



Road Tripping during a Pandemic

Tombstone Territorial Park and the Dempster Highway

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I recently returned from a road trip through northern British Columbia and the Yukon with a pair of classmates. We had dreamed up this trip fairly soon after I moved to Prince George, BC to pursue a master's degree in the fall of 2019, and were very fortunate that it could still happen amidst a pandemic. While I attend the University of *Northern* British Columbia, true northerners are quick to point out that its location in Prince George – PG for short – is really more like central BC. It's all relative though, right? Two-thirds of British Columbians live in the southwest corner of the province in the Vancouver and Victoria metro areas, so PG itself is often an afterthought, much less anything to the north of it. Despite that southerly perspective, after a year in PG I knew there was a lot more “north” to explore.

Aside from the inherent intrigue of new and potentially fascinating places, this trip was also an opportunity to pass through the area I'm focusing on for my master's research in conservation planning. While my travel partners and I only traversed the periphery of my area of interest (it's quite difficult to access) I got a taste for the remoteness of this part of the world in the form of highway signs reminding you to refuel and black bears outnumbering fellow motorists on the roadway at times. Making this journey in the midst of COVID-19 likely only added to the

solitude we experienced, as many Canadians stayed closer to home this summer and the only Americans on the roads were those transiting to Alaska. I should add a disclaimer that as BC residents my companions and I were allowed to be taking this trip – Yukon opened their borders to BC and the Territories a month and a half prior, and Travel Yukon had been actively courting tourists given their economic importance to the territory.

Our first deviation from our pre-COVID plans actually meant that we kept a northward course – continuing on the Stewart-Cassiar Highway rather than stray west to visit Hyder, Alaska. Hyder's only connection to the outside world is a road through Canada, which has been a challenge for its residents given pandemic border restrictions. They're only allowed into neighboring Stewart, BC once a week for essential trips like groceries or a doctor's visit. It also means residents are cut off from their friends and family if they live on the other side of the border, as is the case for [one poor teenager](#). For us it was simply a matter of, "Oh well, maybe next time." As an American travelling with two Canadians though, it did cross my mind that if they got tired of me they could dump me in Hyder and see if I could sweet talk my way back into Canada.

Upon arrival at the Yukon border we had to show proof of residency in one of the approved jurisdictions. In the spirit of pandemic improvisation, a park ranger scrutinized us rather than a police officer, presumably due to limited resources. Waved through, we continued onto Whitehorse, the territorial capital, to meet another classmate who grew up there and was home visiting. She and

her family treated us to a rafting trip down the Takhini River the next day, which was one of the highlights of the trip for me. Putting in on Kusawa Lake, we got to experience the contrast of open water and a headwind before the water narrowed back into a river. With the towering Mount Vanier as a landmark, it became clear how much the river current was aiding our progress. This is

Champagne and Aishihik First Nations territory, and just days after we were paddling the river, the Nations' government announced that they were placing a [moratorium on chinook salmon fishing](#) here to protect the population. This year only a fraction of the usual number of fish made the journey from the Bering Sea up the Yukon River through Alaska to this part of the



territory. Chief Rose Kushniruk explained, “We are concerned about declining salmon stocks and the impact on our ability to engage in traditional harvesting, cultural practices, seasonal gathering, and ability to eat our traditional foods.”

After a day trip to Kluane National Park, we continued northward to Dawson City and later Tombstone Territorial Park along the Dempster Highway. Dawson is a Klondike Gold Rush town that has held onto its turn of the century character and charm. This stop represented a welcome reprieve from camping, as we stayed at the Downtown Hotel, known for its “Sourtoe Cocktail” that features a real, mummified human toe in it. The original toe used was a casualty of frostbite, but the business now has multiple preserved toes on hand to satisfy the popularity of this curious cocktail. While questions of sanitation abound under normal circumstances, this practice has been tabled due to COVID-19 – though I swear I was gonna do it! Continuing on to Tombstone, we were treated to stunning arctic tundra landscapes with shrubs already displaying fall colors in August. These views were capped with the jagged profile of the Tombstone Mountain Range, with the igneous rock Mount Monolith jutting up above the rest. Tombstone was a novelty for me because while there were loosely defined hikes to go on, they were mere suggestions since visitors are free to traverse the landscape as they see fit. Upon reflection, our two days here rivaled our Takhini paddle for most memorable experience on this road trip.

I have a list – partially mental, partially jotted down – of the adventures I want to take during my two years studying in BC, and while I may not get to experience all of them in quite the manner I’d hoped, I consider myself very fortunate to have made this trip. Northern BC and the Yukon have so much to offer, and I consider a trip like this to be a vital part of my graduate school education beyond the traditional classes and research. Gaining different perspectives is one of the reasons I relocated from the agricultural American Midwest, and getting to know this corner of the world I currently call home has been remarkably fulfilling.

