

explore

Alaska

★ *The Last Frontier* ★



When I was younger, my grandpa gave me the invaluable gift of travel. In 1993, he took our small family on a two-week cruise around the Gulf of Alaska. It was the most exotic place I'd ever been. As far as I can remember, I didn't know much about our big and beautiful 49th state. I thought everyone in Alaska lived in log cabins and igloos, rode on dog sleds, constantly dodged wild animals, and that it snowed every second of the day. I stuffed my suitcase full of all the winter clothes and rolls of film I could find.

It turned out I knew nothing about Alaska, except that it was big. Our high summer temperatures stayed snug in the 80s, snow didn't incessantly fall from the sky, and dog sleds, igloos, and large numbers of mammals migrating toward groups of people were about as common a sight as a squirrel in a turtleneck. Alaska was an exhilarating lesson filled with new experiences and a renewed appreciation for nature. It was, and still is, one of the best vacations of my life.

Ever since, I'd dreamed of returning to our country's largest yet least populated state, and finally, over 20 years later, it happened. But this time, I ditched the boat in favor of a good old-fashioned road trip. And as it turns out, I never actually did fully understand how big was "big."





My boyfriend and I had been in Alaska just three days and already we'd covered 637 miles, roughly the distance from San Francisco to Portland. We'd driven through what I can only assume was Middle Earth, walked on a glacier, survived a slightly embarrassing kayaking rescue, and were the lucky benefactors at the **Lake Louise Lodge** bar when the "this round's on me" bell was rung repeatedly by generous local fishermen, happily back from months at sea. We'd barely even scratched the surface of our journey, and I was already equal parts exhilarated and exhausted.

In planning our two-week road trip, I'd assumed the drives were going to be long. Alaskan cities are spread out and there are only a few major highway systems in the whole state. What I hadn't factored into our driving time were the

countless number of stops we would make on the side of the road, armed with cameras and ready to record the ever-changing yet always impressive scenery surrounding us.

There was a particularly epic stretch of scenery along the renowned **Seward Highway**, a route taken by train or car and considered one of the most scenic drives in America. But after all was seen and driven, my favorite was a section between **Anchorage** and **Valdez**, where the road twisted and wound around dark snowcapped mountains that dwarfed the collection of tall spruces at their base. It was fiercely humbling, almost too big to take in, and certainly no camera could do it justice. There's something magical about being a small dot against something larger and infinitely more powerful than you. And in Alaska, that's the norm.

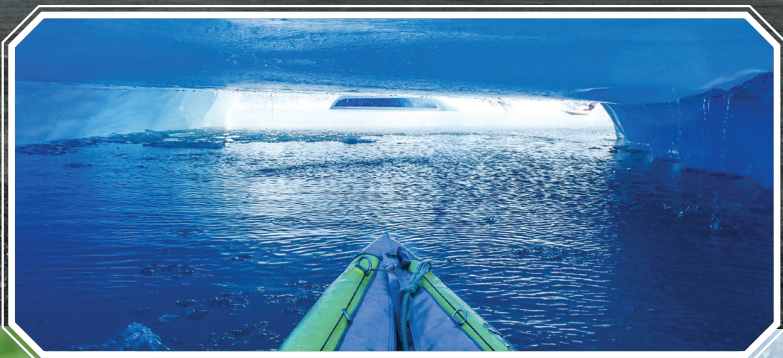
After leaving the icy blue glacier waters in Valdez and spending a night on the banks of **Lake Louise** with bellies full of homemade chili and glasses full of booze, we found ourselves in the quiet wilderness of **Alaska Interior**. We'd rented a simple Mongolian-style yurt in a forest located just outside of the small and vibrant town of **Talkeetna**. It had no running water, cell reception, or internet, but it did come with a small wood-burning stove for cooking and heating, a covered deck with a dart board, a private outhouse, and a casual mention from our hosts about "two young juvenile bears" that were "you know, roaming around the area lately." As I sipped my hard cider and threw a few darts in the civil twilight of 12 a.m., I thought to myself, *This is the (slightly terrifying) life.*

We spent our few days in the Interior exploring Talkeetna's historic **Main Street** strip, taking in gorgeous views of North America's tallest peak on **Mount Denali**, and driving through **Denali National Park and Preserve**, where a Jeep safari found us gleefully bouncing along on the pothole-riddled pathways that led into the wild.

Outside of the tree-lined trail, the tundra was expansive, desolate, and beautiful; it felt like it could swallow you whole. We stopped in **Healy** at the **49th State Brewing Company** specifically so I could snap a photo in front of the famous Bus 142 from the movie *Into the Wild*. (The real abandoned bus is still out in the wild. This one on the brewpub's front lawn was the mock bus used in the movie.) On the way back down to our yurt, we also made a point to stop at the bizarre, abandoned igloo off the highway. The large white structure looked like it was once used as a hotel, but with its boarded-up windows, graffiti, and scattering of furniture on the nearby grass, it's resigned to nothing more than a unique photo op.

By now we were getting used to finding strange and abandoned things by the road. Be it hotels, a burned bus, huge crosses, loads of trash, a disturbing number of bullet-riddled highway signs, or even whole cars driven into snowy ditches and then abandoned until the snow melts – Alaska sure knew how to forget about things.





The rest of our time was spent exploring the **Kenai Peninsula**, home to some of Alaska's most accessible wilderness spots and one particularly memorable village. In **Seward**, we hiked up to **Exit Glacier**, traded stories with year-round locals over whiskey, and spotted whales, otters, and bald eagles on a **Kenai Fjords National Park** tour. We walked to the tip of the Kenai Peninsula on **Homer Spit**, visited a museum of local heritage that included a section featuring singer Jewel's family, and watched countless bald eagles fly all around us on **Bishop's Beach**. And, in the small and secluded Old Believers village of **Nikolaevsk** where it feels like you've traveled back in time nearly a century, we met Nina. Bustling in the simple kitchen of her bold and unintentionally kitschy **Samovar Cafe**, dressed in a colorful traditional sarafan, Nina told us stories of migrating to Alaska from Russia while cooking us a proper Russian meal of dumplings (none for me!), borscht, sauerkraut, and special hot tea. I smiled as I sipped, happy to know that even in a place as big as Alaska, some things were not forgotten.

*During our trip, I was concerned that eating gluten-free in Alaska's remote areas and small towns would be difficult, but it was a breeze. For our long drives and self-cooked meals, we gathered supplies from the impressive gluten-free selections in Carrs and Safeway supermarkets. While almost everywhere – even a small restaurant in the one-road town of **Hope** – had something on the menu I could eat, we found specifically-marked gluten-free menu items at **Snow City Cafe** in Anchorage, **Mountain High Pizza Pie** in Talkeetna, **49th State Brewing Company** in Healy, and **Two Sisters Bakery** in Homer. Plus, Seward's **Nauti Otter Inn** offers free, make-your-own gluten-free waffle and pancake mix for guests to use. Three cheers for the gluten-free friendliness of the last frontier! *



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Katherine Alex Beaven is a writer/photographer and world traveler. Whether on assignment or on vacation, Alex can usually be found at the nearest food cart or restaurant sniffing out the local gluten-free goodies. Her photography site, katherinealex.com, features some of the wildlife, landscapes, and portraits she's taken along the way.