

How I Spent My Summer Vacation by Bob Vaughn

My parents loved to travel, and by the time I graduated from high school I'd been in 46 states. That number didn't change for over forty years until this past July when my wife and I and some friends took a 15 day trip to Alaska. The four of us had gone to Europe half a dozen times, but had always made our own arrangements, renting cars and staying mostly at bed and breakfast places. (I've driven over 10,000 miles on the left side of the road, most of it in other countries.)

This time we chose to do an organized tour for two reasons: First, Alaska is a big place and requires a lot of driving to see even a small part of it, and second, the isolation of so many places has required the tour companies to build their own hotels, purchase their own railroad cars, and so on. In many ways you're at a real disadvantage to not be with a tour company. One day on the bus we traveled 273 miles on the only road between Tok and Dawson City. There are just two towns along that entire road with a total population of fewer than 100. Not a good place to run out of gas. Cell phones? No chance, except for in the very few major cities.

We flew to Anchorage and boarded a train the next morning. The observation car was owned by Holland America Lines and afforded a great view with a restaurant on the lower level. We rode the train (awestruck as we went through Wasilla just a couple weeks before it was to become infamous) up to Denali National Park. While in Denali we took the park service's eight hour bus tour and got some excellent wildlife pictures. The park also has their own dog sled teams, and we visited their base camp and demonstration area.

Some Alaska trivia: Cool weather vegetables and flowers (such as cabbage and begonias) grow to huge proportions in the 20 hour days of summer. On the other hand, going far enough north is like going up a mountain in terms of the size of the tree population. Around Fairbanks, for example, the common dogwood tree grows to only a few inches high due to the latitude. We saw only one small stretch of the Alyeska Pipeline. It is situated ten or so feet off the ground so the wildlife can go under it easily, but they often like to stand near it in the winter since the oil is transported at a temperature of approximately 100° F. Large moose antlers weigh in the neighborhood of 70-80 pounds. Some parts of Alaska are very arid, with less rainfall than Phoenix, while at the top of some glaciers snowfall can reach over 70 feet (not a typo) a year.

Some highlights of our trip included visiting the original cabins of both Robert Service and Jack London (ask the English Department). Also, a helicopter trip landing on a glacier for a 40 minute hike was almost surreal. On a boat trip for about 100 miles down the Yukon River, we came across a mother black bear with her two cubs on her back swimming across the river – probably at least a quarter mile wide there – while eagles soared overhead. We ended up with four nights on a cruise ship down the inside passage. Despite record July rainfall and all-time record low temperatures for the month, it was an excellent adventure.