

Alaska in September – A Tour of Denali National Park

Wednesday, September 6, 2006, began by celebrating my birthday with Leslie and Kathleen who invited me to have dinner at “Macaroni Grill” where I enjoyed a fabulous lobster ravioli topped with grilled garlic shrimp! During dinner we shared glasses of the house Chianti wine on the “honor system” by marking down each glass with a crayon on the white paper tablecloth! The next morning, I drove to Ontario Airport to take the Delta Airlines flight to Salt Lake City and onward to Anchorage, Alaska via Seattle. It was a very nice flight with beautiful views of the San Gabriel Mountains north of the airport. As we departed Ontario, it was 101 degrees with scattered thunderstorms in the area. Upon arrival in Salt Lake City, I had a three and half hour layover before connecting with the flight to Anchorage. So, I headed to “Squatter’s Pub & Brewery” for a delicious Buffalo chicken sandwich and a cold pint of their India Pale Ale. As time for the departure of the Anchorage flight approached, I headed to the gate. Once I arrived at the gate, I suddenly heard my name called, and when I went to the counter, the agent offered me \$400 in travel vouchers and a first-class seat on the Delta Airlines “nonstop” flight to Anchorage if I would volunteer to give up my seat on the Seattle flight. It was a “no brainer” decision to accept the offer, which would arrive in Anchorage an hour earlier than my original itinerary, and in the comfort of first class! The flight was very enjoyable, especially when the “snack” of a smoked turkey sandwich, three bean salad, and a luscious double chocolate brownie was served. And, although the flight was over four and half hours, it was very pleasant and comfortable. We arrived in Anchorage a few minutes before midnight, yet there was still enough daylight to easily read a newspaper! (one of the things I love most about Alaska) I picked up my rental car, a brand-new Jeep, and drove downtown to check in at the Captain Cook Hotel – my favorite place to stay in the city.

I awoke the next morning to see partly cloudy skies and 51 degrees outside, A stark contrast to 101 degrees the day before, and I headed to the “Snow City Café” for a fantastic crab omelet, along with sourdough toast and huckleberry jam. The place had more than doubled in size and been wonderfully renovated – looked almost like a totally different restaurant from last year, but the food was still phenomenal. Later I drove to Barnes and Noble bookstore, which remains one of my favorite places in Anchorage, to look for some gifts for the boys Ben and Sam. I found some neat sports stuff for them and some music CDs for me. After a hot cup of coffee at Starbucks, I went to the “Brown Jug” and found a lovely bottle of Pinot Noir from the San Luis Obispo winery as a gift to Marion and Micheal. After all the shopping, I drove to Earthquake Park and hiked along the trail overlooking Cook Inlet as storm clouds gathered off to the west. There were beautiful views of downtown Anchorage across the turbulent waters of Cook Inlet and the dramatic backdrop of the Chugach Mountains in the background.



View of Anchorage from Earthquake Park



Potter's Marsh and Chugach Mountains

That evening, I joined Marion, Michael, and the boys for dinner at their home which they had recently remodeled with new wood floors, new furniture, and incredible stainless steel kitchen appliances! Michael prepared a fantastic dish of chicken curry, together with basmati rice. As we sat around the table, Marion talked about her trip to England to attend her father’s funeral a couple of weeks before. Her father had died

suddenly in a car accident and Marion seemed still very much affected by it as she described the reunion with her family at the funeral. She felt strongly that at some point she really wanted the boys to see their ancestral “roots” in England. While we had a wonderful evening together, I felt a bit sad for Marion as I left.

When I returned to the hotel, I decided to walk over to “Humpy’s Great Alaskan Alehouse” for a beer and to listen to live music. That evening the band was from Arizona and they played some pretty darn good music, especially when the lead singer did an imitation of Janis Joplin – great voice! While I was sitting at the table, a small group of college kids asked if they could join me – it was very interesting to see how they interacted with each other and to listen to their conversation, much of which was about who was dating whom and whether or not it was a serious affair! After the band finished their set, videos of extreme sports began playing on the flat screen TVs all around the bar. So, I decided to head down the street to “F-Street Station”, another of my favorite places, where I joined several people sitting at the kitchen bar for a late-night snack of the best halibut and chips in the world. It was fun to watch the cooks as they prepared each dish. On my trip to the restroom, I spotted a sign posted above the urinal which read: “Notice to Pilots – those with short pilit tubes or low manifold pressure, please taxi up close. Pilots who follow you may not be float equipped!” (One doesn’t need to be a pilot to know what the sign means!)

The next morning, I checked out of the Captain Cook Hotel and made a reservation at the Millenium Hotel at the airport for my return home in a few days. Meanwhile, I began my journey northward to Denali National Park where I had booked a room for a couple of nights at the “Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge”. I drove up the Glenn Highway to the junction with the Matanuska River where I had a beautiful view of the Matanuska Valley in brilliant fall colors of yellow, red, and orange! Then it was on through the town of Wasilla that has to be one of the longest stretches of “strip development” in America – definitely not what Alaska was meant to be! Beyond Wasilla was the small town of Willow, an hour and half from Anchorage, and as I passed through the town, I wondered who had come up with the crazy idea of moving the state capitol from Juneau to Willow! (note: that idea has since died) Continuing north, the traffic thinned out considerably, with the exception of the “double long” semi-trucks headed to Fairbanks and perhaps on up to Prudhoe Bay. Just beyond Willow, it started to rain, and the clouds began to descend upon the mountains. Despite the rain and heavy overcast, the fall colors of the foliage were spectacular! Their “brilliance” under the dark clouds was as if they had their own source of light – really amazing! I stopped many times in the rain to take photos.

As I approached “Broad Pass”, the landscape transformed into a brilliant red carpet of fall foliage, and being above 2,000 feet elevation, trees had given way to the tundra. When I stopped to take a photo of the mountains shrouded in mist, looming over the tundra, I discovered the ground was covered in luscious huckleberries! Unfortunately, I only had time to pick a few of the delicious wild berries. Beyond Broad pass, the rain slowly ended, but the heavy overcast remained. However, in the distance ahead I could see small breaks revealing blue sky on the horizon. (probably there were sunny skies in Fairbanks)



Broad Pass

After another hour or so, I arrived at the “Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge”, now part of the recently designated “Denali Borough”. There was even a newly installed “traffic light” on the highway. I also noticed that the area had expanded considerably, although it still retained its beautiful, rustic appearance. The lodge was situated on the edge of a high bluff overlooking the swift flowing Nenana River below, which was popular for white water raft trips.



Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge



Nenana River and white water rafts

I experienced a bit of a problem checking into the lodge due to having made the reservation in advance online, but the young Russian front desk clerk did a great job in resolving the problem. When I found my room, it had a gorgeous view of the Nenana River and the mountains beyond in their brilliant fall colors! (I couldn’t have asked for a better view) Once I had unpacked and settled in, I headed to the “Base Camp Bistro and Bar” for dinner. My server showed me to a table outside on the deck overlooking the rapids of the river. As I enjoyed a cold pint of Alaskan Amber beer, I wrote my notes of the day in my journal. Despite light rain, the view was beautiful. After a couple of beers, I ordered halibut and chips, my favorite, and it was delicious, although I still believe F-Street Station serves the best! My server was “Maya”, a very pretty young blonde woman from Russia. She was very attentive and quite interested to know about what I was writing in my journal. I assured her that she would be mentioned in my notes. As I enjoyed dinner, I noticed a couple sitting near me, an older man, and a much younger, very overweight woman. I couldn’t help but overhear their conversation, which was rather “overheated” at times and sometimes quite rude, especially his remarks/comments about people seated in the bar, including me! Meanwhile, a group of Australians were seated behind me, and from their conversation I could tell they felt a bit awkward around the couple at the next table. Eventually the couple left, and who knows what happened after that – but I didn’t really care to know anyway. I believe the Aussies felt the same way as we exchanged glances. As the rain became heavier, I retreated to my room for a quiet night.

The rain continued throughout the night, and I awoke the next morning to find a heavy, dark overcast sky, with light rain and 40 degrees – not a good day to see Mt. McKinley! After breakfast, I filled up the Jeep with some gas, picked up a cup of hot coffee at the “Lynx Creek Mercantile”, and then drove to the National Park Visitor Center where I got a map and paid the entrance fee. Then I drove 15 miles up the main road into the park as far as the Savage River checkpoint, beyond which private vehicles were not allowed to proceed. Along the way to Savage River, there were spectacular views of the Birch Forest shining in their brilliant yellow dress, despite the rain and low clouds. The tundra was bright red and orange, dotted with the short, dark green spires of Black Spruce. On the edge of the road were several signs posted warning people not to walk off the road because of the danger of “rutting moose”! Although I looked hard, I saw no moose. However, as the clouds began to lift, I could see fresh snow on the peaks, so winter was not far off. On the way back from Savage River, I saw a grey wolf crossing the road directly in front of me. But unfortunately, I couldn’t get my camera out of the bag in time.



Entering Denali National Park



Fall Colors of Tundra

Returning to the Visitor Center, I bought a book about the plants and wildlife in the park, as well as some postcards before I went to the “Morino Grill” and ordered my favorite halibut and chips for lunch. I was informed that the restaurant was out of chips, and in fact, they had been for the past three days. So, they gave me an extra-large portion of halibut which was fresh and delicious! After lunch, the clouds continued to lift and the rain stopped, so I hiked along a trail near the Visitor Center and suddenly came upon a large male “Ptarmigan” strutting his stuff in a beautiful display. Further down the trail I came to the site of the old “Morino Roadhouse”, which was the first form of accommodations in the park. Then I came to the junction with the “McKinley Station Trail”, and about a half mile down the hill I came to Riley Creek and a great view of the 500 foot long, 300-foot-high steel railroad trestle. As I stood on the edge of the creek, I heard the whistle of the train, so I waited about 10 minutes and sure enough, the train came across the trestle 300 feet above me! It made for some great photos.



Riley Creek Railroad Bridge

After the train had passed, I hiked up to the main road through some very wet brush, yet the view of the boreal forest was gorgeous. When I reached the train station, I read a very interesting story about the history of the railroad and the park over the past 80 years. There was a desk in the station where one could book a bus tour of the park, which is the only way one can travel deep into the park beyond the Savage River checkpoint, so I decided to sign up for a tour the following day. Then I hiked the trail down to Horseshoe Lake, and as I reached the shore of the lake, the sun was just starting to peek through the clouds. The lake was actually formed by a huge beaver dam, but I could see no beavers around. When I hiked back up the short, but very steep trail, I heard the train whistle again, this time it was the northbound train, and I was able to capture a great photo of it as it rolled along above the lake through the gorgeous fall foliage on the mountain slope.



Horseshoe Lake



Nenana River Canyon

Finally, the sunshine began to break through the clouds in earnest as I drove down the Nenana River Canyon, with beautiful fall foliage on the steep canyon walls brilliantly highlighted by the sun. Several miles north of the park entrance, I came upon the massive power plant and coal mine complex near the small town of Healy – a stark contrast to the surrounding wilderness! Then on the way back to the park, I stopped at the edge of the bridge over the canyon to take a photo. At the same time, a car pulled up behind me and four Japanese tourists “jumped” out with their cameras and dashed to the exact same spot from where I took my photo! Afterwards, I stopped at the “Nenana View Bar & Grille” for a beer, and the view was great. The bartender was a young man from Russia, and he said there were many young people from Russia and Eastern Europe working in the restaurants, bars, and hotels outside the park for the summer and he would be returning home at the end of the season. Upon leaving the bar, I saw a red fox dash across the highway, although I don’t think anyone else was even aware of it.

As evening approached, I decided to drive back into the park to capture some more photos of the beautiful fall foliage highlighted by the long rays of the setting sun. The snow-covered peaks were beautifully lighted by the lovely alpenglow of the sunset. Returning to the park gate, I came to the place where I had seen the grey wolf earlier in the day. The thought suddenly crossed my mind that I might see it again, and just then he appeared beside the road! I slowed down and pulled alongside him as he casually moved toward the forest. Then he suddenly stopped – I stopped – and for a few seconds our eyes met! It was an amazing and wonderful experience, however brief! Then he moved deeper into the trees, and I lost sight of him. At that moment, I realized I was still holding my camera ready to take a photo – so why didn’t I? (I guess I’ll never know) The wolf was beautiful, peaceful, and captured my attention totally!

For dinner I went to the restaurant in the lodge that overlooked the Nenana River and began with a chilled glass of Columbia Crest Sauvignon Blanc wine and the “seafood sampler” that included Tempura shrimp with apricot raisin chutney, herb crusted halibut, and Dungeness crab cakes in roasted red pepper sauce – wonderful! Then I finished dinner with a slice of New York cheesecake topped with caramel and walnuts. The experience of dinner was a whole world away from my encounter with the wolf – less than an hour and a few miles away! After dinner, I headed to the Base Camp Bar for a beer where many of the seasonal employees had gathered to say their goodbyes as the season was coming to a close in the next few days. Meanwhile, a “lounge lizard” was singing old Frank Sinatra tunes to the mostly college age crowd! (I doubted they had any idea who was Frank Sinatra)

The following morning, it was a perfectly clear and very cold beginning to the day. There was ice on everything, and a chill wind was in the air. The rising sun was highlighting the peaks that were topped with new snow from the day before. In the bright sunshine the brilliant yellow Birch trees were even brighter! I checked out of the hotel and then walked over to Canyon Station to get some coffee and wait for the bus that would take me on the “Tundra Wilderness Tour #17”. Tour #16 was boarding as I waited, and it was jammed with people which left me with the hope that #17 would not be so crowded, but when my bus

pulled up it was already over half full! However, I was able to get a window seat before the bus became nearly full, with just one seat vacant, the one next to me. I was hoping it would remain open, but at the last moment, a large young man boarded and took the seat. Our driver/narrator/guide was very friendly, fun, and quite knowledgeable about the history of the park and the natural environment. His name was George Hamilton, but no relationship to the actor of the same name. He started the tour with a few basic rules and then passed around several rolls of paper towels to help us wipe off the condensation on the windows – otherwise we wouldn't be able to see anything! The majority of people on the tour appeared to be from the southern US, judging by their accent. (such as “see them purty yeller trees”) But they were also a lot of fun, except for the times when we all had to get off the bus at a scheduled stop, and then they became painfully “slow”! (most of them were over 65 and overweight, so it should have come as no surprise I suppose, but it really frustrated me since I was sitting near the rear of the bus!)



“Tundra Wilderness Tour” buses at Canyon Station

During the tour, the views of the snow-capped mountains and colorful fall foliage were spectacular in the full light of the morning sun! Our first sighting of wildlife came shortly after passing Savage River checkpoint when a large bull moose with a huge rack of antlers crossed the road – a beautiful animal. As we slowly climbed up to Sable Pass, we were now above tree line and surrounded by gorgeous bright golden and red tundra. A few miles further up the road, we got our first “glimpse” of Mt Mckinley, known in the native Athabascan language as “Denali”, meaning “The Great One” – and as we stepped off the bus for a photo op, everyone went wild! The sky was cloud free and the mountain was shining brilliant white under the deep blue sky! When we were back on board the bus again, George said that we were only seeing the top third of the massive mountain and that in another hour and half this view would “pale” in comparison to the next view of it. Later, as we climbed up to “Polychrome Pass”, we saw a large band of Dall Sheep grazing high up on the mountain slope above the road. We stopped to take photos of the vast expanse of the Alaska Range in the distance across the valley.

Finally, after a long, tortuous drive on the narrow winding rough gravel road, we came to the 4,000-foot summit of the “Stony Hill Overlook” and Denali seemed to literally “rise up” before our eyes! The view of the legendary mountain from its base at 2,000 feet to its summit at 20,800 feet was nothing short of stunning and breathtaking!! And just then, we spotted a large silver back male grizzly bear moving down the slope below us. We could not have asked for anything more at that moment, and we had George to thank for the opportunity.



Mt McKinley – Denali National Park

On our return trip, we were fortunate to see a pack of grey wolves with four young pups in the Toklat River Valley. And not long after that, George announced that a large grizzly bear mother and two second year cubs were on the road ahead of us. He slowed to a stop so as to allow us the chance to take a photo from the front of the bus. It wasn't long before the bears disappeared into the dense forest below the road. A few minutes further down the road we spotted three large bull caribou grazing just 200 yards from us. At that moment, George said that it had been a good day in Denali National Park – a bit more than an “understatement”! Then he told us about a quote from the first park superintendent – “Denali Park is for all those who understand the language of silence”. When we returned to Canyon Station, I thanked George for one of the best tours I have ever had, and one that I knew I would remember for a lifetime!



Grizzly Bear mother and cubs

Sadly, it was time to leave Denali and head back to Anchorage and prepare for my return home tomorrow. On the drive back to Anchorage, there was a gorgeous view of Mt McKinley (Denali) from the viewpoint at Denali State Park north of Talkeetna - the last view I had of the mountain. Further south on the Glenn Highway was a beautiful view of the sunset over Kantishna Lake and a lovely rainbow across the Big Susitna River.



View of Mt McKinley from Denali State Park



Rainbow on Big Susitna River



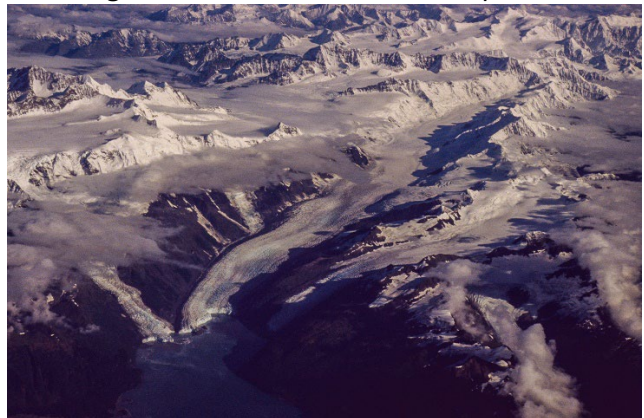
Sunset over Kantishna Lake

Not long after that, I began to run into some light rain that would follow me the rest of the way to Anchorage. When I arrived in the city, I checked into the Millenium Hotel at the airport since I had an early morning flight to California the next day. That evening, I had a delicious grilled halibut sandwich and a cold pint of Alaskan Amber beer in the “Fancy Moose Bar” overlooking Lake Hood before retiring for the night.

The next morning, I took the hotel shuttle to the airport and checked in for the Delta Airlines flight to Seattle and onward to Ontario airport. Shortly after takeoff, a flight attendant made a funny announcement that went like this – “the reading light button above your head is the one with the picture of a light bulb on it. The other button is not the reading light”. A scrumptious breakfast was served as we were cruising high above Prince William Sound, and the views of the massive Wrangell-St Elias mountains were spectacular!



Prince William Sound glaciers



Wrangell-St Elias Mountains

The inflight entertainment system had a fascinating story about a Midwestern preacher who gave everyone in his church \$100 and told them to go out and do something good for people. He called it the “Kingdom Assignment”! Later, as we approached SeaTac airport, a flight attendant made the following announcement – “if you are sleeping, it’s important that you remain upright for our landing”. (I had to wonder; did anyone “hear” that while they were sleeping?)



Seattle – Elliot Bay



Downtown Seattle

My connecting flight was on time, and I arrived back home to find hot, sunny weather once again. The trip to Alaska was a welcome break from the hot weather and hectic pace of southern California, and something I try to do at least once a year to renew my bond with “The Great Land”!