

## Touring Alaska 2018

Arriving in Anchorage was a bit of a shock, it was like stepping into a cold version of the wild west. The airport, hotels and restaurants are all decorated with stuffed animals, animal heads or antlers. Taxidermy is alive and well up here. We also had some difficulty understanding some of the accents and making ourselves understood. Even so everyone is very friendly.

Anchorage is like a big country town where it's all about hunting and fishing and for a few months of the year there is tourism. The tourist season has only just started so it's a bit quiet, and the local market only has a few stalls. All around Anchorage the mountains in the back ground are impressive.



We caught a train south to Seward (200km), passing through some very impressive mountains, some just capped with snow but others almost covered. It is only 2 weeks to summer but it doesn't look like it here. There are a few green tips on trees and a sprinkling of

gardens with bulbs. There are only a few species of trees that will grow in this harsh environment. Seward is an even smaller country town and everyone is eager to talk to strangers in town. Seward is on the south coast of Alaska on a small protected bay. On a tour of the town we were able to see sea otters, a humpback whale, several ducks and a seal. And all this just from the shore!

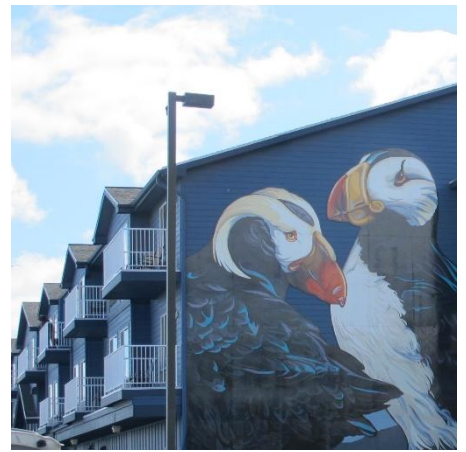




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Unfortunately we have no good photos of any of these animals because my camera got sand in it while we were in the Sahara and we have not been able to get it fixed here. My camera has a much better zoom, so for now we are managing with Graham's camera which only has a 5 fold zoom.

Seward also had an interesting sealife centre which is mainly used for injured animals and research but has many good displays in a range of aquaria. The town has some great street art – these are two species of puffins which we also saw alive in the sealife centre.



Back in Anchorage we packed up again and headed north by bus as the train was still not running (too early in the season) to Denali National Park (375km). We have seen eagles, moose, caraboo and a grizzly bear but all too far away to get good photos. But we did see a few interesting birds and two small animals – a snow-shoe hare and an arctic ground squirrel.

On a tour we learnt that the animals are dividied into 3 types: hibernators (like bears), tollerators (like moose who can scratch through the snow to find mosses to eat and migrators (birds and carribou). Our room looks out onto a fast flowing river with icepacks on both banks. Occassionally a piece breaks off and floats down the river.



Last night we attended a great musical dinner event. It told some of the stories of the early settlers in the area and included poems and songs. The singing was great and the food original – ribs, potato, corn and beans – I felt like I was in an episode of the Waltons!

Today we enjoyed the train trip back to Anchorage. The scenery was stunning, I also saw a black bear. There was lots of snow through the higher areas and much more green on the trees in Anchorage since 4 days ago when we left. Spring has taken hold and things are changing rapidly.



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Being here very early in the season has advantages – not too crowded, still snow on the mountains, and no mosquitoes; but also has disadvantages – many staff are new and not good at their jobs; lots of things are not operating yet and it is too early for the wild flowers.

Most of the tourists are from the “lower 48” as they refer to the core states of USA, but there is a good sprinkling of Aussies, English and Canadians as well.

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The next part of our adventure started with a flight from Anchorage to Juneau where we joined a tour boat travelling around the inside passage, including Glacier Bay, with UnCruise. There were about 70 passengers on the boat –10 Aussies, 5 Kiwis and the rest from all over the USA. An easy group to be with as everyone was interested in the animals and environment. The staff were knowledgeable and helpful and the food was good as well.

This morning was spent whale watching – yes there were lots of spouts from whales blowing and we even managed to get a photo of a tail (the fluke).



There was also a large group of Dall Porpoises. They are black and white and can be mistaken for orcas. They were playing in the bow of the ship for ages. They were fast and it was difficult to get a photo as they jumped through the waves, but I did manage to get one reasonable picture.





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We have seen rafts of sea otters (groups that cluster together in the kelp beds as this helps them float), smaller harbour porpoises, lots of harbour seals, large sea lions and various birds that I found hard to identify, but I did see one puffin flying in circles in front of us. Bald eagles were seen everywhere (there are more bald eagles in Alaska than in the “lower 48” states).

Every day there were one or two activities. We chose not to go snorkeling or do the polar plunge, but we did kayak in front of a calving glacier. Calving is the term used when pieces fall off into the ocean. The glacier was groaning and creaking, sometimes sounding like thunder, and then a huge chunk of ice would fall into the ocean in front of us. We paddled through water littered with chunks of ice called *bergy-bits* and *growlers* - depending on their size. This was a once in a lifetime experience. It was raining and icy cold but we were enthralled to see it, and very glad that we chose a small ship cruise rather than the ocean liner that stopped in the distance so the passengers could see the glacier from the deck. This Glacier is about 180 foot high, the previous one was about 250 feet.



The constantly wet weather did not stop us from doing anything. We put on thermal underwear, trousers, 2 jumpers, waterproof trousers and jacket, hat, gloves and scarf, and rubber boots....yes it took a long time to get ready! But this allows us to go walking, hiking, kayaking and stay reasonably warm and dry. Here we are ready to go out on the skiff (a rubber ducky) to see more wildlife. On one trip we also saw two young deer on the shore of an island. The number of islands must be close to infinite.



The days started early (6 or 7am) and were generally active. During the after dinner talks it was common to see people nodding off.

Later in the week we went further south where there was less snow and very few glaciers. This allowed for more on shore activities, but these were undertaken with great caution because of the number of bears in the area. Bears are always given a wide berth and our camera was not good enough to get a good picture – but you know what they look like. We also saw a porcupine climbing a tree, but again didn't get a good picture. We also visited an unusual little village called Elfin Cove. A small inlet from the sea opens onto a very protected bay with steep sides; the houses surrounding the cove are all on stilts and are connected by timber walkways. There are no roads, no cars and only eight inhabitants in winter; this is expanded by fishermen in summer.



The photo below shows the Wilderness Explorer with the kayaking ready to go. We were fortunate to be able to get into and out of the kayaks on a platform attached to the boat because after two hours of freezing conditions in a cramped kayak it was not easy to get out. We would highly recommend the company UnCruise to everyone! It was wonderful.

