

Alaska Tour – Fairbanks to Anchorage (July 20 – 30, 2019)

Our first “Gate 1” tour within the USA was an adventure beyond our wildest expectations. Let me begin this report with why we chose to visit Alaska. Alaska is truly “the last frontier,” as their citizens proudly display on their vehicle license plates; and it’s bigger than you can possibly imagine. You need to go there to appreciate how vast our 49th state really is. Also, when it comes to wildlife, Alaska is famous for salmon, moose, caribou, bears, whales, bison, puffins, jellyfish, etc. When it comes to scenery, Alaska is famous for glaciers and fjords, mountains, and more lakes, rivers, and waterways than you could dream of. Donna & I spent 10 - “action-packed” days in Alaska and only saw a small portion of it. Our adventure included visits to museums, national parks, conservation centers, a reindeer ranch, an Iditarod dog kennel, a ride on the Denali Wilderness Express train, a rafting experience on the Nenana river, a hike to and on a glacier, a flight on a single engine prop plane, a charter boat trip on Prince William Sound, and lunch at the International House of Hot Dogs. That’s right – hot dogs!!



Map of Alaska



Gate 1 Tour of Alaska

Other reasons we went to this part of Alaska is because we’ve never been there and we wanted the experience a cooler climate to get away from the persistent 100 degree summer temperatures at our home in Santa Teresa, New Mexico. **So – how big is Alaska?? See below.**



Alaska x The Contiguous United States



You could fit Texas into Alaska 2 times!

Let's begin our journey – On Saturday, July 20 we flew from El Paso to Seattle, then to Fairbanks, arriving on Sunday at 3:00am, a day before our tour with Gate 1 was scheduled to begin. We slept for a few hours at our hotel (Pike's Waterfront Lodge) before heading to downtown Fairbanks to visit the Ice Museum and the town plaza.



Pike's Waterfront Lodge – Fairbanks, Alaska



Ice Museum - Igloo & Snowmobile Ice Sculptures



Ice Museum – Sled Ride



Golden Heart Plaza in the Center of Fairbanks



Moose Antler Arch

On Monday morning we met our Gate 1 tour group then took a bus to the Running Reindeer Ranch where we enjoyed hanging out with prancing reindeer in an enchanting birch boreal forest! Jane, the owner and a lifelong Alaskan, lead us as we walked alongside our new furry friends. After the hour-long walk, we'll headed inside to learn a bit more about reindeer while enjoying homemade cookies and drinks.



Running Reindeer Ranch



Owner/Guide – Jane



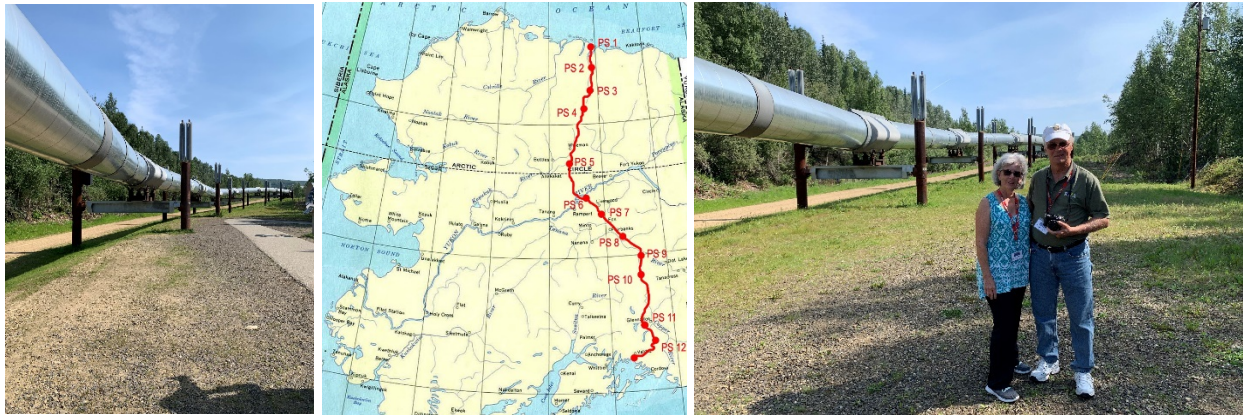
Donna



Hanging out with the reindeer

Reindeer and caribou share the same genus and species name. Domestication is the biggest difference between them. Reindeer are a semidomesticated subspecies of Rangifer, and there are many subspecies of both reindeer and caribou in Alaska. Caribou are large, wild, elk-like animals which have never been domesticated.

Our next stop was at the Trans Alaska Pipeline. The 800 mile Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) was built between 1974-1979 and includes the trans-Alaska crude-oil pipeline, 11 pump stations, several hundred miles of feeder pipelines, and the Valdez Marine Terminal. TAPS is one of the world's largest pipeline systems. It runs from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez, Alaska.



The next morning we found ourselves boarding the Wilderness Express Dome train to Denali national park. The ride includes a full-length curved glass dome that provides a spectacular 360 degree view. All guests have forward-facing seats in the upper level dome, with 88 total seats split in pairs along a center aisle. These leather seats recline, have fold down trays, and may be the most comfortable seating option for any train service in Alaska. Also, upstairs a friendly host guide is on each car to point out highlights along the way, and a bartender offers full bar service for purchase.



Wilderness Express Dome Car



Inside the Dome Car



The other cars on the train

On the lower level, there is a kitchen and a 36-seat dining room where we had breakfast. Also, downstairs are restrooms and a small outdoor viewing platform. Since the Wilderness Express Dome car is at the end of the train, the outdoor platform was a real treat for catching some air, and snapping photos or videos of the incredible Alaskan scenery, or the track and train itself as it curved around a bend. The Wilderness Express private dome cars were custom built for use on the Alaska Railroad and placed in service in 2001 and 2002. Our ride lasted approximately four hours before we arrived in Denali national park.



National Park Sign at Entrance



Our Bus into the Park



Mt. Denali (top right – white color)

Our Denali bus driver/tour guide was excellent. He helped us understand the history, flora and fauna and human connection to this vast and wild landscape. On the eve of the National Park Service’s 100th anniversary in 2016, the name of the highest peak in North America changed from “Mount McKinley” to “Denali.” The timing of the change not only helped mark the agency’s centennial, it shined a light on the long human history of the park and illuminated a naming debate that has lasted more than 100 years.

Following our Alaskan King Crab Leg dinner that night we were escorted to the **Dog Gone It** dog kennel for a few hours of fun and education about the famous Iditarod Dog Sled Race. We had an opportunity to meet the dogs, up close and personal, and learn about the race.



← The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is an annual long-distance sled dog race run in early March from Anchorage to Nome, entirely within the US state of Alaska. Mushers and a team of 14 dogs, of which at least 5 must be on the towline at the finish line, cover the distance in 8–15 days or more. You can’t compare it to any other competitive event in the world! A race covering 1000 miles of the roughest, most beautiful terrain Mother Nature has to offer. She throws jagged mountain ranges, frozen river, dense forest, desolate tundra and miles of windswept coast at the mushers and their dog teams. Add to that temperatures far below zero, winds that can cause a complete loss of visibility, the hazards of overflow, long hours of darkness and treacherous climbs and side hills, and you have the Iditarod.



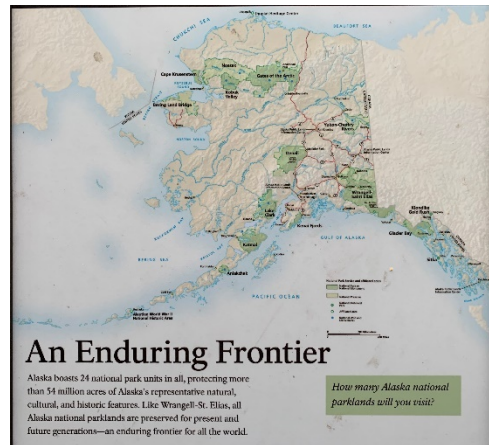
Carey & Donna holding husky puppies at the **Dog Done It** kennel



On Day 6 we drove 135 miles on the Denali Highway (all but 23 miles are gravel) from Denali to Paxson; stopping in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park enroute. Wrangell St. Elias (America's largest national park) is a rugged, beautiful land that rises from the ocean all the way up to 18,008 ft. At 13.2 million acres, the park is the same size as Yellowstone National Park, Yosemite National Park, and Switzerland combined!



Visitor's Center at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park



Map of National Park units in Alaska

That night we were scheduled to make a 30 minute flight from Chitina to McCarthy on a small prop plane, but the weather forced us to ride for 3 hours by van to the beautiful Kennicott Glacier Lodge, our home for the next two nights. Fortunately, during the drive we spotted our first moose. The Kennicott Glacier Lodge is at the center of America's largest national park, overlooking 25 miles of glacier, and surrounded by 14 of the highest mountain peaks on the continent.



Our first moose picture



Getting ready to cross the river to the Kennicott lodge – The lodge^



Built in 1987, the Kennicott Glacier Lodge is a replica of one of the historic mining buildings from the copper mining boom town days. It is located near the center of the 40 remaining structures in the ghost town of Kennicott, a company town built circa 1910. The 190' long front porch has a panoramic view of the Chugach and Wrangell Mountains.

Wow – what an incredible place, and tomorrow we get to strap on crampons and hike on the Root Glacier; an awesome, totally new experience for both of us. ***Here we go***



Sizing our crampons



Hiking the trail to the Root Glacier



Strapping on the crampons



Hiking on the Root Glacier



We Made It to the Top



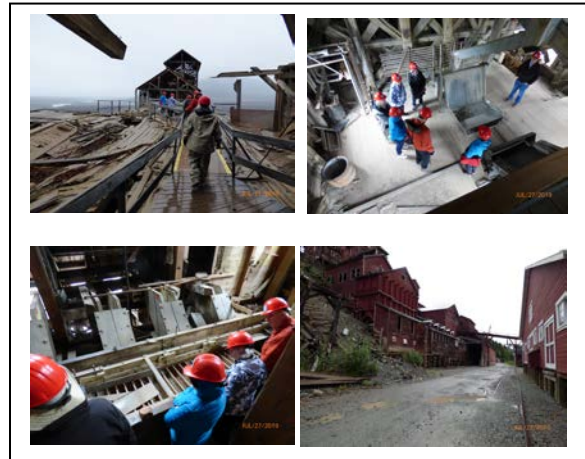
We strapped on crampons and explored the otherworldly surface of the Root Glacier on this icy trek! We peered into glacial ponds and deep blue holes, took in vast and open landscape, filled our water bottles with glacier water, and followed the creeks on the surface of the glacier into



Lunch on the Glacier – Awesome !

their turquoise slot canyons. This hike started with an interpretive walk through historic Kennicott and then onto a two-mile trail to the glacier, following the path of the receding ice. We walked a total of 7 miles. What an adventure – we are living the dream!!

On the morning of day 8 we toured the Kennicott Mine National Historic Site. Following the initial “discovery” of the ore in 1900, the development of the site took considerable effort not to mention financial commitment. Accessing the remote site required the construction of a 196-mile railroad from Cordova at a cost of \$25 million. It included 44 miles of bridges and trestles, many of which were wiped out each spring and had to be rebuilt. The mill town and mine camps included over seventy-six buildings ranging in size from outhouses to the 14-story timber frame mill building. The fist sized chunks of ore were mined from seventy-seven miles of underground tunnels and transported to the mill building along three aerial tramways, totaling 6 miles in length.



By April 1911, the first trainload of copper ore was headed to Cordova on its way to Tacoma, Washington for smelting. At its peak, Kennecott employed 500 to 600 men on three 8-hour shifts. By the time the operation closed in 1938, the Kennecott mines extracted 591,535 short tons of copper from 4,525,909 tons of ore valued at \$200,000,000 in 1938 dollars.

In the afternoon we boarded our flight back to Chitina. Donna & I have traveled to over 95 countries around the world and experienced so many new things and we remember what St. Augustine said – “the world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.” Well this is our first single engine small plane flight, another new experience for us, and we feel blessed to live in a time when the world has come to realize that education is more than just books and tests, it is experiences and memories that shape our minds and our future, even at our age. This is exciting stuff. See our flight pictures on the next page. Wow!! – we really are “Living the Dream”



After we landed we drove to the Chitina hotel Wine/Beer Garden for “Happy Hour,” and heard a talk from Tom – a local resident who lives “off the grid.” His talk was fascinating. From there we continued to Valdez, stopping several times along the way, at Worthington glacier on the Thompson Pass, and Bridal Veil Falls, before arriving at the Best Western Valdez Harbor Inn for the night.



Chitina Wine/Beer Garden



Happy Hour appetizers



Tom – the “off the grid” speaker



Worthington Glacier at Thompson Pass



Donna at Bridal Veil falls



Arrival at the Valdez harbor

On Day 9 we boarded a charter boat (Lazy Otter Charters – Qayaq Chief) and cruised from Valdez, on Prince William Sound to Whittier. Along the way we saw orca whales and stellar sea lions, passed over the site of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, and stopped to rest on Bald Head Chris Island for some photos, before docking at Whittier to drive through the 2-1/2 mile Anton Anderson tunnel. (The longest highway tunnel in North America). This one-lane tunnel must be

shared by cars and trains traveling in both directions, and it usually needs to be aired out in between trips (with jet turbine ventilation, another first!). This unique design that enables a single lane of traffic to travel directly over the railroad track saved tens of millions of dollars over the cost of constructing a new tunnel.



The Qayaq Chief - our boat



View from the cabon



Our captain & first mate



Orca Whales



Stellar Sea Lions



Bald Head Chris Island Rest Stop



Entrance to Anton Anderson Tunnel



Inside the tunnel

Later that same day we stopped at the Alaskan Wildlife Conservation Center, a sanctuary dedicated to preserving Alaska's wildlife through conservation, research, education and quality animal care. AWCC takes in injured and orphaned animals year-round and provides them with spacious enclosures and quality animal care. Most of the animals that arrive at the AWCC

become permanent residents and will always have a home there. We saw brown bears being fed, a bull moose strutting, wolves, elk, wood bison roaming on pastures and more.



Brown bear



Bull Moose



Elk



Porcupine



Black Bear



White Wolf

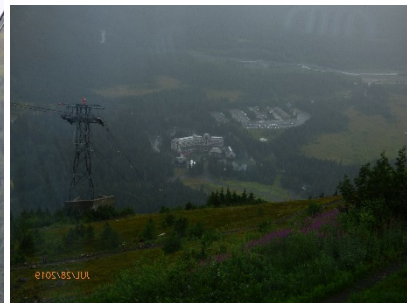
In Alaska the sun rises at 4:00am and sets around 11:00pm this time of the year, so we had another event scheduled for today – a ride on the Alyeska Tramway. Even though it rained we were able to get some good shots of the trip up and back.



Getting ready to board the tram



Cable cars meeting in the middle



A dark, rainy view from the top

The Alyeska Aerial Tram is a seven-minute scenic ride from The Hotel Alyeska to 2,300 ft in elevation and the top of Mt. Alyeska. We celebrated Happy Hour at the restaurant at the top.

Our final stop for the night was at the Voyager Hotel in Anchorage.

On the last day of this spectacular Gate 1 tour we visited the Bird TLC Rehab Clinic where we heard a talk from one of the volunteers about how they rescued and treated a bald eagle who had lost a wing when it flew into an airplane propeller. It took several years to nurse it back to health, but it will never be able to fly again. It is now used in educational training sessions for school kids and tour groups. It was astonishing to see that magnificent bird up close and personal.



Listening to our talk about the eagle



Bald Eagle



Entrance to the clinic

The **bald eagle** was chosen June 20, 1782 as the emblem of the United States of America, because of its long life, great strength and majestic looks. I have great admiration for this animal and what it symbolizes. Both my son Steve and I are Eagle Scouts, and my Dad (Beamy Beamesderfer) was a Pathfinder during World War II – a member of the 101st Airborne unit – the “Screaming Eagles” who fought on D-Day, Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge.

On the lighter side, we had some free time for shopping and lunch, so Donna decided that we should eat at the ***International House of Hot Dogs***. I was really happy that she picked this place. The dogs were about a foot long and filled with all kinds of good stuff. YUM!!



Our final tour stop that day was at the Alaskan Native Heritage, an educational and cultural institution for all Alaskans, located in Anchorage, Alaska. The center opened in 1999. The Alaska Native Heritage Center shares the heritage of Alaska's 11 major cultural groups. Located ten miles from downtown Anchorage, it is situated on 26 wooded acres. Inside – the Hall of Cultures, theatre and Gathering place are home to activities and demonstrations. Outside are six life-sized Native dwellings surrounding Lake Tiulana.



Entrance to the Heritage Center



Totem Pole Carving



Demonstration of Native Dance

Our group farewell dinner was held at the Bridge Restaurant in Anchorage, where the 17 of us on the tour observed numerous fisherman fishing for salmon in the river at the restaurant. After dinner several of us went to the Aurora light show movie - Created by Dave Parkhurst, one of the first photographers to capture the northern lights on film, this 40-minute movie features thousands of his photos streamed together and choreographed to an original music score. Viewed on a 28- by 16-foot screen in the comfort of the Sydney Laurence Theatre at the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, it's almost like gazing up into Alaska's winter nights...minus the cold.

This incredible, action-packed tour has come to an end. We have spent the last 10 days seeing the breathtaking highlights of Alaska. The best part is that this entire trip was video-taped by a professional videographer on contract to Gate 1 to prepare a 5-10 minute promotional video of the tour. Most of the group, including Donna & I, will be featured in the film. We will be informed when the video will be released for the public.

In any case, Alaska is a wonder to behold. This place belongs on everyone's "bucket list." The word "*Alaska*" conjures up many thoughts to many people. ... No matter what words one can use to *describe* what *Alaska* is, or means to them, the old adage that "a picture is worth a thousand words" is the only just way to express how special our 49th state really is. That is, short of going there and seeing for yourself. We plan to go back in a couple years– with our RV.

Back On the Road Again – Carey & Donna Beamesderfer – August 4, 2019