

My wife, Sandra, and I drove our motorhome to Alaska, on our own, on two occasions. We spent 86 days north of the U.S./Canadian border in 2008, 96 days in 2012 and are considering going again in 2014. We both believe this may be the best RV trip you can take. The sights, wildlife, little traffic and wonderful people make this a must-do destination.

RVING TO ALASKA

Article and photo by Ronald Jones #106236



Traveling to Alaska by RV is different from any other trip. Since you will drive your RV, there is specific RV-related information relevant to both Canada and Alaska that will help and will likely be new and informative. Most of the information is about the differences between RVing in the “Lower 48,” Northern Canada and Alaska. These three distinct geographic areas have different laws, traditions, and each has a measure of uniqueness to it—not bad, but different.

I always recommend you plan to arrive at your farthest destination as early as possible in your trip. I don’t suggest days full of hard driving, but you shouldn’t spend too much time stopping on the way.

Here’s why. When you get to Alaska, if you hate it, you can always leave. However, if you love it, then you have maximum time to stay there, and, if you are having a great time, you will want to stay longer.

Suppose you are going to Alaska and would like to visit Banff National Park on the way. Because Alaska is your farthest destination, instead plan to stop and visit at Banff on the return trip. Even if you spent all your allowable time in Alaska, you can easily visit Banff another time because it is so much closer.

Here’s a real example of how we did this. Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, is a wonderful small city with lots of things to see and do. We spent one night there in a parking lot on the way to Alaska, but on our return trip, we spent six nights there in a campground—on both trips.

The Perfect RV Trip

You can get to Alaska by RV, cruise ship, flying, driving a car or even a ferry, and I suppose someone has ridden a bicycle up there, too. However, since Alaska covers this huge area (it is the largest state), it takes time, effort and miles to basically cover the state as a visitor. Plus, it is a long way to get there and back. So, going by RV is the logical choice.

One major advantage of this trip is that it is incredibly easy to plan. After all, there are only three ways to take an RV up there and back, with advantages to each route.



The Alaskan Highway

is steeped in WWII history. Building the original Alcan Highway was considered one of the greatest building projects in history, with over 1,500 miles through wilderness in seven months. However, this accomplishment was lost in the news about the war.



The Cassiar Highway

goes north/south through the middle of British Columbia. This route has great mountain views and is an excellent drive.



The Alaska Marine Highway System

is the ferry system operated by the state. They sail north and south and can accommodate any size RV. Taking the ferry will require reservations.

Driving one route up and the other back is the best option for the first trip. Both routes are paved all the way except for sections under repair. While the ferry is an excellent choice, too, it is the more expensive method of travel and requires scheduling.

Both driving routes intersect close to Watson Lake, BC (home of the Sign Forest). Then, you have one route choice up through Whitehorse into Alaska. North of Burwash Landing, Yukon Territory, you will have to drive one stretch of highway over about 150 miles of frost heaves. Plan to tackle this drive in one day, slow down (about 30 to 35 mph) and everything will be fine.

Time and Miles

I recommend at least two full months in Alaska, that means three months for the full trip. It’s a long way—don’t try to shorten this trip. It takes time and miles to see the state.

One rule of thumb is that you should be south of Whitehorse on both Memorial Day and Labor Day. Doing this will (hopefully and historically) prevent you from being in an early (or late) freak snowstorm. Whitehorse is pretty far north, and winter comes early and lasts a long time.

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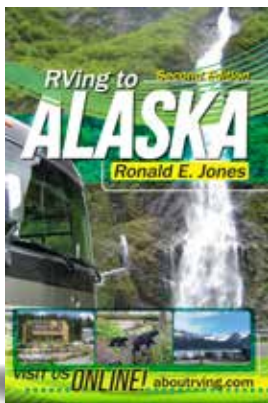
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RVING TO ALASKA, 2ND EDITION

This article contains excerpts from Ron Jones's book, *RVing to Alaska, 2nd Edition*, with a primary focus on how to travel to Alaska on your own by RV.

Newly released, this book covers the differences between RVing in the Lower 48 states, Northern Canada and Alaska, including driving over frost heaves, road conditions, routes, emergency road service, where to go, visitor centers, pets, wildfires, border crossings, packing extra stuff, about campgrounds, loonies and toonies, boondocking sites, wildlife, credit cards, historic mile markers, moose droppings, Alaskan ferry information and RVing to Inside Passage ports. In the March/April 2014 issue of *Escapees* magazine, Ron will cover excerpts of his new book in part 2 of this article.

Read Marcella Gauthier's review of Ron's book on page 72.



RVing to Alaska, 2nd Edition is available for \$24.95 plus s/h. To order, visit

www.aboutrving.com/bookstore.php



CANADA INFORMATION

The shortest driving route from Sumas, Washington (a border crossing northeast of Seattle), through Canada, to Tok, Alaska, is 1,835 miles (2,950 km)—one way. Therefore, plan on spending several nights, eating several meals and fueling up a few times in Canada.

Driving in Canada

If you drive from the U.S./Canadian border to Alaska, consider the following:

- Canada is metric. Many RVs have a button that converts their odometer to kilometers and back to miles. This saves you lots of mental converting.
- If your vehicle was sold in the U.S., the speedometer has big numbers as mph and small numbers as kph. When in Canada, use the small numbers.
- *The MILEPOST* lists Canadian distances in kilometers (km). Consider this when calculating driving times and distances.
- Measure the height and weight of your RV, convert that to meters and kilograms and put a small sticker on your dash with both the English and metric data. All clearances in Canada are in metric.
- Canadian highways to Alaska are mostly two-lane, all paved and, generally, good roads. There were some eight-percent grades.
- We covered one 105-mile stretch (170 km) with no services, only wilderness. So, keep your fuel tank at least half full. Overall, there are lots of fuel stops available.

Canadian Campgrounds

Northern Canadian campgrounds may be a bit different. My experience is most of the following does not apply to those in the first few hundred miles (km) north of the U.S. border. The rules are somewhat different the further north you go in Canada, nothing bad, just different.

- A campground may not even have a central dump station. However, you will find lots of dumping places at fuel stops, towns (municipal sites), museums, etc.
- It is common for restaurants (if you eat) and fuel stops (if you fill up) to offer a boondock site for a night. Ask, because it typically won't be posted. There were many options and places like this to boondock.
- In northern Canadian campgrounds, 30-amp is far more common than 50-amp. Occasionally, only 20-amp is available. I will pay for 30-amp but not for 20-amp. To me, it isn't worth it. I can live far more comfortably (without monitoring which appliances are in use) by boondocking and using our generator.
- We saw several "campgrounds" that were a bare gravel lot or patch of grass and there was a charge to park. We did not stay in these places, but they do exist.
- Our experience was that campgrounds had gravel entrances, sites and lanes and, therefore, were dusty (assuming no rain) or muddy (assuming rain).
- If your TV satellite works in the far north, feel lucky. Your TV antenna is likely useless. Take a supply of recorded shows and movies.
- I was told the "official" policy in both British Columbia and the Yukon on parking overnight in pull-offs and rest areas was that it was okay unless otherwise posted.



ALASKA INSIDE PASSAGE CRUISE HOP

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If you dream of visiting Alaska, but driving is not an option, join fellow Escapees on the Alaska Inside Passage Cruise HOP, July 26 to August 2, 2014. For details and reservation information, See page 30, or visit www.escapees.com/Hop/AlaskaHOP.aspx.





INFORMATION AND BOOKS

There is a large number of private, commercial and governmental Websites regarding travel to and in Alaska, including what to see, do and try. My recommendation is to always find two Websites that give you essentially the same information. This will help verify that the information is more likely to be accurate.

Here are two books for this trip:



The MILEPOST: Alaska Guide and Trip Planner is the legendary Alaska trip-planner and travel guide to the highways, roads, ferries, lodgings, recreation, sightseeing, attractions and services in Alaska and Canada. Don't use your friend's year-old copy. You need the latest information. www.milepost.com



Traveler's Guide to Alaskan Camping has complete coverage of the campgrounds on the Alaska Highway, Cassiar Highway, Alaska Marine Highway and Klondike Loop with full descriptions, maps and contact information. www.rollinghomes.com

Alaska Marine Highway System

You can take a ferry (with any size RV and a second vehicle) and go north or south. If you take the ferry from, for example, Bellingham, Washington, to Alaska, you will not be in Canada at all and not be subjected to any border crossing. However, the ferry is more expensive than driving.

Also, it is a long ferry ride. The popular Alaskan cruises are seven days long. Therefore, your ferry ride is also long as it follows the same route, the Inside Passage, with lots of stops.

You can take the ferry part of the way. We loaded our RV and tow car onto the ferry in Haines, Alaska, took both vehicles off and stayed three to four days in Sitka, reboarded, disembarked at Wrangell, Alaska (for a bear-watching tour) and stayed three days. We boarded again and disembarked at Prince Rupert, British Columbia, Canada. Yes, we had to go through the custom's check at the port. We then drove the Yellowhead Highway (BC 16W) east to Prince George, British Columbia, and then headed south to our border crossing into Montana.

General Information

- We try to charge everything to a credit card. It's easier for us to track.
- Take an excess of small U.S. bills: \$1s, \$5s, and \$10s. Canadian businesses may accept American money, but you will receive change in Canadian money.
- Canadians commonly use two coins unknown in the U.S.—the "loonie" and "toonie." The \$1 coin has a picture of a loon on it and became known as the "loonie." The \$2 coin was nicknamed the "toonie," short for "two loonies." The loonie is one color. The toonie is two colors, silver and brass. (Keep the "T's" together—toonie = two dollars and two colors, and you will keep them straight.) Also, Canadians no longer use pennies.
- A laundromat in Canada typically takes loonies.

- Your credit or debit cards may work at ATMs in Canada, and there may be a fee.
- Find a credit card that does not charge an "international processing fee" or some-such name. Typically, it adds about three percent to your total charges.
- Canada has higher prices than the "Lower 48" for food and fuel purchases.
- Fuel is purchased by the liter (litre). There are about four liters to a gallon. When a Canadian station advertises a fuel price of say, \$1.20, that's the price per liter. Multiply that price times four to get a close equivalent to the U.S. price per gallon.
- My rule of thumb is that Canadian fuel prices are about \$1.50 higher per gallon than U.S. prices.
- You can often call toll-free numbers (800) in the U.S. from Canadian pay phones without depositing money. Don't assume you can call any 800 number. The number can be blocked by the U.S.-based owner.
- Find out if your emergency road service and vehicle insurance claims number accepts toll-free calls from Canada.

But Wait, There's More

Hopefully, this brief look at some of the considerations in RVing to Alaska will help you plan for this trip. Be sure to check the March/April issue of *Escapees* magazine for "RVing to Alaska—Part 2." This article will cover differences and uniqueness about RVing in Alaska, including campgrounds, boondocking, wildlife and some sights to see. 🏠

Ron Jones has been RVing a long time. He quit sleeping on the ground and moved up onto wheels in 1962. He and his wife, Sandy, are currently living in their 15th RV, from small to large, and have been full-time RVers for 11 years. They meander all over the U.S. and Canada. Ron writes for RVers and has written for all the major RV magazines, has published six RV books and runs the popular "How To" Website for RVers, www.aboutrving.com.

Contact Ron Jones directly at ron@aboutrving.com.

My wife, Sandra, and I drove our motorhome to Alaska, on our own, on two occasions and are considering going again this year. We both feel that RVing in this state is easy, fun and safe. While Alaska is the largest U.S. state, there are a limited number of highways, especially for larger RVs, and most of the state is not accessible when driving a vehicle.

RVING TO ALASKA

Article and photo by Ronald Jones #106236



Motorhome parked at rest stop on Seward Highway.

© State of Alaska.
Photo by Frank Flavin.

When you drive to Alaska, you will go through the town of Tok, known as the “town you will visit twice.” You have to pass through Tok to drive in and out of the state. From Tok, you can head to Anchorage or Fairbanks. The highway forms a big triangle with Tok, Anchorage and Fairbanks. You can drive to a few other towns like Valdez, Haines and Skagway, but these are at the end of a route, so you have to backtrack when you leave.

The northernmost city for RVers is Fairbanks. There are a few towns and roads north of Fairbanks, but they are mostly gravel, and we didn’t drive them. The southernmost town you can drive to is Homer. Here, the highway ends at the south end of the Kenai. It is 578 miles from Fairbanks to Homer, a relatively short driving distance in the largest state. On the Kenai, there are a few side roads that go to various towns; the most well-known is Seward.

Anchorage is the largest city and about 2/3 the distance from Fairbanks to Homer. However, like in and around most major cities, good campgrounds are scarce.

Campgrounds and Boondocking

I believe Alaska supports and encourages RVers more than any other state. Going through British Columbia, the Yukon and traveling in Alaska, you will find a reasonable number of campgrounds, not as many as in the “Lower 48” but enough. Caravans reserve these campgrounds and they may be full, but wait a day or two and they will be gone. They are on a fixed schedule; you are not.

Campgrounds

Advance reservations may be difficult since many northern campgrounds are closed for the winter. One campground allowed us to stay on site, but they were not officially open for the summer season.

On our first Alaska trip, I made reservations at all campgrounds where we planned to stay longer than four days. For our second trip, I did not make a single reservation through Canada nor on the mainland of Alaska. I did make reservations for campgrounds at the ferry ports. On the total trip, we were never without a campground when we needed one.

There are excellent city-owned campgrounds. On the Kenai Peninsula, we found these in Homer and Seward. You simply find an empty site, park and put your fee in the “Iron Ranger.” Some sites have hookups, but many have boondocking only. Nearly all have a great view. I believe the cost was \$15 per night. The municipal campgrounds all had dump stations and water available, and your maximum stay is 14 days.

Boondocking

Alaska is the perfect state for RVers because of the option to boondock almost anywhere. According to the Alaskan state trooper’s main information number, it is legal to pull off the highway and spend the night. You

Map courtesy of www.alaska.org/maps.



must be at least four feet from the solid white line, must leave room for an additional vehicle and, of course, don’t dump anything.

There are pull-offs and official rest areas everywhere. Alaska has more than I’ve come across anywhere else. I have seen as many as three per mile in some areas of the state, all nice and large, and some were paved. That’s great since you have the opportunity to spend the night with some spectacular scenery.

I also confirmed with authorities that Alberta, British Columbia and the Yukon also allow boondocking at pull-offs. I recommend mixing boondocking and campgrounds going up and back. Doing so alleviates your

dependency on finding a campground, the need for reservations and setting a fixed schedule. Interestingly, you will find dump facilities at some unusual places such as museums, towns, supermarkets and fuel stops. Use them before you have to use them.

Wildlife

The farther north you are, the more wildlife you will see. On our last trip while driving and boondocking, we probably saw 20 black bears, several moose, bison, eagles and snow geese. The moose and bison may be on, not beside, the highway. Do not tangle with either one—you will lose. The bison is affectionately called the “Yukon Speed Bump.”

Continued >>>



SOME ALASKAN PLACES TO VISIT

FAIRBANKS | After two visits, we like Fairbanks best because of the large number of things to see and do and the variety of places to eat. We have stayed a week in Fairbanks on each trip. It's a smaller city, easy to get around; we found plenty to do, and the people were great. See the University of Alaska Museum of the North, touch the Alaska Pipeline, see ice carvings at the Ice Museum, visit the Gold Dredge and Mine and take a ride on the Discovery, a paddle wheeler.

ANCHORAGE | This is the major city (300,000 plus) so you encounter the problems of a major city with lots of traffic, people, stoplights and scarce parking spaces. There are numerous sights, including Ship Creek State Hatchery, the Anchorage Museum and the unique Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum. At the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, you will find unique aviation history, rare aircraft photographs, information on bush pilots who opened up the Last Frontier, artifacts, maps, news accounts and aviators' clothing. (You simply could not survive in Alaska without bush pilots.)

TALKEETNA | Located at the end of a highway some distance north of Anchorage, Talkeetna is rumored to be the model town for the wacky TV show (from years ago), called "Northern Exposure," but I couldn't verify that information. If possible, visit the Moose Dropping Festival. Talkeetna is the "jumping off" place for mountain climbers that climb Mt. Denali and other peaks. You can get excellent Denali flightseeing tours from Talkeetna as they are used to taking the climbers in.

SOLDATNA | Think fish! Soldotna was voted the number one fishing hotspot in North America by *Field & Stream* magazine in 2004. The Kenai River flows through the town and offers world-class Chinook (King), Sockeye (Red), Coho (Silver) and Pink Salmon fishing. Downtown has a 3,700-foot-long elevated fishing boardwalk along the Kenai River for all to enjoy. People use the boardwalk for a stroll as well as fishing.

THE KENAI PENINSULA

Commonly called the "Kenai," this is a large land mass directly south of Anchorage and one of the great areas to visit.

SEWARD | This is a wonderful town located on the eastern coast of the Kenai Peninsula. There is a lot of touristy stuff to do here with several museums, the Alaskan Sea Life Center (try the "behind the scenes" tour if it is still offered), Exit Glacier and the original start of the Iditarod Race. They even bring some cruise ships into Seward, and the place can get crowded. The ships are easy to spot, and you can actually stay away from that crowd as there are plenty of places to eat, drink and tour in the downtown area.

HOMER | Billed as the "Halibut Capital of the World," fishing charters are everywhere. The Homer Spit is a four-to-five-mile-long narrow stretch of land jutting out into Kachemak Bay, a huge body of salt water surrounded by snow-capped mountains. There are two private campgrounds, and the city also operates three large dry-camping areas on the Spit. Also, find Skyline Drive on your GPS. Head up the big hill on the main highway toward Anchorage. Find West Hill Road and follow it to Skyline Drive, then onto East Hill Road. Meander along this route for impressive views of Homer, the Spit and the bay. East Hill Road is steep, so class-C drivers will have to come down in a low gear. My estimate is the south end of East Hill Road was at least a 10-percent grade (no big rigs). The Oceans and Islands Visitor Center in Homer is one of the most unique in Alaska. It is located on the main highway going through the town headed for the Spit. Plus, there are other museums and sites.

HYDER | Canadian Rt. 37A heads west from the Cassiar Highway and ends at the coast, a relatively short drive. There, literally connected, is Hyder, Alaska, and Stewart, British Columbia. Both are sort of stuck onto the side of Canada at water's edge. You cannot pass through Stewart or Hyder by accident. Hyder is your southernmost chance to drive in Alaska. We stayed in Hyder at Camp Run-A-Muck (a real campground) and came here to view the bears fishing for salmon. There is a great viewing platform that protects you from the bears and the bears from you. Hyder, Alaska, is so close to Stewart, British Columbia, that the only clock in town on official Alaskan time is located at the post office. Everything else sort of normally functions on Pacific time (one hour earlier) to match up with Stewart. It may not be a perfect system, but it works. For the RVers who like to eat later, don't forget this time difference if you are going to a restaurant in Stewart. Stewart also has a free dump station fully accessible to all. It is easy to get to, plenty of room to maneuver the biggest rig and was clean. I believe there was potable water available, too. When we visited there, if you wanted to have your mail forwarded to Hyder, we were told it arrives via float plane on Mondays and Thursdays. If the plane doesn't arrive (for whatever reason), there is no mail delivery, so you will have to wait at least a day. If you can't stay around Hyder, leave your forwarding address with the postmaster. We were told he is very accommodating in forwarding mail to another U.S. post office.

OTHER PLACES

The coastal cities are fun and interesting, but driving to them often requires backtracking—driving back over the same route when you leave. All these places are great to visit, have great campgrounds, several attractions and may be a ferry port.

VALDEZ | There are two local easy-to-walk-to glaciers in Valdez: the Worthington Glacier and the Valdez Glacier. Located on the outskirts of town, it is full of Alaskan history and called the All American Route by gold seekers wanting to trek over the glacier into the interior of Alaska during the Gold Rush of 1898. Valdez has three museums worth visiting: the Valdez Museum & Historical Archive: Remembering Old Valdez Exhibit 1957–1967 (details of the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake. Because of that earthquake and resulting damage, they decided to move the entire town of Valdez a couple of miles away from its original location.) and the Whitney Museum.

HAINES | We stopped in Haines to catch the ferry, stayed a few days and thoroughly enjoyed it. Haines has wonderful campgrounds, the Hammer Museum, Sheldon Museum, Chilkoot Lake State Recreation Site and the American Bald Eagle Foundation. The American Bald Eagle Foundation is a natural history museum and live raptor center, with live bird feedings and presentations. Haines, Alaska, is the home of the largest concentration of bald eagles in the world.

SKAGWAY | As a major stop for nearly all the cruise ships, Skagway has become a true tourist town. We did not take our RV there because we have been here on cruises.

If you plan to go to Skagway, try to plan around those cruise stops. When the ships are in port, you will be competing with a few thousand people for the local sites and shops.

The Best RV Trip

In Alaska, there are many more towns and sights for you to visit and enjoy, and there are lots of ways to get there. But, considering the length of the trip and the time it takes to get there, traveling by RV just makes sense. You can do this, but don't get in a hurry. It takes a full summer to see Alaska.

Your reward is a wonderful trip, beautiful and spectacular scenery, little traffic, good highways, seeing lots of wildlife, manageable costs, great food, a relaxing trip with lots of new things to see and places to visit, plus a lifetime of memories. All of that is enhanced and supported by incredibly friendly and helpful people. I hope to see you up there. 🐻



ALASKA INSIDE PASSAGE CRUISE HOP

Seattle, Washington

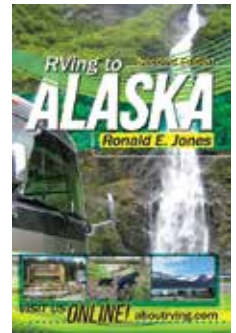
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