

Destination Review: Alaska by Land and by Sea

If you follow us on social media, you know what an amazing visit to Alaska Janet and I enjoyed last month. This was our second cruise to Alaska but the first that included a land tour and I want to share



our experience with the land destinations we visited. Most mass market cruise lines offer the same land tour destinations on itineraries that range from 3-5 nights, and the four-night tour we took was the perfect length for us. We visited three destinations during the land portion of our trip: Alyeska, Denali, and Talkeetna. Lodging, transfers from one destination to the next, and some excursions are included in the land portion of cruise/tours but not food or beverages. The question of whether to cruise first and then tour, or tour first and then cruise is a hotly debated subject amongst travel agents. There is no right answer, but having experienced it myself I have to say I would rather cruise first. The land experience is so amazing, and different, that I think I would have been disappointed with the cruise if we selected the opposite itinerary. Taking the cruise first allowed me to enjoy both.

Alyeska

The drive from the final cruise port in Seward to our first destination, the Alyeska Resort, was a little over 2 hours and took us north through the Chugach National Forest. You'll see some spectacular views, but don't expect close encounters of the wildlife kind as the route takes you on a busy main road. Alyeska Resort was built as a ski resort, but during the busy summer cruising season multiple cruise lines use it as a destination for their land tours. The resort is rated as 4 ½-stars on Trip Advisor, but I think that's overshooting the runway a bit. It was certainly the most luxurious of the places we stayed on the land portion of our trip and it offered some nice amenities, but I wouldn't compare it against a 4 ½-star property in the lower 48.



If you are eager to work off some calories after the cruise portion of your trip there are hiking trails that lead from the resort up the side of the mountain. If, like me, you prefer a more sedentary start to your land tour you can take a tram that runs up the side of the mountain. If you don't fancy hiking, there isn't much else to do at the upper tram station area except to admire the view. And what a view it is! There is a gift shop and museum located in a building called The Roundhouse. Probably because it is shaped like a roundhouse. The building is nestled into the side of the mountain with a cantilevered deck providing fabulous sight lines down the mountain to Glacier Creek.

Denali

We headed to the Denali Park Village in the morning and it was clear as soon as we arrived that it was not the luxury resort we left behind. Denali Park Village is set up like...well, a village. It is rustic, but well appointed. There is a central lodge building and several neighborhood areas each with a number of bunkhouse-like buildings providing additional lodging. The rooms were clean and comfortable though the walls weren't that well insulated against exterior noise. Each area in the village has an outside sitting



area with chairs situated around fire pits where you can sip a glass of wine as the fire chases away the chill air of the evening, which of course we took advantage of. The village has a centrally located restaurant, saloon, and café. For the convenience of guests not staying in the central lodge area there is an area on the outskirts of the village known as Miner's Plaza offering a sundries shop, bar, burger shack and...of all things...an ice cream parlor. The village also has a dinner theater with a song, dance, and storytelling show that

captures some of the history and excitement surrounding the gold rush, but we opted to skip it and hang out by the fire pit.

As with the Alyeska Resort, the lodge is used by multiple cruise lines. Brochures depict the lodges as being deep in the heart of the Alaskan Wilderness, but in truth they are situated along the road. To be sure, the wilderness is just out the back door, and there were wildlife encounters aplenty. In fact, one evening as Janet was hiking around and I was back in the room being lazy, she came upon a mama moose and two babies crossing the trail. I don't know who was more surprised, Janet or the mama moose! Unfortunately, she didn't have a camera. Neither did Janet. At least she has another lifelong vacation memory. Janet, not the moose.

One of several highlights of the trip was the next day's excursion into the Denali National Park on the Tundra Wilderness Tour. Tours through the Denali National Park are tightly controlled by the National Park Service in an effort to reduce the impact on the park's environment and wildlife. The tour buses are modified school buses, which is to say far less comfortable than a true coach bus but more comfortable than a standard school bus. They are equipped with an integrated spotting scope and video system. Much of the wildlife is close enough for guests to see and photograph from the bus's windows, but occasionally an interesting encounter is further away, like the fellow in this picture. When that happens, the driver can point the scope out of the open window or door, focus on the critter of interest and then zoom in real close. Whatever the scope is focused on is displayed on video screens mounted throughout the bus and is also captured digitally and transferred to a DVD that you can purchase after the tour. The tour has comfort breaks scheduled about every 90 minutes along the way since the buses are not equipped with bathrooms, and we highly recommend you take advantage of each stop. Most of the stops are at banks of port-a-pots. They were clean, but you'll want to bring along hand sanitizer.



There are three main options for making an excursion into Denali, the 4-hour Natural History Tour, the upgraded 8-hour Tundra Wilderness Tour, and the full day 11-hour Kantishna Experience Tour. Most of the cruise lines include the cost of the Natural History Tour in the price of the land tour and some even include the upgraded Tundra Wilderness Experience. Ours didn't, but when we did our homework on the destination the upgrade was highly recommended and trust me when I tell you it was worth the additional cost. All tours begin at the park's wilderness access center along a road that is only paved for the first 15 miles. After that the road becomes well-packed gravel for the remainder of its 92-mile length. Vehicle access to the road and the park are strictly limited to the park buses and a select few professional photographers.

The Natural History Tour proceeds on the road from the welcome center for 30 miles, at which point the buses turn around and return over the same road. Our guide called it the “apology” tour because quite often they don’t get to see much other than the landscape. Guides who run those tours find themselves frequently apologizing that their bus didn’t encounter any wildlife. The Tundra Wilderness Tour continues past mile marker 30 and proceeds for an additional 33 miles, at times passing through some pretty treacherous looking mountain switchbacks. The road width narrows in the passes to a single lane carved into the side of a rock wall. It is a special kind of thrill driving in the rain on a slippery gravel road only a foot or so away from a sheer drop of...well I didn’t ask because I didn’t want to know. Oh...did I forget to mention there were no guardrails? There weren’t. The ride was surprisingly smooth most of the time, but that one pass was pretty hairy. There is an even lengthier tour option called the Kantishna Experience Tour that runs the full 92 mile length of the road before turning around.

Alaska has a “big 5” like Africa and their big 5 are the bear, moose, caribou, Dahl sheep, and wolf. And did we see them all! Except the wolves...they were in hiding. The only other thing we didn’t get to see was Denali. Our guide told us that the mountain is obscured by clouds and fog easily 70% of the year,



and a clear view like you see in pictures is a rare event. We knew that going into the tour so though we were disappointed, we weren’t surprised. As the guide predicted we didn’t see much during the first 30 miles. When we did start seeing wildlife the encounters started small, and I do mean small, with ground squirrels scampering across the road and an encounter with Alaska’s state bird, the ptarmigan. From there things got real big real fast as we experienced the first of what would eventually be six brown bears. A mother bear was teaching her year-old cub how to eat meat as they feasted on a Caribou kill next to a riverbed. We would see this pair again on the trip back out of the park, this time with mom snoozing away while the cub nursed. I guess learning to eat meat made

him hungry. In addition to the bears, we encountered several herds of Caribou both from afar and pretty close. We also saw a herd of Dahl sheep up on a hillside. Dahl sheep are the kind that can scale a seemingly sheer cliff. The herd included a lamb and it was the cutest thing in the world to watch as it played, jumping up in the air and trying to do a 360 before landing back on the ground. Several times it landed on an adult, but they seemed very tolerant of the lamb’s shenanigans. On our return trip we encountered a stopped tour bus in front of us, which usually means something of interest was nearby. As we all craned our necks to see what they were looking at, Janet shouted out “bear.” The atmosphere in the bus was electric as an adult brown bear walked out of the brush on the side of the road and casually strolled past the stopped buses. Now that was definitely a close encounter of the wildlife kind! As the bear made his way down the hillside it appeared for a brief time that he might be stalking a herd of caribou, but as we lingered to see what might develop he went in another direction. Our time in Denali National Park, brief though it was, gave us an unforgettable experience.



After our tour through the park we took a shuttle about three miles down the road from Denali Park Village to a small cluster of shops and eateries called the Canyon. After a bit of souvenir shopping we decided to have dinner before heading back to the village. Our guide had given us a few restaurant suggestions for the Canyon and the one that sounded the most appealing was Prospector's Pizza. Not because I was particularly enamored with the idea of eating pizza in Alaska. I like to eat like a local when I travel and the idea of getting pizza in Alaska seemed humdrum...until the guide told us all the locals eat there. I was particularly interested in some of the distinctly Alaska toppings she told us one can get on the pizza. Mind you, she nearly lost me with salmon slices, but I did like the sound of the elk meatball pizza. Can I just say it was amazing? It was just about the best pizza I have ever eaten with a perfectly thin crispy crust, a blend of mozzarella, muenster, parmesan, and provolone cheeses over a traditional red marinara sauce. The elk meatballs made all the difference, delivering a wallop of taste with a slightly gamey edge to it but without all the fat you get with traditional pizza toppings. I think Tidewater Teddy ate all the meatballs off the piece in the picture. We drew the line at the beer though...he is underage after all!



Talkeetna

Our time in Denali came to an end the next morning and we headed out to our next stop, the small quirky town of Talkeetna. In terms of comfort, the Talkeetna Alaska Lodge falls between the luxury of the Alyeska Resort and the rustic Denali Park Village. There is a nice panoramic window at the back of the lodge that looked out over the Denali range, but once again Denali herself was clouded out anytime we stopped to check. The lodge offers several hiking trails which we took advantage of. Throughout our trip the guide or leader of any tour we took gave us instructions on how to avoid bear encounters, and what to do if we came upon one unexpectedly. I wasn't sure if it was hype for the benefit of the tourists, or if it represented real concern. Some people in our group said they saw a black bear with three cubs along one of the trails back at the Alyeska Resort, but I was unconvinced. Until Janet and I came upon a steaming pile of bear scat as we hiked along a trail not far from the lodge. The steaming part is important because that meant the bear that dropped it, though out of sight, probably wasn't too far away. Fortunately, the bear remained out of sight, but even that indirect encounter made me a believer in the "hype" from that point on.

After the bear scat encounter we decided to take the hotel's shuttle into Talkeetna. There isn't much to Talkeetna...we managed to walk from one end to the other in about five minutes, but it is a nice place for people watching. Talkeetna is home to a number of shops selling souvenirs and art work produced by locals, along with a nice selection of restaurants and cafes. We decided to have dinner at the Denali Brewing Company (DBC). If I am being honest we chose DBC because our tour guide told us they would give us a free cab ride back to the lodge where we were staying if we didn't care to wait for the scheduled bus service. Our dinner turned out to be a pleasant surprise that allowed us to linger long enough not to need to cash in on that taxi voucher. I posted a foodie review on Tidewater's blog if you are interested in reading about it.

The next day we took a flightseeing excursion into the Denali mountain range. Denali was once again obscured by clouds, but the excursion was still amazing. There is nothing more exhilarating than flying in a single engine unpressurized 5-passenger Beaver at an altitude of 5,000 feet through a mountain pass surrounded by sheer cliffs soaring to over 10,000 feet in search of a mountain that is over 20,000 feet in elevation. Well actually there is. Like when the pilot got on the intercom to inform us he was going to fly as close as he could get to the wall of rock towering over us to have more room to make a turn. That the wall of rock he was heading toward was completely enshrouded in clouds made it even more interesting. Remembering back to the pilot's pre-flight safety briefing when he described where sleeping bags, tents, food and water were located within the plane in the event we had to make an emergency landing did little to assuage my concern. Let me tell you the adrenaline rush you get from knowing you have a pretty good chance of slamming into the side of a mountain followed by the relief of finally getting your feet back on the ground is quite the combination.



After the excursion we found ourselves back on the streets of Talkeetna and wandered into the Roadhouse, a place friends told Janet about. It is a deli, restaurant and inn that offers family style seating and service. It is popular with backpackers, I suppose because for a few bucks they would let you



take a shower in their communal bathroom without having to rent a room. I'm sure that after being on the trail for a few weeks the idea of a shower even in a communal bathroom is appealing, though they charge another dollar if you want to use one of their towels to dry off...I'm not even kidding about that. That's Talkeetna for you. The Roadhouse is best known for their sweet rolls which earned the Janet seal of approval, but I had to try the bean and reindeer (aka Caribou) chili. You could order the chili without the reindeer meat but where is the fun in that? Can I just say the chili was delicious. The complex play of the beans, tomato stock, and caribou with just the right amount of chili spices was to die for. Oh sure there was cumin. I'm not a fan of cumin but in the right setting (chili), and in the right amount (VERY sparingly) it works for me, and this dish hit all the right notes.

After lunch and a bit more exploring, we departed on the final leg of our trip, the Wilderness Express Train. Compared with everything else we saw and experienced on this trip, the train was a bit of a let-down. Don't get me wrong, it was nice. The coach was comfortable and the observation car gave incredible panoramic views throughout the 114 mile trip from Talkeetna to Anchorage. Unfortunately, unlike the Tundra Wilderness Tour the train wasn't about to stop anytime someone thought they saw a moose. We passed several, but by the time word made it around that there was a moose sighting it was behind us. Part of the train experience is a meal, and for us it was a reasonably tasty dinner. The galley offers a selection of entrees that can satisfy even for the pickiest of palates. I know this because that describes me, and my palate was satisfied. There is also a full-service bar offering a selection of adult beverages at resort prices, which is to say expensive.

Our Alaska cruise/tour was amazing, and I highly recommend it. It represents a more expensive vacation option than a Caribbean cruise or an all-inclusive in Mexico, but it is worth saving up for. Janet and I want to go back on a land-only tour over the winter. So much of what we saw and experienced gave us a glimpse of just how beautiful Alaska would be in the winter. I've been to Anchorage in the winter without Janet, and I know we would both love it.