

INTO THE WILD



Vast icy landscapes meet gushing rivers and deep green forests in Wrangell-St Elias National Park in Alaska — one of the world's last untouched wilderness areas.

WORDS SUSAN GOUGH HENLY



(clockwise from far left) The old Kennecott copper mill; a local grizzly bear feasts on salmon; autumn colours of the Wrangell-St Elias National Park form a patchwork of natural beauty.

The most dramatic scenery in the park is actually within walking distance of town.

There are way more grizzly bears, moose, Dall sheep, bald eagles and salmon here than humans. Before officially becoming a national park in 1980, the area was known only to a few intrepid mountain climbers and adventurers. The local Athabaskan Native Americans had sent expeditions up the Chitina River, but they never returned so the area was believed to be haunted and thus never settled. These days Wrangell-St Elias National Park & Preserve is gaining a lot of buzz for its wilderness experience, minus the crowds. There is so much space here that you can hike in places that no human has stepped foot on before.

There is also a thriving little commune called McCarthy in the geographic centre of the park, less than four hours drive down a dirt road from Chitina. McCarthy sprang to life in the early 1900s when copper was discovered near the Kennicott Glacier. In its first 35 years of operation, the Kennecott Copper Corporation (the spelling error was never corrected) extracted more than US\$200 million (\$190 million) worth of ore making it one of the world's richest concentrations of copper at the time.

After the mine closed in 1938, the mining town of Kennecott dwindled to a ghost settlement but in recognition of its significance, it became a National Historic Landmark in 1986. The National Parks Service has acquired much of the land and is gradually restoring the buildings, all of which are becoming popular tourist destinations in their own right.

"Kennecott was always the quintessential company town," says Boston-born Neil Darish, who owns the carefully restored McCarthy Lodge & Ma Johnson's Hotel (101 Kennicott Ave, McCarthy; www.mccarthylodge.com) as well as The Golden Saloon and a liquor store, grocery shop and hardware outlet. "McCarthy was and still is the party town," he says.

Darish ought to know, as The Golden Saloon has become McCarthy's throbbing heart, serving Alaskan micro-brews and hosting open-mic nights every Thursday as well as a Tall Tales storytelling festival at the end of summer. The 'Alaskavore' fine-dining restaurant at McCarthy Lodge is always popular with guests, serving delights such as Copper River red salmon, Kodiak scallops, local Angus beef and a

host of locally grown garden treats, which also recently featured in the James Beard Foundation's first "Rugged Alaskan Luxury" dinner in New York.

SEEKING ADVENTURE

"You have stunning natural beauty plus more than 100 years of history and a great little community, which has evolved via mining, homesteading and alternative lifestylers, and is now a busy hiking hub," says Brisbane-born Natalie Bray, who arrived here on holiday in 1983, stayed for the winter and never left. She and her husband Kelly run Wrangell Mountain Air (www.wrangellmountainair.com) which operates a thrice-daily shuttle service between McCarthy and Chitina (in the summer months) as well as 'flightseeing' tours and back-country trips to get hikers into the middle of nowhere. (Bush planes, by the way, are the 4WDs of the region.)

"Size really does matter," says this transplanted Aussie, in an effort to explain the gargantuan nature of this wilderness. "There are mountains after mountains, stretching as far as the eye can see. Every valley has a glacier at the top of it and ►





(left to right) Rafting along the Kennicott River is a great way to take in your natural surroundings; hiking in the heart of Root Glacier.

there are an awful lot of valleys. Surprisingly, though, some of the most dramatic scenery in the park is actually within walking distance of town.”

One of the most popular adventures is a hike along Root Glacier, just a 6.4-kilometre round trip from McCarthy. The track is lined with blue lupine wildflowers when I visit in June with Gaia Marrs, who was born and raised in McCarthy (year-round population of about 30) and who now owns St Elias Alpine Guides (www.steliasguides.com) with her husband Wayne. I learn how to walk on the ice with crampons attached to my boots, marvelling at how many rocks are suspended in the glacier. Under the blazing summer sun, water runs across the ice surface, eventually joining streams which, in steeper parts, turn into waterfalls that carve moulins, which are deep ravines in the ice. One of the most spectacular sights here is the Stairway Icefall.

The next day I join a full-day rafting trip, which feels like four adventures in one. We navigate the class II and III rapids of the glacial silt-stained Kennicott River, thankful for our wetsuit jackets and rubber boots since the water gushes directly from the Kennicott Glacier. Once we reach the junction of the Kennicott and Nizina, the river triples in size and meanders slowly across a wide glacial valley, giving us a chance to

pause and marvel at the grandeur around us. We watch a mother moose and her young calf graze just 150 metres away before entering the rock-walled Nizina River Canyon, where the water bursts through a narrow space between 60-metre-high limestone walls. The biggest thrill of all is our flight back to McCarthy, high over the raging rivers, across the glaciers and low over the Kennecott Mine for a spectacular history and geography lesson rolled into one.

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CABIN FEVER

Leaving the ‘metropolis’ of McCarthy we head to Ultima Thule: our base is Ultima Thule Lodge (www.ultimathulelodge.com), on the shores of the Chitina River, 160 kilometres from the nearest road. Owner Paul Claus is something of a legend in these parts, for pioneering the landing of bush planes on ice glaciers. Here Claus and his family have hand-built a cluster of cabins out of logs hewn on their two hectares of land. The rooms are framed with moose antlers and bright flowers, and offer jaw-dropping views over the Wrangell Mountains. I meet the other guests over dinner in the main lodge, with its wide picture windows and grizzly ▶



(left) Reflection of Skookum Volcano in a pond at Wrangell-St Elias National Park.

(below left) Homely cabins await at Ultima Thule Lodge.

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bear rug as Paul's wife Donna and her young staff serve up a feast of moose with morel mushrooms, sautéed potatoes and fresh salad greens from the garden. That night, wrapped in a bathrobe that feels more Ritz hotel than back-country cabin, I sink into the bed crafted from burlled logs and gaze at the soft pink light dusting the snow-topped peaks outside.

Over the next few days I learn about adventuring as it should be: there are no schedule and plenty of surprises. We fly in Claus's custom-made Super Cub plane called Tango (the closest thing to having wings strapped to your back) to mountain ridges where we make the first footprints along cliffs still rimmed with snow. We trek with inflatable rafts strapped to our backpacks and paddle down a glacial-melt stream where my raft gets caught in a log

jam and tips me into the water. Claus builds a roaring fire on the riverbank so I can dry, then spends the next half hour flying close to a large brown bear to frighten it away and dissuade it from eating me for lunch.

As a grand finale, he flies me above what he calls an ocean of ice: the Bagley Icefield, the largest non-polar ice sheet in North America. Light, bright blue lakes dot a white expanse which turns a surreal pale blue when we soar above the jagged tongue of the gigantic Yahtse Glacier. Its 100-metre-high craggy ice cliffs stretch three kilometres across Icy Bay. The water is dotted with icebergs, many doubling as sunbaking platforms for thousands of spotted harbour seals.

Eventually, Claus lands on a strip of beach. Not another soul is around, except for the horned skull of a Dall sheep that was probably attacked by a grizzly bear. Without warning, a skyscraper-size chunk of glacier breaks off with a roar and crashes into the sea with enough force to toss about those thousand-tonne icebergs like rubber duckies in a child's bathtub.

Vast, unpredictable and majestic. I leave this place with a sense of profound wonder at nature's immaculate beauty. ❄️

GETTING THERE To book your flight to Alaska, visit www.virginaustralia.com or simply call 13 67 89 (in Australia).



SEEK ADVENTURE

Multi-day trips in the Alaskan wilderness.

Kennicott Glacier to Cordova

This 10-day rafting trip offers a chance to navigate part of the mighty Copper River, while enjoying views of steep green mountains, waterfalls, glaciers, red salmon run, bears, moose and eagles. www.steliasguides.com.



Fan Glacier Basecamp hike

Travellers are flown to a base camp from where they do day hikes over three to five days, including walking on the remote and beautiful Fan Glacier, with its impressive views. www.wrangellmountainair.com.

Wolverine to Skolai Pass on the Chitistone Goat Trail

A four-day hike where you are flown to the Wolverine landing strip at one end and picked up at the other. Enjoy encounters with wildlife on the way. www.steliasguides.com.