

To untamed Alaska

For a fiftyish couple, a trek through wilderness with a neophyte guide was an adventure and a test.

By Sharon Barr

For The Inquirer



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DOUBTFUL CREEK, Alaska - I didn't plan our trip to prove that we could see the largest state without taking a cruise. Nor did I quite imagine that a tiny airplane would drop me, my husband, Pete, and my 13-year-old son, Adam, in an uncompromising wilderness, with a 24-year-old guide who'd never set foot here until a month before our trip.

But that is what happened. And through it, we learned to trust our instincts and one another.

Instead of boarding a cruise ship in the Inside Passage to begin our trip from Mount Airy, we flew to Anchorage, where we loaded up an RV and spent two weeks roaming the countryside: hiking in Denali National Park and Preserve, watching baseball in Fairbanks, and salmon fishing in the Kenai River.

When it came time to journey into the remote wilderness, though, we turned to an outfitter, Pangaea Adventures, to arrange a trip. Pangaea provided a guide for eight days: Ben, a lean and tanned native of Maine. Our only other traveling companion was Simon, 27, an Australian on a solo adventure of his own.

The first four days were spent sea- kayaking among icebergs in the Prince William Sound and rafting the Tonsina River - all exhilarating times. At the end of the fourth day, I found myself sitting in the dusty gravel lot that is the Chitina Airport, next to a gravel airstrip, a log shack, and two portable toilets. Two red-and-white planes sat in the parking lot.

Small planes are the taxicabs of Alaska. I was, quite simply, terrified on my first trip in a six-seater - the wind jostling the plane, feeling like there was nothing but plywood between me

and the ground. We flew from Chitina in one of these planes to our home for the next four nights.

After seven of these trips, I never quite got over closing my eyes and praying during some part of the flight.

From the air, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve's 13 million acres are astonishing terrain - not just one row of starkly carved glaciated peaks, but range after range of them, interrupted only by the striated Mile High cliffs, deep river canyons, and crystal lakes.

Don, a Wrangell Mountain Air pilot who can land planes on spits of mountain dirt, told us that the place Ben had planned to take us backpacking was impassable. "Don't worry," Don said, "you will love it" at Doubtful Creek, "and there's a map in your bear canister."

Doubtful Creek, about 25 miles east of the old Kennecott Copper Mine, runs through a tundra valley about three miles wide and 10 miles long. We pitched our tents in the middle of the plain between Doubtful Creek and Moonshine Creek, which we would hike in a couple of days. To the north lay the Nizina Glacier, with a dusty coating of brown moraine on its mottled edge. To the west was the Finn, an 8,000-foot rocky outcropping of a mountain. To the south ran a braided river of glacial runoff that changed course daily.

A series of terraced embankments, topped with tundra and edged with rubble, forms the sides of the valley, carved so cleanly by the glacier that I could imagine that a cosmic backhoe had come through. Rising from the valley floor are the cone-shaped foothills, carpeted so densely with spruce and underbrush that ascent is too difficult. Creeks and waterfalls cascade down the mountains.

Pete and I gazed at the landscape that first evening, pondering the fact that our guide had no knowledge of the area save for a topographic map and what we could all see. Our sole contact with the outside world was a radio, useful only for contacting the occasional small aircraft that might fly overhead. Our only way out would be Don, who was scheduled to return in four days.

We had Ben, Simon and one another, and none of us knew exactly what the terrain held in store.

It turned out Ben was thoughtful, cheerful, knowledgeable and calm. More important, Ben had learned the basics of adaptation and survival. There are the bear canisters and rules about storing food. But hiking in the Wrangells is without trails, blazes or signs, requiring you to rely on your eyes, feet, strength and wits to figure out a route from here to there.

There are many water crossings, some over the braided river, some over creeks cascading out of the mountains. On warm days, the glacier melts faster, feeding the creeks and rivers. A creek that is quiet and passable in the morning may be high and raging in the afternoon.

On two days, we tried unsuccessfully to reach the top of the Nizina Glacier, which seemed to recede the more we hiked up the valley to reach it. Heading to the edge of the glacier meant walking up and down the gravelly embankments, which sometimes turned into sliding or climbing on all fours, holding your footing as the rocks tumbled to the next level down.

Each day, a huge piece of the glacier calved off, crashing to the canyon floor, sending a spray of ice and water into the air. We saw signs of the Earth's formation and deformation, picking up jade and ocher-colored rocks, fossils, and a chunk of copper that bore markings of geological time.

We followed the terrain, referring to our map, unrestricted by the need to return by sunset. We crossed rivers by building bridges from downed trees and driftwood or by throwing rocks into the water for stepping-stones. At other places, the water was too deep, and we waded or jumped in. Where brush obscured our view, we called out, chanted and whistled to alert any unsuspecting grizzly bears of our presence. I was happy to see only bear tracks.

Our four days at Doubtful Creek had a timelessness eased by the extended Alaska daylight. In endless dusk, we could linger, talk or read until our bodies told us we were tired. We each knew instinctively that the trip's success depended on a delicate balance of flexibility and determination, of sociability and privacy.

We as fiftysomethings do not often spend a week with younger people as comrades, much less have to rely on their skill for survival. As I look back, somehow the balance worked - our long summer evenings by the kitchen tents, chatting or being silent, trying to make a fifth of Wild Turkey last as long as possible.

I still wonder what would have happened if we had drawn a guide less skilled than Ben, or a traveling companion less agreeable than Simon. Or if a bear had eaten our food. Or if one of us had tumbled down an embankment to the river below. Or if it had rained every day. Through a combination of luck and skill, none of that happened.

Every journey to a new place tests your comfort level: comfort with your companions, comfort with your strength, comfort with tolerance of the unknown. The Alaska wilderness is an extraordinarily beautiful place to challenge your limits.

Exploring the Alaskan Wilderness

Continental, Delta, Northwest, United and US Airways fly to **Anchorage** from Philadelphia International Airport with one stop. The lowest recent round-trip airfare was about \$534.

Things to See

We used the **Lonely Planet Guide to Alaska** to plan our trip. It had some great suggestions for trips.

Other places we stopped and guides we used were:

Talkeetna. The town was the inspiration for the TV show *Northern Exposure*. A cross between hip town and Alaskan outpost, it is the starting point for climbers of **Denali (Mount McKinley)**. Those less daring can take flightseeing tours around Mount McKinley. We took a flight around McKinley with K2 Aviation, www.flyk2.com.

Fairbanks. We actually scheduled our trip around the **Midnight Sun baseball game**, an

annual tradition that is going on its 102d year. The Alaska Goldpanners play a night game without lights - this year's game is scheduled for June 21; www.goldpanners.com.

Kenai Peninsula. We went salmon fishing off the Kenai Peninsula with Jeremy Schimmel, a private guide from Bala Cynwyd who has been guiding in Alaska for 20 years. Alaska on the Fly Guide Service, 907-398-1437.

Also, don't miss the salmon chowder at **Gwins Lodge in Cooper Landing**, www.gwinslodge.com. When you catch your limit of salmon, you can have it processed and shipped home. We used **10th & M Seafood** in Anchorage, www.10thandmseafoods.com.

Chena Hot Springs. Natural hot-springs resort north of Anchorage, also the home of an ice lodge that you can tour, www.chenahotsprings.com.

Wrangell Mountain Air. The air guides for the **Wrangell-St. Elias National Park**. You can also book tours here. www.wrangellmountainair.com.

McCarthy. If you go to the Wrangell Mountains, be sure to stop in this old mining town. Accessible by plane and dirt roads, the town has 50 year-round residents and a summer crowd of about 300 - mostly young wilderness guides and bartenders. www.mccarthy-kennicott.com.

For information

**Denali National Park
and Preserve**

www.nps.gov/dena

Wrangell-St. Elias

National Park and Preserve

www.nps.gov/wrst

Pangaea Adventures

www.alaskasummer.com

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