

## Explore Alaska (From The Comfort of Your RV!): Part Two

by Ann Weber, PassPorter Guest Contributor

There are so many beautiful and interesting things to do in Alaska; it is hard to determine which route you should take. We rented our RV in Anchorage. Having only 7 days for our explorations, we immediately headed north along the George Parks Highway (Highway 3) towards Denali National Park, a must-see on our list. When we thought we had more time available, we had planned on continuing north to Fairbanks and then return to Anchorage via Delta Junction and Glen Allen. You should allow at least two weeks for this route.

There are many places along the way to stop and look at scenery, participate in fun activities, and explore as you drive along Highway 3. In my opinion, if you are planning a trip to Alaska, you must purchase a MILEPOST<sup>®</sup> magazine. It lists just about everything there is to see and do along Alaska's highways. You must be aware that much of the information presented is actually paid advertisements. The other problem we ran into was that there were not always mileposts along the side of the road and it was hard to determine where in the book we were without them.

Along the route from Anchorage to Denali National Park, you will go through Wasilla. This is a great place to load up with groceries and other supplies. There is a Fred Meyer store on the right side of the road as you head north on the Parks Highway. This is a store similar to Super Wal-Mart. If you are several days into your trip and hungry for all your standard chain restaurants, you can find many of them here, too.

After a scenic view stop, we stopped at Talkeetna. This was where we were to spend our first night in the RV. There is a Denali National Park Ranger Station here. It serves as a registration location for climbers and has interpretive programs. We were lucky enough to see a program about how animals survive the Talkeetna winters. Talkeetna is a small town. There are a few quaint museums and shops. Hiking, river rafting, and flight-seeing are all available. Unless you are planning on spending time exploring nature, Talkeetna can be visited in about half a day. Beware of the mosquitoes, they are plentiful and like to bite. It was also fun to try and sleep at night with three skylights in the RV when it never got completely dark outside.

As you continue north on Highway 3, you pass through several different physical geographies. It is interesting watching the changes in the trees

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and plant growth along the road. There are many opportunities to stop and take pictures along the way. There are several locations where Mount McKinley is visible, if the clouds are cooperating. One statistic states you have about a 30% chance of seeing the mountain cloudless in the summer.

Denali National Park is approximately six million acres and has one road going through it. Unless you are camping deep in the park (where you must stay three days and leave your car parked for the duration of your stay) you must take shuttles into the park when you want to go beyond Mile 15. We only spent one night here, but you could easily spend two, possibly three nights. There are plenty of hiking trails as well as an interesting science center, sled dog demonstrations and more. I recommend the eight hour shuttle ride to Fish Creek. The scenery is amazing and you get to see wildlife. How much and what kind of wildlife varies.

On our way back south, we tried to see the Transportation and Industry museum in Wasilla, but it was not open on Mondays. We were able to see the Iditarod Headquarters museum and take a ride, with the dogs pulling a wheeled sled. The ride was extremely short, but very enjoyable. The museum/gift shop had displays and videos about the Iditarod.

We continued south to Highway 1 through Anchorage and on to Seward. There was so much to do and see on the way from Anchorage to Seward, that we didn't arrive at our campground until evening and we missed several stops along the way that looked interesting. There are pull-outs with interpretive signs all along the road.

The first official stop heading south out of Anchorage was the Kenai Peninsula Visitor Center. There is a large snowplow train engine on display. This area gets a lot of snow and is prone to avalanches so the snow plows are very important to the trains. Make sure you see the gift shop/information area. When we were there they had plenty of free maps and information and free post cards from Chugach State Park.

The next stop was the Indian Valley gold mine. We purchased some containers of dirt and tried our hands at gold panning. The gold we found was placed in small vials for us to bring home. You can also purchase jewelry that they will load your gold into as a souvenir. The museum is small and unimpressive, but the view of the area is beautiful and panning for gold is a lot of fun.

Our next stop was the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. Although the animals were fenced in, we were able to see things we wouldn't see otherwise on our trip. You drive through the Conservation Center, but

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you can pull over and get out if you want a better view.

Our last touring stop of the day was at Portage Glacier. There is a movie about glaciers that is very informative. There is also a small museum. One to two hours is sufficient for the film and visitor center. I am sure there are beautiful hiking trails accessible from here as well.

Everyone was starving, so we stopped at the Trail Lake Lodge in Moose Pass for dinner. It was a really good meal in a relaxed environment.

During our full day in Seward we hiked the Overlook and Outwash Plain trails at Exit Glacier. The Overlook Trail was not very long, but there was one small area where it was steep enough to make me stop for a short break. Everyone else hiked it without a problem.

After our hikes we went into Seward and had lunch at Apollo's. They served wonderful Italian and Greek dishes. The portions were large enough for some of us to share meals. We ended our day at the SeaLife Center. It was very informative and fun. We spent several hours there going through the exhibits and watching the sea birds and seals. There is a large free parking lot for the SeaLife Center.

In Anchorage, we visited Earthquake Park. I would recommend doing this before your drive to Seward so you can see the effects of the earthquake from different perspectives. We also went to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. This was a wonderful experience. They have villages representing different Alaska Native cultures. You need at least three hours here. If you enjoy history, crafts, songs, and games, you can probably spend most of a day here.

While I feel like we were able to explore much of the beauty of Alaska, we were definitely doing a "commando" tour of the region. There are many sites we were not able to visit. I guess we better plan another trip!

*About The Author: Ann Weber is an avid vacation planner. Now that the two years of planning the Alaska adventure is behind her, Ann is diving into plans for her family's upcoming Disney Christmas vacation.*

Article last updated: 9/21/2006

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