

Long and winding road: the landscape surrounding Mount McKinley, 'The Great One' – at 6,194m, it's the highest peak in North America

# Final frontier

Determined to experience the real Alaska under their own steam, **Joanna Walters** and pal hired a motor-home and headed off into one of the world's last great wildernesses. The verdict? It's not as hard (or as scary) as it looks...

## An emergency-stop in a 10m motor-home isn't the most advisable manoeuvre to make on an open road in the backwoods of Alaska.

But when something unreal, something truly astonishing happens, your first instinct is to slam on the brakes. All was going smoothly until I glanced in my rearview mirror and there, quite unexpectedly, was a mountain. And not just any mountain: 6,194m Mount McKinley, the highest in North America.

Locals call it Denali, its native name, meaning 'The Great One'. This coy Alaskan snow queen peeps out partially from behind her veil of dense clouds one day in three, but the full reveal happens perhaps once in 10 days. I was incredibly lucky to see the peak in all its sky-scraping, toothpaste-white beauty, and heaved the motor-home into a lay-by so I could grab my camera. Out in the crisp, clean air, staring up at the icy giant – that's when I felt that my Alaskan adventure had really begun.

Roaming Alaska in a hefty RV may not be how most people discover this vast state – it's more popular as a cruise-ship itinerary – but I was determined to explore it under my own steam (I'm not a Captain's-Table type of traveller). The state is larger than the combined area of the next three biggest ones – Texas, California and

Montana – and trying to get to grips with even part of it felt like a bold (or bonkers) task. But the road network looked good, and the state's tourism website provided plenty of detailed information. After some serious research, I settled on a two-week, 1,600km adventure and set off from Anchorage with a fellow explorer and navigator, Lisa.

Our first port of call was Denali National Park, an easy four-and-a-half-hour drive from the airport and a great warm-up for learning how to handle the motor-home. Within minutes we were stopped in our tracks by a large, female moose, nonchalantly chewing tree branches just beside the road. We stopped, switched off the engine and out came the cameras. It was a routine that was to be repeated endlessly over the next two weeks.

Camping in Alaska comes with just enough comforts – in this case a fire-pit and simple toilets – to make the wilderness pleasingly un-daunting. Our motor-home could function 'off the grid' like this for three or four nights, with its own gas, electricity and waste-water systems; it felt deliciously liberating.

But we weren't alone for long. Cheery 'hallos' suddenly echoed through the pine trees and an elderly couple appeared, beaming. 'We're Ed and Liz, your camping hosts! Anything you want to know – hiking trail, guides, bears – just ask.' ('Bears?!' Lisa and I put on our best poker faces.) Liz and Ed winter in their native Texas, but come to Alaska in summer to help independent visitors get the most out of the wilds. We were keen to hike unguided

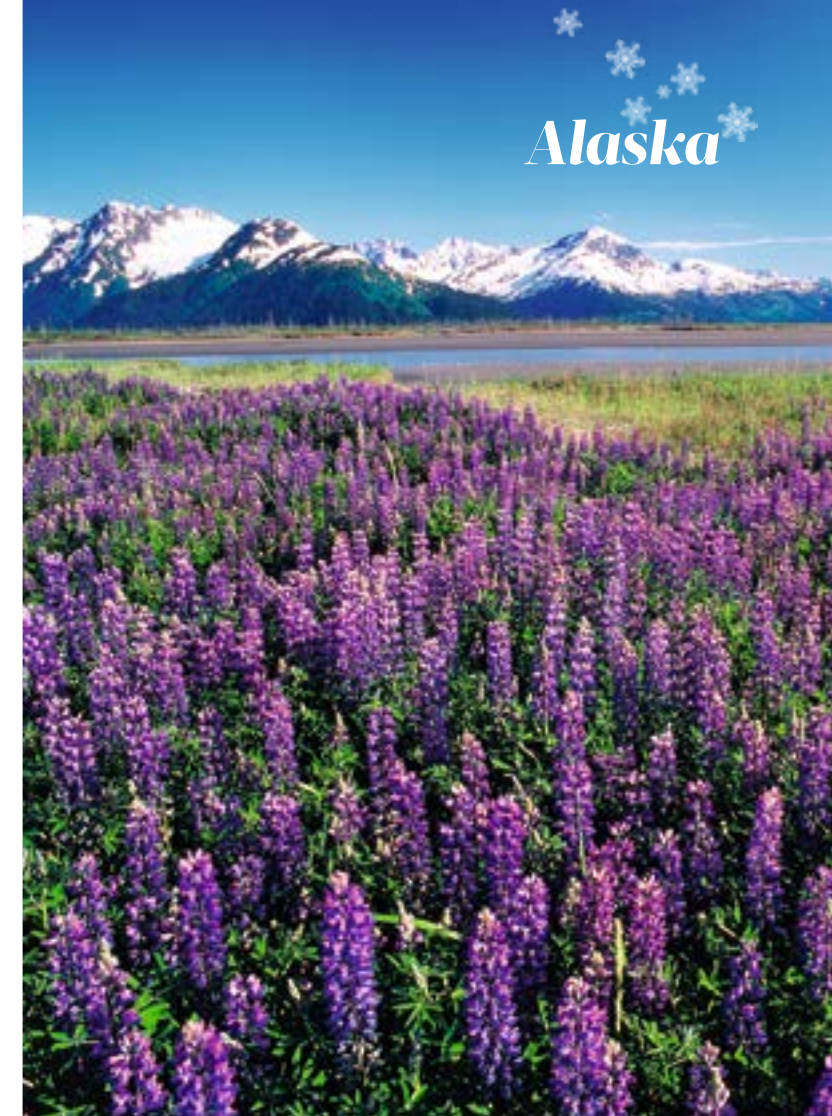
(cars aren't allowed to roam in the park), even though the majority of visitors join a group. Reassured by Liz and Ed's enthusiasm for our plan to go it alone, we took their hand-drawn map and tried not to feel anxious at the talk of grizzlies.

'Just make a noise if you see any coming towards you and they'll run off,' Liz breezed. 'Chat to each other, sing – just keep up the sound levels. The bears here are scared of the human voice and they usually keep away.' Usually? 'If you surprise one there's a slim chance it'll run towards you in a mock charge,' she put her head down and suddenly lurched towards me, swerving off at the last moment. 'That'll make you lose your pudding,' she chuckled. 'But don't worry, attacks are rare.'

We set off into the park singing so loudly that we must have petrified any wildlife within a 20km radius. A lone squirrel peered down at us as we stamped through the undergrowth – I have a sneaking suspicion it was deaf. Caterwauling aside, the hike was astounding: Alaska's is an epic landscape of desolate beauty, yet made up of diversely intricate scenes. In the tundra, I had to lay down on my front to appreciate the delicate alpine orchids and lilies that freckled the scrubby undergrowth; by the time we reached the top of the hill my head was on a constant swivel, trying to absorb the countless peaks that rose and fell across the sky. This marvel was all ours, free of any group or time restriction; we felt humbled, and happily allowed ourselves to be swallowed up by the sheer majesty of it all. ▶

**WRITER'S TOP TIP**

On November 5 2012, the US released a 25-cent coin in honour of the Denali National Park. The reverse side shows a picture of an alpine dall sheep with Mount McKinley behind. About 302 million quarters were minted



All at sea: go flight-seeing by sea plane. Opposite, peering into the abyss; bald eagle; flowers in bloom and the Kenai mountains



**Bear deal:** two grizzly cubs looking for a pre-sunrise bite

Our first grizzly sighting came the next day – but we were on the safe side of a coach window, having hopped onto one of the park’s shuttle buses. Within minutes of boarding, our driver slowed to a halt. ‘You may lower the windows,’ said Wayne quietly, ‘but remain absolutely silent and point only with binoculars or a camera. He’s over there, on your right, about seven metres away.’ My heart skipped. There he was, up on a little ridge, a huge creature with gold brown fur ruffling in the wind, head bobbing up and down into the brush.

‘It’s the blueberries,’ whispered Wayne. ‘He’s gorging himself, fattening up for the winter.’ We watched, silent save for the click of cameras, hushed by Wayne’s explanation that the animals ignore the buses and just go about their business as long as the passengers keep their

mouths shut. The bus crept on. Suddenly, there was a flurry in the undergrowth; I gasped as a wolf sprang into view. I’d expected – hoped – to see just one or two animals, but this felt like being in a wildlife documentary. The wolf ran right across my field of vision, just metres away, pounced into the bush, making two ptarmigan birds shoot into the air in a terrified flap. Frustrated, the wolf loped away – and just as I thought I’d had my animal highlight for the day, a mother grizzly ambled down the hill right past the bus, two cubs rough-and-tumbling behind her.

It was hard to imagine the rest of the trip living up to this amazing mini-safari, but Alaska is a daily head-rush. We were heading east, towards Canada’s Yukon territory, and as the mountains grew and the glaciers glowed an

ever-brighter blue, we decided to leave the main highway and risk a back-country shortcut. One of the joys of a motor-home is that you never have to worry about finding a hotel or B&B for the night. Encouraged by the rental company (‘Yeah, you can park anywhere in the wilderness as long as you’re not blocking the highway’), we camped by the wayside, simply pulling over and setting up house when we decided we’d had enough of the road.

‘Shortcut’ is a relative term in Alaska. It took a full day to reach the Richardson Highway – 24 hours of misty mountains and deep round lakes, with an occasional caribou cantering beside us for a stretch of track. We saw one petrol station, a small camp shop and no settlements, but joining the Richardson propelled

us right back into the modern world – the highway runs parallel to the Trans-Alaska pipeline, bringing oil from the Arctic rigs to the port of Valdez.

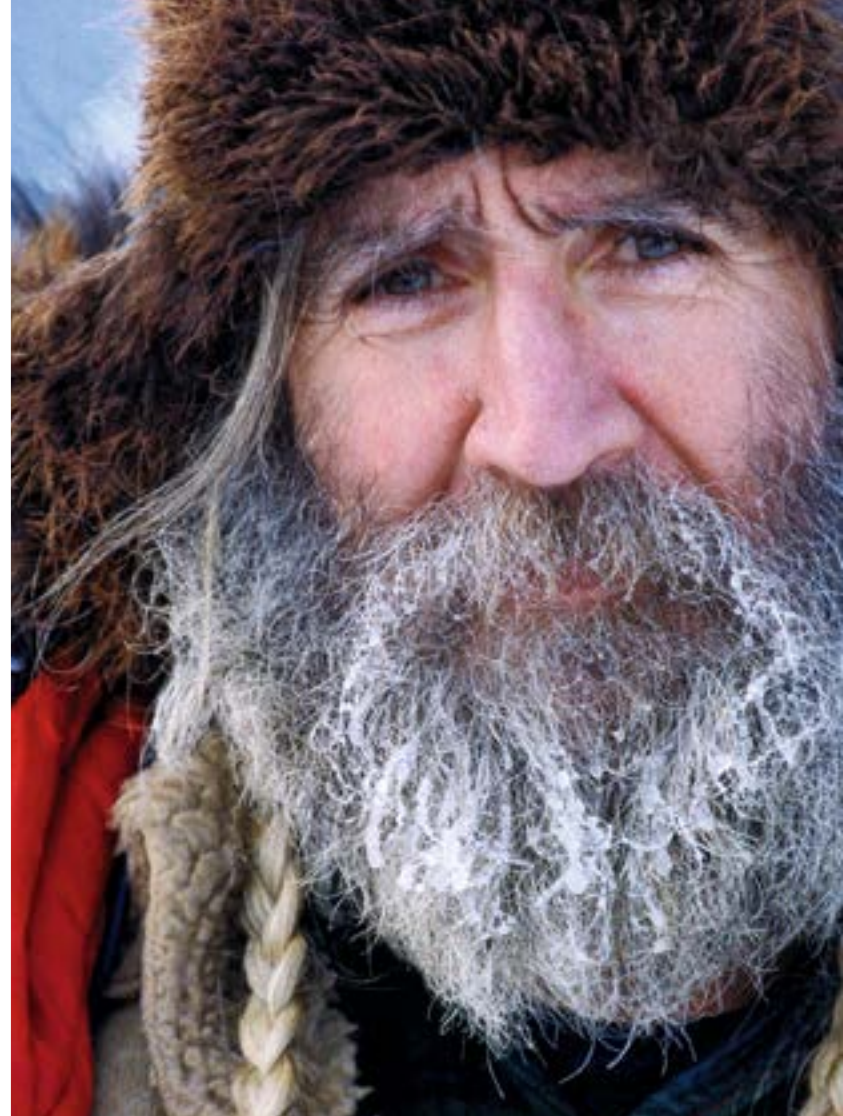
We branched off to a small village called Chitina on the Copper River and drove right down to the water’s edge. Here, small groups of Native Athabascan Alaskans filleted salmon in the shallows, pulled straight from nets that turned on large wooden wheels. The scene probably hadn’t changed for hundreds of years.

But not all of Alaska’s history lives on. The following morning we took a six-seater flight to McCarthy – the road was too challenging even for us – a former mining town. Prospectors raced here at the end of the 19th century during the Gold Rush but found, instead, a different metal – copper. There was enough to build >

**WRITER’S TOP TIP**

The Athabascan culture is matrilineal – children belong to the mother’s clan. Traditionally, at the heart of the group, was a woman and her brother – their families worked together, sharing responsibilities for hunting and teaching social skills.





Bird's eye view: clockwise from top left, Wrangell-St Elias National Park; local trapper; plane flying over a glacier; bull caribou at rest

the lucrative Kennecott Mine, which boomed but then busted. It's now empty and silent, while huge, derelict buildings still cling to the mountainside, teetering over the confluence of two glaciers. The miners used to walk the 8km from the pithead to McCarthy to carouse.

There was something very 'last frontier' about the old settlement; we walked along the dirt main street and had ourselves a beer at the last-remaining tavern. A local guy with long hair, smelling faintly of woodsmoke, tried to convince us cities were 'evil' and McCarthy was the 'kind of place you could survive the Apocalypse'. I said we'd bear it in mind.

Why had we come? Because here you can hike the incredible glaciers that loom above McCarthy. It was an adventurous afternoon: our crampons crunched into the ice and we strode across the frozen, blue-grey wastes, watching the water gurgle into dizzying crevasses.

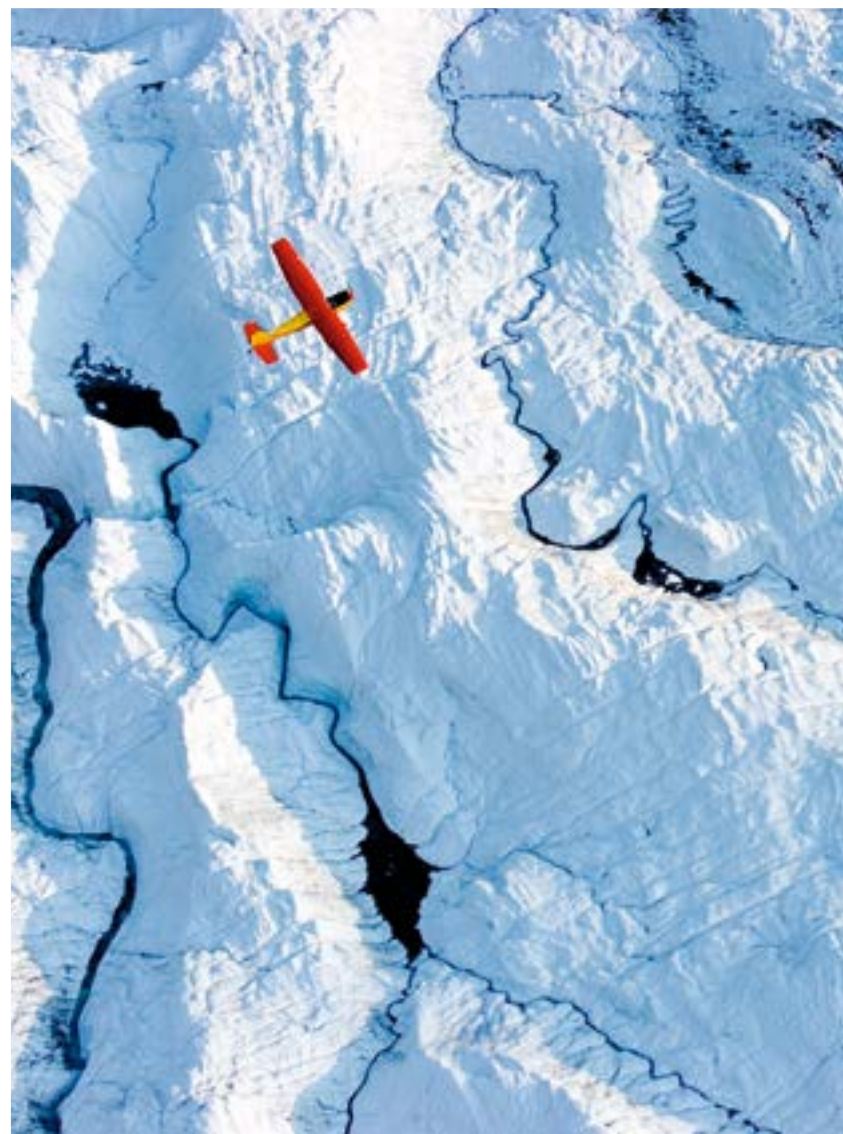
There was something ghostly about McCarthy, but I couldn't help feeling that my sense of melancholia was probably linked to our trip coming to its end. We flew back to collect our faithful RV and drove on to Valdez, where the road was flanked by snow-capped, jagged peaks and the car ferry threatened to return us to the point where our trip began, Anchorage.

**'If you surprise a bear, there's a chance it'll run towards you in a mock charge. That'll make you lose your pudding...'**

But handing back the motor-home didn't mean our adventure was entirely over. We had one last hurrah, a night at a luxury wilderness lodge, a 45-minute hop away by seaplane. We were barely in the air before we spotted a pod of white beluga whales carving through the water, and the wildlife-scouting continued at Redoubt Bay Lodge, where bald eagles nested in a pine tree just beyond our balcony. On a boat that afternoon, we watched as a glossy black bear sloshed along in a watery bog, looking for salmon; meanwhile, upstream, a pair of beavers slapped the water furiously with their tails to warn him off.

Back at the lodge, clasping hot chocolate by the woodburning stove, Lisa and I mused over a trip that had felt, for the most part, as if we were living in a natural-history programme, set amid some of the world's best scenery. Neither of us had expected to see so much wildlife, or for it to be so easy to spot. The choice to go 'indie' rather than join a cruise hadn't limited our experiences at all. It had quadrupled them. Our first taste of the Last Frontier certainly wouldn't be our last. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: 4CORNERS, AWL, GETTY



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go Independent

**BA** (ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Anchorage, via Seattle, from £458 return. **Icelandair** (icelandair.co.uk) flies from Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester and Glasgow, via Reykjavik, from £675 return (May to September); flying time is up to four hours shorter than with rivals.

### Where to stay

**Hotel Captain Cook** (001907276 6000, captaincook.com; doubles from £185, room only) is Anchorage's staid hotel; its Crow's Nest restaurant has 360° views and top Alaskan fare. **Talkeetna Camper Park** makes a hip, rustic motor-home camping detour on the way to Denali (001907733 2693, talkeetnacamper.com; from £24 a night). For info on the park, see [denali.national-park.com/visit.htm](http://denali.national-park.com/visit.htm). In McCarthy, try the mining-era **Ma Johnson's Hotel** (0019075544402, mccarthylodge.com; from £118, room only). **Redoubt Bay Lodge** (0019077767516, redoubtbaylodge.com; from £816pp, full board, including

all tours and boat plane to and from Anchorage).

### Get around

**Great Alaskan Holidays** (001907248 7777, greatalaskanholidays.com) is a reliable motor-home hire company, from £82 a night with unlimited mileage. **K2 Aviation** (0019077332291, flyk2.com) runs flight-seeing tours around Mount McKinley from Talkeetna; from £122pp for a one-hour trip.

### Go packaged

**Windows On The Wild** (020 87421556, windowsonthewild.com) has a 14-night motor-home tour of Alaska from £1,455pp, with Heathrow flights, vehicle and two nights at the Marriott Anchorage Hotel. **Discover the World** (01737214250, discover-the-world.co.uk) has a seven-night rail, road and sea trip from £1,218pp, room only, including Alaska Railroad train, car, ferry and tour in Denali National Park. Flights extra.

### Further information

See [travelalaska.com](http://travelalaska.com).