

# mush it!

## a doctor rides with the dogs

The sound of howling dogs pierces the air. We're running late, but now I know we're on the right track. We run faster and our warm breath can be seen against the cool, crisp mountain air.

My sister and her husband are visiting from Ottawa and I had thought what better way to introduce them to "the wild west" than by going on a dog-sled adventure in BC's backcountry. I had envisioned a peaceful ride in the snow, being pulled by a few cuddly dogs on a sled, while happily enjoying some hot chocolate.

Our professional guides, Jack and Cindy, welcome us with large smiles and usher us to the side of the trees, away from the dogs as they jump up and down, pulling wildly at their chains.

"These are purebred Alaskan huskies. They know they're going to go for a run and they're excited," states Cindy.

"Who's going to be the driver?" asks Jack. "It's a lot of work and you need to keep control or you'll wipe out and hurt yourselves."

His words linger in the air. I was not banking on quite so much action or risk when I'd booked the tour.

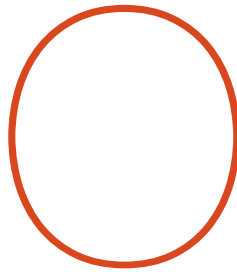
Jack shows us how to get the dogs running by a click of the tongue, how to encourage the dogs when going up hill by running along with them, and how to stop the sled by bearing down with all your weight.

All whilst talking, Jack and Cindy have picked the six dogs for each sled and hooked them up. I can't believe we're ready to race our very own team of Alaskan huskies. My husband Jonathan is the strong one, so I nominate him to be the driver and, incidentally, do all the work while I snuggle under a blanket in the sled (above).

Jonathan yells, "Mush!" and we're off. I feel the raw strength of the dogs as they lunge forward. The powder snow flies in the air and the dogs yelp out to one another, howling as they run free. At every turn, I watch their paws sink into the glistening white snow. I feel the adrenaline rushing in my veins, and I decide that this is even better than hot chocolate.

—Dr. Lili Nasserri

IF YOU GO > Dr. Nasserri's dog-sledding adventure was at Sun Peaks Resort in central BC. > [sunpeaksresort.com/activities](http://sunpeaksresort.com/activities); [activities@sunpeaksresort.com](mailto:activities@sunpeaksresort.com) MORE > See "if you go" on page 24 for where to mush in the Yukon.



nce you've spent any time in the winter in the Yukon, you're entitled to some bragging rights. Especially in February, when the nights last 17 hours, the mercury can dip to  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and the Yukon Quest is in full swing. This is when you'll bump into down-wrapped figures lumbering the snowy streets of Dawson, curls of misty breath following everyone. And add to all that human exhalation the dogs'...

Dogs seem to outnumber people here (Dawson's population is 1,889) at the halfway point of what's called "the toughest race on the planet." The Yukon Quest is 1,600 km (10 days, 2 hours, 37 minutes in the fastest time) through the frozen wilderness between Fairbanks, Alaska, and Whitehorse, Yukon, on the old "highways of the North"—historic winter routes followed by prospectors, adventurers, mail and supply carriers travelling between the gold fields of the Klondike and the Alaska interior. It was the only means of travel a century ago, and it's still a huge part of the Yukon today.

The start and finish of the Quest alternates between Fairbanks and Whitehorse, but the place to get immersed in the race—and the winter bravado—is Dawson. Fans travel far to witness this spectacle of dogs and their mushers braving the harsh journey. And to experience the glittering beauty of winter this far north. There's nothing like it. It's even better if you love dogs. (Fittingly, the Yukon Coat of Arms is surmounted by a malamute, or husky, standing on a mound of snow.)

A 36-hour layover in Dawson means mushers check in, rest and fuel up, get updates on trail conditions and mingle with dog handlers, media (from all over the world), locals and groupies—all with sleepy, wind-burnt faces, and all clad in fleece and covered in dog hair.

The celebrity and mushing guru here is Alaskan Lance Mackey, four-time champion of the Yukon Quest (and two-time winner of the Iditarod, *and* the only musher to win both 1,600-km races back-to-back). As the first to check in to Dawson, he's also the prize winner of four ounces of gold nuggets (one of the previous year's nuggets graces his ear as a stud). But every musher here is a star—young, old, male, female, rookies and veterans alike.

Troops of followers trudge across the frozen Yukon River to the provincial campground that becomes base camp for all the dog teams. Spectators watch the teams come and go. Like the young German photographer from Munich. It's his first time in Canada—or anywhere this cold—and he loves it. It's not unusual to hear multi-lingual conversations on the icy river banks and snowy streets. A group of Italians ask a local volunteer about seeing Jack London's cabin while here. It's closed over winter, but a call is made and someone shows up to let the Italians in for an impromptu visit. Such is the Yukon hospitality.

The camaraderie continues at Bombay Peggy's, the go-to gathering place and watering hole (and former gold-rush era brothel). During Quest season you might sip on a Dog Ball Highball (just what it sounds like...) at the Night of Northern Naughtiness (a benefit to raise funds for the Dawson Humane Society). More merriment is found at The Pit, another bar and institution dating from 1901. And another festive spot: the Downtown Hotel, where mushers take advantage of a soft bed while tourists and neophytes swig the bar's famous and kitschy Sourtoe Cocktail (complete with another kind of appendage, this one human).

PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Snow clings to branches on the frozen banks of the Yukon River; A sled dog peers out from a kennel atop a pick-up; A snowy Dawson street; The vast Yukon as seen from the Air North flight between Whitehorse and Dawson; Ice inukshuk on the ice bridge over the Yukon River; Typical house in Dawson; Icicles cling to the beard of musher, Phil Joy, a contestant in the 2008 Yukon Quest. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Caribou and bison sausage makes gourmet picnic fare along the Dempster Highway; Iconic Downtown Hotel in "downtown" Dawson, home of the Sourtoe Cocktail; Trail up to the Midnight Dome; Sled dogs arrive at Dawson checkpoint in the Yukon Quest; Pick-ups, kennels, and dog sleds are a common sight during the Quest; Sign outside the ribald Pit Bar, a local institution since 1901; Moosehide mittens handmade by local First Nation artist Eldrea Christiansen; Dawson's go-to bike shop, run by Tim Gunter, keeps cyclists pedalling year-round; Winter along the Dempster Highway is stunning and like nowhere else—a view towards Tombstone Territorial Park.