

Off The Main Road Alaskan Adventure

By Duane Ryks

Above—The view of the Matanuska Glacier along the Glenn Highway.

Chapter Two

Roadtrip to Valdez

Climbing out of the Matanuska-Susitna Valley from Palmer, the Chugach and Talkeetna mountain views on either side make the drive on the Glenn Highway one of the most scenic in all of Alaska. The highway follows the Matanuska River up to the termination of the Matanuska Glacier, then on to the junction of the Richardson Highway at Glennallen. The towering mountains along the highway seem so close that you could almost reach out and touch them from the window.

The view of the Matanuska Glacier from the road is spectacular with its background of majestic snow-capped peaks on either side. We previously visited this area three years ago and spent time hiking on the trails that overlook the glacier in the State Recreational Area. The trails provide views that you just can't get from the pullouts.

Just past the glacier you come to Sheep Mountain, Sandy's favorite photogenic mountain in all of Alaska. The mountain is decked out in a rainbow of colors, from green trees at the base to gold then red and finally deep purple at the top. Across the road to the south are three mountains in different distinct colors. We have seen Dahl sheep on the mountains in this area in the past, but not this time.

More scenery opens up as you approach Glennallen. In front of you are the snow-capped Wrangell Mountains. As we drove we caught glimpses of the tops, but rain rolled down through the valley and obscured our view when we reached the junction. At the gas station and convenience store there was a small purple trailer with the name Tok Thai Food. There was a bit of a line, so we decided it must be alright.



The rainbow colors of Sheep Mountain have made this one of Sandy's favorite photo subjects in all of Alaska.

Wow, were we surprised. The food was fantastic and the portions more than adequate.

Turning south on the Richardson Highway, the Wrangell Mountains are on the east side for miles. The sun was back out by the time we reached the Willow Lake pull out. The lake provides a sweeping, wide-open view of the mountains reflected in itself. Kiosks in the parking area provide the names of the not-so distant peaks. It was tough to get Sandy back in the vehicle until she had photographed everything at least twice.



Above—Mt. Drum, the 12,010 foot peak on the western edge of the Wrangell St. Elias Mountain Range, is reflected in Willow Lake along the Richardson Highway south of Glennallen.

Highway 4 then rises to the top of Thompson Pass—the snowiest road in Alaska. The average snowfall is 551 inches. The most snow recorded was in the winter of 1952-1953 when they received a whopping 974 inches. Near the top of the 2805 foot pass is Worthington Glacier with a small visitor's center and rest area. At the top of the pass is another pullout. You can look down at the long deep valleys below. It was misty and cold so we didn't stay long. The road is kept open throughout the winter. The trans-Alaska pipeline runs over the pass to Valdez.



Top and Left-Views from the top of Thompson Pass in September of 2010. (It was misty and hazy on our trip.)

Photos courtesy of Sandy Kay Photography. Contact her at www.sandykayphotography.com or email: sandykay7@gmail.com.



Above—The Worthington Glacier at the top of Thompson Pass.



From the top of the pass you quickly descend through Keystone Canyon. Towering waterfalls drop from the canyon walls. Bridal Veil and Horsetail Falls were among our favorites. They are so high, and close, that you can't get them in one photo.

At the base of the canyon we quickly arrived at Valdez, AK. Most people know the name because it is at the terminal end of the trans-Alaska pipeline; one of the cities destroyed by the 1964 earthquake; and the infamous Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. The modern city sits on the shore of the northeast corner of Prince William Sound. It has a beautiful harbor

where we watched, in envy, fishermen cleaning their catches of halibut, sea bass, and yellow-eyed rockfish. Across the bay are the Alyeska Marine Terminal and a salmon hatchery.

Troy has friends in Valdez, Doug and Audrey Johnson. They invited us to go for a cruise on their boat and then to their house for dinner. The cruise on Doug's boat was incredible as we motored along the base of gigantic mountains on all sides that rise from sea level to over a mile high. Many peaks were still snow-capped due to the tremendous amount of snow the



Opposite Page—Lower left is view of Bridal Veil Falls; Lower right is Horsetail Falls.

Left—Colorful Yellow Eye Rock Fish waiting to be filleted on the wharf at Valdez.

Below—Prince William Sound at Valdez.





Left-The colorful top of the Totem Pole outside of the Whitney Museum in Valdez.

Above-A pair of nesting eagles at our campground.

Below-Troy and Duane strolling amid the boats in Valdez Harbor.

Opposite Page-Calved icebergs floating in front of the Valdez Glacier.



area receives. Doug allowed me to take the controls of the vessel for a while. We saw sea otters, harbor seals, eagles, many ducks and shorebirds. Unfortunately we didn't see whales this trip. At the Johnsons' home we enjoyed a feast of barbequed chicken and fresh salmon.

While in Valdez we visited the Maxine and Jessie Whitney Museum. Maxine assembled a large collection of precious stones, native artifacts, clothing, jewelry, and art. Jessie accumulated a zoo of full-body animal mounts that even Cabela's would be jealous of. The museum is housed at the Valdez College.

We camped at the Glacier View Campground. It is a nice campground with welcomed hot showers, which can be hard to find in Alaska. A few sites were closed due to nesting bald eagles. The proud parents gave Sandy's camera an extensive workout.

Nearby, we visited the Valdez Glacier. A number of icebergs were floating in the lake at the base of the glacier. We hiked up a cliff alongside the lake to get a full view. Troy broke off pieces of the dense ice and filled our cooler. Chunks of the slow melting ice lasted 5-days in the cooler.

Troy's roommate Jeff Johnson, also formerly from Minnesota, drove down to Valdez and picked him up. Sandy and I went on to Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.

