

THE CampChuck REVIEWER

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Editor, critic, layout, distribution, and general factotum ...



Bush Pilot Strep Buzzes Our Glacier Tour

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The Road Taken

We pretty much drove everywhere you can drive in and around Juneau in our week-plus there. We logged about 300 miles, including the longest road about 40 miles north from downtown. We also poked south out of downtown. Peninsulas and islands rise above the water that creates the protected channels of Alaska's southeast panhandle and not much sense for pavement.

From where we stayed 6 nights at the end of the road on Douglas Island, we drove 4 miles to the center of Alaska's capital each day and made two forays to the north end of the island. Add in the signature Mendenhall Glacier area and a couple other spurs. You can't drive in or out of this region, but we sure did optimize our rental car.



Day by Day

Wed 6/3: Leave home dawnish to fly Sacramento to Juneau (change in Seattle), drive rental car 12 miles to a Douglas Island rental across Gastineau Channel from Juneau after tootling around downtown.

Thu 6/4: Drizzly, windy day; drove the Douglas Island roads & roads south and east of Juneau; Sealaska Heritage & City Museums; checking out shops; favorite dinner, The Rookery Café (Vegetable bibimbap; kimchi; gochujang; egg; rice; crab kimchi rice; blood sausage; green garlic; bacon; egg; cilantro).

Fri 6/5: Mendenhall Glacier incl. Nugget Falls and other side Mendenhall Lake; Juneau Arts & Culture Center incl. Alaskapella & Thunder Mountain Big Band; also Coppa homemade Ice Cream incl. Spruce Tip, Rhubarb, Belgian Chocolate, Madagascar Vanilla, & New Orleans Coffee.

Sat 6/6: Hike at Echo Cove; Shrine or St. Therese; Jensen-Olson Arboretum; Island Pub; more Coppa ice cream.

Sun 6/7: Boat tour to "Tracy Arm," 7:30 assemble, back at 6: glaciers, icebergs, sheer cliffs, waterfalls, seals, bears, eagles; convenient Red Dog Saloon.

Mon 6/8: Treadwell Historic, Cope Park, and Flume hikes;

more Coppa Ice Cream; and Salt, the expensive meal of the trip (great fresh, seared halibut; very good vegetarian Wellington).

Tues 6/9: Leave our 6-night stay (Coppa stop; brief Auke Lake hike; turn in rental car) to fly Wings of Alaska, 45 minutes, from Juneau to Skagway for a 2-night stay at the White House B&B; very good halibut & salmon at Skagway Fish Company. (continued, page 4)

You Can See the Forest for Trees

Southeast Alaska has a lot of trees. No, really, a gazillion lots of trees. In between thick ground covers and lush varieties of vegetation, there are more trees. With steep slopes everywhere, the impressionist brushstrokes of the region are tree green. Maybe white-covered peaks and ice fields escaping down glacial river runs brand the allure, but trees set the tone. Surely, myriad channels of salt water keep the vast Pacific Ocean at bay, but trees sit on mounds and mounts above that water.

Temperate as in not freezing cold, and rainforest as in not really about snow and ice, this temperate rainforest thing isn't people's go-to image of Alaska. Indeed, the Q squiggle descending southeast from the Oh My Huge state of Alaska is all the Alaska we focused on for a first visit. That mere squiggle makes an expansive impression.

All the trails we hiked were well manicured. We strolled many forest paths engulfed by the green. One passed a stream here and a pond there widening at the shore of Mendenhall Lake. Away from tourist busloads, we looked across the water at Mendenhall Glacier and Nugget Falls.

We followed a trail at the north end of Douglas Island through layered green. It opened to a view of fishing boats in a wide stretch of waterway. Across the channel, the bottom end of the Chilkat Mountain Range, capped in clouds, hinted at ice fields above tree line.

Another walk, above densely constructed downtown Juneau, was a wooded one not only because of its densely constructed forest nature. It sported a mile of plank after 4-plank-wide wooden plank atop a flume that historically coursed into town.

Near the rental home we called ours for six nights, we strolled through forest that once was the bustling town of Treadwell. It fueled the largest hard rock gold mine in its heyday. In 1917 the mine collapsed. Lots of trees can grow lots of tall in nearly 100 years of rainforest resurgence.

A couple of brief walks, each before heading to a quickly navigable airport, wound close to housing and other buildings. Forest and lakes shaped these paths, too.

It was satisfying to mix in locales like the Shrine of St. Therese, with its cleared stretches and gardened parcels—though the chapel sits surrounded by woods with the woods surrounded by the channel north of Juneau's built up areas. Likewise, but with a differently lofty spirit, the Jensen-Olsen Arboretum carved forest and gardened spaces. Trees shaped the open space. Cultivations of floral color assured a satisfying visit.



Manufactured Mailbag

Dear Editor,

Ice cream?

I.U. Weyawlskreme, Licks, GA

Dear I.U.,

Funny you should ask. We spent some or all of nine out of ten Alaska days in Juneau. We did Coppa six of those days. They make their own ice cream – mmm mm, top notch.

Adventurous flavor creators, they be bold – but not for exaggerated effect. Besides being distinctive with their chocolate, vanilla, and coffee, I loved their rhubarb (balancing tart/sweet), watermelon seaweed (balancing untypical familiarity & an unlikely accent), spruce tip (from actual spruce tree needles, it grows on you quickly), strawberry peppermint (balancing popping flavor again)....

Besides ice cream, the cardamom cake (classy), chewy brownie (fudgelicious), creative soup rotation, Cuban panini and such, the Coppa owners were engaging people – mmm mm, top notch.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

Man, keep reminding yourself. If you gotta keep jamming yourself, stick with movies, man. You've got half a chance sticking with movies.

A friend, Los Angeles

Dear Friend,

My 21st century output of special travel editions barely trickles compared with a considerable stream of them in the 90s. At whatever rate, I like the way travel editions keep the jam flowing.

Ed.

On foot, by car, boat, plane, train, and fork/knife/spoon, we had a very good first time to Alaska.

Find links to photo sets of this Alaska trip at <http://www.campchuckus.blogspot.com>.

Look for the Alaska page near the top right. Each of the 4 links opens its own window. If you click on a photo look for the "Slideshow" tab and click "Play" or click through individually.
(may work a bit differently on handheld devices)

Between Juneau and Skagway

Juneau, capital of the state of Alaska, can't be reached by road. It comes to mind that visiting this region (most any region of Alaska) deserves time in the sky and time in a boat. Besides Alaska Airlines in and out of Juneau, we traveled from there to Skagway in a Wings of Alaska 8-seater. We returned to Juneau via Alaska Fjordlines. This "fast ferry" takes less than half the seven hours the Alaska Marine Highway ferry takes.

Skagway is a fine enough place to visit, juiced by nostalgia for its brief gold rush at the end of the 19th Century and the clever attraction of a 40-mile round trip to the Yukon, Canada border. (I'd say rent a car for a day: way less money; way more sightseeing flexibility.)

What made visiting Skagway a great part of this Alaska trip was the 45 minute flight from Juneau at only 140 miles per hour and 2500 feet above the waterways with mountains all around. (Four massive cruise ships parked in a town of 1000 people doesn't proportion the same as such tourist competition in Juneau, population 32,000 including a substantial government economy.)

Not incidentally, at half the cost of a quick custom ride by plane or helicopter amongst ice fields and mountains, the Wings of Alaska experience decently substituted an expensive line item of (for us) an expensive 10 days.

What made visiting Skagway a great part of this Alaska trip was 3+ hours traveling about 30 miles per hour on the Fjordlines catamaran. This included expert conversational-style tour guiding and several stops for close looks at waterfalls, eagles, and sea lions. We saw several blow sprays from humpback whales, but alas none surfaced for us.



Up Close to Glacial Blue

The best experience of a many ways satisfying first trip to Alaska was the Tracy Arm boat tour. We assembled next to cruise ships hosting thousands. Our 40 people left Juneau by little boat about 8am.

Led by our knowledgeable and informative captain and crewed by two teens (brothers) we chugged south out of Gastineau Channel into open but still landmass protected waters.

The scenery, nice enough, headed to spectacular when we turned into Tracy Arm – an ever narrowing inlet that ends at two outlets of the Sawyer Glacier. Rivers of ice deposit floes that flow down the Arm. Even large floes tend to melt in a day or less.

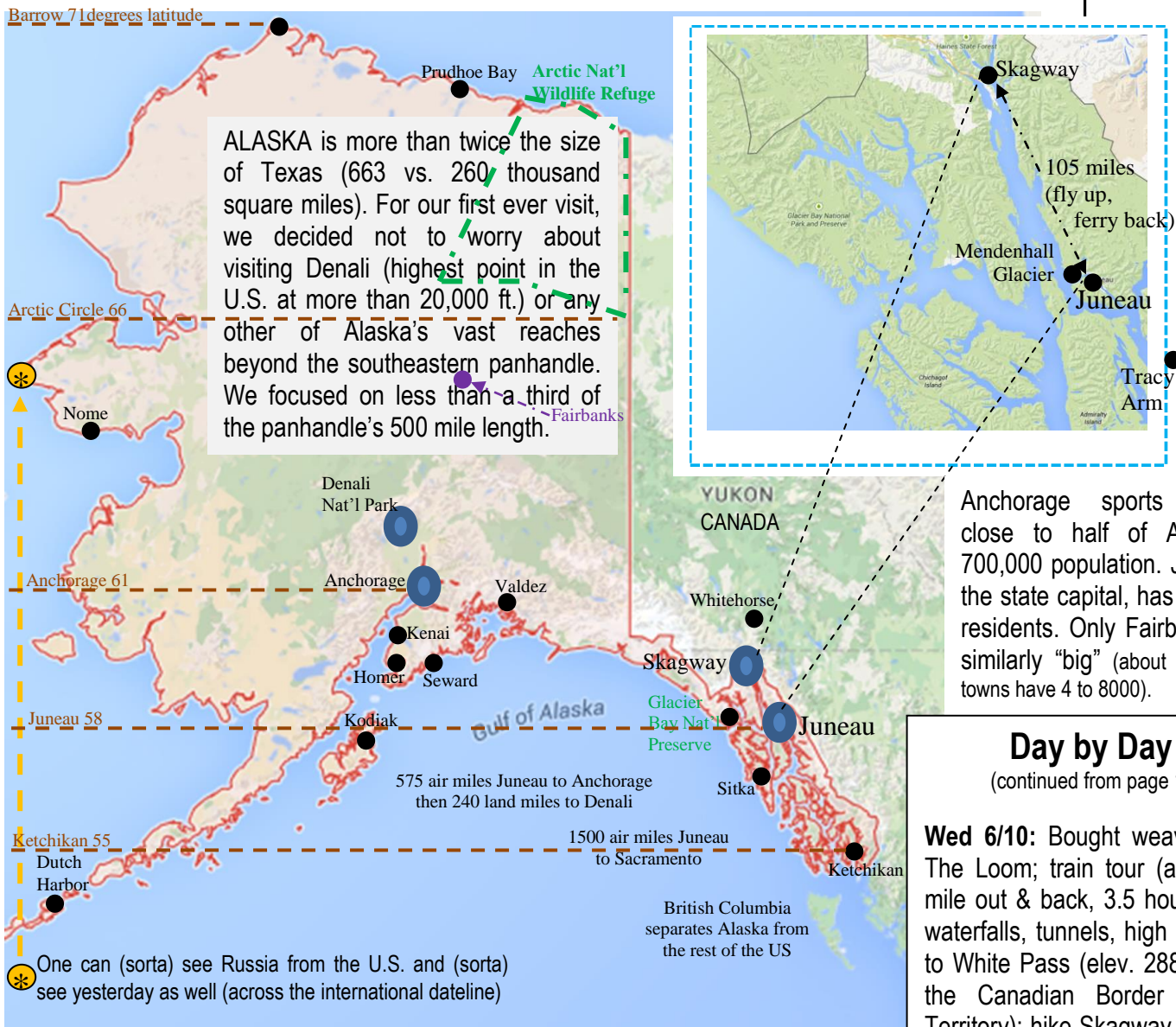
We gazed fast and slow at waterfalls, bears, eagles. We circled the curious shapes and curiously blue of a couple of icebergs. (Compacted glacial ice absorbs way more of the red end of the spectrum than the blue end.)

Fjord mountains rose steep and high. Towering cliffs contributed stark geology to the millions of trees. Close to Sawyer Glacier, the boat negotiated ice all around. Seals chilled on frozen rafts.

Unlike Juneau's signature Mendenhall Glacier, which almost every visitor views from about a mile or more away, we idled to within a few hundred feet. We stayed long enough to hear rumbles. Only small bits of the glacier tumbled into the water. (Neither a whale sighting nor a substantial calving of ice was in our tourist cards this trip.)

The fact of a glacier is stunning to see, enhanced by the blue it carries to the water's edge and by the surrounding composition.

The long tour day (10+ hours) hums into sleepiness, but boating the 150 mile round trip settles richly as the centerpiece of our Alaska experience.



Day by Day

(continued from page 1)

Wed 6/10: Bought weavings at The Loom; train tour (about 40 mile out & back, 3.5 hours, with waterfalls, tunnels, high trestles) to White Pass (elev. 2885 ft.) at the Canadian Border (Yukon Territory); hike Skagway incl. old cemetery; dinner at Spitfire thai.

Thu 6/11: Early departure on Fjordlines "fast ferry," 3+ hours plus bus shuttle, 100 miles Skagway to Juneau (waterfalls, glaciers, more than a dozen eagles; dozens of sea lions; a few "blows" by whales but none near or surfacing); rented a car to facilitate great halibut and chips at Sandbar & Grill, Mendenhall Lake and N. Douglas hikes; and more Coppa ice cream.

Fri 6/12: Brief Moose Lake hike and 6th Coppa visit incl. watermelon&seaweed ice cream before flight home via Seattle.

Canada / continental US border 49 degrees latitude

Southeast Alaska is temperate rainforest (rain, like 60-70 inches & 200-250 days per year with rain; mostly temps above freezing and not more than 70s). Our daytime temperatures tended to be low fifties, sometimes sneaking over sixty. Before our arrival, the region had its warmest, driest May ever. Forecast after departure: a few days of dry in the 70s.

It rained some on 8 of 10 days, sometimes much of the day, but only a few short periods beyond the drizzle-to-light range. It was significantly windy one day and bits of a couple-3 other days. Of course, getting out on deck during 2 boat trips also counts as windy. Wind in the humid chill was the only really cold feeling (but c'mon, not Alaska cold).

The big weather effect was thick clouds, keeping us from full, grand mountain vistas. We did get a sense, in glimpses and breaks, of the everywhere steep surrounds. Less expansive views still made quite the great outdoors impression.

The weather kept us from taking the Mt. Roberts Tram and shifted us to many shorter hikes. As active as we were – tiring anyway, including some early up and at it days -- we might not have opted for longer hikes. We did satisfyingly plenty.

(Bugginess, by the way, zero.)