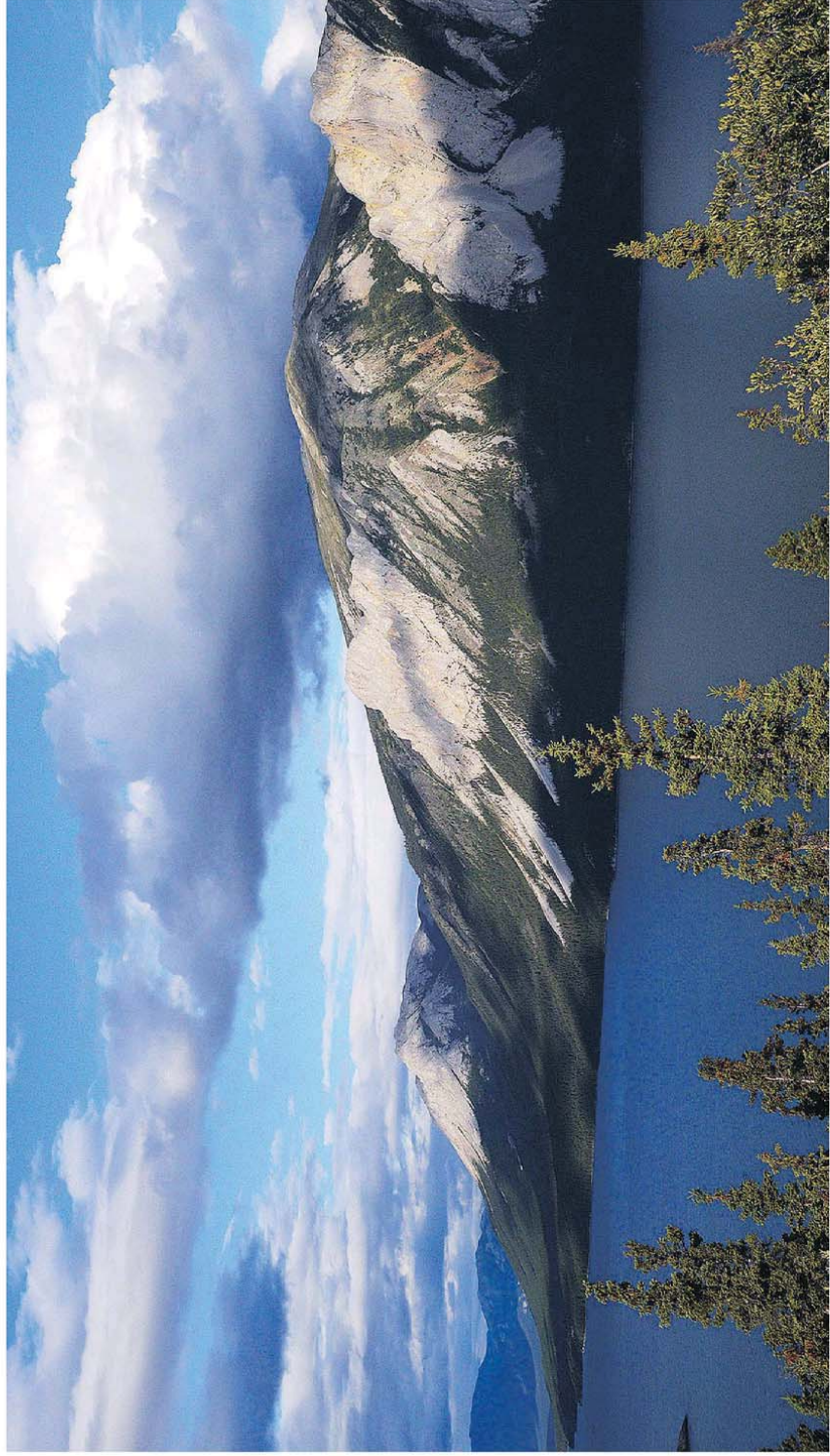
# TRAVEL

travel@sunprovince.com

## DRIVING THE **Golden Circle,** LOADED FOR BEAR

From Whitehorse over the border to Haines and Skagway and back to the Yukon through the White Pass — all with an eye out for grizzlies. **Pages B14-15**

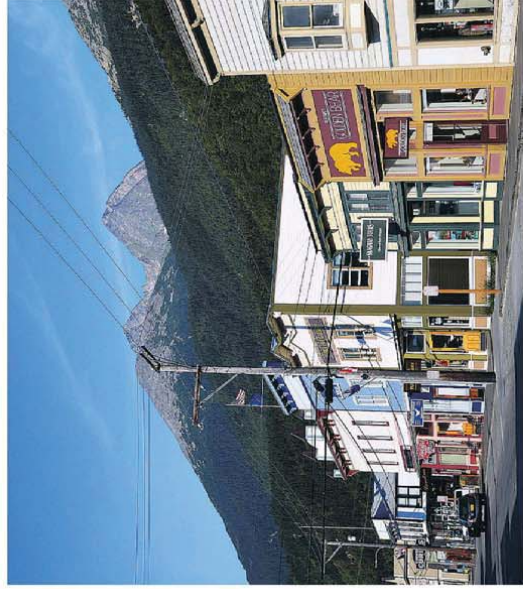
The drive from Skagway to Whitehorse is 176 scenic kilometres of good road that heads from the coast through striking mountain vistas into gold rush country. GLEN PETRIE



Tagish Lake, another scenic pull-off on the road from Skagway to Whitehorse, is a shining gem in an area that does not lack for dramatic vistas. — PHOTOS: GLEN PETRIE

# On the grizzly trail to Whitehorse

Looking for bears in Yukon and Alaska on the Golden Circle Route through White Pass



Gold rush tourism: Skagway, Alaska, gets over 10,000 cruise visitors on a typical day; Haines, near Glacier Bay National Park, gets far fewer.

**Glen Petrie**

Well shy of the 1,990-metre summit of King's Throne, my legs felt rubbery and I considered quitting. Then a German couple came bounding merrily down the trail, backs, and I felt ashamed.

"Not so far," the young dad assured me. "Not so difficult." Right. The King's Throne trek is one of the most popular day hikes in Ključane National Park, which means you may encounter a handful of other people, which in the Yukon constitutes a crowd, and many of them will be European. Why is it that so few Canadians venture north?

Getting a satisfying taste of our north is easy, and doesn't necessarily require a lot of time. My partner and I had less than a week, and on a recommendation of Whitehorse-based friends, we followed an itinerary that delivered great travel bang per kilometre: The Golden Circle Route.

"You'll see Ključane, drive a gorgeous road into Alaska, cruise on a ferry, visit Skagway and cross the White Pass you return over the mountains to Whitehorse," said my friend, who has lived in Whitehorse for years and knows the region well. "And you can do it in three or four days."

Sold. To allow time for sightseeing, hiking and wildlife viewing, we allowed five days, which in the end felt just about right. Picking up a rental car in the cool, modern Yukon capital, we drove a mere two hours to Haines Junction, a village at the edge of Ključane National Park and Reserve. We found a motel, got maps, checked the bear report (no recent sightings) and a few hours later were climbing the dizzying slope of King's Throne.

After a couple of spectacular hikes in Ključane, one of Canada's most spectacular national parks, we motored south on the Haines Highway toward Alaska, a paved majestic carpet unfurled across majes-

tic landscapes. Seldom did we pass another vehicle. A grizzly sighting was on my wish list, and a stop at pretty Dezadeash Lake seemed a good bet, since the sign declaring it bear country had been chewed and clawed to bits.

The Yukon has over 6,000 grizzlies, about one for every six humans, but alas, we saw none at Dezadeash, although they might have seen us.

Following the road into a remote finger of northern British Columbia, we stopped to admire the Tashshini River carving a canyon below the Alsek Mountain Range, then drove over a sweeping glacial plain that rose gradually to the Chilkoot Pass. The sharp, Eiger-like pyramid of The Three Guardsmen Mountain loomed ahead, and after that it was all downhill into Alaska.

Picture-perfect Haines is the end of the line, a hamlet of 2,600 surrounded by salmon-rich waters. Here, I was sure, I would see my bears.

"July is a little early," cautioned Dan Egoff of Alaska Nature Tours, whom we hired to take us to the best bear-viewing sites. "Late August and early September you see bears all over." When the salmon run in the Chilkoot River, it's possible to simply stand on the roadside and watch brown bears fishing just metres away. Alas, Dan was right. On hot July day, there wasn't an ursus arc-tos in sight.

We did see lots of eagles. The Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, just up the road, sees more than 3,000 eagles gather each November to gorge on spawning chum, and there are plenty of the raptors around Haines at any time of year.

Intent on seeing a bear, I cheated and booked a visit to rustic sanctuary called Kroschel Wildlife Center, which nurtures orphaned or injured animals brought in by Parks Service officers. To earn their keep, Kroschel's critters sideline as movie and TV stars.

We got chummy with a whole ark of native animals: caribou and moose (kissable, if you dare), a really beautiful lynx, wolves, foxes, a wolverine, a porcupine and yes, a grizzly bear. Her name is Kitty, and she inhales a blueberry pie with one snort, the privilege of being a film siren.

We then moved on to Skagway aboard the Alaska Marine Highway ferry Columbia, a delightful one-hour mini-cruise on the icy green waters of Lynn Canal.

If Haines charms with its lack of touristic chicanery, Skagway does not. Our ferry docked beside massive cruise liners that disgorge up to 10,000 passengers a day in a town of just 900 residents. Skagway is part of the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, its main street a re-creation of the days of 1898. Most of the historic buildings are now souvenir shops, and most of them are owned by the cruise lines.

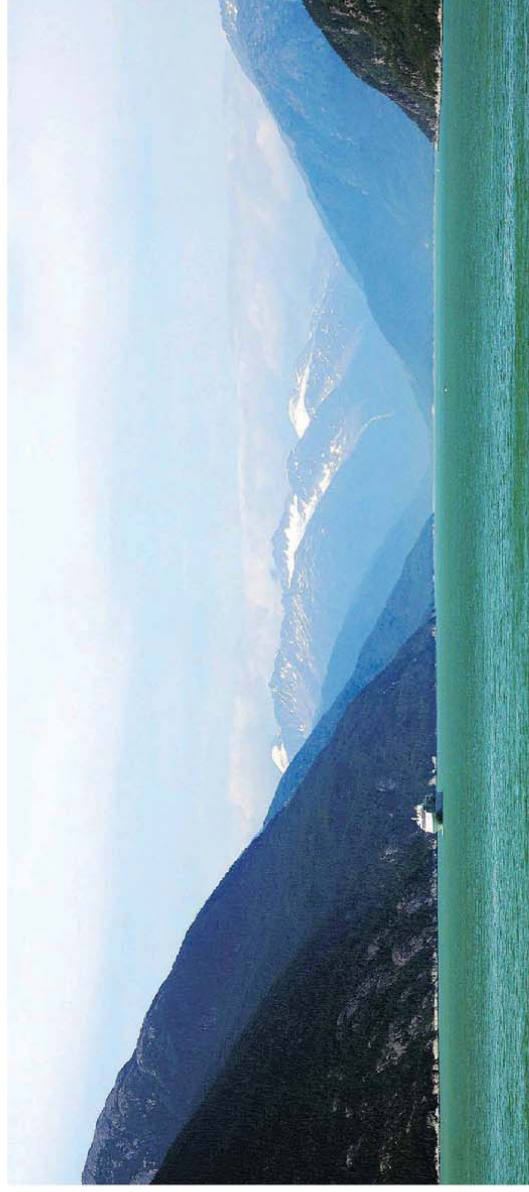
From here, prospectors once braved the brutal Chilkoot Trail over the mountains to reach the gold fields of the Yukon interior. We took a shortcut — the White Pass and Yukon Route Railway.

Initially deemed an engineering impossibility, the line opened for business in 1900 just as the gold rush was coming to an end. It was resurrected in 1968 to serve the growing cruise trade. From the rear platform of an antique car (#244, "Lake Emerald" built in 1883), I watched as the train shuddered on narrow-gauge tracks up steep grades and leaned around sharp bends. We passed Harding Glacier, Bridal Veil Falls, bridges and trestles and tunnels, and hissed to a stop at the summit, 873 metres above the ford, in icy rain. I was thankful we hadn't hooded it.

On the final leg back into Canada en route to Whitehorse, we simply had to stop to admire the vista of Bove Island rising out of the Yukon's Tagish Lake, and again at Emerald Lake to see its supernaturally vivid green and blue waters. Then, it was



The White Pass and Yukon Railway crosses a trestle over the Skagway River. Completed just as the Klondike gold rush ended in 1900, the line was once considered an engineering impossibility, but was reactivated in 1988 to serve cruise line passengers — PHOTOS: GLEN PETRIE



Cruising up Lynn Canal toward Skagway. Once the jumping off point for the gold rush, Skagway is now a souvenir stop for cruise lines.

**"If Haines charms with its lack of touristic chicanery, Skagway does not."**

**If you go**

on to Carcross (as in Caribou Crossing), a thriving Carcross/Tagish First Nation community where you can find, of all things, a sand desert. And then... Wait! Stop! A bear!

We hit the brakes just in time to see a hefty specimen off the shoulder. He sniffed the air, turned and waddled his big grizzly butt into the brush. I was so thrilled I could hardly bear it.

**For more information:** Yukon Tourism, [travelyukon.com](http://travelyukon.com); Ključane National Park and Reserve, [pc.gc.ca](http://pc.gc.ca); Haines Convention & Visitor Bureau, [visithaines.com](http://visithaines.com); Alaska Nature Tours, [alaskanaturetours.net](http://alaskanaturetours.net); Skagway Convention & Visitor Bureau, [skagwayway.com](http://skagwayway.com); Alaska Marine Highway System, [dot.state.ak.us/amhs](http://dot.state.ak.us/amhs); White Pass and Yukon Route Railway, [wpyr.com](http://wpyr.com); Tourism British Columbia, [hellobc.com](http://hellobc.com); Alaska, [travelalaska.com](http://travelalaska.com).

Westjet, Air Canada and Air North fly daily to Whitehorse from Vancouver.