

Alaska by Train, Plane, Ship, Bus and River Raft By Eddie Cullum

The cruise line tours of Alaska just didn't offer enough for us, so we booked two vacations. One was a week touring Alaska by train and bus booked by Alaska Tour and Travel. The second was a cruise through the inside passage. Unlike any previous vacations, we traveled with some friends of ours that we met when I was a working person, Pat and Eva McKannan. Eva has MS but refuses to let it get the best of her. She keeps up with the best of 'em.

We flew from Dallas to Anchorage on July 2nd, 2006. After a very short night, we left by train for a very unique place called Talkeetna, located about half way from Anchorage to Denali National Park and Mt. McKinley. The mountain, seen only by one of six visitors, was obscured by clouds when we arrived. Our 4th of July was spent salmon fishing. My catch was limited to one rainbow trout, about 20 inches long but it was not a keeper. Pat landed a king salmon about 20 pounds but that was on his first cast and there is a limit of one, so he threw it back, never to land another.

Back at the Talkeetna, we noticed a lot of activity and hurried to the back deck where Mt. McKinley was making an appearance. I took several picture with my new digital SLR with a 2 gig compact flash cards (1800 pictures per card). On the 5th, we made a trip into town and decided to take a "flight seeing tour" of the mountain in a small charter Cessna. My wife has been deathly afraid of small planes since her ex-husband got a pilot's license and took her on some hair-raising adventures. Somehow she agreed to go. Pat and Eva wanted to land on a glacier but knew Mahala would never buy into that, so that made arrangements for a glacier landing without our knowledge. Well, it turned out to be one of the highlights of our trip. I have a picture of Mahala strangling Eva for putting one over on us. At any rate, I got more pictures of Mt. McKinley along with the other surrounding mountains.

Back at the lodge, the mountain was still visible, but we had to get to bed so we could catch the train to Denali the next morning. The trip was through pristine wilderness with beautiful streams. We arrived at the Denali Bluffs Hotel just in time to catch a shuttle bus down the road where we prepared for river rafting. Putting on the dry suits was a challenge for some of us. Mahala got her shoes on the wrong feet. (More about Mahala and shoes later!) Eva kept trying to put her left leg thru the left armhole even though the guide kept correcting her. Ed, though, takes the cake when it comes to dry suits. He didn't let the air out and he was walking around looking like the Michellan man. The more his suit puffed up, the further up it pushed his life vest until it almost blocked his vision completely. We finally got everything squared away and made our way to the rafts.

Let me tell you about some cold water. 34 degree water. This water was a glacier the day before. Cold, clear water. The guide told us to get ready to have our picture made around the next bend. Just then we took on a lot of water, cold water, in my ear water. It was painful, and I have the picture to prove it. However, we did survive. Went back to the rafter's office to take off the dry suits (another adventure--as hard to get off as to get on) and retrieve our shoes and coats (which we still haven't had to wear). Some poor woman is going around looking in vain for her shoes while Mahala is still trying to get out of her suit. Finally, when Mahala goes to put her shoes on

they don't fit! She has stolen this other woman's tennis shoes. Well, this woman claims her shoes from Mahala, but doesn't put them on immediately. Meanwhile, Mahala is still looking for her shoes. She eventually finds them and comes back over where we are to sit down and put them on, but they still don't fit! She has stolen this poor woman's shoes again. Finally, Mahala finds her shoes, which do bear a striking resemblance to the other woman's, in her tote bag.

The next morning we got an early start the next day for a 12 hour bus tour through Denali National Park. It was a cool, damp morning when we drove into Denali Park. We saw a few Dahl sheep and a couple of caribou but not much activity. We saw some grizzlies in the misty rain trying to keep their cubs warm. By the time we got to the cabins in the center of the park, the rain had stopped. We saw a demonstration of huskies pulling sleds (on wheels). Mahala tried her hand at panning for gold. I think I would make more as a greeter at Wal-Mart. The trip home in the afternoon was much more interesting. We saw bears moving around in the distance, lots of caribou, sheep and a few other wild critters. Suddenly we came around a curve and the driver stopped. There in all it's splendor was Mt. McKinley, rising more than 20,000 feet into a suddenly clear, blue sky. We shutter bugs piled off the bus to photograph the mountain from this view. I believe this was the fourth straight day we saw the mountain. And only one of six get the experience.

Back on the bus, we rounded another curve and the driver suddenly slowed, killed the engine and rolled slowly forward. Directly in front of us on the road was a young grizzly cub standing between the front legs of its mother. Bears have the right of way so we sat quietly, except for cameras, exchanging glances with the duo in front of us. Soon they decided we were not a threat and went about their business of hunting for food.

The next day was spent on another bus back to Anchorage. The highlight was a moose standing beside the road, apparently trying to find a break in traffic so he could cross. I imagine he finally gave up on that idea,

Back in Anchorage, we went back to the same hotel where we spent our first Alaska night. We had one day to see Anchorage, which we did on foot. This was a rather leisurely day and we needed the rest. The next morning we were back to the train station, heading to Whittier and our cruise ship. It was Sunday and we again enjoyed the scenery, but this was quite different from the other train rides. Here we saw many homes, each with a private plane in their back. I was impressed with a large area of dead trees, miles inland, that were killed by salt water in the 1964 tsunami. Nothing has grown there since.

Sunday evening and I have lost track of dates. I think it was the 9th. Underweigh aboard a cruise ship and enjoying the opportunity to relax a bit. Our first point of interest was College Fjord and then Glacier Bay. We saw some calving in the glaciers but not big ones. A park ranger came aboard and narrated our tour. She told us that the glaciers began retreating about 30,000 years ago, when they extended as far south as Milwaukee, but there was been a recent acceleration of the retreat, starting about 300 years ago. I am trying to figure out how George Bush caused that.

Leaving Glacier Bay, we passed two humpback whales, a mother and calf. The mother was quite disturbed by our presence and beat her flipper on the water repeatedly to scare us away. In the distance I saw twenty or so white dorsal fins which I believe must have been beluga whales.

The next day we came to our first port of call, Skagway. Here we took a train ride up the White Horse Pass, gateway to the Klondike during the gold rush of the early 1900's. The next port of call was Juneau where we took a whale watching boat trip. We mingled with what must have been thirty to forty humpbacks. Several approached the boat then gently submerged and reappeared on the other side of the boat. When they humped their backs and raised their flukes, they were going to the bottom to feed. They would reappear in twenty minutes for more air.

On formal night, Eva made reservations for us to eat in Sabatini's Italian Restaurant. It wasn't what any of us, especially Mahala, expected. We all looked gorgeous in our fancy duds and went to the restaurant to eat. It turned out to be a meal with a gazillion courses and the only thing you pick is the entree. Everything else is pre arranged. We were served very small portions of some very strange food. It's a good thing the portions were small since there were so many servings. Mostly we all ate, or at least tried everything until the main course arrived. Mahala had ordered langostinos thinking it was a type of pasta. The look on her face was priceless when the waitress set her plate in front of her. There were four or five things on the plate that looked like big crawdads. They had the eyes and feelers and everything. They really were disgusting. Mahala says "I didn't order this!" and asks the waitress to take it away. The waitress says "Just try it and I bet you'll like it." and walked away. Needless to say none of us ate her crawdaddy thingies and the waitress eventually took them away. Quote from Mahala: "I don't eat things with eyes on them. Ever."

Our last port of call was Ketchikan, where we took a nature and wildlife expedition. We saw dozens of bald eagles, no longer on the endangered list. Deer and bear and salmon streams and other sights of beauty and interest. A wonderful way to end our stay in Alaska.

The next morning, we arrived in Vancouver. What a far cry from the city I visited in 1961 when I was in the navy. It was huge. We did a bus tour of the city that afternoon before our flight home the next morning. I recall visiting Stanley Park named for the same Lord Stanley whose name is on the National Hockey League championship trophy.