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ALASKA & YUKON ADVENTURE



NORTHERN BLACKTOP WITH AYRES ADVENTURES.

BY MARK TUTTLE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR
AND GENIE TUTTLE

When travelers think of Alaska, most imagine visiting the scenic islands, fjords and glaciers along the Inside Passage in its southeastern panhandle, or the wildlife in Denali National Park and vast wilderness that covers most of the state. That's fine if you fancy ships and airplanes, as the sights in the bush and Inside Passage aren't connected by roads, and except for the towering sweep of Mount McKinley, Denali's interior can only be seen by air and tour bus.

Rider readers may also associate Alaska with the desolate Dalton Highway that starts just north of Fairbanks and runs 360 miles on rough gravel road to Prudhoe Bay, in the northernmost reaches of the Sourdough state. Conquering the "Haul Road" is good for

bragging rights, but risky and hard on a bike, particularly if the weather turns.

Mere mortals like me, who would just like to tour some of Alaska by motorcycle yet still have a grand adventure, will be pleasantly surprised by how much can be explored on paved roads—you just haven't heard of most of it. Although the state's paved highways only crisscross the southeastern quarter of the state, Alaska is more than twice the size of Texas, so there's a lot of road to ride. Our goal on the first 13-day *Rider* Alaska and Yukon Adventure with Ayres Adventures was to cover as much as possible, including a big chunk of the Alaska Highway (aka the ALCAN, that runs 1,520 miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to

Background: Often shrouded by clouds, the relatively rare sight of North America's highest, Mount McKinley, takes your breath away. Inset: Our group of 10 explorers (minus the always riding Roger) and two guides taking a break on the Alaska-Yukon border.



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Fairbanks) and most of the highways in Canada's Yukon Territory. All paved except for the sections under improvement or repair.

Most riders have Alaska on their bucket lists, but why the Yukon? Fewer than 35,000 people reside in Canada's westernmost territory (and for that matter, less than 700,000 live in Alaska). It's a wild, rugged place that's largely the watershed of the long Yukon River, covered with snow-melt lakes and perennially snowcapped mountains in its southwest corner. Well worth a visit just for the scenery, but also the Klondike Gold Rush history that gives most of the towns a frontier feel. The most famous, or perhaps infamous, is Dawson City right on the Klondike River, with its late 19th-century-style buildings and locals in Gay Nineties costumes. Vaudeville-type follies shows are more common than WiFi in Yukon hotels, and were twice a highlight of our evenings.

First it was Anchorage, Alaska, our 10 riders and two capable guides John and Nuno coming from all over the USA, Europe and South Africa and meeting up at a nice downtown hotel. Ayres Adventures, our host for this journey, typically limits its tours to 10-12 riders, and gave us an appropriate choice of bikes with tankbags and side cases that ranged from BMW F 650 GS to R 1200 GS Adventure.

In August in Anchorage it's easy to forget you're in what is truly the "frozen north" much of the year, with hot rods and skateboarders cruising the main drag while they can before the sub-zero temperatures and 18-hour nights return. We benefitted from summer's extra-late sunsets, yet still had some cool days on this tour, with the average around 60 F. Our seasoned riders were all smart enough to bring protective riding gear for any weather as well as healthy respect and patience for changeable road conditions, construction and a few bugs.

Our group of barking twins roared out of Anchorage the first day with guide John leading us out of town on Alaska's short and only interstate, up through Palmer and onto the Old Glenn Highway.

Nuno was close behind with our luggage in the Ayres monster truck and mega-trailer. Freeway became green forest road winding nicely along the Matanuska River, with our first stop at the long glacier of the same name. Glaciers cover about 5 percent of Alaska, mostly in the south where more snow falls. We got our first taste of what the winters here can do to the roads on a detour to lovely Lake Louise for lunch, when fierce and sudden dips in the asphalt popped one rider's back wheel high in the air.

Just how high was the night's topic of debate, of course, at a luxurious lodge owned by Princess Cruises in Copper Center. Iron Butt veteran and endurance-riding record-setter Ron Ayres himself joined us that evening, then escorted two riders on a rainy side trip to the port of Valdez next day, famous for fishing, earthquakes and oil spills. A small group of us took the same route as far as the sweeping Worthington Glacier and our first glimpse of the 800-mile Trans-Alaska oil pipeline, which is said to carry a million barrels of oil a day from the state's North Slope fields to Valdez's ice-free port.

From the glacier we made our way back through a large river valley and warmer weather to the village of Tok, at the otherwise wilderness crossroads of the Richardson and Alaska Highways. We enjoyed the simple but comfortable room typical of the more remote hotels on this ride, a good meal with the group that evening and visiting the hotel's big gift shop and dog sled museum, which has Bill Arpino's basket sled from the first Iditarod in 1973.

We knew our adventure was truly underway at our first stop next day, at the remote mining town of Chicken at the end of a nicely winding, high mountain road. It was given the nickname of the Alaska state bird because its founders couldn't spell Ptarmigan. From here we were supposed to catch the Top of the World Highway to Dawson City, but severe winter storms had washed it out, along with any chance of our riding it and staying even somewhat on schedule. The Ayres guys adeptly rerouted

1. Matanuska Glacier is a short distance from Anchorage and the largest accessible by road, at 27 miles long and four wide.

2. *Epilobium angustifolium*—Fireweed—sets the roadsides ablaze in Alaska and Yukon.

3. Worthington Glacier on the Richardson Highway, that dead-ends at Valdez.

4. The crossroads at Tok, Alaska, is mile 1,314 of the ALCAN's 1,520.

5. Road construction and repair are part of summer life this far north.

6. Mount Billy Mitchell, named after the "father of the modern U.S. Air Force."

7. The small mining outpost of Chicken is the jumping-off point for the Top of the World Highway.

8. Ayres truck and trailer combo carries luggage and the occasional pillion passenger needing a respite.

9. The Dawson City Detour crew won the bug collection award.

10. Chicken has a bar, gift shop, café, website (chickenalaska.com)...and an attack chicken.

11. The road down from Independence Mine, with Palmer, Alaska, in the distance.

12. Sternwheelers like the *SS Klondike* in Whitehorse, Yukon, were vital river transport during the late 1800's gold rush.

13. Unmanned fish wheels, this one on the Chilkat River near Haines, Alaska, are common and scoop up salmon swimming upstream.

14. U.S. border station on the Alaska-British Columbia border high above Skagway near the infamous Chilkoot Pass.

15. Mailing postcards back home from North Pole, Alaska's tiny Visitor Center gives them a pretty unique postmark....





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us the only way they could, which really only meant skipping the Klondike Highway and Dawson City, though four of our group used the rest day in Whitehorse later on to make the Dawson trip regardless. We were happy someone would take home stories and pictures from this rowdy gold rush town, where many of the locals are descendants of the original miners.

Big mile days took us down through the Yukon, the roadsides ablaze with violet fireweed blossoms, past Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge and Kluane National Park's endless high, always snowcapped peaks. We rode over plains covered with vast lakes and silvery rivers and past forests of stunted trees struggling to grow in the shallow soil over the permafrost. In Beaver Creek we laughed at the Frantic Follies in the big dining room of the resort, and on our first rest day in comparably bustling Whitehorse we visited the MacBride Museum of Yukon History, learned about the Klondike and the flora and fauna of the Yukon and ate wild salmon for dinner. Crossing briefly into BC on riding day six we scaled breathtaking alpinelike mountains before and after the infamous Chilkoot Pass, over which would-be miners had to drag themselves and all of their gear from now-touristy Skagway enroute to hoped-for riches on the Klondike. A ferry then took us an hour from Skagway to scenic Haines, Alaska, where we rode north alongside the Alsek Mountains back through BC and into the Yukon once again, rejoining the ALCAN and backtracking to Beaver Creek over the roughest part of the ALCAN built on ever-changing permafrost.

The ALCAN to Fairbanks flanks the Alaska Range to the west, passes the pipeline, Eielson AFB and North Pole before ending in Alaska's second biggest city of Fairbanks. No, not THE cold and barren North Pole 1,700 miles up, but a little town named by an enterprising group in 1953 to draw tourism, not to mention hundreds of thousands of letters to Santa Claus every year.

The rainy forecast for our second rest day in Fairbanks changed the minds of anyone thinking about making the 406-mile round-trip to the Arctic Circle marker for a photo (though guide John led an Ayres tour on that miserable Dalton Highway all the way to Prudhoe Bay immediately after ours). Instead we spent our rest day walking the Chena River downtown or visiting the impressive museums at the University. Some rode to Chena Hot Springs outside of town and soaked it up, spotting another moose to add to our wildlife-watching tally that included wolf, bear and caribou. Genie and I were lucky enough to get a private tour of



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1. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline up close and personal at the visitor stop for it outside Fairbanks. Heat sinks atop the supports keep the warm oil from melting the permafrost below. 2. Dawson City in the heart of gold rush country in the Yukon. 3. Independence Mine State Historical Park outside Anchorage.

the area by local *Rider* contributor and Ayres guide Ed McClure, who showed us the Pipeline Visitor Center and the home he and his wife Patricia built themselves.

For the most part Alaskans are a friendly, inquisitive yet independent bunch. If not native they were generally lured to this rugged existence by the oil industry, military service or even homesteading prior to the mid '80s, and subsistence hunting and fishing still provide a large share of the food supply in rural Alaska. Overall life and the people here are quite different from that in any of the southern 48; a sign I spotted in Tok summed it up well: "Welcome to the last foreign country still friendly to Americans."

On the penultimate riding day we spent a glorious but chilly 45-degree morning winding down through endless forest to the village of Denali for coffee, then motored over low mountains and higher plains until the awesome Mount McKinley came into view. Its snow-covered massif looks more like a painting than something of this earth. That evening fireside at a luxurious lodge hotel in Talkeetna we had a beautiful

view of the mountain as well...according to the locals the first glimpse unobscured by rain in 32 days straight.

From Talkeetna it was a pretty straight shot back to Anchorage, except for a detour on one of the area's most enjoyable and twisty roads up to the mysterious and scenic Independence Mine State Historical Park outside Palmer. Arriving in Anchorage early afternoon at the same hotel where we started, we rested, bid one another fond farewells over dinner and then returned to our much different lives down south, or in Europe and elsewhere. It was an awesome and enjoyable 2,500-mile adventure, and now I'm determined to go back and bag the Top of the World Highway someday....

The 2011 Rider Alaska and Yukon Adventure with Ayres Adventures will run June 25-July 11 with Clement Salvadori. For more information see www.ridermagazine.com or www.ayresadventures.com, and check out our blog online for more photos and reports from the 2010 tour. **37**

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