

CHILKOOT TRAIL

Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park, Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site

*Alaska, United States; British
Columbia and Yukon Territory,
Canada*

DISTANCE: 33 miles (53 km) one-way

TIME: 4–6 days

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE: 1 2 3 4 5

STAGING: Whitehorse, Yukon

The very place names on this storied route—the Golden Stairs, the Scales, Happy Camp, the Stone Crib—are redolent of the suffering and hard effort on the part of 1898 gold miners. These hardy souls trudged up into the wild Coast Range with their ungodly loads and visions of wealth to be scraped from the Yukon gold fields. There's no mistaking the history here: both sides of the trail are littered with rusting relics, equipment the miners jettisoned out of exhaustion. Even today, the sad jetsam of their backbreaking burdens remains, strewn along the way, giving the trail an authentic aroma of human struggle.

Who would have thought that more than a century later the backcountry journey those miners blazed, driven by lust for riches, would become one of the iconic wilderness routes in North America? Interesting terrain and big scenery come in equal measures here on the Chilkoot. Temperate old-growth coastal rain forest, steep, rocky passes, and an exhilarating 20-mile (32-km) ramble through alpine basins, high plateaus, and the boreal forest set the trail apart from other backcountry routes. But in the same way the Anasazi ruins of southern Utah add a unique element to Southwest hikes, the detritus left behind by those

tough miners adds an irresistible Gold Rush component to the Chilkoot Pass hiking experience.

It's a reason to come, but there are many others. This 33-mile (53-km) adventure is unique, traversing a corner of North America where the Yukon, British Columbia, and Southeast Alaska come together in an odd, complicated convergence of borders. The geography makes doing the Chilkoot not just a hike, but a multifaceted travel experience with frankly unreal variety, featuring the wild west coast of Southeast Alaska, the remote interior of British Columbia, and lively Whitehorse, Yukon, as the starting point. Exotica such as antique railway lines and travel by floatplane further colors the experience.

All the moving parts can complicate logistics. A hike that covers two countries, one province, one state, one territory and two national parks can present some serious trailhead transportation issues. The Chilkoot Trail demands some advance planning and attention to detail, but the hike is worth the trouble.

And while the route is closely linked to the miners who followed it for a few years at the turn of the previous century, those treasure-seekers were not the first to use this great trail. One of the few glacier-free corridors through the intimidating Coast Range of British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alaska, the Chilkoot Pass had for centuries been a crucial trade route for the Native peoples of the coast, notably the Tlingit, on their way to the interior.

This irrefutable fact of geography is why the Chilkoot remains one of the most compelling recreational backcountry routes in North America: it's a natural. The route rises quickly from tidewater to crest Chilkoot Pass at 3,300 feet (1,006 m), but instead of dropping back down, it meanders more than 20 miles (32 km) through an alpine wonderland while losing only a thousand feet to its terminus at Bennett Lake. Those final three days reveal an unforgettable stretch of trail. An abundance of North American wildlife, including moose, wolf, coyote, and grizzly bear, make this a quintessential wilderness walk.

The American frontier is exotic to visitors from abroad, and the international border here adds yet another twist to hiking the Chilkoot. There's no official mid-route border station, but you will need your passport. Travel documents are checked in Skagway, as the trail is managed jointly by the US Park Service and Parks Canada. Coupled with the large contingent

OPPOSITE: *Hikers climbing toward Sheep Camp get their first view of the Coast Range glaciers. PHOTO BY PETER POTTERFIELD.*

