

North to Alaska by boat and BMW

Bob Bahrey's trip to Alaska started at his home in Lombard, but the "adventure" commenced in Bellingham, Wa., when he and his BMW model K1100LT boarded a ferry boat bound for northern waters.

By Bob Bahrey

My 5,500-mile motorcycle Alaska adventure began in Bellingham, Washington, at the Alaska Marine Highway ferry terminal on June 20 and ended 18 days later in Monroe, Washington, on July 8.

The adventure began painfully. Before boarding the Alaska Ferry, I stopped at a service station to top off the gas tank and add air to the tires. While measuring the tire pressure I touched the hot muffler with my hand. SSSST. Ouch! A second-degree burn. It was now painful



No charge to set up tents on Alaska-bound ferry

to grip the handle bar for the rest of the way to the ferry terminal in Bellingham. Fortunately the next three days on the ferry, give the wound time to heal.

The M/V Columbia ferry traveled north for 1,000 miles to

Haines, AK. Ferry life consists of socializing, reading, sightseeing, getting off and on the ferry at towns along the way to check them out. Don't be late for the ferry departure time, it will not wait.

Roads and Routes

I disembarked in Haines, Alaska, and rode northwest through a small part of British Columbia, then the Yukon Territory, then into Alaska, where I continued northwest to Fairbanks. From there my route went south, to the Denali National Park, then to Anchorage, then to the Kenai Peninsula, and finally to Whittier, on the Gulf of Alaska.

There, I caught the southbound ferry M/V Kennicott to Prince Rupert, BC, and rode east to Prince George, BC then south to Washington State, a 1,000 mile route.

This route, the final leg of my adventure, contained some of the most beautiful landscapes I experienced during the entire trip: rain forests (with gentle rain), gentle winding roads, cool mountain tops, warm deserts and deep river canyons.

Probably 95 per cent of the roads I traveled were paved and about 5% were under repair, requiring occasional travel on the temporary gravel surfaces.

Winter must be a challenge for Alaskan drivers.

All the steel guard rails I saw were either:

- bent
- dented
- or broken

Post-Traumatic Stress

During the last leg of my homeward bound trip from Washington State to Lombard, I had lots of time to mull over the adventure just completed. Then I had a mild anxiety attack.

It finally dawned on me what I had done. Traveling alone on deserted roads through desolate wilderness, being unable to repair the bike if it had broken down (only Anchorage and Fairbanks have au-

thorized BMW dealers), unable to lift a fallen bike without help, and the chance of encountering large unfriendly wildlife (bears, moose) etc.. Fortunately, nothing insurmountable occurred. I'm pleased to have completed the trip, which had been in the planning stage for nearly 3 years.

Breakdown

In Alaska, I stopped to photograph a fertilizer manufacturing plant and an oil refinery, despite signs indicating that stopping is prohibited. A security guard wagged her finger at me and indicated for me to move on.

I usually turn off the engine when I stop for photos, then restart the engine and move on. This time the engine starter was "dead". Panic Time, in a violation zone. I went through the complete start cycle several times before the engine finally caught and started.

Eventually, several days later, after experiencing several similar unsuccessful starts, I discovered that the safety switch on underside of the frame controlled by the side stand had become coated with dried road mud which prevented the switch from "closing" sometimes.

Tip-Overs

I tipped the bike over twice on the trip, both times at nearly zero speed, and neither time was I hurt.

One tip-over occurred when I lost my footing on a sloped, rain-soaked, gravel parking lot at a motel.

This fall sheered the right pannier aluminum fasteners from their mounting hardware, and also it popped the right side view mirror out



Getting a tow up a slippery, soft hill

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of its retainers. Fortunately the motel was right next door to a hardware store, where I bought a pop rivet gun to replace the aluminum rivets to re-mount the pannier brackets. I taped the rear view mirror together with black electrical tape.

The second fall occurred on a steep uphill soft dirt road.

The rear wheel lost traction during the slow climb, spun out and the bike tipped over. After righting the bike with help from another person, (I cannot lift the 700 lb loaded bike alone) I was "towed" uphill a few hundred feet until we reached level road and proceeded on my way.

Anxious moments

I had a Garmin Zumo 550 GPS mounted to the motorcycle, but gas stations occasionally did not exist where indicated by the GPS. This caused several anxious moments. For instance, at one point on the trip, the GPS indicated that there were gas stations at 60 and 120 miles down the road. Partially WRONG! The stations were there, but were closed and out of business. Anyway, I did make it to that next station with about 1/2 gallon remaining in the tank. I still had the spare gallon in the pannier.

Scariest part

Riding the Whittier tunnel passage, to the southbound Alaska ferry, was the scariest part of my entire trip. This tunnel connects the port city of Whittier on Prince William Sound to the Seward Highway and South-central Alaska. Originally built as a railroad tunnel during World War II, it opened to vehicular traffic in 2000, and consists of a wet, dimly lighted 2 1/2 mile single-lane road with a pair of railroad tracks down the middle. Cars and trucks straddle the tracks and motorcycles ride between them.

Here's the scary part. The pavement is serrated, (grooved) with the grooves parallel to the direction of travel. And they're just the right depth and width to set my front tire hunting, weaving back and forth in an out of and on top of the grooves, requiring continual vigilance to stay away from the rails. My K1100 has soft steering, it does not respond quickly. I did not fall, but apparently there have been some falls in the past because a pick up truck followed our group of motorcyclists through the tunnel to help pick up those who may fall. None did on that excursion.

Wildlife and Sightseeing

Most of the wildlife I saw while on commercial tours.

On a tour boat, departing from Seward, AK, we saw whales, sea lions, walrus, porpoise, and a myriad of aquatic birds. A glacier "calved" while we viewed it from the tour boat about 1/4 mile away.

Seward is named after William Seward, one of President Lincoln's cabinet members who advocated the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. It became known as "Seward's Folly" or "Seward's Icebox". There is nothing foolish about it now.

On a tour bus in Denali National Park, we saw brown bear (*a/k/a* Grizzly bear), caribou, moose, fox, gray wolf, Dall Sheep which have large spiral shaped horns, and the American bald eagle.



Two-mile tunnel to Whittier, Alaska, supplied the trip's scariest moments.

Eagles mate for life, and every year return to the same nest, which are built of sticks and twigs and can weigh up to 6,000 lbs. Eagles' eyes have two focal points, one for distance and one for close range focusing on both simultaneously, giving them extraordinary vision and a strong advantage as a bird of prey.

Communications

My T-Mobile cellular phone was 99.5% useless on most of the trip. Only in major population areas was a signal received, i.e. Anchorage, Wasilla (Governor Sarah Palin's home town), Fairbanks, Homer (very weak), and Seward (very weak). Prior to the trip, I inquired about renting a "Satellite Telephone" which works everywhere on earth. The cost was about \$600 for 2 weeks, so nixed that idea.

Costs

Total average daily cost including food, fuel, lodging, tours, tunnel fee, and ferry was approximately \$170 per day.

Fuel: 11¢ to 15¢ per mile based upon an average of 40 mpg and 93 octane fuel selling for about \$4.75/gallon in Alaska and about \$1.60 per liter (\$6 per gallon) in British Columbia.

Food: three adequate (not fancy) meals in family restaurants at about \$35 to \$40 per day, including tip and tax.

Lodging: tenting on the ferry boat sun deck, no charge; tenting in campgrounds, \$10 to \$20; hostel, \$20 to \$35; motel, \$90 to \$140.

Alaska Marine Ferry: \$1,700 round trip, 1,000 miles each way for motorcycle transport and deck sleeping in my own sleeping bag and air mattress.

Commercial tour boat out of Seward, Kenai Peninsula: \$135 for 6 hours on the water including a complete very good Salmon dinner. I got mildly seasick and found out afterwards that sugared ginger helps alleviate seasick symptoms.

Commercial tour bus in Denali National Park cost \$90 for 8-hour tour and snack supper. No private vehicles are allowed on Denali roads.

Occasional snacks purchased in food stores cost about 50% more in Alaska because almost everything is transported there thousands of miles from the lower 48 via semi truck, barges, airplanes and train.

Motorcycle equipment and supplies

I brought with me on the Bike, over 100 items including tools, tire repair kit, 12 VDC air pump, spare light bulbs, tape, first aid kit, hygiene kit, clothing and camping equipment for temperatures of 90°F to 32° F, snacks, camera, maps and GPS.

If you're considering a motorcycle trip to Alaska for the first time, I will be pleased to try to answer your questions.

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