

The Dempster or the Dalton: A Comparison

Written by Ron Moon

Wednesday, 14 November 2012 08:50



I'm no expert on things Alaskan or even things Canadian but earlier this year we drove both the Dempster and the Dalton Highways as part of our trip around the world (see: www.guidebooks.com.au and follow the links to our travels).

Back in Dawson City, Fairbanks and Anchorage we were often asked what both routes were like and, by push bike riders especially, which one was better ... read 'easier'!

Here's what we reckon! Feel free to comment or differ!!

The Dempster Highway



The Dempster Highway (sometimes referred to as Yukon Highway 5 and/or Northwest Territories Highway 8), begins 40km east of Dawson City and connects the Klondike Highway in

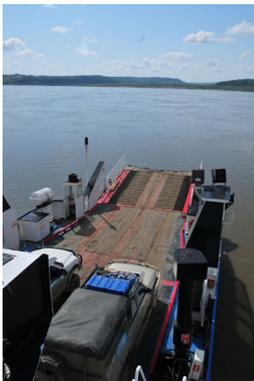
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the Yukon to Inuvik, in the Northwest Territories and situated on the Mackenzie River delta.

Much of the highway follows an old dog sled trail and is named after a Royal Canadian Mounted Police inspector, William JD Dempster, who, as a young constable, frequently ran the dog sled trail from Dawson City to Fort McPherson NWT. Dempster and two other constables were sent out to rescue another police party in March 1911, but only ended up finding the bodies of the party. They are buried at Fort McPherson.



With oil and gas exploration booming in the Mackenzie Delta and with the town of Inuvik under construction the highway started to be built in January 1959 from Dawson City. Only 115km (71 miles) of basic road had been built before the project was abandoned in 1961.

Then with huge oil discoveries made at Prudhoe Bay in nearby Alaska in 1968, Canada was afraid it may lose control over the seabed off the Yukon coast to the USA so to bolster their claim to the northern Arctic, road construction was restarted. The highway was finally opened in August 1979.

The highway is now a two-lane, gravel-surfaced, all-weather road that runs 737km (458 miles) from the Klondike Highway north across the Arctic wilderness to Inuvik.

The highway crosses the major rivers of the Ogilvie and Eagle Rivers, both of which are bridged, and the Peel and the Mackenzie Rivers which use a ferry in summer and ice bridges in

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winter. We only just managed to get through as the day after we got back to Dawson City the road was closed - the ferry on the Peel was out as the river came down in a flood and they had to cut a line and let the ferry swing into the bank. As well, the approach road was washed away

During the winter months, this northern route extends another 194km (121 miles) to Tuktoyaktuk - normally known as just Tuk - on the northern coast of Canada. Known as the Tuktoyaktuk Winter Road, this route uses frozen portions of the Mackenzie River delta as an 'ice road'.

When you start your journey north from the Klondike Highway, you follow the North Klondike River for a short while, climbing as you do so through a number of vegetation zones.

Further north you pass through the Tombstone Territorial Park with its fine mountain vistas and wild country and before exiting the park you cross the continental divide at North Fork Pass, at 1400 metres (4665 ft) the highest point on the Dempster Highway.



About the half way point along the highway, (9km south of the Eagle River crossing) amongst the Richardson Mountains you come to Eagle Plains, the only habitation and service point along the road.

Just 36km north from Eagle Plains, you come to the Arctic Circle and 60km later the border with the North West Territories. Through here wander the Porcupine caribou herd - numbering over 150,000 animals - on their annual migration. If you are lucky you'll see hundreds if not thousands of animals. We weren't, missing one mob of about 5,000 animals by an hour or so!

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Once across the Peel River you'll quickly come to the historic settlement of Fort McPherson, which with its historic cemetery and canvas tent manufacturing, is worth a quick look.

The much wider Mackenzie River ferry crossing, below the Inuit settlement of Tsiigehtchic, is located at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Arctic Red Rivers.

Inuvik, at summer road's end, is a town of around 3400 people and is the administration centre for Canada's Western Arctic. It offers a full range of services and facilities (check out: <http://inuvik.ca>).

The Dalton Highway



The Dalton Highway (Alaska Route 11 and officially the James W. Dalton Highway) is a 667km (414-mile) that begins at the Elliot highway about 115km (70 miles) north-west of Fairbanks. It ends at Deadhorse near Prudhoe Bay and the Arctic Ocean and the vast oil fields that dominate this flat area of coast.

Once called the North Slope Haul Road it was built in 1974 as a road to access and to help build the Trans Alaskan Pipeline and the oil fields which were just coming into production back then. It is named after James Dalton, an Alaskan and an expert in Arctic engineering who was deeply involved in the early exploration for oil in northern Alaska.

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The route passes through the Boreal (northern) forest for the first 295km then winds through and then crosses the Brooks Range at Atigun Pass (up to the 440km mark). Descending the range you come onto the treeless North Slope for the next 135km. Finally at Last Chance you come onto the Coastal Plain which takes you to the Arctic Ocean.

Leaving from Fairbanks it's an easy run across rolling hills (Aussies and Dutch people would probably call them 'mountains') on a sealed road to the junction of the Dalton Highway. Somewhere north of here the road turns to a really good gravel road but from here all the way to Deadhorse there are long strips of blacktop - which are getting longer each year.

At the very wide braided Yukon River there is an impressive bridge while nearby on the northern bank is a BLM info centre and a boat ramp for the many fisherman who come here chasing salmon and more. Just up the road at the small enclave of Hot Spot (or 5-Mile) is a restaurant and a small BLM campground.

Further north is Finger Mountain which has a bit of a walking trail and some great views of the surrounding countryside. The Arctic Circle pull-out is passed 185km from the Elliot H/way and near every tourist stops here.



At Coldfoot, once the site of a gold rush town and later a pipeline construction camp you'll find a rustic motel, bar and fuel. The place is still used to support remote mining and exploration camps. Less than 10km further on is the BLM Marion Creek campground which is a beauty surrounded by the rugged mountains of the Brook Range.

The small town of Wiseman, which is about 5km off the main road, is a little further north and

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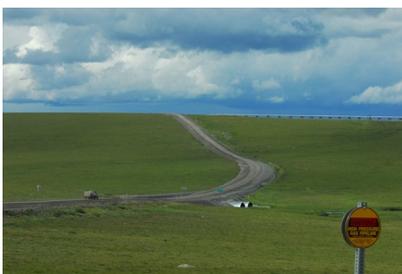
was ... still is ... a small mining community. It's worth a visit!

As you head north the road parallels the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River with the Sukakpak Peak an impressive sheer rock mountain to the east of the road. There's a few spots to wild camp along here beside the river. You then wind up the main range to Atigun Pass (4739 feet) and if there isn't any fog or cloud around you are lucky and you'll get some good views.

From here you'll descend quickly to the North Slope and then to the coastal plains south of the Arctic Ocean. You'll pass Toolik Lake with the Uni of Alaska research base before you'll begin to follow the Sag (really Sagavanirktok) River. This shallow fast flowing stream passes the Franklin Bluffs, which are close to the road and are named after the British navigator who mapped much of the Arctic coast of Alaska.

Deadhorse a short distance further on, is not much more than a HUGE industrial and construction site dotted with the occasional hotel (just 3), a general store and two places where you can get fuel. In amongst all the maintenance sheds, workshops, offices, etc, there is a maze of pipes running from little green sheds, which house pump heads that drag oil from deep underground. There is much more oil still here (16 billion barrels pulled out - 40 billion barrels estimated remaining) and a lot of gas - which at the moment they pump back underground to force the oil up.

The place for RV's and others to camp is at the pullout beside the Sag River, basically opposite Deadhorse Camp just as you enter the sprawling industrial area of Deadhorse - GPS 70°11'14"N 148°25'58"W. Tours of the oil field and the only way to get to the Arctic Ocean are run from Deadhorse Camp (24-hour notice required - ph: 877-474-3565).



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A Bit of a Comparison

While we enjoyed both routes, all of us enjoyed the Dempster Highway more than the Dalton.

They are much the same length:

Dalton Highway - Dawson City to Inuvik is 797km (498 mile)

Dempster Highway - Fairbanks to Deadhorse is 775km (484 mile)

About 35-40% (270-300km) of the Dalton is sealed with more each year. Just 50km of the route from Dawson City is bitumised.

The highest pass you cross on the Dempster is the North Fork Pass at 1400 metres (4465 ft). On the Dalton Highway the Atigun Pass at 1422 metres (4739 ft) is the highest pass you'll cross. The Dalton is a lot hillier than the Dempster

There is a lot more truck traffic on the Dalton (approx 150-180 trucks a day in summer - 250 or more in winter. The trucks supply the Prudhoe Bay oilfields.

The gravel surfaces of both highways are pretty damn good although they do get muddy and a bit slippery when wet from rains or roadworks. There are a lot more road works on the Dalton (because of the increased usage).

There's a lot less habitation along the Dempster - on the Dalton there are road maintenance bases, oil pipe line pump stations, along with three tourist facilities, a small town just off the highway and a science research facility.

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The Dempster has only one tourist service facility - Eagle Plains about half way. On the Dalton, Coldfoot is about half way and offers basic tourist services. The Yukon Crossing and the Hot Spot also offer limited facilities.

You must fly to Tuk from Inuvik during the summer to get to the Arctic Ocean. To get to Prudoe Bay, through the security area from Deadhorse, requires you join a tour group [\[link\]](#)

You can read more about Ron and Viv Moon's travels around the world along with a heap of travel hints and information; go to: www.guidebooks.com.au - and follow the links to their travel across Africa, Russia, Australia and the Americas, or follow them on Facebook at: www.facebook.com/MoonAdvPub.

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