



Brown bear with salmon, Brooks Falls



Bonanza Range reflection, McCarthy



Caribou, Denali National Park



Totem pole, Ketchikan

Alaska's bear necessities

Untamed expanses, snow-capped mountains, craggy glaciers and roaming wildlife. Aaron Cork finds America's far north lives up to all his dreams.

It's possible to dip into Alaska from a cruise ship: brief snapped snapshots of a distant world. Instead I got under the skin of this captivating land on a thrilling journey that included travel by ferry, car and floatplane and veered far off trodden routes.

My journey began in Ketchikan, the self-proclaimed 'Salmon Capital of the World'. The town boasts the world's greatest concentration of totem poles – you see modern examples all over the place – but I was especially interested in the collection at the Totem Heritage Centre on the edge of town. Here I found 17 wonderfully preserved totems recovered from deserted Tlingit villages, each still vividly telling their own unique stories of an almost-vanished local culture.

An overnight ferry took me north through the famed Alaskan Inside Passage: mile after mile of narrow waterways threaded through islands carpeted with dense forest and remote native villages. The occasional whale sighting kept everyone enthralled.

Juneau is Alaska's somewhat unlikely state capital, set in a picturesque location on the Gastineau Channel. It was, however, a good base for exploring nearby Admiralty Island, known as 'the Fortress of Bears', which I first glimpsed on the floatplane that took me there. Within minutes of landing we spotted our first brown bear meandering along the beach at a leisurely pace. Keeping a safe distance, we followed the bear to Pack Creek, a bear Utopia of sorts, where we watched another six grazing on the sedge grasses.

After a short flight to Anchorage, I drove along the majestic Parks Highway via Denali to Fairbanks. The next day, with growing anticipation, I found myself bumping up the renowned Dalton Highway towards the Arctic Circle. This remote stretch of gravel follows the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline for 414 miles towards Prudhoe Bay in the high Arctic. Spotting the occasional moose beside the road, I saw the dense boreal forest give way to wide-open tundra planes and the dramatic peaks of the Brooks Range.

At latitude 66°33' it is almost mandatory for visitors who have made it this far to stop for a picture beside the Arctic Circle sign before making the official crossing into the Arctic by foot.

Travelling along the Richardson Highway between Fairbanks and Valdez you begin to understand the sheer remoteness of the Alaskan interior and the natural beauty it contains. To the east lies Wrangell St-Elias National Park, the largest in the USA. The park is at the convergence of three mountain ranges and has America's highest concentration of glaciers. Deep within the park and reached only by bush-plane, the small car-free town of McCarthy and the Kennicott copper mine swept me into the distant past. In what looks like a set from a Wild West film, McCarthy packs more character per square metre than most Alaskan towns. The town has been brought back from the brink of extinction after the 1900s boomtown heyday of wild saloons, rowdy miners and a busy red-light district. Today's visitors are drawn by the surrounding landscapes, with an impressive array of glaciers, icy waterfalls and mountains. From McCarthy, you can explore the imposing remains of the abandoned mine site, or don crampons for a guided hike on Root Glacier.

An apt climax to my Alaskan adventure was my encounter with the bears of Brooks Falls. After a thrilling floatplane flight and a brief bear safety talk, I found myself witnessing one of Alaska's most celebrated images at first hand. The salmon run was in full swing and up to 12 brown bears had congregated by the falls to catch their fishy supper. Usually solitary creatures, they were drawn together by this abundant food source: Brooks is one of the only places you'll ever see brown bears in such close proximity and great numbers.

In retrospect I wondered how the weeks had seemed to pass so fast, but then reflected on the countless wonderful experiences Alaska had provided. While undeniably remote and wild, much of Alaska is surprisingly accessible: a must-visit destination for any nature lover.

Aaron Cork
Canada & Alaska Specialist



Glacier cruise



Aaron, Arctic Circle

FACT FILE

A two-week self-drive trip to Alaska costs from £3,750 per person based upon two people sharing. Prices include flights, 14 nights accommodation and car hire. Prices can vary with the inclusion of bear viewing trips and lodge stays. Please contact Aaron on 01993 838 709 for further details.

