

Outside Valdez, Alaska,
Shoup Glacier stands
out among the Great
Land's natural marvels.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

*The road from Southeast Alaska through the
Yukon reveals a world of vast wonder*

STORY & PHOTOS BY **JEFF LAYTON**

THE BLUR ON THE EDGE OF THE ROAD WAS A PORCUPINE.

UNTIL THAT MOMENT, I'D NEVER SEEN ONE IN THE WILD. IN SECONDS OUR RENTAL CAR SCREECHED TO A STOP, AND WE WERE LEAPING THROUGH BRUSH WITH CAMERAS IN HAND.

As it turns out, porcupines aren't very fast, and the 25-pound creature scaled a skinny evergreen tree and parked himself directly at eye level. His blonde quills looked more like fur than stabbing weapons, and I'd never wanted to pet something so sharp in my entire life.

My wife, Amanda, and I were in the middle of a two-week, 1,600-mile road trip from Southeast Alaska through Canada's Yukon territory. After four nights sailing the Inside Passage from Bellingham to Skagway, Alaska, aboard an Alaska Marine Highway System Ferry, we had rented a car and soon left civilization in our rearview mirror on a journey through historic gold-rush territory.

That's when we met the porcupine.

He was to be the symbol of our odyssey—the exceptional, “I've never done that before” totem. And believe me when I tell you, few places on Earth can compete with the far north when it comes to new experiences.

Canada's Yukon territory is particularly remarkable for its abject wilderness—something that feels completely foreign in today's world. You can travel for hours between towns without seeing development of any kind. The few roads cross hundreds of miles of emptiness. That is, unless you count the thousands of moose, bears,

wolves and caribou that tromp the forests. In winter, the terrain resembles what you might see on *Ice Road Truckers*, but summer reveals a vast—at times quirky—wonderland.

Just outside the Yukon village of Carcross, for example, we rounded a corner to find the remains of an ancient lake bed. The sand dune—a relic of the last ice age—was several stories tall and had an old sofa sitting squarely in the middle of it. The latter's purpose was a mystery, but we had it to ourselves, and we decided it provided the perfect opportunity to pose like pensive hipster rock stars on the cover of a record album.

It's not the major sights that surprise you about the Yukon, which has a landmass larger than that of California and a population that wouldn't fill half of Husky Stadium. Rather, it's the raw vacancy.

The route we traveled was dotted with landmarks from the Klondike gold rush, which peaked from 1896 to 1899. Many would-be miners exited ships in Skagway, like we had, and crested the famed Chilkoot Pass before spilling into Canada's Klondike region.

We visited sled dogs in Whitehorse and learned how to pan for gold at a working mine near Dawson City. But we truly felt the heart of the Klondike when we imagined the lives of gold miners alone in the wilderness. It's not hard to imagine—not that much about the scenery has changed.

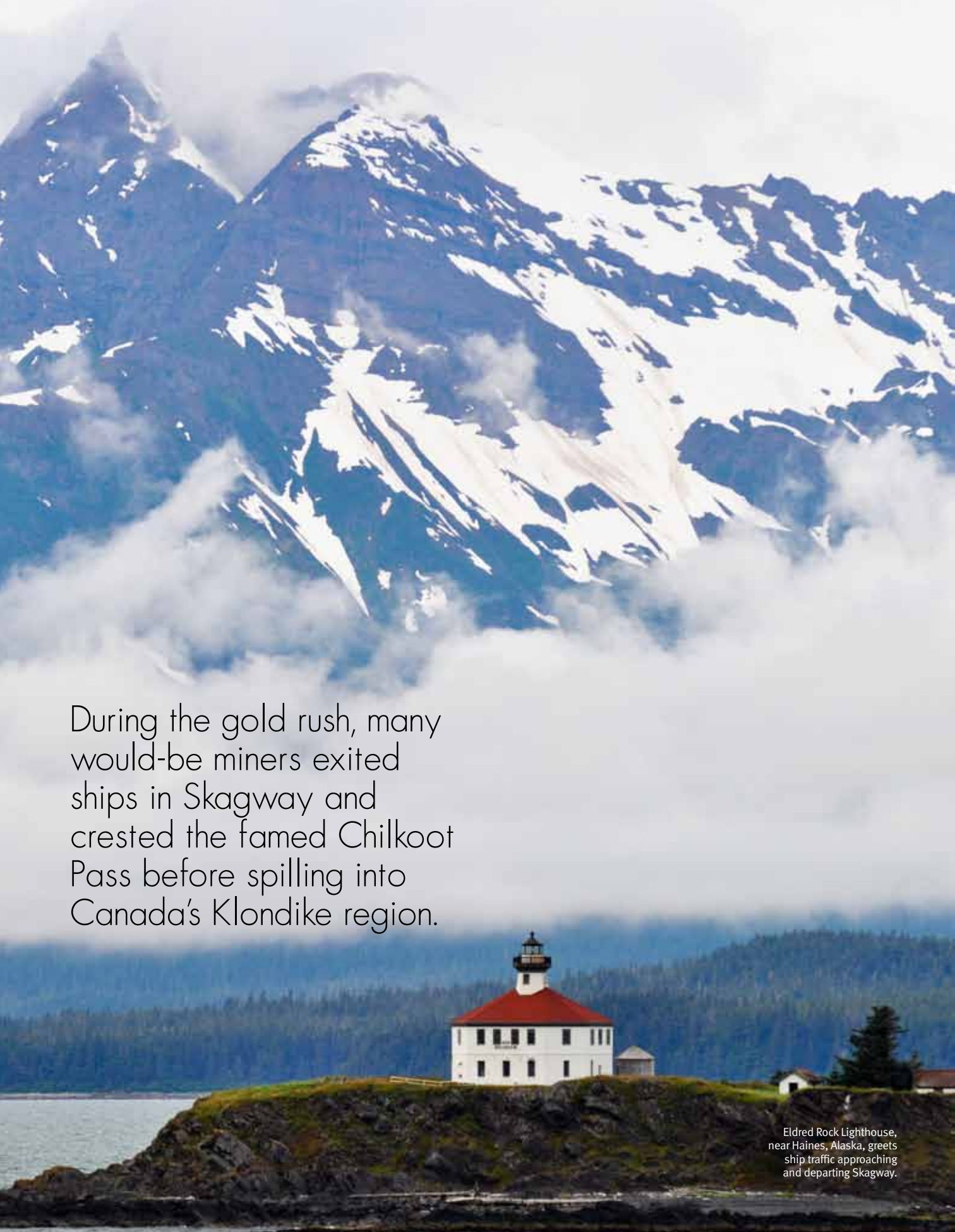
We crossed back into Alaska on the eighth day of our trip, at the northernmost land port of entry in the United States—an outpost on a spine of mountains along the Top of the World Highway. An hour later, we descended into a valley and camped along a lonely riverbank.

There is a freedom you gain when you travel in empty country. In Alaska, it's legal to camp anywhere that



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kayakers explore the historic red light district in Ketchikan, Alaska, one of the stops on the ferry ride to Skagway; a hiker surveys Root Glacier in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park; a black bear takes a meal break at Allison Point, near Valdez; and a look at Worthington Glacier atop Thompson Pass, also near Valdez.





During the gold rush, many would-be miners exited ships in Skagway and crested the famed Chilkoot Pass before spilling into Canada's Klondike region.

Eldred Rock Lighthouse, near Haines, Alaska, greets ship traffic approaching and departing Skagway.

BEAR PHOTO BY MARK HARRIS/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES; ALL OTHERS BY JEFF LAYTON

isn't privately owned. No permits needed, no asking permission. Just pitch a tent or pull over, and nature is yours for the night.

Day 10 found us camping alongside Root Glacier inside Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve—the nation's largest such park (it's bigger than Switzerland) and perhaps the most underrated.

Camping on the side of a valley a stone's throw from a glacier was akin to sleeping near an icy dragon. The “beast” shifted at night, making a deep bass *whomp* that we felt in our sternums. Rockfalls slipped from its scales and melt water sliced through its pores.

We spent a day exploring the remains of the Kennecott Copper Mine, which closed in 1938. The next morning, Scott from St. Elias Alpine Guides helped us strap into crampons (or “sharky-shoes,” as a 3-year-old hiker from one of Scott's previous groups called them), and we stepped onto a glacier for a hike on its otherworldly surface.

When you see a glacier from a distance, it looks like a solid block of ice, but when you actually hike on one, you realize that the landscape is an ever-changing playground of cobalt-blue ponds, caves and surreal canyons.

Scott showed us a hole where a waterfall cut straight into the glacier. These formations, called moulins, should not be taken lightly, he told us. Fall into one, and you'll find yourself in a river that runs under the glacier. And “if you're lucky,” he added, to underscore the danger, you'll emerge in a few hundred years.

At the edge of the glacier, ice caves seemed to glow from within. We ran our hands over the smooth blue rippled patterns making us feel like fish trapped in a frozen river.

Day 12 of our trip found us bobbing in a kayak on an emerald bay about four hours from Valdez, but miles from anything. Ahead of us, car-sized chunks of ice from the Shoup Glacier dropped into the water.

Mountains were so green and water so blue that we could have sworn we were in Hawaii—if it weren't for the snow-capped mountain and polychromatic glacier off our bow. The thought of work was almost laughable.

Eventually, we pitched our tent a few hundred yards from the glacier's face. We pulled clear ice fragments from the bay and melted them for our drinking water. We watched river otter pups squabble over a small fish. We played hide-and-seek with a pair of seals a few feet from shore.

In a couple of days, we were due to drive 300 miles to Anchorage for our flight back to Seattle. But as we pondered the end to our northern adventure, all we could think about was how we never wanted to leave. 📌

Seattle-based photojournalist Jeff Layton and his wife, Amanda, frequently visit remote and exotic locations around the world.

MORE ALASKA–YUKON FUN:



Load up on fresh cinnamon rolls at Lemon Rose Bakery in Skagway before you straddle the U.S./Canadian border on the hike at International Falls.



Visit sled dogs in Whitehorse, Yukon, at Muktuk Adventures, which offers mushing lessons in winter (summer is too hot for the dogs). muktuk.com.



Visit a working mine and try your hand at gold panning at Goldbottom Mine Tours, Dawson City, Yukon. goldbottom.com.



Drive the panoramic Top of the World Highway and spend the night in funky Chicken, Alaska.



Take a scenic flight to the bohemian town of McCarthy, Alaska, and explore the well-preserved Kennecott Copper Mine on the edge of Root Glacier in Wrangell–St. Elias National Park. Schedule backcountry trips, glacier hikes, ice climbing adventures and flightseeing with St. Elias Alpine Guides. steliassguides.com.

Watch bears feed on salmon from your car at Allison Point, a few miles from Valdez, Alaska. Take a guided overnight kayak trip to Shoup Glacier with Pangaea Adventures. pangaeaadventures.com.

ROAD TRIP TIPS

— The most notable towns with lodging between Skagway and Anchorage include Yukon's Whitehorse and Dawson City and, in Alaska, Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and the towns of Chicken, McCarthy and Valdez.

— The Alaska Marine Highway System Ferry has room for vehicles but frequently sells out. Reserve well in advance for summer travel.

— Contact a travel agent to learn about one-way car rental opportunities between Skagway and Anchorage. RVs can be rented in Anchorage, but reserve well in advance. Some rental companies don't allow you to drive on gravel roads, so be sure to ask.

— It is easy to drive in Alaska and the Yukon, but rock chips and tire damage are common. If renting a vehicle, it's a good idea to pay for the extra insurance.