



## Denali National Park, Alaska

Denali is not like any other National Park. First it is the most remote and it is massive and most of the park has no roads or even trails. There are no campgrounds or hotels inside the park and no scenic roads for people to drive.

Most visitors come to Denali as part of bus or cruise/land tours and unless you are planning an extended Alaska driving vacation those are probably your best options. First, Denali is not your typical National Park. Access for the general public is mostly restricted to taking the parks bus excursions. While these are really good tours the problem is you need to make reservations way in advance – weeks or even months before. Going on a cruise/land tour all your park access is arranged by the tour companies.

We visited Denali as part of a cruise-land package. Many travelers enjoy this combination of cruise and land tour as it is a comfortable way to visit this part of



Alaska. We took the cruise from Vancouver and then traveled overland by train and bus from Seward. If we were to do it again, however, we would do the opposite. It would be much better to spend a number of days touring and then have a wonderful seven nights to relax and be pampered on the cruise ship.

In our case we disembarked our cruise ship in Seward where we visited the Alaska SeaLife Center and then took a Resurrection Bay Wildlife Cruise.

Resurrection Bay is an amazing wilderness area where you will be virtually guaranteed to find dolphins, sea lions, Dall sheep, otters, eagles and a huge variety of sea birds. Honestly it was the most incredible boat excursion we've ever taken.

Later that day we boarded the Wilderness Express train. It is our understanding that some cruise lines offer train service all the way to Denali but our Celebrity package didn't. The trains are made up of double decker glass domed observation cars offering great views as the train traveled across some high snow covered terrain that was crossed by a number of streams and rivers. The individual cars themselves are actually owned by the various cruise companies and that evening we were served dinner in the lower level dining room.



The train took us to Girdwood where we spent the night at the Hotel Aleyska which is a major ski resort. On the next morning we had time for some hiking and took the Alyeska Tramway up to see the views from 2,300 feet above the valley. In the early afternoon we boarded our bus and spent the next night at the Marriott in the city of Anchorage. While in Anchorage we spent time at the downtown market and had a light meal at the wine bar, Crush Wine Bistro. The following day we spent most of the time on the bus getting to Denali with a stop for lunch in Talkeetna. Along the way we also got our first good look at Mt. Denali (McKinley) and the Alaska Range.



We arrived late in the afternoon at the Denali Visitor Center where we took the Discover Denali Tour, a 1.5 mile walk where a ranger familiarized us with the park and all it had to offer. We spent the night at the McKinley Village Lodge (now renamed Denali Park Village). The next morning we embarked on the tundra



wilderness tour, sponsored by the Park Service, with approximately 8 hours on a bus dedicated to enjoying the scenery and wildlife and learning the park's history. There were lots of photo stops and a "bag lunch" was included.

For perspective you need to understand that the scenery is inspiring but so is the very desolate

and wild character of Denali. Many of the mountain tops are above the tree line exposing huge expanses of meadows. The major focus of the tour is the wildlife but that also needs some explaining. Area wise, Denali is our largest national park. It encompasses about 9,492 square miles (larger than the state of New Hampshire) and most of it is without roads or even trails. The animal populations are much smaller than most people would expect.

There are only 70 grizzly bears per 1,000 square miles in Denali. Other census numbers per 1,000 square miles show 131 Black bears, for wolves less than 8, and the estimate for the total Denali Caribou Herd was about 2,230 animals. Dall Sheep totals for the park are less than 1,900. Based on these numbers it's easy to understand that looking for wildlife is the major focus of the tour. We were lucky and saw



two grizzly bears, a small herd of Caribou and two different groups of Dall sheep. We also saw many "suicide squirrels", so named because locals think they prefer to die in front of buses rather than face the prospect of a grizzly bear digging them out of the ground. One of the grizzlies we saw was digging frantically which probably meant squirrel.

The landscapes are vast and rugged and North America's tallest mountain, Denali (previously Mt. McKinley) stands above everything. The only problem is that it is shrouded in clouds most of the year, but, even if you miss the "Great One," the Alaska Range is an awesome sight.

While we recommend the land tour, if you are planning on going to Denali on your own it is important to understand three things. First, the park is vast and has very little in the way of rest areas or visitor centers. Second, the park generally does not allow private cars far beyond the entrance and visitor's center. Lastly, you need reservations to take the park operated bus tour and they book up weeks, maybe months in advance. Visiting Denali is not a casual process and considering the vast distances crossed in Alaska, you need to begin to make your arrangements months in advance.

Staying at Denali Village offers a choice of a number of accommodations, some restaurants and gift shops and it was home to a popular helicopter tour. The Into The Wild Bus



from the movie based on a true story. But just recently for public safety the bus has been removed from its wilderness area. It seemed that over the years trekkers never stopped coming to see the bus, and a number of them died along the way. It was the last home of Chris McCandless, who detailed in a journal the tragic final moments of starvation in 1992 after he was trapped by the swollen, icy waters of the Teklanika River. McCandless had taken shelter in an abandoned city bus for 114 days before he died.

After another night near Denali our tour headed for Fairbanks and our flight home. In Fairbanks you can visit and walk under The Alaska Pipeline, tour an interesting history center and see

gold mining operations. We love cruising Alaska but this land tour was a truly unforgettable experience.