

The Ice Road Truckers

The Ice Road Truckers are an eclectic group of 18-wheeler drivers who annually trek to the Canadian north in order to deliver high value goods and supplies to mines for high amounts of money. The truckers can earn as much within a two-month season than in a year of their regular jobs. The Ice Road Truckers were popularised in a documentary of the same name in 2007. It focused on regular veteran adventurers Hugh 'the Polar Bear' Rowland, Alex Debogorski, Jay Westgard, and Rick Yemm in his second year, and the rookies TJ Tilcox and Drew Sherwood. Alex calls the winter ice road season: 'The dash for the cash'. It is highly dangerous, but lucrative.

The Ice Roads replaced dog sleds and barges from the days when gold was discovered in the 1850s, followed by discoveries of pitchblende (for radium and uranium), then silver and finally diamonds in 1990s. The temporary frozen highways lead from the Tli Cho base in Yellowknife and cross over 300 miles of frozen lakes, connected by portages (ice covered islands) over which 100,000 tons of material goods are delivered via ten thousand truck loads to diamond mines and other industries in the far Canadian north. It is a non-stop business to the mines of De Beers Snap Lake, BHP Ekati and Diavik, as well as clearing out other old mines of their equipment.

The drivers face constant danger and have to avoid going through the ice, spillages, crashes, breakdowns, isolation, storms, and working relationship problems. Twenty people have died since the inception of the Ice Roads in the early 1940s by John Dennison, an ex-Mountie, and modern technology and know-how has not made the transport any less perilous. Why not airlift supplies or build bridges? Airplanes, such as the C-130, are six times more expensive for delivering loads and cannot carry as much as a truck. The minimum the ice has to be is 16", but at 50" thick, the ice can handle 85 tons and is stronger than a steel bridge. There is talk about future tarmac roads leading from the north down to the mines, but such road works and industrial plans could blight the northern environment and make local climate conditions worse.

Temperatures can plummet to -40°C with blinding snow blizzards and there is only a nominal two month season or 70 days for the ice roads to survive. In 2006, there were only 45 days of ice roads and people wondered if global warming was having an affect. How much longer will the ice roads last and how sustainable will the mines be without a regular flow of equipment in the winter? While the lifetime of the resources and mines are not strictly known, the ice roads will continue to supply the mines and keep the local economy alive.

One wonders why such resources of fuel, money, transport and man-power are utilised in such a spectacular and hazardous fashion. Even if it is vital for local community survival, the diamond mining industry is driven by commercial considerations for public consumption. So if people ask why professionals risk their lives to mine in the frozen north, to drive there, and risk environmental contamination and damage, then look no further than our high streets, businesses, industries and homes. Our economies and lives run on precious goods and as long as our insatiable demand for these products last, then such dangerous jobs like the Ice Road Truckers have will exist and seek to fuel that demand. The dash for the cash is truly on.