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ON THE TOMBSTONE EXPRESS

Heli-hiking in Yukon's Tombstone Territorial Park takes you from the wild west to wilderness in one exhilarating day

Near the top of Tombstone Pass on the trail to Divide Lake, our group of three hikers and two guides pauses to shed layers after the sun finally peeks through the clouds, rocketing the temperature and illuminating the sub-Arctic landscape.

Behind us, Tombstone Mountain and its surrounding rocky spires tower magnificently above a tundra carpet of green dwarf birch and yellow caribou lichen. In front of us lies a tricky section of talus rock-fall—we'll have to use our hands, watch our footing and look for inukshuks as we navigate over slabs and around boulders of dark gray *syenite* (an igneous rock similar to granite) speckled with orange and green lichen. These rocks have sloughed off from

the jagged ridges high above, thanks to Yukon's freeze-thaw cycle.

An hour earlier we'd clambered out of a helicopter that flew us into Tombstone Territorial Park from Dawson City during an agreeable weather window, landing near a backcountry campground at Talus Lake. The 30-minute lift from the whirlybird shaved off an hour-and-a-half of travel time to the park, and saved us a gruelling 24-kilometre hike from the Grizzly Lake trailhead located on the Dempster Highway.

Opting to heli-hike also dropped us right at the foot of the magnificent Tombstone Ranges. We'll be able to admire the eye-candy peaks over one long day-hike to Divide Lake and back (the sun doesn't set here until well past 10:00 p.m.—even in August), a total distance of 12 kilometres over an undulating, at times hard-to-dis-



Heli-hiking allows visitors to Dawson City to experience this landscape as a day-trip. **BELOW:** The signature peaks of "Ragged Mountain Land" are the cooled plugs of volcanoes that never erupted, revealed by erosion over millions of years.

cern, trail. Still, our guides have come prepared if low clouds prevent the helicopter from picking us up in the evening—along with hiking poles and day packs, they've flown in camping gear and food to stay overnight, just in case.

I take in the sweep of this glacier-carved valley and its imposing vertical pinnacles and think there could be worse places to spend the night.



LOCATED ON THE TRADITIONAL TERRITORY OF THE TR'ONDĒK HWĒCH'IN PEOPLES.

OFTEN REFERRED TO as Canada's Torres del Paine, Tombstone Territorial Park straddles the Continental Divide about a 90-minute drive from Dawson City, Yukon. Its name in the Hän language, spoken by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, means "Ragged Mountain Land." It's an apt moniker for a landscape punctuated by vertical rock walls that rise up to 350 metres above the valley floor.

Like Chile's famous towers, as well as British Columbia's Bugaboos' granite spires that were popularized by early rock climbers, these peaks that look like grave markers were once volcanic plugs that never erupted; instead, they cooled underground and were gradually revealed over millions of years as overlying sedimentary rock eroded due to rain, wind and glaciation. Here, some 300 kilometres shy of the Arctic Circle, is a protected natural landscape like no other.

USA KADANE (26)

"This is all part of the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in," says George McConkey, a guide with The Klondike Experience, as he indicates the mountains and valley with a sweep of his hand.

First peoples used and migrated through the area for at least 8,000 years, hunting moose and caribou, trapping, fishing and harvesting traditional plants and berries—before settlers arrived and mistook 'Tr'ondëk' for "Klondike."

When the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in began land claims negotiations in the 1980s, First Nation citizens and elders wanted to ensure the landscape of their traditional territory remained intact. Tombstone Territorial Park became a reality through the final treaty agreement, and it protects the region's wildlife, fragile ecosystem and cultural heritage—there are numerous archaeological sites within the park.

It's unlikely visitors to the park will come across these locations, or even see traditional harvesting taking place. What they will see, in addition to the spectacular spires, are some of the unusual permafrost features that buckle the land once the boreal forest of spruce, aspen and poplar—which we observed flying in—gives way to tundra.

AS WE CARRY ON toward Divide Lake, what looks from a distance like a perfectly flat meadow of dwarf birch, bearberry bushes and patches of caribou lichen becomes hummocky and boggy upon closer inspection. Here and there lie hollows filled with water that appear to be alpine tarns, but with no discernible water source. McConkey explains the pools of water are thermokarsts, or thaw lakes.

"For whatever reason, some of the permafrost gets exposed and melts, and then the water has nowhere to go," he says.

It's the kind of landscape in want of a moose—or a herd of caribou. Both woodland and barren-ground caribou travel through the park and rely on that ground lichen as a wintertime food source. It's a reminder of just how fragile the land is this far north. There's hardly any soil so a careless boot scrape can easily damage the ground cover. We stick to the trail, and when we need to move off the route for lunch, we take different paths and try to step on bare rocks.

After a satisfying spread of charcuterie, cheese, carrots and chocolate beneath

Dawson City-based The Klondike Experience organizes custom backpacking or heli-hiking trips into Tombstone Territorial Park. klondikeexperience.com

Monolith Mountain, with a view of Divide Lake, we turn around. I keep hoping we'll see more wildlife—grizzly bears and Dall's sheep also live in the park's Tombstone Ranges—but all we encounter are a human couple packing up their tent at the Talus Lake campground, a group of hikers and their dog and a few birds.

PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, Tombstone Territorial Park received about 25,000 visitors per year, most of them stopping in at the interpretive centre along the Dempster Highway in the summer (in contrast, Banff National Park, which is three times Tombstone's size, receives over 160 times the number of visitors annually). It's no wonder we feel like we have the trail to ourselves.

In fact, I get the feeling that Yukoners want to keep Tombstone a secret, and I'm not wrong. Jesse Cooke, founder of The Klondike Experience, has mixed feelings about flying guests into the park via helicopter (the company also organizes Tombstone backpacking trips to Talus Lake that begin at the Grizzly Lake trailhead). With the custom heli-hikes his company coordinates, he wants people to understand and respect the park even though their time there is short—which is where his guides' excellent interpretation comes in.

"It's a very special landscape," he says. Seven hours after we set out, we arrive back at Talus Lake. Cresting Tombstone Pass for a second time an hour prior, in fact, the monolith of Tombstone Mountain had been completely obscured behind a curtain of dark grey clouds, prompting McConkey to joke about setting up the tents for a park slumber party. But now the cloudline has risen and we're confident the pilot will be able to land.

While we wait, McConkey pulls out his harmonica and begins to play, his jaunty notes reflecting our group's euphoria over a day well spent. The impromptu jam session soon gets drowned out by the *thwack-thwack-thwack* of the helicopter that will spirit us back to Dawson City.

Later that night I watch can-can dancers inside Diamond Tooth Gertie's gambling hall while sipping Yukon whisky with my fellow hikers, and I try to reconcile our surreal day. We've gone from Canada's frontier to its historic wild west—from the back of beyond to happy hour, basically—in the space of just a few hours.

I toast Canada's oldest casino, and the trailblazers who discovered gold and put this boggy outpost on the map. But most of all I toast those who had the foresight to protect the "Ragged Mountain Land" that rendered us speechless for a day. ✕



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