

September, 2006

This was our second trip to Alaska. The goals were to see some of the stuff that we missed the first time; the Northern Lights, Denali (or is it Mt. McKinley?) and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. We flew into Anchorage and rented a car for the trip into the back country. Cheryll's sister asked us to look for her other brother-in-law. She told us that he was about six feet tall and had a beard. Yeah, sure. Alaska is the land where men don't shave, women don't wear makeup and dogs don't wear leashes unless they're harnessed to a sled. We overheard one woman get upset when a man tried to help her with her bags. "No way, I'm a bush woman!" she exclaimed. The Mary Kay cosmetics distributor must have closed up shop long ago. They wouldn't sell us beer at the supermarket, but did tell us about a hardware store four miles outside town where they sell beer out of a special back room. It felt like prohibition. Alaska is not just a natural experience. It's a cultural experience as well. People on cruise ships might miss all of this fun.

The week after Labor Day is a great time to travel. We needed no reservations. Fall only lasts two weeks, but the brilliant colors were at their absolute peak for our visit. Daily high temperatures were in the 50's and 60's, but it was snowing on the mountain tops and more snow is expected at the lower elevations before the end of the month. We went out about 11 PM on our first night in Copper Center. The Northern Lights were putting on quite a show as they weaved and danced across the sky. We'd both seen them before in Northern Michigan, but nothing so dramatic. A full moon and clouds spoiled any further attempts to see them on this trip.

We spent two nights at the former mining town of McCarthy. McCarthy sits at the end of a 60-mile dirt road within Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. This is the nation's largest national park with 22,000 square miles of land, a glacier bigger than Rhode Island and nine of North America's highest 25 peaks. The park has all of this, but only 100 miles of dirt road. We were warned about bears gorging themselves on raspberries and blueberries along the trail. If you are approached by a grizzly bear, curl up into a fetal position and play dead. If you encounter a black bear, fight back. Or is it the other way around? We hiked up the hills to a couple of old copper and gold mines. We didn't see any grizzly bears, but did enjoy meeting some of the grizzled locals at the town bar. Regular bathing is not part of the program for McCarthy's residents. They seem to be escaping something.

We asked about camp sites along the northern road, and the Park Ranger volunteered that we could use the Viking Lodge for free. This is the most laid-back National Park that we've ever encountered. No toll booths or long lists of rules. The Viking Lodge is a log cabin in the woods deep in the heart of the park. To get there you drive 21.8 miles down a dirt road and find a small parking pad. On the north side of the road is an unmarked footpath which leads one-third of a mile through the tundra and forest to the one-room cabin. There was no electricity and the only running water was in a stream out back. It had a wood stove and a stack of firewood that previous guests had left. We only had to sweep it out when we left. This was the furthest from other human beings that we'd ever been. It was wonderfully quiet, but the second morning was a little frosty with a morning temperature of 28 degrees F. The morning trip to the outhouse left us appreciative of the hardships that our ancestors endured. The people on the cruise ships were definitely missing this fun.

We drove a full day to Denali National Park and stayed at a luxury Bed and Breakfast. It was quite a contrast. At the Viking Lodge we ate hot dogs and Jiffy Pop. At the B&B we soaked in the hot tub and ate Eggs Benedict. We drove into the National Park and did not see Mt. McKinley in the light rain and clouds, but did see a couple of moose and some Dall sheep high on the mountainside. We had missed seeing the mountain on our first trip and were disappointed about not seeing it again.

Our last stop was at Talkeetna. Talkeetna is a funky town from which most expeditions to climb Mt. McKinley depart. It was not climbing season and our waiter volunteered that he was currently writing a novel, but had climbed the mountain 12 times and was guiding an expedition up the

North Face of Everest in the spring. We hope that he's a better mountain guide than he is a waiter.

Our final morning dawned clear and bright. The visibility was perfect and the winds were calm. Denali towered far above the Alaska Range. We decided to splurge on a flight-seeing trip which included a landing on a glacier on the flanks of the mountain in a ski-plane. The views of the mountain up close were like no other. We landed successfully at 7000 feet in a foot of fresh snow. We got out for a short walk on the glacier and to leave our marks in the snow. When it was time to take off, the plane wouldn't budge under full power. The pilot explained that in the bright sunshine, the skis had frozen to the glacier. He had five of the nine passengers get out to lighten the load while he did three take-offs and landings with the rest of us aboard to pack down the snow. It worked and we took off successfully. We've heard applause before when a plane lands safely, but this was the first time that the passengers applauded when a plane first started its take-off roll. Or do you call it a take-off slide? In any case, we won't soon forget this experience. Nope, you can't have this much fun aboard a cruise ship.

We drove back to Anchorage and had a picnic at a park by the Lake Hood seaplane base. It was buzzing with activity as seaplanes came and went. We carried an empty water bottle through security, filled it at the drinking fountain and then smuggled it aboard our delayed, dirty, and foodless Northwest red-eye back to Minneapolis and then on to Detroit. Most third-world airlines are providing better service these days.

Alaska 1997 Trip Report

Cheryll and I departed on Thursday, June 26th on our flight to Seattle, connecting to Bellingham, Washington. We made it fine, but Cheryll's suitcase followed about three hours later on the next plane. On Friday, we rented a car and drove an hour north to Vancouver, British Columbia. Our tour of the city was highlighted by a visit to Stanley Park and 18 holes of par 3 golf. It was a beautiful area; very lush with a large variety of flowers and ferns. After waiting a solid hour to get back through US customs, we returned the car and were dropped off at the ferry terminal in Bellingham where we boarded our ship for the next two days. The M/V Columbia is about 350 feet long, has two decks for cars, RV's and trucks, and two decks lined with about 80 cabins. Having booked this in December, we were lucky enough to have a nice stateroom with a big window. Most of the 600 passengers were not as fortunate. The aft deck became "tent city" as small tents popped up for the journey. Many of the passengers slept in the lounges. The ship had a cafeteria and a restaurant with great views, good food and reasonable prices.

The good news on Saturday was that the ship continued to run at full speed in spite of the fog. The bad news was that we were awakened around three in the morning by the ship's fog horn which continued to blast every two or three minutes until the fog burned off around nine. After that, we had a great sunny day sailing the Inside Passage. From Washington to Alaska we only had to sail an hour or two on the open sea. A very pleasant ride. We saw dozens of bald eagles, whales, porpoises, sea otters, and a sea lion.

On Sunday morning at 6:00 AM we arrived at our first stop, Ketchikan. We only had two hours, but a local entrepreneur was at the ferry terminal and we paid \$10 each for a brief tour of the city which included Creek Street (a former red light district) and a totem pole park. It's a neat place and deserves more time on our next trip. That afternoon, we had a brief stop in Wrangell, and then got off the ferry in Petersburg, a fishing village with a Norwegian heritage.

The next day we toured the area, visited the museum, learned about fishing, toured a cannery (where we wondered why anyone would work here for just \$7/hour) and hiked to a park a few miles out of town. It was a pleasant place which has not been taken over by tourism. The harbor is too small for the cruise ships to call. We caught a different ferry at 2:00 AM and continued on up to Juneau, the capital, where we took another brief tour. We stopped in Haines, and finally docked in Skagway around 6:00 PM. We checked into our hotel, The Westmark (bad choice - we were told that a tour group was coming in and that checkout time would be 9 AM, no exceptions) and headed to the airport where we went flightseeing over Glacier Bay National Park in a Piper Cherokee Six. The views of the glaciers were magnificent and we flew by some mountain goats as well.

The next morning we toured Skagway, taking in the history of the Klondike Gold Rush era 100 years past. We picked up an Avis rental car which came complete with a previously cracked windshield (standard equipment for Alaska's gravel roads) and drove north, crossing into Canada's Yukon Territory where we stayed in Whitehorse. The airport in Whitehorse has an interesting weathervane. They have taken an old DC-3 and mounted it on a twenty foot pole with a bearing which allows it to pivot with the wind. The next day we drove to Dawson City and the area of the Klondike River. Here we found what was left of the Klondike gold rush. In the evening we met friends Carol and Jim Crawford and Mark and Peggy D'Orazio who were taking a similar trip in the opposite direction.

The next morning, we took a ferry across the Yukon River and stopped at the Top of the World golf course (Canada's most northern) for nine holes. Old dredge buckets are used as 150 yard markers. We drove (in violation of our rental car agreement) across the "Top of the World Highway". This was definitely a highlight of our trip. The gravel road is built into a mountain ridge in a complete wilderness. The views are incredible. We crossed back into Alaska, and continued on to Fairbanks with a stop in Delta Junction to take pictures under the sign marking the end of the Alaska Highway.

We spent the next morning touring Fairbanks (felt no compulsion to return) with a stop to play the North Star Golf Club (America's Northernmost - 64 degrees, 53.78 minutes north latitude). It was about 80 degrees, but we were playing on permafrost. Apparently, if you dig a hole a foot deep, the ground is frozen. Only the surface layer thaws in the summer. The course was rough, but fun. In the evening, we headed to Healy, near Denali National Park.

We had tickets for a bus tour of the park the next day. It was cloudy, so we didn't get to see Mt. McKinley, but we did get to see caribou and nearly had a wolf join us for our picnic lunch. The following morning we headed across the Denali highway and narrowly missed killing a moose which decided to come running out of the bush at the instant our car was on the deserted road. She took a turn at the last second, saved her life and saved me a big repair bill.

We continued on to Valdez - end of the Alaska pipeline and former summer workplace of Hillary Rodham who is said to have spent a summer sliming fish here. We took a tour of the oil terminal where the tankers are loaded and witnessed the results of what happens when oil politics, environmentalists, and corporate greed all get together. There were three levels of redundancy for every contingency in case anything (like the Exxon Valdez) should ever happen again. We understand that the wells in Prudhoe Bay are starting to dry up, but they've found another oil field not far away. Unfortunately, this area is currently populated by a herd of caribou. It'll be interesting to see how much money the

environmentalists can extract from the capitalists to open this area to drilling. We're looking forward to the rhetoric that's sure to precede any action in Congress. Incidentally, when the pipeline was built, the oil companies were required to put enough money in escrow to completely remove the pipeline above ground and relandscape the area as near as possible to its former state as soon as the oil stops flowing. Consequently, the flow has been slowed to assure that the oil doesn't run out before this caribou thing is taken care of.

The next day we headed to Wasilla and checked into the Lake Lucille Inn for a brief period of relaxation. We rented a Hobie Cat and sailed the surprisingly warm lake. The next day we drove to Portage and visited the glacier there. We took a tour of Prince William Sound on a large catamaran. We got up close to some tidewater glaciers and witnessed chunks of ice breaking off and dropping into the sea. The next day was spent touring the Kenai peninsula with stops in Soldotna, Homer and ending up in Seward. In Seward, we took a boat tour of the Kenai Fjords National Park. This was a mistake. We had to go out into the open sea. Soon, over a third of the passengers were sick and the captain had to turn the boat around early. In any case, the scenery was very similar to what we had seen on the protected waters of Prince William Sound. Cheryl found it interesting that National Park Ranger Rick, who accompanied us, had similar taste in humor to Rich as he was quoting Monty Python during the tour.

We wrapped up the trip with one final souvenir stop at the Walmart in Anchorage. Fascinating place. The parking lot was loaded with trailers and motorhomes apparently camping at no charge and without objection from the store management. Question to ponder; Why would anyone spend the time and money to drive their RV to Alaska and then camp in the parking lot at Walmart? The parking lot at Kmart was equally saturated.

The next day we dropped off the car and caught an uneventful flight home - connecting in Seattle.

The statistics; days on ferry - 3, miles on rental car - 2400, gravel road miles on rental car - 300; price of a souvenir hat at a typical gift shop - \$15, price of a souvenir hat at Kmart - \$3, ratio of typical prices for food and lodging to those found in Michigan - about 50% higher, grizzlies sighted - zero, hours of sunlight in Fairbanks - about 21, although it never really gets dark, latest tee time reservation available at the Top of the World Golf Course - 12:00 midnight, days spent traveling - 18 (but not enough; Next trip we're thinking about taking the ferry from Kodiak Island through the Aleutians and then flying to Point Barrow. We'd also like to visit Sitka and spend more time in Ketchikan. The old mining town of McCarthy in Wrangell-Elias National Park also looks interesting).

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