

# ALASKA LAND TOUR & CRUISE

July 24 – August 6, 2011

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## A GLIMPSE OF ALASKA: Interior and Inside Passage

After packing and repacking in order to attempt to prepare for an Alaskan land tour and cruise, the suitcases were loaded in the car to make the trip to meet the travel group on the campus of ABAC. I had anxious thoughts about trading South Georgia heat, humidity and pesky gnats for the cooler climate of the Last Great Frontier. After a plane change in Seattle, in just a few hours we were touching down just south of the Arctic Circle in the city of Fairbanks, by the clock about midnight, twilight was just falling.

Early Monday morning we were greeted by our land tour director, a young Polish girl with an Irish name. I was in awe of the breath-taking flowers blooming in the landscape; the blooms are enhanced by the extended hours of daylight during the summer. A trip down the river on the Riverboat Discovery III in the heart of Alaska gave me a glimpse of life along the river. An Alaskan float plane pilot demonstrated a river landing and takeoff; float planes were docked all along the river and provide the residents transportation and delivery of goods. Wealth on the river is judged by the number of "toys" in the drive...floatplane, snow mobiles, and boats. A wedding takes place on the river as the waters from the clear Chena River blends with the silt laden glacier Tanana River in a very distinct pattern. Along the river I saw and heard the kennel of a real Iditarod champion, the late Susan Butcher; even though it is summer, the musher must still keep hundreds of dogs in shape. In the Athabaskan Indian village I began to marvel the native people's ingenuity as native interpreters shared the way life for their ancestors. A young girl modeled a beautiful multi-toned pelted coat made from wild animal's fur; it made me wish for cold winters here in the Deep South.



There's gold in them there hills even today and it's hard work to get it out. Panning for gold at the El Dorado Mine is not a quick process, even though techniques have been much improved over the methods used by the early miners. I was amazed at the value of the few shining nuggets as it was weighed and priced according to today's market. As the motor coach made its way back to Bear Lodge, we stopped along a section of the Alaskan Pipeline, at the point where it goes underground for the final leg of its journey to the sea.



Novel engineering keeps oil flowing and protects the pipeline from the effects of earthquakes. Dining in an open air setting, our group closed out the evening with a delicious meal at a local salmon bake.

I highly recommend the Alaskan Railroad as one of your travel experiences; a domed traincar took us from Fairbanks to Denali National Park. Perched in the comfortable upper level I got a panoramic view of the expansive vastness of Alaska's interior and its wildlife. The dining level below served me a superb reindeer sausage omelet breakfast. Once in the park, I boarded a bus for the six hour tour that meandered through the park up to the tundra region. In their natural habitat, I observed grizzly bears forging the brush to build their winter fat, moose and caribou endowed with impressive antlers grazing, Dall sheep grazing on the steep slopes, along with other smaller animal camouflaged in the underbrush. As an educator, I wish I could have had a classroom of 7th grade science students along to see firsthand the flora and fauna of the deciduous forest, the taiga and the tundra. It is reported that only thirty percent of the visitors who come to Denali get a view of Mt. McKinley (Denali). Unfortunately, while in this area clouds shrouded the "Big One."



After a short, strenuous hike down to town and back up to the lodge, it was time again to relax aboard the Wilderness Express train for a scenic journey to Talkeetna. Praying for cloud cover to dissipate, I boarded a small plane along with Greg, my husband and friends, Johnny and Martha Marchant, and headed off into the Alaskan Mountain range to make a glacier landing.



First time flier in a small aircraft, there were nerves, but I was relieved to experience a smooth ride and landing as weather cooperated. Taking us high, above the cloud cover, we got our first glimpse of Mt. McKinley. This excursion was by far the most magnificent and wonderful of the trip, views from the plane and on top of Ruth's Glacier was nothing but awesome! After catching a nice evening meal in Talkeenta, Greg and I strolled back to the lodge. Along the roadside we spotted moose track, and quickly picked up the volume of our conversation in order to avoid an up-close moose encounter!



Our alarms were set for a late morning wakeup, but Mother Nature had another plan, at approximately six a.m., the room shook for a few seconds. A 5.4 earthquake had occurred centered northwest of Anchorage. Fortunately there was no damage, but I will always remember the bed shaking, the glasses clinking together and the frame pictures beating against the wall. Up and out, we took the path back to the main lodge to see if Denali was going to be revealed. To my wonderment, the snow capped peaks of the giant was being exposed as the cloud cover burned away in the late morning sun.



Now traveling via motor coach, we headed out of Talkeetna to Anchorage, Alaska's largest city. Still fascinated by the sled dogs of the Iditarod, I took in the Sled-Rodeo rodeo dinner show featuring the Seavey family. A small crowd at the early dinner-show allowed the unique opportunity to chat with Dallas Seavey, Iditarod competitor and son of 2004 Iditarod champion Mitch, who shared his family tie to the founding of the race back in 1973. Alaskan summers are most pleasant, but I asked Dallas when should I come during the winter for a visit? He quickly replied, "March...during the Iditarod." I was given a couple of options that would put me close to the race, travel by plane to the various locations along the 1150 mile course from Anchorage to Nome or volunteer to work one of the checkpoints along the route. Could this be my next Alaskan Adventure? But with the threat of temperature well below zero, I had better go prepared!

Before departing Anchorage, I broadened my knowledge of Alaskan Indian culture, with a visit to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. Young Alaskan teens performed native dances and explained how each movement is representative of a story. With pride teens told and demonstrated the games played at the Native Youth Olympics of Alaska. What amazed me most was how physically challenging and how the games served a dual purpose play and preparation for hunting. Strolling around the life-size recreated Indian village, native interpreters shared stories and crafts. A colorful hand beaded purse in a craft as a young child, passed down to her from her elders.



A scenic journey from Anchorage to Seward concluded the final leg of the land tour to the meet our ship, Radiance of the Sea. Our very knowledgeable tours bus driver shared insight into the areas of interest. As I looked to my left soaring mountains rose with jagged peaks, on my right were an abundance of waterways with dramatic shorelines. Evidence of one of Alaska's most devastating earthquake and tsunami can be seen from the highway, a "Ghost forest." Dead trees still stand where saltwater came up from the sea and killed the roots. In contrast, though labeled a weed, the roadside was covered with blooming fireweed, a truly stunning display of color.



Seward is a quaint little fishing port that was teeming with boats coming in and out of the harbor. Once I boarded the ship, there was time to explore all decks and then I settled myself on an upper deck to relax and enjoy the boat show going in and out of the harbor in a late afternoon sun.



After cruising throughout the day, by mid-afternoon the ship arrived at Hubbard Glacier. I had read about the process known as glacier calving, but to experience it is another one of those unforgettable moments. Sounding like loud, rumbling thunder the glacier spoke as the sheer weight of the ice moves fractionally. In

anticipation, my eyes scanned the glacier horizon, searching for the first indication of a monstrous ice mass giving way and collapsing into the waters below. I was not let down, as this spectacle happened repeatedly.

Typical summer weather greeted me in Juneau, the capital city, which can only be reached by boat or by plane. In the morning mist, I hopped the inexpensive Glacier Express bus and traveled out to Mendenhall Glacier. Here in the park, I hiked down a short trail leading to the visitor's center. Along the trail, a clear shallow stream teemed with salmon struggling to reach their spawning waters. Black bear inhabit area, and were spotted fishing in the stream by other members of the tour group. I just had bad timing, and did not get in on the black bear sightings. A longer hiking trail took me closer to the breathtaking glacier and waterfall. Shades of blue can be seen in the glacier, caused by the absorption of light from the visibly spectrum. Floating in the waters were huge blue icebergs just out from Mendenhall, easily viewed from various trails.



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Rich with history, Skagway Main Street has been recreated to resemble the town of the late 1800's. With the crowds of tourist in the city, the town still had the hustle and bustle of long ago. After stopping by the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park to brush up on the Yukon gold rush history, we took a Smart Bus out to the gold rush cemetery and Reid Falls. The graveyard is filled with young men in their 30's and early 40's, children, and a few women, who perish in search of gold. One most interesting characters buried there was Soapy Smith, who appeared to be a true gentleman, but ran a gang that took advantage of the desperate miners. Smith would later offer money, the money he had stolen earlier, from these same miners to return home after their failed mission.

Tendered at Icy Strait Point my husband asked why I always booked excursions that require physical activity, as we planned to kayak at Icy Strait Point. We strolled through a historic cannery as we waited to climb aboard our two person kayak. For the few hours we paddled through the smooth water along the Hoonah shore in hopes of spotting humpback whales and bald eagles. For the adventurous, there is the world's largest zip line, 5400 feet. This port also offers a guaranteed whale spotting tour, where fellow travels got their photographic opportunity.



Salmon capital of the world Ketchikan was the last port of call. I thought I was going to be the odd one out as I took off on a salmon fishing excursion with my husband and a couple of guys from our ABAC tour group, Wayne Kilgore (Tifton) and Buz Stephens (Tallahassee). To my relief at the boat we were greeted by Louise, the boat hand and skipper's wife. The waters were mostly calm and weather picture perfect. We never landed a big King while releasing many undersized, eighteen inches or less. Our final catch was eleven keepers, Silvers and Chum, netting about thirty-five pounds of fresh



and smoked meat that was shipped to Ty Ty. With disappointment, I began to regret that I had not taken an excursion dedicated to whale watching. But while out salmon fishing out of Hudson's Cove, what should appear but humpback whales, and close to the boat! I cannot describe my ecstatic reaction.

Thankfully whale watching became a pastime as we moved slowly along the final leg of the Inside Passage heading to Vancouver, B.C. Just as we were leaving Ketichan, sitting out on the balcony I spotted a small pod of humpback whales. The next day while enjoying sunshine and a friendly card game on the back deck more whales appeared. This time it was Orcas and humpbacks! Truly this trip provided all that I expected and more.

Disembarking in Vancouver we hit some of the high points in the Olympic host city, with short visit to Stanley Park with its impressive collection of Totem poles. Finally a delicious farewell dinner in Seattle before we boarded flight 153 back to the heat, humidity and of course gnats!

