

*Dalton Highway and Denali National Park, Alaska*

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Doing the Dalton and Denali

By CLAIRE WALTER

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Of the five ways to experience the full Dalton Highway built for the construction and servicing of the northern half of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, I rejected four. Driving? I didn't want to subject my car to more than 800 round-trip miles of windshield-dinging,

tire-punishing, suspension-demolishing, air-filter-clogging, gas-squandering travel on this epic gravel road. Bicycle? I don't have the legs, the lungs or the time. Motorcycle? It combines the disadvantages of a passenger vehicle and a bicycle. Hitchhiking? Not for this gal.

That left the fifth: the bus — or, in tourist-speak — the luxury motorcoach, which has a lot more going for it than you might think. The Dalton Highway, (a.k.a., North Slope Haul Road), provides arguably the most Alaskan of all touristic experiences. No other way can you grasp the North Slope's vastness in such (relative) comfort.

One price buys transportation, a short oilfield tour and overnights in two barebones "hotels," one an oil workers' camp at Deadhorse (Mile 414 of Dalton Highway) and one at Coldfoot (Mile 175), billed as Alaska's northernmost truck stop. The bus crew consists of a driver and a chipper hostess or host to organize room assignments and baggage assistance and add some on-board commentary.

Beyond the obvious benefit of a professional driver piloting the rugged, 44-passenger behemoth, you sit high for better views and only do the road trip one way along the Dalton Highway, either northbound or southbound between Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay and Fairbanks with a flight the other way.

Because the deep freeze protects the tundra from heavy vehicles, oilfield construction activities at Prudhoe Bay are concentrated in winter, leaving Deadhorse's extremely simple modular buildings for tourists in summer (late May through mid-September). While oilfield workers mostly toil in the cold and the dark, visitors enjoy perpetual daylight and rather benign temperatures.

A road trip's three main attractions are the north country's panoramic vastness, the wildlife and the pipeline itself. I flew north to Deadhorse and rode south in late June. A few weeks earlier, I would have been able to train my binoculars on thousands of migrating birds, but as it was, I saw gulls, crows and tundra swans swimming and dipping in meltwater ponds. Heading south through the pancake-flat tundra, the bus passed herds of caribou grazing among the wildflowers and an Arctic fox slinking along. Later, Dall sheep tiptoed across the steep, rocky roadside slopes at Atigun Pass in the Brooks Range. Farther south, in the forested zone between the Brooks and Alaska ranges, a black bear shooed her two cubs up tall pine trees for safety, and a couple of moose waded through roadside lakes.

When critters are sighted, drivers pull over for a few minutes. Passengers must stay on the coach, disembarking only at real rest areas. Although the vehicles are equipped with lavatories, most people prefer the outhouses, which while rustic, don't bounce or sway. Expect to stop at such places as 355 Mile Wayside, Sag River Overlook (Mile 348), Happy Valley (Mile 334), Atigun Pass (Mile 244), Gobblers Knob (Mile 132) and of course, the Arctic Circle Wayside (latitude 66 degrees 33' North at Mile 135). Everyone has his or her picture taken there.

Don't miss the exemplary new Interagency Visitor Center across the highway from the Coldfoot overnight. Interpretive ranger programs and excellent displays fill in some blanks that occur when you experience northern Alaska through the bus window.

Whether you love or loathe the pipeline, it is a remarkable engineering achievement. Never more than a mile from the road and easy to see, it is earthquake-proof, computerized, valve-equipped, outfitted with seven pump stations, mostly raised above the permafrost, occasionally underground and even

suspended from the Yukon Crossing Bridge (Mile 56).

Everything has downsides. A coach tour's are the cost (close to \$1,000 per person, double occupancy from Gray Line Alaska, 800-544-2206, [www.grayline.com](http://www.grayline.com)), being unable to stop where and for as long as you wish and listening to one too many groaner jokes. Still, when you consider the pluses, you too might conclude that leaving the Dalton driving to someone else is a good way to go.

### *Training Wheels — From Fairbanks to Anchorage*

Railroads have been part of Alaska for more than a century. Tracks lassoed the rugged mining town of Fairbanks and fastened it to coastal Alaska — and even though it is sanitized for tourists' protection, it still offers a big dose of Alaskan soul. Riding through the deep forests at a stately pace, with the train's unmistakable muffled sound and gentle sway is at once soothing, uplifting and totally stress-free.

Fully one quarter of Holland America Lines' Inside Passage cruise passengers take a rail trip along this route. But you don't need to be a cruiser to take the train. In fact, it's a popular trip with rail fans, who love experiencing America's last remaining full-on railroads (i.e., scheduled passenger and freight service).

The Alaska Railroad puts on one northbound and one southbound train daily between mid-May and mid-September, and two major cruise lines hook their own cushy dome cars to it during the summer tourist crush. Off-season, there are two Alaska Railroad runs a week in each direction with two dozen stops — more transportation than tourism.

The leisurely 360-mile, 12-hour day-time Anchorage-Fairbanks journey can (and should) be interrupted with a day or more at Denali National Park or perhaps Talkeetna, the departure point for most McKinley climbs and one cool town. Doing just one of the shorter rail segments is also an option.

The rails follow the broad rivers that flow from the interior to the sea. On the north to south run, you will see, in turn, the Chena out of Fairbanks, the Nenana past Denali National Park, the Chulitna through adjacent Denali State Park beyond and then, briefly, the Susitna before the tracks veer eastward toward Anchorage. The Mears Memorial Bridge crosses the Tanana River at Nenana. At 700 feet in length, it is one of the world's largest single-span bridges and also was where

President Warren G. Harding drove the railroad's golden spike in 1923.

If you travel southbound, other scenic highlights include the deep river-carved gorge east of the national park boundary, assorted summits of the Alaska Range, Mt. McKinley, Mt. McKinley, Mt. McKinley and storied Talkeetna.

When "the great one" is visible in all its white-cloaked majesty, the train practically lists westward on the tracks as passengers press their noses and lenses against the big panes to view the mighty mountain. Hours later, the Chugach Range appears as the train approaches Anchorage.

Truth be told, once past McKinley, there's not much to see between Talkeetna and the developed Mat-Su Valley. Otherwise, for hours, the train passes through flat, forested miles. Occasional glimpses of small settlements, lakeside cabins and an angler or two casting for sport or for dinner serve to break up the long green corridor. Passengers pass the time in the dining room (lunch and a very early dinner are available), reading or

in reverie as the mesmerizing forest passes the huge windows.

Other diversions are the chatter of fellow passengers and the occasional microphone-borne commentary of an on-board hostess. Some information is interesting (the story of the Mears Memorial Bridge) or useful (where the best photo ops of Mt. McKinley are), but some plain silly.

One tale is told about the Alaskan village that for decades had no Electricity. When power finally came and with it television, the townspeople watched “America’s Most Wanted” and saw their mayor on the screen. I heard the story twice. On the bus from Prudhoe Bay to Fairbanks, the town was reported to be Wiseman; on the train, Goldstream. A few more such lame jokes on the long reach from Talkeetna and Wasilla, and I gratefully took advantage of the bartenders’ “white Russian special.”

#### IF YOU GO

Gray Line of Alaska (800-544-2206, [www.graylinealaska.com](http://www.graylinealaska.com)) offers Dalton Highway motorcoach packages, and the Alaska Railroad (800-544-0552, 907-265-2494, [www.alaskarailroad.com](http://www.alaskarailroad.com)) operates between Fairbanks and Anchorage. Its Denali Star offers forward-facing bench seats below and dome car seating above, plus dining and bistro cars and an on-board tour guide. Holland America’s McKinley Explorer (877-SAIL-HAL, [www.hollandamerica.com](http://www.hollandamerica.com)) and Princess’ Midnight Sun Express (800-PRINCESS, [www.princess.com](http://www.princess.com)) both boast gleaming dome cars with assigned seats on the upper level and dining below, open-air platforms at the ends of the cars, and “car managers” and hostesses to describe the sights. Alaska Railroad engines haul all the cars, so no matter which livery decorates the railcar, the schedules are identical.

#### SOME RAILROAD HISTORY

It has been 101 years since railroad tracks were laid 50 miles northward from Seward, 90 years since Congress allocated \$35 million to extend the rails to Fairbanks and 81 years since the Alaska railroad was completed. The train enabled people to travel overland to McKinley (now Denali) National Park before there was a Parks Highway, built in the 1970s, and it predated viable year-round commercial aviation.

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