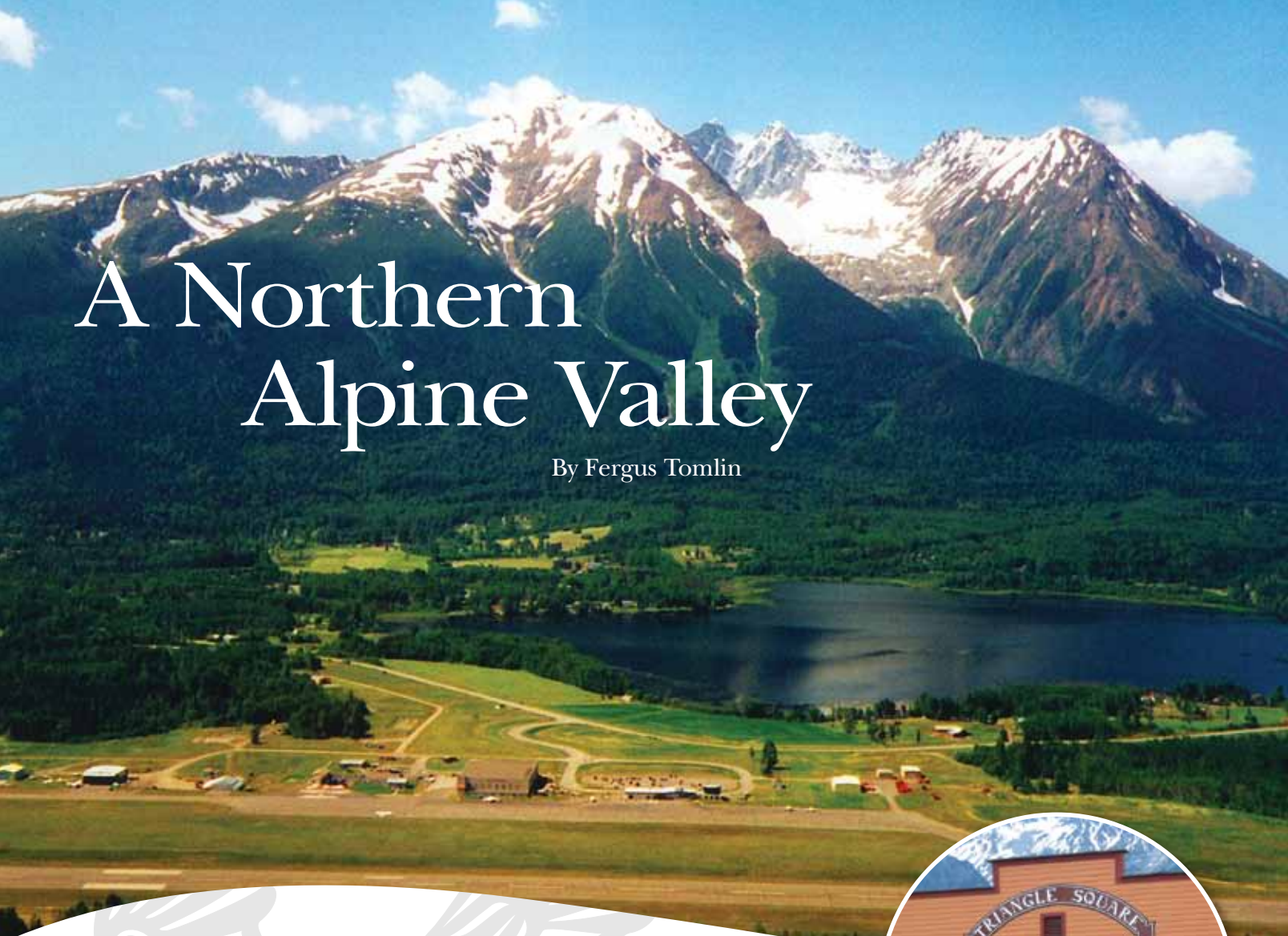


# A Northern Alpine Valley

By Fergus Tomlin



*On exiting the main doors of the airport for the first time, travelers immediately know they are in a land of alpine splendor. They stand facing a skyline defined by the magnificent Hudson Bay Mountain, which proudly showcases its very own glacier, with the tranquil Lake Kathlyn in the foreground.*

The Bulkley Valley in Northwest BC is a profusion of natural beauty, adventure and history.

An alpine paradise called the Bulkley Valley lies between the Hudson Bay and the Babine mountain ranges. It is located midpoint between Prince Rupert and Prince George on the highway 16 corridor in northwest BC. The highway runs through this alpine valley providing a panorama of stunning natural beauty and a multitude of opportunities to experience the joys of rural lifestyles in northern B.C..

Above: Smithers Airport facing majestic Hudson Bay Mountain nestling its own glacier with Lake Kathlyn in the foreground.

Photo credit: Smithers Regional Airport

Right: Old town Hazelton



This valley is home not only to pristine alpine meadows, world famous salmon bearing rivers, cross-country, downhill and heli-skiing, big and small game hunting, eco-hiking, river rafting and music festivals. It is also home to family farming, large and small scale forestry and mining operations, idyllic small towns and villages and a century of history waiting to be discovered by curious visitors.

Thanks to Hwy 16 meandering through it, the Bulkley Valley and its myriad pleasures are easily accessible to touring cyclists, motorists, RVs and motorcyclists.

With a little imagination one can easily mine the history of the Bulkley Valley and travel back in time. Fortunately, the Valley provides numerous avenues for



Above: Houston – Original one-room log school house and the first church built in Pleasant Valley are easily accessible alongside Hwy 16 in Houston.

Photo courtesy of Zach Czirfusz

stepping back in time such as telegraph trails, old prospectors' cabins and early 20th century architecture. Perhaps the easiest way to discover the histories and cultures of this alpine valley is to visit its many fascinating and intimate regional museums. These museums supply multiple embarkation points for a journey into the past along Hwy 16 as it winds through the natural splendor of the valley.

Situated a little to the southeast of the Bulkley Valley, the village of Burns Lake serves as a gateway leading not only to the Bulkley Valley itself but also the gateway to Francois Lake's waterways and landscapes of natural beauty. Although Francois Lake freezes solid every winter, the car ferry operates year round thanks to a bubble system laid along the lakebed of the ferry route which prevents freezing. The village of Burns Lake is sprinkled with delightful examples of pre 1939 buildings such as the 1924 Freemasons Hall at 3rd Ave and Centre St. The friendliness of its residents and its architecture combine to give the village a cozy, small town ambiance. Burns Lake is also home to The Lakes District Museum which holds the key to opening the



Above: Burns Lake – The village of Burns Lake is the southeast gateway to the Bulkley Valley and also the northern gateway to Tweedsmuir Park and the Lakes District area. A cozy enclave of pre-war northern architecture, culture and friendly people.

Photo courtesy of Frank Bergen



Above: Moricetown – Traditional First Nations fishing techniques similar to this 1932 photo are still practised every summer at the Bulkley Valley River gorge in Moricetown.

Photo courtesy of Bulkley Valley Museum

history of Tweedsmuir Park and the British aristocratic family it is named after. Burns Lake is the northern gateway to Tweedsmuir Park, one of the biggest and most splendid of natural reserves in BC which extends west towards the coastal community of Bella Coola. The museum also houses the regional archives, an eclectic collection of local and international military artifacts and a 1920's operating room among its treasure chest of historic displays. Burns Lake may be a village but it is a metropolis of discoveries for the imaginative traveler.

Heading west from Burns Lake along Hwy 16 the observant traveler will notice the encroachment of snow capped mountains and a slight but steady rise in elevation on the approach to Houston, the first town at the southern end of the Bulkley Valley. Houston's visitor's centre located alongside Hwy 16 features perhaps the largest fly fishing rod in North America situated incongruously beside a restored, one-room log school house and a pioneer church. In its early days, the

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Above: Smithers – 1911 is the centenary of the first car to drive overland from the U.S. into the Bulkley Valley, P.E. Sands made the historic journey driving a Studebaker Flanders. This year Smithers, Telkwa and Old Hazelton museums celebrate this epic event as part of their Gasoline Valley extravaganza with eight exhibition sites throughout the valley.

Photo courtesy of Bulkley Valley Museum

Houston area was called Pleasant Valley for very good reasons. A slight detour onto the surrounding network of roads will reveal a rich and fertile countryside, forests and abandoned mine sites. It is no wonder Houston has produced its share of iconoclastic and rugged individuals during the past century. Houston was also the final destination point for many families from the initial wave of Dutch immigration to the Bulkley Valley starting in 1937. Today, Houston's hiking and walking trails are a favourite stopover for eco tourists. Every Sunday morning during the summer months, Houston's small municipal airport is given over to remote control (RC) model airplane enthusiasts. This little airport becomes the perfect destination for little boys aged from 6 to 96 years of age. Spectators are always made to feel welcome by the RC enthusiasts who happily provide demonstrations of daring aerobatic feats and formation flying.

The Alpine town of Smithers is the bustling administrative centre of the Bulkley Valley. The Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad established Smithers as the site for its divisional headquarters and town site in 1913. Today the original railway station building is still operating but the contemporary transportation centre for the Bulkley Valley region has shifted to the Smithers Regional Airport. The Smithers airport provides state of the art air services to the traveling public and to the burgeoning northern B.C. mining industry.

A quick visit to the Bulkley Valley Museum in Smithers will reveal a cornucopia of captivating historical nuggets from the Bulkley Valley's rich prehistoric to recent history. The Bulkley Valley Museum exhibits cover

locally excavated fossil sites, the Wet'suwet'en First Nations, farming, railroad, mining and forestry industries and the still secret Valentine's Day, 1950, crash of a USAF B36 bomber in nearby Kispiox. The Museum is also the jump-off point for 2 fascinating strolls through Smithers and its easily accessible history. One stroll is the Smithers Culture Crawl along Main St. and its environs which feature historic kit homes shipped in by rail during the 1920s & 1930s, glorious gardens and museum exhibitions in stores and cafes. Enter a supermarket or a furniture store or other business listed on the Culture Crawl and discover exhibitions detailing the Swiss, Dutch, Scandinavian and American migrations to the valley.

The other stroll is called Gasoline Valley which showcases the centenary celebration (1911-2011) of the first car to drive overland from the U.S., south of the 49th parallel, up to the village of Hazelton in the Bulkley Valley. Using the showrooms in four car dealerships as exhibition sites, the Museum lays out the history of the contribution of the automobile to the economic and social development of the Bulkley Valley in a unique yet entertaining fashion.

While exploring the Culture Crawl and Gasoline Valley it is difficult to avoid the friendly and welcoming people of Smithers, or Smithereens as the locals call themselves, who make the time spent in their quaint town so rewarding and at the same time so relaxing. Strolling along Main St, it is easy to become enraptured by the ebb and flow of this charming alpine town. Visitors enjoy its epicurean fare, family owned stores or just chatting with a car salesman who delights in being an exhibition tour guide in his showroom as he describes the role of the automobile in the Bulkley Valley. The people of Smithers welcome any opportunity to chat about their rich history. Smithers is world renown as a base location for experiencing some of the best salmon fishing rivers and big game hunting regions in the world. This alpine town features the gorgeous Hudson Bay Mountain literally soaring up from the western terminus of Main St. In the winter the Hudson Bay Mountain ski hill is a mecca for skiers from throughout northwest B.C., The Yukon and Alaska. In the summer the mountain's alpine meadows are a favourite haunt for hikers and nature photographers.

Journeying 30 km west from Smithers on Hwy 16 on to the First Nation fishing village of Moricetown will give visitors the chance to observe Wet'suwet'en people catching salmon in the raging waters of a gorge in the Bulkley River. In the summer, a pull-out lookout above the gorge gives visitors a birds eye view of villagers using centuries old methods for catching fish. Moricetown also boasts a museum on a bluff overlooking the gorge

which houses the history of the region's different First Nations clans. There are five Wet'suwet'en clans: Gilseyhu (Big Frog), Laksilyu (Small Frog), Gitdumden (Wolf/Bear), Laksamshu (Fireweed) and the Tsayu (Beaver clan). There is also a lovely roadside café in which visitors can enjoy indigenous cuisine while watching the traditional Wet'suwet'en methods for harvesting wild salmon.

A final stop before leaving the Bulkley Valley is the oldest, combined First Nations and European settlement in the area called Old Hazelton. Today, Old Hazelton is known worldwide as the adjacent site of the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum, a recreation of a typical Gitxsan First Nation village situated at the confluence of the Bulkley and Skeena rivers. It preserves the lifestyle and history of the Gitxsan people in a completely natural setting.

Driving into the village of Old Hazelton feels like driving into a 1900's movie set. Old Hazelton keeps watch as the mighty Skeena River passes by on its long journey west to Prince Rupert. The architecture and restaurants of Old Hazelton reflect the area's fame as a former fur trading depot and paddle steamer terminus. The Hazelton Public Library and Museum, idyllically located overlooking the Skeena River is another vault of information about the early days of settlement in the Bulkley Valley.

The Bulkley Valley is a truly a rural, alpine valley, a valley which is open and accessible to visitors who wish to explore and to discover its beauty and charms and history. Perhaps the only danger a visitor has to fear is falling in love with this valley and never wanting to leave again.





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