



The White Pass & Yukon Route: a railroad to adventure

Jim Dufresne
Lonely Planet Writer

When the 110-mile White Pass & Yukon railroad opened in 1900, it carried thousands of stampeders from Skagway, Alaska to Whitehorse in the Yukon, Canada on their way to seek their fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush.

Eventually these miners were replaced by cruise ship passengers as the White Pass & Yukon Route became one of the most popular day tours in southeast Alaska. Passengers now board the historic, narrow gauge train with cameras, not gold pans, and marvel how it climbs 3000 feet in just 20 miles with steep grades of almost 4%, cliff-hanging turns of 16 degrees, two tunnels and numerous cantilever bridges and trestles. But these days a growing number of outdoor adventurers are booking passage after discovering the railroad also provides easy access to a pristine mountainous wilderness.

Here are three great adventures made possible with a ticket on the White Pass & Yukon Route:

Denver Caboose

At Mile 6 of the railroad is this bright red caboose which hikers can reserve through the US Forest Service and spend a night or two. Inside there are five bunks, a table and a stove. Outside are commanding views of the surrounding Sawtooth Mountains and a 4.5-mile trail that leads to Denver Glacier and Upper Elway Falls.



Laughton Glacier

Glacier Station at Mile 14 of the White Pass & Yukon Route is little more than a sweeping curve in the tracks and a trail sign. But departing into the trees is a trail that leads to another US Forest Service cabin and then into the Laughton Glacier amphitheatre. This is as dramatic a place as any in Alaska, a powerful blend of craggy Sawtooth Range peaks and the fingers of ice that spill out of them to form the glacier at the bottom. Combining the train ride and the 1.5-mile hike to stay at the remote cabin makes this slice of Alaskan wilderness accessible to almost anybody.

Chilkoot Trail

This the most famous trail in Alaska and one of the most popular, with more than 3000 hikers following the historic route every summer. It was the same route used by the Klondike gold miners in the 1898 gold rush, and walking it is not so much a wilderness adventure as it is a history lesson. The 33-mile trek includes the Chilkoot Pass, a steep climb up to 3525ft, where hikers scramble on all fours over loose rocks and boulders. Scattered along the entire route are reminders of the gold rush, a huge steam boiler, rusty tin cans, tools, a lone boot.



The completion of the White Pass & Yukon Route put the Chilkoot out of business, and for many the highlight of the hike is reaching the railroad's historic Lake Bennett Depot at the end. Here travelers feast on beef stew and apple pie and then board the trail for a ride back to Skagway. Experiencing the Chilkoot and returning on the White Pass & Yukon Route is probably the ultimate Alaska trek, combining great scenery, a historical site and an incredible sense of adventure.

