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EDITOR LINDA BATES 604-605-2371 FAX: 604-605-2521 • SATURDAY, JULY 19, 2008 • E-mail lbates@png.canwest.com

CHASING HISTORY ON THE GREAT YUKON RIVER



An aerial view of the Yukon River.

PHOTOS BY KATHERINE GIBSON/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

YUKON | Journey from Whitehorse to Dawson City retraces gold rush route

BY KATHERINE GIBSON

The Yukon is a cleansing experience at forty below," quips Ted Harrison, one of Canada's most celebrated artists. He ought to know. For more than 25 years he lived there, painting the people, the old-time buildings, the mercurial landscape and its dancing skies.

I am in Whitehorse to experience the Yukon for a book I am writing about him. Fortunately, it is summer. While the night temperatures are bracing, I am spared Harrison's "cleansing experience."

The sun is breaking the horizon when I join six others at the jetty in Whitehorse to begin a five-day journey down the Yukon River to Dawson City. Our route will retrace that used by swarms of fortune-seekers in the 1898 Klondike gold rush. This trip also recalls a similar journey Harrison took in 1977, 10 years after he immigrated to Canada from England. Where better to understand him than among the emerald lakes, wild night skies and untamed landscape that inspires his paintings.

Rather than mimic the early adventurers who challenged the river in canoes or on makeshift rafts, we travel in first-class comfort aboard the *Shakat*, a European-style, glass-topped riverboat. Thanks to a partnership between four First Nations, whose lands we will pass through, and private businesses that created The Great River Journey,

See Father-son trip through the Yukon and NWT, E5

WEEKEND EXTRA

each day will take us deeper into Yukon wilderness and further back in time.

"There are two moose for every person in the Yukon," says our guide Chris as we chug toward Lake Laberge, an hour or so away. "Calcification from shellfish turns the river a deep green colour. And those holes in the cliffs?" he adds, "are nesting sites for swallows. Been there forever." The chalky cliffs cast champagne shadows on the water as we glide through a still life painting of river, forest and a cloudless sky. No moose on these shores. But we see bald eagles and ravens scavenging for breakfast. Except for a small party of canoeists, we are alone in a hushed setting, floating by unseen wildlife in the forests that flank the shore.

As we enter Lake Laberge, I recall the lines from Robert W. Service's poem *The Cremation of Sam McGee*: "The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,/ But the queerest they ever did see/ Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge/ I cremated Sam McGee." Service penned his famous poem (in which he uses a different spelling of the lake) in 1907 in Dawson where he worked at the Bank of Commerce. Eighty years later, Ted Harrison added his bright, playful pictures to Service's verses, a brilliant combination that rekindled a romantic interest in the Yukon.



WEEKEND EXTRA CONTINUES ON PAGE E7



Ted Harrison has been painting the Yukon for more than 25 years.

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