

TRAVEL

The friendly ghosts at the end of the road

by DAN RUBINSTEIN
For Southam Newspapers

HYDER, Alaska - The rain has been falling intermittently for two days in Hyder, Alaska and puddles of murky brown water are starting to resemble small ponds on the grassy grounds of aptly named Camp Run-a-Muck.

I'm sitting under the tin roof of the campground's picnic shelter, eating a can of bean soup while staring at an enchanting vista of misty green snow-capped mountains. On the wall of the shelter there's a sign informing visitors that the park is dedicated to the memory of George W. Tullos, 1959-2000.

After finishing dinner I take my book into the cozy hotel pub next door.

Ordering a pint, I ask the bartender who Tullos was. "Oh," the ballcap-topped barkeep responds, "he was just a guy who worked here."

"What happened to him?" I inquire.

"A bear got him," he answers matter-of-factly.

"What . . . happened?" I pry.

"The bear got him," he repeats.

Turns out Tullos was doing some work behind the pub one night and had the misfortune of surprising a hungry (or angry) grizzly.

My tent is behind the pub.

"Don't worry," the bartender says, noticing my look of concern (or alarm) as he affixes a lemon wedge to the rim of my wheat beer. "He wasn't camping or nothing, he just worked here."

Situated at the tip of the Portland Canal, a 145-kilometre finger of saltwater curling inland from the Pacific, Hyder is a quirky, idiosyncratic town that feels like the backdrop of the surrealistic Alaska-based TV show Northern Exposure.

Horses wander the unpaved and deeply-rutted main street. Nostalgic, kitschy songs like North to Alaska and Springtime in Alaska clang out of a souvenir shop's tinny speakers 24 hours a day. Locals are nonchalant about killer grizzlies.

Hyder, population 100, a community that bills itself as the friendliest ghost town in Alaska, is literally at the end of the road.

A spur called Highway 37A leads west into town from British Columbia's mighty, desolate 733-km Cassiar Highway, which splits off the Yellowhead Highway between Terrace and Smithers, B.C. and stretches north all the way to the Yukon.

Just before entering Hyder, you pass through its sister town, Stewart, B.C., Canada's most northerly ice-free port.

Its population four or five times larger than Hyder, Stewart is a modern community with paved roads, fine dining restaurants and a toaster museum featuring more than 500 different kinds of toasters (in a building that was once the home of nurse turned prospector turned customs agent Klondike Kate, who was never the brothel madame erroneously remembered in northern lore).

Hyder is definitely the more intriguing of the two towns. Even though it's in the United States, one doesn't have to pass through American customs to enter. You do have to clear Canadian customs upon returning to Stewart.

Such an anomaly is Hyder that the town observes B.C. time, not Alaska time, which is one hour slower. Businesses there also deal primarily in Canadian currency; if you buy something with American dollars, even if you're an Ameri-

can citizen, they'll still give you your change in loonies.

Despite the copious rains of the Pacific Northwest - locals say there are two seasons: winter and rain - Hyder and Stewart are by no means miserable places when wet. Indeed, there's so much to do, from hiking and fishing to museums and listening to oldtimers tell bear stories, they're a wonderful destination between May and October - and only a 15-hour drive from Edmonton.



Southam photos
The toaster museum above is in Stewart, B.C., Hyder's sister town. A boardwalk left, connects the wharf to the town of Hyder.

The history of both Hyder and Stewart is inextricably linked to the mines. A onetime refuge of the Nass River Indians, who came inland from the Pacific to escape the coastal Haidas, hunt birds and pick berries, the area was first explored by whites in 1896 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Prospectors and settlers arrived two years later. The Stewart brothers came in 1902 - Robert M. Stewart became the first postmaster - and three years later the town was adorned with their surname. Initially called Portland City, the American community was eventually renamed Hyder after Canadian mining engineer Frederick B. Hyder.

Gold and silver veins were discovered and drove the economy until the 1950s.

Tourism in Hyder is not about five-star hotels. It's about going into the Sealaska Inn's pub with the front door left wide open, the midnight sun making 11 p.m. feel like dusk, and watching a 10-year-old boy beat his father at the pool table with a bar full of locals shouting encouragement.

It's about going for meditative, serene strolls on the wooden road that leads to the Hyder pier, and watching the seals.

From the pier, looking west, the green mountains that line the fjord-like Portland Canal become greyer and greyer as they fade off into the horizon.

It may be raining, there may be grizzlies around, but the pub is warm and

dry, Neil Young is probably playing on the jukebox, and if you stand quietly on the pier long enough that playful seal studying you from a few feet away might just swim closer for a look at that stranger with an umbrella smiling in the twilight.

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