

## Seward, Alaska Story, July, 2007

Nestled on the tip of a fjord between snow-capped mountains, Seward is perhaps the most popular and pleasant town in Alaska. From Anchorage the Seward train departs daily at 6am, returning from Seward at 6pm. Our train ride took 4 hours to travel 115 miles because it is a scenic train and the engineer slows the entire train down upon passing a glacier or sighting a wild animal.

Here our train was passing one of many patches of white, flat-top wild flowers in the rain forest just north of Seward. We were told that these beautiful plants, like poison ivy, produce painful skin reactions. If anyone knows the name of these, please let me know.



The Alaska Railroad was built about 100 years ago and is still the only US railroad built and run by the federal government. Twenty years ago it was sold to the State government. Ironically it is the most customer friendly railroad we've traveled on in the US. Who says a government can't run a railroad?

Rain fell during the entire first day of our trip. While cameras don't like getting wet, wild animals love it. On the brief train trip to Seward we saw several moose, Dall sheep climbing a mountain peak, a black bear, and marmots.



Midway to Seward we passed the Upper Trail Lake, the calm lake in the black & white picture on the left. Even though the sky and mountains were dark, the perfectly still water yielded the beauty of quiet stealth.

Soon after we passed Kenai Lake on which is based a flight school. Here is a plane taking off. (See below.)

Alaskans really like to fly. Our train passed a backyard airport in Anchorage. The runway resembled a golf course, but next to every house on the runway was a plane tied down but ready to fly.

The Anchorage to Seward train route also features several glaciers including Portage Glacier, which has receded to the point of almost disappearing. As the train passes further south passengers get free views of Spencer Glacier, Bartlett Glacier, and Trail Glacier.



**Seward.** This little town of about three thousand people boasts a popular boat harbor for hundreds of small tour and fishing boats as well as ports for the mega-cruise ships. Surrounding the port are ice fields and remarkably tall mountains. Founded by Russians the town became a thriving industrial center until wiped out by the 1964 earthquake. In the aftermath of broken buildings, destroyed forests, and giant fires, two 40 foot tsunamis flooded what was left of the town. Everything was re-built, but this time more as a tourist than a producing city. The only remaining signs of earthquakes are in the surrounding rural areas where a few decaying shacks and quite a few dead tree trunks litter the landscape.

After arriving in Seward we spent the afternoon exploring the town under an umbrella and taking pictures at the Alaska SeaLife Center. The center has a wonderful collection of water birds including colorful tufted puffins and horned puffins. Many had no fear of humans. Several puffins slept only inches away from the loud, delighted children. As you might expect some of the puffins liked to puff out their chests as they flap their wings vigorously. One of the many fish tanks held dozens of large salmon. I like the way the light reflected off of the scales of this King Salmon (above). Incidentally we bought 20 pounds of king salmon and arranged for it to be shipped home. Even with shipping, the cost was far less than buying it in Minnesota. Many Minnesotans brought their catch of salmon and halibut home as checked baggage on our flight. But knowing the cost of a fishing expedition and excess baggage, these people didn't save much if anything over buying the fish itself.



**Glacier Cruise.** We had reserved a Kenai Fjord boat tour for 9.5 hours of the next day. (About 25 large tour boats go out each day to see the glaciers and the marine wildlife.) Our boat held 150 people comfortably and traveled at 15 knots (18 miles/hour). The



captain narrated the tour as he was a geologist and unusually knowledgeable about the local wildlife.

The glacier cruise started from Seward's Resurrection Bay and by mid-day arrived in the Kenai Fjord National Park wildlife refuge area. After cruising around several small islands,

the captain slowly dodged small icebergs in order to get as deeply as possible into the Northwestern Fjord next to the Northwestern Glacier.

As we drew near this glacial highpoint of our tour, we found a large bald eagle sitting on a little ice pad as if guarding the glacier. (See photo on previous page.) Dozens of harbor seals lay casually on little chunks of ice in front of another glacier (the Ogive Glacier) nearby. (See photo on the left.)



As the captain brought the boat up to only 150 feet of the ice cliffs, the thunder of the breaking

ice sounded like a Midwest thunderstorm. He turned off the boat motors and the sound was uncanny—a “thunderstorm” that never stops. After waiting about a half an hour, a huge chunk of ice dropped into the water with the sound of a plane crash. The picture on the left shows the explosion as the ice splashed into the icy water. The breaking away of these ice chunks is called calving. I guess it reminded the Eskimos of birthing.



As we stood there reverently watching and listening to the calving, the little ice berg on the left floated by. These sea gulls looked as if they sensed the sacredness of the glacier.

Less than a mile away, adjacent to the Anchor and Ogive Glaciers, we found another kind of awesomeness: a giant rock wall laced with narrow water falls. In this picture of the lower third of one waterfall, you can see some people on our boat in the lower right corner, which gives you a sense of the size

The Northwestern Glacier Fjord was truly amazing, in part because it was so isolated. Only small boats can go in to see these glaciers and only in the last 25 years have boats gone back into the Fjord. Fortunately the area has become a protected piece of



the Kenai National Park.

On the way back to port we encountered quite a few surprises in the water. Below are a mother and child humpback whale diving and blowing.

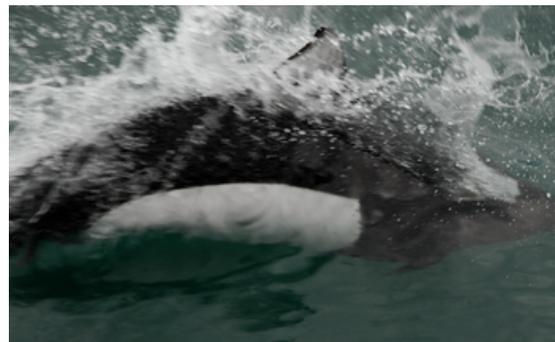


We also found several orca families. Orcas are very large dolphins that are called “killer whales.” In the photo below you can see the tails of one large family. The tail fins of the males are twice as tall as the females. Interestingly these families are matriarchal. A female is in charge despite having a smaller tail.



The sea life that surprised me the most was the Stellar Seal Lions. They must be the largest seals in the world because they are at least 6 times as big as a normal seal. We saw them sunning on rocks together.

The Dall Porpoises gave us another sea creature encounter. Several of them played games around our boat. These large black and white animals started swimming around



the boat at speeds of 30 plus miles per hour. I could see a porpoise torpedoing just under the water surface, so I followed it with my camera until it surfaced for a second. In the picture on the previous page you can see one surfacing and revealing his (or her) white underbelly. If only we could swim like that!

Probably the birds most fun to watch are the puffins because of their bright colors and weird head growths. They are plentiful in some rocky areas around the bays and islands. Nancy shot this one in a rare moment of stillness. Usually they fly or swim vigorously around. They wouldn't go to land at all except that is the only place that they can have babies.



When we docked in Seward in early evening, sport fishing boats were unloading and celebrating the day's catch. Here is a picture of one boat's fisher people lined up to show off the fish they caught. These smile-for-the-camera shows go on all evening. Most had caught halibut and many weighed in the range of 50 pounds or more, the fish that is. In this group was a rare fisherwoman.



**Exit Glacier.** Just 12 miles out of town is a huge glacier called Exit Glacier, because explorers were lost in the huge Harding Ice Field and the Glacier was the only way to exit. We walked right up close to the ice. The glacier doesn't appear to be big in the next picture (next page) until you notice the dots that look like ants in the lower left part of the photo are really people. What most surprised us was finding out that the glacier has been receding rapidly and steadily. A hundred years ago the ice extended a mile down the road toward Seward. Scientists can estimate the boundaries of the glaciers far into the past by examining the kinds and size of the plants that replace the ice. The photo on the right is a fireweed, one of the first plants to grow up from the rocks left by the glacier.





We strongly recommend a weekend or a week in Seward for its beauty and the many things to do. But remember that the town's activities close down for 8-9 months a year. And during the summer, reservations need to be made many weeks in advance. Don't even try to go there for a July 4<sup>th</sup> vacation as 20,000 people descend on the tiny town that weekend for the annual run-to-the-top-of-the-mountain foot race. Be prepared for Alaska summers and long days. At this time of year the sun sets after midnight and rises at 4am. It is invigorating once you get used to it.

