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Bus saves friends' sojourn in Alaska

By Anne Z. Cooke
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Even if bus trips were my style, I wouldn't have thought one the best way to see Alaska. Yet there we were in Anchorage, on the last night of a 10-day bus trip.

Two weeks earlier, I'd been packing jeans and socks when the phone rang. "They've changed their minds," barked our Alaska contact. "They don't have room for you after all."



Steve Haggerty / ColorWorld

Tourists on a Gray Line bus take a break along a northern highway.

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Steve Haggerty / ColorWorld

A wildlife cruise in the Alaska trip Gray Line set up for Dorothy Hitchcock (left) and Anne Cooke.

It couldn't be, I thought. In less than 48 hours my travel mate and grammar school friend, Dorothy Hitchcock, and I were due to leave for a week at a rustic cabin on the Kenai Peninsula. We'd paid for unrefundable plane tickets.

Alaska is always on my A list of destinations. I'm rarely too busy to drop everything and head north, even for a cabin without plumbing.

The marvels Alaskans take for granted — salmon swimming upstream, bald eagles perched outside the front door, vast tracts of wilderness — seem like miracles to me.

Dorrie, who had never been to Alaska, wasn't giving up. "How about Gray Line, the bus company?" she asked.

Gray Line, Holland America Cruise Line's bus company, packages add-on land tours for its cruise passengers. You travel on a schedule with other people, climb on and off the bus in long lines, and stay in the same hotel.

"This is pretty last-minute, but I'm sure we can come up with something," said Sandra, who answered my call. We'd be traveling with other people, mostly cruise passengers. But other than that, we'd be free of schedules and crowds.

"This wouldn't work in the Lower 48, but we can do it here because Alaska has so few roads," she said. "Wherever you want to go, chances are we're already going there."

By the next day, she'd stitched together an itinerary and printed ticket vouchers for each of our trip's segments. The trip included two days in Anchorage, two in Denali National Park, two in Fairbanks, two in Nome (on the Bering Sea) and a final overnight in Anchorage.

Sandra tossed in some extra excursions: a "Cabin Nite" pioneer dinner and musical revue in Denali; a marine life motor cruise through the Kenai Fjords National Park; a historic sternwheeler cruise on the Chena and Tanana rivers, and a couple of others.

Having everything planned ahead was liberating. We tramped all over Anchorage, toured museums and marveled at the lush flower gardens and wheelbarrow-sized cabbages.

We scented a whiff of the dread herd mentality at the Anchorage train station, where a hundred cruise passengers milled around awaiting their marching orders. But that was as bad as it got.

Once we were seated in Holland America's plush McKinley Explorer dome car, the landscape swept by, a panorama of forests, river canyons and the snowy Alaska Range.

Our first tour was a flight-seeing trip to Mount McKinley in what pilot Kevin Colson, an 18-year veteran called "the workhorse of Alaska," a Cessna 207.

"The safest plane there is. I've hauled sled dogs, and school kids, even had a baby born. But it's not a Disneyland ride," he said, opening a hatch to reveal a two-weeks' supply of emergency flares, a shotgun and food for six. Then, slightly sobered, we were off for an intimate view of fractured glaciers, icy rock faces, knife-edge ridges and steep snowfields.

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The next day we took the bus trip into the national park, via the only access road, a long, dusty, bumpy ribbon over rolling tundra. The driver's keen eye soon spotted two wolves, small herds of mountain sheep and a lone brown (grizzly) bear along a creek. Thank heaven we had binoculars.

By day three we'd hit our stride: A tour, then the afternoon to take a rafting trip or hike and the long midnight summer evenings to shop or explore. In Fairbanks, friends with a car drove us to Chena Hot Springs, a pioneer-era log lodge and spa with cabins and a new hotel wing, where we spent the afternoon soaking in hot water. On the twilight drive back to the hotel we counted a half-dozen moose standing hip deep in water.

In Nome (Gray Line booked the flight), we visited a sled dog kennel for a ride and panned for gold. In Seward, we took a marine life cruise in Resurrection Bay and spent a half-day fishing for halibut. Back in Anchorage, on our last night, we treated ourselves to grilled fresh salmon at the Glacier Brewhouse, where the manager insisted we try the restaurant's signature dessert, sticky bread pudding drenched in a custard sauce.

Was the trip a success? Definitely. Dorrie was glad we'd covered so much ground. She also liked hearing what so many other travelers had to say. As for me, prebooking made it a breeze. But tours like the one we took are really a starting point. In a perfect world, I'd ride to the end of the line and keep on going.

If you go

Getting there: We flew to Anchorage on Alaska Airlines' nonrefundable tickets offered early in the season. See alaskaairlines.com. Intrastate flights to Kotzebue, Nome, Barrow and other villages are rarely discounted.

The Anchorage Hotel: This historic property has elegant small rooms, personal service and a terrific downtown location. Eat breakfast at the Hilton, next door. Double rooms range from \$99 to \$209. 330 E St. 800-544-0988.

Anchorage Hilton: This 591-room chain hotel has a sports bar, shops, dining room and cheerful coffee shop. Double rooms start at \$290. 500 W. Third Ave. 800-445-8667.

The Glacier Brewhouse: Serves steaks, pasta, salmon and American and Alaskan favorites. Great salads and five good beers brewed on the premises.

The Downtown Deli: Breakfast features eggs, bacon, potatoes, fruit, wheat muffins, pancakes and oatmeal. Lunch and dinner are standard American fare.

Gray Line Hotels beyond Anchorage: In Denali National Park, the McKinley Chalet Resort 907-683-8200 2215; convenient, rustic, big cafeteria. In Fairbanks, the Westmark, 813 Noble St. 907-456-7722; in Nome, the Nugget Inn 907-443-2323.

Gray Line bookings: Gray Line operates from May to September, when roads are snow-free. At 888-452-1737 and 800-544 2206. Visit www.graylinealaska.com.

Gray Line's transportation network takes independent travelers on all its regular routes, and can also book hotels, meals and excursions. Prices vary according to items included.

More Gray Line tips:

When your trip vouchers arrive, compare them with Gray Line's computergenerated itinerary. Read the fine print. If you find yourself traveling with a group, ask for luggage tags that ensure your luggage will be loaded with theirs, on your bus.

Because Alaska tourism is seasonal, some tour and desk employees are seasonal hires. You, not they, are responsible for hearing departure announcements, boarding the right bus and double-checking times and destinations. This is especially important in Anchorage hotels, where two or three tours may depart simultaneously.

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