

# This place makes you feel vulnerable

By Robert Christiansen Ashford

The neon sign in front of the motel said it all: -18 degrees C. This was the coldest I had ever been, and it was only going to get colder.

I wanted a challenge, something different, and while the allure of gold mining had tweaked my interest, (it is still very big in these parts, especially in the Klondike and Yukon territories), my aim was simply to drive to Alaska in winter.

If ever a highway should be experienced, the Alcan is it. Long thin empty roads covered in thick ice stretch into stunning vistas and blinding whiteouts. Built due to the threat of a Japanese invasion in 1942 by the US military, it runs for 1378 miles from Dawson Creek British Columbia to Delta Junction Alaska. During the summer months, big rigs and heavy tourist traffic churn the highway up, and road construction is constant. Winter shrouds the entire landscape in isolation. This place makes you feel vulnerable.

Other than snow-plows, semi-trailers and the occasional traveler, traffic was scarce. This is not I-5 up the West Coast of the US, this is the Alcan. Cell phones rarely work up here, but we stuffed our Rav4 with a small arsenal of survival gear consisting of road flares,

extra food and water, glacier goggles, blankets, shovels, a stove with fuel and matches, and the essential 'Milepost.' This publication is invaluable, especially during the winter. It documents practically every gas station, motel, tourist activity and sightseeing adventure along the northern routes in Canada and Alaska.

As we headed through British Columbia, we began to encounter ice clouds, hovering millimeters above the road surface. They looked like ghost snakes slithering across the road from strong winds.

Our little vehicle was pounded most of the way up. An occasional headlight in the rearview mirror or taillight ahead did provide a degree of imagined security but even this could be the cause of concern.

Loggers own this highway in winter. They hammer along the near empty roads kamikaze style. If an eighteen wheeler appears, your best bet is to pray they don't slide.

Something else we found out while on our travels along the Alcan, is when arriving in a small town (often just a gas station), with our knees crossed and expectations of the lonely gas station attendant eagerly awaiting our business, we found instead a 'closed for the winter' sign. On occasion, the appearance was clearly more permanent. Be practical in winter. If the gas station is open, fill up, get coffee, and do not pass up the opportunity of an indoor toilet. Trust me, trying to pee in wind chill minus 25 takes some serious desperation.

The scenery throughout western Canada is stunning. Huge deep blue ice formations, thirty feet and more in height stream down rock faces at the roadside. Moose and small herds of caribou stray onto the highway to lick salt from the road surface, making every blind corner a potential heart gripping wreck. As we reached a high point on the road one early afternoon, the sun touched the horizon and flooded the valley and snow drenched forest in front with a warm golden red glow. It was a picture perfect memory of the trip I will never forget.

Canada offers some jaw crunching tortuous drives, many down long steep slick windy roads. One such place was known locally as 'suicide hill,' due to the number of vehicle crash fatalities on it. As we approached, all the truckers had stopped to put chains on their tires for grip. We had chains, but not knowing how steep the hill was, or how sharp the corners were, or how ineffective the low barriers overlooking tremendous steep sheer drops were, we headed down.

I will be honest, I was hovering between an out of body experience and a heart attack the whole way. It wasn't until we reached the ice encrusted iron bridge over Toad River at the bottom, that I began to breathe again.

That one hill, about 5 minutes of our entire trip became a constant reminder of the hazards this journey presented.

One of the pleasures of driving in winter even after a long day, was the comforting sight of golden light streaming from the windows of a Inn in the snow-lit darkness ahead. Toad River Lodge had this appeal. Outside, everything was crisp, clear and frozen. A natural blue tint lit up the night air, making the snow glisten and strips of flickering green lights pulsed across the sky. The fish and chips weren't bad either, but anything hot tastes good after 12 hours behind the wheel.

Just north of Toad River is Laird Hot-springs. If you do nothing else on your winter journey but stop there, it will not be a wasted trip. Words fail to describe this place. About one quarter mile beyond the parking area was a silent frozen forest. The only sound was the crunching of snow under our boots as we walked deeper along a narrow path.

It was beautiful and eerie. The trees bent over, held by the excessive weight of ice and snow, and we could see thick plumes of steam rising from the springs through the ice-encrusted branches. The air was so cold within the forest that with each inhale, I felt my throat dry up and clench like I was being strangled.

The winter springs are visually spectacular. We stripped down to just swimwear in the changing rooms that were right alongside the springs, and clutching our shivering bodies, walked across the thick ice on the deck. It was a savoring moment as we sank into the 108-degree water. This was a moment I will never forget. It was indescribable. Hot pockets of bubbling water reached 126 degrees causing burning pins and needles to erupt

over my skin. It made me feel like I was being boiled alive and I loved it. I'm told in summer the springs are very popular. In winter, the place was practically empty.

The Yukon is block-heater country which we didn't have. The temperature was 33 degrees below at Watson Lake which was not unusual for the first week of February. A week earlier, it had been 42 below.

We stopped here overnight. As we walked to our room, I saw all the other vehicles in the parking area plugged in to electrical sockets. It was at that moment that I realized not having a block heater in the Yukon in winter was tantamount to vehicular suicide. Because of this, at 2am I got up out of my warm bed to start the car. It was bloody freezing. I prayed for a few seconds, hoping the engine hadn't frozen in place, and turned the key. After several anxious turns, she slowly chugged to life. I left it running for the rest of the night. This was the only time on our trip where I had trouble starting the car.

The next morning, I pulled on a heavy down jacket to fill up at the local gas station. Try standing still holding a metal gas pump nozzle in minus 35 degrees with a bastard wind whipping at your face after just getting out of bed. My nostrils froze which is a really weird experience, and my eyelashes stuck together which is even worst. A thick heavy cloud flowed out my mouth upon each exhale like I was smoking a big Cuban cigar.

Every time I inhaled, my throat would dry up forcing me to cough. I don't know why I didn't wear gloves, but I would recommend them. My hands changed color from healthy

to a shade of orange and blue, and the tips of my fingers began to ache as if someone had hit them with a hammer. Now *this* was cold.

Just over the Canada Alaska border is Tok. For whatever reason, I liked Tok. It could have been the exhilaration of making it to Alaska, or maybe it was the hot pizza at Fast Eddy's, something about the place made our stay enjoyable. Tok was also our final stop along the Alcan highway. From there we headed past the Wrangell mountains, and the stunning Matanuska glacier in the Chugach mountains until finally making it onto the frost damaged streets of Anchorage.

Traveling along the Alcan highway, through the beauty of British Columbia and remoteness of the Yukon and Klondike and into Alaska, has reawakened something within me that had for a time grown weary. The gold rush may be over, but a spell binding fervor still permeates from the silent abandoned mines, within the rivers and mountains, and offers us all a piece of the fabled pioneering spirit of adventure. It may be buried deep inside us, but we all still yearn for it.

