

The Freedom Road

The Bella Coola Hill

Dubbed the "Freedom Road" by Valley residents, the stretch of (now) Highway 20 that joins the Bella Coola Valley with Anahim Lake in the West Chilcotin was completed in 1953. Prior to this date, the only way to obtain goods in this remote community was by steamship at the harbor or by horse pack trains that wound their way down the steep slopes of the coast mountain range. Having been told by provincial officials that the province was unable, or unwilling, to construct a roadway through such terrain, the Bella Coola Board of Trade hired a single bulldozer and the work began on September 14, 1952 and continued through the winter.



Photo courtesy of Bella Coola Valley Tourism

The brute determination of a small group of volunteers amazed the provincial government and they agreed to cover some of the costs. However, when that money ran out the community was once again left on its own and a second bulldozer operator from Tatla Lake started working down from the top.

Carving along a new trail that had been walked and surveyed by eye, the two bulldozers grew ever nearer to each other. Just over one year later, on Sept. 23, 1953, a small group of onlookers witnessed these two brave equipment operators remove the last bit of rock and debris to touch their blades, symbolizing freedom for the citizens of Bella Coola. Being very narrow and steep, with several extremely tight curves, the roadway nevertheless gave citizens the ability to leave their wondrous valley by travelling overland, and not just by sea.



Photo courtesy of Stephen Waugh

Look for the small blue plaque bolted to the roadside rock bluff that marks the spot where these two courageous men met. The road winds its way through some beautiful country, from sub-alpine meadows to coastal rainforest below, and you can feel and smell the different environments. You'll certainly feel your ears pop and, if you have an open plastic soda or water bottle, have a look at what happens to it once you reach the bottom.



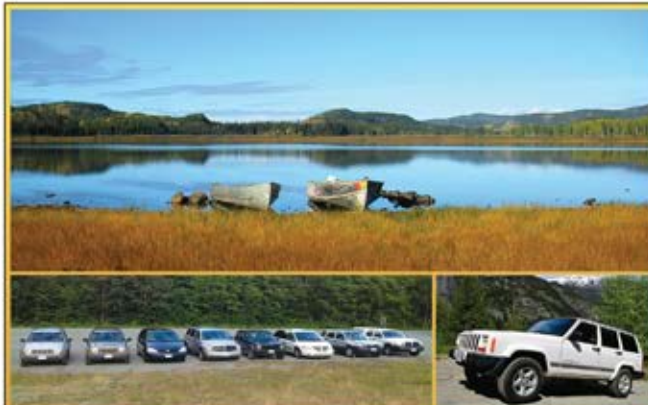
Photo courtesy Stephen Waugh

The Wildlife

Part way down you'll cross the crisp, clear waters of Young Creek, a perfect spot for a mid-day picnic or just to sit and listen to the constant babble of the creek beside you. You can also see many animals on your adventure, from Grizzly and Black Bears that are often seen munching on roadside grasses above the Young Creek Bridge, to Lynx and Wolverine darting across the gravel track a few hundred meters in front of you.

And, if you really watch closely, you might see a Marmot sunning on the rocks near the top or tiny Chipmunk sized Picas on the roadside bluffs some where around the blue sign mentioned earlier. If you do, roll down your windows and listen for their two different kinds of whistles.

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