

Classic Kenai Peninsula

By Brian Jewell



It's 6 p.m., and I'm running late for dinner. Although the rest of the group has gathered in the dining room of Alaska's best resort, I'm hiking down a nearby mountain, awed by the beauty of this rugged country and blissfully unaware of my tardiness.

Massive, wild and largely undisturbed by human civilization, Alaska holds a prized position among American tourism destinations. From the wildflowers growing along the side of Mount Alyeska to the staggering sight of the Kenai Fjords near Seward, this state boasts limitless natural attractions and luscious landscapes.

Much of Alaska is as untamed as the sockeye salmon that swim through its rivers. Walking its ground and standing on its shoreline plants travelers squarely in the heart of the continent's crowning beauty.

Fortunately for travelers, the purity and seclusion of Alaska's most beautiful places do not make them difficult to reach. On a tour from Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula, visitors can have adventurous experiences hiking on mountainsides or rafting on glacial rivers and then retreat to a gourmet dinner and a luxurious hotel room.

I'm on a summer tour of Alaska with two bank travel groups — First State Savings Bank from Missouri and Jacksonville Savings Bank from Illinois — as a guest of Cruises and Tours Worldwide. Together, we'll discover the best of the state's wilderness splendor and well-honed hospitality.

Wide spaces and wildflowers

It's not like me to run late for a meal, especially a good one. But I've lost track of time during my hike on Mount Alyeska. Our group will spend the next two nights here at Alyeska Resort — the state's only AAA four-diamond property — which sits at the base of the mountain. In the winter, the resort's aerial tram transports skiers to the top of the peak; now, in the summer, it takes visitors up to see the gorgeous views of the valley below.

Several of us take the tram ride to the top of the mountain, where we enjoy wonderful views of Turnagain Arm, an extension of the Cook Inlet, as well as the incredible greenery of the valley below. Thick white clouds loom low overhead, although instead of obscuring the view, they somehow seem to tuck us in, creating a sealed-off wonderland of steep mountainside and lush color.

I am alone, though, in my decision to hike the 2.5-mile North Face Trail back to the resort. I should have plenty of

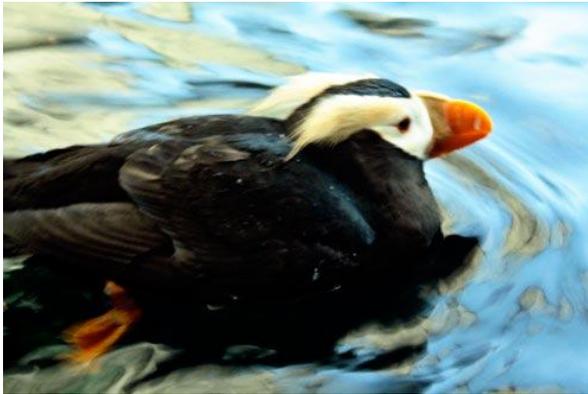
time to make it back before dinner, but the landscape and its vivid details are so distracting.

During the descent, I discover new plant life at about every 100 feet in elevation. The colors and shapes of these leaves and flowers are mesmerizing. Although I don't know what they are called or where else they grow, I enjoy stopping to study them along the way, marveling at their intricate structures and how the colorful petals stand out from the green background.

I've made so many stops to take in sweeping vistas, photograph dew drops on blooming wildflowers and taste water from the clear, cold streams running down the mountain that my quick hike has turned into a leisurely stroll. With about a half-mile to go, I realize I'm in danger of missing my dinner, so I double-time it back to the resort for a great steak meal.

Although the rest of the group is well into their salad course by the time I arrive, our tour director, Kevin Davis, seems unconcerned by my absence.

"It's dinnertime," he said. "I knew you'd make it here eventually."



River rafting

We must make quite an amusing sight: 50 adults attempting to squeeze our way into rubber overalls, slickers, life jackets and rain boots, and then load into rubber rafts along the banks of the Kenai River. This gear will keep us warm in case anyone falls into the chilly waters or in case it rains (always a possibility in Alaska).

After a night at the resort, we've made a trip to join Alaska Wilderness Adventures for a float trip down this beautiful glacial river. We began with a salmon bake on the riverbanks. Now that we're fitted out in rain suits and briefed in safety procedures, we're ready to begin our float down the river.

As we embark, our river guide, Gus, explains that the river's color comes from fine particles of silt picked up by the surrounding glaciers as they slowly scraped along the sides of the surrounding mountain. The river gently snakes us through the towering evergreens of Chugach National Forest, which surrounds us on both sides.

Gus also spends much of the 90-minute trip pointing out some of the various birds and small animals that live along the river and telling us about the salmon run that will happen here next week. We pass a few fly fishermen along the way, but Gus says that next week, when tens of thousands of salmon return to these waters to spawn, sections of the riverbank will be packed with anglers elbow-to-elbow, creating an event known locally as "combat fishing."

"Fishing isn't just a sport here but a subsistence activity," he explains. "During the fishing season, locals can catch up to three fish a day and stock up on it. We eat salmon all through the winter here."

By the end of the trip, we've floated to a spot 10 miles downriver from where we started. Along the way, we've seen numerous fish and several bald eagles in the trees around us. The elusive bears and moose that live in the area did not make an appearance today, but the sun did, giving us a rare cloudless afternoon in the Alaskan wilderness.

Kenai's crown jewel

It is one of those days I'll always remember: The dramatic peaks and glaciers of the Kenai Fjords have lodged themselves permanently into my memory, alongside other natural wonders on the scale of Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon.

We arrive this morning in Seward, a small town at the southern end of the Kenai Peninsula that is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park. Although there are numerous jaw-dropping national parks in Alaska, Kenai Fjords is unique in numerous aspects, including that it is the only park visited almost exclusively by boat.

So our group boards the Kenai Explorer for a six-hour sightseeing cruise that will take us alongside the fjords for incomparable views of the scenery, as well as of wildlife such as puffins, seal lions and humpback whales.

A fjord is a geological formation that has been carved by a glacier, the captain tells us as we get under way, and the Kenai Fjords are massive stone monoliths and islands that sit on the edge of the Gulf of Alaska.

Behind the large stone formations sits the Harding Ice Field, an expansive range of snow-capped mountains where a number of active glaciers continue to move downhill toward the sea.

These two elements create a dreamy duality of scenery, and I am taken aback by the way the tree-topped rock formations in the foreground contrast with the snow-capped mountains climbing behind them in the background. This place where the mountains meet the sea is as beautiful as any other place I've seen on earth.



Our expedition takes us past Bear Glacier, where large icebergs have calved off the enormous formation.

“Those icebergs are easily 10 times as large as the boat you’re on,” the captain says. “Glacial ice is some of the most dense, most dangerous material ever known to man.”

Later, we approach Holgate Glacier, a 400-foot-high colossus of snow and ice that moves at four feet per day into the sea. The captain positions the boat so that we come face to face with the glacier, where large chunks of ice send up a trembling roar as they calve off the side and cascade into the water below.

The air is colder here, but everyone stands on the outdoor deck, hoping to catch another glimpse of this natural spectacle.

A dog’s day

To finish the 1,049-mile Iditarod dog sled race is no small feat; Mitch Seavey has finished the race 17 times, taking first place in 2004. At his training camp in Seward, Seavey and his family introduce visitors to this unique Alaskan competition and the dogs that make it all possible.

We’ve arrived at the Seavey’s complex this morning for a tour of the kennels and the “Ididaride” experience. As soon as we get off the bus, we can hear the excited barks and howls of the dogs that live and train at these facilities and have been conditioned to love visitors.

Half of the group immediately loads onto sleds to begin their ride. My half starts with a visit to the kennel, where several female huskies have just given birth to litters of puppies. Our guide tells us about how the dogs are raised and trained and then hands the puppies out to group members for cuddle encounters and photo stops.

After visiting with the dogs, we learn a little about the Iditarod race itself, and our guide dresses a volunteer in a full set of racing gear. Soon, though, we’re divided into groups of six and climbing onto specially built carriages that will transport us on our dog-team ride through the woods.

The dogs seem even more excited about the ride than we are. The team driver says that these creatures are born to run, and he has to exercise control over the dogs to make them stand still. They get their chance soon enough, though, hauling us careening through a 2.5-mile wooded path alongside Box Canyon Creek at the foot of Resurrection Mountain.

The sled ride makes a great end to my Alaskan adventure. Although the bank groups will board a seven-night cruise in Seward, I’ll be headed back to Anchorage for an overnight flight home. With any luck, I’ll sleep through most of the long flight east, dreaming of Alaska’s wilderness wonders.

**CRUISES AND TOURS
WORLDWIDE**
Discover the Difference

**Customizing Incredible
Travel Experiences
Since 1981**

Alaska's Kenai Peninsula - Summer 2011

The special touches that you always provide on your tours were especially evident on our trip to Alaska. Every day brought a new highlight! We like to give our clients experiences beyond their expectations. You always make that happen for us! Thank you for another very special memory!

Suzie Glisson, Jacksonville Savings Bank

Contact us today to plan your next travel adventure!
annedavis@cruises-toursworldwide.com
www.cruises-toursworldwide.com
800-435-2710



CRUISE LINES
INTERNATIONAL
ASSOCIATION, INC.

