

Whitehorse

Land of the Midnight Sun



Robert Service wrote these words to what has become one of Canada's great epic poems, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, while working as a bank teller in Whitehorse between 1904 and 1908. They captured the magic and the mystery of a remote northern territory and a frontier town that spawned the stuff of legend.

Today, the frontier town is a city of more than 15 000 people, the largest in northern Canada and capital of the Yukon — a territory containing some of the most inspiring mountains and rivers in North America.

A triangle in the northwest corner of Canada and neighbour to Alaska, the Yukon is larger than Germany and a little smaller than France. With 70 per cent of its population living in Whitehorse, the Yukon remains a land of vast wilderness dotted with small communities tied together by a thin web of roads and rivers. At the heart of them is Whitehorse, a modern city with one foot planted firmly in the past and the other securely in the present. Today the city stands much as it always has: the gateway and service centre to the territory.

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
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.*

— Robert Service

Whitehorse remains one of Canada's best-kept secrets. But 100 years ago, this was not the case.

The paddlewheeler *Klondike*, which today rests as a historic site in downtown Whitehorse on the bank of the Yukon River, is a reminder of earlier times when an extraordinary mass movement of people from around the world travelled to the Yukon to seek their fortune in the gold fields of the Klondike. During the 1890s, Whitehorse was the last resting place for gold

seekers on their journey down the Yukon River. It was here that adventurers like the great writer Jack London braved the great turbulent waters, said to move like the white manes of charging horses.

With the completion of White Pass and Yukon Route Railway from Skagway in Alaska, Whitehorse began to expand and develop. The community grew around the point where the railway and river met on the western bank of the river.

It is only recently that Whitehorse has returned to the population high it knew in 1942, the year that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began construction of the Alaska Highway. In anticipation of a second "rush" (34 000 people, as it turned out), a road was hacked out in nine months to Fairbanks, Alaska. Soon after it was upgraded to an all-weather highway. The following years saw the development of an extensive road network across the Yukon in response to mineral developments and the establishment of new towns more easily serviced by road from Whitehorse.

Ferry traffic continued out of Whitehorse into the 1950s until most of the services

For all its northern pioneer traditions, Whitehorse is very much the quintessential modern city.



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