

The best little outhouses in Alaska

by Hal Smith

Most of us from “the outside,” as Alaskans call residents of the Lower 48, are introduced to America’s last frontier via a coastal cruise along the Inside Passage. The world’s longest protected marine highway, running from Seattle about 1,000 miles north, whets the appetite of many visitors to explore the interior during a second visit.

Second-time visitors flock to Denali National Park, the most popular wilderness destination in the state, drawing 400,000 travelers annually.

You can book a sea/land trip with a cruise line, or you can travel independently by train or car to the park, get an orientation at the impressive Denali Visitor Center, hike the adjacent trails, and take a narrated bus tour.

Park rules limit public access by car to the first 15 miles of the Park Road, a mostly two-lane gateway into this six-million-acre wilderness, which remains much as it was when 19th century gold prospectors staked claims in the Kantishna District, where the road dead-ends about 90 miles inside the park.

The restriction on cars prevents uncontrolled hordes from disturbing this whole and pristine ecosystem. Unlike some of the Lower 48 national parks, you won’t see rangers acting as traffic cops to allow wildlife to cross the road.

Each morning during the tourist season (roughly mid-May to mid-September), tour drivers offer commentary about the park and any wildlife visible from the bus, aided by hand signals by which passing drivers share sightings.

The “Big Five”

However, without a decent pair of binoculars, visitors may not get a satisfying look at the park’s “big five:” grizzly bears, wolves, moose, caribou, fox, or Dall sheep, those white specks high on the mountain slopes whose near extinction at the hands of market hunters inspired the park’s founding. Denali is not, as it has been called, “the Serengeti of the North.” Despite the park’s vast size, relatively few mammals live there:

- First, the park gets only about 16 inches of rainfall per year, so food is sparse and vegetative cover limited.

- Second, most of the park is blanketed by vast year-round ice fields and glaciers, some of which are thicker than the Grand Canyon is deep. These are part of the forbidding foothills of the Alaska Range, including Mt. McKinley, the park’s jewel and biggest attraction. It’s the tallest mountain (20,320 feet) in North America as well as one of the coldest places on Earth.

Everyone on the bus anticipates seeing Mt. McKinley (or Denali, as the locals call it), but the mountain creates its own weather. Though other high peaks in the park may be “out” on a given day, Mt. McKinley often isn’t visible from the bus route. Indeed, except for pit stops and a boxed lunch at a roadside picnic area, many visitors never leave the tour buses.



Mt. McKinley, the tallest peak in North America, looms over Denali National Park bikers on a hill near Wonder Lake.

Why, then, would anyone want to take the bus? It’s one of the easiest and least expensive ways for tourists to actually enter the wilderness.

Alaska has few roads, and most of the state (including Juneau, the capital) is inaccessible except via water, dog sled, snowmobiles or planes. So a tour bus is quite a convenience. As one guidebook author says, Denali offers “the only \$30 safari in the world.”

But hardy, adventurous Sierrans have alternatives. If you are a backpacker traveling independently, you can get off a shuttle bus at a Park Service campground with your gear, or wander farther off across the hills and river valleys. It may be your first time walking across tundra, a spongy carpet of lichen, heathers, low-profile berry bushes, grasses and wildflowers.

Birders’ heaven

Alaska has an international reputation among hard-core birders for the large numbers and variety of birds that migrate there to nest and feast on insects, including memorably large mosquitoes.

The state draws about 450 species of waterfowl, more than any other place in the world. Arctic terns, for example, travel 11,000 miles from Antarctica, much of the way over water. You’ll see plenty of raptors, too, and, perhaps, trumpeter swans swimming in isolated kettles (small but deep ponds filled with snow melt). You’ll need waterproof boots because, despite the lack of rainfall, the tundra is often squishy — the permafrost prevents water from being readily absorbed by subsoil.

Return to the road whenever it suits you; out-

bound shuttle buses pick up hikers anywhere along the road at intervals of up to one hour.

Or, if you would prefer to spend several days in this unspoiled wilderness but don’t have the experience to sleep confidently under the stars, you can stay at one of several wilderness lodges in Kantishna.

These have been built on private property “grandfathered in” when the federal government created the park in 1917 or expanded later. The lodges pick up their guests at the train station and bus them in — six hours over a gravel road that sometimes hugs the slim ledges chiseled into nearly vertical mountainsides, where the road often narrows to one lane, without a guard rail.

Camp Denali

When *Sierra Atlantic’s* co-editors arrived with a busload of guests at Camp Denali, one of the world’s first eco-tourism lodges, we all cheered the personable young woman who delivered us, as much for our lively journey as for her impressive knowledge of the flora, fauna and geology of the park. Early on, she encouraged passengers to shout out wildlife sightings (“Bear at 3 o’clock!”) and stopped for all of them. In no time at all, 35 strangers on a bus were amiably chattering away as we passed around binoculars, maneuvered for camera angles, and field-tested our wildlife identification skills.

What sets Camp Denali apart from its competitors is its emphasis on in-depth outdoor education. It’s really as much a nature center as a vacation spot, and savvy Alaskans have a hard time concealing their envy when they hear an Outsider talk about the place. Each week Camp

Denali features an expert or naturalist to lead optional daytime activities (your choice of easy, moderate or strenuous) and to offer informal evening talks. These experts may include researchers, authors, wildlife photographers, and leading conservationists.

We went on several easy birding forays with one such special guest — Stan Senner, director of the Alaska chapter of the Audubon Society. Aside from being a masterful birder, his sense of humor and deep knowledge of environmental issues made him fine backcountry company. Red-haired Annie, one of the staff naturalists, has a keen interest in wildflowers of the tundra and often had us standing over or squatting around tender, tiny blossoms, flourishing in seemingly impossible places. She gently chided us whenever we tended to walk single file. If we ambled abreast across the fields, she explained, we’d create no trail and have less impact on plants.

Camp Denali is the only lodge that has the Park Service’s permission to lead such guided hikes from anywhere off the Park Road and to moor canoes on Wonder Lake, which mirrors Mt. McKinley on a clear day.

Camp Denali’s special relationship with the Park Service began more than 50 years ago when three aviators (two of them women), who had ferried fighter planes around for the military during WW II, started the business together. The diminutive women, Ginny Hill Wood and Celia Hunter, went on to become founders of the conservation movement in Alaska and remained grassroots activists for decades.

After running the camp for 24 years, the owners were ready to retire, but did not want their low-impact retreat to be ruined by a developer. So they gave a mortgage to the current owners, Wally Cole and his wife Jerry, like-minded conservationists. The down payment consisted



Even the outhouses provide a spectacular view at Camp Denali.

What I learned in church

by George Klein

For the past few years, I've taken part in the Hudson River Project. Its goal is to increase activism for the benefit of the Hudson River watershed by having people of faith work with enviros like me. Garrison Institute, sponsor of HRP, is on the east bank of the Hudson just an hour north of New York City.

"People of faith" covers a lot of territory: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, as well as many other spiritual voices. These faiths are rooted in an environmental ethic, often expressed in their sacred texts, and are increasingly concerned about environmental stewardship and justice. Many of our nation's largest religious denominations have made public statements on the gravity of climate change and the human responsibility to mitigate it.

In its first year, HRP held 12 monthly public "conversations," mostly at the Garrison Institute. At these events, we covered the practical and spiritual dimensions of specific regional environmental issues, listened deeply, and found we had a

lot of values in common. Among the participants were Aaron Mair, of the Sierra Club's Atlantic Chapter; Rev. Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith; John Cronin of the Beacon Institute and formerly of Riverkeeper; Sister Miriam MacGillis of Genesis Farm; folksinger Pete Seeger; Alex Matthiessen of Riverkeeper; Rabbi Lawrence Troster of GreenFaith and the Coalition of the Environment and Jewish Life; and Paul Gorman of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, to name just a few.

We learned about local sustainable agriculture, challenges to the Hudson River watershed and its waterfronts, witnessed a discussion between Lisa Rainwater of Riverkeeper and a spokesman for Entergy, owner of the nuclear generation plant Indian Point, and other events. Global warming was by far the most common concern.

In its second year, we went back to our communities and approached houses of worship and our municipalities, requesting that they have an energy audit and start taking steps to alleviate global warming. As with the Sierra Club's Cool Cities campaign, the idea is to stimulate institutional



action and thereby inspire people to act in their own lives. We also hammered out a statement of shared values, called "Our Shared Nature" (see www.garrisoninstitute.org under "Spotlight.") This is an ongoing process, a living document.

What did I learn at church? I learned how to better articulate my values to people of faith, who are as concerned about the environment, a.k.a. Creation, as we, and want to take practical steps to solve these problems. I also made new friends from whom I learn and gain support. And one of the churches I approached in my home town did an energy audit and then held a

fundraiser in November, benefiting my Sierra Club Group and two other local non-profits. I also learned of wonderful faith groups such as New York Interfaith Power & Light.

Efforts such as the Hudson River Project reflect a national trend in religious communities toward increased commitment to environmental engagement, and highlight exciting partnership opportunities.

The Sierra Club, through its Environmental Partnerships Program, works closely with communities of faith. I learned recently that almost half of Sierra Club members are also members of faith communities who attend worship regularly. And these communities share our values: stewardship, sustainability, concern for justice, and concern for future generations. When we work together, everyone is stronger!

I am proud to join the many Sierra Club activists who have been working with people of faith for years.

I urge you to work with people of faith in your community. It's interesting, satisfying, and, best of all, it works. Please call me at (914) 941-2505 to talk about it, or visit www.sierraclub.org/partnerships/faith/.

George Klein is a member of the Lower Hudson Group.

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entirely of two rocking chairs Wally made himself.

Wally is on the state board of the Nature Conservancy as well as the council of the National Parks Conservation Association. He and Jerry also established and fund a foundation which helps Alaskan teachers educate children about the wilderness.

"Ginny and Celia offered warm hospitality, and this was a much more rustic, 'mom and pop' operation. But the facilities were declining," says Wally, a jack-of-all-trades and shade-tree mechanic who grew up on a Maine dairy farm. "We have greatly enhanced the food, facilities and guide services.

"This place has never been just about making a buck. We're not a resort. Camp Denali is a matter of stewardship; it's a trust.

"Our biggest challenge is to stay small and find 35 to 40 guests per week who can afford to come here. A corporate CFO would conclude we should be three times our size. But we don't want to grow; it's better to raise prices, when necessary, to meet rising costs."

Those costs include a staff of about 50 (more than one per guest), including a chef who prepares gourmet meals and bakes bread and pastry; and maintenance of a fleet of vehicles, staff housing and 17 guest cabins — all at a remote location at least six hours from the nearest supplier. Plus, it seems just about *everything* is expensive in Alaska's isolated economy.

So even though Camp Denali provides good value, a visit is still \$435 per day, per person. Visitors occasionally include VIPs, from Laura Bush on a girlfriends' getaway (with a Secret Service entourage), to Alaskan politicians on an annual retreat after the

If You Go

- Denali National Park — www.nps.gov/dena
- Shuttle, campground reservations — 800-622-7275
- Alaska Railroad — 800-544-0552
- Camp Denali lodge — www.campdenali.com. Camp Denali also operates nearby North Face Lodge for visitors who require electricity and indoor plumbing.

legislature adjourns. But on our recent visit, we met "regular" people, from a 30-something public librarian with her husband (a green grocer for Wal-Mart), to retirees, working professional people, et al.

Guests are not pampered in luxury accommodations with fireplaces large enough to roast a moose on a spit. The one-room cabins are cozy, clean, and simply and appealingly furnished. But they are heated by a woodstove and have no phones, TVs or electricity. For hot water, you fill a kettle at an outside spigot and heat it on a one-burner gas grate. Hot showers are available at a bathhouse near the authentic log lodge and new timber-framed dining hall.

Each cabin has an outhouse. Ours was the cleanest I've ever visited and didn't even give off an odor, perhaps because it was early June, the beginning of the season. Like the cabins, each with a large picture window, the outhouses also face Mt. McKinley. Rather than the traditional half-moon cutout for light and ventilation, the door to our privy had a sizeable heart-shaped port that framed the mountain.

Surely this is the Lexus of outhouses — high on a south-facing hill,

with an extraordinary view as changeable as the clouds, the winds, the seasons and the light. As real estate entrepreneurs are fond of saying, it's location, location, location.

Our final day in the park was spent in a camp bus en route to the train station. We were traveling about 35 mph, the speed limit, scanning hills and fields for wildlife. The bus abruptly slowed to a crawl. "We've got wolves in the road!" our driver announced. Three of them.

We were in the middle of one of the most rugged and twisting stretches of the Park Road, with walls of mountain rock on the left and a sharp, scary drop into a river valley on our right. Dall sheep would have made a quick getaway, but the sauntering wolves continued to make good use of the road, with an occasional look over their shoulders.

Our fellow passengers were excited, even raucous, snapping photos

furiously and bumping into each other like paparazzi. The wolves were the only Big Five celebrity we had yet to see.

It was "rush hour" and a few buses coming from the opposite direction were obliged to duck into pull-off areas and yield to the critters and our bus. From a distance of about 75 yards, we followed the pack, losing sight of them now and then around a curve. After about ten minutes, the terrain flattened and the wolves darted up behind a brushy rise on edge of the road. As we passed the rise, I gazed up and saw a wolf — actually just ears and eyes — peering over the top. It was watching the bus and, as we passed by, our eyes met.

Hal Smith, co-editor of the Sierra Atlantic, writes travel articles for major metro newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Chicago Tribune, Buffalo News, and many others.

OUTINGS • OUTINGS • OUTINGS



Get Out There

There's nothing like learning about nature with fellow Sierrans. New York's Groups offer a great variety of activities — and lots of them — for you to have fun while expanding your understanding. For an up-to-date list of Sierra Club outings, go to <http://newyork.sierraclub.org/outings>

If you need information, have questions about the Atlantic Chapter Outings Committee, or wish to volunteer, call 212-791-2400, option 1, or send an e-mail to acocoutings@pobox.com