

A Flat in Paris

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I have always been drawn to Alaska and after spending a summer there as a high school student. I wanted to go back. My wife Claudia and I had talked about going there for years but somehow the time was never right. Alaska is expensive and the logistics are complicated so we kept putting it off. Then three years ago Claudia said, "maybe this year we should go to Alaska", I jumped at the chance. And I knew right where I wanted to go, Wrangell-St. Elias. Wrangell is in southeastern Alaska and is our largest National Park. It is roughly the size of Switzerland. The eastern edge of the park borders the Kluane National Park in Canada, which is of similar size. Wrangell is home to 9 of the 16 highest mountains in the United States and roughly a third of the park is glaciated. There are no roads in the park, almost no trails and few visitors. In short, perfect. I also thought that it would be good training for a possible future trip to the Gates of the Arctic National Park.

Cell phones do not work in Wrangell and since we planned to do a couple of fly in backpacks, we would be completely on our own for days at a time. So I started to think about emergency communications. A satellite phone would have been ideal but they are expensive and too big and heavy for a party of two. Radios that let you talk to a passing commercial airliner were cheaper and lighter but airliners don't fly over much of Wrangell. A new device called a Spot emergency rescue beacon had just come onto the market and I bought one. It was small, light and cheap. It combined a GPS with the ability to send a message to a satellite. But there are only three messages you can send. I am OK, I need help or I need emergency rescue. A "Spot" emails these messages along with your GPS coordinates to up to five people that you preselect. After my "Spot" arrived I selected five people and began to test it by sending "I am OK" messages from my backyard. Accuracy was impressive. The GPS coordinates clearly showed that I was in my back yard, not my neighbor's. Unfortunately the device sometimes failed to talk to a satellite and there was no way to tell if the transmission was successful. My mother was on the list of those to be emailed and when I explained that if she got a message asking for help she would need to call the Alaska State Police and request a rescue she replied "Oh, dear, wouldn't you rather have a flat in Paris"? My friend Eugene was also on the list and he had additional instructions. I asked him to call the air service if he did not get an OK signal from us within a couple of days of our pickup time. Just call them up, see what they know about us, and then use your judgment I said.

Getting to Wrangell is not trivial and the logistics of hiking there were daunting. We decided to combine the trip to Wrangell with a trip to the Kenai Peninsula since they could both be reached from Anchorage. In total we would be gone three weeks.

To get to Wrangell you fly to Anchorage and then drive 300 miles to McCarthy. The last sixty miles are on an old gravel road known to the locals simply as "the road" and takes three hours. "The road" has a bad reputation and most car rental companies will not allow you to drive it. I called small local companies in Anchorage first, figuring that they would be more likely to allow me to drive "the road". They wouldn't, so I started calling the national chains. Most said no but National told me

that there were no restrictions in the United States. When I double-checked the woman rather snippily said, "I told you there are no restrictions in the US". A guide in Wrangell later expressed surprise that National had said OK and when I told him of my conversation said, "Oh, the rental companies don't consider Alaska part of the US".

The rest of the logistics were easier. I made arrangements with Wrangell Air for the drop-offs and pick-ups for our backpacks. We wanted to do a hike on the Root Glacier and I wanted to climb in the glacial moulins so we made arrangements with a guide service in Kennecott. Thanks to the web it was easy to find a cabin to rent just outside the park. The cabin had a kitchen and we planned to cook since there are very few places to eat in Wrangell.

Once we got to Anchorage we supplied up laying in food, wine, stove fuel and bear mace for us. For the car; oil, several cans of "Fix a flat", duct tape and some hose clamps seemed prudent. Although we tried to buy everything we needed in Anchorage, we were not anal about it since we knew there were two small towns on our way, and a general store in McCarthy. This would prove to be a mistake.

The next day we set off for Copper Center a tiny little place about half way between Anchorage and Wrangell where we spent the night at "The Copper Moose" B&B. The Copper Moose would have been a charming place to stay if it were not for the proprietor. The owner "CD" had been a surveyor on the North Slope when the Alaskan pipeline was built and talked non-stop, bragging about his exploits of younger years, making it hard to enjoy the spectacular views of Mt. Wrangell and Mt. Drum in the distance. Both Mt. Wrangell and Mt. Drum are in Wrangell National Park and the view whetted my appetite for Wrangell.

Between Copper Center and McCarty there are a couple of roadside cafés and two small towns. Well not really towns, calling them towns would exaggerate their size. The first is Glennallen and we planned on buying some last minute supplies there. A quick look around Glennallen dashed those hopes but there was always Chitina, which I hoped, would be bigger. Chitina lies at the end of the pavement. From Chitina you drive 60 miles on an unpaved road that ends at a parking lot just outside of Wrangell National Park. Chitina made Glennallen look like a thriving metropolis. Chitina was tiny and seedy looking and in early September it was mostly closed for the season. In truth most of the stores and the one hotel looked like they had been closed for years. We managed to buy a loaf of bread and a tank of gas from the one place that was open.

We passed through a surreal looking gap in the rock cliffs and left the pavement. The drive was happily anti-climatic. It took three hours to go 60 miles and driving the road required my full attention. But the famed and feared road did not live up to its reputation. There were no flats or broken oil pans.

Our cabin is just outside the park and is a very pleasant surprise. The cabin is large, bright and airy. The owner Andy who is working for the Park Service restoring historic mining buildings in Kennecott built the cabin and the craftsmanship is superb.

Roughly a mile down the road from our cabin is the end of the dirt road. At the road's end there is a gravel parking area patrolled by a man who looks like a street person. He explains that parking is \$5 a day. There is crude hand-lettered sign to the same effect. The parking "attendant" explains that there is another area a quarter mile away where you can park for free but that that is unattended parking and who knows what could happen to your car. The whole deal feels like a shakedown but it seems better to pay for attended parking. We park and walk across the pedestrian bridge that provides access to the park. From there it's a short walk to the small town of McCarthy, population 42, less in the winter. McCarthy is mostly closed. In particular the store in McCarthy is closed. We won't be buying any supplies in McCarthy. That evening we inventory food supplies for our almost two week stay. We look to be OK for dinners but are short on breakfast and lunch supplies. More critically we will run out of wine. In our cabin we can get a cell phone signal although barely, and I am able to call my sister for a bread recipe and bake a couple of loaves of bread. The wine situation still looks grim.

The next day we take a shuttle from the park entrance to Kennecott. The shuttle is an old school bus, now painted green and the four mile ride over the pothole filled dirt and gravel road is bone jarring. Kennecott is an old abandoned copper mining town. From 1911 to 1938 Kennecott was a thriving copper mining town but in the late 20's the ore started to run out, and faced with declining copper prices, the Kennecott Copper Company abandoned it. Today a few park and guide service employees and handful of very hardy year round local residents inhabit Kennecott. In addition to the abandoned mining buildings there are some small rustic houses, a small hotel and some tents. In the old days mining executives and skilled workman like machinists and welders stayed in the houses. The laborers lived in large dorm buildings.

From Kennecott we hike one of the few trails in the park up to the old transfer station for the Jumbo mine where we eat lunch while watching a mother grizzly and her cub feed on the hillside across from us.

One of the glories of Wrangell is the Root glacier. It's one of the largest glaciers in the world and is easily accessible, well at least easily accessible once you are in Kennecott. We have a glacier hike on the Root lined up with Monte, a guide from Kennecott Wilderness Guides. Monte and his father bought one of the small houses this year so Monte has a house to live in. Last summer he lived in a tent. Now that the store in McCarthy is closed, Monte or a friend must drive to Anchorage for supplies. It's a 600 mile round trip so when anyone goes they take orders from the other residents and come back with a full car. The people in McCarthy and Kennecott seem very tight knit and friendly. But it takes a special kind of person to

live here year round. The winters are long, dark and cold and you are totally isolated. This may explain why McCarthy has had two mass murders in the past 30 years.

The Root is amazing. It's full of interesting features, huge moulins, waterfalls tumbling over ice cliffs, rivers cut into the ice, crevasses and ice seracs. Monte is a very cool guy and knows where the most interesting features are. We spend all day walking on the glacier. This time of year the crevasses on the lower part of the glacier are all exposed so we don't need to be roped although we do need crampons. I have been on a lot of glaciers, but the Root is different, the scale is different and the features larger than any glacier I have ever been on. While hiking we come across an area we think of as the skating rink. It's a large perfectly flat section of ice about the size of a skating rink. The surface is covered with a film of water and a very thin layer of fine glacial dirt. The ice underneath is as smooth as if a Zamboni had just been across it. Smaller features like this are common but Monte says he has never seen one this large before. He says he may ask his parents to send his ice skates so that he can skate on it.

I have two ice climbing days coming up but I will only be climbing with Monte on the second day. Tomorrow is Monte's girlfriend's birthday so he is taking the day off and I am climbing with Matt another guide. We warm up by climbing some 70° ice walls including one with an overhanging bulge, and then Matt decides that it is "Moulin time". We hike across the glacier to a large Moulin known as the Grand Canyon Moulin. Moulins are holes cut in the ice by flowing water and this one is huge. We anchor the rope with a couple of ice screws and then Matt gets ready to lower me into the Moulin. "This is the most intimidating place you have ever been" Matt says as he lowers me. Very reassuring. Matt is not kidding. The Moulin is about 150 feet deep and there is a waterfall on one side. The roar of the water makes it impossible to talk to Matt. The hole is overhanging and dark at the bottom. There is a deep blue glow from the ice, which is under great pressure. The whole place has a malevolent feel to it; you know it wants to kill you. At the same time it is beautiful. The waterfall is spectacular and the Moulin is filled with beautiful, fluted ice features. I cannot see Matt from the bottom and I feel like I am on another planet. Matt had warned me that the ice at the bottom would be bullet hard. "Ice tools just bounce right off it" he said. He's right. I can only get the first one or two teeth of my tools and crampons into the ice. I slowly and carefully climb out. It's the hardest ice climbing I have ever done. As I near the top I get to ice that sees sun and the ice changes from blue to white. It's much softer and it's a cruise to the top.

I ask Matt if he wants a lap and he declines saying that he doesn't have his stiff boots on today. He may also be worried that if something goes wrong I won't be able to get him out of the hole. While I rest before going back down for another lap, Monte, his girlfriend and another guide wander by. They are out looking for interesting features for us to climb tomorrow. It's weird, here we are on a remote glacier and we see people we know. Monte does want a lap. It takes Monte a little while to climb out and Matt and the other guide give him a hard time for climbing like an old lady.

Monte just shakes his head and says, "It's a lot harder than last time I climbed it". They leave and I head back down for the last run of the day.

At the bottom I look around and try to relax and appreciate the surroundings and not let myself be intimidated. It's otherworldly and still intimidating. I start climbing out again moving off very shallow tool and crampon placements. Maybe it's end of the day fatigue, maybe over confidence. Whatever the reason on the steepest part of the overhang I let my hips drift out from the wall. My crampons blow and I fall. My left hand is ripped from my ice axe leash and I am left dangling from the rope. My right axe is safely leashed to my right hand but my left axe is stuck in the ice above me. Using my right axe I get back on the ice but thanks to the rope stretch I am too low to reach the left axe, which hangs maybe six feet out of reach. There is no way I can climb the featureless overhanging ice with only one axe.

I am in no real danger. Matt can setup a haul system and haul me out. This will be hugely embarrassing. Matt and I have no way of communicating but eventually he will rig a haul system and begin the hard work of hauling me out. So it's only my pride that is in danger. Usually I carry two prusik loops on the back of my harness, these allow me to ascend a free hanging rope and if I had them I could fix my problem in no time. But I don't. I have left them behind because I know that some guides are nervous about clients carrying self-rescue gear. So I left them even though the guide who taught me to climb in Yosemite told us never to leave the ground without them. Nevertheless as another guide told me there is always something you can do if you just stay calm and think! If I can chop a handhold for my left hand I will be home free. I can hang from the rope and use my one axe to chop a high left handhold. Then I will be able to crank off it, work my feet up and plant my right axe as high as possible. I should then be able to mantle the axe and reach the shaft of my left axe. My pride will be saved.

I am more than a little worried about the left axe though. I know it's not in the ice very deeply and the rope is running right by it. I am worried that vibrations from the rope could knock the axe off. If that happens the axe is gone. The bottom is the Moulin is filled with cracks too small for a person but easily large enough to swallow an axe. I start trying to chop a handhold. This proves to be easier said than done. The ice is exceptionally hard and brittle, and it dinner-plates out as I chop. I can't get an edge that I can pull on. I try several times but each time I fall as I try to move off my left hand. The effort is starting to fog up my sunglasses so it is getting hard to see. It's dark in the hole so I don't need the glasses for sun protection; I need them to protect my eyes from ice chips.

I look up and to my horror see the axe falling toward me. I have two almost simultaneous thoughts; this is a catastrophe and this is an opportunity. Then without thinking I reach out with my left hand and catch the axe by the handle. I very slowly and carefully leash it to my hand and pull the leashes of both axes as tight as possible.

I know that I should hang on the rope for a few minutes to relax and recover both physically and psychologically but I know Matt must be wondering what the hell is going on so I start climbing, slowly and carefully. I climb out and tell Matt what happened. Matt shakes his head, he has never heard of anyone catching a falling ice axe before, and he had no idea that there was anything amiss. He thought I was just having trouble climbing out.

The next day I set out with Monte. If Matt was all about climbing the hardest features we could find, Monte is all about climbing the coolest, most interesting features we can find. And after yesterday I am fine with that. Monte knows the glacier well and he spent much of his day off looking for cool new places to climb. We head out for a Moulin known as the Jesus Hole. Monte says it doesn't get climbed much because it's a little bit of a hike but that it's well worth it. Anyway it's a beautiful day, the glacier is fascinating and there are spectacular views of Mt. Wrangell so it's a fine hike. The Jesus Hole is the biggest Moulin I have ever seen. You could drop a large building into it. It's much bigger and more open than the Grand Canyon Moulin and has a completely different feeling. It's overhung but more open and it gets more sun so the ice is softer. It's a huge ice playground filled with interesting stuff to climb. The climbing is challenging but never desperate and we play on it all morning, never climbing the same thing twice. Monte and I hit it off from the start and he's a great guy to climb with. In the afternoon we hike over to some slot canyons that Monte discovered yesterday. He says he never seen them before. They are just like slot canyons in the Southwest but on a smaller scale with walls only about 100 feet high. They are narrow enough so that at the bottom you can often touch both sides and they have streams of water running through them. Mostly the streams are not deep and with our crampons and waterproof alpine boots we can walk in them without getting our feet wet. Occasionally however the streams give way to deep blue pools that drop into the depths. The water is very clear and you can see down many meters into the plumbing of the glacier. We spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the canyons and climbing the walls.

The next day is a big day for Claudia and I. Wrangell Mountain Air is dropping us off at Iceberg Lake. We will be at Iceberg Lake for four days and three nights. Most of Wrangell is inaccessible except by air so we have arranged for two fly-in backpacks. Iceberg Lake is about 70 miles from the McCarthy which is the nearest inhabited place. The Lake is called Iceberg Lake because it forms behind an ice damn. Until the mid-80's the damn never broke but since then it has broken at some point in July draining the lake and leaving icebergs stranded on the now dry lakebed. To the north of Iceberg Lake there is an unnamed glacier. To the South lies, the Bagley Ice Field the largest non-polar ice field in the world. The Gulf of Alaska forms the Southern boundary of the Bagley Ice Field. It's wild and remote and I am intensely drawn to it.

There are two air services in McCarthy and I have chosen to fly with Wrangell Mountain Air because it is the older of the two. Harsh Darwinian selection operates with Alaska bush pilots so experienced ones are probably safe.

Iceberg Lake is remote trail-less wilderness so it won't do to fuck up. I have carefully studied the USGS topo maps for the area and looked at Iceberg with Google Earth. Unfortunately the topo maps for Alaska are 15 minute maps rather than the 7 and ½ minute maps available for the rest of the country, and Google Earth does not have high-resolution imagery for the area. But I have done the best I can and I have pre-programmed the relevant waypoints into my GPS. I have also picked Monte's brain. He has guided backpackers in the area and knows it well. He is delighted to learn that we are going unguided which reassures me since several of the locals have asked me if we are going with a guide. We plan to basecamp and then day hike from our camp. I have picked out a spot to camp about four miles from the landing strip but Monte talks me out of it. He says, "If you're going to basecamp, basecamp. You can camp by some alpine lakes that are a half mile from the landing strip". He says I will see the lakes from the air.

We show up at Wrangell Mountain Air and fill out the preflight paperwork. It's sobering. What is the color and make of your tent? What is the color of your outer jacket? What is the color and temperature rating of your sleeping bags? How much extra fuel and food do you have? These are all questions that are only of interest to search and rescue.

We will be flying with Kelly Bay who with his wife Natalie Bay own Wrangell Mountain Air. Unfortunately the weather has turned. It's raining and the long term forecast looks bad but we have already booked and paid for the flight so since we can fly, we will. Kelly tapes our bear mace to a wing strut with duct tape and does our safety briefing covering the location of the fire extinguisher, first aid kit and survival gear. We strap in, put our headphones on and take off. It's unnerving, visibility is poor, we are flying in narrow mountain valleys and the mountains on either side of us exceed the legal operating altitude of the aircraft. To make matters worse Kelly keeps taking his hands off the stick to point out the sights, which in the clouds are barely visible. I remind myself that Kelly has been doing this for years and knows his job and finally relax. At the landing strip at Iceberg is a sandbar littered with bowling ball sized rocks. I spot the lakes on the approach and Kelly lands the plane as if this is a piece of cake. It's raining and we re-rig our packs under the shelter of the wing. Claudia does not consider this shelter. Then we move off and Kelly turns the plane around and leaves. Monte had warned me that this would be a bad moment psychologically. "The plane will leave and you will realize that you are completely dependent on him coming back", "Monte said. Realistically you are not walking out of Iceberg, you need to be prepared for that". But it wasn't a problem since with the bad weather; we were too busy to worry. It's in the low forties and raining fairly hard. We need to get camp set up as quickly as possible so we head up to the alpine lakes. There is another person camped right by the sandbar. Kelly told us that he was being picked up the next day. He has been too lazy to find a good campsite and his tent is now sitting in a puddle of water. He is cooking right next to his tent, a no-no in grizzly country, and he looks miserable. I am not happy to see another person but we never see him again. The route to the lakes is steep and

covered with wet rocks. With a heavy pack on it would be easy to slip and this is a bad place for a sprained ankle or injured knee so Claudia drops her pack and heads up to find a good spot to pitch the tent. I will come back for her pack.

Claudia finds a nice level spot for the tent with good drainage so that water will not pool by the tent. We get the tent pitched, and establish a kitchen area well away from our tent. It's a good spot for a kitchen since there is large flat topped rock that makes a nice waist high rock counter that we can use for cooking and prep work. The only thing it lacks is any shelter from the rain. The whole area is above tree level so there is no shelter anywhere. Nor is there any good source of water. The alpine lakes are the only water source and they are filled with glacial flour. We can pump water from them, but it's not very good for our water filter and may clog it. Fortunately the filter's a beast and handles the glacial flour with no trouble. And the water tastes great. All in all it's a great spot to camp. There is a hanging glacier above the alpine lakes and I am sure the valley we are in is gorgeous if only the visibility was good enough for us to see anything. The rain picks up and we retreat to our tent. The good news is that our sleeping bags and sleeping pads are dry and we have dry clothes packed in sealed plastic bags. But our rain jackets have already started to wet out and it's cold. We cook and eat dinner in the rain and fall asleep listening to rain hit the tent.

But the next morning is gorgeous. It's sunny with a bright blue sky and I figure we are over the worst of the weather. The views are spectacular and we head up the valley to explore. Looking down the valley toward Iceberg Lake we can see the gleaming ice of the Bagley Ice Field. Up valley lies a glacier and distant peaks. A river that we will be able to cross only by getting on the glacier and crossing over the ice splits the valley. The river is too fast and deep to ford safely. We work our way up valley. It's slow going since we have to find our way through a band of small rock cliffs but we are in no hurry and there is a lot to see, both a grand landscape of glaciers and mountains and small one of wildflowers and mosses. Eventually we get to an open area where it looks like the going will be easier. It's not. It's a bog. It's always wet but yesterday's rains have made it a real mess. The trick is to keep moving, if you stop you start to sink. Claudia does not like the bog very much and we will have to wade through a stream to get onto the ice. With the weather suddenly looking a little dicey we decide to turn back. I am disappointed not to get to the glacier but that's life. Tomorrow we plan to head to Iceberg Lake to see the beached icebergs. We probably should have scheduled an extra day here. Turning back proves to be a mistake since by dinnertime it is raining and we will not see the sun again.

In the middle of the night the wind wakes us up. It's howling outside with driving rain. The wind shakes the tent and I hope the tent designers at Black Diamond know their stuff. If the tent shreds in the wind we are screwed. It's still raining in the morning and we have a wet miserable breakfast. Everything is hard in the rain. We cannot eat in our tent and all our food has to be stored in bear barrels. The barrels are fussy and hard to open, especially with cold hands. After breakfast the rain

drives us back to the tent. With the ground getting wetter and the wind picking up I start to worry that the tent stakes will pull out of the sandy soil so I go outside and pile the heaviest rocks I can lift on top of the tent stakes. While I am out, I check on our packs. There is no room for them in the tent so they are outside double bagged in garbage bags. They seem OK. It is so windy that we decide that one of us should stay in the tent at all times so that the tent does not blow away. I lack confidence in my rocks despite their weight. There is little call to go outside anyway. The temperature has continued to drop and each time we look outside we can see that the snow line has dropped. It's now only about a thousand feet above us and continuing to drop. Going in and out is a pain, you need full raingear but you can't bring the raingear into the tent for fear of getting the sleeping bags wet so you have to put your boots and the wet raingear on in the small vestibule and then reverse the process when you come in. We leave the tent only to eat, pump water and pee. We have given up on cooking so food is power bars, cheese or cookies. We are dry but it's cold and damp in the tent even in our sleeping bags. I tell myself that the rain will have to stop sometime and then realize that's not really true, not here. Moist air is blowing in from the Gulf of Alaska and cooling as it crosses the Bagley Ice Fields. It can rain for days. I am glad we did not schedule an extra day. We spend the whole day in the tent. We are due to be picked up the morning but unless the weather improves Kelly will not be able to come get us.

Neither of us sleeps well that night. I lie awake and mentally rehearse how I can take the tent down and pack up while keeping the inside of the tent dry. In the morning we will need to pack up and move to the sandbar where Kelly will land. But if he cannot come get us, we will have to re-pitch the tent and wait by the sandbar for him. He will come get us when he can, but we have no way to talk to him. It's still raining in the morning but not as hard and the wind has died down some. I think Kelly can probably get in. After another wet breakfast we pack up, trying to keep everything dry as best we can. We hike down to the landing site and get there about 10:30. I think our pick-up is at 11:00 but we have a second fly-in backpack planned and one of our pick-ups is at 11:00 and one at 12:00. I might have confused them but I don't think so. It's raining harder now and visibility is poor. Eleven o'clock comes and goes. Claudia thinks the pick up time is 12:00, but I think we are screwed. We stand in the rain straining to hear an aircraft. Monte said we would do this. I start looking a place next to the landing site to re-pitch the tent. I figure at about one, I will go ahead and re-pitch it. We are getting cold standing out in the rain. Nothing looks very promising as a tent site, and the "weather" ceiling is low enough so that I don't think Kelly can get us even if the pick up time is noon.

I have under estimated Alaskan bush pilots. At noon on the dot we hear an aircraft. Kelly lands, steps out of the aircraft and says, "Bet you guys are glad to see me". We are. Taking off is an experience. The plane bounces over the bowling ball size rocks on the sandbar as Kelly starts to take off. We don't have sufficient airspeed at the end of the sandbar so the plane descends as we go off the cliff edge. You can hear the engine change pitch as we go over the edge and sink. Kelly tells me it scared him the first time he did it. I can see why. Kelly says we won't believe it, but that as soon as

we turn the corner out of the valley the weather will be good. Sure enough it's blue skies and sunshine. Before long we land in McCarthy and shortly after that we are back in our cabin, eating hot food, drinking hot coffee and taking a long hot shower.

The plan calls for a day of day hiking and then a second fly-in backpack. We are supposed to fly into the Wrangell Plateau, but it's over a thousand feet higher than Iceberg and is covered with fresh snow. Wrangell Air thinks they can land there but they don't know if they can takeoff, so that's out. Winter has come early and many of the best spots are already snow covered. The weather forecast is not very good; rain low, snow higher up and the thought of being stuck in a tent in the rain again is unappealing to say the least. So we decide to convert our flight into a flight-see. At least we can try to pick a clear day for that.

By this point we have been in Wrangell so long that we are practically locals. George the shuttle driver tells us that our money is no good on the shuttle and gives us a couple of free passes in case we get a driver who as George puts it "does not know the score".

Claudia and I plan to venture out on the Root glacier on our own. The spot where we have been getting on the glacier is a bit steep and Claudia does not much care for it. So our plan is to walk further down the trail and find a better place to get on the glacier. If we walk far enough down the trail we can get on the glacier closer to the Wrangell ice fall and get a better view of it. Mt. Wrangell is only a little over 16 thousand feet, but the base elevation is only about a thousand so the Wrangell icefall is as long as Everest's. It's also just as dangerous. I hope to get close enough for a really good look at the icefall while remaining far enough away to be safe from shifting blocks of ice. It's a good plan, but this is Alaska and things soon go awry. The trail out of Kennecott is flat and easy walking although it's narrow and flanked by waist high bushes on either side. We pass the spot where we got on the ice before and continue up the trail. There is a small spur trail that leads to a backcountry outhouse. A few minutes passed it, I suddenly stop and softly say, "bear" and start to backup. "Don't joke" Claudia says a split second before she spots the bear and begins to backup. It's standing on the trail about 10 feet in front of us, and it looks pissed. I am not particularly worried since we have run into a number of bears, and like us they seem to know the drill. We back around a corner and wait for a few minutes. I say "I am sure it's moved off, I will just peak around the corner and check". Claudia questions both my sanity and my intelligence, but I creep forward and look anyway. The bear is still there, has not moved at all, and still looks pissed. We turn around. It looks like we will get on the ice in the usual place. We later learn that the bear is a mother with a cub, and has been annoyed by the traffic on the trail. We never saw the cub.

A little further along a guide from the St. Elias guide service stops us as we get to the turnoff for the Root Glacier. He wants to borrow our binoculars to count the number of people on the ice below. He counts, there are eight, there should be nine. He has lost a client. There are supposed to be eight clients and two guides, but he stayed up by the outhouse so that one of the clients could use the bathroom. Apparently not wanting to embarrass her, he did not follow her closely and now he cannot find her. I suggest that he and I split up, the spur trail to the outhouse makes a loop and by going in opposite directions we can make sure she does not slip by us. Claudia says that she will move part way down to the ice to a point where she can both count the people on the ice, and signal us on the trail. My choice of the Kennecott Wilderness Guides to climb with rather than the St. Elias guide service was a random choice, but it looks good now. Not only has this guy lost a client, but Claudia and I are the ones doing all the thinking. The guide seems overwhelmed. Of course losing a client does look bad on the resume. The guide and I split up, but fail to find his client. Claudia still counts eight on the ice. He and I agree we will make one more pass and then he will have to radio the guide shack, something he really does not want to do. On the second pass I look more carefully, she cannot have just disappeared; but I know there is a bear in the area so I start looking for any signs of an attack. I find nothing. The guide decides he will have to contact the guide shack and I figure we will have to get the people on the ice to help with the search. But just as the guide pulls out his radio we see Claudia signaling us, there are nine people on the ice. Apparently instead of taking the trail the woman wandered down through the bushes. I am quite sure that management will never hear about this incident.

We go onto the ice with the guide and move off in the opposite direction so that we get away from the large group. We are really just wandering on the glacier since we don't know it well and don't know where the cool features are. Fortunately the Root Glacier is heavily featured and it almost does not matter where we go. My only concern is keeping track of where we are so that I can get us back without trouble. While walking on the glacier we run into Monte, who seems to be everywhere, and a couple of his friends who are out for some ice climbing. Monte is clearly pleased to see us out by ourselves. He says they knew what the weather at Iceberg had been like, and they had been thinking about us.

Shortly after lunch we head back and get off the ice. We walk up the spur trail to where it joins the main trail that leads back to Kennecott. As we reach the junction I look to my left. There, a few feet away, and still looking pissed, is the bear. We beat it back to Kennecott.

The weather is a bit dicey, but it looks like we maybe able to do our flight-see today. Claudia and I are in the office of Wrangell Air talking to Kelly and passing the time while we wait to see what the weather will do. It's clear enough to fly, but for a flight-see you want good visibility, otherwise what's the point.

The weather cleared and our flight-see was on. I thought a flight-see was a bit touristy and in the normal course of events I would not have done it. And I would

have been wrong. Our pilot is Don Welty. Don normally does a long fly-in backpack of his own after the season is over, but this year he is afraid that snow will severely restrict his landing choices. You can really only appreciate the beauty of Wrangell from the air. There is just no other way to experience the grandeur and vastness of Wrangell. Don flies us over vast glacial highways; ice rivers carved on the glaciers and mountains whose bases are buried in 10,000 feet of ice. We fly into the Canadian part of the park and make a close pass of Mt. Hunter. I am not sure of the legality of this, but radar coverage is sparse in this part of the world, so I am sure no one knows we are here. It's spectacular, and it would have been a shame to have missed it.

We are leaving McCarthy and Wrangell. McCarthy is closing for the season. The National Park facilities have been closed for a week and we took one of the last shuttles from Kennecott. I am sad to leave. I want to come back and I want to go back to Iceberg in better weather.

You are probably still wondering about the wine problem. There happens to be a bar, no more like a saloon in McCarthy with an attached liquor store. In Alaska a storage area for the bar counts as a liquor store.

Once again we are taking two days to drive from McCarthy to Anchorage. From Anchorage we will go on to the Kenai Peninsula.

On the way back to Anchorage we are stopping at the Majestic Valley Wilderness Lodge. We have chosen it, in part because it has a restaurant, and there are few places to eat between McCarthy and Anchorage. It looks closed. We finally find someone in the Lodge and she says that she can give us a room, but the dining room is closed. We have reservations, but since the chef has left for the season, reservations mean little. The place is expensive and we are staying there only because of the restaurant. There is no reduction in price. Fortunately we are experienced Alaska hands, and we have extra food and fuel with us. We fire up our stove and cook outside. It's cold and we are bundled up in coats and hats. A woman runs by us in shorts and a jog bra, so maybe we are not experienced Alaska hands after all.

The next morning we push on to Anchorage, from there it's the Kenai Peninsula, which is much tamer so we figure the worst of the hardships are over. Little do we know that we will come close to death there. But that is a story for another paper.