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# THE LOW DOWN



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## FORT SELKIRK, YUKON

Learn the stories behind the stories at a historic Yukon River settlement


BY JONNY BIERMAN

**I**t was a hot Yukon summer day under the seemingly never-setting sun. We were en route from Dawson City back to Whitehorse for a seven-day celebration of circumpolar Indigenous culture at the annual Adäka Cultural Festival, but with one stop to make along the way near Pelly Crossing at Selkirk First Nation. This stop was highly anticipated by my partner and me because it meant trading the car for a boat, the road for the river and Google Maps for knowledgeable Indigenous guides.

Our destination? Fort Selkirk. A traditional trading, hunting and gathering place for the Northern Tutchone

People—the first Hudson’s Bay trading post in the Yukon—and once a popular stop for steamships travelling between Whitehorse and Dawson City. Now a popular camping spot among canoeists, the abandoned town would serve as the backdrop for our Indigenous heritage tour with Tutchone Tours. We pulled into a gravel clearing next to the Yukon River where we met our guide and the founder of Tutchone Tours, Teri-Lee Isaac.

**WE WALKED DOWN** the riverbank to the brand-new riverboat Teri-Lee recently purchased specifically for her company. Her partner William was waiting



LOCATED ON THE  
TERRITORY OF THE  
NORTHERN TUTCHONE  
PEOPLE AND SELKIRK  
FIRST NATION.

for us—he would be our river navigator for the day while Teri-Lee provided the knowledge and history of her ancestors.

We began learning about the history of this river and its importance to the Northern Tutchone People—so much of its significance comes from the abundance of wildlife it supports. After about 30 minutes of ping-ponging down the river avoiding the obstacles above and beneath the surface, Teri-Lee pointed at some white dots on the cliff. As we navigated closer, I noticed what started to look like a mountain goat... but with bighorn sheep horns. Teri-Lee explained that they are Dall's sheep, found only in

northwestern British Columbia, Yukon, Alaska and the Northwest Territories.

"The Dalls migrate all year long," Teri-Lee said. "They've been here for over a thousand years and are a protected species. It's illegal to hunt them for everyone apart from Selkirk First Nations citizens who are allowed to hunt one per year. But not many people do. I mean, look where they're hanging out! They're quite difficult to reach and I wouldn't hunt them anyways because they're like my friends."

We carried on down the Yukon before reaching our destination at the confluence of the Pelly and Yukon rivers—Fort Selkirk. We disembarked the boat and

made our way to the first historic building where information panels on the walls told stories of gold rush and Selkirk First Nations history. To any modest canoeist using the designated camping facilities here while doing the Whitehorse to Dawson circuit, Fort Selkirk could look like a well-maintained ghost town, but its story is much deeper than that. Teri-Lee's mission is to bridge the gap between her ancestors' unwritten history—which she shares with her Peoples' permission—with the commonly written, shared and taught colonial gold rush history.

"There's not much online from our First Nation about traditional knowledge, ▶



Tutchone Tours offers both day trips and weekend trips to Fort Selkirk. Tours begin in June. From \$275 per person (adult rate). [tutchonetours.com](http://tutchonetours.com)



**ABOVE:** Dall's sheep peer down from the banks of the Yukon River. **RIGHT:** Terri-Lee Isaac tells, with permission, stories of her People's living culture and history.

so I'm living it every day. You have to be a part of the programs and services that the First Nation provides to carry on traditional knowledge. So, all of my life, I've been a part of this community. I know everybody. I know who my cousins are, and who's related to who, and I know the traditional laws. I heard the legend stories from the old elders that have now passed on and with that, I provide that knowledge on these tours. As First Nations of the Yukon and First Nations at Fort Selkirk before first contact, we were on these Indigenous lands for thousands of years. The stories I share with you are not written on these panels."

She pointed to one of those panels. Protected behind the glass was some colourful beadwork, and surrounding it, historical knowledge about the area that didn't quite mention what these beads were actually about—but that's where Tutchone Tours comes in.

"Our people traded with the Tlingit and Chilkat extensively, and these beads made of abalone shells are some of what would have been traded. They are some of the many goods exchanged between the Tutchone people and the Tlingit and Chilkat people on the coast in what is now Alaska."

**WE CARRIED ON** under the hot summer sun in and out of buildings of significance until we got to the Big Jonathan House. This was the residence of Chief Big Jonathan who was chief when Hudson's Bay was establishing Fort Selkirk. A replica of the house serves as a cultural interpretation centre at Pelly Crossing between Whitehorse and Dawson and is a must-stop for anyone passing by. Terri-Lee gestured to more historic buildings and chuckled while showing us where she used to play hide-and-seek as a kid until we came to the remnants of a Model T Ford truck that she would also climb on in her youth. Her multigenerational storytelling through ancestral connection was really coming to light.

Teri-Lee explained that the truck belonged to her grandfather, Billy Isaac, who was a wood harvester for the steamships. He used his fortunes to buy the first vehicle in Fort Selkirk and shared it with the community until it found its resting place where we stood before that day. This wasn't just a rusty old truck—these weren't just old log buildings—and this certainly wasn't just an old Hudson's Bay trading post. This was both pre-colonial and post-colonial Indigenous history being connected by someone whose multigenerational relationships stemmed deep within these lands.

After lunch, we set off back up the Yukon River towards the car, but we had one more piece of history to see. We pulled off the river, got out, and followed Teri-Lee towards a tree. She reached into the grass and pulled out an abalone shell button that would have been used on a coat. "This is an artifact that I found on the trail. It's about 200 years old and would have been traded by the Chilkat. And so, to find this sent chills down my spine because I found something that is so old and well preserved. I leave it here because we're in the Yukon, you're supposed to

leave it where it is. And in this case, I'm never going to put it in my pocket. It's not mine, it belonged to somebody, and I preserve it under this tree because it is in our traditional territory."

I assumed my perch back on the boat's bow and thought about how *preservation* seemed to be the theme of the day. Preservation of culture—preservation of heritage—and preservation of identity. Using the Yukon River and Fort Selkirk as her stage, Teri-Lee Isaac is preserving information and artifacts through storytelling that can only be learned on a trip with Tutchone Tours. ✕

## IF YOU GO

Visit the annual Indigenous celebration of Adäka Cultural Festival where talent from Canada's territories and Alaska celebrate art in the forms of carving, painting, fashion and music. June 29 to July 5 at the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre in Whitehorse. [adakafestival.ca](http://adakafestival.ca)

Stop at Pelly Crossing to visit the Big Jonathan Heritage Centre and Selkirk Centre where you can purchase Indigenous-made goods such as Yukon Soaps.

Near the village of Champagne, Kwäday Dän Kenji (Long Ago Peoples Place) is a living museum where visitors can learn about traditional Southern Tutchone life. [yukonfirstnationculture.com](http://yukonfirstnationculture.com)

In Dawson City, allow Tommy Taylor to take you to his family fish camp on a tour with Fishwheel Charters. And at the Commissioner's Residence, join Parks Canada's "Red Serge, Red Tape" interpretive program which serves as a platform to decolonize the stories we tell about history between Indigenous people and Canada while helping visitors acknowledge their roles in reconciliation. [dawsoncity.ca](http://dawsoncity.ca)

## THE LOW DOWN