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It's not Paris but a Skeena Adventure is just as fun

From Terrace in North Central B.C. to four nearby First Nations villages, to Prince Rupert on the Pacific West Coast, and then eastward through the Rocky Mountains to Jasper

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Aug 17, 2022 • 22 hours ago • 4 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)



The Nisga'a Museum in Laxgalts'ap, has one of the finest collections of Northwest Coast aboriginal art. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

When friends asked where I was going on vacation I told them I was flying to Terrace.

“Paris?” asked several of them.

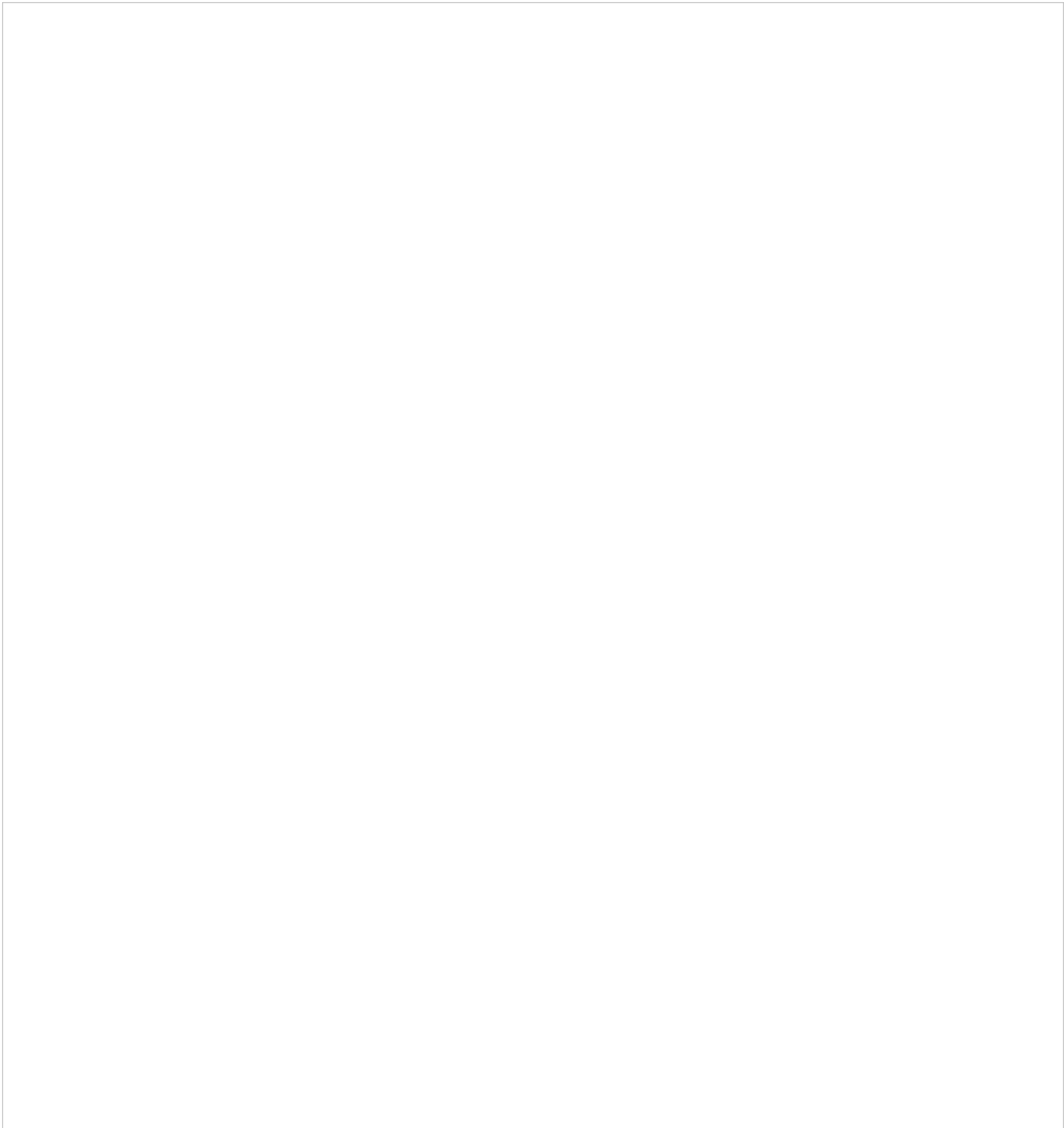
“No, Terrace, British Columbia,” I said. “Quite different.”


Coincidentally, Paris, France was one of the last trips I took before COVID-19 and, not yet ready for international travel, my trip beginning in Terrace this past June was my first since.

I was one of 20 on the eight-day Skeena Adventure tour organized by Mile Zero Tours, based in Victoria, a journey that took us from Terrace in North Central B.C. to four nearby First Nations villages, to Prince Rupert on the Pacific West Coast, and then eastward through the Rocky Mountains

to Jasper, Alberta. My tour mates were a friendly group of seasoned travellers – one had been to more than 80 countries.

The view from Vancouver to Terrace was a panorama of 700 km of snow-capped peaks atop ribbons of green, including an ice formation I dubbed “Fried Egg Lake.”





The flight from Vancouver to Terrace over snow-capped peaks atop ribbons of green, including “Fried Egg Lake.” PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

I stepped off the plane into a picturesque valley surrounded by mountains on all four sides. Terrace was quiet. Apparently, during the height of the pandemic it had been a ghost town with the occasional moose strolling down the empty streets.

Our guide, Brian Downie, a Terrace city councillor, shared the history of the Skeena, and how for centuries it had been a vital trade route between the coast and the interior. The Tsimshian people on the lower section, and the Gitksan on the upper, were known as the “keepers of the canyon.” To pass through the river’s canyons traders were required to pay a toll to the chiefs, typically furs, salmon, berries, seaweed, or herring roe. When train service arrived in 1914, the local tribes way of life changed significantly as trade rerouted to the rails.

At Kitselas Canyon, a National Historic site, we met enthusiastic guide Darren Bolton, and his two granddaughters. Darren, a prolific carver, is a graduate of the Freda Dieseng School of Northwest Coast Art – the only one of its kind in Canada.

In addition to a trip by dune buggy to view the original trade route canyon, we toured four longhouses filled with artifacts, including an elaborately carved canoe that Darren had worked on. Also on the site are four well-preserved totem poles from the 1800s, representing each of the four clans; Eagle, Killer Whale, Wolf and Raven.

The four totem poles at Kitselas Canyon, a National Historic site.





The four totem poles at Kitselas Canyon, a National Historic site. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

At the Nisga'a Museum in Laxgalts'ap, 150 km northwest of Terrace, we had the place to ourselves for a private tour. The 300 piece Ancestor's Collection, described as "one of the finest collections of Northwest Coast aboriginal art in existence," includes exquisitely carved masks, bentwood boxes,

headdresses, soul catchers and other works of art of the Nisga'a people. The museum, completed a year after the signing of the historic 2010 Nisga'a Treaty, includes treasures from museums in Ottawa and Victoria that were returned to be displayed for the first time together in their place of origin.

To reach the museum we traversed the Nass Valley, a landscape scarred from a 300-year old volcanic eruption. Stories passed down amongst the Nisga'a tell of villagers fleeing a river of lava in which thousands died and two Nisga'a villages were destroyed. Today the grey and black lava is covered with moss and footholds of vegetation.

We also passed swollen rivers and waterfalls, results of a late spring freshet. I had heard that the Skeena River can rise two metres in 24 hours, not comforting news when in several spots a few feet from the road, the river looked close to spilling its banks.



The trip to the Kluane National Park Grizzly Bear Sanctuary, home to North America's highest concentration of grizzlies was a highlight. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to the Khutezeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary, home to North America's highest concentration of grizzlies in a natural environment. We spent the day aboard Prince Rupert Adventures Tours' covered 100-person boat cruising north to the Sanctuary. It wasn't long before we came across grizzly bears eating clams, mussels and sedge grass along the shoreline. On the return cruise humpback whales breached and soaring eagles put on a show, the finale to a spectacular wildlife viewing adventure.

From Prince Rupert to Jasper we travelled on a Via Rail train, a 1,160 km journey with a stopover in Prince George for the night. In addition to our reserved seating we had the use of a comfy lounge with books, tea and coffee, conversation – including with a gregarious man from Paris – and a domed observation car.

Wild life viewing was spectacular with Prince Rupert Adventures Tours.

Wild life viewing was spectacular with Prince Rupert Adventures Tours. PHOTO BY LIISA ATVA

Staring out the window as we curved around lakes and mountains, chugged over teeming rivers on

skinny, scary bridges, and passed train stations reminiscent of old western movies was a meditative bliss. Alas, our train ride was interrupted by a derailment – a freight train a few hours ahead – that had us spend four hours on a bus instead of the train.

After the quiet of the previous cities and towns, Jasper, Alberta was buzzing with tourists. The reason – the Rocky Mountains are spectacular. Athabasca Falls was a shimmering spectacle of thundering glacial blue. Although the Columbia Icefield has shrunk considerably since I was there forty years ago, there is still over thirty metres of ice on top, and more behind what we could see from the base.

I enjoyed the local bounty of the North just as much as the fine food in Paris. At our first night's dinner at Don Diego's Restaurant in Terrace I dined on a fusion dish of Mexican and local fare, pumpkin seed and coriander crusted sockeye salmon.

In the tiny remote coastal village of Gingolx (pop. 500) – we passed only two cars on the thirty minute drive there – our lunch was tasty halibut and chips at U Seefood U Eat it! The proprietor was excited to see us and took pictures as we filled the tiny cafe.

It was great to see more of Western Canada, and was as interesting a trip as many places I've travelled further to.



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