

# THE LOWDOWN

GO HERE

## Kluane National Park & Reserve

**IN THE SHADOW OF THE CONTINENT'S HIGHEST PEAKS AND EDGING SOME OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST ICE FIELDS, CANADA'S BEST HIKING TRAILS AWAIT**

By David Webb

“**W**hat does this smell like?” queries our guide, Brent Liddle, as he picks a ball of spruce pitch off a tree that is dripping in the stuff and holds it to my nose. I feel like a school-kid called in front of class.

“Vapo-Rub?” I respond, receiving a Gold Star from today’s teacher.

Liddle, a retired Parks Canada Interpreter, explains that spruce pitch, when dropped into a pot of boiling water, has the same effect as menthol for clearing one’s sinuses. It also treats minor abrasions like aloe vera. The trees themselves use it to flush out spruce beetles; hence why the infested specimen before me resembles a melting candle. I’m only a few kilometres along a day-hike into Yukon’s Kluane National Park & Reserve and already I’m engrossed in a five-sense Northern Learning Experience.

Liddle, three others (from Germany, Montreal and Whitehorse) and I trod upslope on Auriol Trail, a 15-km hike that serves as a brief introduction to Kluane. At 21,980 sq-km, it’s fair to say Kluane has a lot of room to roam. Of course, that’s failing to take into consideration the entire UNESCO World Heritage Complex of which it is a part. This multiplex combines parks in Alaska, Yukon and BC to create a near-100,000-sq-km tract of internationally protected land. So, providing you pack your passport, a trip to the Kluane/Wrangell- ▶





Hiking Outpost  
Mountain in Kluane  
National Park.



Hiking Auriol Trail in vibrant fall foliage.

St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Elsek UNESCO World Heritage Complex will give you access to a wilderness preserve about the size of South Korea.

As the tiniest sample of this land, popular Auriol Trail, accessed from the Alaska Highway seven kilometres west of Haines Junction, leads hikers past moose bogs, over mountain streams, through robust Arctic flora and to the fringe of the alpine before looping and descending the 370 metres it climbed. An optional two-kilometre offshoot midway leads to an alpine-set scenic viewpoint; fuel up with a handful of trailside moss berries or red currant for this steeper leg. Auriol Trail is not just a good day-walk — a backcountry campsite halfway along is an excellent hub for local exploration. Mountains in the Auriol Range alone could provide a season's worth of scrambles; Quill Peak is a particularly sought after route in the area.

Liddle knows all of the best trails in the park — a smattering of its “untold mountain ridges to explore.” From memory, he lists hikes such as Alsek Trail, which holds spectacular glacial features and remnants of historical flood-

ing. Cottonwood Trail to Goat Creek, a short hike that can continue to a four-night, 88-km epic if one so desires, as well as gentle St. Elias Lake Trail — perfect for families — also make the cut. Liddle's springtime choices are Sheep Creek East and West, which offer sightings of Dall sheep with their newborn lambs, as well as the obligatory predators — wolves, eagles and bears — milling about in the mix.

“A grizzly was here,” Liddle points out. Ahead, a partially fallen spruce has had its bark rubbed clean by the hump of a brown bear, leaving a patch of exposed wood about two metres off the ground. Tufts of grizzled fur are lodged in the bark. Further along, we come across a stump torn to shreds by a bruin in search of grubs, as well as more fur. One could knit mittens after a weekend in Kluane.

“There are about 250 grizzlies in Kluane,” Liddle says. “And about 150 black bears. But in the fall, moose are more dangerous.”

Moose are formidable on the best of days. During the rut, they are downright ornery. Liddle explains that a grizzly bear will almost assuredly flee from our five-person group — but a rutting bull might not. I suddenly catch

## TRIP PLANNER

### WHERE TO STAY

Dalton Trail Lodge, located on the edge of Kluane National Park, offers cozy lodge and cabin accommodations and hearty meals (including picnic lunches). A lively dining room, pub and games room keep things interesting after dark. Dalton sells a seven-night hiking package, which includes daily transport to trailheads, all meals, one guided hiking day and some equipment rentals. [daltontrail.com](http://daltontrail.com)

Located near Kathleen Lake, The Cabin & Kluane Ecotours offers five self-contained guest cabins, each sleeping two to four people. Shared bathrooms, barbecue area and fire pits — as well as optional breakfast at the main lodge and guided eco-tours — are available. [kluaneco.com](http://kluaneco.com)

Kathleen Lake Campground offers 39 first-come, first-served campsites near Kathleen Lake in Kluane National Park. Bear boxes, fire pits and picnic tables are located at each site. Cost, \$15.70 per site/night; open from Victoria Day until Labour Day. There is also a day use area and picnic shelter. Backcountry camping is available within the park, \$9.80 per night.

### WHEN TO GO

For snowshoers and cross-country skiers, March is a great time to head north. Temperatures have risen to bearable levels, the Northern Lights are in full force and the daytime hours are bathed in a unique Arctic light locals describe as “intoxicating.”

Prime time to hike in Kluane National Park is late-July through early September. In June and early-July, trails are usually muddy and bugs can be oppressive. August-September hiking trips see vibrant foliage as well as chance sightings of Northern Lights.

### RESOURCES

Kluane National Park & Reserve of Canada: [pc.gc.ca/kluane](http://pc.gc.ca/kluane)

Travel Yukon: [travelyukon.com](http://travelyukon.com)

Haines Junction: [hainesjunctionyukon.com](http://hainesjunctionyukon.com)

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

### Flightseeing Tours

See more of the park than you ever could on foot via a flightseeing tour with Kluane Glacier Tours. Based out of Haines Junction, KGT offers 60-, 75- and 120-minute tours in their all-Cessna fleet. Expansive views of the South Arm and Kaskawulsh Glaciers, as well as Mount Logan, are well worth the often nausea-inducing plane ride. [yukonairtours.com](http://yukonairtours.com)

### Yukon Wildlife Preserve

If you missed sightings of moose, black bears or grizzlies during your time in Kluane, you can still snap photos of a variety of northern wildlife at the Yukon Wildlife Preserve, located a 30-minute drive northwest of Whitehorse. A five-kilometre loop walks visitors past mule deer, moose, elk, woodland caribou, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, muskoxen, bison and other beasts. Not to be confused with a zoo, this preserve rehabilitates and stewards regional animals unfit for the wild. [yukonwildlife.ca](http://yukonwildlife.ca)

sight of fresh moose scat and an ominously large hoof print embedded in the mud. Still, after 38 years in the area, Liddle has yet to become moose fodder.

"I started with Kluane in 1975... The park was newly established, the largest of all the mountain parks in Canada and relatively unknown. My job was to research the park and develop an Interpretive Plan to develop all the facilities and services," Liddle explains. He had planned to stay for three months, but never left.

"Yukon does that to a person," he continues. The challenge to understand Kluane — to explore it on foot and document what made it such a special area — was captivating. As was discovered, along with holding the continent's highest peaks and the world's second-largest non-Polar ice fields, Kluane also has the greatest diversity of flora and fauna north of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel. After four decades in Kluane, Liddle says he is still learning, exploring and making personal discoveries.

Further along, he explains that we are walking along an active fault line.

"We get about three tremors a day," he

says. "You usually won't feel them." As a feather in its diversity cap, Kluane is also the most seismically active mainland region in North America.

Shortly before halfway, the breeze begins to gust more intensely. Clouds the Auriol's peaks had previously held off have suddenly socked-in. There is a familiar scent



in the air now; West Coast born-and-raised, I know the smell of rain. Northern weather changes quickly — temperatures can swing 20 degrees Celsius in a single day. Sunny skies can turn to downpours in an hour. At higher elevations, snow can fall any time of the year.

The landscape leading back to the trail-head is heaving and carved by glaciers. Elsewhere, hidden from sight by the mountains-beyond-mountains, are leviathan ice fields — second in size only to Greenland's and the Poles'. Vistas of primordial behemoths like the Kaskawulsh and South Arm Glaciers are some of the main draws to the region, though one must tackle the challenging, multi-day *Ä'y Chü* (Slim's River) West/East or Observation Mountain Plateau trails for rewards so great. Auriol Trail is but a teaser to Kluane. If the park were a meal, Auriol wouldn't even be the complementary bread. It is the ice water you sip while reading the menu.

With too little time to spend in Kluane during this Yukon foray, I find myself once again a Prisoner of the North. I'm compelled to return and probe this park as best I can, each time pushing just a little further into, and learning a little more about, one of Canada's final frontiers. And today, amidst a bouquet of white spruce, moss berries, red current and moose droppings, I discover that exploring Kluane can simply mean following your nose. ■

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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