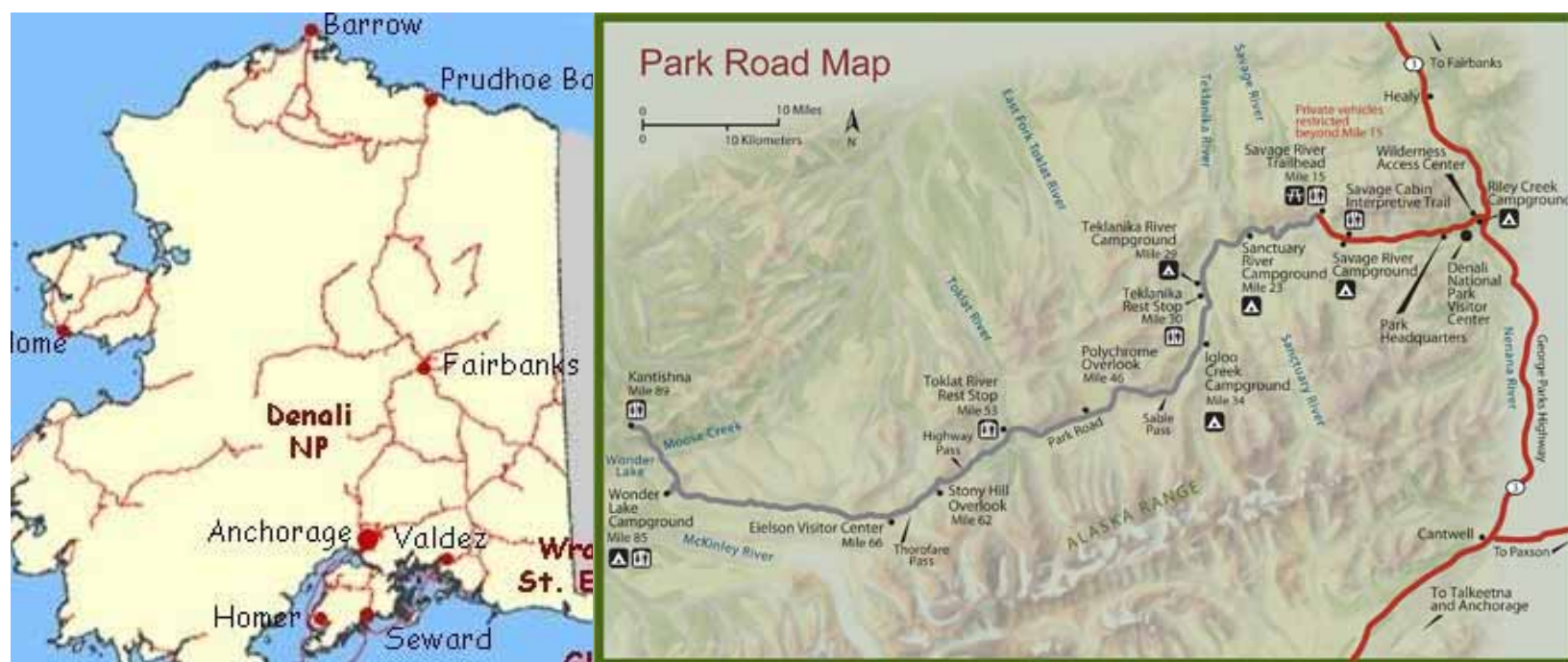


ALASKA EXPLORER 2011

This trip started off a little differently. Kathy and I were discussing some improvements to our home, and I casually mentioned we would be home for most of the summer. She said it is a shame to waste a summer, and I agreed. We discussed a number of tours, and decided it would be the right time to go to Alaska.

We had previously taken an Inside Passage cruise, but that cruise did not allow us to experience the interior of Alaska.



In making the flight arrangements for the trip, we were told the cost is the same whether we flew out of Burbank (a smaller, closer, airport) or Los Angeles International. The problem was going out of Burbank meant 2 connections and getting in to Fairbanks at 8 PM. The LAX to Fairbanks entailed only one connection and got us there at 2PM, but we would have to overnight at the airport.

The funny thing, though on the return flights, we would fly from Anchorage to Seattle on the same flight, change planes, and fly to either LAX or Burbank nonstop.

Well, in a decision Solomon would be proud of, we will fly up from LAX and fly home to Burbank! That way we will be much closer to home, and not have to walk miles through the terminal.

Unfortunately, upon returning from our European trip, a few weeks before our Alaska trip, we got some bad news. The major freeway between us and LAX was going to shut down completely for the entire weekend before we were to leave! That meant we could not even get to the hotel at LAX!

Well that cost us a bunch of \$\$\$ because we had to change our flights to leave from Burbank. In retrospect, for the amount of money it cost, we could have gone to Marina Del Rey on Friday and spent the weekend there!

Well, it turned out after all the hoopla about it being a traffic nightmare, the project was finished early and we would have not had a problem! Oh well, it was something on which we could not take a chance.

FAIRBANKS

We flew from Burbank to Fairbanks by way of Seattle and Anchorage, and were taken to our hotel. It is nice not having to fly through 8 time zones, for a change. The next morning we met with our group, and were taken on a tour of Downtown Fairbanks, which was not that large.

From there we were taken to a visitor center to view part on the Alaska pipeline that carries oil from the North Slope of Alaska to Valdez on the south coast. The design is quite interesting, as the pipe must be insulated from the permafrost, as well as isolated from the effect of earthquakes.

There was also a display of a pipeline "pig", which is a device pushed through the pipeline to clean out any buildups inside.



After that, we were taken to the University of Alaska Museum. There were many interesting displays of native life and fossils. There was also a theater showing a movie on the Northern Lights, which was not showing while we were there.

Since the only time to see the Northern Lights was in the winter, we decided one winter trip to Yellowstone was enough for us. Fortunately, the museum gift shop had a DVD of the Northern Lights we could watch in the (warm) comfort of our home

We then took a sternwheeler cruise on the Chena River where we watched a bush pilot in a floatplane take off and land.



The ship captain had radio contact with the pilot, and put it on the PA system, so all the passengers could hear the exchange between them. We then went downriver following a paddle wheeler that was a sister ship to ours. We also passed a small grass landing strip used by some bush pilots.



Further down the river, we stopped next to the kennels owned by Susan Butcher and her husband. She won the Iditarod race a number of times, but unfortunately passed away a few years ago. Her husband and daughters are still racing and breeding sled dogs.



A little further downstream, we saw 3 reindeer. We found out if they are wild they are called caribou, but domesticated they are called reindeer.



We then docked at a simulated Athabaskan Indian Village, where we were shown how they dress and how they prepare salmon for drying.



After returning from the riverboat cruise, we were taken to a salmon bake, which was really nice. There was a whole park full of old mining equipment, and to enter the park, you went through a simulated mine.



It was really nice dining outdoors among the trees. It brought back many memories to Kathy of the times she went camping with her family.



DENALI

We left Fairbanks and rode south along the Parks Highway. We stopped at a viewpoint and found we were lucky to see Mount McKinley! We were told that we were very fortunate, as it is only clear 30% of the time. We also observed a "sundog" which is a halo around the sun caused by ice crystals.



We stopped at Nenana, where they have the Ice Lottery every year. People buy lottery tickets to predict when the river ice will break up. A big tripod is placed on the ice, and when it moves the time is recorded. Last year's prize was over \$380,000, but it would have been split among all those with the correct date and time.

There was also a small railroad museum there, but unfortunately it was more of a gift shop.



A little further down the road, there was a very interesting set of shops and displays, including a "fish wheel"



That evening we went to the Denali Dinner Theatre, which featured a family style meal and musical comedy. It was a lot of fun, and the food was very good, also.



They read a poem by Robert W. Service, who was known as the “Poet Laureate of Alaska” called “The Shooting of Dan McGrew”. A number of people in the audience were asked to participate, which added to the fun.

The next morning we went river rafting. I thought we had signed up for the milder run, but they put us in the “Canyon Run” instead. It was on that trip I discovered that Kathy is even more of an adrenaline junkie than I am! We opted to sit in the front. Our philosophy is “It is better to wear out, than rust out”.

Grins

They put us in “dry suits”, which fit over your clothes and are sealed at the wrists and neck. They also gave us booties to put on over the feet of the dry suit. I gave Kathy some of my heavy wool socks to wear, and we really needed them.

This river trip begins at the entrance to Denali National Park and journeyed eleven river miles to Healy, Alaska. During this 2 Hour whitewater adventure we encountered over ten major Class III to IV rapids in the Nenana River Canyon! The Denali National Park frontier was on our river left shore with Mt. Healy rising over 3,000 feet to the summit. Exciting wave-trains and powerful hydraulics created rapids like “Razorback,” “Iceworm,” “Cable Car,” “Royal Flush,” and “Coffee Grinder!”

At one point the raft dipped into a trough and we got what was called a “glacial facial” of 40 degree water!



It was a fantastic wild ride!! The take out point was a lot more civilized than it was in Costa Rica, where we had to slog through a half mile of mud to get to our bus. They helped us get out of our dry suits and they even had bathrooms there.

We had a great pizza lunch in the Denali Village, and went back to our hotel to get on the Tundra Wilderness Tour deep into Denali Park to look for wildlife. It was an 8 hour tour that took us about 70 miles into the park. Everywhere we looked there was beautiful vista of snow covered mountains. We were on the lookout for wildlife, and were not disappointed. The first one we encountered was a caribou, just wandering up the road.



One funny thing that happened was we spotted a lone Dall sheep perched in an alcove in the rocks, and quite far away. Then someone said, "Look ahead!" There perched on an outcropping was a number of Dall sheep looking like they were posing for a nature magazine!



We also saw a number of bears, but they were normally far away, but I managed to get a picture of one. We also saw a red fox, which wandered down the road past us.



On the way back to the Visitor Center, we encountered more of the Dall sheep wandering down the road. Two of them were sort of butting head or playing.



We got back to our hotel around 10 PM, and it was still light! Fortunately, we had blackout drapes, so we did not have a problem with sleeping. It never got dark, and we were told that stars were not visible until Sept.

The following day we had a free morning, and we had discussed taking a jet boat ride. Our tour manager said it was not a good idea, as if anything happened we would miss the train. The previous day one of the couples in our group took a jet boat ride, and the engine conked out!

ANCHORAGE

After a leisurely morning, we boarded the Alaska Railroad for the 233 mile, 8 hour trip to Anchorage. The line follows the Susitna River and we hoped to see some wildlife. The last 6 cars were for passengers who were sailing or had been sailing on a Holland America or Princess cruise.



I volunteer at a railroad historical society, and I act as conductor on the Fillmore & Western tourist railroad. I met one of the Alaskan Railroad conductors, Ryan, on the train, and told him what I did. It turned out he was raised in our little town of Santa Paula, California. That is very unusual, as our town has only 29,000 people.

In the middle of the wilderness, our train stopped, and we were told we were meeting the northbound train to exchange crews and supplies.



Shortly after we got underway, we passed over Hurricane Gulch, where the bridge spans 918 feet, and is 296 feet above the creek.



We also passed one of the many glaciers, and got a view of Mt. McKinley, only 46 miles away.





When we arrived at the station at Talkeetna, which is 114 miles from Anchorage, we were told that the air conditioning on the Princess railcars had broken down. The passengers were offloaded, and buses had to be sent to get them. We were sure glad it was not us.

ANCHORAGE

We were taken on a city tour, and then taken to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. It is in a beautiful setting around a small lake. There were representations of the different types of lodgings and some kayaks. The kayaks have a wood or bone frame and are covered in sealskins.



After touring the site, we attended a performance of the native dances and songs given by young men and women. They were involved in keeping their native cultures alive and passing them down to future generations.



After the performance we were taken to Anchorage's Saturday market. It was a huge area with many tents selling artwork, jewelry, handicrafts and souvenirs all made by local artisans. Thankfully nothing was marked "Made in China". Unfortunately, we had an appointment to go flight seeing so we could not spend much time there.

Kathy was disappointed that we had not seen any bears up close and personal (but not too up close), so we arranged for a flight to look for them. I had to call a number of companies before I found one that had an opening, as it was a last minute thing.

We took a taxi to Lake Hood, which was right next to Anchorage Airport, and a major seaplane base. We were supposed to go in a Piper PA-12, which is a very small airplane, but Kathy took one look and said there was no way she was going in that plane. She thought it did not look airworthy, even though it was, and besides she did not like the color! Just for laughs I got in the back seat of the

plane, and it would have been even cozier than the Waco we flew in Kauai, assuming we both could even get in it.

So, instead we chartered a DeHaviland Beaver, which was a much larger and much more comfortable aircraft. The Beaver is a real workhorse in Alaska and Canada.



Piper



Beaver

Our pilot was a great guy and fit the image of a real bush pilot, with a grizzled white beard and boots. It turned out he was the chief pilot for Trail Ridge Air, also. Kathy sat up front with him, and I sat in the back. The aircraft windows in the back were bubbled out for me to get better pictures, and a line man cleaned all the windows before we left. That attention to detail showed it was a really professional company.

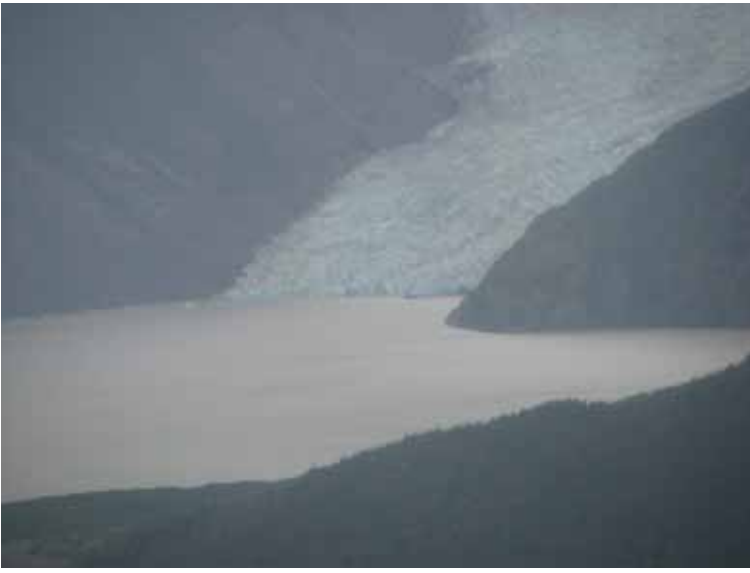


Pilot Dan



Copilot Kathy

We took off from Lake Hood, and flew across the Turnagain Arm of the Cook Inlet. The wind was blowing about 40 knots, and the ride was a little "lumpy". I can imagine what it would have been like in that little Piper! It seems that the wind blows down from one of the valleys and across the water. We could tell by looking down at the whitecaps on the water that it was really windy. We continued up the Turnagain Arm, and after we passed that area, the air smoothed out. In the distance we could see the Skilak Glacier, and the lake that was formed by its retreating.



As we were flying along looking for bear, Kathy spotted a moose in an open field. I could not get a photo in time, but this is what it looked like. We flew up to an area by Goat Creek, and spotted some brown bears fishing in the stream. Kathy finally got to see her fishing bears. When we left Dan had originally planned to land near the bears, and even had his gun with him, just in case. I asked Dan if we could land on the lake and taxi near the bears, but with the surrounding mountains, the downdraft would have made it too difficult to take off again and climb out from the lake. I always live by the words "there are old pilots, and bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots". I had to copy the bear pictures from other sources, but you get the idea.



The main thing was that we did get to see bears, see some beautiful country, and to experience the float plane. Our landing back at Lake Hood was so smooth that we did not even know we had touched down on the lake. It was a fitting end to our Alaskan adventure.

The next morning we headed out to the airport for our flight home to Burbank. When we went to check our bags we were informed that our flight was delayed due to some mechanical problems and we would miss our connection in Seattle. We went to the Customer Service Desk, and asked them to

work their magic. Fortunately, we have our choice of two airports in our area, Burbank or Los Angeles International (LAX).

They got us on a flight to LAX, but it did not get in until midnight! We were originally scheduled to arrive at Burbank at 9 PM!

The other problem was we had to contact our car service to tell them about the change in airports. I tried calling their toll-free number on my cell phone, and kept getting a message that the number was not working. I thought it might be a problem with my cell phone coverage, so I found a pay phone in the terminal to try the number. Unfortunately, I got the same result calling from a pay phone.

I thought I might contact them by e-mail, and searched the terminal for Internet access. I was told to go to baggage service, and they would let me use their computer. Fortunately, they were not busy, and I was able to access the company's website and get their local number.

I called the number, and thankfully got through. I informed them of our change in airports, and they could accommodate the change. I now have their local number saved in my cell phone along with their toll-free number.

Also because it was going to be a long day, I had us upgraded to First Class on our flight from Seattle to LAX. It really did make a difference for us not to be jammed in coach.

While we were waiting, we decided to have lunch. There was a restaurant called the Norton Sound that had a little window to serve people on the non security side of the terminal. I thought that was a great idea, so we could have all our carry-on baggage with us on a cart. Kathy suggested that since it was our last meal in Alaska, what better way to finish it off than with King Crab. The restaurant offered a one-pound King Crab plate that was fantastic!



In summary, Alaska is such a large place that we barely scratched the surface. We had a great time, had a lot of adventures, and enjoyed it thoroughly. As so often happens, we traveled with lots of nice people, and many were from other parts of the world. We were full of American pride for our remarkable state of Alaska. There are really no words for us to explain the magic, so we will leave you with the words of Robert W. Service the Poet Laureate of Alaska.....

It's the great, big, broad land 'way up yonder,
It's the forests where silence has lease;
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,
It's the stillness that fills me with peace.

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