



Alaskan roads can be a good deal of fun to ride, as shown here along the Glen Highway.



That's Boundary Lodge, close by the Alaska/Yukon border on the Top of the World Highway.

# THE FAR NORTH

2011 *RIDER ALASKA AND YUKON TOUR WITH AYRES ADVENTURES.*

BY CLEMENT SALVADORI  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR AND SUE SALVADORI

Ah, the last frontier! Well, sort of. That's an Alaskan slogan, which has been around a long time. However, for citizens of the lower 48, and Hawaii, a trip to Alaska is an eye-opener. Compared to Maryland, or even Montana, there is a whole lot of Alaska filled with mountains, lakes, rivers and trees...and very few roads. Same goes for the Yukon, the neighboring Canadian territory.

The last time I was in Alaska was 35 years ago. After celebrating the bicentennial with friends in Oregon I took the Marine Highway (which means on a ship, with BMW motorcycle in the hold) up to Haines. That was a good trip, with limited funds, mostly camping and campfire cooking.

Then Editor Tuttle tempted me with a second trip to the 49th state on the *Rider Alaska and Yukon Tour* with Ayres Adventures, which advertises itself as offering "Premium Motorcycle

Tours Worldwide." Premium is good, as it means ordering off the menu every evening, soft pillows every night and somebody else hauling the luggage. How could I refuse? Also, it would make a great birthday present for my bride.

The Ayres map showed that we would be traveling most of the roads I had been on in 1976, and the comparison would be interesting. Sue and I flew into Anchorage on June 24, arriving at midnight by the clock, almost daylight by the Arctic sun and the recently passed summer solstice, and were met by tour leader John Jesson. The first shocker was Anchorage, with a brand-new airport and lots of high-rise buildings. It had been a mildly booming town when I last saw it, with all the oil money beginning to create opportunities, but was now a genuine city.

Being a day early, Sue and I got on our BMW R 1200 GS to ride south a hundred miles to the tiniest of towns on

# THE FAR NORTH

the Kenai Peninsula, Hope—which had not changed much since I was last there. Although it did now have a rudimentary one-pump gas station. Hope's heyday was over 120 years ago, when gold was found in two nearby creeks, and the population soared to more than 2,000—and is now less than 200, mostly catering to summer tourists.

Back to Anchorage. The rest of the tour group arrived, with four gents—all leaving wives/girlfriends at home—and a couple from Maryland. And our second guide, Ed McClure, who moved to Alaska in 1980 and knows the roads well.

Next morning we saddled up and headed out on the Glenn Highway—a long road that heads toward the Wrangell Mountains, with a stunning look at the snow-covered peaks that I remembered well. In 1978 the Wrangell-St. Elias became this country's largest national park, covering more than 13,000 square miles. And our hotel

couple of motels and gas stations, a few stores and a small airport. Here Sue was fêted on her birthday—which number will never be divulged.

I was looking forward to the next day, when we would go over the Top of the World Highway, including 40 unpaved miles between Chicken and the Canadian border—Alaskans and Yukonians like calling their roads highways, even if they are dirt. In 1976 the day was sunny and the ride a delight; this time I was not so lucky, as we woke to a rainy sky. We headed up the Taylor Highway, and the rain stopped before we got to Chicken. Chicken is a story in itself, of an old mining town that was almost abandoned—until the road over Top of the World was improved in 1955 and the seasonal tourist rush began.

Leaving Chicken, a light rain started and the spacious views disappeared, which forced us to

**Below left: During the long winter nights in these northern climes, a fertile mind and a welding torch create their own fantasies. Far right: On the way to the village of Hope on the Kenai Peninsula, we stopped to have a look at the Portage Glacier. Below right: Alaska is dotted with lakes, thousands of them, all good for fishing; this one is called Louise, and the lodge serves a fine lunch.**



**Above: Mount McKinley, with its summit at 20,320 feet above sea level, is the centerpiece of Denali National Park, and the tallest mountain in North America.**

that night in Copper Center had a magnificent view of the mountains, as well as delicious halibut on the menu.

The next day was a short one, so we agreed that a side trip along the Richardson Highway to Valdez on the coast would be in order. However, after going past Worthington Glacier and over Thompson Pass at 2,771 feet, we dropped into the rainy seaside—and sensibly turned around to head to Tok. There is not much to be said about this town, as it is merely a cross-roads on the Alaska Highway, servicing traffic, with a

concentrate on the road rather than gawk at nature's wonders. I feared for two of the riders in the group who had not much experience on dirt roads, let alone slippery, muddy ones, but they faithfully followed in the track of the leader. When we stopped at the Boundary Lodge, a ramshackle roadhouse just before the border, I asked if they had been nervous. Not at all, they said, figuring that Ed knew what he was doing, and they would do the same. Occasionally ignorance can be beneficial.

The border was at 4,127 feet, the Top of the World peaking at near 4,400 maybe a mile farther on; the clouds and fog did limit the views. Sixty miles later the road had dropped more than 4,000 feet and stopped at the edge of the Yukon River. This is a seriously big river, flowing for some 2,000 miles from its headwaters

# THE FAR NORTH

**Right: Jim and Bob wanted to tell their friends that they had been to the Arctic Circle, so Ed guided them up the Dalton Highway on a long 400-mile day. Below center: Copper Center, close to the main entrance to Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, has reconstructed a log church in town. Bottom right: Susan, the Queen of Chicken Creek, an old mining town along the Top of the World Highway, serves up great home-cooking to the tourists.**

in Canada's Coast Range in a great arc through Alaska to the Bering Sea. In late June it was in full flood, and there was what looked like a rather puny little ferry struggling against the current. Obviously the ferry's engines were built to cope with the fast-moving water, but all I could think was that if the engines quit we would end up doing a fast trip down the river. That did not happen. Probably an emergency cable runs from shore to shore, just in case.

On the far side was Dawson City, a one-time gold-rush boom town. In 1896 prospectors found gold along the Klondike River, which flows into the Yukon at Dawson, and within two years the place was home to 40,000 people—mostly miners, but also businessmen, a few clergy and many ladies of questionable virtue. Hotels, saloons, brothels and the occasional church were quickly built, and the city became the capitol of the Yukon Territory for the next half century. By 1900 the rush of gold-panning prospectors was finished, with big money taking over the mining operations, which petered out during the Great Depression. Now it is a great little honky-tonk town, many of the old buildings restored, with year-around residents of about 1,500, and tens of thousands of tourists in the summer. The Klondike Kate restaurant did serve up an excellent salmon for my dinner.

We only spent one night there; I would have preferred two, as there was much to see. Sue participates in local activities, like drinking a sourtoe cocktail—a shot of whatever you like with a mummified toe in it—the Downtown Hotel. A braver person than I, she is.

Next day was the long run along the Yukon to Whitehorse—the territorial capitol since 1952.

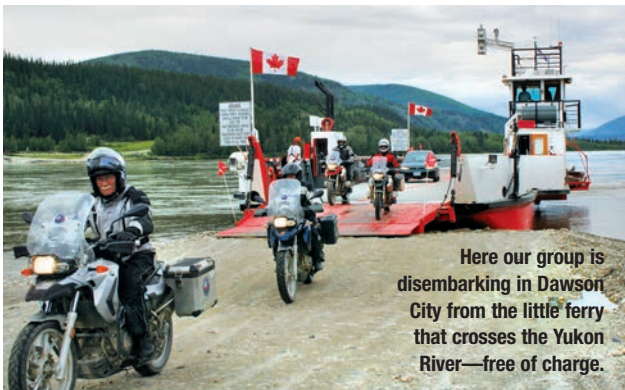


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In the far north distances tend to be long, and communities few, so we did three 300-plus mile days. This may sound like a lot, but the roads were good and the traveling was easy. Since we were a small group, seven bikes, and there was very little traffic, we tended to ride together, although we were free to go off on our own at any time. The only proviso was to stay on the designated route so that the chase could find you in case you suffered a breakdown—only one flat in the 2,400-mile trip, by the way.

After a free day in Whitehorse, we did a short run along the Klondike Highway over White Pass (3,292 feet) into the Alaskan panhandle and the port of Skagway. I had not been on this road before, since it did not exist in 1976, though a narrow-gauge railway had been built in 1900. The road is a brilliant piece of engineering, with endless sweepers that motorcyclists so love. The town pretty much shuts down in winter, as its main business is lightening the tourist wallets. A local restaurant provided me with a fine piece of salmon in ginger sauce.

Skagway is the end of the road, and early the next morning we got on a Marine Highway ferry for the hour-long ride across Lovett Canal—which is a narrow finger of the Pacific, not a canal—to Haines. I had disembarked here 35 years before. Though it had grown some, not much seemed to have changed in Haines—named for a New



Here our group is disembarking in Dawson City from the little ferry that crosses the Yukon River—free of charge.



We are headed for 3,300-foot White Pass, crossing the Coast Range between the Yukon's Whitehorse and Alaska's Skagway.



# THE FAR NORTH

**Right: On the north side of White Pass this suspension bridge crosses over one of the many tributaries of the Yukon River.**

**Below left: Sue sits with the mummified "sourtoe" at the Downtown Hotel in Dawson City, prior to dropping it into a glass of Johnny Walker Black—which she drank. Below right: These old buildings in Dawson City were built on permafrost, and when the buildings were heated, the frost melted, and the leaning began.**

Jersey woman who, without ever going to Alaska, provided money to build a school in that town. From Haines the 150-mile Haines Highway connected with the Alaska Highway at, what else, Haines Junction—the big difference being that the road was now paved. All dirt when I was there. We had a brief passport check as we crossed back into Canada, then over 3,493-foot Chilkat Pass, and on to Haines Junction, and up the Alaska Highway another 200 miles to our hotel in Beaver Creek—a wide spot in the road just before getting to Alaska. And the honkiest of tonky Vaudeville shows to keep the bus tourists happy.

Another long day got us to Fairbanks, where we had a day off. Most of our group chose to lie around and see the local sights, but a hardy two, plus guide Ed, went off to have their picture taken at the Arctic Circle, 200 miles north. And 200 miles back, most of it on dirt roads. Our heroes!

Penultimate day on the road, and we were going to Denali National Park in the hope of seeing Mount McKinley—



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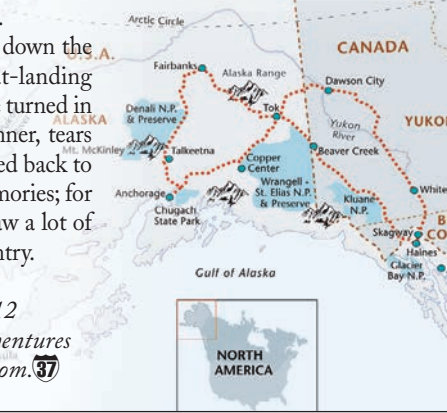
which we did! A 90-mile road runs into the park, but without camping reservations we could only ride 15 miles, to Savage River, but on the way, there was a fine view of the permanently snow-covered mountain. Back in '76 I lucked into a camping permit at Wonder Lake, 85 miles out, and had a splendid view for three moonlit nights. The view of the mountain was even better from our night's lodging in Talkeetna, where Alaskan cod sated my appetite.

On our way back to Anchorage we detoured to the Independence Mine State Historical Park near Wasilla. This was a splendid way to end the trip as the road up Granite Mountain to the park is as good as any to be found in the Alps. The hard-rock gold-mine (meaning tunnels) was active until World War II, employing over 200 people, and some of the buildings have been preserved, with guided tours being offered. Glad I did not have to work there.

The final ride was a rush down the mountain, then an hour flat-landing back to Anchorage where we turned in the bikes, had a farewell dinner, tears and all, and the next day jetted back to our old lives. With great memories; for a 12-day tour we certainly saw a lot of the magnificent North Country.

For information on the 2012 Rider Tour with Ayres Adventures see [www.ayresadventures.com](http://www.ayresadventures.com) 

**Left: On our final return to Alaska, after a night in the Yukon's Beaver Creek, we took the mandatory group shot. Below left: The finale for the trip was a ride up Granite Mountain to the old Independence Mine near Wasilla, now a state park.**



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