

BUMFUZZLE

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Travel in a Panel

POST CARD
PART 2
RETURN
TO ALASKA



We couldn't get enough of the river beds.

If anybody has ever taken a more round-about route to begin their around the world trip I'd like to see it. After a few months kicking around Mexico, Ali and I returned north. We hadn't planned on it, but an opportunity to be participants in an around the world vintage auto race had presented itself. Unfortunately, in the end, the entire thing fell apart and the race never happened. This put us in Oregon with the summer quickly approaching. Summer, North America, huge road trip, equals only one thing. Alaska. A new route was set.

Before we headed out of the Lower 48 States this time I had a little bus maintenance to attend to. Our clutch had been grinding away for a month now and it was time to fix it. This would be my first foray into the art of engine dropping. I sat down in the garage at my mother's house, opened up my ragged copy of How to Keep Your VW Alive, and got to it. A couple of hours after I had disappeared Ali came out to check on things only to find me sitting there with the engine on the floor. "I thought you were going to come and get me when you needed help?" she said. Please, who needs a girl's help when there are only four bolts holding your engine on? Of course dropping an engine is the easy part, putting it back in and having it start is the real challenge. Somehow I had success on the first turn of the key. I was feeling pretty smug, not to mention incredibly handy to have around.

The traditional route to Alaska is along the Alaskan Highway. We envisioned this route to be clogged with seventy year-olds behind the wheels of seventy-foot tour bus RVs driving desperately from one designated campground to another. Maybe that's unfair, but we opted to stick to the far smaller and more scenic Sea to Sky and Cassiar Highways running through western British Columbia to the Yukon Territory.

After breaking camp along this stretch one morning we spotted a couple of moose standing in a swamp. Seconds later we watched a large black bear trot across a grassy field. At the gas station a little further on Ali told the cashier about it. She just shrugged, as if to say,

"Yeah, I see that every day." To us though this was amazing, and we couldn't wait to see more. Best of all we didn't see any RVs.

We eventually ran into a fork in the road with one direction leading to a long forgotten corner of Alaska. Not really forgotten for those that live in the tiny town of Hyder, but for most of us this place has never come to our attention before. Ali and I forked left and wound our way down through a whole series of glaciers before crossing the non-border back into our home country.

Right off the bat we liked the place. One dirt road about three blocks long crossed by another about the same length constituted the entire place. As we drove in there were concession stands lining the road selling hot dogs, hamburgers, and beer. There was definitely a festive mood in the air. However it didn't dawn on the two of us why this was until we spotted a lady walking down the street dressed from head to toe in the U.S. flag. Oh yeah, 4th of July, Independence Day. We'd clearly been on the road and

away from calendars too long.

After a long drive up dirt roads through the nearby mountains, crossing into and back out of Canada half a dozen times along the way, we reached the top of the Salmon Glacier. Here it was the middle of summer and we were surrounded by ice hundreds of thousands of years old. Back down in town later the party began. We got on pretty good with the owner of the bar who, not surprisingly, also owned the abandoned gas station next door. Once she found out we were the owners of the bus parked out front



An amazingly scenic drive through Canada along the 99.

When the weather is cooperating this is the scene from just about anywhere in Alaska.



Ali and I crossing the Arctic Circle for the first time that month.

When we reached the town campground yet another guy walked right up to us and, looking astonished, asked, "You drove from Minnesota, all the way up the Dempster to here, in that?"



Our first taste of small town Alaska.



In a small town in Alaska we stumbled upon this bus stop.

she insisted we use her gas station as our own personal campground for the night. With our campground situation settled we were free to partake in the festivities, including the beer can tennis ball bowling championship. Small town fun at its best.

Back out on the Cassiar Highway the bus began to take a beating. The road was gravel much of the way and it wasn't long before that gravel was flying at our safaris. It would be two window chips and a dozen paint chips on the nose before we got out of there again. Fortunately the awesome amount of black bears along the road took our minds off the bus destruction. They seemed to be around every corner, often allowing us to pull up right alongside of them to watch as they foraged through the bushes. Ali wondered aloud if our little 1600 could even outrun them. I doubted it.

After a brief jaunt along the Alaskan Highway we detoured up the Klondike. From there the most interesting looking route was 460 miles of dirt along the Dempster Highway, dead-ending in the town of Inuvik way up above the Arctic Circle. A town that at this moment was in the midst of 56 days of 24 hour a day sunlight.

The beginning of the Dempster was a simple scenic drive, with an incredibly beautiful mountain valley to start things off. The road from there was pretty rough, but the scenery more than made up for it. After the first few hours the mountains faded into rolling

tundra and the rain began. The mud was so slick I could hardly keep the bus on the road. Meanwhile Ali was busy mopping up the constant streams of rainwater that poured in through our safari windows. Windows that had been exceptionally cool, and cooling, in Mexico, were now

nothing more than a pain in the butt.

By the time we hit Inuvik we were exhausted. Our first stop was to the world's most expensive burger joint. As soon as we walked inside somebody asked us, "You made it up the Dempster in that?" Five minutes later someone else repeated the same thing, word for word. When we reached the town campground yet another guy walked right up to us and, looking astonished, asked, "You drove from Minnesota, all the way up the Dempster to here, in that?" What, doesn't everybody drive fifty year old buses up that wimpy road of yours? And quit calling my bus "That."

After enjoying all that Inuvik had to offer we turned around and drove right back down the road again. Nine hundred miles after having left it we finally hit the tarmac again. Almost immediately Ali looked over at me and said, "What's with you steering back and forth? You look like a cartoon." I did too, steering in big arcs while the bus continued straight ahead. A few miles down the road at the gas station we realized why. We had a flat. Swerving around pot holes on the rough dirt road we hadn't even noticed it.

Our entry into Alaska proper was during a stunningly gorgeous »



The Dalton Highway runs alongside the Alaskan Pipeline.



The view through the window along the Dalton Highway.

“The Dalton was simply an amazing road to drive. Majestic scenery, giant herds of caribou and muskoxen, mud, washboards, rivers, mountains, it had it all.”



Atigun Pass, the highest in Alaska, along the Dalton Highway.

summer day filled with blue skies and warm temps. For a few days this actually stuck around for us and we began to think Alaska was heaven. We quickly learned that finding camping spots in the bus consisted of nothing more than finding a bridge. A bridge meant a river, and a river meant a river bed. There was always a dirt track down to the water's edge where we could spend the night alone with the sound of a river trickling over glacier rock out the back gate.

The bus was a continuous conversation starter, as always. It also got us preferential treatment a few times. One day we stopped off at a park where we'd heard there were grizzlies feeding in the river. At the park gate we found out it cost eleven dollars simply to park there for an hour or two. We hemmed and hawed and decided to bag it, but the young guy working the booth said, "Dude, I'll let you in free. That bus is sweeeeeeet." He sounded like he'd just crawled out of the back of a smoky VW himself.

One of the problems we started to encounter for the first time had to do with gas. Not the astoundingly high price of it, or the quality of it, but with the lack of it. Up to this point in our trip simply watching the odometer and making sure it didn't tick over 300 miles between fill-ups had been easy enough. But here in Alaska where everything seems to be 300 miles away from everything else this became a little trickier.

It wasn't a big deal when we ran out of gas the first time, but driving right past the gas station in Seaward two days later and then running out of gas fifty miles from anywhere made me look a little stupid. The nice thing about Alaska is that every third person is towing a boat behind a pickup, so it wasn't long before a guy with a five gallon outboard motor tank pulled over to help us out. You'd

think that would have been the last time I would let this happen, but I then took off with those couple of gallons on a side road up into the mountains calculating that we'd still have enough to get back down and make it to the next gas station. My calculations were off a bit though and even Ali, my long suffering wife, wasn't immune to some heavy eye rolling as we coasted to a stop two hundred meters from the

station. Running out of gas three times in five days will hopefully be a tough record to break.

In the tiny town of Nenana we were turned onto a splittie-bus-stop by some locals. After a little searching amongst the five square blocks of the town we found it. A generous supply of surprisingly good looking splits. Knowing all about the Alaskan penchant for gun ownership and no trespassing signs we didn't investigate too thoroughly. A week later we returned, this time hoping to find the owners and ask about getting a brake light switch, and found that the entire town was underwater. There had been so much rain this summer that the nearby river was flooding and the buses were now somewhere underwater.

To escape the flooding we drove north to the Dalton Highway; 450 miles of oil money funded adventure to the Arctic Ocean. This is the quintessential Alaskan road, running from Fairbanks to Deadhorse, stopping just a few miles short of the icy Ocean itself. This was a road built to test the bus. There were dozens of hills with grades steep enough to require crawling up in first gear. And that was before the Brooks Range came into view, along with Alaska's tallest mountain pass. On July 31st we drove through a fresh dusting of snow at 4,700 feet. It seemed a little early for termination dust, the Alaskan phrase for the first snow of the season. We were high and cold in the middle of summer.

The Dalton was simply an amazing road to drive. Majestic scenery, giant herds of caribou and muskoxen, mud, washboards, rivers, mountains, it had it all. If not for the terrible wet weather we might have spent a month camping along its length.

Up at the top of the world near the Arctic Ocean we decided that we'd been cold and wet long enough, it was time for some sun and scorching heat again. We crossed the Arctic Circle for the fourth time that month and boogied south.

Back through Canada and into the U.S. we made a leisurely winding journey south to Mexico. In Oregon we spent a couple of days driving high up the dirt roads of the Steens Mountain before dropping back down again to camp out in the middle of the vast dry lake beds of the Alvord Desert. In Nevada and Utah the land was so desolate that we could simply pull off the road anywhere to spend the night under the unlit starry sky. In Arizona a friend took us up in his plane for a flight over the Grand Canyon. And in Oklahoma another friend put us up for a few nights while we worked on the bus.

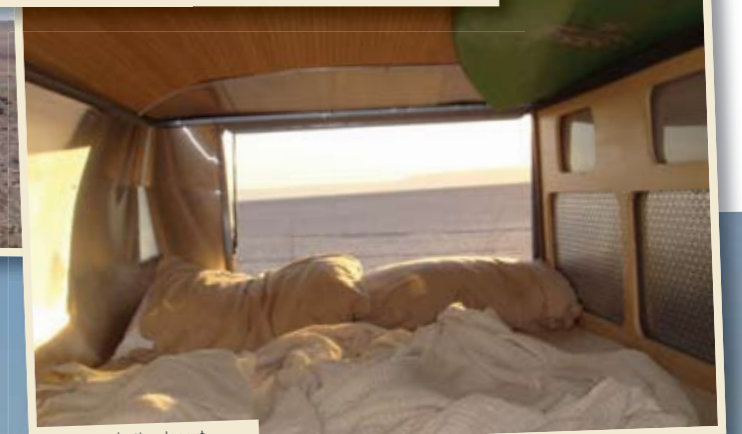


Sounds like a challenge to us.

“We had covered 19,000 miles from the Mexican border to Alaska and back to the Mexican border. That brought the trip total up to 32,000, or roughly ten times the amount of miles that should have been necessary to reach this point”



Dirty laundry, a constant nemesis.



Waking up in the desert.

been necessary to reach this point. However we'd seen a lot of great things that we hadn't planned on seeing this time around, and now, with the bus just getting warmed up, we were looking forward to diving back into more south of the border adventure. ☺



Camping in the dry lake bed of the Alvord Desert, Oregon.

Next issue the Bumfuzzle Bus travels Central America. Check out www.bumfuzzle.com for more information and progress so far.