

Alaskan Adventure

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Words by John Howell

No other state in our great nation is as rugged as Alaska-there's something about the fierce nature of the land that beckons to the truly adventuresome. Around every turn, adventure is waiting. The farther you explore, the more you're met with magnificent mountain views, crystal-clear lakes and rivers, and awe-inspiring natural glaciers. And the countryside is teeming with wildlife. Sit still in the woods for a spell and you're bound to see a moose, a stray wolf, or possibly even a bear. And no matter how prepared you may think you are, when you see one of the aforementioned critters, you can't help but be in awe (that is, unless it's a Grizzly with a nasty disposition, at which point you'll forget the awe and start looking to make a hasty retreat).

For this issue you're holding in your hands, Keith Mulligan (our resident photo guru) and I decided to head north to Alaska, where the sun shines strong throughout the day and night. During the summer months the sun just barely dips below the horizon around 4:00 am or so, and then it quickly pops back up. At its darkest hour, it's barely darker than dusk. This would allow us to ride day and night if we wanted to.

Keith and I agreed upon a weekend tour with Alaskan ATV Adventures (www.alaskaatv-adventures.com) and then booked our plane tickets. What we didn't know was just what sort of epic adventure we were about to embark upon.

Day One-Knik Glacier and Talkeetna B-29 Bomber Crash Site

We met our guide, Tim Cook, early Friday morning, and immediately we felt at home with him. He spoke with such passion for the land and had such enthusiasm for the ride ahead that we knew we were in good hands. Our first day of riding started just west of Anchorage, where we walked atop sections of ancient ice at the Knik glacier. We planned to finish the day's ride atop the neighboring Talkeetna mountains, where we would be scouting out the wreckage site where a B-29 bomber went down in a storm over half a century ago.

Tim unloaded his Honda Rancher AT quads at the start point near Knik glacier. After weaving through a network of densely wooded trails, we dropped down into a massive sand wash and started riding toward our destination. Along the way we had to cross through streams and rivers (Tim would always dismount and wade through the water in chest-waders to make sure it was passable). Not long into the ride we had our first wildlife encounter-only this one wasn't moving. We found a dead moose in the middle of a wide-open dry creek bed. "Look at the tracks," Tim shouted over the hum of his Honda's engine. "This one must have gotten surrounded and taken down by a pack of wolves." It reminded us that we better watch our step along our adventure.

Five miles out from the glacier, we noticed a distinct change in the air temperature. "That's the glacier," said Tim. "We're getting closer." As we continued up the creek, a small plane buzzed us, very low to the deck. Amazingly, he landed in the dry creek bed in front of us-yet another common occurrence in Alaska that simply fascinated us.

We rode on for another ten minutes or so until we reached the foot of the glacier. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. When we shut the machines off, there was only serene silence punctuated by the popping and groaning of the centuries-old ice ahead. There was a heavy melt going on, which made it impossible to get to the base of the ice. Luckily, we were still able to hop about on huge chunks of the glacier in the temporary lake in front of us. When we first jumped on the ice, the water around it bubbled and hissed as the glacier chunk would crack and shift under our feet. It was a bit unsettling at first, because we didn't know what it was going to do, but it was so exhilarating that Keith and I continued to hop from ice floe to ice floe like little kids.

We stopped for lunch and looked out at the glacier-there couldn't have been a more picturesque backdrop for our meal. We then saddled up and headed back, traveling over a whooped-out sand wash at 50 mph to add some additional excitement to the ride. It wasn't as if we needed any more, though-the experience now sitting behind us was a thrill of a lifetime.

We headed up to the Talkeetna mountains trailhead to finish our first day's ride-to see the bomber site. We started around 8 pm. and it was still perfectly light out. Tim figured that by the time we wrapped up the ride, we would have been at it for close to 17 hours. It was certainly a long day in the saddle.

This ride was considerably faster. Tim must have sensed that Keith and I wanted to tackle the mountain trails with more speed-the three of us weaved between deep rain ruts and jagged rocks all along the trail. Keith and I would jockey for position behind Tim, racing past each other using alternate lines up hills and through creek crossings. Keith would splash through a stream and blast me with water, I'd return the favor by giving my engine a few extra revs while in the mud in front of him.

When we got to the top, our giddiness was replaced by solemn respect as we gazed out upon the plane wreckage. Tim told us the pilot and crew were on a mission when bad weather forced them to fly lower than usual. If they had only flown 50 feet higher, they would have sailed right over the top of the mountain and continued on northward to finish their mission. Instead, they clipped the mountain and the ensuing fire raged for three days.

As we traversed back down the mountain in single file, a massive rainbow spiked out of the gathering clouds. It was almost as if Mother Nature was saying, "Welcome to Alaska-here's a little gift for the end of your day."

Day Two-Girdwood area

We had a considerably subdued day of riding planned for our second day (we only planned to hit one area and then spend the rest of the day checking out the local scene in town). We headed out to an area near the town of Girdwood to look for King Salmon that were starting to spawn and head upstream-these are the big suckers that can get up to 80 pounds! Tim was quick to point out that this area also has a plentiful amount of bears, and that we should be on the lookout for them. Now, I have never ridden in an area where I had to keep an eye out for wildlife that could eat me, so I found myself looking around often. Any time your guide has handguns, rifles, and shotguns with him, you know there's a reason.

Twenty minutes into our ride, we came to a trailhead, where we dismounted and hiked into the water. Along the path Tim told us stories-one such tale was about his friend who is the oldest living man in Alaska to kill a bear with his bare hands (using a knife, he accidentally hit its jugular). He reassured us that, in the past few years, only a few people have been killed by bears in this area. Comforting words indeed.

We got to the river after hiking down a cliff and spotted the salmon struggling to get upstream. There must have been 30 or 40 fish sitting in one pool right before a large waterfall. It was if they were all summoning up the energy to make the mad dash up the raging water. Occasionally a fish would leap out of the water and make a big splash as it fell back into the shallow pool. We watched, waiting to see if any of the fish would make it. I also found myself watching and waiting to see if any Grizzlies would be joining us for a late afternoon snack.

Day Three-Girdwood and Gold Mines at Hatchers Pass

Tim saved the best for last. We started our final day with a quick ride at Girdwood again before reaching a secret location Tim had set aside for our last ride.

At the start of the trailhead at Girdwood, Tim locked up the brakes on his quad. He motioned for us to come up and check something out in the dirt alongside him. There was a massive bear track in the middle of the trail. Keith put his hand next to the paw print-it was easily three or four times the size of his hand. "That's a big bear," exclaimed Tim. "We'd better keep our eyes peeled." Only two days before, not far north of us, an older couple was killed by a Grizzly (they had a gun but didn't have the time to use it). It's rare for bears to attack humans, but if you're in their territory, you'd better watch your back.

We rode cautiously, and the morning was incident free. We saw the occasional bear track, some steaming piles of bear crap (Tim told us that the bear must still be nearby), and we saw the occasional critter here and there. We even saw a mother quail with its young flock. They ran in front of our machines for a while as if they were going on the ride with us. After a minute they tucked tail into some brush and flittered away.

We did a quick loop scouting for bear and moose, but no such luck. Tim then told us of our next destination. "I'm taking you to go explore abandoned gold mines at high altitude," he said. I was ready to explore the abandoned mine shafts in the mountains at Seward.

When we arrived at the base of the mountain, I was somewhat...uninspired. I had seen tons of mountains, and this didn't look too spectacular. I couldn't see what was so special about this place.

After riding up steep fireroads for the good part of a half hour, our Hondas' engines gasped for air. The altitude turned what started out as a leisurely third-gear ascent into a second gear "looking for more power" kind of ride. Around three-quarters of the way up, we stopped for a quick break. When we turned around to look at what we just rode up, words escaped my mouth that I dare not print in this family magazine. Keith and I just looked at each other in shared silence, equally amazed at what was sprawled out in front of us. Tim smiled and said, "I didn't want to hype up this spot too much...I figured I'd let it speak for itself." The view was beyond words.

We continued up the mountain to the gold mines. We stopped and learned along the way about the Alaskan gold rush and the life of a miner. It was all fascinating stuff and we were eager to check out the man-made caverns in the side of the mountain. Equally interesting was the change in terrain. When we started at sea level, it was super lush and green. As we climbed out of the tree line, around 4,000 feet, the mountain scenery changed and everything started getting really mossy and spongy with sparse shrubs and bushes. Beyond that, as we got closer to the mines, the mountain transitioned into pure craggy rock and loose slate.

We got to the top and Tim pointed out a small blip on the side of a cliff. "See that?" he asked. "That used to be a house built into the side of the cliff." We broke out a pair of binoculars to see it properly. The house was partially collapsed on the side of this nearly vertical wall of rock...nearly 10 to 15 stories up in the air! Whoever lived there and mined the rock had some pretty big stones of his own.

Tim pointed us around the side of a cliff and instructed us to "head up the hill about 100 yards or so until you see the first mine shaft," while he waited below. We huffed and puffed, gasping for oxygen like our Hondas had earlier. We made it to the first mine. It had collapsed, but there were a few more still open above it. We made our way up to the next one, and it was partially open. The entrance was on its way to collapsing-debris littered the entrance, almost closing off the tunnel to the outside world. I peered inside the dark narrow passageway, but Tim's words rang out in my head: "Don't go in-they can be unstable and I haven't had a chance to check to see if they're safe." Maybe it was the number of adventurous events that had already transpired, or maybe it was the look on Keith's face saying "You're out of your mind," but I went in anyway. I could barely see an old wooden timber propping up the tunnel on the inside-that was the goal that I had to reach. Once I made it (creeping along slowly so as to not disturb the sleeping mine), I slowly headed back towards daylight. I'd be lying if the thought of thousands of pounds of rock crushing me didn't pop into my head. As I exited the shaft, I smiled at Keith and said I could now go home feeling like a true adventurer.

While driving back home, we saw an eagle soaring overhead, a moose just chillin' on the side of the highway, and even a few stray mountain goats. Now Alaska was just showing off... I can honestly say that my time up in Alaska was one of the most adventurous ATV experiences I've had in my life. If you're looking to make some life-long lasting memories yourself, Alaska is a tough ride to beat.

Sidebar 1

Alaska Fast Facts

Alaska isn't just some cold block of ice to the north of us. Here are a few tidbits of info on the 49th state that you may not have known (see, did you even know it was the 49th state?).

_ In 1867 United States Secretary of State William H. Seward offered Russia \$7,200,000, or two cents per acre, for Alaska. Many Americans called the purchase "Seward's Folly."

_ Joe Juneau's 1880 discovery of gold ushered in the gold rush era.

_ In 1943 Japan invaded the Aleutian Islands, which started the One Thousand Mile War, the first battle fought on American soil since the Civil War.

_ Alaska officially became the 49th state on January 3, 1959.

_ Alaska accounts for 25 percent of the oil produced in the United States.

_ Nearly one-third of Alaska lies within the Arctic Circle.

_ The Alaska Highway was originally built as a military supply road during World War II.

_ The state boasts the lowest population density in the nation.

_ Alaska is a geographical marvel. When a scale map of Alaska is superimposed on a map of the 48 lower states, Alaska extends from coast to coast.

_ Alaska is the United State's largest state and is over twice the size of Texas. Measuring from north to south the state is approximately 1,400 miles long, and measuring from east to west it is 2,700 miles wide.

_ 17 of the 20 highest peaks in the United States are located in Alaska.

_ At 20,320 feet above sea level, Mt. McKinley, located in Alaska's interior, is the highest point in North America.

Sidebar 2

We hooked up with Alaska ATV Adventures for our trip, but there are a few other companies that offer guided tours. Check out the following web sites and see which one best suits your needs.

Alaska ATV Adventures: <http://alaskaatv-adventures.com>

Explore Tours: <http://www.exploretours.com>

ATV Alaska: <http://www.atv-alaska.com>

Alaska Outdoors: www.alaskaoutdoors.com

Princess Lodges Hotels: www.princesslodges.com/denali-atv-adventure.htm

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