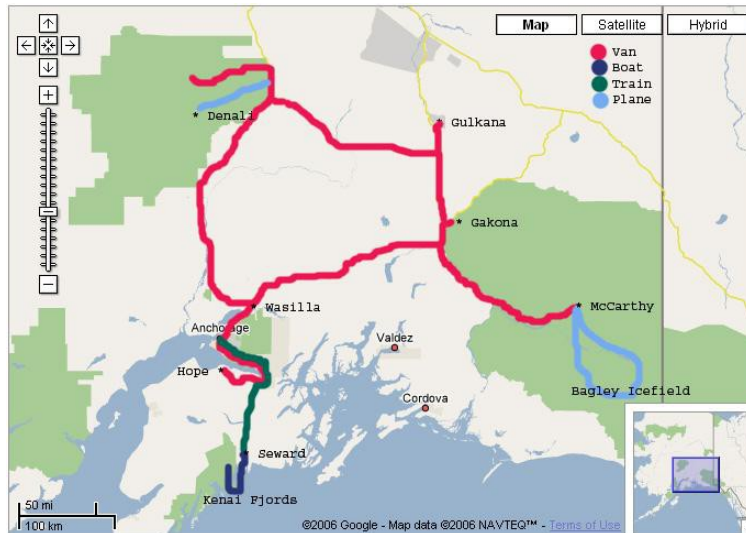


My trip to Alaska

June 29-July 9, 2006



June 28

I had been dreaming of getting up to the wilderness of Alaska for many years, and I finally had the chance to fulfill this dream. My coworker Xinyang had gone just a couple years back and after she raved about it, I was convinced I wanted to go too. After doing a few searches on the Internet, I saw a number of tour companies that did tours visiting different places, involving hiking and camping in the wilderness.

Alaska Airlines had a special to Anchorage for \$360 - cheaper than flying back to the east coast! My flight was at 4:00, and it was hard to imagine I would be in Alaska in just 6 hours - as I was growing up, Alaska conjured images of wilderness and scenery like New Zealand or Scandinavia, many more hours away! I managed to get my luggage into one carryon bag - no checking required, which was nice since I would hate to lose a bag when my tour started the next day - 9 days without luggage would be quite a while! We took off from San Francisco heading north over the central valley. Lassen and Shasta were mostly covered with thunderstorm clouds, but as we moved north, the clouds cleared to give us great views of the whole Cascade chain - Mt Hood, St Helens, Adams, and Rainier, as we touched down in Seattle to change planes. About an hour later we were headed past Vancouver - all the coastal mountains were clear - Whistler had to be one of them! The west coast of BC is an amazing array of glacially scoured fjords, ice fields, and rugged islands - the flight was like doing a cruise in fast forward as we continued north. A few bands of low clouds appeared farther north by the St Elias range, and its signature 18000 ft peak Mt St Elias stuck up like an ice castle far above the clouds.



The rugged glacially scoured Chugatch range came up as we were landing, and a lot of classic Alaska scenery came into view - I was lucky to have a window seat! Steep mountains, glaciers breaking off into turquoise lakes full of icebergs, and green valleys filled the view. I couldn't wait to start our tour and be hiking in those kinds of places!

A short taxi ride took me to the Arctic Fox inn B&B in Anchorage, and my tour was all confirmed for tomorrow. It was a fitful sleep with the excitement and anticipation of a great trip, and even with all the shutters drawn in my room, I couldn't make it get dark!

June 29

My alarm buzzed at 7:30 - my gear was packed, and I enjoyed a nice breakfast at the B&B. Shortly after, a big blue Ford E350 van pulled up - I figured that was my ride. Sheri introduced herself - she was going to be the guide for the next 9 days. We shuttled over to another hotel to pick up the rest of the tour. I had wondered what the group was going to be like - you never really know at first, but this was a pretty cool group. Randy and his wife Gail were from New Boston, NH, and Gary and his wife Bev were from San Francisco - we met in Alaska, but live only 20 minutes apart!

Our first stop was to the Earthquake Park just outside Anchorage - it is a memorial of the great Good Friday quake of 1964 - the magnitude 9.2 temblor took out much of the city - dropping half of downtown by up to 17 feet. Look at any map of the city before 1964 and compare it with a map today and you'll see. Whole forests of trees dropped into the water and their bare trunks stand as a reminder to that devastating day. People in Alaska refer to the big quake in a similar way that people in CA think of the 1906 or 1989 Loma Prieta quake.

Our path took us around one of the largest seaplane airports in Alaska – it was amazing how many seaplanes there were - actually about 1 out of 60 Alaskans has their own plane - it is a necessity, considering that 2/3 of the state has no roads and is "in the bush". There are so many lakes in Alaska - some sources say over 3 million - that finding a place to land isn't normally a problem. The post office in Anchorage is open every day of the year - also a necessity for many, since for many people out in the bush, food deliveries come by post.

We could easily tell which season it was in Alaska as we headed north... there are 2 seasons, winter and road construction season! Fortunately, we weren't delayed too badly this time, but there has been much worse before.

Shortly afterward, we arrived in Wasilla - the official start line of the famous 1049 mile long Iditarod dog sled race. Every year around March, mushers from all around the world compete in the race, and this past year, the winner completed the entire race in just about 9 1/2 days - an amazing testimony of stamina and endurance, as mushers and dogs endured temperatures to 40 below and gale force winds in the frozen tundra on their way to Nome. Part of the route even crosses the frozen Bering Sea - not exactly a place where you'd find a Starbucks or McDonalds when you got hungry or had to use the bathroom...

One of the mushers there was the son of the famous musher Joe Redington, who competed in the Iditarod numerous times, helped in the search and rescue of plane crash victims using dog sleds in areas far from any road, and he even mushed a dog team to the summit of Denali at 20,320 feet! Some of the dogs were running around - eagerly waiting for the first snowflakes of winter to fall. They kept in shape by pulling tractors, and tourists could even take a ride. His son was there and signed a copy of his dad's amazing experiences for me.



Past Wasilla, we made a food and supplies (and wine and chocolate) stop at Carrs, then continued up the main highway north up toward Denali. As we headed north, we entered a lush taiga forest of spruce trees interspersed with lakes - we kept our eyes out for moose, bears, and trumpeter swans on the lakes

since they frequent those areas. Further north, the trees got smaller and more spread out before disappearing altogether when we entered the open tundra. We continued up over Broad pass, which on a clear day affords a great view of the Alaska Range. Denali (the Mountain) is only "out" about 1/3 of the days, and alas, today was one of the other 2/3 of the days - there were mostly clear skies overhead, but the clouds seemed to gather around the mountains - we just saw the slopes around the base of the mountains up to about 4000 feet (it was hard to imagine what another 16000 feet would have looked like!)

We checked into a campsite in Denali National Park at the Riley Creek campground - a nice shaded spot not far from the creek - you could hear it gurgling in the background. We got our tents set up fairly quickly - we were all pretty experienced with camping gear. The biggest challenge was keeping the stupid squirrels out of our stuff. It almost seemed like having "bear boxes" was more to keep the squirrels out of the food than bears!

Our first hike for the trip was at Horseshoe Lake, not far from the entrance to the park. I was looking forward to getting on a trail and seeing some of the scenery up close - it is one thing to see things through a window, but it's really nice to be out on the trail. We crossed the tracks of the Alaska Railway and headed down into the valley with the lake. Almost immediately, we saw something large wading in the water - the wildlife is one of the things that brought me to Alaska, and I wasn't to be disappointed - it was a bull moose drinking from the lake! We went down to the water and watched him for a good half hour - as he was just having a good time in the water. I wished I had a good telephoto lens, but when my friend was in Antarctica a few months ago, he learned the trick of pointing your camera through your binoculars, and got some great shots of the penguins. Here, I gave it a try on the moose, and it worked beautifully!



A few of us decided to do a flight seeing tour of Denali - they were reporting that it was pretty nice, even though it was pretty cloudy where we were. The pilots

from all the different flight seeing tour companies all communicate with each other and help each other find the best spots and way to see the Mountain up close. We had a brief snack and salad and got on the van for Denali Air. They took us down to the airport a few miles down the road, and we checked in. The price of \$285 sounded a bit steep, but I was told it was worth every penny. Plus, how many chances do you get to fly up to a 20,000 ft mountain?

We hopped in a 10-seater Piper aircraft and hit the runway. The climb was a bit rough as we ascended over the lush taiga forests, kettle lakes, with the steep mountains as the backdrop. We climbed over a set of ridges, each one a little higher than the last - the first ones lush and green, the next ones with a few snow patches and streaks of white, the next ones with solid white caps, and finally a set of pure white mountains with huge glaciers snaking off different sides. The Alaska Range was like a dam, blocking the marine clouds from the south - it looked like a 7000 ft high dam with waterfalls of clouds pouring off, with everything clear on the lee side.

As we got closer, we could start seeing the Mountain - Denali was obscured by a few scattered clouds at around 15000 feet, but as we passed the clouds, it was clear as a bell. When they say the mountain is "out", we saw how it is so relevant to where you are. The peak probably is usually out and above the clouds most of the time (unless it's covered by a cap cloud - the mountain generates its own clouds) - you just have to get high enough to see it. The steep hillsides were covered with fluted snow, which poured down avalanche chutes down the glaciers far below. The pattern of moraines in the glaciers made them look like giant snakes reaching as far as you could see. All the peaks looked like they had been completely covered with thick whipped cream. The scale was hard to imagine - I thought the snow in some places looked maybe 50 feet deep; the pilot corrected me and said it was probably 300-400 feet deep. We pulled up pretty close to the mountain, and I thought we were maybe getting a little too close - the pilot was probably going to pull us away and take us back home, but next thing, he turned *toward* the peak, bringing us an even closer look! He said we were still a good mile away - but it felt like we were going to crash any moment! Batteries and memory cards were being chewed as all of us furiously clicked photos to capture this moment of a lifetime! We could see the details in the crevasses, ice caves in the glaciers, and flutings on the steep sides. I think there were even some climbers below us, returning from a grueling expedition of several weeks to reach the summit - and here we were, on a 60 minute flight seeing the summit up close - of course mountaineers would call that cheating... In the old days, climbers would have to trek probably 40 miles to even reach the base of the mountain - it is that remote - but now, they can fly up to the 7200 foot level on a glacier using a ski plane. Where do you draw the line?



We got back from the flight seeing tour - my senses were still pretty overwhelmed at this point, and it took the rest of the evening just to start digesting it! The flight was a bit rough as we bounced around between clouds and lofty peaks. We made a quick dinner before retiring for the night. I started to get engrossed a bit in my new book - the story of Joe Redington was quite captivating. I gave up waiting for it to get dark so I put some socks over my eyes and finally shut them for the night.

June 30

I was looking forward to today - doing a wildlife safari ride through Denali. Denali is famous for its wildlife, including grizzly bears, moose, caribou, dall sheep, wolves, and countless others.

After breakfast, we walked up to the bus stop by the ranger station and lined up for our 10:00 bus. I picked up another book at the visitor center - showing the scenery and telling the story about Alaska. I always like having books like that, plus if my camera was lost or the memory got corrupted, at least I would still have some photos. Our bus showed up and we were off. Glad we weren't on the 9:30 bus - they were still waiting for a driver when we left!

We passed the park headquarters and some of the sled dog kennels on our way into the park. We saw some of the trainers - they were walking the dogs when we were on our way back. The taiga forest thinned as we climbed up near the tree line at around 3000 ft. Almost immediately, we saw our first wildlife - 2 moose along the wide Savage river valley - the buses were lined up with cameras

pointed and ready. They even were walking toward us - we took it slow and let them take their time. Soon after, we saw a cross fox foraging for food right along the road - even circling the bus so everyone could get a good look! We had to avoid running over some snowshoe hares and arctic ground squirrels!

A grizzly and a cub were foraging in a meadow to our left - hanging out in the open. We were pretty lucky so far with the wildlife! Many times the bears are in the thick brush or out of view. However, much wildlife uses the park road as a thoroughfare, since the tundra is often boggy and wet and difficult to cross. Some dall sheep were also hanging out on a peak up to our right. Fortunately, a hunter with a keen eye was sitting next to me, and he seemed to spot things nobody else on the bus could see! Binoculars would wave back and forth until the target was spotted - I wonder how often a lot of wildlife is missed when an expert hunter wasn't around.



We stopped for a bit at the silty grey Teklanika River - it's silty from all the glacial flour suspended in the melt water. It was interesting that it seemed like the river was very low, but actually all the glacial rivers are like that. The silt and sand gets deposited continuously, and the river is always carving new channels.

Our route took us up to the Sable pass at over 4000 ft - patches of snow still clung to the green tundra. A couple of caribou were spotted in a river valley to our left (seemed like all the wildlife was to our left - we had received a tip that the left side was the best place to sit!) We continued up to the Polychrome overlook and Cathedral Mountain. The multi-hued mountains consist of different minerals that change the rock to red, orange, green, and blue. A very pretty sight. We did a short hike around the overlook, admiring the alpine tundra wildflowers and sights of the faraway peaks in the distance.

Fields of brilliant pink eskimo potatoes and sweet peas were growing along the banks of the Toklat River - we made a short visit before heading over to Fish Creek. The creek is one of the few clear water creeks in the park - most are grey and silty from the glacial melt water - and it was full of graylings. Most creeks don't have fish because of the silt. We were lucky to spot a beautiful blonde grizzly in the distance - it was pretty still and looked like a big rock, but as soon as the head moved, dozens of binoculars were fixed on it.

We're not supposed to approach grizzlies too close, and we turned around at this point. It was a great day - and there was more to come. We spotted on the way back a pika, some more caribou and dall sheep, golden eagles, and even a willow ptarmigan, Alaska's official state bird (though the ubiquitous mosquito often takes this title).

The clouds were thickening - unfortunately obscuring our view of Denali - today was not a day for the mountain to be out, but at least we had a great view yesterday on the flight. But I've also heard cloudy days are better days to spot wildlife - since not as many animals are seeking shelter in the shade and they are out. We passed through a few showers on our way back, but they were predicting it to clear a bit later. I still had my fingers crossed for seeing Denali.

The rain stopped as we reached camp and started preparing dinner. A brilliant rainbow arched across the sky along the mountains east of us as we enjoyed a campfire and smores and wine. I took a little stroll down to Riley creek - its churning waters making for a relaxing music as my mind started processing and digesting everything that had happened so far. When your senses are overloaded, you need some time to regroup a bit! It has been a great trip so far - and this was only the end of the 2nd day! I read a few more chapters in my book as the pitter patter of raindrops hit the tent lulling me to sleep.

July 1

We had to wake up pretty early from camp - we had a big day planned. The tents were quickly broken down and breakfast was on the table. We packed our lunches and got on our way. The rain stopped and the clouds were starting to break up. Heading back south on the Parks Highway, we turned onto the famous (or infamous) Denali Highway. Stretching for over 130 miles across endless open tundra, the road is not recommended unless you have high clearance, multiple spare tires, and 4WD experience. Hmmm - was it going to be like some of the 4WD tracks in Death Valley going through rugged canyons, but this time, we would be getting chased by bears?

Much to our delight, we found that the road had been graded recently and was in pretty good shape - a sign at the beginning of the road warns of the perils that usually lie ahead. Apparently, just a couple weeks ago, there was a blizzard snowstorm along the Maclaren summit at 4000 ft - and the road isn't exactly sheltered from the elements.

We proceeded along the southern boundary of the 400 mi-long Alaska Range - as the clouds started clearing, the ranks of higher peaks in the background started to emerge. We gazed in awe at the great Nenana River and west fork of the Susitna River with the 12000 ft peaks of the Alaska Range far away. Glaciers snaked down the canyons between the faraway peaks, and it looked like you could probably walk there in a day, but in reality, the peaks were probably 50 miles away! The air is so clean in Alaska with very little haze, and distances are hard to fathom.

We stopped for coffee and blueberry pie at the "Gracious House" - a little shop along the lonely highway. The cabin bore the traditional marks of an Alaskan wilderness cabin - the moose antlers decorating the roof, the outhouse with some kind of character, and the food cache in front stored up high and out of the reach of bears and deep snow. It's always fun to patronize the locals a bit. Many tourists probably only see the major cities of Alaska, only hitting those convenient places reachable by the mega cruise ships or those major cities that tourists sense as a must-see. There's something special about the character of Alaska that can be captured by visiting these homely little businesses.

After crossing the wide Susitna River, we climbed up to the Maclaren summit ridge. Topping over 4000 feet in the high tundra, the ridge gives amazing views of alpine lakes formed by glaciers coming off the high Alaska Range to our north. 13832 ft Mt Hayes loomed in the distance. A caribou graced us with its presence by one of the lakes as we basked in the beauty of the alpine landscape. We enjoyed our snacks of fruit and reindeer meat sausages at one of the lakes. Fortunately, the mosquitoes weren't so bad and we could enjoy a nice hike in the open tundra. We spent about 3 hours wandering about - the sky was such a deep clear blue and the grass was a nice pastel green, littered with alpine lakes and a few spotty snow patches - the last remnants of the previous winter.



Back on the road again, we continued east along the Denali highway, then north up toward Gulkana. Again, lakes dotted the landscape almost everywhere - most

were quite small, but some of the larger lakes were a couple miles across. The snow-covered mountains and brilliant blue sky filled with puffy white clouds were reflected like a perfect mirror in Summit Lake - one of the larger lakes.

It was a strange feeling getting back onto the pavement - we had gotten so used to the rough dirt road, and forgotten what smooth road was like! We stopped at one of the rivers to see if the salmon might be spawning. It was still a little early in the year, but every year starting around this time, thousands of sockeye salmon swim upstream in the rivers to spawn. Apparently, they remember the exact spot where they were born, and can swim upstream all the way from the sea, picking the right forks in the rivers everywhere to get back to their original spot. We were there at the right time - the bright red fish were packed like sardines in the river dropping eggs. I wanted to just grab a net and scoop up the fish - have a great cookout, but at this point in their lives, they were already starting to decay - the grip of death was already upon them. Many of them already were mottled with white patches on their scales. What a wondrous show of death and life - thousands of salmon swim hundreds of miles upstream to spawn a new generation, knowing this would be their last journey.

We soon left the comfort of the paved main road and headed up toward the Gulkana glacier. This was the first time I've seen a large glacier up close - it looked like we could reach the glacier in just a few minutes. This is also the site of the annual Arctic Man festival - a competition where guys show off their strength, stamina and speed in a series of events - kind of sounds like the world's strongest man competition. We soon concluded that since real Alaskan sourdoughs have big beards and probably drink a lot of beer, this festival would involve a lot of "beers and beards..."



As we neared the glacier, the road got rougher and rougher until we decided it was time to get out and walk. Still it didn't look more than about a quarter mile. I

would be quite fooled, however. Donning our mosquito nets, we hit the trail, following the silty grey river coming off the glacier. The trees gave way to bushes, which then disappeared, with just a few grasses and flowers remaining. Soon, even those disappeared, leaving just a rocky glacial canyon. Fortunately, the mosquitoes also disappeared by then. Apparently, the glacier had reached much farther recently, but over the years, the ice had been retreating - they said you could almost drive to the ice about 50 years ago, but now you had to walk quite a distance.

A few ATV's buzzed us on the trail - I so wanted to ride in one! Sure beat walking! Soon after, we saw the river forking and the trail headed up over a long narrow swinging bridge across the river. It was not for the faint of heart, and one of us decided that the bridge was far enough. The planks were just far enough apart, and the bridge was just high enough above the raging river that it definitely tested your fear of heights. Fortunately it wasn't too windy and the bridge wasn't swinging that bad that day too.

I thought the glacier would be right in front of us as we topped the next ridge, but it still didn't look any closer! Unfortunately, it was getting late, and we had to turn back - I was told it would still take another 20 minutes to get to the ice, so 40 minutes round trip. I know we didn't have to worry about it getting dark, but it had been a long day (we had been up since about 5:30)!

We made it south to Meier's lake where we enjoyed some burgers at a roadhouse - a good way to cap a long day on the road. It was a welcome sight to see warm beds waiting in our cabins - after 2 days of camping. Hot showers, warm beds, TV, and a place to charge my camera batteries! Plus, just outside my window was a gorgeous view of 16237 ft Mt Sanford, 14163 ft Mt Wrangell, and 12010 ft Mt Drum.

July 2

I had a pretty good night's sleep, being in a real bed again. But we hit the road fairly early - we had another fairly long day planned. We had breakfast at the Sourdough roadhouse just down the street - famous for its sourdough pancakes. After gorging ourselves for a bit, we headed down to the visitor center to the Wrangell St Elias national park. The park adjoins another park in Canada, and together, they form the largest national park in America. Bigger than 6 Yellowstone's, the St Elias national park includes some of the most amazing glaciated mountains in the world. The welcome video and pictures at the visitor center would give us just a glimpse.

Although we had been seeing it over the last couple days, it remained the "you-know-what"... we all knew what it was, snaking over 800 miles from Prudhoe Bay all the way to Valdez, in southern Alaska, crossing 3 major mountain ranges, crossing through some native tribal land, and built in just 2 years. The Alaska oil pipeline, a stainless steel pipe 48 inches in diameter, pumps almost 700,000

barrels a day through some of the most remote terrain in the world to bring energy to people thousands of miles away. It was interesting seeing such a massive piece of engineering up close - I had heard about it for many years, but never expected to actually be able to touch it!

We hit the road again, heading east now toward McCarthy. The town was still about 90 miles away, again mostly on dirt roads. Our full-size van was holding up pretty good, considering so many miles of rough roads! We decided to make a lunch break at Liberty Falls - an elegant cascade about 50 feet high. It looked like a lovely spot for a swim, but the water was about 2 degrees above freezing! Not quite like Hawaii, but probably about as picturesque, with brilliant rainbows arching across the spray at the base of the falls. And a lovely spot for a picnic - we broke out the smoked salmon, cream cheese, and bagels for a nice snack.

Crossing the 400 ft deep Kuskalana river gorge and passing the towering railroad trestle where it crosses the Gilahina River, the road followed an old railroad bed - the tracks have been gone for many years, but they used to carry trains full of treasure from the mining town of Kennecott. We decided to patronize another small shop - Robin's ice cream shop - a little 8 x 10 foot cabin out in the middle of nowhere. The state that consumes the most ice cream per capita is Alaska - nope it's not Florida or Texas. Traditional Eskimo ice cream (akutaq) is actually made from seal or whale blubber and some kind of berries - no sugar was added. Being a Ben & Jerry's fan, I'm not sure how well I would do with akutaq though.

We reached the town of McCarthy in the late afternoon. We just had one more bridge to cross to get into town. However, due to some (interesting) small-town politics, they don't let commercial vehicles pass over the bridge. I thought it was due to weight restrictions, but the bridge looked sturdy enough. Apparently, they made up their own rules about letting people across, and every vehicle is checked. We got out and walked across, and Sheri drove across later. Actually, it was a nice walk - the raging river below us flowing off the massive Kennicott and Root glaciers flowing from the dazzling snow-covered peaks above us. In fact, the water was so rough that a group that was white water rafting had managed to wrap their raft around one of the supports of the bridge, and the raft was still there, fluttering in the current. The whole bridge was vibrating from the current. I just hope all the rafters got out safely - I never heard what happened.



I thought the creeks were running fast, but apparently every year, one of the creeks has a massive flood. An ice dam forms up on the Kennicott glacier when a hidden lake high up on the glacier starts thawing. The ice dam usually breaks around the middle of July, releasing a torrent of water 15-20 feet high down the creek. Fortunately, the bridge was about 25 feet high, easily accommodating this flood normally. I just hope the rafters aren't on the river that day!

We got our tents set up and got a nice pasta dinner started. Food always tastes so good when you're camping - especially with the views we had! Perched on an island of the McCarthy creek, we saw up to 16390 ft Mt Blackburn in the distance - the snowy peak like a grand snow cone far away. After dinner, we enjoyed a nice walk around our island, followed by some yummy smores around the campfire.



July 3

We awoke to a beautiful morning - we were looking forward to a nice hike today. We had breakfast at our campsite and put together some bag lunches for on the trail. Our plan was to do about a 10 mi hike up to an overlook near the Erie Mine along the Root Glacier. Today was one of the biggest anticipated days of the trip and I was glad when it turned out to be a great day.

We took a shuttle bus to Kennecott (note the town has an "e", but the glacier and river is Kennicott with an "i"). Kennecott is an old copper mining ghost town that was active in the early 1900's. When 2 prospectors in the summer of 1900 discovered magnificent green cliffs of exposed copper along the Kennicott Glacier, they realized they had stumbled upon a bonanza of good fortune. Bonanza Mine is one of the largest copper mines in the world, having yielded many millions of dollars. Work was hard in temperatures reaching -40 degrees in remote and difficult terrain. Fortunately for us, most of the buildings have decayed very little and we can still see and appreciate much of the mining town.



Hiking along the edge of the Root Glacier, we passed the town and took a side trail down onto the ice. For most of us, it was the first time actually walking on the ice of a glacier. Near the toe of the glacier, there is enough sand and stones so you can walk in regular shoes without slipping, but just a short ways ahead, the ice was clean and white. We'd need crampons to walk safely there - we planned on doing a guided glacier hike in a few days. We did get to fill our water bottles with glacial melt water flowing from a waterfall on the ice - a very cold and refreshing drink on a warm day.



We continued along the trail - making noises to ward off any bears - some hikers just ahead of us saw a black bear. I was kind of hoping to see a bear, but also I was happy not seeing one this time - the trail was rugged and if one decided to attack, we definitely did not have the advantage. We kept saying "NO BEAR" and clapping our hands to scare away any bears - another couple hikers saw one, but we never did.

We neared the end of the maintained trail, hiking on a narrow ridge with steep drop-offs on both sides - some of us started getting a bit nervous - especially if a bear did decide to show up! Deep turquoise pools filled cracks in the glacier on one side, and the ruined buildings of the Erie mine stood far up on the hill on the other side. If you listened carefully, you could hear the cracking of the ice as it flowed slowly but inexorably down the mountain. It'd be really fun to try to get up to the Erie mine, but it would be quite a hike up the loose talus for a couple thousand feet. The cables of the aerial tramway still lay there on the ground - it was interesting to imagine miners ascending the steep hills every day and hauling out copper ore. Actually, a bunch of nice pieces were laying there - we each collected a few samples with chunks of malachite and azurite with brilliant green and blue crystals.

We took our time on the hike back, and on the way, I noticed one of the creeks tumbling down the hillside toward the glacier. Looking a little closer, there was a large opening in the ice - an ice cave formed by the creek. This piqued my curiosity and I decided to have a look - from the outside, it just looked like a dark opening in the white ice - nothing too interesting, but going into the cave just a little bit revealed the most amazing magical experience. The ice was a deep electric blue all around - brighter near the entrance, and deeper brilliant azure blue the farther in you went. The cave was so deep, the brilliant blue blended with the blackness of the void farther down. The smooth scalloped ice was so clean and pure - the pressure of hundreds of feet of ice squeezed out any air bubbles. You could see at least several feet into the ice. The frigid creek ran

along the floor of the cave, cascading over boulders in a series of waterfalls. One of the drier rocks formed a nice tripod for my camera to get some shots. I wonder how long it took such a cave to form, and if it ever collapsed and re-formed by the action of the creek and the movement of the glacier. I wonder how far it went, and if it connected with a network of other caves, forming an extensive plumbing network deep within the ice. The experience of seeing such a magnificent place almost haunted me in a way - it stuck with me for weeks after I got back from the trip.



The trail back out of the cave was short, but quite steep and I had to catch my breath a couple times. Back on the main trail, we arrived back in Kennecott, exploring the old buildings, heavy mining equipment, and enjoying some cold drinks at the Glacier Lodge. I picked up some souvenirs and a t-shirt, and soon afterward, our shuttle arrived to take us back to McCarthy. We enjoyed a nice meal at a restaurant there - indulging in king salmon, steak, and wine.

It was nice to camp in the same spot again - not having to worry about moving our stuff. We just relaxed by the fire - still trying to get used to the fact the sun would still be up at 10 PM and the stars wouldn't be coming out for yet a couple more months.

July 4

I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate the holiday than by going on a flight seeing tour of the Wrangell-St Elias range. There was a tour leaving at 10:00 for a 90 minute tour over the Bagley ice field. I went on my own, filling the last seat of a tour, while the others slept in after the long hike yesterday. The flight wasn't cheap, and in fact I spent more for the flight seeing (this flight plus the Denali flight seeing) than I did to fly from SFO all the way to Alaska!



It was a clear bluebird morning and the snow covered mountains glimmered in the morning sun against a deep blue sky. We took off in a 4-seater Cessna - the pilot, me, and a father and son. Leaving the small gravel airstrip, we headed south, across the wide, braided and silty Chitina River, and down the Tana River canyon. We stayed low - often pilots can spot bears and moose along the river banks. We flew over lush taiga forests dotted with kettle ponds formed by glaciers long ago, which soon gave way to alpine tundra and up to the Tana glacier. The pattern of medial moraines formed graceful arcs in the ice as it snaked down the canyon - from a distance, it was almost like the rings of Saturn. Soon, the moraines went away, and the glacier was just an expanse of clean white ice broken by scattered crevasses. Large seracs and ice chunks broke off into one of the rivers nearby, revealing bright blue ice. I never realized how blue the ice is when it's compacted - just like in the ice cave yesterday.

The glacier led up to the edge of the Bagley ice field - one of the largest non-polar ice fields in the world. Stretching 125 miles and up to 4000 feet deep, it looked like you were in the middle of Antarctica. Although we had only been in the air for 15 minutes, I felt like we were in the loneliest stretch of our planet - or maybe we were on a different planet. It was beautiful in its magnificent desolation, its austerity, its inhospitable nature - a wilderness not meant for man to enter. Jagged peaks many thousands of feet high surrounded the ice field - some reaching almost 20000 feet high. Mt St Elias at 18008 feet, Mt Vancouver at 15700 feet, and even the massif of Mt Logan in Canada almost a hundred miles away was clearly visible. The air was so clean - the visibility was in hundreds of miles, and the scale was hard to fathom. Giant glaciers spilled off the peaks in every direction - only small areas of rock were visible between the slabs of ice. Numerous turquoise melt water lakes dotted the ice - that's got to be some of the clearest and purest water in the world too.



In the distance, we could make out the marine layer pouring off the ocean - we could make out the water in the distance in the breaks of the clouds. We followed the ice field for a little ways until turning left down one of the canyons in the range to our north. There are so many canyons filled with glaciers, but I think we went over the Baldwin glacier - we saw the whole process in reverse now, following the glacier downhill toward its terminal moraine in a lush green river valley. The contrast was amazing - as if we were on the moon and now we're over the Amazon rainforest! The green valley was filled with a beautiful taiga forest, again dotted with kettle ponds and beaver dams. Soon, to our right, we saw these magnificent 1000 ft high limestone cliffs filled with waterfalls formed by the melting ice far above. The water cut deep canyons and caves in the soft limestone - it would be a really cool place to explore - but just a bit tough to get to... the only way to really see them is by plane!

Back on the ground in McCarthy, rapidly running out of room on my memory cards (I had almost filled all 4 of them now - I would have to start figuring out what to clean off), I was just trying to digest all we had seen. I had been on sensory overload yesterday and especially during the flight I needed some time just to sit. However, my senses wouldn't get a rest just yet. Just as we got back into McCarthy, the town's Fourth of July parade was just starting! I met up with the others in our group - they had slept in, but decided to come out to the parade. And it was the 100th anniversary of the founding of the town! The small town definitely had a lot of spirit, from railroad engines made from chair backs and cardboard boxes to home-made fire engines to kids in wagons waving flags. It was definitely one of the most fun parades - where everyone in the town got to participate!

We celebrated with some tall ice cream cones (you have to do that on the 4th of July!), enjoying the scenery as we headed back toward our camp. We had to walk across the bridge out of McCarthy (again, we couldn't ride in the van without paying some hefty fines - due to those small-town politics!).

We were soon on our way, bumping along the 60 mile dirt road back out of the mountains. Our progress was soon thwarted by some road construction - a drilling machine was parked squarely across the road in front of us blasting the solid rock on one side of the road in order to widen it. We were delayed for about 20 minutes, but treated to front-row box seats of a great show of heavy machinery - big drills, dump trucks, and explosives - every kid's dream!

Following the river, we re-visited the 400 foot deep chasm of the Kuskalana River and the tall railroad trestle over the Gilahana. A ways further, the river merged with the mighty Chitina River, where dozens of fish wheels were turning. A bunch of subsistence fishermen were running the wheels - turning not with the current, but against it, in order to capture salmon swimming upstream to spawn. The fish get caught in the baskets as they rotate, and fall down a chute into a box. Every once in a while, some guys come out to check the baskets, and during the 15 minutes or so we were there, two 35 lb king salmon were caught! They were some beautiful salmon - Gail and I went up for a closer look. One fish was being filleted into gorgeous deep pink steaks, and the other had just been caught. Gail went to pick it up, when it decided to let her know it wasn't quite dead - with a few flaps of its tail, it almost made her faint! We got some great pictures of her holding a prize catch (though not her prized catch - we'd have to pay a good \$30 in a restaurant to get this quality fish). Though these fishermen were fishing to live on, their figures seemed to indicate otherwise - they seemed to be living like kings!



We made a quick stop in the town of Chitina - visiting the "It'll Do Cafe" and a couple shops - seeing some artwork and photography by some local artists, while Sheri went off to pick up some supplies. It was a nice break - we needed to walk around again after being in the car for a few hours. We were soon on our way, back on the paved road - it was strangely quiet driving on the pavement again! Shortly afterward, however, this smooth pavement seemed to not be as smooth -

as if it wasn't graded right - almost as if the road was under construction and they had roughened the surface to repave it. But the road looked fine. We quickly discovered that the van had developed a shimmy. Slowing down lessened the shimmy, but soon, the shimmy started getting worse. Fortunately, we were back in town and could pull over at a gas station. We decided to have a look at the tires to make sure everything was OK - maybe they had lost some air after driving over several hundred miles of dirt roads. It turned out not everything was OK - quite far from it, actually. The two back tires were almost completely shredded - the rubber was mostly gone, and even part of the steel belt was ripped! I'm not even sure how they held together! We were lucky to catch the problem when we did, and after putting our minds and muscles together for about a half hour, we had the back tires changed (we kept 2 spares in the van for these trips - good idea!).

We drove the last few miles up to Gakona where we had a campsite ready up on a high bluff overlooking the Chitina River. The view was amazing - the wide river valley, the open country in the distance, and a range of high peaks on the horizon. A cloud deck at around 10000 ft unfortunately hid the summits, but on a clear day, you could see Mt Wrangell, Mt Drum, and Mt Sanford. The snowy bases were visible, and occasionally, portions of the higher summits would peek through. It was enchanting just watching the flow of the clouds always changing - kind of like watching the restless flames of a campfire can be so relaxing.

The mosquitoes were flying pretty thick along the banks of the river, and we had our full bug armor on - our mosquito nets were on and the candles were burning. Sheri even had a propane burner at the campsite to repel the swarms of biting insects. We all pitched in to help with dinner - we were hungry - and put together some yummy tacos. Some of us almost forgot we were wearing the nets, and after the first bite of dinner or sip of beer we rapidly remembered we were wearing the nets! Randy shared some of his delicious chocolate bars as we enjoyed the changing scenery outside. It was a long but good day - the mosquitoes were out in force now, and Gail ended up brushing her teeth inside her mosquito net. I was happy to be in my tent, out of the bugs - I read a couple more chapters of the Joe Redington story, and shut my eyes.

July 5

The morning dawned cool and clear, and we soon got breakfast ready. We had another long day planned - we had reservations for a glacier trek in the morning, then the long drive down to the Kenai Peninsula. We were pretty good at breaking the tents down by now, and we were soon on the road. Sheri was even impressed at how efficient we had become! This was the last night of camping - the rest of the trip we'd be in cabins. It was nice knowing we'd have real beds and warm showers and power for charging batteries for the rest of the trip! But it was really nice to be camping out in the wilderness too.

We headed back south and turned west on the Glenn highway, passing on the northern side of the Talkeetna range. Capped by the majestic 13176 ft Mt Marcus Baker, the range is home to many glaciers. Matanuska glacier is one of the largest, reaching 27 miles long, and is one of the most popular, due to the relative ease to reach it by car. We signed up with MICA tours on a 3-hour trek on the ice.

This is a trip I had been looking forward to since we landed in Alaska - to be able to see a glacier up close and see the different features of the ice. The morning started out pretty foggy and misty, giving the glacier a mystical feel - wisps of clouds seemed to emanate from the cracks in the ice. They called for a chance of rain - I was keeping my fingers crossed. But then again, the weather forecast seemed to always be "partly to mostly cloudy with a chance of rain" - that seemed to cover all the bases!



The fog soon cleared, and we could glimpse some high icy peaks in the distance as patches of blue sky emerged. Our great guide Jess took us out to the ice and started sharing stories about how the glacier used to go almost all the way up to the road, but now it had receded quite a bit and we had about a 10 minute walk to get out to the white ice. Even before I thought we were near the glacier, Jess pointed out that just a couple inches below the surface there was ice. I took one of my ski poles and poked a little hole and it looked like black tar - actually that was ice. We were actually already on the glacier! In fact, we had to watch out for patches of "black ice" - where it looked OK to walk.

We soon reached the edge of the white ice and strapped on our crampons. Last time near Kennecott we couldn't go out very far on the ice since we didn't have crampons - but now our tour included crampons, helmets, and ski poles for trekking on the ice. I've done snow climbs with crampons and ice axe, but never on solid ice - it was reassuring to see how the points stuck in the ice so we didn't slip.

The ice was littered with erratic boulders that had been carried down the mountain by the flow of ice - we see these all the time in Yosemite, but it's cool to see it happening right now - not imagining what it was like thousands of years ago. In fact, much of Alaska is wilderness that many parts of America were like long ago - when large glaciers flowed down mountains, grizzly bears roamed about and the land was covered with native forest. Now, much of the forests have been logged, and even when you go to a place like Yosemite, you have to imagine what it was like with the glaciers and wildlife that used to roam free. In Alaska, you didn't have to imagine it - you can still experience it today.

We continued our glacier trek uphill, crossing over higher and higher ridges of ice. Melt water rivers cut winding channels in the ice, leading to deep blue melt water lakes. Sometimes, the streams disappeared straight through the ice in moulins - deep holes in the ice. Glimpses of blue ice could be seen within. I wonder what it would be like to be able to explore one of those moulins - would it connect with a deep blue ice cave like the one in the Root glacier near Kennecott and run for miles through the ice?

We reached as far as the first major icefall - a broken series of seracs probably 50 feet high. Streaks of deep blue showed in the cracks, it had a menacing feel - like it could all fall down on top of us. An ice climbing tour was taking people climbing some of the seracs - teaching ice climbing with crampons and ice picks, evaluation of how solid the ice was and if it was safe to climb, proper use of ice screws for protection, and belaying techniques. I looked at the ice climbing tour - I'd have to save it for the next trip - maybe then we could rappel into a moulin safely, explore a bit and climb out!



There was so much to see - it was like being on sensory overload. Waterfalls coming out of another icefall to our side gave us another chance to fill our water bottles. Further down on the glacier a river had cut a really deep slot canyon - probably 20 feet deep, snaking through the solid ice. One of the melt water lakes had re-frozen (quite solid) and I have a picture where it looks like I'm "walking on water" - there was just a thin layer of water on the ice, casting a perfect reflection.

We started heading back toward the toe of the glacier - and we noticed it looked like one of the erratic boulders had rolled over. Interestingly, the rocks generally roll backward. The shadow cast by the rock keeps the ice in front of the rock a little more solid, and when the ice behind the rock melts a bit, the rock rolls backward. This continues, and the rock can roll many times. Glacier ice near the base of the glacier generally melts about 4-5 inches a day during the summer. This almost balances how much new ice forms each winter, but recently, more ice has been melting than forming, causing the glacier to recede.

There's only so much you can learn from a geology textbook - I think I had actually learned most of this stuff in high school, but I probably never really paid that much attention to it - just enough to pass the test, and then the day after the test, my thoughts turned to other matters... I feel like I learned more in one day during this trek than weeks of geology classes in high school!

We waved good-bye to Jess and got on our way. We had a nice picnic lunch at an overlook above the glacier - I wandered around a bit, taking pictures, and when I got back, the food was ready - thanks Sheri!

The weather forecast was right - the rain was on its way. Fortunately, it held off until after lunch when we were on the road! We continued down the Glenn highway, reaching the small town of Palmer. Palmer was famous for producing the largest vegetables in Alaska - normally you don't think of Alaska having much in the way of agriculture - like California, but actually, they've set many records for large crops! Where else can you get a 35 lb cauliflower, a 168 lb watermelon, and a 19 lb carrot! Many of these are world records - check the Guinness book!

We headed south toward Anchorage, running a couple quick errands, before heading down toward the Kenai Peninsula. The weather started to clear, revealing majestic snow-capped peaks all around us. As we paralleled the railroad tracks on the Seward highway, I felt like we were back in Denali on a wildlife tour! Dall sheep were grazing on the hillsides, bald eagles were flying about, a moose was grazing by a lake near the road, and countless other birds were flying overhead. Ribbons of waterfalls flowed down from the icy peaks above. The road took us to the end of the Turnigan arm, past the Spencer glacier, and onto the Kenai Peninsula. The landscape was composed of bright pastel colors - the light green grass, and pastel blue sky dotted with puffy clouds - I felt like we were in a painting.



We reached the small town of Hope - originally a gold mining center - prospectors came from all around hoping for a quick fortune. Dinner was at the Bear Creek cafe - with gourmet salmon, wine and dessert in a beautiful setting. I was wondering if I was really gaining or losing weight on this trip - we've been eating pretty good, but also been doing a bit of hiking, so it was hard to tell. We settled at the Discovery Cabins for the night - my cabin was a historical trapper's cabin probably 100 years old! I was tired and originally just looking for a warm bed, but this place was really cool. I lit a fire in the antique wood stove to warm up the place - it was cool imagining that hunters were using this same cabin so long ago. I finished most of the Joe Redington story and flipped through some of the books in the library in the cabin before hitting the sack.

July 6

I had a good night sleep in the rustic trapper's cabin and soon headed over to the main cabin where breakfast of hotcakes and fruit and coffee was being prepared. That was definitely a treat after camping for 3 days. As we were having breakfast, however, some news came in about a flood in McCarthy - apparently the ice dam had burst a couple weeks early this year, sending a torrent of water down the river. I remember they were talking about this a couple days ago, and I didn't think much of it - I just thought it was a normal thing that happened every year but wasn't ever really that bad. Apparently the flood was pretty bad this time - the river had crested at around 31 feet, much higher than the bridge, and a 40 foot span was washed away. There were reports of geysers spouting of the ice of the glacier - maybe the moulins which normally funneled water downward were now spouting water upward as the pressure from the flood built up. We were lucky to have left when we did - we might have been stranded for a few days. A bunch of construction equipment was apparently washed away, but Sheri thought the place where we camped a couple days ago was high enough to be OK... she hoped, since another group was supposed to come in the next couple weeks!

I was looking forward to going on a hike today and seeing some of the scenery - especially after a lot of driving yesterday. Our original plan was to hike up the Bear Creek trail, but reports were coming in that it was still a bit snow-covered and lots of trees were down - also the mountains were enshrouded in thick clouds. We changed our mind to hike the Gull Rock trail, paralleling the coast, ending at a large rock that's a breeding ground for lots of seagulls.

The hike took us through some nice temperate rainforest - the northernmost rainforest in the world, consisting of lush green spruce trees, paper birch, dwarf dogwood, devils club, and lots of interesting mosses. A couple times we paused to enjoy some of the scenery - we hung out on some rocks, watching the tide come in. Amazingly, the tide range is about 28 feet, and you can actually see sandbars disappearing as the tide came in. We sat for probably a half hour, watching whirlpools form as the current rushed past islands and an entire sandbar was engulfed. Several bald eagles swooped by, gracing us with their majestic presence.

Most of us stopped at a rock about halfway to Gull Rock, making a 6 mi round trip hike, but Randy the adventurous one, decided to try to make it all the way, completing a 10 mile hike! While we were sitting and watching the tide, Randy went on, reaching the rock, turning back and meeting us again just about as we were leaving. On the way back, I went down to check out some of the rugged shorelines - exploring the rocky shore, some sea caves, and some tide pool critters.



On our way back from the hike, we almost ran over a black bear on the road - even with my slow camera (it takes 7 seconds to turn on, warm up, focus, and shoot a picture), I managed to just barely get a picture before it ran away - whew! We had the rest of the afternoon to hang out and relax a bit - we took a walk

down Main St - visiting a mining museum and craft shop, and a small espresso bar (converted from a trailer, not exactly a Starbucks, but had a lot more charm) before we came to the end of the street at the beach. Fishermen were coming out in droves, trying to catch some of the early season salmon and Dolly Varden as they were starting their journeys upstream to spawn. In fact, one of the fishermen right in front of us caught one. The clouds obscuring the mountains were starting to part, revealing higher snow-capped peaks further away. Again, the pastel blue sky and green grasses and trees made for a scene like out of a painting.



We enjoyed a nice BBQ dinner on the official last evening of the tour - it was hard to believe that tomorrow was the last day! Looking back, we definitely saw a lot and I struggled to get everything down in my journal before I forgot it - eventually I would write up a trip report (which you're reading now...) - you can only capture so many things in pictures - much of the experience can't be captured on film. Sheri's husband Michiel joined us for a nice BBQ on the deck of the main cabin as we reminisced about our trip.

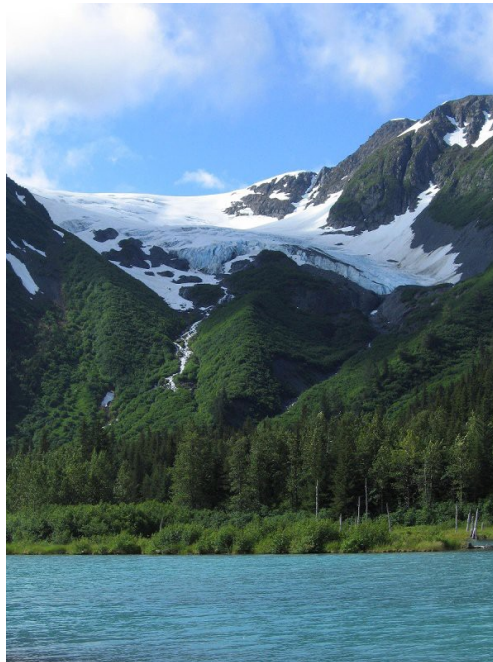
A few of us watched a documentary on Joe Redington - it was a nice complement to the book - seeing many of the scenes set to pictures. He was an amazing man and dealt with challenges and hardships many of us could hardly imagine now. My eyes were getting heavy near the end of the video and I settled back at the trapper's cabin for another night.

July 7

Today was our last day of the tour - we enjoyed another breakfast at the main cabin, but soon had to hit the road again. We headed back east along the southern edge of the Turnigan arm until we reached Portage. Several glaciers flowed down a series of canyons, flowing into a large lake full of icebergs, which later spilled out into a beautiful turquoise blue river.

The williwaw winds were blowing today, engulfing the Portage area in dense fog - the winds are formed when cold air from above the ice blows downhill. These katabatic winds can be pretty fierce and the weather can be quite unpredictable. The visitor center was nice and warm and we watched a nice video on the glaciers of Alaska and saw some interesting exhibits on the wildlife. It turns out that much of the interesting wildlife is under the water - Alaska is a premier cold-water diving destination, featuring beautiful invertebrates feeding on the nutrient rich water.

The fog parted enough for us to catch glimpses of the great glaciers and mountains above, and we could see icebergs floating by - it'd be fun to take a kayak out sometime and paddle around a bit. On our way out, the weather cleared nicely and we had a great view of the hanging Explorer glacier up in a canyon above the river against a pastel blue sky. All of this was reflected in the brilliant aqua blue-green water of the river. It looked like a piece of heaven.



Back on the main road, we headed west now, on the northern edge of the Turnigan arm, where we stopped at the town of Girdwood. Famous for the nice ski resort of Alyeska, this is one of the only towns in Alaska with more people in the winter than the summer. We walked through the world class resort and started on a hiking trail behind the lodge. We hiked to the Winner creek gorge, a couple miles past some lush temperate rainforest in a deep granite canyon. We sat there mesmerized, watching the clear water swirl through a 30 ft deep slot canyon. Hiking through the forest, we would have had no idea that there would be such a canyon - it definitely took us by surprise. It was fun how Sheri would often hide the details of a hike like this, so we'd be pleasantly surprised when we got there!

We enjoyed cold drinks and ice cream at the lodge before loading up the van to our final stop - Potter Marsh. Potter Marsh is a haven for wildlife - some of the best birding opportunities in Alaska are there. Arctic terns use this area as a stop on their migration route which takes them all the way to Antarctica - they have the longest migration pattern of any bird. Geese and swallows frequent the area, and we also saw a muskrat foraging for food. Several of the streams were full of spawning sockeye salmon, and like what we saw near Gulkana, the fish were packed in the river like sardines getting ready to drop their eggs.

This was our last hike of the tour, and soon we were back in Anchorage checking in at the Susitna place. Thanks Sheri for a great trip and I look forward to traveling again to Alaska!

Total hiking we did –

Date	Trail	Distance
June 29	Earthquake Park	½ mi
	Horseshoe Lake	1 ½ mi
June 30	Polychrome point	1 mi
July 1	Maclaren summit	6 mi
	Gulkana glacier	4 mi
July 2	Liberty Falls	½ mi
	Footbridge	½ mi
	Around island	1 mi
July 3	Erie Mine	11 mi
July 4	McCarthy town	½ mi
July 5	Matanuska glacier	2 mi
July 6	Gull Rock	6 mi
	Beach at Hope	½ mi
July 7	Winner creek gorge	5 mi
	Potter Marsh	1 mi
Total	All trails	41 mi

Wow - we hiked 41 miles during the trip! This deserved a celebration dinner - we decided to walk around town a bit where we picked a gourmet restaurant that was also a microbrew. So we gorged ourselves on prime rib steak, Alaskan king crab legs, and a local brew - the tab came out to over \$40 a person, but it was worth every penny!

This was the last day for everyone else on the trip - they were flying back tomorrow, but I was staying an extra day to do the Kenai Fjords tour. Everyone else did this tour as a pre-trip extension, but I did it as a post-trip package. I had to be up and on the train at 6:00 for this tour, so I had to be in bed early.

July 8

The alarm buzzed at 5:00 - it sucks to have to get up so early when on vacation, but this was an opportunity not to be missed - many people say the Kenai Fjords is one of the best parts of Alaska. I was keeping my fingers crossed for good weather - the seas are known to be rough at times, and it's not uncommon to have 15-20 foot swells even on good days, and during storms they can be 40 feet.

I awoke to a mostly cloudy morning - low clouds were obscuring the peaks. At least it wasn't raining and it didn't seem too windy. It was nice staying close enough to the train station to be able to walk, and not have to worry about calling cabs at 5:30 in the morning! I got to the train station and ended up chatting with some fellow travelers - swapping stories and sharing memories. One person was going to be doing this tour, and afterward getting on a plane at 1 AM the next morning to fly back to Seattle, then hike part of Mt Rainier later that morning! I was looking forward to just sleeping in - my flight wasn't until 2:45 pm.

The train was pretty comfortable - I kind of dozed intermittently as we made our way out of Anchorage heading south toward Seward. We had driven most of this route yesterday, but the train tracks depart from the road for a section. It was quite a scenic ride - the mountains were still mostly obscured, but we saw some wildlife - dall sheep just outside the train, bald eagles, and some waterfalls. The driver even slowed a couple times to let us have a better look.

We reached the end of the Turnigan arm, then cut southward through the mountains, passing a beautiful glacier and a really long light blue lake - I kept seeing lakes through the trees, but I think they were actually all the same lake! Float planes were docked in front of some cabins by the lake, and some kayakers were out paddling early. There was something magical about being on a train in the wilderness - no roads go through these mountains - it was almost like something from one of those Sleep Train commercials.

By about 11, we reached the town of Seward on the coast, tucked deep in one of the fjords, surrounded by mountains. The clouds started parting and peeks of sun came through, revealing more of the glaciated peaks all around us. Glaciers flowing from the Harding ice field spilled down around us, some reaching the ocean and breaking up into icebergs as the tide went up and down, and some spilled off into large lakes separated from the ocean by their terminal moraines. Marathon Mountain (their equivalent of Mission Peak in the Bay Area) went almost straight up from the ocean to 3000 ft - the fastest climb was under an hour roundtrip from the city!

We steamed south on the National Park tour offered by the Kenai Fjords Tours. Cruising south to the mouth of Resurrection Bay, we spotted some sea otters frolicking on their backs - they seemed to be enjoying us watching them and were quite photogenic! The clouds had cleared, revealing a beautiful blue sky

with layers of dazzling mountain peaks on the horizon. A couple spouts of humpback whales were spotted in the distance, and we cruised up slowly to have a better look. We ended up becoming a whale-watching tour for about an hour as probably a half dozen whales cruised slowly by, spouting, slapping their fins, and arching their backs. I've seen whales off the coast of California and I always wondered if maybe I might have seen the same whale twice in different parts of its annual migration.



Cruising next to the steep granite cliffs Cheval Island, we went around the Aialik cape and turned back northward into the next fjord over from Resurrection Bay. The cliffs were like giant scoops were cut out of the rock - actually they were cut out by glaciers throughout the years. Many of the glaciers have melted, but we'd soon be seeing glaciers meeting the ocean. Scores of puffins were floating in the water and perched up on the cliffs - their telltale orange beaks giving them away. Hundreds of common murre were intermingled with seagulls as well.

Rounding the next rock, we spotted a large herd of stellar sea lions. Reaching a couple thousand pounds, they were laying peacefully on the rocks enjoying the sun. We stopped for a bit while hundreds of lenses were being focused and megabytes of memory cards were being put to use. Though I've seen a lot of sea lions in California, the stellar sea lions were still quite impressive - and a lot bigger too!

The seas ended up being pretty much dead flat today - maybe 1-2 foot waves, but when we saw the giant sea caves and arches cut in the rugged rocks, we knew we were out on a really good day - the relentless pounding waves had cut these formations over the years. One of the cliffs had 3 giant arches side by side - the three windows. It was so calm that we even took part of the cruise ship into a large sea cave to see it up close and the birds flocking all around us!

We could now look up the Holgate arm - a side fjord cut by the Holgate glacier, which was still flowing into the ocean. A little farther was the Pederson glacier, another glacier that looked like it was reaching the ocean - even though it was just a bit short. It probably once reached the ocean, but as with most of the other glaciers, they have been retreating as the climate has been warming. I felt like we were pretty lucky to still see a bunch of glaciers splashing into the ocean - during lunch, they showed us a slideshow on the boat with before and after pictures - comparing pictures from the 1920's with pictures today, and many of the glaciers look like they've almost completely disappeared or at least retreated up the mountain. I wonder if in 30 years if this tour I was on now would still be able to see glaciers up close.

We reached the end of the fjord and we could see a mighty glacier at least a mile or two wide breaking off into the ocean. This was the Aialik glacier spilling off the Harding ice field - icebergs littered the ocean, and our captain slowed us down and carefully navigated the icebergs to bring us in closer for a better look. A sea otter was playing by one of the icebergs - having a good old time in the frigid water. Some sea kayakers even passed by - apparently, one of the boat tours carries a bunch of kayaks and drops people off near the glacier, lets them paddle for the afternoon, then picks them up. Sounds pretty cool - but I imagine you'd have to be careful - some of the ice chunks calve off the glacier with fury.



We stopped for about a half hour - just taking in the experience of seeing the mighty 300 ft high face of the glacier up close, hearing the ice crack almost constantly, and seeing huge chunks break off. A chunk of brilliant blue ice would break off, then a few seconds later you'd hear the BOOM, then later, we'd see the waves coming toward us - the icefalls caused mini-tsunamis, rocking our boat a little. There were even sea caves carved in the ice by the tides. Many of the chunks were small, and some were like continuous streams of ice coming down, almost like waterfalls, but some chunks were giant slabs of ice maybe 10-20 feet thick. It was hard to grasp the scale of the place - I thought we were right next to the glacier, but knowing that the sound came a few seconds after the ice chunks broke off - we realized we were probably still almost a half mile out.

We headed back mostly the same way, but taking a couple small side trips, one to a military fort perched high on one of the islands - the only way up was by pulling yourself up a cable up the steep rock face. We also checked out a bunch of bald eagles nesting in some pine trees on the steep rocks. I was watching an eagle as it caught a fish, and as it was swooping back up toward the nest, it got attacked! It was hard to believe a giant eagle being attacked, but it was knocked down into the water and stunned for a while, before it slowly made its way back on the rocks with its lunch stolen. Apparently a falcon had swooped down from above and smacked it! I didn't even see the falcon coming, but some others did - that was quite a bold move!

We got to see some other interesting wildlife on the way back - a couple more spouts of humpback whales, and even one from a fin whale which was probably almost as long as our boat! Shortly after, I saw a porpoise jumping like a dolphin. Also, a couple times, I saw what appeared as a blue cloud under the boat - when we got closer, I saw it looked like a bunch of bubbles - it was a "smack" of thousands of moon jellyfish.

Back on shore at around 6:00, it had been a great trip. Even though we were about a half hour late, the train waited for us - many of the passengers do this boat ride and then connect with the train. We got back on the train and headed back north toward Anchorage. It had been a long day, but a good day. It was nice to be back on the train, eating a nice dinner in the club car, after which I started to doze again. The clouds started rolling back in, again obscuring the mountains. I was half asleep in the morning when we went through the tunnels, but on the way back, I gazed in awe as we went through a series of about 6 tunnels, where we had some great views of a couple glaciers, tall waterfalls, and a deep canyon.

On the home stretch toward Anchorage, the cloud deck started to part, pulling back like a curtain - sunbeams coming down from heaven. It was like the light at the end of a deep tunnel - mountains that I hadn't seen before started popping out - even some of the higher peaks of the Aleutian chain were now visible. I might even be able to see Denali poking out in Anchorage when we got back - I heard rumors that on a good day you could see the Mountain.

We reached the station at about 11:00 - pretty late, but the sun was still shining high and bright. On my walk back, I passed through the Captain Cook monument park - talking about how Captain Cook on his journeys around the world discovered this part of Alaska. A compass pointed to some of the high peaks around me - last night everything was in clouds, but tonight I could make out almost all of them. I think I could glimpse Denali way in the distance by lining up the arrow on the compass. Back at the Susitna place (named after Susitna mountain looking like a sleeping lady in the distance), I heard the view was good from our deck. I ended up staying up until past midnight, actually seeing my first

sunset in Alaska (on my last night there), where the silhouette of Denali became clear in the waning red sunlight.



July 9

Alas, today was my last day in Alaska - it had been a great trip, but all good things must come to an end eventually. I woke up around 9:00 and the world cup final game between France and Italy was just starting. I watched it for about 15 minutes and the score was tied 1-1. I wanted to sit and watch, but I wanted to see a bit of the city and also attend a church since it was Sunday. That turned out to be the right decision - the game remained tied 1-1 for the rest of the game (Italy won in a shootout at the end) - I went downtown and made it to the 11:00 service at a church. A bunch of visiting tourists were in the small congregation, and it was neat to worship together, especially with so many memories of God's amazing creation still pretty fresh in my mind. It was a very hospitable place - the visitors were even given loaves of sourdough bread (which I enjoyed back at the office with smoked salmon when I got back!)

My bags were packed, and the taxi showed up around 1:00 for the 10 minute ride to the airport. It was sad to say good-bye - the people were wonderful, and the scenery was spectacular - I'd have to come back sometime. But next time, it would probably be on my own, and also probably more in a specific area, since I know more about the different parts of Alaska now. I really liked the Kennecott / McCarthy area, and also the Kenai Peninsula - I'd have to spend more time there.

The 737 was loaded and we were all boarded for our 2:45 departure to Seattle. As we climbed, 20,320 ft Denali and 17,000 ft Mt Foraker stuck high above the low-level cloud deck as we made our way south. Glaciers flowed in all directions, spilling into bright blue lakes full of icebergs or directly in the ocean - I think we went over Valdez and Prince William Sound. The peaks of the Chugatch range passed under us and we followed the west coast of Canada before landing in

Seattle. A weak weather system was passing, obscuring many of the mountains in clouds, but it cleared enough for us to see Rainier capped with a beautiful set of lenticular clouds - like a series of stacked flying saucers. The saucers didn't seem to blow away, but they kept re-forming in the same place, undulating with the shifting currents of the wind.



It was quite a short layover - only about 25 minutes, but I made it across the airport on the tramway (amazingly), and my luggage also made it (even more amazingly), and we landed on time in San Francisco after seeing the most brilliant red fiery sunset from 38000 feet just before we touched down. What a great way to cap off a wonderful trip. I'd be back soon!

The end.