

## **RV'ing in Alaska**

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### **May 18, 2001 - Departing Atlanta**

After two and a half or three months of non-stop planning my wife Janel and I are finally off to Alaska! Departing Atlanta on Delta Airlines, we fly north as the Georgia pine covered rolling hills turn into the slightly larger Appalachian Mountains. Soon the scenery turns to roads that impose their grid pattern relentlessly over Iowa and Minnesota and others on our flight path. This same path will take us further north up to Canada where I spent most of my first four years of life - before the scenery goes breathtakingly still. The lakes below are small and often even parallel, running generally north-south or almost north-south, indicating their ice age origins. Lakes turn slowly into hills and then into mountains.

The sky, which had been getting darker as the sun dipped toward the horizon, now seems to have reversed itself and to have risen a little bit. I'm not sure if it's an illusion, but it seems possible since we were definitely headed north, but have now started to turn west. The hills have all of a sudden started turning into giant snow-capped mountains and then we see glaciers and small frozen mountain streams. At least they look small from here... We pass over what I assume is Wrangell/St. Elias National Park, our nation's largest national park. At 12 million acres it's larger than Switzerland and has taller mountains to boot. Wrangell/St. Elias National Park also packs nine of the nation's 15 tallest peaks, though Denali National Park has Mt. McKinley, which is the tallest.

As we approach Anchorage, we see snow covered Mount McKinley and a smaller peak next to it off of the right side of the aircraft. Even though it is 240 miles away from Anchorage by car, from our vantage point in the sky, it is huge and appears to tower above the clouds that look like they're only coming up to its waist. If I didn't know better, I would guess that it was 20 to 40 miles away. I still haven't figured out how a 20,000-foot high mountain can appear to be so close. We are able to keep our eyes on the mountain for about five minutes until we drop through the last layer of clouds and everything shows hues of orange of the setting sun. A few minutes later, after a shot over blue open water, we touch down a few minutes early in Anchorage. Alaska. After all these years, Alaska!

## May 18, 2001 - Anchorage at Last

It is 11 pm. It is still light out, but barely. The daylight hours will peak a month from now in late June. Few cities are named as functionally as this one: Anchorage which is a port. The temperature is in the 40 degrees Fahrenheit, but feels warmer. The highs during the next few days should hit 60 degrees Fahrenheit. In fact I'm not uncomfortable in the yellow polo shirt, khakis and buck shoes that I'm wearing. So it can't be too much below 60 degrees. This isn't quite the Alaska that I was expecting.

Everyone is from out of town including our cab driver, a Nick Nolte clone from Detroit. "I've been here 20 years, and I never went back. I go down to visit every once in a while..." he says matter of factly. We will end up hearing quite a bit of this kind of sentiment from others in Alaska. People just seem to get glued to the majestic beauty of this rugged state.

He takes us to the Sweet Retreat Recreational Vehicle (RV) Rentals a few miles off of the highway, chatting the whole way. Sweet Retreat is giving us a great rate of \$90 per night plus an 8% tax; the May Special. We booked everything a while back by e-mail and telephone with Marcela. She and the gang at Sweet Retreat will leave the key for us inside the external hot water heater maintenance compartment since they close at 5 pm. We have never RV'ed, have no idea what we are doing and really don't know where the hot water heater maintenance compartment is. There are lots of rounded rectangle doors measuring from a few inches across (for gas and for water) up to a few feet – such as the large luggage storage compartments along the flanks. But we find the hot water heater and the key. The door key works after a little experimentation, and we're finally in. Nick drives off after we thank him and tip him profusely.

The first thing that we are struck with is that even though this twenty-footer is a "little" RV in Alaska, it is much wider than we expected. I can't figure out how it is ever going to fit in a lane on the road, or how I am going to ever get it around a corner. The length is about right though. Inside we have everything that we would ever need including a microwave, a table that turns into a bed, two other beds that are queen size, a toilet, a shower, two sinks (one for the kitchen and one for the bathroom), eleven windows, at least twenty compartments like the kitchen cabinets and clothes storage closets to the little door pockets, an oven, a microwave, a closet, a fridge with a freezer, curtains all around, etc. We can immediately see how we will be at home here for the next few days.

We soon figure out that the electricity only runs when the RV is off from a generator or if you are hooked up, from a land line. Clean water is stored on board in an eighty-liter tank and serves the kitchen sink, bathroom sink, shower and commode. The first two feed the gray water tank and the latter two the black water tank. You have to hit a "dump station" to dump water and replenish. The electrical generator powers all on-board appliances other than electrical stuff that would be used to operate the vehicle as a vehicle (windows, dash, etc.) which are powered from the vehicle's "car" battery.

### **May 19, 2001 - Saturday morning in Anchorage**

I am excited and Janel is too. It never seems to get completely dark. We are too excited about being in Alaska to sleep well during the night. Sweet Retreat RV Rentals opens at 9 am. It takes us an hour to watch the orientation film, ask a lot of questions and feel like we are ready to go. We head out, slowly, nervously, hoping not to run over anything small, like a Cadillac. I have never driven anything larger than a mini-van. We don't get far before stopping at K-Mart where we go to requisition some basics, like thermal socks. From Anchorage we head south toward Seward.

### **May 19, 2001 - Saturday afternoon to Seward**

The facts about Alaska are astounding and really hard to take in. If Alaska were to be superimposed over the Lower forty-eight states of the USA, it would reach both coasts and Canada and Mexico.

Our planned itinerary is convenient: it is almost all approximate multiples of 60 road miles. In fact, I wish I had thought of calling this Alaskan Units - AUs - while we were there. Anchorage to Seward is 120 miles. Seward to Homer is 180 miles. Homer to Anchorage is 240 miles. And Anchorage to Denali is 240 miles which we will be doing twice driving up there and then back to Anchorage on the last few days of our trip. However, these mileages don't bear out to consistent driving times because of the differences in the quality and speed limits on the roads.

Seward was named after William Seward, the US Secretary of State who arranged for the purchase of Alaska from the Russians at about two cents an acre in 1867. What a bargain! The wonderful place at the southern end of Seward is the municipal campground where we will end up camping for two nights. There are tent spots and RV spots. We are in a medium-size parking lot marked out for RVs. Our "campsite" is quite a room with a view. We have Resurrection Bay - basically the ocean reaching north deep into the fjord which leads to Seward. There are snow capped mountains all around including behind Seward and all around Resurrection Bay. The tree line interrupts the white flanks at about 2,000 feet, which is half way down. Our new home is all of twelve feet from the lapping fjord water and perhaps less than that above it. We are also right next to the Iditarod Trailhead Park.

The RV is kitted out with a full set of cooking and eating ware - pots and pans, glasses, forks and knives and plates, etc. So we didn't have to buy any of that. And Janel makes us a great dinner. The clouds are dark looking south down the long neck of Resurrection Bay - the fiord that leads to the ocean. I have never had a room with a view like this one, with mountains in all four directions.

### **Sunday, May 20, 2001 - Seward**

We wake up with the early presence of overcast daylight that breaks gently over the waves and mountains that surround us here in Seward. It is just past six am. We head to another part of Seward to take an eight hour cruise to Kenai Fiords National Park. We

board the vessel along with maybe forty other people. The harbor itself is beautiful. There are no big yachts, but there is a large cruise ship on one end of the port. A couple of seals in the harbor were floating on their backs, and seemed to be watching us as intently as we were watching them. The water must be just above freezing temperature, but their thick coats protect them just fine.

The sky is overcast. And that should have been a warning. But we only had a limited time allocated for Seward, including the day we arrived – yesterday, so it is more or less now or never since we are due to leave tomorrow. The ship starts pitching up and down at the bow and conversely at the stern. At first it is not too bad, but the farther we get away from Seward and out of Resurrection Bay, the worse it gets. The clouds turn from a slightly dark white gray to a much darker gray. The cruise turns into a disaster with very, very choppy waves, a lunch buffet that is much less than we expected, and Janel hanging off at the back of the ship on several occasions along with several others who are getting sick.



The scenery is spectacular, however. There are glaciers reaching into the sea, magnificent trees growing magically out of the sides of sharp hills, rocky crags full of seals and sea gulls and much more. The eight hour trip is cut short down to six hours as we head back in to beat the storm that is coming upon us. The skipper probably headed back into Resurrection Bay at normal speeds, but to us it felt fast. The enjoyment we had had by being outside was quickly tempered by thick, cold raindrops smacking us and the windows of our vessel.

### **May 21, 2001**

We wake up again to muted daylight. So far we've done pretty much nothing other than relax. We do a sewage and water dump and also take on potable water and then head north out of Seward on Alaska 9. It's the only way in by road, and it's the only way out.

The "crowds" have thinned out. There are only a few RVs compared to what must have been close to fifty the day before. We pass the harbor again off to the right and then bid adieu to Seward.



We drive all the way through the Kenai Peninsula. The beautiful mountain scenery turns, slowly and almost abruptly at once, into flat tundra. The tundra looks rather inhospitable. I wouldn't want the RV to break down out here at night or when it is cold. I suppose that it could be hours before being rescued. This scenery is endless, running on for an hour or two. But I just want a place to pull off for the night...

We pass through Soldatna and continue south along the western edge of the Kenai Peninsula. We are now along the Cook Inlet - a curved index-finger shaped body of water that must be 180 miles or so long, and that points to Anchorage and ends there. There are the peaks of what I first think is Katmai National Park off to our right. I just saw a very interesting documentary not too long ago about the volcanic activity of the 1910s that wreaked havoc on what has become the park. All the conical mountains continuously remind us that volcanoes formed this area and that we are on the Pacific Rim. Later I realized that we were actually right across from Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. The peaks were those of the Chigmit Mountains and included both Iliamna Volcano and Redoubt Volcano, both of which are just above 10,000 feet. They don't look all that far away, but the Cook Inlet is about twenty to thirty miles wide right in front of us, and looking at the map, it would appear that while they appear to jut straight out of the water that they are actually another fifteen miles or more away.

The road drops lower and closer to the water though we are still a few hundred feet back. We need a campground for the night and spot the Ninilchik State Recreation Area right on the water. There is a short steep road that leads down from Alaska Highway 1 to the beach. Just driving around the RV lot, we see masses of golden eagles. We see fifteen or so clustered together right by the water when we get to the far end of the campground. We even see some bald eagles too. In fact, I have never seen so many eagles in my life. It is amazing.

### **Tuesday, May 22**

The next morning, I spend twenty minutes to get within fifteen feet of a bald eagle and take a photo that fills my frame. He sits majestically on a



boulder that protrudes two and half, perhaps three, feet from the tidal beach. He looks at me, contemptuously, and then shortly thereafter, flies off skirting the beach along with several other birds that zoom off to the south.

We drive south to Homer, Alaska. Starting with the downhill approach from Ninilchik, we can see for miles as we were approaching Homer, noted for its spit, a narrow peninsula extending about 4.5 miles into the water and away from the center of town. The narrow peninsular spit itself is a fun tourist trap stuck in the 1970s or so that time seems to have forgotten. The view from the end of the spit was spectacular. It feels like we are in the middle of a huge fiord - as we practically are, surrounded on three sides by great snow-capped peaks extruded straight out of Kachemak Bay. There is a ferry that runs from here to Kodiak Island. I have always wanted to go there. If we had another couple of days of travel time, then we just might have done so. We feed the sea gulls and admire the scenery. We know we are in for a long drive the rest of the day. The RV seems to have an issue heading back up the hill out of Homer. I heard somewhere that a lot of people have transmission problems, etc., with older RVs and end up just selling them here in Homer and then going home without their RV. Now I know why.

The road out is beautiful. Even though we are driving a decent amount, the view from inside the RV is almost always superlative. Even when it is relatively dull, it is unique, and thus interesting. We climb and then continue through the thick winding coastal forest which would turn spartan and then lead us into what might almost have been fields. We pass Ninilchik State Park again and keep going in the direction of Soldatna.

### **Wednesday, May 23, 2001**

The morning starts off in a grand way. We wake up at about 6 am, as usual. We take our time getting up and getting ready. Our campsite is at Portage Glacier's Williwaw Campground. We are one of perhaps four families in the campground.

The trip odometer read 335. So that is how far we have driven since picking up Minnie Winnie at Sweet Retreat in Anchorage four days ago. Then we went to Portage Glacier and saw pretty much nothing of the glacier itself that has long receded around the corner off to the right and well out of sight. But we did see the brush ice and mini-icebergs (called simply "bergs") that have been calved from it and then blown into the end of the lake adjacent to the visitor's center. We take the Portage Glacier Ferry. The tour is well done. It is fifteen minutes to the glacier, half an hour there and then fifteen minutes back. The views from the lake are amazing. Bergs are calving right in front of us. And the icy blue cracks are quite marvelous.

We spend most of the day today driving. We drive the fifty or so scenic miles north from Portage Glacier to Anchorage through a landscape of snow-capped mountains flanked by beautiful ocean views of Cook Inlet. We re-provision at Carr's in Anchorage. From Anchorage, we head north, still on Alaska 1, which is probably still officially the Seward Highway. All Alaska highways are numbered and named. Seward Highway connects Anchorage and Seward. The Parks Highway connects Anchorage and Denali and Fairbanks, but is actually named after a certain George Parks, and not because Denali sits

on it. Most of the highways are one lane in each direction except for in cities such as Anchorage, with 250,000 souls where the highways grow to three lanes in either direction. But generally speaking, even in the towns such as Homer and Seward, it is just one lane either way. And moose like the roads: on three separate occasions we have seen moose grazing within ten feet of the road, apparently oblivious to passing vehicles.



From Anchorage, we pass through a series of run of the mill towns that could be anywhere. Eagle River is first. And then on to Wasilla, Houston (which I don't remember even noticing), Willow (ditto), Montana (ditto), Sunshine (ditto), Talkeetna (ditto again). In fact, the only town I remember noticing was Trapper Creek, where we had planned to dump our excess waste and take on new water. There are two gas stations; neither is the one that our guide booklet we had received in the mail before leaving Atlanta told us to expect. But based on the mile markers in the guide booklet and where we thought we were, we guess that it was the Tesoro Gas Station we had passed a little while back. Unfortunately, the dump station at the Tesoro Gas station was still frozen, according to our gregarious hostess who greeted customers even as she busied herself sweeping the floor. She was very apologetic that we couldn't use the facilities and tried to find a way to give us some free water to make up for it. This kind of kindness is typical of just about everyone we met in Alaska. Regardless I would certainly recommend that people hit dump stations well before they plan to need them and also replenish at every opportunity even if it might slow down projected travel times. We had to turn around, go back to the last open dump station we had passed, tank up and then turn back around, losing an hour and a half in the process.

I was tired of driving, but we really had no choice since we absolutely had to have some more water and also needed a place to dump our waste water. So we drove seventy miles past Denali State Park where we had planned to stay for one night and on to the real thing: Denali National Park. The drive was beautiful. Anchorage to Denali should have been a five hour drive, but I think that it took us about six with the turn around to head back for the gas station. Alaska around Denali is divided into two main types of surface layering. Taiga is basically what is below the tree line. Here you have the white cedars and the black cedars and all of the underbrush. Tundra is what is above the tree line,

typically 2,000 to 3,800 feet depending on weather and winds. The railroad crosses the road from time to time, runs parallel at others and disappears completely the rest of the time. The road gives us scenic views to both right and left, but mostly to the left as we actually start to approach Denali. At 7:30 pm or so, we finally make it to the entrance of Denali National Park. The Visitor Center is officially closed, but we decide to go in anyway, and find out that there is an employee party. We get information from the bookstore, and then head back to the RV site at the entrance.

### **May 24, 2001 - Denali**

Our day is pretty slow. We drive to the Princess Lodge Hotel opposite the entrance to the park and head up the long sinewy drive to actually go up the hill to actually get up there. Walking inside, it feels very much the lodge. We are there for the breakfast buffet and fill ourselves on the good food. It is our first meal on this trip that is not in the RV. The view from the restaurant is pleasantly commanding and we can see the George Parks Highway right below us. We head back down the hill, cross the George Parks Highway and into the park. The road curves to the right (north) passing the Visitor Center then climbs uphill and changes directions a few times before arriving at the Denali Train Station where a crowd is gathering. They are probably headed back to Seward. Princess Cruise Lines plies its trade up and down the Inland Passage threading through the islands that make up the southeastern panhandle of Alaska heading covering the Juneau, Misty Fjords, Glacier Bay area before heading to Seward. I don't know if all of the cruises do this since we didn't investigate the cruises. The cruise ships dock in Seward and then passengers disembark there, go to the train station there, and get shunted up to Anchorage and then eventually on to Denali.

So near the train station, we fill the natural gas tank up for about \$50. I fiddle a bit and finally have to get someone to help me figure out how to get the cap off. A nice lady, probably barely in her 50s, comes out to show me what to do to remove the cap. I always wonder how people do all of this stuff in the winter. We park behind the hotel and then make a short, but still beautiful hike up to Mt. Healy. Later we have another night of staring out of the back window of the RV, waiting for the aurora borealis to show. It doesn't. It is not until later that we will figure out that the Aurora Borealis doesn't show at all during this time of year.

### **May 25, 2001 - Preparation Day**

Denali National Park vaguely resembles a triangle with a base that runs from southwest to northeast and a top which points northwest. It's about 120 miles from one side to the other! The road into the park is basically a straight shot toward Mount McKinley which is located slightly southwest of the center of the park. There is no way to traverse the entirety of Denali by car and there is only one entrance for vehicles, and that entrance is on the east. This solitary road is paved for a short distance and then turns into a dirt and dust road the rest of the way as it reaches eighty-five to ninety miles to Wonder Lake and Kantishna. It is too early in the year for that portion of the park to be open, so for our purposes, the road only runs out to fifty-eight miles to the Toklat River.

Today is a preparation day. We get up late as is becoming more and more routine now that we are adjusting to Alaska time. It is cold outside, perhaps somewhere in the low forty's (Fahrenheit). We feel it inside and the borders of all of the windows are misted up. It was sunny in spots, but that has been supplanted by faceless white clouds that blanket the sky. It is a good day to stay inside and do very little of anything other than sip hot chocolate and watch movies. Unfortunately, we have neither. The other RVs are still around as well; collectively we look like a pod of stranded whales on jacks, hoping that the tide will come in perhaps.

At 10:30 am, we drive to the Visitor Center to make reservations for tonight, back at Riley Creek Campground as well as for various shuttle buses and to confirm our reservations at Teklanika. Reservations at Riley are still unnecessary, we are told, contradicting what we were told last night by the camp host. We don't have time for anything else as the shuttle bus leaves in a few minutes. The buses are painted white and skirted by a ranger green stripe along the bottom. Our driver professes to know nothing about geology, but still manages to banter convincingly about the abundant flora and not so abundant fauna. There are 600 bears estimated to roam throughout the park, which seems like a lot until one considers that Denali's 6.2 million acres are spread over an area larger than New Hampshire in a park about half as big as Switzerland. There are several hundred moose and about 2,500 caribou. The Dall Sheep are too numerous to be counted according to Ben. He takes the two of us and four other passengers, an elderly couple and two guys from the army sporting crew-cuts who are here to hike seventeen miles to the Savage River.

Like all of the other buses and all of the other tours into the park, it takes the same dirt road, kicking up a cloud of dust behind it, and stops at the same places – a vehicular freestyle of sorts. Those same places are any place the bus driver or the passengers find interesting. See a moose? Stop. See an elk? Stop. See a bear? STOP! Everyone rushes to the side of the bus closest to the animal(s) and takes photos. I assume we'll tip over sideways at some point, but it hasn't happened yet. The animals are often right in front of us some place, but camouflaged away. Movement helps: when they move, we stand a better chance of seeing them. The marvelous thing about Denali is that the animals are all wild though they appear innocuous.

When the sun is out, we see all kinds of warm, upbeat hues that are golden, tan or brown framed or spotted with white snow. When the clouds cover up the sun, then the world turns into a black and white photo with the various warm hues turning into black. The white snow stands in great contrast then. The river meanders alongside the road at one point and the scenery just gets more and more spectacular. Small sand bars split the river into ribbons. Life is good, the scenery amazing and everyone on the bus is in a great mood. Though the 30 or 40 of us are all together, we are alone out of sight of anyone else. The mountains on both sides are both vast and intimate at the same time. Sometimes we are right on top of them and sometimes they are off in the distance.

A mountain goat stands - a solitary spirit alone for miles (other than us) - in the distance,

his fur the perfect off white color that makes it look like a rock face. Standing just tall enough to nurse underneath is a baby. The bus stops at Savage River. We get out and take photos. Everyone gets back on board and then we head back to where we had picked up the bus in the first place and then got back in the RV.

With the camp ground closed and out of commission and with no other place to go, we listened to the workers, headed back out of the park, then turned left to head to Healy. The drive up to Healy was beautiful - a small serpentine stretch with a nice vertical rise off to the right (east). And we ended up at Denali RV. After sleeping in Seward, at Ninilchik and also at Portage Glacier, this camp ground was visually minimalistic. In fact, it was a shame that we didn't have the stunning scenery that we had gotten used to so quickly. But there were full hookups, and so we parked the RV, opened the water door and power doors and plugged in the water and electricity. Plugged in, we wouldn't have to run the loud generator tonight.

### **May 26, 2001 at Denali National Park**

Today we start out at Denali RV. The day is young and we are very excited to be heading back into the park and to Teklanika - the camp ground in Denali we had made prior arrangements for. Teklanika represents the furthest that one may drive oneself by RV or any other type of private vehicle.

We have a special three day pass to park our RV at Teklanika Camp Ground - a tent/RV ground. The rule is that we can drive in, park for three days without moving at all, and then drive out. Or so the rangers tell us. And our ticket says the same thing to effect: "Permit valid for one vehicle. ONE TRIP IN AND OUT ONLY" - spelled out emphatically in capital letters just like that. No extensions of any kind are offered; there are a finite number of spots. And moving the RV can only be done when leaving. We drive in the twenty-nine miles into the park, find a nice spot and then park the RV. There is a bus heading further into the park that stops in front of the camp ground not too long later, and so we board it along with a few others. Destination: Toklat River.

The bus is a standard school bus, and I feel like I am back in school with a bunch of adults. And the bus driver is the youngest person aboard. The road curves every which way and we go from one side of the bus to the other to view whatever is being called out by the bus driver or passengers. We pass by the same places we saw yesterday. The scenery is becoming familiar and comfortable. But it still impresses endlessly. We get back at "night". It is not, for it is still completely Alaskan summer bright outside, but our bodies feel tired from having been sight-seeing all day.

### **May 27, 2001**

We wake up late enough to miss the 8:45 am bus, but then catch a green bus at about 10:45. Our Teklanika camp ground is at mile 29, but our destination is anywhere around Polychrome where we can get out and hike a bit. That's the way it works in Denali: buy a ticket for a bus trip, but then get off wherever you want just by asking the driver. And we

do just that. Annette, our good natured and informative bus driver dropped us off right where the unfinished dirt road bottoms out about fifty feet above the valley floor. From there, we hiked out a mile through the scrub brush to the little foothills sprinkled with snow. I thought it was a lot of fun to be out there in the middle of nowhere and yet still know that we weren't. So I figure the chances of a bear encounter are rather slim. But the nice thing is we cannot see the road. We can see where it cuts along the side of the hill only because a bus would go by every once in a while. I wish I had taken a good book that I could read. The sunshine is perfect - not too hot. The lighting is golden across the valley floor in front of us.

We spend three hours out there waiting for the bus. We get the last two seats. Later the bus-driver turns away other hikers trying to get on. He tells them to wait for the next bus, but each bus that we have been passing that is behind us is full! I spot mother grizzly and her cub and again a mother and cub (probably the same one) and then again another bear standing up! By the time we get back to our RV ground, we are too tired of roughing it to stay at Teklanika. We are prepaid for another night, but we are fidgety and not all that thrilled with the camp ground. So we decide to leave the park one day early and head back to Denali RV, just outside the park, a few miles north of the park road and the entrance. We knew that there would be full hookups. On our way out, we saw a grizzly and her cub off to left, just 30 feet away from the road! We saw other animals on our day trip including a fox, some mountain goats.

**May 28, 2001**



It is only when we leave the park that we see the great 20,320 foot tall Denali (Mount McKinley), the tallest mountain in North America. But we were not alone in almost missing it as something like only five percent of visitors to Denali National Park ever see the top of the mountain. The view is astounding. The mountain feels like it's practically right on top of us. We marvel for just a few minutes since we have to get back to Anchorage in time to drop the RV off after cleaning it up.

We finally get back into Anchorage. And now we have to find a dump station for we are supposed to return the RV cleaned up and cleaned out or face fines. We have a map of

dump stations, and so we finally find one and I get to do my least favorite chore yet once again. We also top off the gasoline. There is no one to check us in at Sweat Retreat RV so we leave the keys in the drop and head out hoping that we won't get some surprise fees/fines when we get back to Atlanta. Next we got to the airport and caught our nine hour flight back to Atlanta.

**Editor's Note: All photos in this article were taken by the author.**