

# ALSEK RIVER

## HIMALAYAN LANDSCAPE IN NORTH AMERICA



The Tatshenshini/Alsek rivers rated #1 river trip in the world in National Geographics "Journey of a lifetime"!

FLOATING PAST THE SURGING TWEEDSMUIR GLACIER ABOVE TURNBACK CANYON. TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO



### TRIP DETAILS

Approximately 205 kilometres (128 miles) with an elevation drop of 579 metres (1,899 feet).

### SKILL LEVEL

Beginner – *The guides navigate with oars & paddling by participants is optional for those who want more activity! For more information, see the FAQs at [nahanni.com](http://nahanni.com)*

### RENDEZVOUS POINT

High Country Inn

### DURATION

12 river days

### TRIP TYPE

Raft

## YOUR TRIP

From the headwaters of the Alsek River, Yukon Territory, to Dry Bay, Alaska, in the traditional lands of the Champagne Aishik First Nation:

→ Flows through the world's largest non-polar ice cap with some of the world's most active glaciers (see it while you still can).

→ Rafters float through two stunning, iceberg-filled lakes.

→ Part of the world's largest biological preserve.

→ Bald eagles and grizzlies abound. World's tallest coast range mountain (Mount Fairweather – also BC's tallest).

→ Flows through the Yukon, British Columbia, Alaska, Glacier Bay National Park, Tatshenshini-Alsek Provincial Park, to its denouement at the Gulf of Alaska.

→ Great hiking with abundant wildlife and wildflowers.

→ The Upper Alsek flows through Kluane National Park and Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and courses through a Himalaya-like landscape.

→ The Upper and Full Alsek include a spectacular helicopter portage over Turnback Canyon and the surging Tweedsmuir Glacier.

→ Became well known in the late 1980s after a controversial, proposed copper mine and road in the heart of the region were stopped.

The Tatshenshini and Alsek form a "Y" where the Tatshenshini flows into the Alsek. The upper portion of each is dramatically different, so you want to keep both on your list.

# ITINERARY

## DAY 0 – WHITEHORSE, YUKON

*This is the first date listed for your trip.*

Your journey north from your home will be a refreshing departure. You will fly over the largest expanse of wilderness in the world with stunning views on cloudless days. Passing through quieter and friendlier airports, you will begin to immerse yourself in the wilderness experience that is about to unfold.

This is the arrival day and is the first day listed for your trip. The scheduled flights arrive in Whitehorse throughout the day. Aim to arrive by 6pm. Please make your way to your hotel and plan to rendezvous with your guides in the lobby of the High Country Inn at 8pm for an orientation meeting with the trip leader. There will be a chance for last-minute questions concerning clothing, gear, packing and other details.

Whitehorse is a great place to spend a few extra days and there are local day hikes, bike trails, canoe rentals, dog mushing kennels to visit as well as a National Historic Site and several museums. Renting a car for a day trip through the White Pass to Skagway, Alaska is a popular outing.

## DAY 1 – ALPINE SCENIC DRIVE TO THE RIVER

Following breakfast (*not covered*), we will meet in the hotel lobby at 8am and will embark on our journey down the Alaska Highway for the 1½-hour van ride to the small community of Haines Junction. There we will visit the Kluane National Park Interpretive Centre.

The next leg of our journey will take us through the stunning scenery of the Haines Pass to U.S. customs. Our objective is the U.S. Customs Post at Pleasant Camp where we clear U.S. Customs before the trip. You may be tempted to have an afternoon nap during the drive, but the scenery will keep you riveted! Later in the afternoon we arrive at the edge of Kluane National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Site where we transfer to a four-wheel drive vehicle waiting to take us the final 20 kilometres along a rugged trail to our waiting rafts.

As the 4x4 fords streams and bumps across meadows, we often see our first bears of the trip. Mountain goat and Dall sheep are frequently sighted on the hillsides above. The valley floor is also excellent habitat for moose, beaver, songbirds, terns, swans and other waterfowl.

The “road” fades out at the braided alluvial fan of Serpentine Creek. Here the rafts are rigged and waiting on the banks of the Dezadeash River. You will have time to make final adjustments to your pack and the guides will introduce you to river travel. finer points of the day’s journey.

Here, on the edge of Kluane National Park, you embark on a gentle piece of river, winding through the broad valley, as it flows into Alsek Pass. Initially the Dezadeash River, one of the two sources of the Alsek, flows quite slowly. We carry paddles (in addition to the guides’ oars) and anyone who desires to pitch in and build up an appetite for the delicious meals to come is welcome to do so. Camp location will be determined by the prevailing conditions.

## DAYS 2 & 3 – TO LOWELL LAKE & GLACIER

In the morning we will find that the river is very slow moving for the first few miles, but after the confluence with the Kaskawulsh River, the resulting swift-moving river is named Alsek.

This is an interesting portion of river that flows past ancient lava flows, unusual rock formations, dunes of windblown glacial tills known as



PIETER VENEMA PHOTO





loes. We will keep our eyes peeled for bear sightseeing as we float down river. Along the way we stop for walks to viewpoints, a waterfall, and a grizzly bear rubbing tree or some other interesting feature. The guides will tell you of the dramatic event in the 1870's when this portion of the river was flooded by a massive lake, caused by the surging Lowell Glacier blocking the river.

The lake flooded hundreds of square kilometres. When the dam broke, the ensuing flood was greater than the volume of the Amazon. Throughout the valley you will see remarkable remnants of the lake and flood. The horizon is dominated with rocky glaciated peaks.

In the afternoon of Day 3, the river quickens and in the last couple of exciting kilometres we encounter the trip's first rapids as the river washes around boulders left behind by the glaciers. Here we get our first view of the white tops of icebergs in the distance.

Though presently receding, massive Lowell Glacier still spills into the lake that is carved out at its toe. Like the other glaciers of the St. Elias Mountains, Lowell is a remnant of the last ice age. Lowell Lake is an iceberg-filled spectacle similar to the

larger one on the lower Alsek made famous by books and posters. We camp on the flats at the base of the cliffs against which Lowell Glacier, once pressed during a surge, sealing off the Alsek's flow. This is a natural place to spend an extra day to hike or just soak in the sights.

#### DAY 4 – LAYOVER AT GOATHERD MOUNTAIN & HIKE

For two nights we camp next to Lowell Lake with Goatherd Mountain rising up behind us. This is a superb destination for hikers – truly a world-class hike with fantastic wildlife.

Even those who don't choose to go to the top can get a marvelous view from its base. One can look out over the jewel-like icebergs of Lowell Lake and see 50 or more kilometres up the ice falls of Lowell Glacier to 13,905-foot Mount Kennedy (named after JFK and climbed by his brother, Bobby).

Other peaks surrounding Kennedy – Alverstone and Hubbard – rise up to over 15,000 feet: Mount Logan, Canada's highest and second in North America only to McKinley, lies farther back at 19,850 feet.

Goatherd Mountain is well-named

as it is home to over 100 mountain goats, some of which graze the slopes right above camp. Ptarmigan, horned larks and pipits nest and feed in the high country.

Golden eagles soar over the slopes looking for unwary Arctic ground squirrels. A rainbow of wildflowers carpets the alpine meadows. The guides will split up to accompany some to the top of the plateau, others to the lower flanks and meadows, and still others for a ramble along the gentle iceberg-studded shoreline of Lowell Lake.

#### DAY 5 & 6 – ICEBERGS, RAPIDS AND DOWN RIVER INTO ALSEK CANYONS

On Day 5 we break camp after enjoying the culinary delights for which we are famous, whipped up by our talented guides. We continue through Lowell Lake, paddling and rowing through a maze of icebergs, which have calved off from the face of Lowell Glacier. The bergs range in size from minute to massive – some are the size of entire apartment blocks! Periodically one rolls over with a resounding thunder, exposing its freshly-washed, sapphire blue underside.

After about four kilometres, the lake narrows and becomes a river



THE HELICOPTER FLIGHT OVER TWEEDSMUIR GLACIER AND TURNBACK CANYON IS A HIGHLIGHT OF EVERY TRIP. GARY FINLEY PHOTO

again with its characteristic speed. The bigger bergs get hung up in the shallows of Lowell Lake's outlet but many smaller ones (up to the size of a van) can escape and we may bob and weave downstream with them.

The major rapids of the trip are encountered below Lowell Lake. There is one tight spot where, in most water levels, the guides will line the boats or run them through empty. It's easy to walk downstream a few hundred metres and meet the boats once they've negotiated this spot. Don't worry, you won't have missed anything. The fun rapids continue below.

Shortly below these rapids we meet the first drainage of the Fisher Glacier on the right. Here the terrain begins to close in and the river valley becomes more confined. Waterfalls plummet off the rugged mountainsides as the river races underneath. It's a very imposing, awe-inspiring landscape. A number of fun rapids and wave trains await downstream!

A second layover day is spent at a camp somewhere below the Bates River. There are a number of possible layover camps well-positioned for alpine hikes, glacier walks or simply relaxing with a great view.

About a day before Turnback Canyon we leave the Yukon Kluane National Park and enter British Columbia's Tatshenshini-Alsek Wilderness Park.

In June 1993 the BC portion of the Alsek and Tat was preserved with the declaration of the Tatshenshini-Alsek Wilderness Park and has since been designated a United Nations World Heritage Site. The Tat-Alsek watershed is not only the heartland of the largest protected wilderness area on the continent, it is the largest in the world.

#### DAY 7 – MORE WHITEWATER TO TURNBACK CANYON & TWEEDSMUIR GLACIER

Massive wave trains and stunning scenery fill this day. The objective for Day 7 is to position ourselves to rendezvous with the helicopter for the aerial portage over the glacier on the morning of Day 8. We usually endeavour to get down to our camp at Tweedsmuir Glacier, above Turnback early enough to allow a few hours exploring the start of Turnback Canyon that afternoon or evening.

Turnback consists of several kilometres of some of the ugliest, most tortured and turbulent whitewater you'll see anywhere. Although it has been kayaked a "handful" of times in low water, it is

no place for a raft. For this reason we employ the exciting "heli-portage" strategy the following day! After dinner the guides deflate the rafts and consolidate the gear for the heli-portage. This camp is spectacular, with a dramatic and imposing sapphire-blue glacier hanging off the nearby mountains. You will cozy up in your tent in the comforts that are the hallmark of our journeys.

#### DAY 8 – HELI-PORTAGE FLIGHT OVER TURNBACK CANYON

Immediately after breakfast a helicopter will rendezvous with us and begin the heli-portage over the canyon and glacier, one of the highlights of the trip.

It takes four or five hours to shuttle everyone and everything over the canyon. The incredible views of glaciers and canyons from the helicopter make this one of the grand highlights of the trip. After lunch we get back on the river and float down to a spectacular camp right at the confluence of the Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers.

At this point the two rivers swell to stretch nearly three miles wide, surging through braided channels that criss-cross the valley. The resulting union bears the name Alsek

THE LOWELL GLACIER UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN ON  
LOWELL LAKE. BRUCE KIRKBY PHOTO





River and soon enters the State of Alaska and Glacier Bay National Park.

## DAY 9, 10 & 11 – INTO ALASKA - MOUNTAIN SPIRES & GLACIERS

For those who have already travelled the Tat-Alsek with us, this is an opportunity to revisit the spectacular 55 miles of the lower Alsek from the Tat-Alsek confluence down. For those new to the lower Alsek, it's a chance to see the many hanging glaciers of the Pentice Ice Cap and the Brabazon Range.

On a giant river bend named Kodak Corner, we are encircled by peaks in a stunning amphitheatre of glacial ice and rock. From this point we view the crystal-blue hues of Walker Glacier, its ancient ice, deep crevasses and jagged seracs and ice falls.

Floating downstream we have a view of more than 20 glaciers as we make our way down to the place where the Alsek and Grand Plateau Glaciers come together at the river to form a mile wide face of ice.

Alsek Lake was formed by the gouging action of the glaciers resulting in the largest lake found anywhere in Glacier Bay National Park. The only thing breaking the mystical spell of the iceberg-filled

lake with the mountain backdrop is the frequent explosive crescendos of calving glaciers spawning multi-ton icebergs. Observe Mt Fairweather in the distance, over 15,000 ft in height. Enjoying a hike above the lake is a delight to all of the senses.

## DAY 12 – DRY BAY, GULF OF ALASKA & FLIGHT BACK TO THE YUKON

The final leg of our memorable trip is from Alsek Lake to Dry Bay on the Gulf of Alaska. At the tiny commercial fishing enclave we are met by small charter planes for the flight back to Whitehorse with a plane load of memories.

On the way to Dry Bay the Alsek passes through a transition from the tallest peaks on the continent to the broad, flat Pacific coastline.

In this valley we have a vertical distance of over 15,000 feet between us and the highest peaks, an overall elevation difference greater than that of the Himalayas.

At the Dry Bay air strip the aircraft will pick us up and fly us back through the Coast and St. Elias Ranges to Whitehorse. Upon landing in Whitehorse, we clear Canadian customs. After unloading you will be transported to your hotel.

Following welcome showers, the group may want to gather at a local eating establishment. Whitehorse is a lively town and it will not be difficult to find a way to enjoy the evening!

*(Accommodation and dinner in Whitehorse not included).*

## DAY 13 – HOMEWARD BOUND

This is the last date listed for your trip.

After goodbyes and a last look around Whitehorse, we will head for home with a cargo of fond and spectacular memories. *(We recommend you consider another day in Whitehorse in case of a rain delay from Dry Bay).*

*Please note:* The above is a tentative itinerary and has been designed with much thought to capitalize on the most scenic and exciting parts of the river, while making time on other sections. Your guides will adjust the schedule to make the best use of river and weather conditions.

Please ensure you have a warm winter jacket, ie down coat or other “puffy” jacket. Robust rain gear (top and bottom) are provided as are lifejackets and dry suits (not required every day). Rain boots are



FLOATING ON ANCIENT ICE FROM THE ST. ELIAS RANGE ALSEK RIVER, KLUANE NATIONAL PARK, YUKON  
KALUM KO PHOTO

recommended, we can rent these if you prefer not to travel with them; see more on our 'Details & Equipment list.

At the fish packing plant in Dry Bay we will be picked up by a bush plane and flown back to Whitehorse. Be sure to have proof of citizenship with you for the U.S. and Canadian customs.

Meals and pre- and post-trip accommodation in Whitehorse are your responsibility – the cost is not included in the expedition fee. We have attached a list of Whitehorse hotels.

Breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks are included from the Day 1 lunch until the final river meal. Any other meals off the river are your responsibility.

## SUGGESTED READING

*Your guides will carry a small reference library which include field reference books. Following are some books for winter reading:*

1. **A Naturalist's Guide to the Tatshenshini-Alsek** by Heather Hamilton
2. **A Naturalist's Guide to the Arctic** by E.C.Pielou
3. **After the Ice Age – The Return of Life to Glaciated North America** by E.C. Pielou

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PANORAMIC VIEW WITH LOWELL GLACIER IN BACKGROUND. DOUG AND CATHY HULL PHOTO