

Trip report: Backpacking in Denali NP and Other Alaskan Adventures

by Colette Wiseman

We flew into Anchorage on Thursday night, arriving at midnight. Rented a car and drove 4 hours straight to Denali National Park (<http://www.nps.gov/dena/>) and hung around outside the ranger station to be first in line (and there was a line!) when they opened at 9am. We quickly and luckily secured our desired overnight permits, shuttle bus tickets, and bear containers (for food, not for bears) and hopped on the bus into the park. 4.5 hours later we were dropped at the side of the road and proceeded into the wilderness for 8 days with approximately 60lb packs.

First we hiked up a valley towards Scott Peak. 1.5 days of hiking later, we were at the base of the mountain and an 11-hour attempt (starting at 11am since there is almost 24 hours of sunlight!) successfully took us to the top. Mostly this involved walking across and up a steep and unfortunately slushy (sometimes up to the thighs) glacier, but as there is no trail it really challenged our route-finding skills... particularly when the clouds came in and we lost all visibility! A few Dall sheep were very entertained to watch us putting on our snowshoes. They literally made beds in the loose rock with their feet and sat down to watch us! Sheep TV, I guess.

Next, a few days hike down the valley and across a pass took us to fabulous views of Denali (aka Mt McKinley), the highest peak in the US at 20,320 ft. Across the pass and up the next valley, we approached Sunset Peak and decided to attempt it a different way from the “conventional” route – conventional meaning that there is a rumor someone climbed it that way once! We walked across another glacier and up a moderate ice slope to a breathtaking ridge which extended another ¼ mile to the true summit... but since we had great views from the ridge and it was already a long day (and I don't like ridges) we enjoyed the views then headed down.

The next two days we hiked out back to the road to be picked up at 6:30am (at least that's what the schedule says; it actually showed up at 8). On the way back we were slowed down by a mother grizzly and her 3 new cubs who were taking a stroll down the road. We also slowed down for a few wolves snacking at a caribou carcass. Of course there were wolves, foxes, caribou, moose, birds and sheep too!

With two days left in our trip we ate a huge breakfast (it was 1pm by the time we found food) and went to check out Talkeetna, a tiny town which is the launching point for Denali expeditions. It turns out that real mountaineers don't hike from the road, they get flown as close to the top of the mountain as possible and then a guide pushes them the rest of the way to the top on fixed ropes.

Talkeetna was quaint but small, and for our last day we drove down to Seward, 2.5 hours south of Anchorage. It's not much of a town, but the bays, fjords, snow-capped mountains and glaciers make for indescribable beauty, especially in the clear blue skies which we were lucky enough to get (a nearby town gets 3 times the annual rainfall of Seattle). This is where all the cruise ships dock and go see the glaciers calving into the ocean. We had some ideas of kayaking out there, but then found out that it takes a week to kayak to the glacier! Of course you can also pay \$300/person for a 50 mile speedboat ride which will drop off you and your kayak... we opted out. Another trip, perhaps...

And then back to Anchorage with another hitchhiker (previous one was an evolutionary biologist from Indiana). This one was a tour-guide for the Alaska Railroad. So he got a free ride and we got a free history/ecology/culture lesson!