

Catholic Travel

EXPLORING ALASKA: THE LAST FRONTIER



Aaron and Beth Leventhal enjoying Alaska's incredible scenic beauty

Photos by Beth Ervin Leventhal

By Aaron Leventhal

Alaska is unique, comprised of a land mass twice the size of Texas, 45,000 miles of coastland and a glacial area 100 times greater than that of the rest of North America. With almost 50 percent of its population in metropolitan Anchorage, the 49th state is, for the most part, a wilderness wonderland.

For more than a decade, my wife Beth urged me to explore Alaska with her, but I am averse to cold weather, and prefer warm, tropical destinations. Nevertheless, I consented to a 10-day tour of Alaska this past September and was rewarded with an exceptional experience.

Everywhere we traveled we were mesmerized by Alaska's natural beauty—majestic, snow-capped mountains; glacial lakes; dense, wooded forests; and lush, green valleys. Alaskans everywhere were welcoming, and proud of their land, its history and culture and rugged outdoor lifestyle.

We created our own itinerary, traveling by small ferry boats, trains

and express buses rather than large cruise ships, the standard vehicle for tourist travel (more than a million passengers annually). We prefer serendipitous encounters with locals and the flexibility to alter our schedule that the cruise lines cannot pro-



Railride through the Skagway Mountain Gorge.

vide.

The best time to explore Alaska is from May through September, when the climate usually is mild, dry and sunny. However, be prepared for sticker shock, since this is the high season for its hospitality industry. Costs for lodging and sightseeing tours are reduced from April to mid-May and in September after Labor Day weekend.

Listed below are some of our most memorable experiences. There is much more to explore in this fasci-

nating state, which has been branded America's "Last Frontier."

Juneau

The charming state capital (pop. 30,000) in southeast Alaska is located on the Inside Passage and surrounded by a ring of majestic mountains. Attractions include Mount Roberts Tramway, Macauley Salmon Hatchery and Mendenhall Glacier. Adventure Bound Alaska offers an unforgettable cruise through Tracy Arm Fjord past waterfalls,



The Sawyer Glacier Cruise through the Tracy Arm Fjord

glaciers and wildlife to the massive Sawyer Glacier. The Silverbow Inn is a charming, downtown boutique hotel with a friendly staff and delicious breakfasts. Nearby restaurants include the Hangar on the Wharf, Saffron Indian Comfort Food and Salt for creative Alaskan cuisine.

Skagway

We boarded a ferry in Juneau for a relaxing seven-hour trip to the historic, small town of Skagway, famed for the frenzied days of the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-98. In just two short years more than 20,000 prospectors with dreams of riches passed through the town to the nearby gold fields. They built the landmark, narrow-gauge White Pass & Yukon

TRAVEL, continued from P. 2

Route Railroad through treacherous mountain slopes in Arctic blizzards and temperatures as low as 50 degrees below zero. We enjoyed a railroad excursion through treacherous mountain passes in vintage cars, the self-guided Downtown Walking Tour and a visit to the Red Onion Saloon, with its hilarious brothel tour, bedpan collection and sexily costumed wait staff. The historic Skagway Inn on Broadway, the town's main street, includes a full breakfast at its popular Olivia's Bistro, which features wild game and Alaskan seafood.



Justin Harkins leads guided tour in Denali National Park.

with the coming of the railroad. After decades of booms and busts, the town today is a quintessential tourist favorite, said to have inspired the TV show "Northern Exposure." Main Street is lined with locally owned and managed galleries and shops in rustic log buildings, including the popular Blue Moose, known for native Alaskan crafts. On a clear day, Denali Mountain (formerly named Mt. McKinley) can be seen in the distance.

A high point was the four-hour "River, Rail and Trail" guided offered by Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures. We enjoyed delicious dining at the Wildflower Cafe, is acclaimed for its creative, Alaskan menu;



Talkeetna Roadhouse, with family-style seating and amazing breakfast specials; and locals' favorite Latitude 62 Restaurant & Lounge. The Talkeetna Inn, conveniently located steps from shopping and dining, is known for clean, comfortable and affordable accommodations.

Denali National Park

Established in 1917, Denali is the first national park created for wildlife and not for geological attributes. It does, however, boast Denali Mountain (formerly Mt. McKinley), the tallest mountain on earth measuring 20,310 feet from its base. Just one 92-mile road stretches through the park's six million acres (larger

than the state of Vermont). Our tour guide and driver Justin Harkins had an uncanny ability to spot wildlife on the tundra, sighting moose, Dall sheep, snowshoe hare, golden eagles and grizzly bears. The Visitor Center offers free sled dog demonstrations and ranger-guided walks. The Grande Denali Lodge has splendid mountain views and courtesy shuttle services. The Eastern European fare at Moose-AKA's is outstanding.

Columbus travel writer Aaron Leventhal has organized a 10-day, small group tour to Alaska in September 2020. Check it out at LeventhalTravel.com.



Talkeetna is filled with native Alaskan crafts in funky shops and galleries throughout the village.

Creole Kitchen

SERVING BREAKFAST, LUNCH & DINNER

Save \$5 with purchase of \$20 or more

Authentic Creole specialties, Poboys, Jambalaya, Muffaletta, Crawfish, Etouffee, Gumbo, Andouille and more.



1052b Mount Vernon Ave.
614-372-3333
www.creolekitchen.biz

CATHOLIC TIMES - OFFER EXPIRES APRIL 30, 2020



Warm up with our Mama's this winter.

GET A FREE POUND

of German Potato Salad, German Sweet Slaw, Red Cabbage or Sauerkraut und Pork with a purchase of 9 links (3 pounds) of Bahama Mama, Bratwurst, Mild Mama or Knockers.

240 E. Kossuth St.
Columbus, Ohio

614 444-6808

WWW.SCHMIDTHAUS.COM

Catholic Times - Expires March 31, 2020