

QUEST FOR THE AURORA

Famed for its awe-inspiring northern lights, Canada's icy Yukon Territory is an exhilarating playground for avid adventurers. Photographer Dan Avila explores the majestic mountainous beauty of this frozen subarctic wonderland.

Travel photography means different things to different people. That's the beauty of it, really. For me, the experiences that are the most compelling are the visceral, primal and natural. It's about feeling a connection to the power of nature and even tasting the danger that this can represent. It's not that a trip to Canada's Yukon Territory needs to be a white-knuckled adventure; it's that it can be for those that want the challenge.

Located in the far north of Canada, and sharing a border with Alaska, the Yukon stretches to

the Arctic with winter conditions dipping down to unthinkable lows. The more pedestrian yet resplendent way to explore the region is in the warmer months, with wonderfully mild conditions and sunlight that almost never ends. I choose to experience the Yukon during the big white to pursue my passion for photographing remarkable landscapes and to attempt capturing my bucket-list photo of the Canadian northern lights.

The Yukon feels like the upside-down version of Western Australia's Pilbara region. It is sparsely populated with a strong indigenous heritage. It is wild and remote with a

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brehtaking landscape that can be unforgiving to the ill-prepared. While the Pilbara can reach temperatures in the high 40s, I am winter-shooting in the Yukon in temperatures of minus-30 degrees Celsius. I know it is properly cold when I open a bottle of water and it freezes in my hand before I can even take a sip.

Arriving in Whitehorse, I am determined to take advantage of the crisp weather and blue skies to explore as much as possible in my five-day stint, barely enough to scratch the surface.

The wild north

A little like an enclosed safari park, the Yukon Wildlife Preserve covers hundreds of hectares of varied terrain and provides an opportunity to see some of the major wildlife drawcards of the region in one place.

The standout performers are the Arctic foxes – ever moving and with a permanent cheeky grin – and the feline of the north, the graceful lynx. Both animals have perfectly evolved to deal with their habitat and conditions. The lynx are equipped with enormous paws that spread out like snowshoes. I sink to my thighs in the soft snow while the lynx prance across the surface.

Driving north to Dawson takes the better part of a day, with the driving subject to the icy road conditions. The town is charming, a little like the set of an old Western. The next morning, while waiting for Tommy, my First Nations guide, I watch a young family crossing the frozen Yukon River by dog sled.

Several hundred kilometres north towards the Arctic Circle, the roads are pure ice and the landscape is positively Narnian. Lynx dart across the road then wait, confidently, for a photo. The mountainous landscape is carved by rivers now turned to slick, green ice.

My final Dawson experience is a stunning flight through the Tombstone Mountains with Great River Air. Each time a scene emerges that needs to be captured, I stick the camera lens out the window as minus-30 degree air rushes through the cabin. A post-flight hot coffee never felt so good.

Driving south toward Kluane National Park, I make it to the much-anticipated

dog sled trail at Muktuk. After the excited barking settles down, the Alaskan huskies find their rhythm and the sleds quietly slip across the snow as the smile freezes on my face.

Aurora goodness

Driving west towards the Alaskan border, I arrive at Mount Logan Lodge. With clear skies and crisp conditions, I head out with a small group on snowmobiles to reach the Kluane Ice Cave. The blue and green of the dense ice is gorgeous, and it opens out to valleys each side, allowing the setting sun to flood the cave with light.

Back at the cabin, my host and guide, Ryan Gustafson, cooks a hearty meal and prepares us for a night shoot. “The aurora can come at any time, and it can disappear within minutes,” says Ryan.

I notice a faint glow on the horizon, like a city in the distance. We quickly drive out to a small frozen lake that offers an unobstructed view, with mountains in the distance. In front of me, within 20 minutes, the aurora goes from a glow to a series of magic dancing ribbons. It is so beautiful and in that perfect, freezing moment, I capture my aurora experience. ♦

Travel file

Information

Canada Tourism keepexploring.com.au
Check the aurora forecast before you head out with your camera. auroraforecast.gi.alaska.edu

Experience

Muktuk Adventures offers a Yukon dog sled experience. muktuk.com
Dawson City tour guides yukonweb.com/tourism/fishwheel

Accommodation

mountloganlodge.com



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01 Viewing the Aurora Borealis at its best requires a moonless, clear sky 02 The cheeky face of the fast-moving Arctic fox 03 Located in the Kluane National Park, Mt Yukon is the highest peak in Canada. All images © Dan Avila

04 A tiny hiker at the mouth of the Kluane Ice Cave provides a sense of the enormous scale of the cavern 05 The elegant lynx is perfectly adapted to sprint on soft snow 06 These Alaskan huskies are born to run. All images © Dan Avila



Scan the QR code to watch a video of Dan's Yukon adventure or visit the website: signatureluxurytravel.com.au/yukon