

Frozen hair is a nuisance in most places, but at the [Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs](#) in Whitehorse, Yukon, it's a higher calling. Every winter, hundreds of people try to [freeze their hair](#) into a troll-doll-like coif for a chance to win cash prizes of 2,000 Canadian dollars, or nearly \$1,500.

And just in case that doesn't give you goose bumps, Andrew Umbrich, 36, the hot springs' owner and general manager, has opened a designated snow-rolling area to let bathers cool off without banging into the rocks surrounding the pool. "I have to give them a safe place to roll because they're going to kill themselves on these boulders," Mr. Umbrich said.

These are the kinds of safety considerations that tend to arise in rugged places like the Yukon, a roughly 186,000-square-mile wedge of northwestern Canada that extends from British Columbia across the Arctic Circle to the Beaufort Sea. Its long winter nights and boreal location make it a prime destination for viewing the northern lights, and with the sun's magnetic field [approaching the peak of its 11-year cycle](#), sending more charged particles into the Earth's upper atmosphere, 2024 could bring the best displays in years (one reason Whitehorse landed on this year's New York Times [52 Places to Go](#) list).

Image



Competing in the chain saw chucking event at Yukon Rendezvous last year. To prevent injuries, the saws lack chains.

Credit...
Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



Image



Rendezvous attendees can also compete in the log toss, choosing between lighter and heavier logs for the throw.

Credit...

Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



Those long subarctic nights also make for plenty of pent-up energy, which Yukoners let off just as the sun begins to make its resurgence in February, with the joyous — and decidedly offbeat — [Yukon Rendezvous](#), a festival in Whitehorse that celebrates its 60th anniversary this year from Feb. 9 to 25 with events like chain saw chucking and flour packing, not to mention the hair freezing.

Destination Canada, the national tourism board, has increasingly promoted festivals like Yukon Rendezvous along with other wintry experiences. While the bulk of travelers visit the Yukon in the summer months, winter visits were on the rise before 2019. After taking a hit during the pandemic, the number of international visits recovered, but remained 21 percent below 2019-20 levels last winter.

Fishnets, feathers and mittens

In 1988, Luann Baker-Johnson, 64, of Whitehorse, carried 494 pounds of flour for 30 feet to place second in Rendezvous's flour-packing contest, a grueling challenge that has its roots in the late-1890s Klondike gold rush.

Editors' Picks



Why February Is the Best Month for Resolutions



Searching Astoria's New Condo Developments: Could He Afford a One-Bedroom?



A Couple Went Viral. Then the Internet Started Digging.

Image



Luann Baker-Johnson, at her glass-blowing studio in Whitehorse, once carried 494 pounds of flour for 30 feet, placing second in the Rendezvous flour-packing contest.

Credit...

Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



Ms. Baker-Johnson, a glass blower and owner of [Lumel Studios](#), now makes some of the prizes, including a nearly three-foot-long glass ax, for the festival's competitions. Ms. Baker-Johnson's daughter Shanta Ferguson, 31, a Rendezvous champion, threw a chain saw 32 feet, winning the 2019 women's competition, an event whose appeal will be self-evident to anyone who's ever struggled to start a chain saw in freezing temperatures.

Ms. Ferguson and her husband, John Ferguson, 32, run the [Gather Café and Taphouse](#) next door to the glass-blowing studio. The menu features fresh local ingredients — no small logistical feat in the remote, frozen North, where imported produce can look a bit haggard. The Arctic char tacos are served with greens grown hydroponically in nearby shipping containers. "People are surprised by the quality and caliber of restaurants up here," Ms. Ferguson said.

Image



The “Healing Totem,” in Whitehorse, carved to honor the Indigenous people affected by Canada’s residential school system.

Credit...

Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



Image



Main Street in downtown Whitehorse. The city is gearing up for the 60th anniversary of Yukon Rendezvous this month.

Credit...

Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



With thousands of people expected to converge on Whitehorse for Rendezvous in the next few weeks, local residents are getting ready. “What I love about Rendezvous is that

everyone has the opportunity to enter. They can toss logs, throw an ax, chuck a chain saw and it doesn't matter if you win a competition or not, it's such bizarre fun," Ms. Baker-Johnson said.

The territorial government's tourism office provides 100,000 dollars in operational funding to the festival and promotes it on the [Travel Yukon](#) website and social media, even offering tips on Rendezvous dress code — typically suspenders, feathers and other 1890s garb, along with plenty of warm clothing.

That last bit is sage advice, as Stephanie Hammond, 49, discovered in 2011, shortly after moving to Whitehorse, when she joined the local roller derby group's float in the Rendezvous parade. When temperatures dipped to minus 35 Fahrenheit, she assumed the parade would be canceled — it wasn't — and was surprised when her team piled into the back of a pickup truck in roller derby costumes, fishnets and all.

A taste you won't forget

Image



Dawson City, about 330 miles from Whitehorse, was a major destination for fortune hunters during the 1890s Klondike gold rush.

Credit...

Devon Berquist for The New York Times



Dog sleds have crisscrossed the Far North since long before the days of “White Fang.” But with climate change making the snowpack unreliable, dog-sled races have run into some difficulties. In 2016, a mild winter in Anchorage forced organizers of the Iditarod, the world’s most famous dog-sled race, [to rely on snow brought in by train](#). The year before that, the Babe Southwick Memorial, a dog-sled race originally held on the Yukon River during Rendezvous, was relocated because the ice had become unsafe. Rendezvous no longer holds dog-sled races (the [FirstMate Babe Southwick Memorial Race](#) continues under different organizers), but there’s still plenty of action at the [Yukon Quest](#), a roughly four-day dog-sled race from Whitehorse that reaches Dawson City, about six hours northwest by car, on or around Feb. 7.

Image



BonTon & Company, in Dawson City, is famous for its housemade charcuterie. The building next door is tilting because of melting permafrost, a major problem in the Yukon as the climate warms.

Credit...

Devon Berquist for The New York Times



[Dawson City](#), a major destination for fortune hunters in the 1890s (including Jack London, the author of “White Fang”), still draws travelers today. The town of about 2,400 is home to Canada’s first gambling hall, museums and other colorful buildings — many of them tilting ominously as the permafrost thaws under their foundations. Warming permafrost is a [widespread problem](#) in the Yukon, causing landslides and destabilizing soil. Dawson City residents must occasionally [jack up the buildings](#) to keep them level.

Dawson City hosts the [Thaw di Gras Spring Carnival](#) (March 15 to 17), a Rendezvous-like event where you can cheer on dog-sled teams, toss an ax or watch adults race on tricycles. The town also challenges those with iron stomachs to sample a local tradition, the [Sourtoe Cocktail](#), at the gold-rush-themed Sourdough Saloon. After taking the “Sourtoe Oath,” initiates drink a shot of whiskey (“Most club members prefer [Yukon Jack](#),” the saloon advises) garnished with a preserved human toe. It doesn’t count if your lips don’t touch the toe. Over the years, the club has acquired 25 toes (all donated).

Image



Locals in Dawson City catch live music shows most weekends at the Westminster Hotel.

Credit...

Devon Berquist for The New York Times



Image



The interior of the Westminster Hotel, which residents of Dawson City lovingly call the Pit.

Credit...

Devon Berquist for The New York Times



Once initiated, you may want to clear your palate at [BonTon & Company](#) (reservations recommended), a Yukon culinary landmark famous for its housemade charcuterie. After dinner, take in live music most weekends down the block at the [Westminster Hotel](#), which locals lovingly refer to as the Pit. If you're in town between March 28 and 31, you can catch a movie at the [Dawson City International Short Film Festival](#).

Image



The charcuterie at BonTon & Company features local and housemade ingredients.

Credit...

Devon Berquist for The New York Times



The northern lights in Whitehorse, which was once served by paddle-wheelers like the S.S. Klondike.

Credit...

Manu Keggenhoff for The New York Times



Ms. Dickson owns and operates [Who What Where Tours](#), a company that not only offers northern lights tours, but also takes visitors to the [Yukon Wildlife Preserve](#), where they can ride a bus, walk or kicksled — a small, self-propelled device — around a three-mile loop to see northern animals like musk ox, bison, caribou, moose, lynx and arctic fox in a natural landscape. “In the Yukon, you can hear the quietness,” she said.

Visitors who want to learn about the area’s Indigenous population can tour [Long Ago Peoples Place](#), a First Nations camp, where they can hear about Southern Tutchone history and culture. “In the winter, people want to know how we survived,” said the Yukon First Nations member and camp manager [Meta Williams](#). Imagine what it was like for it to be minus 69 Fahrenheit, she said, “living in a brush shelter, packed with snow and sprinkled with water” (a way to add a layer of insulation from the wind and cold).

Indigenous tourism has expanded rapidly in Canada, outpacing the overall growth rate of tourism in the country. The Yukon First Nations Culture and Tourism Association works with [15 to 20 Indigenous tour operators](#) across the territory who offer dog sledding, snowmobiling, ice fishing and traditional drum making, among other activities. Many First Nations economic development corporations have invested in tourism-related businesses like airlines and hotels.

Ms. Williams hopes that visitors leave Long Ago Peoples Place with a new understanding of the past. “Our history is not all written in books,” she said. “When we started back in 1995, I had no idea that someday we could truly tell our story and not have somebody tell it for us.”

She has early memories of her grandparents, who lived in the bush year-round, making special trips to Whitehorse for Rendezvous. “They would be dressed up in their finest beaded and moosehide tanned clothing,” she said.

An antidote to cabin fever

On the eve of the festival’s anniversary, Rendezvous organizers reflected on how it has changed over the last six decades, from adapting to warmer temperatures — they once had to buy snow from the local ski hill for the snow sculpting event — to promoting diversity and inclusivity at events like the [Call for the Cup](#), which has been billed as a search for “Yukon’s primo male” but is open to people of all gender identities.

“Rendezvous has changed and evolved” while trying to hold on to the traditional side, said the festival’s president, Tamara Fischer, who said she also wanted to raise awareness of Indigenous people’s participation in the festival. “I’m an Indigenous woman, and last year for the program I wore some of my regalia,” she said. “I wanted people to know that there are Indigenous people involved.”

At its heart, the festival remains a time-tested antidote for cabin fever. Yukoners have long known that silly antics are as much a balm for the winter blues as a quiet night watching the wonders of the sky.

Just ask Mr. Umbrich of Eclipse Nordic Hot Springs, which hosts the annual hair-freezing contest. Wellness and health are primary focuses at his facility. So even when it gets really cold, he said, guests can rest assured: “No one’s ever broken their hair.”