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Travelling the Northern Woods & Water Highway Part 2

From Winnipeg and across northern parts of the four western provinces.

July 21, 2017

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CANAAN NG



Story & photos by Dale Harrison

Through northeast Saskatchewan the highway skirts the southern edge of the boreal forest with a mix of farmland and the forest never far off the northern side. The population thins out along this section; the largest community on the east side is Nipawin (4,265). You can overnight in the hamlet of Love and forever claim to have been in Love. There are numerous regional parks with the Prince Albert National Park north of the Highway in the centre of the province. I always encourage travellers to support the small communities along the way but the City of Prince Albert has everything that you may require if you choose to shop there. The highway meanders north again at Shellbrook. The road quickly departs farmland and plunges into the forest again. From Big River it parallels Cowan Lake, a long narrow lake, then onto Green Lake, then heads west to Meadow Lake. Here it is obvious you are in an area that thrives on forestry with numerous mills and wood fibre processing facilities seen along the side of the road. The fishing is great in all these small lakes. Meadow Lake Provincial Park runs parallel, a few kilometers to the north, of Highway 55 on the western side of the province. This park is a series of lakes connected with canoeable rivers and teeming with fish.

Alberta has several larger lakes and large rivers to provide plenty of water time. Cold Lake is the largest community along the Highway in northern Alberta. This community provides the unique opportunity to see Canada's fighter jets flying low over the city taking off and landing at 4 Wing, Canada's fighter training base. Time your trip in late May and June and you can witness fighters and larger aircraft from many countries participating in training exercises from Monday-Friday. A trip to Cold Lake is not complete without visiting the beautiful marina and walking out onto the pier or spending time on the beach on the northwest edge of the community.

Your westward journey, travels again through the mix of boreal forest and farmland and will take you to the next large lake at Lac La Biche. Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park is located northeast of the community past the beautiful and challenging golf course then across a spit of land to an island like setting. Lac la Biche provides the eastern access to the Alberta Oil sands via Highway 881. To the west of town is the historical Lac la Biche Mission site with restored buildings and a large area to relax and stretch your legs while travelling back in time to when the area was first explored. Now it's time to go further westward onto grassland, and the heaviest travelled portion of highway accessing Hwy 63 to Fort McMurray.

If you are into industrial sites you can take a side trip and see what was North America's largest pulp mill when it was constructed in 1990. The Alberta Pacific Forest Industries Mill (Alpac) Pulp Mill is responsible for improving many roads and highways in northern Alberta and is consistently one of the top 100 employers in Canada.

The Town of Athabasca is located in a valley that provides access to the Athabasca River, which drains northward to the Arctic. Athabasca has a very challenging golf course that plays up and down along the river valley.

West of Athabasca the highway takes another northward venture, which departs from the agricultural lands of southern Alberta and plunges into sparsely populated boreal forest. There are sections of 50 to 70 kms with no population centres but lots of lakes and campsites. You eventually pop out of the forest near Slave Lake, Alberta's largest rubber tire accessible lake. Slave Lake is over 90 kms long and 8 kms wide in places. The highway skirts the southern side with many small lakeside first nations communities. There are also many sheltered marinas, great fishing, beaches, and campgrounds adjacent to the water. On the west end of Slave Lake is the historic Grouard Mission historical site with a native arts museum.

The scenery changes again as you pop out of the forest into the Peace Country of northwest Alberta and northeast BC. So named after the Peace River that flows through the region carving out wide and deep river valleys that are spectacular in the fall with the changing colour of leaves. This agricultural region is blest with longer hours of sunshine during the summer. It is possible to be on the golf course at ten p.m. in the evening at

the height of summer. This also creates an excellent growing region for a variety of crops. From High Prairie, the highway swings north through McLennan, hometown of Northern Woods & Water Highway pioneer George Stevenson. The loop that takes in the wide valley at Peace River and Historic Dunvegan is worth the extra kilometres; both of these valley vistas appear suddenly out of flat agricultural land and catch you by surprise. West of Peace River is Grimshaw, Mile Zero on the MacKenzie Highway that takes you into the Northwest Territories. Following the road south will take you through Fairview, then on to the spectacular river valley at historic Dunvegan.

This is cowboy country and there are a multitude of rodeos held in many communities throughout the spring and summer. Harmon Valley, near Peace River, hosts a rodeo mid July, High Prairie's Pro Rodeo runs the end of July or early August, Grimshaw follows a few days later and Dawson Creek a week later.

Rycroft pivots the highway west again for a short jaunt through the forest and into northeast BC. As you get closer to Dawson Creek the terrain starts to change to rolling hills of the eastern slopes of the northern Rocky Mountains. Dawson Creek is Mile Zero on the famous Alaska Highway, and is celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2017. This was the western terminus of the Northern Woods & Water Highway as George Stevenson envisioned it. But rather than leaving people hanging, there is an effort to extend the official Highway back south through British Columbia to capture the unique beauty of all the four western provinces.

The road to Fort St. John, which is along the first part of the Alaska Highway, swings north for a bonus side trip will take you along the mighty Peace River and allow you to explore the diverse Peace River country before crossing over the Canadian Rockies on your way south. You will cross the Peace River again at Taylor, site of a new hydro dam that started construction in 2016. Shooting past Fort St. John, the northern industrial hub of the BC Peace Country, you will branch off to the south and follow the Peace River to Hudson Hope, home to two hydro dams with tours available, then on to Chetwynd.

Chetwynd is a forestry-based community that created a unique way to showcase their industrial roots. Each year they host a chainsaw carving contest that draws some of the world's best carvers, leaving behind over 120 beautiful and unique carvings throughout the community. The event runs early June.

South from Chetwynd you will travel through the Pine Pass of the Rocky Mountains. This region is popular in the winter for snowmobiling and skiing because of the large amounts of snow. The snow is what feeds the start of the Peace River. A short side trip from the Highway will take you to Mackenzie, another northern forestry community. It is near the southern tip of Williston Lake a "Y" shaped lake 150 km long created from the backwater of the WAC Bennett dam at Hudson Hope, north of Chetwynd.

A hundred and fifty km south brings you to Prince George, a crossroad with the Yellowhead Trans-Canada highway, and also the locale of another major river, the Fraser. From this point south the highway parallels the river as it takes you into the interior and the Caribou-Chilcotin region. This land between the Coast and Rocky Mountain Ranges is very dry and warm in the summer months. This is ranching country and with the mix of cows and horses comes the rodeo. Williams Lake Stampede hosts five rodeo performances over four days, over the Canada Day weekend in July. There are plenty of opportunities to leave the car or camper behind and let a horse take you for a ride in the fresh air.

From Williams Lake, the highway moves away from the Fraser River. You pass through communities that were named during the Caribou Gold Rush. 108 Mile Ranch, 105 Mile House, 100 Mile House measured the distance of each from Lillooet. Just north of Cache Creek you are offered choices to your travel adventure. The less travelled route, Hwy 99 will briefly connect you to the Fraser River again near historic Lillooet, then southwest through the Coast Mountains to Pemberton, onto Whistler and along the coast from Squamish to Vancouver on the Sea to Sky Highway.

The alternative more travelled route from Cache Creek is the junction point for Highway #1, the Trans Canada Highway, and your return east or continue south through the Fraser Canyon with communities like Boston Bar, Hell's Gate, Hope and on into Vancouver.

The [Northern Woods & Water Highway](#) provides the opportunity to see more of western Canada. The highway from Winnipeg to Dawson Creek is approximately 2500 km; another 1200 km will take you through two mountain ranges, along the Fraser River and to the west coast in BC. Take your time and enjoy Canada's great variety of scenery. See the Prairie Provinces through a different lens.

Dale Harrison is president of the [Northern Woods & Water Highway Association](#). He travelled and published the Northern Woods & Water Highway Guide for five years in the late 80's and early 90's.

Editor's Note: If you missed Part 1 of this story, you can read it by [clicking here](#).