

Alaska trip report – June 2010

Part 1: the bits that most interested Peter, by Peter

So, another holiday in a cold place beginning with A, and so soon after Antarctica. There were complaints, as we stood in the snow on the edge of the Arctic Ocean only days before the summer solstice, that perhaps this was no way to spend a summer holiday.

This was a two-week holiday to Alaska. The holiday was to celebrate Jane's 50th birthday, which isn't actually happening until later in 2010. But June is a better time to visit, when the days are longer and the air is warmer.

About Alaska

Alaska was bought by the United States from the Russians in 1867, in what has been described as the best property deal ever done (\$7.2 million, or less than 2¢ per acre). Much of Alaska's value lies in its mineral wealth. Originally it was gold. Now it is oil and gas, as well as coal. The coal is shipped to Korea. The oil is shipped around the world. It is extracted from land on the Arctic Sea coast around Prudhoe Bay, and sent via an astonishing pipeline 789 miles across the state to the ice-free port of Valdez on the South coast, where it is put into tankers. Since much of Alaska comprises tundra, which is permanently frozen beneath the surface, and since oil needs to be heated to make it fluid enough to flow, complex engineering has been needed to make sure that the pipeline does not melt its way into the permafrost.

The parts of Alaska with which most people are familiar are the towns that are visited by the cruise ships – the so-called "panhandle". Towns such as Skagway, Sitka and Juneau, the state capital which has no road access at all. These date back to the gold rush years of the 1890s, and lie on the very wet coast immediately to the north of the border with Canada.

But we explored the other part of Alaska – the part you can explore by road. There aren't many transport corridors in Alaska, and this route was originally opened up by the railway not the road. The road from Anchorage to Fairbanks was only built about fifty years ago.

Where we went, and why

Alaska is the 49th state of the USA, which it joined as recently as 1959. The urban parts look like the USA, in terms of the suburban shopping malls and general sprawl, but the people there seem to feel independent from the "lower 48", even those who are not native Alaskans. It felt a bit like visiting Scotland but about a million times bigger.

We started off the trip in Anchorage, the commercial hub of the state. "We" were Gerald (the tour leader), Peter and Penny, Liz, Jane, Duncan, Sara and Chris, Steve and Ann and Steve and Jacky. Even in a group of twelve, two people shared a name. We made our way to Anchorage by a number of different routes and met up on Sunday morning in the rather gruesome breakfast room in our hotel, where all the plates, cups and cutlery were made of plastic. The food, surprisingly, was not bad so long as you didn't want to eat pancakes, which I did being on holiday in America. I had to wait six days for pancakes.

The tour concentrated on three main areas. We started on the South coast of Alaska in the small harbour town of Seward. Then we drove back through Anchorage to Fairbanks in the middle of the state and from there most of us caught a plane to Barrow on the Arctic Ocean. Barrow is the largest native community in Alaska and the most Northern settlement in North America (330 miles above the Arctic Circle). Then we finished off with four days in and around Denali National Park.

Seward

The holiday started with the drive from Anchorage to Seward. Gerald had hired two vehicles for the twelve of us, so that we all had window seats and there was plenty of room for the luggage. He drove one and Duncan or Steve drove the other. The 120 mile drive was spectacular, the first part along the coast and the second into the mountains and over a pass. We stopped frequently at interesting spots for wildlife, including Potters Marsh, on the edge of Anchorage, which is renowned for its migrating birds. There we saw a nesting red-necked grebe, various other birds and our first muskrat. At another stop we saw a nesting bald eagle and some of the best ice cream we've tasted this year. Alaskans like ice cream. They give it names like moose tracks and caribou caramel and it comes in huge cones or tubs.

Seward is a small harbour town on the southern coast of Alaska. It is ice-free all year around, and so was chosen as the starting point for the construction of Alaska's first (and only) railway. Since the advent of cars and planes it has lost its importance and now only some 3,000 people live there. But it is popular as a holiday and fishing destination, and it is visited by HUGE cruise ships several times a week.

The town is surrounded by snow-capped mountains and the scenery is spectacular. It is however more fragile than it looks. In 1964 Alaska was hit by a magnitude 9.2 earthquake that caused severe damage from which Seward has never recovered economically. Alaska is on the Pacific ring of fire – the chain of volcanoes that encircle the Pacific Ocean.

We stayed in the Farm, a small B&B on the outskirts of Seward for three nights. We stayed in little cottages, and right next to us was a large, relatively smart trailer park. Next to that, however, was a distinctly trashy trailer park, the sort with as many car parts as flowers. A very odd juxtaposition.

During our stay in Seward we toured around the area stopping off at interesting wildlife spots and walking through the forests. We also walked up to the toe of Exit Glacier, which is one of a dozen of so glaciers that flow out of the Harding Ice Field, one of the largest icefields in the world at 900 square miles, and only discovered in the early 1900s. The glacier has been retreating for several centuries.

"Despite all the warning signs, some folks still cosy up to the crackling, calving glacier for photos. Please note that this glacier has removed such people from the gene pool before, by dropping large chunks of ice on their heads. It's a great spot to explain global warming *and* natural selection to the kids." (Lonely Planet guide, page 268)

On the outskirts of Seward we were able to walk alongside a sea otter – no further away than twenty feet – as she swam on her back for about a mile along the shoreline, using her teeth to open mussels picked up from the water beneath her. Regrettably (for many reasons – not least, you shouldn't give names to wild otters), and before the full picture had become clear, she had been christened Backstroke Bob. Happy memories of Fred (aka Freda), the Blue Peter tortoise.

On another day, which happened to be the only day on our holiday with really foul weather, we took a full-day cruise out into the bay on a sightseeing boat. If the sun had been shining, the views of the mountains in the Kenai National Park around us would have been spectacular. We had no views but we did see Steller Sea Lions, our friend the sea otter again, Dall's porpoises and a humpback whale diving beside the boat. The trip took us to a magnificent, although mainly fogged-in, tidewater glacier at the end of one of the nearby fjords, where the ice was flowing out over the sea in the form of a huge cliff. Periodically large chunks fell into the sea, so you don't get too close to it.

The food in Seward is worth mentioning. Fish is very popular, especially halibut, but the Alaskans have a way of ruining this fantastic fish – by deep-frying it. What a waste. The scallops were excellent, however. The best meal (should you ever find yourself in Seward) is at the Salmon Bake, the slogan of which is "Cheap Beer and Lousy Food". Given that it was

the best food we ate in Alaska, they need a new copywriter as we almost didn't visit them. Knowing what we know now, we would have eaten there every night.

For the trip back from Seward to Anchorage, half of the party had opted to catch the train, which meant a relaxing afternoon in the town, including a trip to the Sea Life Centre for some – the closest possible views of some of the wildlife including a HUGE Steller Sea Lion and seabirds too numerous to mention. The train trip back was as spectacular as we had hoped, as we climbed high into the snowy mountains on the way back to Anchorage. The other half of the party retraced their steps by road and had time for a spot of birdwatching before collecting us from the "railroad depot" at 10 pm.

Anchorage to Fairbanks

We all met up again in Anchorage where we stayed overnight. The following morning we set off on the 350 mile drive to Fairbanks, the second city, which took most of the day. On the way we had a sneak preview of Denali National Park to break up the journey, seeing our first moose, various birds including willow ptarmigan, and quite a lot more ice cream.

Fairbanks is a sprawling city of some 25,000 people, with virtually 24 hour daylight at this time of year. This was our jumping-off point for Barrow, but the whole party had half a day there together before splitting up. During that time there was some birdwatching, while others visited the Museum of the North, a spectacular building on the university campus, where you could easily spend an entire day and not see everything. I was amused by the ready-made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the museum café.

We stayed in an unremarkable hotel on a main road, but just opposite was a genuine American diner, open 24 hours, and a great place for breakfast (at, of course, any time of the day or night). We ate pancakes with bacon and maple syrup at conventional hours. All around Fairbanks, the cottonwood trees were shedding their seeds, like a billion dandelion clocks all disintegrating at the same time and making the ground look like it had just snowed.

We left three of the party in Fairbanks, with the smaller vehicle, and reportedly they had loads of fun on their own including panning for real gold and visiting the museum. The rest of us caught a plane to Barrow – just an hour and a bit's flying time across the tundra but unbelievably far away in terms of lifestyle.

Barrow

Barrow is a community originally founded by the Iñupiat people (one of the native American tribes) on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, to provide easy access to the migration route of the bowhead whales, one of their principal food sources. The settlement presumably originally comprised igloos, since there are no trees for hundreds of miles around, but the igloos have now been replaced by prefabricated houses and the dogs sleds by 4x4s in the summer and skidoos in the winter. The town has no road connection to the outside world. It is serviced entirely by air, apart from one or two giant barges that bring in building materials, cars, lorries and buses and other heavy items during the very short Arctic summer. The barges are dragged onto the beach, apparently, once the sea ice has melted, and unloaded with forklift trucks. It must be an extraordinary sight. There was still a border of several hundred yards of sea ice during our visit in the second half of June, but Gerald said that it would be gone within a couple of weeks.

Barrow is well above the Arctic Circle so there is 24 hour daylight in summer. It makes going to bed very difficult, since there doesn't seem to be any obvious reason to do so.

The native people have certainly embraced the twentieth century with enthusiasm. From Barrow there are daily flights to Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as to smaller native settlements (one of which rejoices in the name of Deadhorse). Two of us, trying to visit the Iñupiat Heritage Centre on the Sunday morning, found it closed and so instead visited the town's one supermarket, which looked surprisingly like any other supermarket in the US, with a hundred varieties of everything you could wish for, presumably all at subsidised prices. It

was like finding a mammoth Tesco in the Outer Hebrides. We were particularly impressed at the skidoo for sale at a tad under US\$10,000. There are several restaurants in the town, serving every kind of food, and even a drive through (or possibly around) coffee house.

Barrow is difficult to describe. The Lonely Planet Guide says "an arctic ghetto sitting on the edge of the imposing frozen ocean, a blip of human existence in an otherwise desolate land". There are no surfaced roads – tarmac would disintegrate in the winter. It's the sort of place where in the winter the temperature drops so low that it doesn't matter whether you're talking °F or °C (the scales cross at -40°, by the way). While we were there, just days before the summer solstice, the temperature hovered around freezing and we had hazy sunshine for much of the time – which was a great improvement on the more usual fog. The houses are raised off the ground on stilts to avoid melting the permafrost. The services are all insulated, whether above or below ground. Everyone drives 4x4s.

Why is Barrow there? Although only about 4,000 people live there, it is the administrative capital of North Slope Borough, which comprises the top quarter of Alaska. The administration of this area, together with a staggeringly large sum of money, has been handed over to the native communities in accordance with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. According to Wikipedia, the act was passed to settle native land claims so as to permit the building of the Alaska Pipeline. There are still massive social and health problems in the native areas, particularly in relation to diet (too much processed food and not enough vitamins) and alcohol. Barrow is "damp", which means alcohol cannot be legally sold there but it can be brought in for personal consumption. We elected not to take any.

Why did we go there? Partly to experience the place, and partly to see the wildlife. Two of us did manage an hour in the Iñupiat Heritage Centre, which by accident we found to be open on the Sunday afternoon. Hundreds or perhaps even thousands of personal experiences of the native people had been recorded before they had been lost forever. And it does seem that being once more in charge of their own destiny has brought a new meaning to life.

As for the wildlife, it did not disappoint, despite our missing out on the two giants. There should have been polar bears, feeding off the whale carcasses on the beach. The native people are allocated a quota of bowhead whales that they are allowed to catch, which they evidently consume with great enthusiasm (whale skin and blubber is apparently a principal source of vitamin C). We left three days before the summer whale festival, which was a relief as otherwise we would have been expected to join the native people eating whale meat and blubber. For various reasons, the polar bears were not around, possibly frightened off by some scientists carrying out research on a nearby spit. We did not see the bowhead whales either, as they had passed by on their migration several weeks earlier (we would have needed to charter a small aircraft to find them, which would not have been cheap). But we did see many of the birds that live on the tundra, or migrate there in order to breed. The highlight was snowy owls (not easy to see when they were sitting on the snow), but there were also red and red-necked phalarope, redpoll, skuas (called jaegers in the US) and some raptors. Why do the birds go all the way to the Arctic to breed? Because of the 24 hour sunlight and the copious numbers of mosquitoes available to eat. The more mosquitoes they ate, the better, in our view.

Denali National Park

After a couple of days in Barrow, we flew back to Fairbanks and rejoined the rest of the party, and the following morning set off the 120 miles or so to Earthsong Lodge, on the edge of Denali National Park. This comprises twenty or so small log cabins and a pleasant restaurant cooking sensible amounts of home-made food (restaurants in the US tend to serve portions that are so large that they put you off eating, bizarrely). We stayed there for four nights, on the last of which we held Jane's official birthday. Earthsong Lodge is on Stampede Road, made famous in the book "Into the Wild" by Jon Krakauer. The book, which was required reading for us all, tells the story of Christopher McCandless spending time in the Alaska wilderness, entering it by Stampede Road, and sadly never leaving again.

From Earthsong Lodge we took day trips into Denali National Park and the surrounding countryside. Denali National Park was created in 1923 in order to save the wild animals, which were being systematically slaughtered by big game hunters once the first gold prospectors came into the area in the early part of the 20th century. The park comprises almost 9,500 square miles of wilderness and contains wolves, bears, lynx, moose, snowshoe hares, marmots, golden eagles and many other mammals and birds. At the entrance is the main administrative area with a visitors centre and campsite, and just one road which leads about 100 miles into the park – which is insignificant when seen on the model in the visitors centre. Cars are allowed on the first 15 miles of the road but beyond that you have to use a shuttle bus.

On one of our days in Denali, we travelled up the road in a bus for about 65 miles, and then back, taking about 8 hours for the round trip, as there is a lot of stopping to look for wildlife. We had excellent views of Mount McKinley, named after the 25th president, and the tallest mountain in North America at over 20,000 feet. The mountain, called Denali – “the High One” – within Alaska, is rarely visible in the spring and summer so we were very fortunate. On another day, we drove along the unpaved Denali Highway, just outside the park, to look at the wildlife and walk on the tundra to try to find a particular bird that nests there (it was not to be seen but it was a magical experience trying to find it). On the third day, we spent the morning and afternoon on two separate walks in the National Park.

The highlight of our time in Denali was seeing not one, but two, lynx late one evening in the part of the Park where cars are permitted. Seeing a lynx in the US (a separate species from the European lynx) was something that Gerald, our leader, had been trying to achieve for many years in Alaska. It was a great moment for him, and for those with him.

On our final day, the main group drove back to Anchorage and had some time for some birdwatching in an Anchorage park, but a splinter group enjoyed one of the most spectacular railway journeys in North America – the eight hour trip from Denali to Anchorage on the Alaska Railroad. In a glass-topped, double-deck railway carriage, we swayed gently in the sunshine through fantastic scenery at a stately 40 mph, surprising the odd moose here and there. The carriage even had an open-sided observation deck at one end, enabling us to sense the scenery as well as view it. For us, possibly, this was not only the highlight of the holiday but the entire reason for coming to Alaska in the first place.

The holiday ended in Anchorage, with people leaving on various flights in the same disjointed manner as they had arrived and feeling that they had enjoyed a very well organised holiday with most congenial fellow travellers.

Part 2: Penny’s wildlife report

[coming soon]