

Into the Tombstones:

A Journey to the Arctic

Story and photos by John D'Onofrio

I first heard about Tombstone Territorial Park in northern Canada a few years ago. What I heard intrigued me.

The park is brand new; it was created in 1998, and its management plan - which enabled it to begin operations - only won approval in 2009. The signs saying “Welcome to Tombstone” went up last August.

Located in the northern Yukon Territory, the Tombstone Range has been described as “the Patagonia of Canada” for its collection of soaring monoliths rising above the treeless tundra - an otherworldly landscape of harsh beauty. The park consists of wilderness on a truly epic scale and is home to a virtually untouched ecosystem that includes grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines and caribou. Its 2200 square kilometers boasts a single hiking trail - the trail to Grizzly Lake - and even this is more a rough and tumble route over rocks and ridges than a trail in the usual sense of the word. Wild with a capital W.

And amongst a select cadre of autumn color cognoscenti, the Tombstones are quietly emerging as a world-class destination for brilliant fall colors. But presently, this park remains little-known and little-visited. Facilities are minimal. The chance to explore this epic landscape before it was “discovered” was irresistible.

And so, with my old travelling pal Godfrey Winfield, I hit the road north for the 2,000 mile drive from Bellingham to the Grizzly Lake trailhead.



Tombstone Mountain and Mount Monolith on the trail into the heart of the Tombstone Range

Into the Tombstones

Three and a half days later, suffering from serious road fatigue, we found ourselves heading north on the Dempster ‘Highway’, Canada’s northern-most road (see page 36). It was early evening when the Tombstones came into view, like the Hallelujah Chorus, off to the west. An amazing - and sobering - sight. From a distance, it was easy to see how the mountains got their Anglo name - the sheer rock towers surely resemble massive tombstones, a giant’s graveyard. The Gwich’in people, ancestral inhabitants of these isolated mountains, called them *Ddhal Ch’el*, which translates roughly as “among the sharp, ragged, rocky mountains”. No kidding.

The next morning we visited the

Tombstone Interpretive Center to secure hiking permits. The facility, like the park, is brand new - an off-the-grid wonder of timber and stone. To get a permit, it was necessary to sign a waiver

Our route would take us up onto Grizzly Ridge before dropping beside Grizzly Creek into the Grizzly Valley and finally reaching Grizzly Lake. I was glad that I’d brought the bear spray.

acknowledging that if we didn’t return, no one would come looking for us. A nice touch, we thought.

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At the trailhead, we hoisted our backpacks under clear blue skies and started up through a forest of brilliant yellow birch trees. Before long we found ourselves at the upper edge of the tree line, ascending a rocky alpine ridge, views widening with each step upward. All around us the sub-arctic wilderness was a blaze of color – the yellow forests yielding to deep red tundra where the ridges climbed out of the valley of the North Klondike River.

We traversed the top of the serpentine ridge, climbing through notches and side-hilling on loose rocks. In the distance to the west we began to get glimpses of the dark towers that encircled Grizzly Lake. Rising like



Sunrise illuminates Grizzly Lake

the mountains of Mordor, Tombstone Mountain and Mount Monolith crowded the sky.

After more than nine hours on the ridge, the route descended to golden meadows, bustling with marmots. Another exhausting hour and a half over slippery lichen-covered boulders brought us to the austere shores of the lake in its cold and treeless cirque beneath vertical walls of stone. We had it all to ourselves.

Beneath the Towers

The immensity and primordial emptiness of the place was overwhelming; wilderness on a scale that we don't often get to experience. It was a place where conversations were held in hushed tones.

We spent the next few days exploring the wild vertical topography around

Grizzly Lake - climbing scree slopes to high and lonely ledges, watching rainbows shimmer over shattered grey rocks, silently observing as the sunrises and sunsets bathed the epic landscapes with luminescent light.

Wandering through knee-high 'for-

ests' of dwarf birch, across mossy-green bogs and through fields of played-out fireweed, we were reminded of summer's brief seductive blossoming here just below the arctic circle. From the high places, the great towers loomed,

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Rainbows over Grizzly Valley.

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Road to Adventure: The Dempster Highway



North of the Arctic Circle, the Richardson Mountains rise above vast taiga forest

Twenty years ago, I had the pleasure of travelling to the arctic coast of Alaska via the Dalton “Highway”, the 400-mile long gravel haul road built to construct the Alaska pipeline that stretches to the Beaufort Sea. Hiking in the Brooks Range and experiencing the vast limitless wilderness of the Arctic coastal plain have been treasured memories ever since.

So when contemplating a journey to the Tombstone Range in the northern Yukon Territory, the Dempster Highway caught my eye. Besides the Haul Road, the Dempster - Canada’s northern-most road - is the only other road in North America that crosses the Arctic Circle. Beginning in the northern Yukon Territory near Dawson, the road continues past the Tombstones, winding its way north for 450 miles, crossing the Arctic Circle and entering the Northwest Territories before ending at Inuvik, an Inuvialuit village on the fabled MacKenzie River Delta.

The first gas station is 230 miles up the road (a surreal motel/café/highway maintenance facility called Eagle Plains). These miles are blessedly devoid of civilization. Other than the Tombstone Territorial Park interpretive center and the odd outfitters cabin, there are virtually no other structures of any kind along the way.

So after a spectacular hike in the Tombstone Range, near the southern terminus of the Dempster, it seemed only proper to explore farther north

on this lonely road. The route will take us up the valleys of storied rivers - the North Klondike, Blackstone, Ogilvie, and Peel; rivers that, for all intents and purposes, are unchanged from ancient times, save the wearing of water on stone and the almost unimaginable weight of winters that settle over these northern lands for most of the year.

The road, at least as far as the border with the Northwest Territories, is devoid of towns, and largely empty of people. It’s surface is gravel and dirt. Walk in any direction and you’re on your own. North of Tombstone Park, the road traverses the treeless Blackstone Uplands, a vast area of tundra and rolling hills. Kettle ponds are scattered about the landscape and the area is popular with *alces alcesgigas*, the tundra moose.

As we travel north along the Blackstone River, the Ogilvie Mountains rise in the distance. Chalk-white, these bare, rounded peaks hang spectrally against

the northern horizon. The play of light and shadow on their slopes is a visual spectacle. Camping along the Dempster is as easy as pulling off the road on any number of gravel tracks that inevitably lead to the banks of one of the rivers. Solitude is a given. So is the relentless wind.

Darkness finally comes and the Aurora Borealis dances in the sky, shimmering red, blue, green, yellow among the stars. Under such conditions, sleep is not easily contemplated.

North of the Ogilvies, the road climbs to the top of Eagle Plains, a high plateau with panoramic views back at the white mountains and ahead to the Richardson Range. We stop here for showers and gas. *Everyone* stops

for gas at Eagle Plains. It’s the only gas station along a 570 mile stretch of highway.

Continuing north, we cross the Eagle River, it’s banks a yellow blaze of aspens, and drive through vast landscapes of spindly black spruce - the taiga forest, land of little sticks. The scale is hard to internalize. A roadside sign marks the crossing of the Arctic Circle. Beyond Rock Creek (an actual campground here, out of the wind), the road climbs into the Richardsons and roiling clouds. We enter the Northwest Territories in a



The Aurora Borealis

serious blow, visibility down to a hundred feet. We turn around at Wright Pass, wheels spinning in the mud. Time to head home, which from these lonely mountains, seems very far away indeed.

black as midnight. And the colors: cadmium yellow, cardinal red, deep magenta, burnt umber; a landscape that could've been painted by Van Gogh.

The weather changed every couple of hours: sunshine, clouds, rain, hail, snow, sunshine again. When the rains blew in, the veiled peaks took on the sublime appearance of a Chinese brush painting, hard edges gone, a setting for dreams.

On the third day, a party of hearty Germans arrived at the lake, their oompah bravado and gung-ho enthusiasm quickly muted by the scale of the landscape. They ate quietly from foil pouches. "We are eating moose flesh", one of them told me, and sure enough, they'd brought packaged moose, procured in Sweden.

As dusk fell, a gentle rain began to fall and the wind blew like Lester Young's horn through the rocks; a lonely and forlorn song, a lament and an anthem.

In the pre-dawn morning everything was iced up and I tried to keep warm waiting with my camera and tripod for the sunrise to reach the lake, its



Grizzly Lake

surface a mirror broken by protruding rocks the color of ghosts. The arrival of the sun bathed the cirque in radiant,

golden light and the chill was instantly forgotten. I lingered on the shore of the lake, reluctant to leave, savoring the play of light and dancing cloud shadows on the soaring walls of stone.

We loaded our packs and climbed back up onto the ridge for the journey back to the trailhead, turning often for long, luscious looks back at the towering monoliths. In my life I've had the exceedingly good fortune to experience some of North America's premier mountain landscapes - the Canadian Rockies, Denali and the Alaska Range, the Brooks Range, the Sierras, and of course our own beloved North Cascades. But between you and me, the Tombstones really peg the meter.

Just don't tell anyone.

Check out an expanded photo gallery of images from the Tombstone Range and the northern Yukon at AdventuresNW.com

Portions of this story previously appeared in *Cascadia Weekly*.

eARTH *The art of nature*



Anita K. Boyle's Northwest-inspired Assemblages

My art often uses a sense of place as though it were a language. The earthy, muted colors of the Northwest's tangled underbrush can be found in my palette. Last year, I created a series of assemblages made for, and from, the Pacific Northwest—inspired by being rooted here for over fifty years. These artworks contain wasp nests, bullet casings, snail and robin shells, rusted metal, baling twine, discarded electrical components, pollen, as well as hand-made paper containing cattail and cottonwood fluff, pond scum and an entire bird's nest. Each detail becomes a representative of our rain-shadowed environment.

