

Alaska!

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As it turned out, it was so easy to drive in Alaska, if there were roads, that is. Where they existed, drivers would hardly be tested. But we had to cruise thrice and fly twice, to reach even popular destinations. One in six in Alaska owns an aeroplane, according to statistics. So forget about motoring adventures in the narrow and winding fjords in Norway.

Joanne and I were waiting for boarding, at 3:45 am in the early morning of June 24, inside the Anchorage airport, on our way back to Hong Kong via Seoul. A KAL officer approached us, out of curiosity I guess. He's Malaysian Chinese, half retired, and we then talked enthusiastically in Cantonese: the beauty and solitude of the "two-season" Alaska, hotness in summer, namely June thru August versus freezing cold (in all the other months), the lack of Chinese "dim sum" (as Koreans were operators behind most "Chinese" restaurants), etc.

He was shocked when we told him that we had driven around Alaska for more than two weeks. "Very few Chinese do that", he said. Having slept earlier for less than three hours in the motel, we were not sober enough to appreciate what that meant.

I took a chance to look outside. The sunlight was becoming brighter, and I could recognize the Chugach Mountains that lied north of Anchorage. Many more beautiful mountains were further out in the Alaskan Range: none more impressive than the Denali (McKinley), the tallest in North America, I told myself. It was a strange mid-night/early morning experience anyway. I remembered I had driven to the airport at around 2:00 am, and could have turned off all lights in the car without facing much hazard. As we'd learnt, sun setting and the persistence of sunlight were two different things. Yes, of course, Anchorage just celebrated solstice the day before yesterday, I mean two days before yesterday.

I fell asleep quickly in the plane. I dreamt about so many things: the dramatic glaciers near Whittier and Seward, the landing on the snowy Sheldon Amphitheater deep into the Alaskan Range, the unforgettable bluish floating icebergs around the majestic Columbia Glacier off Valdez (Valdez, yes, where the infamous Exxon oil spill

causing environmental disasters occurred), and our silly debates in a cloudy evening about where exactly Mount McKinley was at the Talkeetna Lodge (involving a multinational contingent of Americans, Australians and Chinese)---only to discover the morning after that we were all wrong because Denali had been above the clouds!

And there were those lovely sea creatures in the Prince William Sound: sea lions, cute and back-floating otters, smoothly swimming seals, colorful puffins, and, with sheer luck, a half-visible humpback whale and an even more elusive orca whale.

“Hi, sir. What do you want for your main course?” I found myself confronted by a smiling KAL air hostess. I mentioned something, and probably later swallowed it, before sinking again. Joanne, I barely managed to notice, was not much more active either. How we missed the king crab, halibut and salmon in Alaska! And the local amber ale and beer (to be frank only for me, not for Joanne): which were even more expensive than most imported booze, including Bud and Miller from the Lower 48! Well, deservedly so. They tasted among the best that I had sampled over the places I’d travelled so far. Anyway, everything was expensive in Alaska.

Then I vaguely recalled the lack of wild animals on land. Denali National Park was a great disappointment; we saw only a moose, a number of dall sheep, and a single snow hare. In the Canadian Rockies three years ago, we found mountain goats, and moose-like creatures everywhere. We were even chased by a goat. Well, timing? Weather? In any case, it was not meant to be a show for humans. Somehow, the joy of being able to pan some gold flakes in an operating mine near Fairbanks had a compensating effect (surely we paid for the “show tour”).

Involuntarily I woke again when somebody announced that the plane would reach Seoul in a few hours on the “next day”. We earned a day on the way in (we departed Hong Kong in the afternoon of June 7 and arrived at Anchorage in the morning of the same day!). Now we had to pay back. So what’s the big deal?

I slipped back into half consciousness. Ha, crossing the International Date Line. What about crossing the Arctic Circle? We did that, didn’t we, from Fairbanks on a jet tour? And were awarded a certificate each! The Alaskan Pipeline, like a twin brother of the unpaved Dalton Highway (where most privately rented cars had to pay a premium to enter), was visible most of the time whenever we cared to look downward from the plane.

We all applauded, when the pilot announced that the plane was crossing the Arctic Circle. Joanne and I had never ventured so far north, not even in Norway. But I almost laughed, in Coldfoot, where the plane landed miles beyond the Circle. I felt so warm that I wanted to take off my jacket.

It shouldn't have been a surprise, though, when a few hours ago in Fairbanks temperature actually neared 30 degrees Celsius and we were so bothered by randomly flying mosquitoes. The lesson? Even supposedly frozen places might be very hot in summer, however short the season.

Alaska! A week after returning, I'm in a position to say something more objective. Despite and because of all the surprises, Alaska is now number one in terms of natural beauty in our limited ranking. Over the Canadian Rockies, Norway, the Grand Canyon, and Switzerland.