



Flying to Alaska

Follow the no-frills "trench" route or the Alcan Highway for an unforgettable experience

Text and photos by DON DOWNIE / AOPA 188441

Somehow Canadian Customs inspectors are usually cheerful, relaxed and glad to see you. Lucky, perhaps, but in many years of flying into Canada, we've yet to meet one who presented a problem. Canadian "paper work" is a model of simplicity—a single 3- by 4-inch light blue sheet that you don't even have to return.

A flight into Canada, perhaps to join the Alaska Highway (popularly called the Alcan Highway) at Dawson Creek, to Alaska can be a highlight in any pilot's travel experience. Depending on where and when you go, the trip can be almost tranquil, adventuresome or just a bit "hairy." It will certainly be colorful and take you over some of the greatest scenery ever flown.

For starters, let's head north from Seattle and travel the Fraser River/Highway 97 route to Prince George. Although originating from Southern California, our trip actually began with an ADCUS (advise customs) flight plan from Seattle's Boeing Field, and after an hour en route to Abbotsford, B.C., our Cessna 170B entered the "circuit" (traffic pattern) and landed. Formalities took less than five minutes after a Piper Comanche ahead of us had cleared Customs.

The only new wrinkle was that handguns are no longer permitted in Canada. Had we carried one aboard, we would have been turned back to Bellingham, Wash., the nearest U.S. port of entry, where we would have had to make arrangements to leave the gun. However, shotguns and rifles are okay and are encouraged as survival equipment.

Flight plans are required in Canada for all trips except training within 25 miles of the home airport and for all flights in this sparsely settled area. We found the Canadian DOT technicians most cooperative. Their workload still permits one to ask them to make a motel reservation or find out if camping is permitted. They can even take time for the friendly chit-chat that

seems to have been lost in big-city traffic.

Planning for this trip is essentially the same as going farther west into "non-contiguous" Alaska. You will be asked on each Canadian flight plan whether or not you have survival equipment. It makes good sense to carry at least what is required by Canadian regulations: five pounds of food and mosquito head nets for each person, an ax and knife, first aid kit, shotgun or rifle and ammunition, fishing gear, cooking utensils, snare wire, portable compass, matches and signaling devices. Check Canada/Alaska government publications or AOPA's *Canada* booklet for a detailed list, as well as special items required in winter.

Camping isn't for everyone, but we enjoy it. We carried a comfortable tent, two sleeping bags, stove, food and water, and saved the cost of the equipment on this single trip. However, we also took out the back seat of our 180-hp Cessna 170B to provide space for all this.

If you carry a snack bag along with your survival gear, you can save considerable time and perhaps a few bucks at fuel stops; cafeteria-style, no-frills hamburgers at Prince George were \$2.50. Thermal cups and hot coffee or iced tea, coupled with cheese and crackers, cold cuts and even candy bars, can cut hunger pangs and ground time.

Departing Abbotsford northeastward, we picked up the popular Fraser River route northbound over the town of Hope. This grass airport is close to Vancouver and there's considerable sport flying, including gliders—so look carefully before you land.

Navigation up the steep Fraser River gorge is no problem. Follow the river, railroad and highway—and keep above the cables spanning the river, which are marked on the airways sectionals but not on the provincial chart.

There was still a great deal of June

The Yukon River bends around Dawson City, the doorstep to Alaska's eastern border.



A 125-mile diversion to the west of the Alcan takes you to the flight strip at Tsuniah Lodge, for good food and trout fishing. Ingenika (below), offers the "trench route" flier a rest stop and fuel from drums that are brought in by barge on nearby Lake Williston.



daylight, even after a 3:00 p.m. departure from Seattle, so we air-filed for Watson Lake. At Lytton, the Thompson River joins the Fraser and there's an option of roads that converge right there. This area is a high, rolling area rather than sharp mountain ridges. We landed for fuel and a stretch at 108-Mile House—a fine, plushy resort with an FBO living right on the airport. The field has a slight hump toward the middle, so a Unicom call is a good hedge against a surprise.

We diverted to visit old friends at Tsuniah Lodge, 125 miles west of the main highway. Aside from an occasional jeep trail, Groundhog Creek, the Taseko River and two or three lodges, there was little below but solid green forest. All of a sudden, you're very much in the back country.

New, remote radio outlets to Williams Lake on 122.2 MHz give constant communication southwest toward the Lillooet Range and its glaciers north of Vancouver. During this visit, the old four-course A/N radio was still in operation, doubling as an ADF homer. En route to Tsuniah Lodge, we crossed the range leg near Big Creek, an additional navigation checkpoint.

Tsuniah was, as always, comfortable, with hungry rainbow trout and Dolly Varden lurking in the front yard at Chilko Lake. The 4,000-foot flight strip, elevation 4,000 feet, is more than adequate for light twins, so the one-man jobs almost never have trouble. And the food is great.

Next day we flew back to the security of the highway and north to Prince George where decisions—long pending—were made. Do we "fly the trench" and save 388 miles, or detour east to pick up the Alcan at Dawson Creek and Alcan Milepost No. 1? While the trench is a straight shot from Prince George to our destination of Watson Lake, it lacks the security of the Alcan route's link with civilization in case of trouble.

Flying the Trench

Flying the trench, the airways, or staying with the highway over both northwestern Canada and Alaska depends on your personal philosophy of single-engine flight and your speaking arrangement with your powerplant. Under most off-highway conditions, you're going to bust the airplane and probably be a long way from help if you have a power failure. With a flight plan and a good ELT, chances of rescue are relatively good. It's a calculated risk and each pilot must make up his own mind.

The Canadian FSS specialist at Prince George assured us that "nine out of ten general aviation pilots fly the trench when the weather is good." We were also assured that fuel was available at Ingenika, a 6,000-foot-long

hard dirt and gravel strip at the north end of Lake Williston.

Thus, we flipped a coin, looked longingly at the 388-mile saving and headed up the trench. It's about 100 miles to MacKenzie where the paved airport has fuel. With a safe three hours, 420 statute miles, of fuel plus a little reserve in our 180-hp 170B, we debated about topping off at MacKenzie, but computed a safe out-and-back radius to Ingenika.

The Canadian FSS briefing sheet lists 12 "airports" along the trench. These vary from "Blackwater, very poor, not recommended for use" to "Terminus Mtn., approx. 100 nautical miles from Fort Ware; ½ mile east at Kechika River—grass strip in a meadow clearing. No communications, no fuel. EMERGENCY USE ONLY."

Navigation is a cinch to Ingenika and another 50 miles to Fort Ware (2,700 feet, rough gravel and dirt), where fuel was reported as not available that week. Isolated Fort Ware has fuel flown in, which reportedly would cost \$2.50 per Imperial gallon.

Aside from the several bush strips along its shores, 90-mile-long Lake Williston lying along the trench has a singularly uninviting shoreline. The lake was formed by a dam at the south end near MacKenzie and was not cleared of trees before the lake filled. Thus, both the surface of the lake and most adjoining beaches are so littered with decaying logs that a forced landing could be a major misadventure.

At Ingenika, we talked with pilot/manager/trading post operator Harvey Sims, who had his Cessna 180 tied down near the strip. He pumped in 17 Imperial gallons at \$1.80 per gallon. His avgas comes up the lake on a barge from MacKenzie and he sells an average of 60 drums a season. Turbine fuel is usually available since it is used by jet helicopters exploring the area. Don't be surprised when you top your tanks that your engine appears to have become suddenly thrifty. The Imperial gallon is 1.22 U.S. gallons and a quart of oil is also larger.

Sims operates a store and has one cabin available. He has run the trading post there since 1970 and told us that the airport was built as a temporary fire-fighting, water-bomber base in 1969 and has been maintained ever since.

Don't plan on sport fishing on Lake Williston. Sims quit supplying boats after two were smashed. "There's too much trash in the lake," he commented.

Half of the 260 nautical miles from Ingenika to Watson Lake follows the Finlay and Kechika Rivers, but tributaries come in from the east and some pilots have wandered off in that direction. At this point you're still far too low for VHF/VOR reception from Watson Lake; an ADF is much appreciated. We had installed a used King KR-86 and found the ADF extremely useful, both in Canada and Alaska.

Up the Alcan

There is another, more popular way to get to Watson Lake—especially for those coming from the eastern part of the United States. (We flew this route on our return trip.) Heading northwest by west you could well enter Canada at Calgary and then proceed up the Alcan to Watson Lake. (Although the Alaskan Highway does not officially pick up that name until Milepost Zero at Dawson Creek, the "Alcan route" is popularly considered to begin at the Canadian border below Calgary.)

Don't be timid about landing at the larger Canadian airports. A transponder and an early call to approach control help a great deal. Even Calgary International at "Stampede" time was no problem. Probably everyone in town was watching the annual rodeo.

If you plan your next northbound stop at Edmonton, most light aircraft bypass the way-out-of-town International and go directly to Edmonton Industrial where excellent motels surround the field. Northwestbound flight crews frequently plan a night on the town in Edmonton.

A new weather alternate for Edmonton is Whitecourt, 95 statute miles to the west where a new airport, DOT station and FBO facility were just being completed during our visit last fall. Whitecourt is where the highway crosses the Athabasca River.

Horseflies in the area near Whitecourt were large enough to pick up on radar and were distracting in the cockpit during flight.

A people-proof pesticide for use inside the cockpit is desirable—did you ever try to swat one mosquito in flight?

Edmonton is usually the last large eastern airport before diving off into the "boonies." There's a 737-sized paved runway, new terminal building, fuel and maintenance. Radio is remoted from Fort St. John 45 miles on up the highway.

The first official 90 miles of the Alcan highway from Dawson Creek are paved, but after that you can follow the course of the highway during most summer days by the plume of dust that drifts into the clear air. Highway travelers are cautioned to protect the under part of their gas tanks with a piece of inner tubing and to use plastic headlight shields to prevent damage from flying gravel. Most cars we saw northwest from Dawson Creek had heavy mesh covering the radiator and headlight area; frequently windshields are starred from rocks. Just one more reason to fly the route.

Fuel and remote radio (122.2) from Fort St. John are available at Dawson Creek, although many visitors continue to Fort St. John, 40 miles farther, on, to top off for the 200-mile flight to Fort Nelson. Local pilots have varied ideas about following either the Prophet River or the highway. Naturally, the riverbed route will clear lower weather and damp sandbars are usu-

ally adequate landing spots, but assistance is always readily available along the Alcan and much of the highway area is wide enough for a safe landing.

Walter Lawrence, who runs Dawson Aero Sales and Service, specializes in picking up wrecked airplanes. Thus, he is the resident expert on how not to do it along this section of the Alcan. He recommends the trench in good weather; considers following the Prophet River from Fort St. John and on to Watson Lake preferable to going over the highway because the terrain is lower, the passes wider and there's less chance of making a wrong turn.

Vig Hope, an elementary teacher in Anchorage, has ferried four taildraggers up the Alcan. She recommends following the road except for switching to the railroad between Fort St. John and Fort Nelson because the rails are farther from the mountains. She has always flown alone and camped beside her airplane.

During winter months, Fort Nelson and other Alcan stops are crowded with exploration teams where the frozen-hard ground makes a highway of the entire country. Many automotive travelers prefer the Alcan in the winter because there is no dust or loose gravel. Sled trails show up on the sectional charts as faint dashed lines.

Just as in any other type of flying, weather is the No. 1 problem up the Alcan. Pilot reports are appreciated. On a previous trip, I talked with a Super Cub pilot who spent 25 days (in February) at Watson Lake en route to Anchorage. For a scenic vacation trip up the Alcan, even in the best flying months of mid-June through mid-August, program your available time for a couple of days of unplanned, rainy layovers.

It's beyond Fort Nelson that the country begins to climb. If you stick with the highway, you can sample the accommodations of small, chartered airports like Toad River. Toad River, Mile Post 437.6, has a fair grass-and-gravel flight strip. The charts make it 2,300 feet long at 2,500 feet elevation, uphill to the east. The windsock was caught against a pole when we landed slightly downwind and uphill. Here, 100-octane was \$1.80 an Imperial gallon. Food was excellent, with homemade stew at only \$2.50—a veritable bargain by most Alcan standards.

Just west of Toad River, the Alcan winds through a deep canyon around the towering, stark granite peaks of the Sentinel Range, then swings north along Muncho Lake toward Liard River where there's an NDB and a Provincial Park with hot sulphur springs. Lodging, food and avgas are available. Visitors are cautioned: "Don't leave food out—there are many bears in the area." The 4,000-foot Liard River flight strip, built at the same time as the highway, is nearly 20 miles from the Provincial Park. We didn't land there, but California pilots with



The more "secure" Alcan highway route to Alaska is not without its grandeur—or traps for the unwary; bare granite teeth of the Sentinel range (above) flank the highway near Toad River. The 2,300-foot Toad River flight strip is typical of many aerial oases adjacent to the Alcan. This one offers food and fuel, others are more austere.



whom we talked the next day reported tables and a comfortable camping area, even though the latest B.C. Air Facilities Map lists, "Emergency only; gravel, no facilities; poor conditions."

Watson Lake has DF capability if you are high enough to receive. And, when you get there, it is one of the most beautiful airports I've ever seen. Taxi fare to town is \$7.50, but there's a small coffee shop open at the airport during the day. Canadian FSS and weather briefings are available on the field. Travelers wishing to camp out can find outlying parking areas, but there is no campground as such.

Through the Yukon

Departing from Watson Lake there is a choice of roads. One turns north up the Frances River; another angles south toward Prince Rupert and a third, the middle one, heads west to Teslin. Many of the navigational errors on the Alcan have come from this

area. Make sure you take the correct middle road, doublecheck with a VOR bearing and tune in the ADF at Teslin if you have the equipment. With local compass variation now 33E°, the magnetic compass becomes increasingly difficult to use, particularly in marked areas of local magnetic disturbance.

We elected to continue on to Teslin where the "village" is within a mile of the good, gravel flight strip. It was windy, the temperature down to just above freezing at night, and there was just one motel room open in town on a Saturday night. The tent stayed in the plane to be used later.

Whitehorse is not much more than a warm-up hop from Teslin unless there's a weather problem. It has all the goldrush history you'd ever want to find—restored river sternwheelers, dusty backstreet buildings dating back to the gold rush contrast with modern motels, busy tour buses and the excellent jet-sized airport overlooking the town from the west. The new control tower has complete weather briefing, airport information and flight-planning

Charting the Way

Canadian Sectionals cover 4 degrees of longitude (east-west) and 2 degrees of latitude (north-south), but are printed only on one side. By comparison, U.S. Sectionals cover 8 degrees longitude and 4 degrees latitude and are printed on both sides. Thus, you'll need at least 25 Canadian Sectionals to cover adequately the area from Lethbridge to the Alaskan border, not including charts for the Coastal area.

Four Canadian WAC charts cover all the same area, but are more difficult for pilotage because they are half the scale, 1:1,000,000. The Canadian VFR Supplement (\$1.40 for single copies plus 50¢ handling) gives up-to-date airport information south of 60° North latitude, while the Canadian Northern Supplement (\$1.00 plus handling) goes north from there. Order all charts from the Canada Map Office, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E9. Telephone: (613) 998-3865.

Canadian charts are also available from the Canadian Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (COPA), P. O. Box 734, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1T 5S4, (614) 236-4901, with same-day service. Canadian charts are available and billed in equivalent Canadian dollars.

One of the best "whet-the-appetite" briefing booklets, *Air Tourist Information Canada TP 771*, is updated and published annually. For a free copy, write to: Transport Canada, Civil Aeronautics (SLPP), Transport Canada Bldg., Place de Ville, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N8. This publication de-

tails all Canadian flight procedures; i.e., no VFR on top, "plus 500-foot" altitudes not used for cruising flight, flight plans mandatory, use 122.2 MHz in uncontrolled airspace, etc.

D. J. Dewar, Western Regional Administrator, Transport Canada, advised, "Unfortunately, there is not a single place where your readers can get all available government brochures on Western Canada. However, our headquarters in Ottawa is attempting to put together a single authoritative source document on flying the Alaska Highway in pamphlet form. When this is published, it will be available from my offices, Transport Canada Air, Western Region, Federal Public Bldg., 9820 107 St., Edmonton, Alberta T5K 1G3.

"It now appears likely that the Canadian Map Office will produce an Aeronautical Strip Map (scale 1:500,000) for the Alaska Highway. The availability of this chart will be advertised in *Air Tourist Information Canada*." (These strip maps, ARC 11 and 12, were available until 1971.)

Each of the Canadian Provinces and Territories produces an Air Facilities map. The excellent British Columbia map can be obtained from the British Columbia Aviation Council, 208, 438 Agar Dr., International Airport So., Vancouver, B.C. V7B 1A4, without charge. Ask for two copies since airport data is on the reverse side of this 2-by 3-foot pilotage map. Four hundred fifty landing spots and seaplane bases are listed, but there is no nav/com information.

facilities. Camping is permitted in some parts of the airport, but the Airport Chalet motel with a 24-hour cafe is within a block of the transient parking area.

Begun in March of 1942 during the rush of early WW II days, the Alcan Highway was connected in October of the same year at Mile Post No. 588.1 (all mileage is outbound from Dawson Creek). The highway was officially opened on November 20, 1942, in -15° temperatures. It was opened to tourists in 1948. Original Mile Posts have been replaced by kilometer posts, so if you drop down to check the mileage ahead to a town with an airport you may just get the word in kilometers.

There's a fine day-long trip on a narrow-gauge railroad from Whitehorse south to Skagway (Alaska). If you have a two-day weather delay or want to sightsee on the ground and spend one night in Skagway, it's a much recommended trip. If you prefer to fly the 100 miles, check with Customs at Whitehorse before departing. This is a border-crossing flight and U.S. cus-

toms must be advised. We were told that no formal notification system was in force for this particular flight and that it was the pilot's responsibility to contact U.S. Customs by phone before heading south.

If time and budget permit, we'd recommend the flight from Whitehorse to Dawson City up the Klondike Highway. Dawson City is considered the center of the Klondike Gold Rush and today gives a spirited try to live up to its reputation.

From Dawson City, your flight choices are limited. Go north to the barren Arctic above Fort McPherson (we didn't), east into equally barren country, west to Alaska over the Taylor Highway to the U.S. port of entry at Northway, or follow the Yukon River to Fort Yukon. Check U.S. Customs availability at Eagle, Alaska, before departure.

Of course, if you're running short of time, money and clean clothes, it's back to Whitehorse and on south. We chose Northway and Alaska, but that's another story. □