



BRITISH COLUMBIA

Heart of Golden

BY SABRINA DOYLE

KONA IS NO damsel in distress. For starters, she's a dog — a white Alaskan husky, to be exact. But the story of her rescue does carry a whiff of fairy tale (spoiler: it has a happy ending). Before Kona arrived in Golden, B.C., to trot off into her snowy sunset, she was in a rough spot in Saskatchewan. (The details aren't entirely clear but indicate she was neglected by an ill-equipped dogsledder stretched too thin.) She was saved from that life by her current musher-cum-Prince Charming, Matt Parr.

When I first meet Kona and Parr, they're snuggled on a couch next to a crackling potbelly stove, Kona gazing into the blue eyes of the man who's devoted his life to saving pups in similar positions. Over the past 11 years, Parr has rescued some 50 dogs.

He has trained and successfully found homes for most of them with nearby farms and families. But 14 of those dogs now run for Parr's Golden Dog Sled Adventures, the touring business he launched in 2013 in the town best known for skiing, snowboarding and snowmobiling.

A tour with Parr, however, is an opportunity not to be missed for visiting winter enthusiasts. It offers an introduction to the tradition of dogsledding and a heartwarming story of a man dedicated to saving sled dogs.

A team of huskies owned by Golden Dog Sled Adventures rests on a trail in Golden, B.C.

People have been using dogs as a means of snowy long-distance travel for centuries; the earliest evidence of sleigh-bound dogs dates back to AD 1000 and the Thule people of Canada's North. From their history as mail-carriers in northern Canada and Alaska to the famous lead sled dogs Togo and Balto — who relayed medicine by team to a remote Alaskan village suffering from a diphtheria outbreak — to the fictional Buck from Jack London's 1903 novel *The Call of the Wild*, sled dogs have long held a special place within the northern narrative.

Today, the human-dog transportation relationship is less about survival and more a matter of lifestyle. Some opportunistic sledding outfits, says Parr, take advantage of aspirational dog-lovers and prioritize profits above the health of their charges. Some owners have simply grown too old for the business, he notes, but are too attached to their dogs to let them go.

Parr says the small size of his outfit — he caps his capacity at two teams — is what makes it particularly special. "People want to see the connection, that bond, between the musher and the



PETER SHEARD; MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO

dogs,” he says. “You can’t get that with some of the larger, 100-dog kennels.”

True to his words, guests don’t just get to mush dogs with Parr’s outfit. Before they hit the trails, they meet the animals, get acquainted with each one’s personality and help harness them to the sled. They also learn about the differences between the Siberian and Alaskan huskies that make up Parr’s pack.

Siberians are all about brawn — their big, fluffy bodies can haul heavy weight over long distances in the coldest of conditions. Alaskan huskies such as Kona, however, are essentially mutts. They combine the speed and lightweight build of greyhounds, pointers and collies with the strength and cold resilience of their counterparts.

Kona is the lead dog of the team I take to the trail with. She’s sweet and smart, and as we race through evergreens along the well-packed trail surrounded by mountains, I marvel at the team’s

Golden Dog Sled Adventures owner Matt Parr helps steer the sled during a ride.

coordination. From my snug and warm position on the sled, I look up to see Parr barking “Ha” and “Go” to instruct “Left” and “Right” to the team. His enthusiasm is infectious, his love for the dogs obvious. “Honestly, all the stresses of my life go away when I’m mushing dogs,” he says.

Together with his girlfriend, Parr is currently working on a new project called Team Spirit, which will operate out of Golden Dog Sled Adventures and be devoted to the rescue, rehabilitation and re-homing of retired or unwanted sled dogs. Eventually, he says, an eight-hectare sanctuary behind his main office will serve as a safe environment in which rescued dogs will be able to heal, and bring joy to others.

When the tour is done, it’s time to give the dogs (and guests) a treat. Parr splashes



a warm water and chicken mixture into each dog’s bowl, giving each an appreciative pat. I join the group in the cabin for hot chocolate and cookies. It’s a perfect happily-ever-after. ❄️



Watch a video of Parr with his dogs at cangeo.ca/nov17/dogsled.

PETER SHEARD

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