

I step out into the main reception of Smithers airport and get my first surprise. A big, black bear is standing and looking at me with a snarling face. Luckily, he is dead and stuffed and put up for display in a glass cabinet.

But word around little Smithers town is that the man who shot this bear had learned a thing or two about involuntary sphincter control when this beast had come charging at him.

Stephanie, who is in charge of the National Rental Car counter, right next to the stuffed bear, tells me that I will certainly see black bears and grizzlies during my five days in Northern British Columbia.

“Stay in your car if you come across one,” she advises me while handing over the keys of my rental car.

It’s a Nissan Versa. I look at the little car and

then back at the bear and I think my face gives away my uncertainty in taking this small car out for a 1,400km wander in one of the world’s last true wildernesses. Stephanie has grown up on a diet of fresh mountain air and free-range eggs and meat and it has bred kindness in her. She deftly upgrades me to a Chevy Suburban at no extra cost. It is so huge that everybody in the airport right now could probably get into it.

The province of British Columbia is arguably Canada’s prettiest. Unfortunately, most visitors think that British Columbia can be checked off the list once they’ve visited Vancouver, Whistler and Victoria – the golden triangle, so to speak.

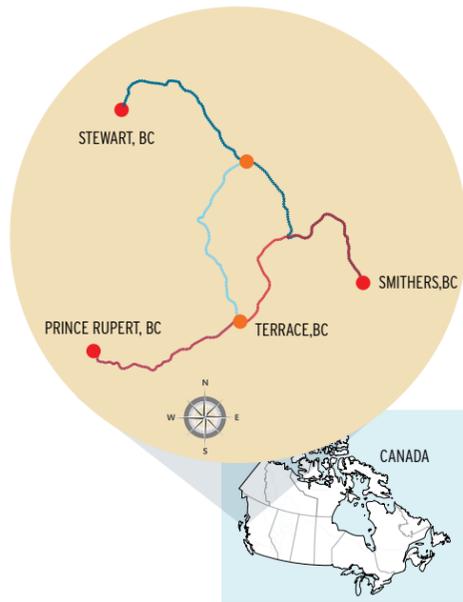
Sadly, that is very ignorant. While Vancouver and Victoria are beautiful cities and Whistler, a charming mountain resort, respectively, it is Northern British Columbia that will leave the →

Grizzlies, glaciers and great driving roads – Northern British Columbia has it all. **Rishad Saam Mehta** takes a Chevy Suburban across 1,400km of one of the world’s last remaining wildernesses.

# DUE NORTH

PHOTOGRAPHY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA





**'In this part of Canada, even geriatric grannies drive mammoth SUVs.'**

← road trip or adventure enthusiast gasping at the beauty of it all.

So, I had hopped on to a little plane at Vancouver and flown for two hours and landed at Smithers.

Hardcore roadtrippers usually hire an RV and drive from Vancouver across BC and Yukon and into Alaska – that is a month-long trip at the least, along the famed Alaska Highway that was built in the Forties. But since I had just five days, my plan was to do a little circular trip, taking in the best that Northern British Columbia had to offer. My drive would take me along the Yellowhead Highway, the Stewart-Cassiar Highway and the Glacier Highway.

I drive out from Smithers, taking Canada Highway No 16, also known as the Yellowhead Highway, enjoying the paucity of traffic and the pine forested views. But it is when I turn right onto Highway No 37, that heads north all the way to the Yukon, that the true feeling of driving into the wilderness kicks in. The landscape is dimpled with deep blue lakes just sitting pretty. There are snow-capped mountains stacked along the sides of the road; many of them have huge glaciers that have crawled down the slopes. The most magnificent is the huge Bear Glacier 30km short of Stewart, its crevices shining blue. Behind it are mountain peaks named after British prime ministers Disraeli and Gladstone.

Stewart is a prime example of an old frontier town that saw its peak during the Gold Rush, mining and logging days. In fact, the Ripley Creek

Inn, where I am staying, was the old centre of town. Today, guests stay in what used to be the bar, the post office and the brothel. There is still some ancient mining machinery rusting away on its way to becoming some kind of archeological artifact.

I am thankful for my Suburban, not because of the state of the roads that are baby bottom-smooth tarmac, but because I fit right in with my 5.3-litre V8 petrol engine. In this part of Canada, even geriatric grannies drive gargantuan SUVs and anything less than 4 litres in cubic capacity is deemed fit for only mowing the lawn.

The US and the state of Alaska are just 3.4km from Ripley Creek Inn. While the main portion of Alaska borders Yukon further north, a small sliver of the state sits next to British Columbia. There is no road access to the main part of Alaska from here, hence you can just drive into Hyder, Alaska. And you should, because 37km from Hyder is the huge Salmon Glacier and the entire drive is fantastic. The Visitor's Centre in Stewart that is right next to the Ripley Creek Inn has a very handy booklet outlining a self-guided auto tour from Stewart to the Salmon Glacier.

When I drive this road the next morning, unfortunately, the weather is dense fog and I just see glimpses of the Salmon Glacier. But when I step out of my car to photograph the Suburban amongst all the snow and ice near the summit of the road, I suddenly see another car frantically flashing its lights at me. I put down my camera and wave out. The driver has a sheer look of terror on his face and is gesturing that I look behind.

I do and about 40 feet away, there's a huge grizzly bear standing in the snow and watching me with amusement.

## A SUGGESTED ITINERARY

- DAY 1:** Fly into Smithers and drive to Stewart
- DAY 2:** Drive into Alaska and go to the Salmon Glacier and explore Stewart
- DAY 3:** Drive towards Prince Rupert via the Nass Highway or BC Highway no. 113. There are plenty of places to stop at and things to see along this drive
- DAY 4:** Go for a bear-watching or whale-watching cruise (depending on the time of year) with Prince Rupert Adventures
- DAY 5:** Drive to Smithers
- DAY 6:** Explore the lovely region around Smithers. It is the perfect wind-down
- DAY 7:** Fly back to Vancouver



A bear by the road is a sight you'd come across often.



You can get this close to grizzlies and live to tell the tale on a cruise in the Khutzeymateen with Prince Rupert Adventures.



Skeena Lake, British Columbia. On a day like this, at a place like this, what's better than taking a dip?



### NEVER RUN!

This is the first rule of bear safety: never turn and run from a bear. However, I didn't get that memo and I sprint back to my car, yank the door open and jump inside. Thankfully, the grizzly isn't bothered. He turns around, bends over, dramatically showing me his posterior, and then heads off in the opposite direction.

At the Glacier Inn bar in Hyder, later that evening, weathered old locals tell me that there are plenty of trekking paths around these mountains but they would never venture onto them without a gun. The best defense against a bear is a shotgun with slug and shot cartridges loaded alternately.

My next day's agenda is a 442km drive to Prince Rupert and the route goes back on Highway No 37 for 141km and then turns onto the Nisga'a Highway or BC Highway No 113. This is a dirt road and the chunky, all-terrain soles of my Suburban prove their worth. I don't have to worry about sharp rocks and the high ground clearance lets me drive over the odd log lying across the road. What I have to be careful about not driving into or over are the mamma bears with cubs in tow that I see often. Then there's the snarling bobcat and the inquisitive coyote. All of these run off into the foliage before I can stop and pick up my camera and shoot through the windshield.

This is all volcanic area and a region that is rich in native culture. The First Nations' people were here many millennia before the white man arrived, and totem poles and artifacts at the Nisga'a Museum tell about this.

I join the Yellowhead Highway again at Terrace where I stop for lunch at A&W and honestly, it is here that I have the best burger I've ever had. The Papa Burger that is the trademark here is made with beef fat and the fries are also →



Often, you'll see Bald Eagles swoop down to catch something that is scurrying across the road.



Potato skins with sour cream, chives and bacon bits. This full meal is considered just an 'appetiser' here.

← fried in beef fat. None of that vegetable oil nonsense here – this is probably why this burger place stands head and shoulders over the rest.

Prince Rupert is a slight shock after Stewart. There is actually traffic here. I can even see two cars in my rear view mirror. I have come to Prince Rupert just to take Prince Rupert Adventures' cruise out to the Khutzeymateen, a protected sanctuary for grizzly bears.

Unfortunately, the weather is horrible with heavy rain and cloud, but Debbie, who along with her husband Doug – skipper of the boat – owns PR Adventures, tells me that the rain doesn't really bother the bears.

I board the boat at 9am and even with two 650hp outboard monsters, it takes the big boat about two hours to get to the rugged Khutzeymateen valley in the wilderness surrounded by mountains. A small finger of water runs through it and this is deep enough to accommodate the boat. And on the banks of this channel, I am treated to wonderful sightings of grizzly bears as they scavenge the beach for food. They are a little mangy since they've just come out of hibernation and are gorging themselves on grass.

They look very cuddly but the crew is quick to remind passengers that grizzly bears do eat humans. This cruise is really a very unique way of getting very close to the bears and yet being assured of your personal safety.



### Plan the getaway

**IF YOU'RE VISITING Vancouver, then add six days and do this trip. It is like another holiday itself. And really far removed from the sights and experiences that you will have in Vancouver, Whistler or Victoria.**

**This is the roadtrip for you if you like the outdoors. Besides, if you're interested in history, there's a lot of First Nations culture, historic sights and museums to be checked out.**

**You need to hire a car at Smithers airport and the only operator there is National Car Rental. The drives are long but they are very pretty and there are many places to stop enroute.**

**In Prince Rupert, instead of staying in town, consider staying at the Cassiar Cannery that is half an hour away from town but in a stunning location by the Skeena River.**



Visitors' centres like this one in New Hazelton have staff who are a wealth of information on what to do.



It is not so the next day when I am back in Smithers. Blaine Estby, who has grown up in Smithers, is showing me around the hills, the waterfalls and the lakes around the town where he has spent many boyhood days fishing, hiking and indulging in other activities that are too surreptitious for this story. We pick up a couple of hot dogs and other goodies from the local baker and deli and then go for an invigorating hike to the Twin Falls.

Hot and sweaty now, we drive to Skeena Lake and eat some of the goodies by the lake. It is a bright and sunny day and the blue waters of the lake look very tempting. Blaine encourages me to go for a swim, saying that there's only trout in there. I throw off almost every stitch of clothing and wade in. The water is refreshingly cold. Not surprising since it's freshly melted off glaciers.

Blaine goes off for a walk while I swim a fair distance into the lake.

But we'd forgotten a half-eaten sandwich on the picnic table by the lake. When I come out of the waters and am drying myself, I see a big black mamma bear with three cubs in tow sizing up that sandwich. I drop my towel and grab my camera. The bear probably thinks that it is a weapon and she ushers her cubs into the foliage, giving me a long hard stare before following them in herself.

Strangely, I am not petrified. In fact, I sit at that picnic table staring at the spot where the bear has rushed in with something like piety. I think to myself about where else I could sit by a beautiful lake, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and expect a bear to come by and check out my sandwich or a bald eagle to swoop down to try and grab it.

No other place comes to mind and I realise how fortunate I am to have visited one of the last true wildernesses remaining in the world. **AI**



The magnificent Bear Glacier 30km short of Stewart on the Bear Highway.