

Another Alaska Tale!

By Vincent Scippa

I recently had time to reflect on a motorcycle trip I took to Alaska in the summer of 2003. I felt it was important to share the experience, and to pass on some knowledge to others contemplating this trip. For me it started in 1998 when I said to my friend Mitch Simons, “Hey, when we both turn 40, in 2003, we should take that motorcycle trip to Alaska.” As that year got closer I thought to myself, “Did I really mean that?” I had taken several weeklong motorcycle trips before, but questioned if I would enjoy a three-week tour. I knew it could be a great motorcycle journey and very challenging at the same time. We talked about it from time to time and in 2002 decided to do it. Mitch’s brother Collin Simons, and friend Dave Edinger would join us. Mitch would ride his BMW R1150RT, Collin and Dave would both ride their Suzuki Hayabusas, and I would ride my BMW R1100RT.

We started detailed planning about a year before our departure. When planning a trip of this magnitude, no amount of research is too much. Very early on we decided that from Texas, we needed at least three weeks for the journey. Others may find that with all the things Canada and Alaska have to offer, more time is needed. Some of the best information we received was from fellow riders that had made the trip. Reading Alaska trip



Mitch Simons, Collin Simons, Dave Edinger and Vincent Scippa

articles and Internet research is also very helpful. A copy of The Mile Post, which gives detailed information about Canada, Alaska and the highways, is invaluable.

We decided that July was the best time of year to go. We then planned our travel days followed by making Alaska marine ferry reservations from Skagway, Alaska to Bellingham, Washington. We wanted to return by ferry to give us a three-day break, let us see the Inside Passage, and prevent us from repeating the entire Alaska Highway. Our most northern goal would be the Arctic Circle. And with the exception of the circle attempt, we decided to only travel paved roads. We would stay in motels along the way, as none of us had a desire to camp. We did not plan each day in too much detail, thereby giving us flexibility.

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From the day we left, we had two weeks to travel to and tour Alaska, before boarding the return ferry. We planned on starting with three 600-700 mile days, followed by five 400-500 mile days, to get us to Alaska. That would give us six days in the big state. Doing the heavy miles at first gave us catch up time if we had a breakdown or weather delays. As far as gear and equipment, we planned on weather extremes. Collin and Dave had Aerostich suits. Mitch and I took summer and winter jackets. We all took heated vests, necessary rain gear, and some spare parts in case of breakdowns. We took several tire repair kits and a powered pump. Two of us had GPS units. All of us had bike-to-bike communications with various FRS setups. We all took passports and purchased Medjet Assistance insurance. (These are the people that fly you home in case you get sick or injured, and get your bike back.) One of the most important things for this trip was to be mentally and physically prepared. As far as our machines, fresh tires, up to date maintenance, and a double check of everything was key.

On Saturday June 28th, 2003, we set off toward Alaska with three main goals in mind, to reach Alaska, to arrive at the Arctic Circle, and to do it safely. The first two days were mostly interstate and took us through

the Texas panhandle, Oklahoma, Colorado and into Wyoming. The third day we decided to take a route through Yellowstone to make the trip as scenic as possible. Traffic was heavy and because of our pace, we only stopped a few times in the park. As we later reached Helena, Montana, this third day ended up being our



Highway 93, the Icefields Parkway, Alberta, Canada

longest ride day. The next morning we headed for the Canadian border via Glacier National Park. Entering Glacier we journeyed the “Going To The Sun” road. The scenery was grand; this area could easily be the apex of a separate trip. With twisting roads along mountain ridges, altitude changes, the view of valleys and peaks, Glacier is a must do for every motorcyclist. Shortly after leaving we entered Canada via Highway 89. We traveled the plains of Alberta into Calgary, where we took Highway 1 into the Canadian Rockies to our destination of Banff. To travel this road into the Banff area requires an entrance fee, because it is a National Park. Our first night in Canada was a treat as the mood in Banff was festive, as everyone was celebrating Canada Day. The next morning, our previous four days of excellent weather ended with a

cold light rain. We suited up and continued west traveling the Icefields Parkway, taking us past the Columbia Glacier and through the mountain passes of the great divide. This stretch of winding highway revealed some spectacular country. In all my crossings of the Rockies, this was the most scenic. Past the town of Jasper, traffic disappeared as we took Highway 16 to Prince George, then rode north to Bear Lake where we stayed for the night. This was the coldest day of the trip.

On our fifth day we officially reached the Alaska Highway, or Alcan, near Fort St. John. Now, the technical start of the Alcan is in Dawson Creek, which because of a misunderstanding on my part, we missed by about 50 miles. If you do this trip and would like to start at milepost 0, research other routes like riding to Dawson Creek from Chetwynd. The Alcan on the Canadian side is wide and nicely maintained. Traffic was light but we did pass many RVs. As we continued north, we ended our first Alcan day in Fort Nelson. The following morning started with rain in the forecast. This was also the day we started to hit construction zones. Some of these are easy to ride through, and some are more difficult, with rain making the surface slippery. Deep gravel in other sections can be unnerving. The rewards for this day were the sight of brown bears eating on the side of the road, wild buffalo, moose, and some very nice lakes. Past the town of Watson Lake, location of the famous Sign Post Forest, the scenery dulled.



St. Elias Mountain Range near Haines Junction, Canada

Riding along I thought about something we were told: going to Alaska is an endurance ride. There are sections on the Alcan where you ride for miles and miles with bland scenery that wears on you, but there are big rewards for enduring this. By early evening we crossed a long metal bridge into Teslin, where we stayed the night. The next morning sunny skies and improving scenery greeted us. We entered the large town of Whitehorse and visited the White Pass & Yukon railroad station. Shortly after leaving we came upon Haines Junction, and a view of the St. Elias mountain range. We then passed the incredibly beautiful Kluane Lake and set our sights on Alaska. Several hours later we reached the border and celebrated the fulfillment of our first goal. After a stop at US customs, our trek into Alaska began.



The US side of the Alaska Highway actually came as a bit of a disappointment. From the border to Tok, it was narrow and we hit bad section after bad section. They did have an earthquake eight months earlier damaging the road, but with all the tax revenue Alaska gets from oil and federal assistance, we felt they had time and money to fix it. We picked a nice motel in Tok ending our day. The next morning with eight days and

4,448 miles behind us, we finally had an easy travel day. Leaving Tok we stopped at an old military base called Tanacross, where they used the runways for motorcycle road races. Our Texas plates brought a lot of curiosity. It was great talking with local riders as we learned this was the only place in Alaska they road race. I hate to admit it but Collin and Dave got most of the attention on this day. They see plenty of BMWs travel up from the lower 48, but rarely see sport bikes such as the Hayabusas. After our visit we continued north 200 miles to Fairbanks, where we planned to say several nights. We later enjoyed a walk along the downtown river, as the sun stayed out until well past midnight.

On Monday July 7th, we departed Fairbanks for the Arctic Circle. Near the town of Livingood, we entered the unpaved chip seal Dalton Highway. Portions of the road were pretty solid and comfortable to ride on. However, some stretches were slippery because maintenance trucks spread water to keep dust down. This highway is the service road for the Alaska Pipeline, and with the industrial traffic, extra caution was essential. It was slow going and challenging. After several hours we passed the Yukon River where we ate lunch and fueled for \$2.50 a gallon. We continued on and as we neared the circle, the forest disappeared exposing the arctic tundra. This was the scenery I had been waiting for, you could see the vast landscape for miles ahead. The Dalton also gives you a little gift around this area, but I won't reveal it. Arriving at the Arctic Circle, Mitch, Collin, Dave and myself had accomplished another goal and we reveled in our achievement.



An hour later, and after 10 days and 4,873 miles, we began to head south. At one point on the return leg,



The Dalton Highway near the Arctic Circle, Alaska

we hit a section of Dalton that had just been wet, and it was so slick I don't know how I kept the bike up. I quickly remembered why we chose the circle as our north destination and not Prudhoe Bay. This section was hard enough, and we understood the Dalton turns treacherous past the circle in the Brooks Range, best attempted on a dual sport bike. I also thought about how difficult it would be to travel this road in rain. I was relieved when we again reached paved highway, as fatigue was setting in. By the time we returned to Fairbanks, the 408-mile round trip journey had taken around 12 hours. After a late dinner, we visited the downtown historical center, again under the light of the midnight sun.

The following morning we departed Fairbanks and took Highway 3 south toward Anchorage. Past the town of Healy, mount McKinley came into our view. We were lucky to see it, because on many days clouds obscure this sight. Though I estimate we were never closer than 50 miles, the 20,320-foot mountain was in our line of vision for hours. It was a picturesque ride to Anchorage and we arrived to a record high heat of 83 degrees. We checked into a downtown hotel, near the shops and restaurants. We later enjoyed an excellent seafood dinner, sitting outside overlooking the inlet. The next day was maintenance day for all the bikes, the shops were expecting us as we had various needs such as oil and tire changes. That afternoon I had some time and took a solo ride south to Portage. It was a beautiful ride along the water, and it really felt like Alaska. I regret not having time to ride this together. Equally disappointing was not having time to ride all the way to Homer. After returning to Anchorage, the late sunlight gave plenty of time for dinner and a trip over to Earthquake Park.



Denali, the Native American name for Mt. McKinley



Emerald Lake, Yukon Territory, Canada

The next day was July 10th; we had two days to get to Skagway to pickup the ferry. We left Anchorage traveling highway 1 to Glenallen, then rode northeast back to Tok. To get to Skagway, we had to repeat a section of the Alaska Highway, this time heading south. After crossing back into Canada, we stayed in the town of Beaver Creek. This was one of the few days on the trip I was ready to end. The weather was very hazy, earlier obscuring our view of the Wrangell Mountain range. We also hit miles and miles of bad road between Glenallen and the border.

The following day the skies

cleared as we continued down the Alcan. Shortly after a lunch stop in Whitehorse, we turned south onto Highway 2 towards Carcross and Skagway. This ended up being one of the most panoramic and amazing stretches of road on the entire trip. It first started as we passed Emerald Lake to what's called the world's smallest desert, then continued as we traveled by exotic lakes and waterways carved by glaciers. We then entered the pass taking us back into Alaska, viewing breathtaking terrain: cliffs, ice, waterfalls, valleys and snow covered mountain peaks. At the end of this spectacular highway, we entered the historic town of Skagway. It was the perfect ending to our last ride in Alaska. If you plan this trip, the ride to Skagway is a must.

Early morning on Saturday July 12th, we loaded on the Alaska Marine Highway ferry Malaspina. The workers skillfully tied our bikes down on the vehicle deck. We then checked into our cabin and started our marine voyage. Over the next two days the ferry made several port stops including Juneau and Ketchikan. We enjoyed the incredible view of the Inside Passage, several times seeing whales and other wildlife. Considered public transportation, the ferry does not have the



amenities of a cruise ship, but besides sightseeing, there are things to do such as watch movies, or hear presentations from a National Park official. The food was surprisingly good and reasonably priced. By the third day, we were rested and ready to continue riding. We all agreed it was a good decision taking the ferry.

On Tuesday July 15, the ferry arrived in Bellingham, Washington. Mitch, Collin, Dave and I then started our southeast ride back to Texas. Just coming from Alaska and the Pacific Ocean, that afternoon it was a shock to enter a 100-degree valley in central Washington. Over the next four days we took a nice route back to Texas, through Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Colorado and New Mexico. We all returned home by Saturday July 19th. When I pulled in my garage, I had 9004 miles on my trip odometer, with over 143 hours of ride time.



Line to load on the marine ferry Malaspina, Skagway, Alaska

I am amazed on how well our trip played out. We were incredibly lucky in the weather department with pleasant temperatures, sunny skies, and only two days of rain. All the bikes performed well with only a few fixable problems along the way. And as I like to say when I return from a motorcycle trip, no tickets and no wrecks. There are only a few things we would have done differently. I'm sure we missed some things but I think our route and schedule was good. And yes, there is that Alaskan dirt I will never get completely out of my bike. We saw some amazing country and experienced all the various landscapes North America has to offer. Riding the plains to mountains and valleys, all the rivers and lakes, through the lush forest and arctic tundra. Our travel along the coastline and ocean, to our return trek through the desert. The Alaska ride far surpassed my original goals and expectations, and I am thankful for the experience. A trip to Alaska really is the type of journey every motorcyclist, who enjoys touring, should take once in his or her lifetime.



Related information:

The Mile Post - www.themilepost.com

Med Jet Insurance - www.medjetassist.com

Alaska Marine Ferry - www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/index.html

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