



Glenn Highway

PHOTO: QUAMRUL HAIDER

Days and nights under the midnight sun

Denali Wilderness, Tidewater Glaciers and Kenai Peninsula

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Known for its overwhelming natural beauty and incredible ice formations, Alaska, the largest state (in area) of the United States is home to a multitude of geological wonders. The state boasts 100,000 plus glaciers, 17 of the 20 highest mountains in the country, scores of active volcanoes, seven national parks, unsullied wilderness, plentiful wildlife, and a diverse ecosystem. With so many fascinating options to explore, a select few—Denali Wilderness, Tidewater Glaciers and Kenai Peninsula, were among the must-see attractions during our short visit to the state in July 2019.

Denali Wilderness National Park is a parcel of untrammled, pristine, primeval land in its rawest form that is unmatched in size and beauty. The wilderness spans over six million acres, enclosing and protecting one of the world's last great frontiers. Landslides, glacially-fed braided rivers, and moving glaciers define the ever-changing landscape of the wilderness, from boreal forests dense with rising pines, birch, and aspen, to barren tundra dotted with jagged mountains chiseled by glaciers. Near the entrance to the park, long, steep, rocky cliffs line a canyon while the Nenana River twists and turns violently below.

In the park, one can go only so far—or rather, so near, by car. The only

road inside the park is the Denali Park Road, which runs parallel to the Alaska Mountain Range. Meandering through low valleys and high mountain passes, the road is unpaved, rugged, narrow, and winding. There are many areas with hairpin curves and steep drop offs with no guardrails. That is why private vehicles can only drive to Savage Creek, about 15 miles from the entrance. To see the park past there requires a bus tour.

We took the 13-hour Tundra Wilderness Tour on July 4, 2019, travelling 95 miles in each direction to the Denali Backcountry Lodge in Kantishna. It is a remote settlement with a fascinating gold rush history and surrounded by the best of Denali.

We stopped at several scenic spots—Sanctuary River, Igloo Creek, Polychrome Mountain, Toklat River, Wonder Lake, and Eielson Visitor Center. From the vista points and from the bus, we had a sweeping view of Denali's north flank, as well as other mountains in the Alaska Range that straddles the park.

We experienced everything the wilderness has to offer: forests and marshy lowlands giving way to hills, and subarctic tundra. The towering granite spires, their snowy summits, eye-catching glaciers and glacial valleys running southwards enthralled us. At every turn,

we saw landscapes full of surprises, and the further we traveled, the more it revealed. During our visit, the famous—often notorious—clouds in the park took a break to reveal the great massif of Mount Denali itself, 20,320 feet high roof of North America.

More than 650 species of flowering plants, shrubs, lichen and moss comprise the vegetation of the park. It is amazing how a land that can be so harsh and desolate with long, bitterly cold winters is the biome for so many beautiful flowers and plants.

One of the wild flowers that caught our attention is fireweed. We saw this gorgeous native flower enflamed in shocking pink shooting up not only in Denali, but also in all the places we visited in Alaska. The ubiquity of fireweed has spread to store shelves, where we found it made into honey, jelly, syrup, tea, and even ice cream.

Denali's wildlife encompasses a variety of species. Grizzlies, black bears, moose, caribou and curve-horned Dall sheep pace the grounds, among others, while falcons, hawks, and golden eagles claim the skies. Black bears inhabit the forested areas of the park, while grizzly bears mainly live on the open tundra.

We saw grizzlies with cubs, including a stray cub eating berries near the road, a herd of Dall sheep and moose roaming freely in their natural habitat. Grizzlies and sheep were spotted way up in the mountains, but luckily, we had two powerful binoculars with us. We saw several caribou with impressive antlers sitting in open areas near the Eielson Visitor Center. We also saw marmots, arctic ground squirrels, and snowshoe hares at the ground level, and several species of birds including a golden eagle perched atop a mountain.

The tour of Denali Wilderness was a wonderful experience for us, especially since it coincided almost exactly with the summer solstice when there is no clear division between day and night. The nearly continuous sunlight debunked assumptions we make about the separation of night and day and how that separation affects animal behavior, including our own.

Next on our bucket list was Tidewater Glaciers, which are valley glaciers that flow far enough to calve into the water. The best place to see these glaciers is from the protected waters of Prince William Sound, which was in the news in 1989 when the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil. The Sound had been a pristine wilderness before the spill. The disaster dramatically changed all of that, taking a major toll on wildlife. Today, it appears to have recovered, though not completely.

Our itinerary included a ferry ride on the Sound—from Valdez to Cordova. Accordingly, on July 5, 2019, we departed for Valdez from Healy, a backwood small town located close to the Arctic Circle, where we had the unique opportunity to experience 24 hours of sunlight. We drove south to Wasilla, got on the eastbound Glenn Highway and then took the southbound Richardson Highway at Glennallen all the way to Valdez.

Driving on the Glenn Highway was like driving through Alaska's postcards.

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