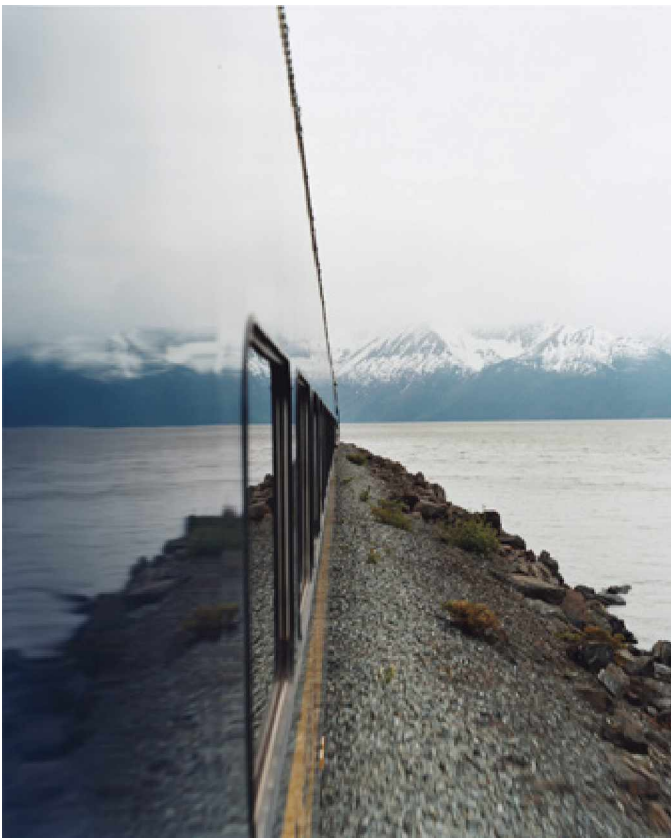




All Aboard

September 2007
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A young family rides the rails through Alaska's spectacular interior—and discovers that old-fashioned train travel is as enchanting as ever.



Left: A mountain view from the train

Below: The conductor

No mode of transportation can match the adventurous atmosphere of train travel—a fact my wife, Whitney, and I discovered on the low-budget Eurail trips of our respective youths. Years later, though, say the word *train* and I'm more likely to envision sprinting for the subway so I can get home to my young son, Dashiell, before his bedtime. And to Dash, of course, train is something small, named Thomas, to be played with on the bedroom floor.

As it happens, trains—the old, romantic kind—are making a comeback. Rail lines around the world are offering itineraries to satisfy your wanderlust and your desire for hassle-free together time. Among the most scenic is the Alaska Railroad, which has served the state since 1903 and recently introduced its first-class GoldStar service. While it's hard to get a full Alaska experience in any single trip—the state is about a fifth the size of the entire contiguous U.S.—this is one of the best ways to sample the beauty of the interior. Traveling by rail also gives you the flexibility to make what you will of the area, spending a few days (or a few weeks) before, after, and between rides enjoying the hot springs and the Ice Museum in Fairbanks, the natural wonders of Denali National Park and Preserve, and the restaurants and museums of Anchorage. In the end, though, it's all about the trains.



We chose this trip in part because we'd always dreamed of visiting Alaska, and in part because it seemed doable for Dash (the 12-hour journey can be split into two parts). Still, we were uneasy as we boarded the Denali Star in Fairbanks: How would a toddler who could barely sit still handle multihour train rides? There was no need to worry. Dash looked around excitedly as we felt the car start to move, almost imperceptibly at first, then more forcefully as it picked up speed bit by bit and we entered Alaska's wilderness. Seeing him gaze out the window, all the while echoing the train whistle with his own voice, I began to relax. Meanwhile, my wife went to investigate the open-air viewing deck. She came back some time later, hair wild and eyes wide: "It's a religious experience!" Before disembarking at our first destination, Denali, four hours later, I had confirmed her pronouncement, watching picturesque mining towns and endlessly weaving river valleys zip by.

After a couple of days spent exploring the splendors of Denali—from hikes to sled-dog demonstrations to helicopter rides—we climbed aboard another GoldStar train for the eight-hour ride to Anchorage. Soon, Dash began succumbing to its soporific rhythm. As he indulged himself (and us) in a nap, Whitney and I enjoyed a rare family-vacation pleasure: sipping a shared Alaskan microbrew and losing ourselves in the immense snowcapped mountains outside the window. When we pulled into Anchorage, we realized we were more relaxed than we'd been after any other 350-mile journey in our lives.



Left: A young passenger takes in the scenery.

Below: The north- and southbound trains on the route pass each other.

Alaska Railroad Goldstar Service

What your family should expect—and what you shouldn't miss—on board and off

From \$132 for ages 12 and up, and from \$66 for kids 2 to 11, for each leg of the trip (children under 2 ride free); akrr.com

The Itinerary

The Denali Star runs daily in both directions between Fairbanks and Anchorage, leaving just after 8 a.m. and arriving at 8 p.m. Along the way, it stops at Denali, a 6-million-acre national park in which you can spend as many days as you like before hopping back on board. There are no overnight trips on this route; instead, you sleep in hotels at each stop where you choose to spend time.

Getting there

Fly to Fairbanks International Airport; Alaska Airlines offers flights from most major cities, with a change in Seattle. Return home from Anchorage International Airport. (You can also do the trip in reverse.)

When to visit

Mid-May to mid-September: GoldStar service operates only in these months, when the region gets between 14 and 22 hours of daylight a day. Temperatures are between 50 and 80 degrees—colder on the mountains in Denali—so be prepared to layer.



The train

Details: Your GoldStar ticket gives you seats on the second story of a glass-domed car and access to the rear open-air deck and the first-floor dining room. Beverages are delivered right to your seat by the bartender.

Seating: The reclining seats are pre-assigned, and can often be arranged to create a section for a party of four.

Food: The wood-paneled dining room serves hearty breakfasts (scrambled eggs and reindeer sausage) and good lunch and dinner options (sautéed trout, wild-game stew), all of a quality that puts that bag of Ruffles on the Acela club car to shame. Most menu items cost between \$11 and \$24.

Scenery: Each bend brings a new vista to marvel at: snowy mountains mirrored in glassy lakes; steel-girder bridges that seem exactly the structures a train "should" be crossing; sweeping curves that offer kids a view of the cars unfolding behind.

Wildlife Along the Way: On the train and in Denali, tell kids to keep their eyes peeled for the "big five": moose, caribou, Dall sheep, wolves, and bears. Give them bonus points for spotting smaller snowshoe hares.



Left: The riverboat *Discovery II* at the confluence of the Chena and Tanana rivers, in Fairbanks.

Below: Panning for gold in Fairbanks; a frontier-style ride near Denali National Park and Preserve; the Imaginarium science museum in Anchorage

The stopovers

Fairbanks

The northernmost point of your trip is a great place to get a taste of Alaska's interior. Kids will love the Ice Museum and panning for gold. Stay at the [River's Edge Resort](#), simple but picturesque cottages on a bend in the Chena River (from \$162 a night, 800-770-3343).

The Food

The Pump House Restaurant and Saloon: Hearty fare (steak, reindeer, and local seafood, including of course Alaska king crab) in an authentic 1890s gold-rush-era setting on the banks of the Chena. Kids will love the giant nine-foot-eight-inch Kodiak brown bear at the entrance. *796 Chena Pump Road, 907-479-8452.*



The Activities

Chena Hot Springs Resort: The natural hot tubs and heated indoor swimming pool are open year-round, as is the Aurora Ice Museum, featuring endless ice sculptures, a circular ice staircase, and the Aurora Ice Bar, where your martini comes in a glass made of, yes, ice. *56.5 Mile Chena Hot Springs Road, 800-478-4681.*

Gold Dredge No. 8: It doesn't sound that appealing, but this legacy of Alaska's gold-mining past, which separated gold from tons of underground gravel for more than 30 years before closing in 1959, is a pretty fascinating piece of technology in its own right. And after touring it, you get to pan for gold—and keep whatever you find. *\$25 for ages 13 and up, \$12.50 for ages 7 to 12, children 6 and under free; 1755 Old Steese Highway N., 907-457-6058.*

Riverboat Discovery: Take a three-and-a-half-hour trip down the Chena in a paddleboat, with stops to watch sled dogs run at the kennels of four-time Iditarod champion Susan Butcher, and a chance to tour a re-created native Athabascan village. *\$50 for ages 13 and up, \$35 for ages 3 to 12, ages 2 and under free; 1975 Discovery Drive, 866-479-6673.*

Fairbanks Ice Museum: If you can't make it out to the one at the hot springs, this place downtown, which features life-size sculptures of polar bears, walruses, and sled dogs, as well as an ice xylophone that you can play yourself, will give you a sense of this region's passion for ice sculpting. *Adults \$12, children 6 to 12 \$6, children 5 and under free; 500 2nd Avenue, 907-451-8222.*



Denali

The sprawling national park has a nearly endless supply of adventures: hiking and horseback riding, white-water rafting and wagon rides, flight tours and glacier landings

via prop plane or helicopter—even night golfing (remember: 20 hours of daylight!). A good hotel option is the rustic, log cabin-esque Denali Grizzly Bear Resort, which is five miles from the park entrance but far less hectic than the larger, cruise-ship-passenger-dominated resorts along the main strip that locals call "Glitter Gulch" (from \$149 a night, 866-583-2696).

The Food

Nenana View Bar & Grill: Sustainable regional fare in the main restaurant of the McKinley Chalet Resort, a large complex that mainly hosts Holland America cruise participants. *Mile 238.9 Parks Highway, 907-683-8258.*

Black Bear Coffee House: This homey spot across the highway from the Princess resort serves good locally roasted coffee (thanks to the long, dark winters, Alaskans take their coffee very seriously). It'll also make boxed lunches for you to take on hikes or other day trips in the park. *Mile 238.5 Parks Highway, 907-683-1656.*

The Activities

Murie Science and Learning Center: A small museum just inside the entrance to the park offers a primer on the flora and fauna you'll find here, as well as giving visitors a sense of just how big Denali really is. The center also offers various field seminars, but they fill up fast, so sign up well in advance of your visit. *Denali National Park and Preserve, 907-683-1269.*

Era Flightseeing: Based just a mile from the park entrance and the big resort hotels, Era offers a breathtaking 50-minute helicopter tour over the top of the Alaska Range, including (on a clear day) spectacular views of Mount McKinley (or Denali, as most Alaskans prefer to call it). Also available are a glacier-landing tour and heli-hiking backcountry adventure. *From \$299 per person; Mile 238 Parks Highway, 800-843-1947.*

Denali National Park Kennels: Watch the park's own team of sled dogs pull a demonstration sled. The chance to meet some of the friendliest dogs up-close-and-personal will thrill little ones. *Included in entrance fee to the park (\$10 a person or \$20 a vehicle); 907-683-2294.*

Black Diamond Covered Wagon Tours: An evocative, old-timey hour-long ride along the northern boundary of the park behind two enormous draft horses, including a stop for a hearty grilled dinner of meat, salmon, and cranberry cobbler. Young kids will love the chance to pet and talk to the horses. *\$79 for adults and kids 12 and up, \$40 for kids 5 to 12, kids under 5 free; Mile 247 Parks Highway, Healy; 907-683-4653.*



Anchorage

The state's largest city is home to the best restaurants you'll find on the trip. There's also the Imaginarium science museum and the fascinating Alaska Native Heritage Center. Tuck in at the charming, spacious Historic Anchorage Hotel, located in one of downtown's oldest buildings (from \$99 a night, 800-544-0988).

The Food

Orso: This upscale downtown hot spot is a favorite for lunch among the Anchorage business set. Try the excellent smoked-salmon chowder and the fresh salmon specials. *737 West 5th Avenue, 907-222-3232.*

Jens' Restaurant: Believe it or not, many of the top restaurants in Anchorage—and thus in Alaska—are located in unassuming strip malls in the Midtown district. Such is the case here, where chef Jens Haagen Hansen and his staff of veteran waiters serve showstoppers like fresh alder-roasted Alaskan king salmon and almond-crusted cod on a blueberry beurre blanc (many of the recipes feature a Danish twist), alongside a remarkably large and diverse wine list. Perhaps best of all, the chef and his staff seem to actually enjoy the presence of young children. *701 West 36th Avenue, 907-561-5367.*

The Activities

Alaska Native Heritage Center: This cultural center, which was built in 1999 by the Alaska Federation of Natives, provides visitors with insight into the five separate indigenous Alaska native groups. The indoor museum features artifacts and short films about each people, as well as demonstrations of native dancing and storytelling. But the highlight is outside the museum: life-size replicas of traditional village dwellings of each of the five native groups, set in a path around a small lake. *8800 Heritage Center Drive, 800-315-6608.*

The Imaginarium Science Discovery Center: This science museum, currently located in the lower level of a downtown mall building, is patiently awaiting an upcoming expansion into a new, larger space. But it's got plenty to keep kids fascinated in the meantime, including turtles and lizards they can touch, a machine that lets them create bubbles while standing inside them, and a live feed from NASA. *737 West 5th Avenue, 907-276-3179.*