



Kluane  
National Park  
and Reserve

Parc national et réserve  
de parc national  
Kluane



## DÄN ZHÜR (DONJEK) ROUTE

*Distance: 110 km (68 mi) loop*

*Time: 8-10 days*

*Elevation gain: 3,600 m (11,811')*

*Maximum elevation: 2,170 m (7,120')*

Trailhead: 700 m (2,300') north of the Duke River Bridge, 9.5 km (6 mi) north of Burwash Landing on the Alaska Highway.

A route is not a trail. Routes are not marked with signs or maintained in any manner. The route described here is only a suggestion that may help guide you on your trip. Self-reliance and wilderness travel experience are essential, including excellent route-finding skills, map and compass skills. It is the responsibility of individual hikers who choose to follow such routes to adequately prepare and be prepared to rely on themselves.

### IN SUMMARY

One of the most popular hikes for wilderness enthusiasts is the Donjek Route. Rising over the vast alpine of the Burwash Uplands and then descending to the toe of the Donjek Glacier, this hike typifies "pristine mountain wilderness".

This route is a recommended 8 - 10 day trip that starts where the Duke River meets the Alaska Highway. It then travels southwest over Hoge Pass to the Donjek River before turning southeast past the Donjek glacier to Bighorn Creek. From this point the route turns northeast rising over Atlas Pass then continuing on to the Duke River and finally following Copper Joe Creek (still marked as Halfbreed Creek on some maps) out to the Highway. The estimated map distance from where the Alaska Highway crosses the Duke River, to where Copper Joe Creek meets the highway, via the following described route, is approximately 100-120 km. About 1/2 of this route is outside the park boundaries. The route follows creek and river drainage for the most part with some sections along an old road, horse and wildlife trails, and some sections, without any obvious trail at all. Route finding abilities and solid wilderness experience is essential for this route.

### THE DETAILS

#### **Option 1: Burwash Uplands**

The route begins about 28 km from the park boundary at the Duke River, 9.5 km north of Burwash Landing. North of the Duke River bridge, turn southwest onto a narrow gravel road. This is an old mining road that you may be able to drive on for about 5 km depending on your vehicle and road conditions. This road is not within the park. Access is subject to change due to mining activity and road conditions. Travel at your own risk.

Approximately 5.1 km down the old mining road (from where you turned off the highway), a few older cabin-style buildings appear on your right. This is a horse camp. Just after the horse camp, the road forks (UTM 07 V 597900E 6802200N). It is a good idea to leave your vehicle in this area and continue on foot.

Taking the right fork, follow the road uphill; you will pass debris from recent mining activity on your left and a portable white trailer on your right. Another 1.5 km up the road, you will arrive at a second junction (UTM 07 V 596900E 6802900N); follow the road to the left. The trail continues climbing through the trees for 3.3 km, passing a lake and a couple of small creeks before reaching the subalpine.

After walking for a couple of kilometres in the subalpine, you will reach an area where the old mining road is severely eroding (sloughing off) into small ponds that exist on either side of the old mining road. The mining road continues for a further 3 km across the hummocky tundra and crosses a creek (at UTM 07 V 591300E 6802000N). The large flat open area on the north side of this creek provides a comfortable camping spot.

It is a good idea, particularly under wet conditions, to continue along the main mining road as far as you can before heading towards Hoge Pass. If conditions are dry, you might choose to cut across the hummocky tundra before the main mining road disappears, but this involves some up-and-down travel over steeper terrain. This is a section of the route where you will need to judge, which is the best route to take, based on the conditions you encounter.

If you stick to the main mining road, in about 3.5 km you'll reach a junction (UTM 07 V 588400E 6803300N) where another road heads straight south towards Amphitheatre Mountain. It is generally advisable not to turn down this road, but to continue along the main mining road for another 1.8 km, at which point the road virtually disappears (UTM 07 V 586700E 6803300N). From this point, head west (left), aiming for a low saddle on the northwest end of Amphitheatre Mountain. From where you leave the road, it is about 6 km over the hummocky tundra to Burwash Creek. There are suitable camping areas on the west side of Burwash Creek, a couple of kilometres upstream from where you descend to the creek. The park boundary (UTM 07 V 583200E 6798100N) is a little further on. A warden patrol cabin is situated at the base of a rock outcrop just over 1 km upstream from the park boundary.

## **Option 2: Burwash Creek**

This is an easier alternative starting point for the Donjek Route, but it mostly follows a mining road through canyons. This route begins about 8.5 km further north along the Alaska Highway from the Duke River bridge. Depending on the condition of the mining road and the capability of your vehicle, you may be able to drive to within 12 km from the park boundary. If not, it is an easy walk through the canyons along the active mining road.

Approximately 750 m north of the Burwash Creek bridge, there will be a mining road to the southwest. Turn here and drive as far as you can. This road is not within the park. Access is subject to change due to mining activity and road conditions. Travel at your own risk.

Around 12 km from the highway, you will come to Tatamagouche Creek. There is active mining on both sides of the creek. This creek will often require you to change into water shoes and can be difficult to drive across. This is the end of the main canyons.

After that, 18 km from the highway, you will get to a point where the road splits (UTM 07V 584693E 6804820N). Follow the road that goes up the hill to the northwest. This is a small climb, but it is much easier than travelling through the canyon via the creek. After 1 km, the road drops back down and rejoins the creek. At this point, the road mostly disappears, but you are above the treeline, so the travel is easy. There are a lot of good camp sites in this area.

From there, continue following the creek along whichever side you choose. Around 22 km from the highway, the creek narrows into a small canyon. At this point, it is advised to travel on the east side of the creek, finding sections of old mining road. The canyon is short, and it soon opens to make for easy travel along the riverbed all the way to the park boundary, and the warden cabin shortly later. There is good camping near the park boundary and the warden cabin. Travel wherever you choose as you enjoy the views of Mount Hoge.

### **Hoge Pass**

The route continues along Burwash Creek. About 1 km past the warden cabin, a creek enters Burwash Creek from the west (UTM 07V 582163E 6797037N); an old mining road runs on the south side above this creek. Follow this road for about 2 km west to Hoge Pass. As it begins to level out, aim southwest for the obvious light gray coloured hill (UTM 07 V 580270E 6796523N) just below the top of Hoge Pass. From the top of the hill, travel southwest until you crest the ridge of Hoge Pass. This is a great area to camp, but there may not be much water available. Do not follow the creek down although it seems to be the obvious route. Once up on the ridges continue southwest, staying to the west along the ridges, as far as possible. About 2 m from the top of the pass, drop down a scree slope to the south (left) (UTM 07 V 578324E 6796439N). Following the scree is fast and is an efficient way down to Hoge Creek. About 10 m above the creek, the scree ends and is replaced by hardpacked mud. This area requires extreme caution as you navigate the last few metres down to the creek. Once in Hoge Creek, follow it all the way down to the Donjek River; it is about 4 km to the horse trail.

There are several gullies heading down to Hoge Creek. They are all tricky and steep with a lot of loose scree and rocks. Choose your route carefully because some gullies are dangerous and impassable. Follow Hoge Creek to the Donjek River. The creek will be high and numerous crossings will be required.

### **Donjek River and Glacier**

Depending on the flow of the Donjek River, it may be possible to walk in the valley bottom along its east side to a point where the river comes up against high cliffs. If you choose this route, just before you reach the cliffs, start hiking east up the slope away from the river (perpendicular to the river) toward the mountains. After 30-45 minutes of bushwhacking, you will meet a well-defined trail (an old horse trail).

When the Donjek is running along the east side of the valley, an alternate route may be taken to reach the horse trail. The horse trail is not obvious from Hoge Creek. To follow this alternate route, look for well-used game trails a couple of hundred metres downstream from the old horse camp located on the south side of Hoge Creek. Follow the game trails to the more prominent horse trail (aim roughly towards UTM 07V 575054E 6794967N).

Once you are on the horse trail, follow it as it crosses a couple of small creeks and opens into a meadow (at UTM 07V 575469E 6792688N). There are some good camping spots in this area. The trail crosses a creek bed of pink coloured rock 2.5 km further on (near UTM 07V 577892E 6790582N). It then enters a balsam grove and enters a creek with clear water (at UTM 07 V 578000E 6790400N). The horse trail continues through thicker shrubs for nearly 2 km before coming to a larger creek (at 07V 580180E 6788992N). It is possible to camp near this creek just upslope from the trail near the cut bank.

One kilometre further on, the trail enters a small meadow that has a running stream. Over the next 3 kilometres, you will cross a few more creek beds, after which the trail opens in a larger meadow (UTM 07 V 581700E 6786300N), also with a running stream. This meadow is closer to the Donjek, and the hills in front of the toe of the glacier make for nice walking and great views of the glacier. It is also possible to walk down to the toe of the glacier from the creek (near UTM 07V 581700E 6786300N). From there, follow the easiest route until you arrive at cliffs above Bighorn Creek. Look for the distinctive gully that provides an easy route through the cliffs to creek level.

### **Option 1: Expectation Pass**

This route up from Bighorn Creek offers stunning views of the Donjek Glacier, Kluane Glacier, and some of the bigger peaks in the icefields. The elevation gain along this alternative route is steady, but the contouring is easy. From Bighorn Creek, bushwhack until you find a small dry tributary creek flowing out off of Expectation Pass (near UTM 07V 587083E 6781755N). It is easy to follow this up to the pass, although it may be quite wet. At the top of the pass, drop down about 50 m to the east to get below some rocky pinnacles. Contour from there and aim for a small knoll (UTM 07V 590020E 6782988N). There is a noticeable sheep trail in the shape of a horseshoe that contours the gully. Maintain your elevation as you contour towards Atlas Pass. There is good camping in this area (near UTM 07V 590523E 6783555N). Choose the most efficient route and follow Atlas Creek up to Atlas Pass (UTM 07V 593038E 6785287N). It is very easy to travel up the creek drainage, where there are numerous places to camp, up to the top of the pass.

### **Option 2: Chert Creek**

Proceed upstream along the north side of the creek until the creek is visible within the canyon. At this point, you must decide whether to stay along the creek or find a convenient route up the steep slopes to the north. If you decide to travel through the canyon, you may find you have to cross the main channel of the creek a number of times. If the creek is high, it is recommended to bypass the canyon by heading north, up roughly 400', and then contouring east to a convenient slope that drops down on the tributary (Chert Creek) of Bighorn flowing from the north. At low water levels, walking through the canyon will take less than an hour, while taking the canyon bypass may take as long as 3 hours.

The next stage of the route involves following the tributary of Bighorn (Chert Creek), which flows in from the northeast. About 2 km up, the creek branches. Follow the right (east) side. 600 m past the fork is a second fork (you will pass a small creek before the second fork, do not mistake this for the second fork!). From the second fork a waterfall may be visible (depending on water levels) on the right side. It is easiest to bypass by following the left fork (west) 300-500 m until a climbable slope appears on the right (east) side. After a short, steep climb you will emerge in sub alpine area and a good place to camp (UTM 07 V 591300E 6782600N). Follow the creek drainage to the top of Atlas Pass.

An alternate route to bypass the waterfall is to climb high on the grassy slopes of the east side of the creek but it is steeper, and you have to climb higher than on the left (west) side. Just a bit above the falls the creek forks again. The area between the two forks is a flat, excellent, slightly overused campsite.

### **Atlas Pass**

Once you reach the top of Atlas Pass the view is stunning and a little overwhelming (provided you aren't immersed in cloud). Simply going straight down the most direct route off the pass is neither inviting nor recommended. The easiest route is to head to the left (north) side of the pass and climb up a bit toward a large rock outcrop along the ridge (UTM 0 7V 592937E 6785488N). It is then relatively easy to contour along the base of the outcrop and over to a broad sloping ridge (about 150m long) composed of silt and scree. This material gives way under foot and provides a comfortable route down (and a more difficult route up). Directly down the slope you see a knoll along the ridge, off a bit to the left. Beyond this knoll there is a small saddle and then the ridge levels off and rises slightly before dropping off to the creek. Stay to the left side of the rising ridge and watch down slope to the left for "Hole #9" (a distinct, flat, green patch visible on the top of a little knoll that resembles a putting green on a golf course). The best route down is the drainage just right (east) of Hole #9 (roughly UTM 0 7V 593811E 6785592N). Once you are down on the creek it is just a matter of following the water to where it flows into the Duke River, about 6 easy km downstream.

### **Duke River**

Just before you reach the Duke River you will see a game trail leave the creek bed on the right. After 200-300 m along the trail, it is possible to head left towards the river and find some good places to camp near UTM 07V 596853E 6789546N.

From this point, proceed upstream along the south (right) side of the Duke River. Hiking on numerous game trails and old gravel river drainage. Just over 4 km along the river you will arrive at small creek, in a big drainage, which flows into the Duke from the south. Along the east shore of the creek, 100 m upstream from the river, there is evidence of old and new campsites alike. Continue along the Duke for about 1 km until the river begins to braid out and look for a place to cross. Once across the river follow game trails and gravel washes for another 3-4 km. If water levels are too high, continue upstream for an additional 5 km and cross Grizzly Creek before finding an area shallow enough to cross the Duke River.

## Cache Lake

Where to turn up, away from the Duke River is not that obvious. As you travel along the river, the vegetation on the left (north) begins to thin out into an open terrace covered in Dryas (mountain avens). From this terrace head northeast to the edge of the vegetation and right away there is a dry creek wash evident and emerging in a small steep fan from the bank. Continue east past this fan until you hit the next dry fan. As you head north up the wash (about 100-300 m) you will find a small path that was once a road. This path can be difficult to find, and the creek is small. If you find yourself standing across from Grizzly Creek, you have gone too far and missed the path. Retrace your steps and eventually you will find the path. You can easily follow this path up over a low pass to Cache Lake where you will find another excellent camping spot (UTM 07V 604044E 6787852N).

When looking at a map, you can see that there is an alternative way to reach Cache Lake, by ascending the first creek (it may appear as a dry creek bed) southeast of Cache Lake. Walk through the trees and continue along the creek bed for about 2 kilometres. Just past the knoll at UTM 07V 605083E 6786202N, exit the creek bed up and to the left (northwest). Continue northwest towards Cache Lake. You will pass another small lake on your left, and the walking is pleasant and provides great views. It is an easy walk down to Cache Lake, and the old road can be located on the west side of the lake. This option is preferable if you had to cross the Duke River above Grizzly Creek.

## Copper Joe Creek (Halfbreed Creek on some maps)

The remainder of the route follows the drainage of Copper Joe Creek. At some points there is evidence of an old road, but in many places, it has been washed away. In most cases the remains of the road are found on the east (right) side of the creek and as a result it is often easier to travel on that side, but you may find it necessary to cross. You will cross the park boundary again about 15 km before the Alaska Highway. The road improves substantially 4 or 5 km before you arrive at the highway, and it is an easy end to the trip.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Unfortunately, cases of giardia have been reported in Kluane, so water boiling, tablets or filters are recommended.

Good boots are necessary when climbing scree and gaiters are also handy for keeping the water, rocks and snow out.

Depending on the year, this route is generally snow free from around mid-June to mid-September. Although unusual, it is possible to get snow on the passes on any day of the summer.

Some commercial companies guide groups over this route, so do not be surprised to see other people in the middle of nowhere. However, some times of year it will be unusual to see someone else on the whole hike.

For all overnight trips in the park Approved Bear Resistant Food Canisters are mandatory (see the link <http://www.igbconline.org/index.php/safety-in-grizzly-country/bear-resistant-products/igbc-certified-bear-resistantproducts>) and a Wilderness Permit is required, both can be obtained from the Kluane National Park and Reserve Visitor Centre in Haines Junction or at the Thechàl Dhâl Visitor Centre. For more information, please call 867-634-7207.

Bear sightings are common in this area. Review recommendations for travel within the **YOU ARE IN BEAR COUNTRY** brochure. Please report all bear sightings to the staff at the Visitor Centre.

Cellular telephones do not work in most of the park. Satellite phones or satellite messaging devices are strongly recommended. **For emergencies, please call 1-780-852-3100.**

Using topographic maps at a 1:50,000 scale is highly recommended: Bighorn Creek 115 G/3, Donjek Glacier 115 G/4, Steele Creek 115 G/5, Duke River 115 G/6, and Burwash Landing 115 G/7.