

The AL/CAN or Alaska Highway
Driving to Alaska and More
By: Ted Barrett

This is not meant to be negative in nature, nor meant to discourage anyone from driving to Alaska. It is meant to provide a clear and detailed description as to what to expect on this journey. However, this is my viewpoint, and other folks have different viewpoints. And, as some have said, it is all in the eye of the beholder. First of all, it is a long, long drive; and getting up each day and moving along another 250 to 300 miles can get old and tiring. The Ice Fields Parkway from Lake Louise to Jasper was very, very rough. Until such time as it is repaired, unless you specifically want to go through the Canadian Rockies, I recommend an alternate route. From the time you leave the Canadian Rockies, there is not much in the way of spectacular scenery until just below Laird River, BC. Most of the view is forest and farm land. And, if anyone tells you that the Alaska Highway is paved all the way -- do not believe them. It may have been paved at one time. From Beaver Creek, YT to Destruction Bay, there were almost 115 miles of dirt/gravel rework. Based on info received early in our trip, it was that way this Spring and also when we had to travel it on our way back south. Plus, pavement that was in place south of Watson Lake on our way north, was torn up in long sections later in August. And, based on what we saw, there is no way all those miles of road will get repaved this year. Other than that, most of the roads are paved, some rough sections and some smooth sections. And, some of the paved sections have loose gravel on the shoulders. Gravel that gets kicked out into the main part of the pavement and become missiles aimed for your windshield. And, if you do not have a cover for your toad windshield, it will become pitted or sand blasted from all the dirt and small gravel on the unpaved sections of highway. Also, your headlights need to be protected, or they will become pitted.

Mosquitoes: Once you get north of Jasper, BC you will run into mosquitoes, lots of mosquitoes. Take plenty of repellant: table top, personal, and skin. Plus, you will need flying insect spray for inside the motorhome, or you will be feasted on during the night. Every time you open the door they go inside. You just cannot keep them out of the motorhome, so you have to spray or be eaten. Before leaving Georgia, we purchased the little devices that run off of butane and they are effective for placing on a table top. We also purchased Citronella Oil wristbands, and they worked. But the best is spray insect repellant named Repel, which contains 40% Deet.

There are a lot of dirt roads in Canada. Plus, many of the parking lots are dirt. What that means is there is a lot of dirt on most of the highways. When it rains, the water on the road is brown (dirty brown) and it will color your RV the same color. If it is wet, then you have mud in the parking lots. If it is dry, you have a lot of dust. The same applies to the campgrounds and RV Parks. If the directory says the campgrounds have good gravel interior roads. What that means is that at one time the campground put some gravel on the road, but that was years ago. What you have now is the gravel smashed into the dirt and a half dirt and gravel road. Again, based on the weather, it is either muddy or dusty. The same mostly holds true for the campsites, but they are a little better with a little more gravel in some campgrounds. Bottom line, there is no way to keep your RV clean. At the time of this writing, 2014, the going price for 30Amp service was \$40 and \$30 for dry camping (no hookups). Also, in 2014, there was an oil boom going on in this part of Canada. As a result, many campgrounds were almost full of permanent oil workers. Most of the campgrounds were full at night. And, they appear to be taking in a lot of revenue, but not putting any back into the campground in the form of maintenance or improvements. Some of the campgrounds are no more than dirt parking lots with very narrow campsites. Forget about the \$40 mentioned above, in the Homer area the prices go up to \$85 during the month of July and almost no place is lower than \$57 a night. The \$85 does not mean the RV park is that nice, it is just supply and demand and they have an overwhelming customer base that enables them to charge that much.

Once you get to Dawson Creek, Mile Post 0 for the Alaska Highway, the road does not change much at first; except there is loose gravel on the shoulder of the roads for most of the miles. If an 18 wheeler gets over into it, it is kicked onto the main part of highway. Then if you are lucky, it gets kicked onto your windshield. For about 50 miles south of Liard River, there were many loose gravel patches on the highway, some for a few miles -- again more rocks on your windshield. Some folks are just luckier than others. We were traveling with two other coaches and had five star-bursts by the time we reach Liard River. Two were the size of quarters. The two other coaches had none.

Frost Heaves: We were warned of frost heaves in the roads. That if you hit one of them too fast, it would tear up your motorhome. We have not seen what I would classify as a frost heave. We have run into plenty of defrost depressions, but no heaves. Actually, what they are to me is whoop-de-do's like in dirt biking. Most of them can be handled around 45 MPH, much faster and they can really rock your coach. I did talk to some local Canadians and Alaskacans, and asked them about the frost heaves. Yes, that is what they call

them, but they had never seen an actual heave, only depressions. I think somewhere along the way, there was a misnaming of these spots in the road. But, there is nothing to really hit, there is no uprising or sharp transition, only a whoop-de-do, so don't worry about them. Most of them are marked by small red flags or signs.

Wildlife: We saw two grizzlies and three black bears between Lake Louise and Jasper, BC and about three more black bears before Grande Prairie. Along this route were two dead moose. Between Liard River and Watson Lake, there were numerous buffalo herds grazing on the side of the highway and we saw at least 10 to 15 black bears along this segment of the route. We also saw lots of black bears on other highways. We saw almost no moose along the highways. Martha was very disappointed about the amount of wildlife sightings. But we were traveling mostly in the middle of the day, not early in the morning or late afternoon, when it is reported that most of the wildlife is seen.

The Top of the World Highway: While most of us think of a highway as being a paved road, in this case that is not true. The road runs from the west bank of the Yukon River at Dawson City, YT toward the town of Chicken, AK, approximately 79 miles. The remaining 25 miles, Taylor Highway, is just plain old country dirt road. The first five miles is gravel pavement. Then it turns into a dirt road with a little gravel spread on it. The dirt is dark brown and if wet can be very muddy -- muddy enough to cover your motorhome and tow vehicle. If not wet, then it can be a dust bowl. As you near the US and Canadian border, there are some one and two mile sections of old gravel pavement. When we crossed into Alaska, there were two miles of coarse gravel, but it is in the process of being paved and the next eight miles were new asphalt pavement. After that it is dirt and gravel again and a section or two of old paved gravel. However, about 25 miles from Chicken, it turns into nothing but a dirt road with no gravel, just yellow dirt and very rough (15 MPH in a motorhome). Many folks have stated that the road is very narrow with no room to pass or meet another vehicle. For the most part, I totally disagree with that. I found the road to be plenty wide, except for maybe two short curves, and even there the road is wide enough to pass with care. Except for the last miles going into Chicken, the road pretty much runs along the ridge of the mountains and is quite scenic. But, there are almost no pull outs to take photos. But with little traffic, you can stop in the right lane of the road (there are no shoulders). As for the scenic view, in my viewpoint, it does not compare with the Beartooth in Montana or a lot of other mountain roads that are paved. In fact, you can see the same type views by running the interstate in Wyoming and Montana. If

you must run the Top of the World Highway or go to Chicken, AK, then I guess the Top of the World must be for you. Frankly, I don't think it is worth it in your motorhome. The same applies to Dawson City. If you need to see the old homes where novelist Jack Lord, poet Robert Service, and historian Pierre Berton lived, or just have the need to see Dawson City, or just to say you have been there, then I recommend you drive straight to Tok, leave your motorhome in a campground there, and take a day trip in your tow vehicle back to Dawson City. If one day is not enough, stay in a hotel. I would never do it again, and if I knew before what I know now, I would not have done it the first time. It is not that it frightened me. In fact, I love driving risky and challenging roads, just not rough and dirt ones in my coach. I just like my coach and Ford more than to put them through that hellish of a drive. My recommendation is to skip them both and go straight from Whitehorse to Tok. If they ever get the Top of the World paved all the way, then it will be a different story.

Before leaving the Top of the World Highway subject, let's go back to the eye of the beholder and different opinions. While in Alaska, I heard a camper ask someone about the road from Tok to Chicken and on over to Dawson City. The person's reply was, "Oh, the road is OK, in fact there are 13 miles of new pavement." Had the person asked me, I would have said, "From Tok to Chicken are 65 miles of very bad rough pavement with several sections, some miles, of dirt/gravel patches. Once you get to Chicken, there are 45 miles of country dirt road that is very rough with speeds not recommended over 15 MPH in areas. After that, most of the pavement is bad and rough, especially in Canada. However, on the US side, there are 13 miles of new pavement, but that is a very short segment of the overall route." I wonder what the person asking the question thought about the road and the advice received, once they had traveled it.

Denali National Park and Mt McKinley: Other than the fact the Mt McKinley is located in the middle of Denali National Park, that is the only connection. From the park entrance you cannot see Mt McKinley, nor can you see it from the wilderness bus rides into the park. You cannot see Mt McKinley until several miles south of the park entrance. Near the park entrance is now a little town with no name. It is about 10 miles south of Healy, and nothing more than a tourist trap. The campground there is the pits. The food is not good and it is expensive. If you want to do the wildlife bus ride into the park, recommend staying at Denali RV Park & Motel in Healy, or go south to Cantwell RV Park in Cantwell and drive back up to the park entrance. There is a road loop just north of Cantwell on the river where you can boondock. **The Denali bus ride is strictly for viewing wildlife, plus there is some mountain scenery, but no possible view of Mt McKinley.** If you are

interested in viewing Mt McKinley, it can be seen from Anchorage and on the drive up north. The best two viewing places is a pull off just outside of Talkeetna or inside the **Denali State Park**. Note, I said state park, not national park. Also, if interested in a plane ride to see it, recommend K2aviation in Talkeetna. They will land on a glacier near the base of the mountain. Stay at the Mat-Su RV Park & Campground just north of Willow, 22 miles from Talkeetna, or in Talkeetna itself. They have a large free overnight parking lot for RV's.

Summary: This is just my honest opinion based on our trip to Alaska. I am sure again, that many will have totally different opinions or thoughts. I recommend if you want to drive to Alaska, begin at Skagway and work your way up to Haines, Valdez, Seward, Homer, Anchorage, and on up to Denali National Park. Then if you have some time left, double back, staying at your favorite spots discovered on the way up. Do not go to Dawson City and Chicken, or to Fairbanks. There is just no bang for your travel buck there and you will put more wear and tear on your coach and tow vehicle than it is worth. There is really nothing that scenic or extra ordinary. Yes, the Top of the World Highway does have some scenic views, but nothing you cannot see in the lower 48. But, if you do want to run the road, do it in your tow car from Tok. Also, note that I say begin at Skagway. Unless you have a real need to see a bear eat a salmon and are there at the right time of the year, or want to see the Salmon Glacier, I recommend you skip Stewart, BC and Hyder, AK. Those two towns are dead. If you do have to go to Hyder, then stay at Meziadin Lake about 38 miles from Stewart and drive you tow car in. As for opinions, a few years ago when I first thought about going to Alaska, I read many postings on the various RV forums. They basically all read like these two. *"Had two flat tires, busted a shock absorber, broke a shock mount, and had to replace the windshield. It was the worst trip of our lives and we will never go back."* Or, *"Had two flat tires, busted a shock absorber, broke a shock mount, and had to replace the windshield. It was the best trip of our lives and we can't wait to go back."* So, you see, it is matter of perspective in most cases. If you fit into the category of the comment in red, then maybe you should take a cruise ship to Alaska,

I will be glad to answer any questions you have about this document or our overall trip. Or if you would like a discussion, we can do that too. My main purpose here is to inform.

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