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WEEKEND BREAK

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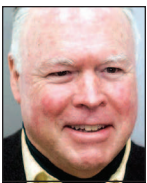
Alaska

BIG, BIG, BIG STATE STUNS THE TRAVELER

By **STEVE FORRESTER**
EO Media Group

I'm not sure what I expected from our first trip to Alaska. The place is not that far away. But it is a world away. Big, big, big is our take on Alaska. The grandeur of the place stunned my wife and me. Denali National Park is Yosemite on steroids. Mt. Denali itself could contain three Mt. Rainiers, and it's 6,000 feet higher.

In planning our trip, my wife admitted to being overwhelmed with options. Thanks to local advice from Steve Fick of Fishhawk Fisheries and Roxanne Fick, a former Alaskan who is a travel agent, my wife pieced together an itinerary that was manageable and diverse.



We flew to Fairbanks, from which we caught the Alaska Railroad to Denali National Park. The train took us on to Anchorage, from which we drove to Seward for the Fourth of July, thence to Homer and finally to the City of Kenai.

Landing in Fairbanks on June 27, we entered the night of never-ending sunlight. Unfortunately, we had missed the annual Midnight Sun baseball game, in which the Fairbanks Goldpanners played the San Diego Waves.

At about 2 a.m. on our first night in a cabin by the Chena River, there was a moment of twilight and then the dawn. Fairbanks restaurant tip: Geraldo's offers an excellent Italian cuisine. And the Chena River Grill was quite good seafood.

The Alaska Railroad is one of the wonders of this state, which purchased it from the federal government in 1985. Its passenger cars maximize window opportunities. And at the back of the cars are open-air platforms — a delight for viewing the passing landscape. Unlike its Amtrak cousins, the Alaska RR offers great cooking in its on-board restaurants. The rail journey from Fairbanks to Denali offered stunning views and wildlife sightings.

One may have the Denali experience entirely without renting a car. In fact, cars do not enter the park, which is a smart thing, and probably a strategy Yosemite will eventually imitate. On our bus trip we saw caribou, Dall sheep and grizzlies. But seeing Mt. Denali itself would wait for another day.

'Seward's Folly'

That day arrived as our train moved south, on its way to Anchorage. Huge. Majestic. Denali, the mountain, revealed itself in stages, during a half hour of train travel.

The 9.2 earthquake of Good Friday 1964 is a fresh memory in Anchorage. Mike Stinebaugh and Charlotte Fox said that when they moved to the city, people spoke of the earthquake as though it happened yesterday. The vestiges of that day are profound.

I met Charlotte some 15 years ago at a Western Arts Association meeting. Her husband's sister, Sara Wisti, lives in Astoria. On Charlotte's recommendation, we toured the Anchorage Art Museum as well as the Museum of the North in Fairbanks.

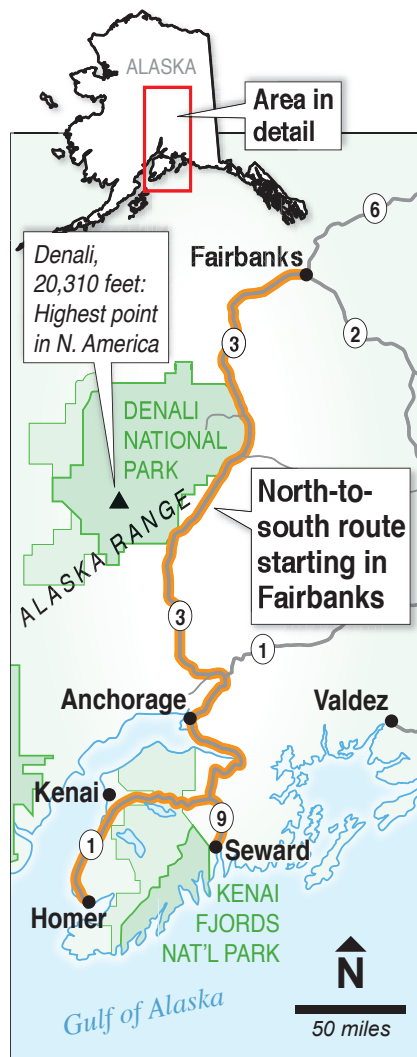
Both of these museums are first-class.



LEFT: Above Homer, looking across Kachemak Bay. RIGHT: The multi-talented Marian Beck on the dock below the Saltery Restaurant. Beck runs the Saltery and creates paintings, ceramics and jewelry displayed in a nearby gallery.



Photos by Brenda Penner



Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group

They depict the natural history of Alaska as well as its political and cultural history. Most of us remember that Secretary of State William Seward bought Alaska from Russia and that it became known as "Seward's Folly." Few of us know much about Russia's long colonization of this vast place.

Our next stop, Seward, resembles Astoria in its active waterfront. The town's population is 2,538, but the fishing boat population moored at Seward seemed to be twice that of Astoria.

At midnight — as the calendar clicked to the Fourth of July — Seward did its



fireworks display. The start time was all about maximum darkness, which resembled our twilight. The atmosphere that night was heavy, so the smoke from the fireworks hung in the air.

An array of wildlife

Seward's great opportunity is a boat excursion into the Kenai Fjords National Park. Sitting next to us on that boat was a couple from Switzerland. Across from us was a family from India. Behind us was a group of six French speakers.

We sailed into Resurrection Bay toward Chat Island and up to the Aialik Glacier, where we observed large chunks falling into the water, creating the sound akin to gun or cannon shots. Along the way we observed a spectacular array of wildlife including otters, a large pod of orcas and humpback whales, puffins and mountain goats.

Of all our Alaskan destinations, Homer was the most spectacular setting — on a giant body of water with mountains looming behind. While shopping, we saw colorfully dressed Russian Old Believers, who have migrated here in recent years.

With our guide Gary Sinnhuber, we fished the Ninilchik River. Sinnhuber lived in Astoria until the age of four. His father worked with Duncan Law at the Oregon State University Seafood Laboratory. As we began our fishing at about 4 a.m., a moose and two calves came toward us, walking down the riverbank. These animals are so large that the young one was as large as a pony. We enjoyed excellent fishing, which produced that night's dinner.

Thanks to a tip from Charlotte Fox, we

found our way to the Saltery, a restaurant in Halibut Cove. One gets there by way of a World War II vintage wooden boat, the Danny J. On the way across Kachemak Bay we saw a profusion of tufted and crested puffins, common murrelets, cormorants, harlequin ducks and guillemots on Gull Island.

At Halibut Cove we met the most remarkable person of our trip: Marian Beck, who runs the Saltery while also creating paintings, ceramics and jewelry that were displayed in a nearby gallery. Beck has also written and illustrated a cookbook, and she manages the island's water system. My wife asked Beck: "When do you sleep?"

'A wonderful spirit among us'

The Pratt Museum is Homer's hidden gem. Its exhibit on the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989 is disturbing. By depicting the magnitude of the spill on a piece of black plastic, the visitor may place that marker anywhere on a map of the U.S. To our surprise, the oil spill spanned an area from northern Washington to northern California.

The Pratt's exhibit on homesteading was most affecting, and its artifacts summoned memories of my grandparents' life in Alaska. Of that time, my Grandmother Forrester said: "We were surprised when descriptions of our time in Alaska sounded to others as a hard life. It didn't seem so to us. We were physically strong, and there was a wonderful spirit among us."

We went to Kenai to see the place and to see Steve Fick, proprietor of Astoria's Fishhawk Fisheries. Fick has an adjunct Alaska facility that he operates for one month. Fick is a master of seeing opportunity in an asset that someone else is discarding. His Kenai building sits high on a ridge overlooking the Cook Inlet.

Restaurant tip: Louie's. While the diner communes with stuffed wildlife, he enjoys hearty breakfast (reindeer sausage) and tasty dinner entrées. The tempura shrimp is fabulous. Eat at Louie's early on a July morning, and you'll find Fick at a booth near the entrance — his Kenai office.

THE ALASKA RAILROAD IS A WONDER. UNLIKE ITS AMTRAK COUSINS, ITS RESTAURANT COOKING IS FABULOUS.