

Alaska untouched

Denali, one of the highest three peaks on this planet, is a mountain with the power to commune with the soul. We explore the pristine wilderness surrounding it.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY / JOCELYN PRIDE



Canoists absorb a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“Where’s Denali?” I ask. “Don’t worry, you’ll know if you see it,” says Matt, a wiry naturalist-guide with a quick wit and encyclopaedic knowledge. We’re standing on a wooden deck overlooking the Alaskan Range. Or at least we would be if it was visible. Every now and again, the shroud of greyness clears, the clouds swirl and a millisecond glimpse of vivid white appears in the distance. Straining my eyes, I look up and try to make out the shape of a mountain. It’s wishful thinking.

“The odds aren’t good,” says Matt, not wanting to get my hopes up to mountain height. “At this time of the year, it’s only about a 20 per cent chance.” I’m a glass-half-full type of person. There’s always a tomorrow.

A PLACE CALLED DENALI

Denali, formerly known as Mt McKinley, makes the other peaks in Alaska pale into anthills. Named by the native Athabascans “The Great One” or “The High One”, standing at 6168 metres, it’s the tallest mountain in North America — by far. Permanently snowcapped, criss-crossed with glaciers up to 50km long, it creates its own microclimate. The “why and how” of Denali’s existence lie in the surrounding 2.5 million hectares of pristine wilderness: bang on the intersection of two enormous tectonic plates and with around 600 earthquakes every year, Denali National Park and Preserve is a snapshot in time.

The park is spoken of in terms of “mile posts”. The only road is 92 miles (148km) long — precisely. Private vehicles are permitted to marker 15; the first possible sighting of “the big one” is at 9, Eielson Visitor’s Centre at 66, Wonder Lake at 85.

So revered is the road that each year around 10,000 people enter the park’s “road lottery”. Four hundred winners are then allowed to buy a single-day permit for one of the four designated days in September and can drive (weather permitting) anywhere along the road. However, of the annual 400,000 travellers who don’t win the lottery, most stay at the entrance and see the park through the windows of former school buses that negotiate the narrow strip of gravel. For some (like me), staying at the end of the road is the ultimate bucket-lister.

AN ECOTOURISM FIRST

One hundred and forty eight kilometres doesn’t sound a long drive. But, given the road traverses mountains, fords

water crossings and passes potential sightings of 39 species of mammals and 155 species of birds, it takes us most of the day to reach Camp Denali.

“Bear at 9 o’clock,” says Matt as he expertly manoeuvres the bus for 24 sets of binoculars to lock onto their first grizzly. We watch as the wind ruffles the blonde fur of a medium-sized female lumbering along the ridge. “Bears are smaller here than in other parts of Alaska,” says Matt. “There’s no salmon run, so they rely on berries and grasses.” Even though it’s around 400 metres away, it doesn’t exactly look small.

“Wildlife here is elusive. The subarctic system can’t support large herds.” With patience and Matt’s trained eyes, however, we see four of The Big Five of Denali: bear, moose, Dall sheep, caribou (wolf is the fifth). By the time we reach camp, our “critter” highlights include (as sung with great hilarity): five Dall sheep grazing, four grizzlies foraging, three moose a-chomping, two caribou fighting and an eagle in a birch tree.

Camp Denali may not be for everyone. It attracts travellers who seek solitude, not multitude. “Nature’s a gift and there can be nothing more important than passing on a love of our environment to the next generation,” says Jose, a fit-looking fellow camper from Boston travelling in a tri-generational family with his parents and children. “Here, there’s nothing to distract us from connecting to the raw beauty.”

This is exactly what the founders of Camp Denali had in mind more than 60 years ago.

Long before the word “ecotourism” was coined, three adventurers with a dream and a plan went in search of a plot with a view of Denali. On a cloudy day, Celia Hunter and Ginny Hill, both Women’s Air Service pilots in World War II, and Ginny’s husband Morton (Woody) Wood, a pilot and mountaineer, stumbled across a piece of open boreal forest land with a small pond and a potential view. When the skies cleared, revealing the jaw-dropping view of Denali, they quickly staked a claim under the then Alaska Homestead Act. With their bare hands, step by step and log by log, they built a series of cabins and opened a lodge that was ahead of its time. “We knew that here people would come to discover the lure of Alaska and feel the spell of the North,” Ginny penned in her journal.

The year was 1952.

Today, little has changed. Under the stewardship of passionate conservationists Simon and Jenna



Hamm (together with their two young children), Camp Denali is considered one of the finest off-the-grid experiences in North America. Taking over from Jenna's parents, who bought the lodge from the founders in the 70s, they are constantly reducing the environmental footprint by creatively using hydroelectricity, biodiesel and solar power.

With names honouring the Alaskan gold rush — Eureka, Last Chance, Stampede and Discovery — the 18 cabins remain true to their origin. In Eldorado, our home for five days, I feel like a kid exploring a cubby house. Covering the handmade wooden bed is a pretty patchwork quilt lovingly sewn by a staff member, Alaskan art hangs on the hand-hewn log walls and, although it's summer, a small pot-belly stove adds to the cosy atmosphere.

But it's the loos that have everyone talking. Each cabin's private outhouse is a far cry from the good ol' thunder box: a spotless and odourless system with each door boasting "the view" strategically framed in a pretty heart-shaped cut-out. There's also a communal bathroom with flushing toilets and hot showers a three-to seven-minute walk (depending on cabin location) up the hill.

HIKING THE TUNDRA

Before our first hike we get the lowdown on what to do *if* ... "Anything can appear, anywhere at any time," says Matt. "Make calm 'hey bear' calls and clap your hands. If you see a bear, don't run. If confronted, try to make yourself look bigger. For moose, back away slowly and get behind something." I wonder if anyone else who opted for the "easy limbering-up hike" along Cranberry Ridge feels like I do. Seeing wildlife from a vehicle is one thing, on foot another.

Recent heavy rain has made the trail boggy and extremely buggy. The buzz of mosquitoes the size of small aircraft (fortunately, not disease carrying) makes a head-net standard wear. The spruce-lined trail meanders through cranberry, blueberry and crowberry bushes dotted with ivory-coloured flowers. "In a few weeks, this whole area will be a bear's banquet," says Matt.

Each day we hike different trails, sometimes bussing to a starting point and other times walking directly from camp. There's always a strenuous, medium and easy (locally called a "foray") route. All hikes are guided and we keep an eye on the range, crossing fingers for Denali to show himself (yes, it's traditionally called a "he").

Clockwise from main: Denali greets Camp Denali diners; Emmalyn tends the camp greenhouse; alpenglow's rosy shades; hardy vegetation on the tundra; a local; Matt, the camp's knowledgeable guide.



ESCAPE ROUTES

■ Getting there

By train is the nostalgic way to see Alaska. The **Denali Star** runs daily to the park entrance from Anchorage or Fairbanks. Breathtaking scenery glides past the large picture windows and three classes of service are available, including a dome gold-star carriage. alaskatravel.com/alaska-railroad

■ Staying there

Camp Denali is an all-inclusive experience for either a three-, four- or seven-night stay. Camp Denali's sister property **North Face Lodge** is located down the hill. Same philosophy, food, level of service and guides — minus "the" view but plus ensuite. campdenali.com

If a backcountry experience doesn't appeal, the area around the park entrance, often called "Glitter Gulch", offers a large range of accommodation. Research carefully and book well in advance. **Grande Denali Lodge** is big but away from the hype, is privately owned and has a great view. denalialaska.com/grande-denali-lodge

If you choose to stay at the park entrance, you will need to explore the park using the hop-on/hop-off green shuttle buses or take a guided bus tour. Flightseeing is also available and magnificent if the mountain is out.

■ When to go

The "season" runs from late May through to early September. Summer upside: long daylight hours, wildflowers, active wildlife; downside: less chance of seeing Denali, summer rain, mosquitoes. Autumn upside: autumn colours, clearer skies, bulked-up bears; downside: cold, more chance of road closures, limited guided activities.

■ What to take

Layers and well-worn-in solid walking boots. Camp Denali has gear available to borrow: head nets, walking sticks, gaiters, rain jackets, rain pants etc. Don't rely on the one shop at the park entrance: it sells great souvenirs but no expedition gear.

■ More information

National Park Service, nps.gov/dena/index.htm
Camp Denali, campdenali.com

One day we hike from the taiga to the tundra. Due to an arrangement dating back before the change in park boundaries, Camp Denali is the only lodge with permission to have off-road guided hikes. We take care not to follow each other, to avoid creating tracks.

As we each find our own rhythm and space, the terrain changes. The spruce become sparse and straggly and my legs start to spring as though I'm bouncing on a trampoline. We gather around and Matt pushes his walking pole around 30cm straight through the vegetation. It stops with a thud. "That's the permafrost," he says. "We're walking on a thin layer of vegetation that's floating on ice."

It's like a carpet. A patchwork pattern of pink, purple, white, yellow and blue stretches towards the distant mountains. We pause to just be. The earthy smell of mosses and lichens intermingles with the delicate scent of medicinal plants. I lie down and gaze at the tiny, delicate flowers. I think of their journey — seven months of darkness under a metre of snow. Strength. Resilience. Humility. One hundred growing days each year is all that sustains this fragile region.

UNDER THE MIDNIGHT SUN

With summer comes long daylight hours and the midnight sun. "This rocket was

planted on June 10 and we were eating it by June 25," says Emmalyn, an innovative young gardener who tends the camp greenhouses warmed by waste heat from the generators. "Seeds grow in half the time written on the packets."

Despite the remote location, for three meals each day (plus snacks) we dine on fresh produce from the greenhouses and local Alaskan producers. Breakfasts are hearty with eggs *du jour*, grains, fruits and you-would-swear-were-baked-in-Paris pastries. For lunch, we create our own sandwiches to take hiking. Each day the house specialty bread (sourdough, roasted potato and buckwheat, multigrain, pumpkin and polenta) is piled high with all the trimmings. Dinners are three courses and lively as we share tales of the trails.

On our last evening, after a dinner of Alaskan seafood ravioli with goat's cheese followed by a decadent chocolate cake with raspberries, the clouds start to lift — slowly at first. Fleeting bursts of blue appear near "the" mountain. Just when it looks hopeful, the clouds close in again. It's a game of hide and seek.

Jenna reads the sky like a book. "It's going to clear," she says, her face beaming with excitement. Jenna knows. She's lived here her whole life. Her affinity with this frozen land is



unmatched. We gather on the same deck from which a few days earlier (or even a few minutes earlier) seeing the mountain seemed like an impossible dream. We watch in silence as streaks of shiny white glisten through the clouds. The shape of the top of the giant monolith emerges to the sound of a communal gasp. "Aren't you beautiful," someone says. It's like being in a theatre with the clouds as the curtain. And then, almost on cue, the curtain opens and Denali stands in all his glory. We clap and cheer amid a frenzy of clicking cameras.

IN ANSEL ADAMS' FOOTSTEPS

With the mountain out, there's a sudden flurry of activity. It's 10pm and we're basking in brilliant sunshine — aching muscles and exhaustion vanish. Some people canoe on the pond, others hike to the ridge above. My husband and I grab a couple of mountain bikes and, balancing the tripod and camera gear on the handlebars and our backs, head to Wonder Lake, 6.5km away. Riding with childish abandon, I barely notice the hills, potholes, rocks and that my seat is wobbly. I worry that Denali will disappear as quickly as he entered centre stage. But the tallest mountain in North America is in top form; he has come out to put on a show.

Leaving the bikes in a bush, we scramble up the hill that captured the heart of famed photographer Ansel Adams in 1947. Wonder Lake is true to its name. Green carpet rolls down to a line of spruce trees fringing the calm water. Denali towers above the rest of the range, reflected as a perfect mirror image. In the distance, two moose stand knee-deep, water dripping off their antlers, and the haunting cry of a loon echoes across the water. As midnight approaches, the sun dips onto the horizon and a faint pinky-purple glow appears. Within a few minutes the colour intensifies and paints the mountain tops with strokes of genius: alpenglow, a natural phenomenon.

This is a sight that can't be forgotten. In the words of Adams, "No matter how sophisticated you may be, a large granite mountain cannot be denied. It speaks in silence to the very core of your being." 📸

■ *The writer travelled courtesy of State of Alaska Tourism.*

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