

# 13 NORTHERN LIGHTS & WINTER DELIGHTS

JAYME MOYE TAKES IN THE UNTAMED BEAUTY OF B.C.'S NORTHERNMOST REACHES

LEFT TO RIGHT: Baba Canyon in Stone Mountain Provincial Park; moose in the woods of northern B.C.; Liard River Hot Springs

From the co-pilot position in a four-seat, single-engine airplane, I've got a golden eagle's-eye view of Wokkpash Gorge below. The snow-covered canyon floor cuts a brilliant white ribbon through the tree-lined valley. Along its rugged edges I spot hoodoos — rock formations eroded into fantastical spires by water, wind and time. I wonder out loud how many people have seen this natural wonder. "Very few," says pilot Urs Schildknecht, the owner-operator of Northern Rockies Lodge. "But caribou see it all the time." He gestures out the window to a trio of caribou on a mountainside.

In the northernmost reaches of British Columbia, there are more caribou than people. Locals know this untamed region as the MK, short for Muskwa-Kechika, which translates from Athabaskan as "bear," *muskwa*, and "long inclining river," *ketchika*. The MK is the size of Ireland and believed to be the largest tract of remaining

wilderness south of the 60th parallel. A single road, the Alaska Highway, connects it to the rest of the world. This is a different kind of winter magic than what I'm used to in the buzzy ski resort town where I live in southern B.C.

## LIKE A LOCAL

My trip began two days ago in the hamlet of Fort Nelson, a former fur trading post that serves as the gateway to the northern Rockies. It's a popular stopover for travellers heading farther north to Yukon or Alaska. From there, my travelling companions and I aimed for Northern Rockies Lodge, a three-hour drive into the wilds of the MK along the Alaska Highway. On the way, we stopped to stretch our legs at Baba Canyon in Stone Mountain Provincial Park and got our first glimpse of what locals do for winter recreation.

We'd brought cleats to affix to our hiking boots so we could go for a

scenic walk up the canyon's frozen river. We stopped often for photos: the rugged, treeless peaks of the alpine tundra set beneath a cobalt-blue sky made for the perfect backdrop.

## LIVING THE DREAM

We arrive at Northern Rockies Lodge just in time for dinner. Beneath the lodge restaurant's vaulted timber-framed ceiling, we enjoy schnitzel and spätzli, a dumpling made using a popular family recipe remembered from Urs Schildknecht's and his wife Marianne's childhoods in Switzerland. Urs — whose name means "bear" — immigrated to Canada in 1979 seeking to make a living out of his passion for flying bush planes. The couple started out running an air charter business in the Northwest Territories. In 1988, they purchased a far-flung property on B.C.'s Muncho Lake; steadily, piece by piece it would become the

Northern Rockies Lodge we're enjoying today.

When the Alaska Highway was paved in 1992, the lodge became more accessible, and business from road-trippers boomed. Urs and Marianne added RV hookups and private cabins and rebuilt the lodge to span 21 guest rooms. Both their kids grew up at the lodge and now work here as adults — Daniel is the head chef and Michael is the groundskeeper. Urs still flies the float planes; he has a fleet of three and is celebrating his 45th year as a pilot. "I am living my dream," he says.

## DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The morning of our flight-seeing tour, I set out early to explore the grounds. Muncho Lake is flanked by mountains and covered in a thick layer of snow. Urs and his team maintain a groomed cross-country ski trail that heads across the lake to a

little landmass known as Honeymoon Island, six kilometres out and back. At the shoreline, there's a 15-by-20-metre skating rink. A secluded snowshoe trail along the lakeshore is a contemplative pursuit, the delicate crunch of snow crystals beneath my feet the only sound.

Later, from the sky, I see the full span of Muncho Lake, its name translating as "big water" from Athabaskan. The lodge and cabins appear like miniature game pieces on the vast shoreline. After we've admired the hoodoos and caribou of Wokkpash Gorge, Urs turns the plane north. He wants to show us the northernmost end of the Rocky Mountains. For a few moments, the landscape is nothing but sharp alpine peaks. Then the mountains begin to peter out, diminishing to gently rolling hills until they reach the Liard River, the official ending of the longest mountain range in North America.

The next day, we drive to Liard River Hot Springs Provincial Park. There are few visitors in the winter. We walk 20 minutes on a wooden boardwalk over warm-water swamps in a boreal spruce forest, then I sink into the placid, 50-degree waters of the spring. We are completely surrounded by snow. Fire and ice. It feels like magic.

## GETTING THERE

Fly to Fort Nelson on Central Mountain Air, which offers connecting flights through Prince George from Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton. For a direct flight from Vancouver to Fort Nelson, charter Northern Rockies Lodge's private aircraft, which accommodates up to nine passengers.

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