



Mountains and glaciers

PHOTOS: QUAMRUL HAIDER

VACATION IN ALASKA:

Flightseeing tour of the Denali Mountains

QUAMRUL HAIDER

Alaska may not fit the bill for what most people envision as a vacation, but it has been on my family's bucket list for a long time. Our 10-day trip started on July 1, 2019 in Anchorage, the largest city in Alaska. We—my wife, myself, son and daughter—visited three national parks: Denali Wilderness in central Alaska, Tidewater Glaciers on the Prince William Sound and Kenai Fjords on the Resurrection Bay near Seward. Tidewater glaciers are valley glaciers that flow far enough to reach out and calve into the sea.

A trip to Alaska is not complete without seeing Mount Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), which is located in the south-central part of the Alaska Mountain Range. Denali is the Native American Athabascan word meaning "The High One," and with good reason. From afar, it is massive; up close, the sheer granite walls, alpine glaciers and pillowing snow cornices are otherworldly.

Mount Denali is the third highest of the Seven Summits—the highest mountains on each of the seven continents—following Mount Everest in Nepal and Mount Aconcagua in Argentina. At 20,320 feet, it is North America's tallest peak, rightly celebrated as an icon of all that is awesome and wild in a state where those adjectives are ubiquitous.

There is a fact about Denali unknown to many of us. By one measure, it could be considered the third tallest mountain in the world. It rises about 18,000 feet from its base, which is a greater vertical rise than Mount Everest's 12,000-foot rise from its base at 17,000 feet.

Seeing Denali from a distance can be difficult. As it is frequently draped in clouds, one can see only a small portion of the mountain beyond its base. Some days the mountain is obscured completely from ground level. Still, with clouds, storms, fog and sunny high-pressure systems all battling it out around Denali, the peak can



de Havilland Beaver

PHOTO: QUAMRUL HAIDER



Mt Denali from the Highway

PHOTO: MAHJABEEN HAIDER

appear at any moment. On the day of our visit—July 3, 2019—we lucked out. It was a sunny, calm, cloudless, postcard-perfect afternoon and we could see Denali from a distant vista point on the highway from Anchorage to Talkeetna.

The magnetic appeal of Denali draws climbers from all over the world. They flock to this mountain to struggle for the summit. Wasfia Nazreen, who conquered Mount Everest as the second Bangladeshi female mountaineer, reached the summit of Mount Denali on June 24, 2014. Dogsledders traverse Denali's lower reaches.

For tourists like us who are not into mountain climbing, flight seeing planes from Talkeetna carry us up the glacier-choked valleys to view parts of Denali hidden from distant eyes. Paradoxically, Talkeetna is a totally flat town 60 miles away from the base of the mountain.

We took a 90-minute flight seeing tour on a ski-equipped de Havilland Beaver. There were six other tourists and everyone had a window seat. A few minutes after takeoff, apprehension of flying in a single engine propeller-driven aircraft gave way

to wonder as we entered a world of rugged, high mountain peaks and spectacular glacier-filled valleys. The wind was calm but the clouds conspired with each other and surrounded the Denali peak, with layers floating between the uplifted knives of snow-capped stone.

Clouds may have prevented a flight over the Denali peak. However, as the plane flew at an optimal altitude of 15,000 feet and since we approached from the southeast, then maneuvered toward the south rim, we enjoyed panoramic views of all sides of Denali and had the best perspective of the sheer size of the mountains of the Denali Massif.

The surrounding mountains were shrouded in black stone and white snow with shocking patches of turquoise blue where the snow had melted enough to create little dish lakes. The pilot flew the plane over those mountains, around them, up to their edge so everyone could see them. We got up close to their snowfields, alpine glaciers, deep crevasses and sheer granite walls. At times—especially when the plane banked sharply left or right to provide better perspective for every passenger, it seemed the snow and ice were almost at our fingertips. When we saw the glaciers beneath the towering mountain peaks, we could understand why these immense ice fields attract people from all over the world.

The high point of the flight was landing on a glacier. Because of clear weather

and calm wind, our plane landed on the Ruth Glacier, located at 5,600 feet in the Sheldon Amphitheater. From there, we had breathtaking views of mountains and glaciers all around. The experience of walking on a glacier was out of this world. After 30 minutes of walking through Denali's icy alpine world, our plane took off for Talkeetna, but via a different route.

As one would expect, the vastness of such an experience could never be captured in a photograph, but we certainly tried. It is the memories that are so vivid and intense, as if the trip happened yesterday. Nonetheless, while going through the mountains, we photographed jaw-dropping scenery, including some glacial landforms we had seen only in textbooks.

How would I characterise our Denali experience? During the flight, my optic nerves shifted into high gear after the plane flew into an Alpine world where everything is so huge that it is impossible to grasp the scale and size. Distances at Denali are warped!

Quamrul Haider is a professor of physics at Fordham University, New York.