

# ALASKA TRAVEL LOG

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by Monica Haven

Alaska--a land of superlatives and majestic beauty, inspiring an occasional "wow!" as I rounded the next bend and glimpsed yet another imposing mountain peak or powerful glacier grinding boulders to pebbles enroute to the cold northern seas. Tree-line was often only a few hundred feet above sea level, so it was not difficult to feel as though I was on top of the world, soaring with the eagles, silently viewing the landscape stretched below.

Prodded and cajoled by fellow tourists encountered in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park (vertigo be damned!), I clambered into a four-seat Cessna for an incredible flightseeing experience, flying closely over the Root and Kennicott glaciers, low enough to see the ice chunks floating in turquoise-blue pools of water scattered over the glacier's surface. Dall mountain sheep clung tenuously to the sides of rocky crags, grazing on unseen vegetation which grew despite the inhospitable environment, the howling and bitter cold winds, the extreme altitude. Suddenly, I saw the near-impossible: Abandoned mining structures perched high above the glacier, surrounded by cliffs which dropped vertically to the ice field nearly 2500 feet below.

The skies were clear and cloudless, the air (although warm) had a crystalline bite that only mountain air has. I could easily imagine returning to this corner of the world, just as the aspen and birch turn to vibrant autumn color, the last tourist has left, and all that would remain would be the locals. I left on my adventures in search of "Northern Exposure" (a syndicated television series), complete with the meandering moose and the quirky inhabitants of Cicely. I found them in McCarthy, a town reclaimed by outcasts of the sixties after the mines had closed and the last railcars had pulled out thirty years earlier. Today's residents are anti-social, anti-government, anti-work, and just plain anti--. One of several tour guides who had set up shop at the end of the 61-mile dirt road (renowned to be Alaska's worst) and across the raging glacial current which could only be traversed by hand-powered tram, began his angry litany by ranting against the newly-formed (1980!) national park which brought tourists into the area. He saw no irony in the fact that I was one such tourist and that it was the tourist trade of the short 2-1/2 month season which provided him with his livelihood. He had come to get away from it all, to live barely above subsistence standards year-round, hunting on federal lands, disconnected from the outside (radio phones were finally introduced last year). And yet, this man charged \$50/hour for guided tours of the nearby glacier!

Glaciers abounded. Some ground relentlessly toward the sea and then calved large ice chunks into frigid waters, and others just ground to a halt, leaving moraines and pingos and eskers in their wake. I marveled at the awesome power of nature and geologic history in the making and was surprised to note that I never tired of these sights. After a while, you might think that if you've seen one glacier, you've seen them all. Not so. Each mass of ice had a unique character or color or back-drop. And each had the power to transform the landscape.

But none brought on the sheer joy and ecstasy as did the Kahiltna Glacier on the south face of Denali (Mt. McKinley). Asked to accompany a bush pilot as he ferried climbers to base

camp at 7200 feet, I stood upon the highest mountain in North America, high above the smoke-filled skies blanketing the valley below (Alaska's 35,000-acre Big Lake Fire was still burning out of control), and gazed upwards at the peak. And suddenly, I understood the climber's motivation: It was not merely a test of inner strength and physical endurance, the need to proclaim that he had accomplished what few others ever would, but the unmatched beauty of pure white ice reflecting in the evening sun and the solitude which lured seductively.

I did not see the north face of Denali, although the wildlife tour through the national park yielded many close-up views of animals secure in federally-protected lands: Fox, marmot, sheep and caribou (our driver assured us that the only difference between a reindeer and a caribou was that the reindeer "had a job"). But perhaps the bear greedily devouring his kill near the road-side was most impressive. Apparently this grizzly had taken down a moose calf four days earlier and was now feasting uninterruptedly for fear of relinquishing his prize to competitors. I watched as two fearless (or stupid?) raven taunted the bear, hopping ever closer to the carcass in hopes of stealing a juicy morsel. The bear, seemingly oblivious to the threat posed to his meal, continued his incessant chewing and only periodically curled his upper lip to snarl whenever these nagging scavengers ventured too close. My fellow bus passengers, mostly cruise ship escapees, were keeping a group tally of the wildlife encountered. Disappointed that no moose was seen, they collectively forgot that our bear's dinner, in effect, helped to make our fauna search complete.

Wildlife was plentiful, if you want to count the nose of a seal and the feet of a floating sea otter I encountered in the Prince William Sound. Ferrying along the Inside Passage, I saw many breaching whales, or so I was told. With the exception of one tail fin, all other massive churning of the waters could just easily have been sinking craft--I was, however, repeatedly assured that I saw whales. Porcupine move much more slowly and deliberately, allowing for better photo opportunities, as did the many ground squirrels, lined up by the side of the Denali Highway (a 120-mile dirt and gravel adventure). As I ambled along, each rodent, once perched on hind legs, scampered off to announce my presence to his den mates. Spread almost uniformly every fifty feet alongside the road, it seemed as though a telecommunications system had been developed by these critters similar to the cells of a cellular phone network. Fish were scarce (too early for salmon spawning), but birds were aplenty: Red-headed woodpecker, impudent magpies, ducks and eagle. One Bald Eagle who had laid claim to a particular boulder by the water's edge on the northern point of Douglas Island, posed for remarkably close-up shots (if the photos are successful, it will have been well-worthwhile to have schlepped my Ricoh 35mm camera, its two attendant zoom lenses and the flash unit throughout my travels).

Huskies became ever more plentiful as I drove northward. Dog mushers taught me that these sometime-beautiful and other-time mangy and lanky dogs were crossbred for strength and stamina. The husky, in fact, is not an American breed, but rather a genetic hodgepodge of malamute, wolf, coyote, and assorted dogs. Most were chained to posts beside 55-gallon barrels which provided shelter from the elements. As a pet owner, this treatment seemed unusually harsh and uncompassionate to me. It was easy to forget that these dogs are the work-horses of the north and thus treated accordingly.

Today's Alaskans are a breed unto themselves as well: Most had come from "the outside" and settled in Alaska for the duration, lured by a sense of adventure as well as the lack of state taxation. Uniformly untraveled once in the state, few had knowledge of the area

surrounding their chosen homestead and could rarely suggest sights to see and things to do despite intensive questioning and obvious interest on my behalf. Most were moderately friendly, but none made a great effort to create a particularly favorable impression or to invite me for a return visit, afraid to share the wilderness they had "found".

I could stereotypically describe the Alaskan as a Republican, an NRA confederate, supportive of the cause but unwilling to join the association and thereby compromise his much ballyhooed independence. "All for one and one for one!" Each day Rush Limbaugh and G. Gordon Liddy shared the radio airwaves for five or six hours. Locals seemed to admire the antigovernment sentiments espoused by these forceful and charismatic men. An almost egotistical concern for self-preservation prevailed, embodied even when talking about the Big Lake fire--people seemed more worried whether the winds would shift and the flames would spread into their area, rather than show any overwhelming compassion for those who had already suffered or for the loss of spruce forests which would now take decades to regenerate. Alaskans are not naturalists or conservationists. All appreciate the beauty which surrounds them, yet most seem to resist any effort to preserve this wilderness. But maybe that is merely because most conservation efforts are government-sponsored and that is reason enough not to approve of the objective. Even marriages can be performed without administrative "blessing". Apparently Alaskans may choose any friend or relative to perform the bonding ceremony merely by applying for a license valid for one day and one wedding only, at no cost.

Locals are casual and informal. Designer suits are categorically replaced by Levi's, Ferraris and Porsches are replaced by mud-encrusted four-wheelers (equipped with engine warmers which could be plugged into electrical posts to ward off the nightly winter chill). Even the governor jogged past me as I admired his blooming lilacs and lilies-of-the-valley, unaccompanied by an entourage of bodyguards to protect him from journalists, lobbyists and crazies.

Tourists are readily recognizable: Often German, always camera-laden, most travelers are a bit older and better-dressed than the locals. They are vacationers who have come to this northern paradise either by cruise ship or by RV, having survived the 1500-mile roller coaster ride of the Alcan Highway. Waves and swells, often ten feet in height and thirty feet apart, are the result of winter frost heaves. Perspectively-impaired as the long and narrow road stretched into the distance, I would often gauge the severity of the next bump by the depth of the skid marks and scars left by the campers and motor homes which had bottomed-out before me. The paved roads, generally lightly traveled, were always good. Dirt and gravel roads were usually better. Freshly graded after the recent spring thaw, these roads were dustier but smoother and lots more fun. Gas, food, phones and help were sparse but never unattainable. Frequently I encountered the same tourists over and over again as we all circled the few available routes, sharing experiences and providing recommendations to each other as though we were seasoned experts. Alcan-drivers were held in particular awe and respect for their obvious endurance and sense of adventure. "The Milepost" [Vernon Publications, Inc. (800) 726-4707] became every driver's indispensable companion, detailing every turnout, fishing opportunity and avalanche gun emplacement to be encountered enroute.

Paralleling the Richardson Highway to its terminus in the Prince William Sound, the Alaskan Pipeline snakes its way southward over the tundra and taiga. It stands as an engineering marvel capable of pumping petroleum each 4-1/2 hours equivalent in value to the \$7.2

million price tag we paid for the Russian territory in 1867. Sometimes the large pipe stands high above the ground on insulated stilts to allow wildlife to pass below, other times the pipe disappears below ground wherever the permafrost allows. A brief bus tour of Alyeska's operations in Valdez "assured" us that no lasting damage was caused by the pipeline or the tanker spill of 1989. Instead, Exxon's clean-up operations were "welcomed" by local merchants able to profit from the massive influx of workers. An excellent but small exhibit in Homer's museum (300 miles away) painted a different picture as told from the environmentalist's perspective, but thoughtfully contrasted with company and political propaganda. Personally, I could detect no ill effects as I ferried silently through the calm and clear waters of the glacier-encircled sound, accompanied by an abundance of varied wildlife.

Few of Alaska's cultural exhibits are even worth mentioning, with some notable exceptions. The Alaska exhibit in the Anchorage Museum of History and Art was of particular interest and quality, well worth a detour either at the beginning or end of any Alaskan journey. The meticulously selected artifacts and attendant explanations succinctly outlined the area's geographic, cultural, political and technical history, providing a terrific preview or summary to a tourist's own survey of the state. And Sitka's National Historical Park dedicated to the preservation of Tlingit totems provides an excellent and scenic complement to Juneau's superb exhibit on Native American culture and history.

As always, however, I was most excited by my off-road jaunts. Any chance I had to travel off the beaten path provided me with the excitement of mastering rough obstacles. I thundered over bottomless potholes and through deep gravel ruts left behind by the flowing melt-waters of winter ice. I gleefully shouted "Rental car!" and plowed onward with great abandon. Each of these less-traveled roadways provided a sense of discovery and the knowledge that I had found yet another travel gem unseen by the average Alaskan visitor. Years earlier, National Geographic [September 1972] profiled a village founded by Russian Orthodox seeking to escape the influences of modern civilization in Oregon. They relocated their community into the primitive wilderness of an heretofore unexplored area of the Kenai Peninsula. Curiosity peaked, I meandered across the hills and plateaus overlooking spectacular views of Mounts Iliamna and Redoubt toward Nikolaevsk. Upon entering the village, I promptly noticed that only women and small children seemed to inhabit the two-street town (men, I was told, were "out fishing" for the summer) and most of these kids frolicked happily on trampolines set up in nearly every yard. It was great fun to watch five or six youngsters bouncing high, boys dressed in brightly colored and gold-embroidered traditional tunics, girls decorously dressed in long flowered gowns, their braided plaits reaching skyward with each rambunctious bounce. What joy to watch these kids jump and play tirelessly!

Children seemed to inhabit a special spot in the Alaskan heart. Looking to bring back memorable yet educational souvenirs to my nephews, I found many charming books telling tales and fables passed on through the native cultures, illustrated by local artists, hallmarking traditions far better than any book published for the tourist trade. Continuously searching to feed the voracious reading appetite of two-year old Justin, I discovered the Tidal Wave in Anchorage. Named for the deadly aftermath of the 1964 Valdez Earthquake which measured 9.3 (!) on the Richter scale, this wonderful shop virtually overflowed with used books; aisles were flooded with publications, a virtual onslaught of images and knowledge.

My journey began and ended in Anchorage. There, as well as throughout my entire itinerary, I overnighted in bed and breakfast establishments. Unlike California's inns of pampered luxury or Carolina's hostels of southern comfort, Alaska's B & B's were informal and without pretense. Often, an extra bedroom abandoned by the college-bound child, was converted into a guest-room. Bathrooms, as well as breakfasts, were shared with the hosts. Sourdough (usually claimed to have been started during the Klondike Goldrush of 1898) pancakes were the norm. Bob and Joanne of Gussie's Lowe Street Inn in Valdez deserve special mention for both a delicious morning meal and the incredible attention lavished upon me: Suffering from vertigo as a result of a day-long ferry trip across glass-calm waters, I was promptly adopted and nestled in the soft down-quilted comforts of a home converted with obvious TLC into a pampered retreat in alpine surroundings. Unable to face another day aboard ship, I changed travel plans and embarked on my adventure into the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (the nation's largest national park--six times larger than Yellowstone). Concerned for my safety in my solitary travels, I had to promise to call Bob and Joanne when I reached my wilderness destination and once again when I returned to the main road. Such parental concern was quite comforting and heartwarming.

Several other folks deserve honorable mention as well: Kim and I caravanned for nearly 350 miles, providing company to each other enroute to Anchorage. It was fun to dodge the ambling moose (damn big and ugly, it looks like a misshapen hybrid between a horse and a camel!), to watch the rose-colored hues of a late night sunset over the Alaskan Range, to share a roadside meal. Ultimately, Kim offered me her sofa for an all-too-short midnight nap before my early morning flight to Juneau.

Welcomed by Mike in the state's capitol, I was overwhelmed by his extreme generosity and thoughtfulness. Obviously proud of both his surroundings as well as his standing in the community (he was greeted by nearly every passerby, each a former math student or the parent of one of his tutelages), Mike provided me with a very personalized tour of the area, focusing on sights enjoyed mostly by locals and never seen by the swarms of cruise ship tourists making a mad bus trip to the Mendenhall Glacier. Nestled amidst lush green forests, lupine- and dandelion-covered meadows, and alpine peaks, this area is strongly reminiscent of the lovely and picturesque countryside of Switzerland, but without the disruptive and disturbing grazing cow and wooden farmhouse cluttering the otherwise pristine landscape. An old plank-covered aqueduct meanders peacefully through this scenery--providing a quiet escape as well as the thrill of hopping from tie to tie along railroad tracks without the danger of a speeding train demanding its share of the right-of-way.

In the end, Alaska is a place of peaceful beauty, a state which stretches expansively, covering an area greater than one-third of the continental United States. Although nearly inaccessible over land, Alaska is never-the-less a part of America, separated only by distance and one time zone. It is not a foreign country--one need not have a passport to enter its boundaries, the currency-du-jour is not the Eskimo Dollar (in fact, only three percent of the population is of Eskimo descent), the official language is English, cars are driven on the right, (800) numbers can be dialed from any pay-phone (although few public booths are available). In short, despite rumor or myth, Alaska is part of us--a place we can proudly claim as our own--a place demanding to be cherished and explored. It is a place to revel in the spirit of adventure, a place to be alone, a place to which I shall return...