

Dempster by Bicycle

cycling the true north



Cycling the Dempster

A Brief Guide

My name is Roberto Gallegos (Mexico). My partner Annika Wachter (Germany) and I are co-founders of www.tastingtravels.com, a project that seeks to promote cycle tourism as a model to cultivate empathy.

In that spirit we have put together a brief guide that will help you on your Dempster Highway cycling adventure, so that you have an opportunity to cycle to one of the most remote places in the world and get to know the people who call these lands their home.

We hope this brief guide saves you time, money and troubles, so that you can enjoy your ride as much as we did. It won't be easy but the reward will stay with you for life.



Annika Wachter and Roberto Gallegos

Tasting Travels

Essential Preparations

Before setting off we recommend you to do the following:

1- Visit the Northwest Territories Centre if you are in Dawson, Canada located just in front of the Dawson Visitor Center. You can always call them.



Northwest Territories Centre phone: 867-993-6167.

2- Check the weather but don't rely on it. It is the Arctic Weather and the weather can change in minutes. So be prepared with warm clothes and rain gear even in the 24 hour summer sunlight.

3- Get the Dempster Highway Travelogue with valuable information on the highway and an elevation chart. Our tips go along pretty well with the Travelogue, it is free and you can even have it mailed to you.



4- Take more food with you. Even if you are a super athlete and you can cycle the Dempster in 5 or 6 days, prepare food for more than those days. If there is a lot of rain, the road might be so muddy, your wheels could get stuck in them. Also you have to take two ferries and sometimes the rivers can be so high that the ferries won't work and you might have to wait a couple of days on either side of the river. We took food for 10 days and ended up being short.

5- Send half of your food stash to Eagle Plains. The Northwest Territories Visitor Centre will assist you in sending half of your food stash to Eagle Plains, a hotel, camp, restaurant town of eight inhabitants for free. This place will be your first stop after 369 km of cycling.

6-Take a bear container with you. If you do not have one, the good people from the Tombstone Interpretive Centre will lend you one with a 60 Canadian Dollar deposit. It is bear country so take all the BEAR AWARE (<http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/environment-you/bearaware.php>) precautions, they are highly recomendable.



7- Take cash and coins with you (one and two dollar coins). Most of the camping grounds are self serve, so you must leave the exact change, 12 Dollars per site.

Thirteen Days on the Dempster



Day 1: Dawson City - YT Km 38.5

Day 2: YT Km 38.5 - YT Km 121

Day 3: YT Km 121 - YT Km 193.8 (Engineer Creek Campground)

Day 4: Rest Day (rain)

Day 5: YT Km 193.8 (Engineer Creek Campground) - YT Km 278

Day 6: YT Km 278 - YT Km 369 (Eagle Plains Hotel / Lodge / Restaurant / Camping)

Day 7: YT Km 369 (Eagle Plains) - YT Km 398

Day 8: YT Km - YT Km 445.8 (Rock River Campground)

Day 9: YT Km 445.8 (Rock River Campground) - NWT Km 76 (Nitainlaih Territorial Park)

Day 10: Rest Day

Day 11: NWT Km 76 (Nitainlaih Territorial Park) - NWT Km 143 (Tsiigehtchic Tourist Centre)

Day 12: NWT Km 143 (Tsiigehtchic Tourist Centre) - NWT Km 235 (Gwich'in Territorial Park)

Day 13: NWT Km 235 (Gwich'in Territorial Park) - NWT Km 272 (Inuvik)

Day 1: 80.17 Km in 5.34.47 hours

Dawson City - YT Km 38.5



Most of the day is a very gentle climb. Mostly flat till the junction, then gentle ups and short gentle downs, rolling. We had a hot and sunny day.

Road from Dawson to the Junction is paved (4 km of construction and extreme dust as of July 2015).

Km 0: On the junction there is a card-lock gas station, but no water, no toilets and no shelter. There is a wooden platform with two benches, good for a rest, might even serve for camping if you don't mind for the traffic.

Km 0.1: Just after the junction there is an informative sign and a big sign with the letters "Dempster Highway". Makes a good picture with the bikes in it.



Km 0.2: You will cross a bridge, that's the last water until km 24.5. So if it is a hot and sunny day, make sure to keep your bottles filled up.

Shortly after: End of the pavement. You won't see it until NWT Km 262. Make sure you say goodbye accordingly.

Km 19 - 22: A bit of a climb, but a nice view from top

Km 24.5: Glacier Creek (slightly yellow water, relatively difficult access)

Km 28.5: Benson Creek (clear water, quite easy access)

From Km 33 onwards: Many tiny creeks and ponds, easy to hear, but hard to see.

Km 38.5: Somebody's old hunting- and camping site. River access (clear water), a rusty box (does the job for the bears), fire spot, several spots for several tents. Many moose tracks, no bear evidence, there's branches put together so if you bring a tarp, you can have yourself a cooking shelter. Many mosquitoes, no wind.

Day 2: 83.93 Km in 6.08.23 hours

YT Km 38.5 - YT Km 121

Day started very hot. Street surface in great conditions. Nibbling on small high-energy snacks. I would have much rather had big snacks that were actually filling. Memo to self: more big and filling portions.

Km 47: Soutcar Creek, water seemed clear, access quite easy.

Km 58: Wolf Creek, Easy Access.

Km 58.5: Grizzly Ridge Trail parking. Toilets.



Km 71.5: Tombstone Interpretive Centre. Flush Toilets, running water. Recommended to treat it, but the staff drinks it straight from the well and so did we. Check out their book selection! You can learn about tracks and excrements of different animals that you might encounter. If you didn't bring a bear container, now is a good moment, to rent one. Rental is free, but you will be asked for a \$60 deposit. Check the weather, check other people's animal sightings, and ask everything you want to know. This is the last building (except for a horse farm) until Eagle Plains at YT Km 369.

After Km 71.5: Quite steep climb. Especially the first part seems to stretch forever. There is a viewpoint on your left at Km 74, well worth stopping. After the viewpoint the climb isn't quite as steep anymore.

Km 80: Summit. Now you can see far through the Tundra, much easier for wildlife viewing. Very scenic. Nice long gentle downhill. Very scenic.

Km 102.6 Two Moose Lake. Benches, Rubbish bins, Lake view, Information, no shelter, no toilets, no camping or overnight staying.

After Km 102.6 You will follow a little river for a while. It is quite nice and clear and at some parts the access is rather easy. Very cold water and not very deep. Easier to have a quick wash if you have a second person that can pour the water over you with a pot or cup.

Km 116: Chapman Lake. Rubbish bins, Information, no shelter, no toilets, no camping or overnight staying.

Km 121: On the right side of the street you will see a hut in the fields. Soon after there is a trail on the right. It leads to a little roundabout. River access (icy water in case you are thinking about swimming). Okay camping spot.



Day 3: 72.65 Km in 4.14.11 hours

Day 4: Rest day

YT Km 121 - YT Km 193.8 (Engineer Creek Campground)

Hot but cloudy day, One 10 km long climb, the rest is mostly downhill. Good street surface. Rain in the afternoon, didn't stop raining for 36 hours.

Km 152.8: Windy Pass Summit. Climb starts very gentle and turns steeper and steeper. Great views from the top. Very windy. Could make a good camping spot if you have a very windproof tent and are tired of mosquitoes.

Before Km 168.3: Grab some water from one of the rivers. After this point the creek next to the road will turn red-orange for at least 25 km. Some parts are quite acidic and not suitable for drinking.



Km 193.8: Engineer Creek Campground. \$12 per tent. Includes outhouses with paper, free fire wood, fire pits on each site. Water from the river is yellow, but after filtering it, we drank it without a problem. There is a spacy kitchen shelter with three picnic tables, roof and walls. Mosquito-net windows without glass. Has a fireplace in the center that heats the room quite well. Brand new tube that replaced the old rusty one. Black Bear tracks less than 10 meters from the kitchen shelter, so as always in Bear Country – make sure to keep your food, garbage and toilet bag (including sun cream and bug spray) safe. There is a strong cable that you can use to hang your food, or you might ask other campers to keep in in their car.

After all the rain, the entrance to the campground was more a pond than a street. If you don't have high waterproof boots, you would probably want to cycle through rather than walk.



Day 5: 85.50 Km in 6.52.00 hours

YT Km 193.8 (Engineer Creek Campground) - YT Km 278

Cloudy day, turned sunny soon. Temperature dropped to 4°C at night. Left at 3 pm when we were pretty sure the roads had dried a bit and the rain wouldn't come back too soon. The road was mostly fine. Got a bit muddy after the Viewpoint. Muddy in some parts, but much better than right after the rain. We had met some drivers who came back south through the mud some hours earlier and they had experienced it as very slippery, deep and sticky mud. They highly recommended us to wait for better weather and that was what we did.



Km 193.8 - Km 240: The road will follow a river (on your right side) that you can fill your bottles in. Just after the rain there were also several small springs and creeks on your left. Delicious clear water. Some of the rivers on your right are clear, some rather yellow. Make sure to stock up on water before the start of the Seven-Mile-Hill, as there won't be any until Eagle Plains (Km 369). If you are desperate for water, keep your ears and eyes open, as there are many springs left and right of the road. But as you ride on the ridge, none of them ever

cross the road, so you will have to walk down the hill. In case of bad thirst: People are nice, both tourists and locals. Most of them carry water and it doesn't hurt to ask them if they can spare a liter for you.

Km 221.2 Elephant Rock Pullout. Elephant Rock is visible if you turn towards the river and look a bit to your right. It is very far away and appears tiny, so use your imagination. There are rubbish bins, but no toilets, benches or shelter.

Km 245.5 Beginning of the Seven-Mile-Hill. Have all your water bottles full by now. Hill climbs in about the same gradient. Take your time and just watch the mountains on your right. Depending on at what time of the day you pass the hill, the mountains might appear soft grey, creamy white, pastel pink or even straight white like snow.

Km 259: Ogilvie-Peel viewpoint. Impressive views to all sides. This is a popular overnight spot for RVs. It is a bit windy and the ground might be too hard for tunnel tents that require pegs in order to stand. There are rubbish bins and outhouses, but no shelter.



Km 278: Very small pullout with gravel and mud. Still makes a good camping spot for the night if you are desperate and tired enough. We reached this place at midnight and nearly saw the sun setting at about 1.30 am.



Day 6: 91.63 Km in 8.06.50 hours

YT Km 278 - YT Km 369 (Eagle Plains Hotel / Lodge / Restaurant / Camping)

This was a very hard day. Hard sun. The climbs were short and rather gentle, the views very beautiful, but the surface was what took all our energy. There was deep mud, loose gravel, slippery gravel, muddy gravel, deep wheel tracks surrounded by mud, and many rocks that make the ride bumpy. Worst mud parts were from Km 270-300. Should be a smooth ride when it hadn't rained.

Km 326: Pullout with toilets and rubbish bins. No shelter or benches or water. Quite windy.

Before Km 369: Some last climbs that seem to never ever end. Very loose gravel on the last kilometers, road tilts to the inner side of the curves, so make sure to stay on the outer side. At the same time try to avoid cycling on the left side of the street if you can't see the oncoming traffic.



Km 369: Eagle Plains. Population: 8. The first building, the first gas, the first place to spend your dollars in other than camping. There is a hotel (about \$160 per room) and campground (\$20 per site that fits up to two tents). Both include hot unlimited showers. Camping bathroom was a bit filthy, but water hot and pressure good. Inside there is WiFi and it is snugly warm.

If you want to eat in the restaurant (Mush Burger (\$14) highly recommended) make sure you get there before 8pm or at least get hold of somebody to order for you if you will just miss 8 pm, because that's when the kitchen closes. After 8pm there are sandwiches, soups, chips and snickers sold.

Views from the camping are just great, but if you grab the campsites in the bushes in the back right, you will be sheltered from the wind. Some old flyers state that there is a Laundromat, but there isn't. You can get Artic Crossing Certificates though! If you make it to Inuvik, they will print you a similar one too.

This is also where you will pick up the second part of your food. It feels a bit like Christmas, because we couldn't even remember exactly what we had sent and were wondering for days if we had sent chocolate or not.



Day 7: 30.33 Km in 3.17.41 hours

YT Km 369 (Eagle Plains) - YT Km 398

Eagle Plains is just a place far too comfortable for an early start. We had a good breakfast, more burgers and didn't leave until 4 pm. In the land of the midnight sun it doesn't really make a difference at what time of the day or night you cycle. Most of the times we had heavy headwinds. In the Tundra there isn't much shelter.

Km 369.1: From the beginning on you will be facing deep and loose gravel. There is a steep drop down to the river and an equally steep climb back up on the other side. Ride with extreme caution here! Gravel is very tricky and road sometimes tilts to the inner side of the curves. And as much as you will need to concentrate on the road - don't forget about the traffic! We had somebody overtaking very quickly and very close and without any warning. We hadn't heard or seen them at all.

Km 378: Peel River. There won't be any water until about 12 km after the Arctic Circle except for some seasonal creeks and brown ponds (leeches?) so if you forgotten to fill your bottles in Eagle Plains, do it now. Water looks brown though.

Back up on the plateau we faced some heavy headwinds.

Km 398: Early finish today, because one of our team had health problems and couldn't continue. Pitched our tents behind a huge gravel pile. This is not a recommended campground, as there is a "no entry" sign, but it was our only chance for a halfway sheltered campsite with some bushes.

Day 8: 49.54 Km in 3.26.40 hours.

YT Km - YT Km 445.8 (Rock River Campground)

Drizzly grey and windy but short day.

Km 405.5 Arctic Circle. Information signs, picnic table, outhouses and rubbish bins. Open land, can be quite windy. Might make a good camping spot for tents that can cope with the wind. A lot of people drive up here and then back south. We highly recommend to continue riding!



Km 445.8 Rock River Campground on the right side. Kitchen Shelter is spacey and has mosquito net windows. There is a creek, BBQ pits, a fireplace inside the shelter, outhouses and fire wood. A good spot for a rainy day. Good camp spot if you want to start the following day with a 20 km climb.

Day 9: 96.23 Km in 8.54.28 hours

Day 10: Rest Day

YT Km 445.8 (Rock River Campground) – NWT Km 76 (Nitainlaih Territorial Park)

Very long, drizzly, cold and exhausting day. By far the hardest on the Dempster. Felt tricked by the thought that I was awaiting a long downhill ride. Difficult street surface in many parts. But a week later there was hardly any mud left. Road conditions are constantly changing. If you want to know, what to expect, ask motorcyclists, who face the same danger in mud and gravel, as cyclists, but are more of a common sight every day. Beautiful tundra scenery.

Before Km 465: From Rock River, there is a gradual climb up to the border. This is the third and last time you will cross the continental divide. The climb looks tough in the travelogue's elevation profile, but as long as you don't face any headwinds, it's not too bad at all. What helps a lot is the awesome scenery. Whenever the road surface allows, you can watch out into the tundra, look out for bears, moose or caribou, or just enjoy the landscape.

Km 465: Border between Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories. Quite windy spot with rubbish bins and information signs. No outhouses, tables or shelter.



Km 0 - Km 70: We have experienced very deep gravel and very muddy parts in this section. Had to cycle very slowly even downhill. But this might change with weather and time. The construction workers are doing a great job in maintaining the Dempster, but sometimes that means that you will have to ride through freshly put very deep gravel, or through muddy sections full of gravel-loaded trucks. On the bright side: Truck drivers seem to know how difficult it can be to ride on an unpaved road, and will leave you plenty of space if there is no traffic from the other side.

Km 20: In the travelogue's elevation profile there's an extremely steep climb, but it's doable. You will be surrounded by steep rocky walls and have a picturesque creek on your side.

Km 23.6: Called the "Descent from the gorge". From here you will descent 853 meters down to the Peel River. But that doesn't mean, that you won't face any climbs anymore.



Km 44: Midway Lake. There is an annual festival held here, but if the festival isn't on, there is not much more to see than a few empty huts and houses. Local sometimes camp here on the weekends. No shelter or outhouses. From here, you will face a lot of short hills. On the top of each, you will see the top of the next and so on. Ponds and lakes to both sides. Can be a very exhausting ride if you were prepared to "descent from the gorge". There are another two gentle but relatively long climbs after the Midway Lake hills.

Km 71: Viewpoint. This is where the actual descent begins. Might need to slow down for deep gravel.

Km 74: Peel River crossing. Free ferry, after the rain the last bit of road to the ferry can be very muddy and slippery.

Km 76: Nitainlaii Territorial Park. Drinking water, flush toilet, kitchen shelter, BBQ pits and picnic benches on each side. Owner Robert charges \$15-22 per site (fits 3 small tents), depending if the showers work or not. If they do work, they are generator-operated and on between 6-11 am and 4-9 pm. Robert brings coffee into the office/info centre in the morning (donation).



Day 11: 69.87 Km in 4.25.50 hours

NWT Km 76 (Nitainlaih Territorial Park) - NWT Km 143 (Tsiigehtchic Tourist Centre)

Sunny and easy ride. Short and gentle rolling hills, spruce forests, and for the first time since Dawson City: A shop for groceries!

Km 86: After ten easy kilometers you will reach Fort McPherson, where there are two grocery shops, a little Inn (prices keep changing, but a room should cost around \$150), a café (hot chocolate for \$1.50, but they also sell some fast food), and the famous Tent and Canvas Store. Pick up a Fort McPherson Brochure to learn about all the other interesting points in town. For us, Fort McPherson was a huge highlight, just because we met so many people. Locals are very friendly and helpful and we just missed talking to locals.

After Km 86: The Travelodge states, that there is a lot of loose gravel to face, but it's nothing worse than the gravel in between the border and Fort McPherson. Nevertheless ride carefully, these long and straight stretches are the ones that motorcyclists often get into accidents.

Km 142: Crossing of the Mackenzie River and the Arctic Red River. The ferry operates in a triangle form: Southern riverbed of the Mackenzie and western riverbed of the Arctic Red River – Tsiigehtchic on the southern riverbed of the Mackenzie and eastern riverbed of the Arctic Red River – Dempster on the northern riverbed of the Mackenzie River and from there back again. So if you take the ferry from south to north, you will at least land in Tsiigehtchic. We highly recommend you to leave the ferry and at least go for a stroll through town.

Km 143: There are about 150 people living in Tsiigehtchic (pronounce Tsee-Gae-Chic with emphasis on the first syllable). The village is known for its good dry fish, but their slogan is "so much more than dry fish!". The houses are colorful and the people very friendly.

There is a touristic information centre and a brand new kitchen building. The cost is \$50 for two persons and \$10 for every additional person and includes: camping, use of the brand new fully equipped kitchen (so new in fact, that apart from one, all pots were still wrapped in plastic as of July 2015), WiFi, electricity and a very clean hot shower including shampoo and soap. You can also use only one or two of these services for a fee. We were the only visitors and Melinda, who works in the Information Centre, allowed us to just sleep on the ground of the kitchen, as we were too lazy to pitch our wet tents.





In Tsiigehtchic there is a “canteen” (open from afternoon till 11pm on weekdays) where you can buy softdrinks, popcorn and ice cream for \$3 for 3 scoops. There are two people drying and selling fish, one of them dries with spices and the other one makes the non-spiced and more traditional fish. Melinda will explain you everything you need to know.

Your other option is, to just pitch your tent by the river. There are a few picnic tables and portaloos by the beach.



Day 12: 93.40 Km in 5.56.33 hours

NWT Km 143 (Tsiigehtchic Tourist Centre) - NWT Km 235 (Gwich'in Territorial Park)

Long and flat and straight roads. Hot day with extreme amounts of mosquitoes. Bad thunderstorm in the afternoon. Not much to see except for lakes, ponds and spruce. Road was in rather good condition.

Before Km 221: There isn't really anything much to see or do along this stretch. Just hope for not too much headwinds.

Km 221: Vadzaih Van Tsik Campground: Nice little camping with BBQ pits, picnic tables, rubbish bins and outhouses, but no shelter of any kind. On the other side of the bridge, there is a day use area.

Km 235: Gwich'in Territorial Park. Beach access, picnic tables, outhouses, kitchen shelter, and BBQ Pits. One tent site costs \$22.50 and fits easily 3 tents. Owner Felix sells an armful of fire wood for \$6.



NWT Km 235 (Gwich'in Territorial Park) - NWT Km 272 (Inuvik)

Km 262: Return of the pavement by the airport junction. Feels very odd at first. Ride is so smooth, you might feel like you're cycling on butter.

Km 271: Welcome to Inuvik Sign. This is the End of the Dempster Highway.



Km 272: Inuvik. A pretty town with a population of 3,400. People are very friendly, helpful and curious. We met so many locals who congratulated us for our ride and gave us a warm welcome to their home town. The Happy Valley Camping has laundry machines (\$3 per machine, \$3 per dryer, \$3 per laundry detergent), showers (included), flush toilets, a kitchen shelter with 1 ½ walls, BBQ pits, picnic tables and six walk-in campsites. These fit two small tents on each platform plus another one on the ground (if you have a tent that needs pegs to stand, you might prefer the ground). Walk-in Campsites are \$15.75 each site.

The touristic information is on your right side entering town. Here you can grab maps and all kind of information, leave notes to people you have met, and ask for anything you want to know. The team there is very helpful and have great knowledge of their town, the cultures, events and the surroundings. During summer there are heaps of events going on, so make sure you check the information's whiteboard. There are grocery shops, souvenirs and many touristy attractions. If you happen to be at the information centre at 3pm on a Friday, you might be picked to be the "Tourist of the week"!

Make sure you don't plan your time in Inuvik too shortly, because there is plenty to see and do. For us the highlight were the locals. They were extremely welcoming to us and made us feel like home. We have had plenty of great conversations and made new friends.

If you reach Inuvik in wintertime, you can follow the Iceroad to Tuktoyaktuk (Locals just call it Tuk)! There will be a summer road built but this will take some years. For now the only way to reach Tuktoyaktuk and Aklavik during summer is by air or water.

If you happen to plan to hitch a ride back to the Dempster Junction, you might consider the road next to the hospital as a good spot, as there are toilets and a little canteen with food and drinks. If you cycled some kilometers further out of town, there will be more construction trucks though.



Enjoy Inuvik! And enjoy your bicycle ride / car ride / flight back!

Special thanks to Dawn from the Northwest Territories Visitor Centre



and to the our companions, Luzia (who took our pictures together), Denise and Martine, you can read about their adventures, <https://jumpingtheworld.wordpress.com/>.

