

The Grease Trail

For thousands of years before Alexander Mackenzie travelled the 450km/279m trail between the Fraser River and Bella Coola in 1793, First Nations peoples used this trail as a trade route, the inland Carriers bearing various goods including volcanic obsidian, highly valued as blades for knives and weapons, and the coastal Nuxalk bearing backpacks laden with the rich grease of the eulachon. This small smelly fish filled the rich coastal rivers in the spring by the billions and were netted into dug-out spoon canoes, fermented in "stink boxes", and rendered into a dietary staple and a prime trade commodity.



Photo courtesy Bella Coola Museum/Local Archives

The Grease Trail (aka "Alexander Mackenzie/Heritage Grease Trail") was part of a vast network of inland trails that enabled Interior peoples access to the rich salmon runs in the upper watersheds of coastal rivers such as the Bella Coola and the Dean and facilitated social networking among various First Nations throughout the region.

In 1793, from a point on the Fraser River south of Quesnel, Mackenzie and his six voyageur companions with First Nations guides trekked up the West Road River to its headwaters in the Rainbow Mountains west of Anahim Lake, from which they descended to the Bella Coola Valley and the coast, completing the first recorded journey by a European across North America – 12 years ahead of the more famous Lewis and Clark expedition to the south.



Photo courtesy Miriam Schilling

While the overland trail ends on the Valley floor under the crags of Mount Stupendous – so named by Mackenzie - his journey continued downriver to tide water at Q'umk'uts (now the Bella Coola Townsite) and then out the inlet to a point on the Dean Channel where his party, intimidated by the locals, turned around – but not before they marked the terminus at Mackenzie's Rock.



Photo courtesy Chris Carlson

Today, the trail is cut by wagon roads, provincial highways, forest access roads, rivers and coastal waterways. It passes through untouched old-growth forests, glacier-encrusted mountain ranges, volcanic rim rock ridges, and salmon-filled streams. Sections of this trail can be planned as day hikes or the entire trail can be completed on foot or horse back in approximately three weeks. Note: only experienced hikers should plan to do the full hike. The less experienced should check out the Bella Coola Trail Guide produced by BCVT: www.bellacoola.ca



Photo courtesy BCVT/Michael Wigle

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