



Tom & Richard with Harvard Glacier



Mt. McKinley

TRIP REPORT – ALASKA CRUISE TOUR August 3 through 14, 2009

This adventure was a 7-day “Voyage of the Glaciers” Princess cruise through the Inland Passage of Alaska starting in Vancouver, B.C. and ending at Whittier (near Anchorage) Alaska with a 4-day extension “Direct to the Wilderness Tour” by train and bus through Denali National Park to Fairbanks. Cruise ports of call included Ketchikan, Juneau, and Skagway from which we took land excursions. The Island Princess did scenic cruising in Glacier Bay National Park and College Fjord. From Whittier, the cruise port, we connected directly to Alaska Railroad’s McKinley Express to Talkeetna. At that community we boarded a Princess bus for a 45-minute ride to the Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge, a resort at the edge of Denali Park, where we spent two nights. From there we took a Princess bus about 100 miles north over Broad Pass (continental divide) to Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge for one night. The Alaska Railroad’s two-level scenic “Denali Express” train traversed the Nenana River valley to Fairbanks where we spent the night at Fairbanks Princess Lodge. We returned early next morning on Alaska Airlines to Seattle. Following are the highlights and my impressions of this great trip with my long-time friend and world-trip companion Richard Brabham.

Ketchikan

Although noted for its 162 inches over an average of 240 days a year, we got lucky: it did not rain at all. Like other Alaska cities we were to encounter, Ketchikan is not itself very attractive but does have some points of historic interest. A statue of an eagle welcomed us as we entered, and “mooned” us when we left. During a walk around town we enjoyed seeing Creek Street, location of historic brothels in the late 1800s and early 1900s. An upscale retail center now resides above a creek teeming with salmon. We took a tour to Totem Bight Park, which is a collection of totem poles and a clan house from the native Tlingit Indians. Each totem has a distinct story depicted up the cedar poles, but I was especially struck by the “shame” totem and the “Woman Who Created Salmon”. Back at sea at about 7:00 p.m. we spotted some whales off Snow Pass Island, one of the few successful sightings for me on the trip.

Juneau

We started our visit with a 40-minute trip to Mendenhall Glacier Park where we spotted eagles in the wetlands. At the park along Steep Creek we saw beaver dams and schools of salmon, including several that had recently been partially devoured by bears. We got reports that we had just missed the bears and a portion of the trail was closed for our safety. We walked the trails observing the beautiful Mendenhall Glacier rising up above the lake and enjoyed the beautiful Nugget Falls. At the Visitor Center we saw a video explaining that the glacier has been retreating since its peak in the 1700s, but has been accelerating at the rate of about 200 feet per year in recent years. Back in Juneau, we stopped by the Art-Deco State Capitol and visited the excellent Alaska State Museum with its displays of artifacts from all of the state’s native peoples.

Skagway

As the northernmost point of the Inland Passage, Skagway became the jumping off point for gold miners hoping to make it rich in the 1898 gold strike in the Yukon Territory. Population boomed to 20,000 only to

decline as resources dried up. Our tour included a visit to the city museum, a private floral and statuary garden, and a trip up the mountain to get a panoramic view of the city and Harding Glacier. (The tour guide enjoyed telling the story that Pres. Warren G. Harding visited Alaska in the summer of 1923 with both his wife and mistress. He died of food poisoning six days later.) We capped off our visit to Skagway with a live show called “The Days of ’98 Show” about crook and con man Soapy Smith who ruled Skagway in 1897-98 with an iron fist until killed by a vigilante group. It was a well done story of this raucous historic era.

Glacier Bay

Glacier Bay National Park, a World Heritage Site, consists of 3.3 million acres of mountains, glaciers, forests and waterways and is a highlight of the Inland Passage. In 1750 the glacier extended all the way to Ice Strait. By John Muir’s visit in 1879 it had retreated 40 miles up the Bay. Today one must travel 65 miles northwest up from Icy Strait to view the tidewater glaciers. The Island Princess entered Glacier Bay about 6:00 a.m. on 8/5/09 at Bartlett Cove (the visitor center). Weather initially was foggy but cleared as we proceeded north into Tarr Inlet. By the time we reached the beautiful Margerie Glacier about 10:00 a.m. it had cleared for a great view. After pivoting so that both sides of the ship could view the glacier, the Island Princess headed southeast, and then westerly into the Johns Hopkins Inlet to view the Johns Hopkins Glacier. Returning out of the inlet at about 12:15 p.m. we passed the Lamplugh Glacier with a stunning waterfall spewing out near its base with the Bay. It was a truly beautiful scenic cruise.

College Fjord

College Fjord is an inlet off Prince Rupert Sound where a group of 16 glaciers were discovered in 1899 by a group of explorers founded by Ivy League colleges. Hence they were named Wellesley, Vassar, Smith, etc.. At the end of the inlet the largest and currently-expanding glacier is the Harvard Glacier. The Island Princess entered the Fjord about 2:45 p.m. and began passing Wellesley, Vassar, and Smith Glaciers until we reached very close to the Harvard Glacier. We lingered there for about 40 minutes pivoting to allow passengers on both starboard and port to view the glacier. The glacier was actively “calving” everything from smaller bits to huge sections off the face. The large calvings would often disturb seals and other wildlife who had positioned themselves on ice bits. By about 7:00 p.m. the Island Princess headed back out of the Fjord. College Fjord was perhaps even more beautiful than Glacier Bay in that there were more tidewater glaciers and the Harvard Glacier was actively calving.

McKinley Express Train

Whittier is an important year-around seaport for passenger and commercial ships seeking access to the interior of Alaska. As promised in the literature we were among the first to disembark the ship about 6:00 a.m. and literally walked across the dock to our awaiting train “The McKinley Express”. The train, operated by Alaska Rail had three Princess-designated one-level cars with rows of tables with four seats on both sides of the train. Fortunately, we were assigned seats traveling in the same direction as the train. We set out about 7:00 a.m. immediately passing through a long tunnel and then proceeded along the easterly side of a large inlet called Turnagain Arm. We were able to see a number of species of birds in the mudflats during low tide. In about 45 minutes we arrived in Anchorage and stopped at the train station for about 20 minutes. Although we could not leave the train, it did not appear that Anchorage had much to offer in scenic beauty. A short time later we passed through Wasilla now considered suburban Anchorage. A guide pointed in the direction where Sarah Palin lives obscured by a dense row of trees. The scenery was beautiful as we passed through the Susitna River Valley. In early afternoon we arrived at Talkeetna, a small village transfer point and supply center for those hiking Mt. McKinley. Some train passengers went into town, but we boarded a Princess bus for the 45-minute ride to the Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge.

Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge

We arrived about 4:00 p.m. and went straight to our room. It was a large room with two king-sized beds and a large bathroom in one of the closer buildings to The Lodge. The complex, while extremely well-laid-out and well-designed is strictly a resort. The only restaurants are those provided by Princess Hotels, with corresponding hotel prices. We had sticker-shock at the expensive meal prices, which we were now paying on our own, rather than the pre-paid arrangement we had on the cruise ship. After dinner at the 20320 Restaurant, we explored the lodge and its huge deck facing directly toward Mt. McKinley, “The Mountain”. As the sun set it was shrouded in clouds. To improve our chances of a viewing, we left our room number for a “Mountain Watch” call from the front desk when and if The Mountain broke through

the clouds. Well, lo and behold, the next morning at just after 6:00 a.m. the phone did ring. Richard and I scrambled into our clothes and went out to see The Mountain. It was just barely visible in the early morning light. Visibility kept improving until the majestic 20,320-foot totally-snow-covered Mt. McKinley (aka Mt. Denali) finally exposed its true glory just before 9:00 a.m. We were overjoyed to be among the 30% of visitors to ever see The Mountain. Our prepaid tour here was a Wagon Ride that left about 10:00. Two cowboys showed up with a two-horse driven wagon. One managed the horses, the other spun out stories. The driver led the horses across Federal, State and private land to a high vantage point where we had a panorama of the jagged Tokosha Mountain range and beautiful Ruth Glacier. Behind the glacier, but no longer visible was The Mountain. After photo opportunities, the cowboys then headed to a paddock with several reindeer (caribou). We were allowed to feed them crackers. Some of the more brave humans (including Richard) held a cracker in their teeth forcing the reindeer to “kiss” them. I declined this offer. Then the cowboys took us over to a sluice box with water, gravel and gold. After instructions, using pans for the purpose we were able to sift out some gold specks. (These were subsequently laminated into a card that states: “As long as you hold this card you’ll never be broke”). We also toasted marshmallows over the campfire and made “S’mores”. We then headed back down the hill passing the cabin of a stalwart Alaskan woman who lives there year around. Later that afternoon I took the Hill Trail recommended by our Princess bus driver (from Utah, as many tourist workers were). It was quite steep but offered a view of The Mountain (Not. It was obscured). Only later did I learn that the trail had been closed earlier that day due to a bear sighting. Damn, I would have loved to have seen one! I also took the Lodge Trail from 20320 Restaurant back to the lodge with an overlook of the Chulitna River. We tried another restaurant in the Lodge for dinner and enjoyed the gorgeous scenery and fresh mountain air, before retiring for a restful sleep.

Broad Pass

About 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, August 12th our Princess bus, driven by a friendly seasoned woman filled with Alaska facts and stories, headed north for the approximately 100 miles to the Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge. Not far south of Broad Pass, which is the “continental divide” in this part of Alaska, where rivers flow north or south of the pass, we stopped at 10:16 a.m. to get the last clear picture of The Mountain. Although it was probably 60 miles away, it was majestic. Broad Pass is also where the Alaska Railroad switches directions for its trains.

Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge

We rolled into the Denali Lodge on the Nenana River just before noon. Happily our room was ready. It was quite a ways from the main two-story Lodge, but close to the dinner theater. It was smaller and not as well appointed as the Princess McKinley Lodge. This lodge is not an isolated resort as there were other shops and restaurants across the road. We took advantage of them for lunch and ice cream. At 1:00 p.m. we boarded an old school bus for an approximately 4_ hour free natural history tour. Stops included: a film at the Visitor Center; a visit to a remote cabin, where a ranger dressed in a costume of the 1940’s re-enacted life in that era; and a talk by a Native American at Primrose Point, a viewpoint for The Mountain but it was obscured. The effort to see wildlife was not too fruitful. We did see: some caribou a substantial distance from the bus along a river heading into the forest; an Arctic ground squirrel at Primrose Point, and some people saw moose on the return leg out of the park. No bears were spotted by anyone on our bus. We returned just barely in time for our dinner show at 6:00. It was truly a great show from a hardworking cast that dubbed as waiters and soloist singers before the show, and then played characters in the main show. The cast re-enacted a story of some of the early climbers of The Mountain. The next morning we had breakfast and lunch at a funky old restaurant called The Salmon Bake that looked like it was falling off the hill.

The Denali Express

About 3:00 p.m. we boarded a bus back into the park and found our way to the train station. We then boarded a two-level Princess train car. The lower level with used for those seeking dinner. While it didn’t live up to the hype of “cruise ship cuisine and service”, the food was good and not too overpriced. I am glad that we did eat, since we arrived quite late at the Fairbanks Princess Lodge. The trip north along the Nenana River canyon was quite spectacular for the first 45 minutes as we came out of Denali Park. The balance of the terrain on into Fairbanks was not as scenic. We did however see a real, live moose up close and personal along the tracks. Alas, all was not lost.

On Board the Island Princess

We did partake in several activities while we were cruising from Vancouver to Whittier. Examples included:

- First evening staff introductions and previews from Princess Dancers and comedian Cary Long as seen on Jay Leno.
- Production Show – “Do You Wanna Dance?” with the Princess singers and dancers.
- A concert by Adrian Zmed of “Grease” Broadway and Hollywood fame.
- International Crew Talent Show - dominated by Philippine waiters who thought they deserved fame and fortune.
- Ventriloquist Dan Horn as seen on David Letterman.
- Lectures by Dr. Ann Burgess, a naturalist who also narrated wildlife sighting and glaciers.
- Story teller/guitarist Steve Hites – an old timer that had many stories about Alaska past and present.
- Lecture and video presentation by Libby Riddles, the first woman to win the Iditarod Sled Dog Race on March 20, 1985.
- A visit to the galley.
- Backstage tour of Princess Theater, with questions answered by some of the cast and crew..
- Captain’s Cocktail Party for Princess Circle members. (We met one guy that had done more than 400 days cruising with Princess. He was on the second roundtrip for this cruise between Vancouver and Whittier).

Conclusion

Richard had done the Inland Passage cruise 25 years ago as far as Glacier Bay with a stop in Sitka rather than Skagway. I had never been to Alaska. When Richard found this 2-for-1 trip that included both the cruise and land tour in the middle of the season, we snapped it up. Nick Sempeti of Postcard Destinations, our travel agent of many years, and Richard followed up with all the arrangements. I am glad we did it. I loved the gorgeous scenery in this vast state: the forests, the glaciers, the mountain ranges, “The Mountain”, the rivers, the lakes and the waterways are all extraordinary. I was struck by the attitude of Alaskans who view their state as the “Last Frontier”. They seem to have little truck was environmentalists and other “liberals” in the Lower 48. There really are a lot of people there like Sarah Palin. I was also struck by how many of those associated with the travel and tour industry said they were from Utah. Many of these young men appeared to have just returned from their Mormon Mission. Alaska has only a four-month tourist season—mid-May through mid-September. It all seems a bit artificial. The “year rounders” are a hearty breed: tough as nails. It takes a special kind of person to want to live in that extreme climate. I could never do it. Finally, as to our fellow cruise passengers, we were struck at how many were traveling as families, sometimes as many as 10 or 12 in a group with up to three generations. It was nice to see the fresh-faced youth mingling among us old-timers.

HAPPY TRAVELS, *Tom Harrison*



Tom and Richard at Mendenhall Glacier