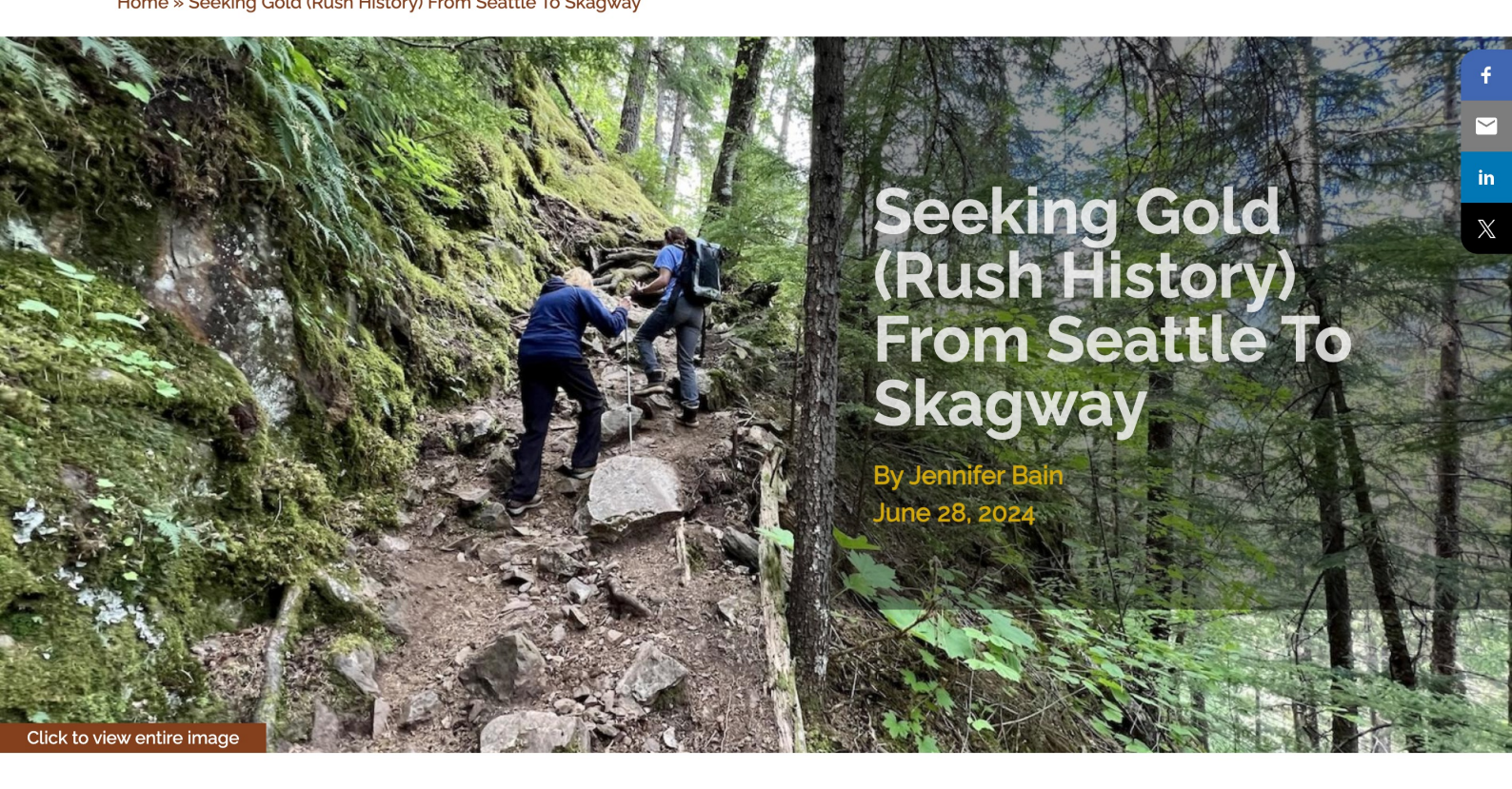


Seeking Gold (Rush History) From Seattle To Skagway

By Jennifer Bain
June 28, 2024

Ambling along the first mile of the Alaska portion of the Chilkoot Trail, we walked in the footsteps of Klondike gold rush seekers without feeling any of their pain. The sun shone, the trail was steep but well maintained, and we were only weighed down by water bottles. In fact, we were warned to leave snacks behind lest any crumbs attract wildlife.

Nope, it was nothing like the 1890s when thousands of "stampeders" tackled these dense forests and rugged mountains on crude trails in punishing weather to get to the Yukon gold fields. Thanks to Canada's Northwest Mounted Police, each was forced to carry a year's worth of provisions and had to move their "ton of goods" along the 33-mile trail with multiple trips.

"Unfortunately, we're not doing 33 miles, just two miles out and back," lamented Olivia Jacobs, who guided us down the trail. "We'll go slow because we don't want anyone to fall. It's more of a saunter than a hike, but it's good to see and we'll be going through a rainforest."


Olivia Jacobs, left, of Chilkat Guides, leads people on hikes along the U.S. start of the Chilkoot Trail in Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park/Jennifer Bain

Jacobs was charged with keeping us "cruise shippers" safe for half a day as we hiked a wee segment of the fabled trek — part of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park — and then did a scenic float down the nearby Taiya River.

Of the 3,805 people on my Princess cruise from Seattle to Alaska's Inside Passage, just four of us signed up for this "strenuous" Skagway excursion to retrace the footsteps of the gold-hungry stampeders. One was my unabashedly urban but fact-loving, 11-year-old son Charlie. While slowly conquering a 350-foot elevation gain with mandatory hiking poles, we did pass five other small guided groups, and some of those folks may well have been shipmates doing different time slots.

Klondike Gold Rush, Alaska's busiest NPS unit, logged 1,284,320 visitors last year. It's further divided into three units — Chilkoot Trail/Dyea Townsite, White Pass Trail and Skagway Historic District. To complicate things, there's an affiliated unit in Seattle, which drew a respectable 71,990 visits in 2023. Parks Canada also preserves two gold rush sites — Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site in British Columbia and Klondike National Historic Sites in Dawson City, Yukon.

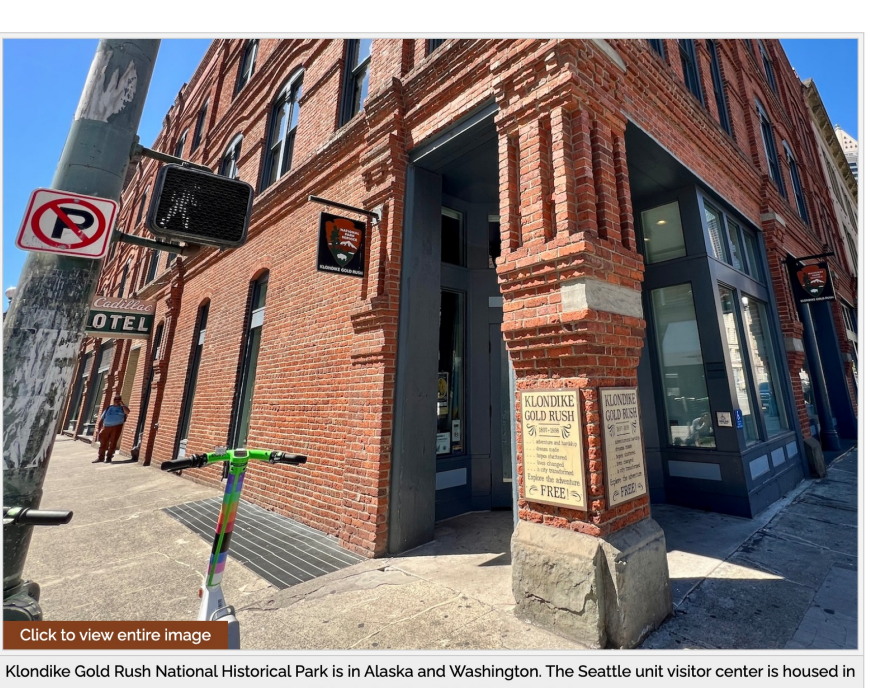


In 2022, the Chilkoot Trail in Alaska was officially designated the Chilkoot National Historic Trail as Charlie MacKenzie discovers/Jennifer Bain

All these places played key roles in the stampede to the Klondike. So let's back up and begin at the beginning.

I've actually been to the very creek where four people found gold on Aug. 16, 1896. George Carmack, a white American, and three Tagish people from what's now Canada — Keish (Skookum Jim Mason), Keish's sister Shaaw Tláa (Kate Carmack) and Káa Goox (Dawson Charlie) — were on a fishing trip but detoured to Rabbit Creek (now Bonanza Creek) on a tip from prospector Robert Henderson. Who actually found gold there is hotly debated, but Carmack staked the initial claim and the discovery sparked a global frenzy.

It wasn't until overnighting in Seattle before my Alaskan cruise that I realized this mostly Canadian story continues in Washington state.

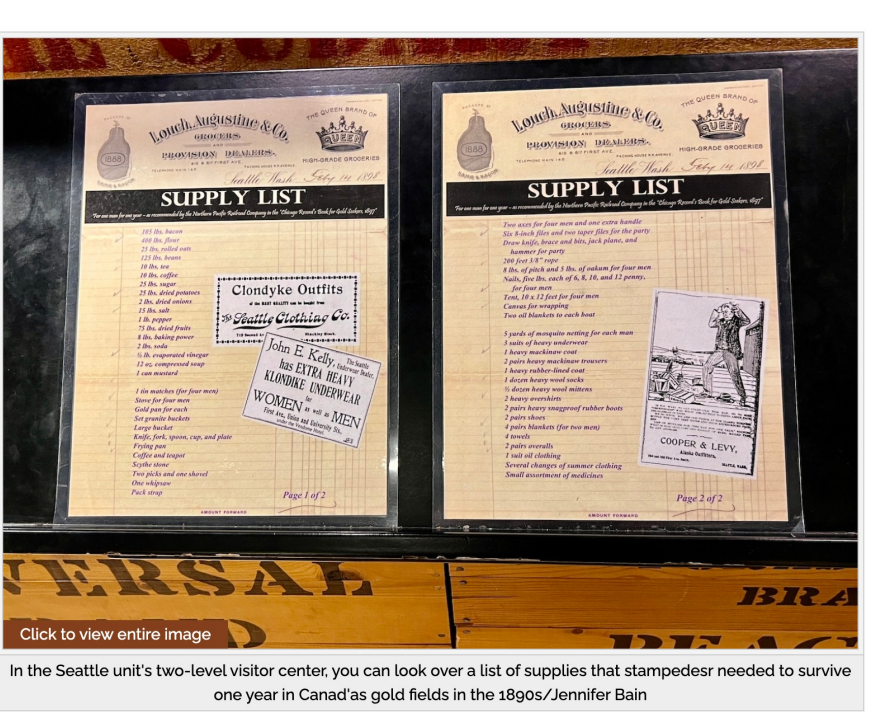


Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park is in Alaska and Washington. The Seattle unit visitor center is housed in the historic Cadillac Hotel/Jennifer Bain

In the Klondike Gold Rush's visitor center in the historic Cadillac Hotel in Pioneer Square, Charlie and I learned that the SS *Portland* arrived July 17, 1897 carrying nearly two tons of gold and 68 newly rich miners with "stories of rivers lined with gold and easy riches in a remote region of northwestern Canada."

The rush was on. Journalist Erastus Brainerd led a group that aggressively promoted Seattle as the gateway to the Klondike. He even landed an assay office in the city to convert prospectors' gold into cash.

Between that summer and March 1898, roughly 70,000 people — 70 per cent of all stampeders — passed through Seattle on their way to the gold fields, and they splurged on clothes, sleeping bags, tents and other supplies.

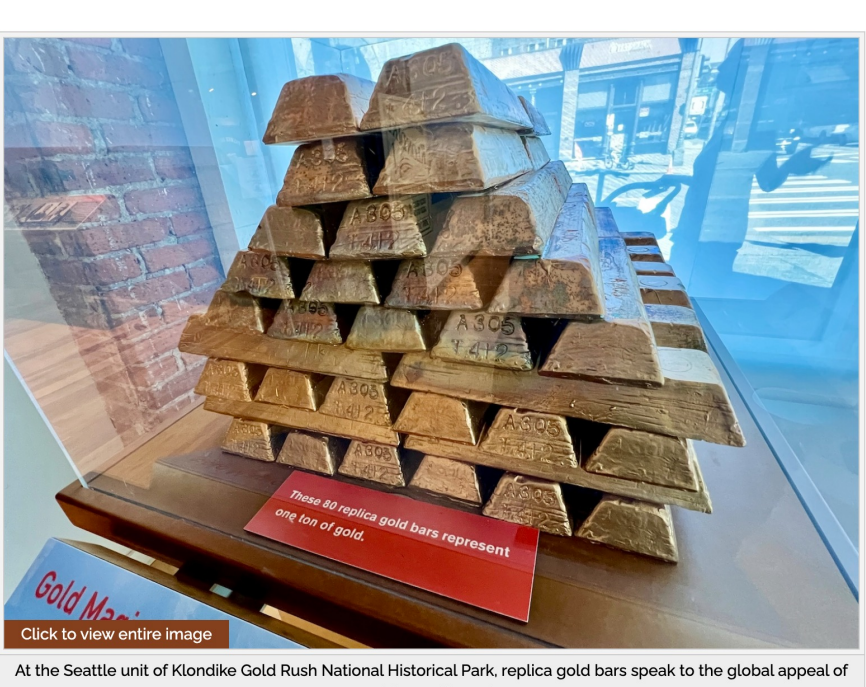


In the Seattle unit's two-level visitor center, you can look over a list of supplies that stampedesr needed to survive one year in Canad'as gold fields in the 1890s/Jennifer Bain

"The despair of the depression was replaced with energy and purpose as Seattle responded to the needs of thousands of stampeders flooding through the city," an exhibit reveals. "As with many gold rushes, it was generally not the miners who struck it rich, but those who stepped forward to meet the miners' needs."

Near a stack of 80 replica gold bars, we read about the lure of the precious metal: "Gold captures imaginations and has been valued by civilizations throughout history. Its scarcity, durability, and luster all add to its value. The hope of 'striking it rich' has sparked gold rushes around the world."

In 1897, one ounce of gold bought 400 glasses of beer, 300 pounds of candy or 10 pairs of women's shoes. It was the equivalent of 2.5 weeks of pay for a factory worker.



At the Seattle unit of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, replica gold bars speak to the global appeal of gold/Jennifer Bain

Two intreractive exhibits bring the gold rush to life. On a day when the price of gold was $2,360.60 per ounce, we stood on a scale that calculated our worth in gold (nearly $5 million for me and $3 million for Charlie — you do the math). Then we spun the "strike it rich wheel of fortune" to see whether we would have been successful stampeders.

Some 100,000 people embarked for the Klondike, 40,000 reached it, 20,000 worked claims or prospected, just 300 made more than $15,000 in gold, and only 50 kept their wealth for any length of time. Still, most said the gold rush was the most rewarding experience of their lives.

Our spins didn't yield riches, but undaunted we boarded our ship the next day and sailed north on a modern-day gold rush journey.


An NPS exhibit in Skagway, Alaska explores how panning was considered the \

Once outfitted, stampeders had to transport themselves and their gear 1,600 miles to the Klondike. A few took ocean-going steamers to northern Alaska, then traveled south to the Yukon on river boats, but this easy "all-water route" was expensive.

Most people took steamers up the Inside Passage to either Skagway or nearby Dyea in Alaska, crossed the Coast Range on foot to Lake Bennett in British Columbia, then built makeshift boats to take the Yukon River to Dawson City.



Even you only do a few minutes — or hours — of the U.S. portion of the Chilkoot Trail, the National Park Service wants you to sign its trail registry/Jennifer Bain

Which brings us back to our day in Skagway. With about 13 hours to play with while the *Discovery Princess* was docked, we had time to experience both the Chilkoot National Historic Trail out of Dyea (now a ghost town) and the White Pass Trail out of Skagway (population 1,179).

"There ain't no choice. One's hell. The other's damnation." I must have heard that colorful quote half a dozen times. It comes from *The Trail Led North: Mont Hawthorne's Story* and is actually the American adventurer quoting an "old fellow" who had hiked both trails and favored neither. The 33-mile Chilkoot was the "shorter but steeper" trail. The 45-mile White Pass was a "lower and longer" option but often muddy and treacherous.

The Chilkoot Trail began as a Tlingit trade route, killed dozens in avalanches, and evolved into a bucket list backcountry hike. Billed as "the world's longest outdoor museum," it is apparently scattered with rusted debris from the gold rush era. We didn't hike far enough to see any of that, though.

In the U.S. this summer, only the first four miles of the trail are open for day use so the Park Service can rebuild bridges, campsites and visitor amenities after severe flood damage. Reservations are open for the Canadian side of the co-operatively managed trail.


 Jacobs prepares to take guests on a scenic float down the Taiya River near the Chilkoot Trail in Alaska/Jennifer Bain

The trail was never on my radar because I'm not a backcountry camper with route-finding and navigation experience. As a mere cruise shipper, I was thrilled to get a two-hour, family-friendly taste of the recreation trail. Guided hikes usually go two miles and end at the Taiya River, where you climb into rafts for an hour-long float trip, but flood damage blocked the route. Instead we hiked a mile, doubled back to the trailhead and then drove to the boat launch past the only remaining ruins in historic Dyea.

We didn't spot Bald Eagles — only empty nests — but did help another raft that was hung up on a fallen tree and waved to rangers lunching on the river bank. Jacobs returned us to Skagway where we ate pizza and bypassed crowded jewelry and souvenir shops to explore historic buildings connected to the NPS.

Gold rush-era Skagway was a lawless place full of booze, gambling, prostitution and con artists but, as a park film points out, "tourism has become the modern day gold rush in Alaska." On the June day that we visited, rangers said a record 12,300 cruise shippers were expected to flood Skagway.



On Skagway's main drag, the NPS has restored the gold rush-era Mascot Saloon and turned it into a free museum/Jennifer Bain

We popped into the Trail Center where rangers help serious hikers prepare for the Chilkoot Trail, reminding them to be bear aware, take bear spray but not bear bangers, hike in groups, stay alert, make noise and carry their passports.

Albert Reinert's Mascot Saloon is now a museum. It sported a coin-operated player piano and electric lights at a time when candles and gas lamps lit most homes. It welcomed working men but discriminated against others — notably the Tlingit.

The gold rush, it should be acknowledged, disrupted Indigenous communities, led to large-scale mining and left a legacy of cultural and environmental scars. National parks in Alaska and the Yukon are starting to tell these stories.



The NPS only offers guided tours of the Jeff. Smiths Parlor Museum in Skagway. Restored to its 1960's glory, the tiny building is connected to a notorious gold rush outlaw/Jennifer Bain

We missed the 1 p.m. ranger-guided tour of Jeff. Smiths Parlor Museum, but peered in a window and read how Jefferson Randolph "Soapy" Smith officially ran a saloon here but unofficially treated the space as a gambling den, city hall and headquarters for his "slippery mafia style gang."

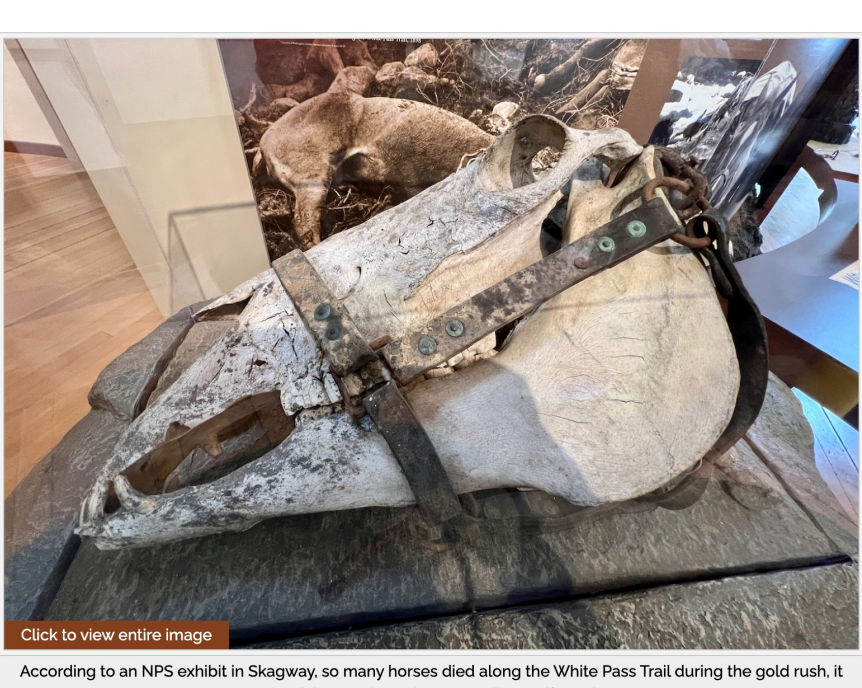
At the park's visitor center, we took in a ranger talk alongside a class of local grade schoolers. The ranger did a land acknowledgement and made a point of sharing how one in every 10 stampeder was a woman, and how people like Shaaw Tláa, Nellie Cashman, Ethel Berry and Bessie Couture deserve more attention.


In Skagway, local artist Peter Lucchetti's \

Beside the Alaska Geographic park store, an interactive "ton of goods" exhibit asks "how far would you go to fulfill a dream?" This is where you will find local artist Peter Lucchetti's "Stampeder Statue" of a man, his dog and dogsled. Unveiled in 2017, the bronze was inspired by more words from that famous stampeder Mont Hawthorne about how hellish the quest for gold really was.

We didn't hear anything about the plight of gold rush dogs, but learned that many who took the White Pass Trail unwisely used pack animals to carry their goods.

"Thick mud, slick rocks and steep cliffs" proved deadly and at least 3,000 horses died on what came to be known as Dead Horse Trail. Beside a skull, we read how horse "skeletons became reminders of the trail's hardships and stampeders' greed."

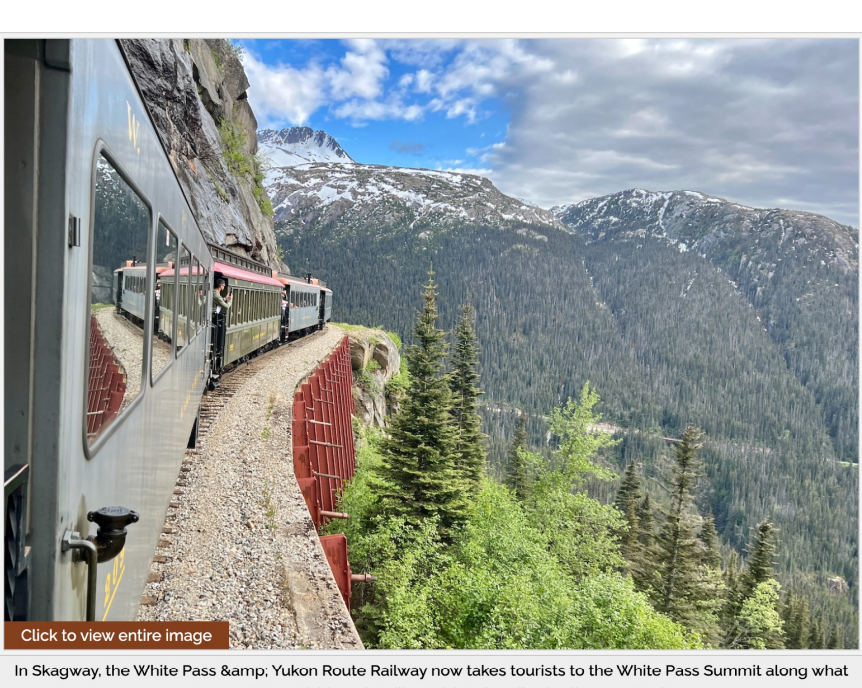

According to an NPS exhibit in Skagway, so many horses died along the White Pass Trail during the gold rush, it was nicknamed Dead Horse Trail/Jennifer Bain

The visitor center itself preserves the 1898 White Pass & Yukon Route Broadway Depot.

Entrepreneurs dreamed of building a railroad over White Pass as a fast, easy route to the gold fields, but the route to the summit and Lake Bennett launched just as the gold rush was ending. Once connected to Whitehorse (the Yukon's capital), the new train was able to carry freight, passengers and tourists.

Our day that began with a strenuous but manageable, mini Chilkoot Trail hike ended with a relaxing train ride to the White Pass Summit — Charlie's favorite experience. Tour guides shared gold rush stories as we passed Soapy Smith's grave, marvelled at waterfalls and Dead Horse Gulch, crossed a magnificent steel bridge and clanked through tunnels.

We passed parts of the historic White Pass Trail, but most of it has been disturbed by decades of railway and highway construction. While the NPS preserves and protects parts of the area, it discourages hiking since the original route isn't marked, maintained or currently used. In fact, rangers encouraged us to book seats on the train, Skagway's most popular attraction.


In Skagway, the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway now takes tourists to the White Pass Summit along what was once a punishing Klondike gold rush trail/Charlie MacKenzie

Our train chugged nearly 3,000 feet up steep grades and easily navigated tight curves, journeying past the (unmarked) Canadian border where mounted police once welcomed stampeders who had the ton of goods needed to survive for a year.

Then we circled back to Skagway, shrieking in delight at a black bear cub rolling in the grass right beside the tracks and then at two adult bears out for a sunset stroll. Charlie was relieved to see the "adorable" apex predators through glass and not while hiking. The chance of seeing bears on these 2.5-hour train rides? Just 10 to 15 per cent.

Back on the ship, we ate a hot meal at the buffet and crawled happily into bed, our comfortable gold rush journey nearly complete. The only thing missing? Gold. That would be an adventure for another day, when we would tour what was once the world's largest gold-producing mill in Juneau and then pan for gold — pay dirt guaranteed.



In the NPS visitor center museum in Skagway, an exhibit conveys how gold rush stampeders carried heavy loads through tough Alaska weather/Jennifer Bain

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