



By Nancy Spencer and Jerry Haynie

Three weeks in Alaska; what an amazing time we had. This is the kind of place you could visit for at least a month every year for the rest of your life and still never experience everything there is to see there. It is a very special, spiritual place where time seems to stand still and it is quiet and beautiful beyond imagination.

We arrived in Anchorage on August 9, the Saturday evening two weeks before our scheduled 5-day mountain bike tour with Alaska Backcountry tours (www.mountainbikealaska.com). On our first full day there, we knew we were in Alaska when we saw a man “walking” his reindeer in Anchorage!! Before we met our Team Evergreen companions, we experienced gorgeous central Alaska during its long summer days/evenings, including Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula on our own. We also met up with some of Nancy’s former co-workers, who filled us in on some of the great sights and eating establishments not to be missed. During our travels we visited Anchorage, Lake Eklutna, Palmer (home of the MTB tour company and location of the AK state fair), Chitina (where you can see Copper River salmon and fish wheels), McCarthy (home of the modern-day “Potato” restaurant and the infamous Ma Johnson’s Hotel of mining times), Kennecott (historic copper mining town and Kennecott Glacier), Copper Center, Wasilla, Talkeetna (where one can see Mt. McKinley/Denali on the rare clear day), Cooper Landing (where we stayed at a B+B that had a campfire social every night), Kenai and Ninilchik (traditional Russian villages), Homer (renown for halibut fishing), Seldovia (accessible only by air/water taxi) and Girdwood (home of Mt. Alyeska resort). We would love to talk with you more and share our photos of our time there. During our visit, we mountain biked on six days, hiked, and saw amazing primitive sights and beautiful flora and wildlife (including bald eagles, salmon jumping upstream, a sea otter and a black bear). We were constantly being warned to be “bear aware”, a theme that remained with us throughout our visit.

Two weeks later, we returned to Anchorage to meet Mike and Tammy Brislin, Janet Saxon, Laura Smith, MaryJean Noland, Steve Kirschbaum, and Paul Delia. On Monday (8/25), Tony Berberich, the owner of Alaska Backcountry Bike Tours, and his able guides, Jen (a champion extreme/MTB rider/racer) and Eddie, picked us all up in Anchorage to take us on our five-day tour of great riding, camaraderie, a fjord/glacier cruise and of course, the good times that our MTB group always has when we spend time together.

En route to the Kenai Peninsula, we all knew that this was going to be a truly great trip when we stopped on Turnagain Arm to observe diving Beluga whales.

Later that day we did an easy 14 mile out and back ride through a valley to Crescent Lake. After the ride, we settled into our cabins in Cooper Landing. These were great facilities overlooking the Kenai River, where the tour guides grilled halibut and side dishes for us to eat around the campfire. On day two, we took the van to begin a 25-mile point-to-point ride along the Russian River Valley. Mike broke his rear derailleur hanger, but with some special rigging and hard work, he was able to ride/walk the bike out of the backcountry. The “highlight” of this ride was hearing a bear growl right around the corner and watching our tour guide lose all color in his face, and directing everyone to scream out of there. Again, we returned to our cabins in Cooper Landing to enjoy our last night at this great facility, with a grilled salmon dinner provided by our tour guides. The next morning we woke up to see two bald eagles in the trees across the river, a pair of white winged crossbills, and several boaters floating down the river. This started the day off right, then we packed the van and after a hearty breakfast, drove to Seward for a 6-hour Kenai Fjords cruise to the glaciers. On this cruise, we were very fortunate to see Orca and hump back whales, Puffins, Murres (birds related to penguins that can dive 640 feet deep for food), sea lions and otters. We also watched, in complete silence, the Aialik Glacier beautifully and thunderously calve for 35 minutes. We returned to Seward and after a great carbo-loading Mediterranean dinner at a local restaurant, stayed in a comfortable hotel that overlooked the picturesque harbor. While the rest of us were on the cruise, Tony was able to find a universal rear derailleur for Mike's bike and installed it so that he could ride the next day.

On Thursday morning, we knew when we left Seward in the van in the rain, that the day was going to be special. We started this 36-mile ride in light rain and donned our rain gear. The ride started at the Devil's Pass trailhead and continued along the Resurrection Trail. An epic ride it was. The 36-mile ride included 8 miles of uphill, 10 miles of level, and then 18 miles downhill. After a few miles, the rain stopped enough for us to remove our rain jackets and we were hoping that it was over. It was not. The rain gear was back on and we had 25 miles to go on this point-to-point ride. So being the tough folks that we are from Colorado, we just sucked it up and enjoyed the ride in the rain and mud. Fortunately, for us, the rain was never heavy but it was steady and constant. About 15 miles into the ride, Mike's derailleur and chain ring literally came apart. Mike and Tony worked on it to no avail, but nevertheless, hiked/biked/kicked their way back and were never more than 45 minutes behind the rest of us on the trail.

The mud, rain, and good spirits of all added to a very memorable day. We ended the ride in the very small town of Hope, where after hosing off ourselves, gear and bikes, and after taking warm showers, we enjoyed dinner in a very rustic but fun restaurant/bar where they had live music (a real Northern Exposure experience). None of us stayed out too late this night after our epic experience that day.

On Friday, most rode Johnson Pass which is a 16 mile out and back, and Mike and Nancy hiked the same trail. At the finish, we loaded the gear and returned to

Anchorage to either continue our AK vacation (some visiting Homer, others exploring the Kenai some more and flight-seeing Wrangell-St. Elias and others motorcycling to McCarthy-Kennecott and back) or prepare to fly back to Denver.

The folks with Alaska Backcountry Bike Tours could not have been a more fun and accommodating group of guides and friends. This tour was unlike any that we have done previously because we stayed in different places and did not camp. Lodging, transportation, food (breakfast, lunch, snacks, dinner) and the Kenai Fjords cruise were included in the package price. Our guides recognized immediately the type of riders that we were and that we were a group who enjoyed having fun. Tony, Jen and Eddie were certainly most gracious and could not have been a group of better hosts and guides. This trip is certainly one of the top tours that we have ever been on and we are sure that everyone else who participated would agree and we would recommend this trip to anyone who is interested. We invited Tony to visit Colorado to make a presentation on his wonderful tour to all Team Evergreen members and hope that everyone will attend to learn how they can enjoy the same experience that we did.