

**Editor's note: After years of contemplating a motorhome trip to Alaska, Ron and Judy Menet realized their dream in 2002, driving both Alaska highways. This, the first article detailing their adventure, covers the six months of preparation that went into the trip.**

**A**sk a dozen travelers to name the most popular domestic vacation destination on an American's itinerary, and odds are that at least 10 of them will correctly say Florida. Ask those same 12 people to name Americans' second most-popular travel spot, however, and at least 10 will probably get it wrong. *Alaska.*

Thousands of RVers and others successfully make the trek north every year. Where such a trip was once a daunting excursion for hardy individuals and husky vehicles, today it can be experienced by anyone. You will still see magnificent panoramas, majestic wildlife and miles of virgin wilderness, but most of the highways are paved and travel services are seldom far away.

Even so, it's still a big adventure. Robert Service, the famed Bard of the Yukon, captured the essence of the area in his poem, *The Spell of the Yukon*: "It's the freshness, the freedom, the farness." Certainly the countryside fits that description, but it's the farness that makes this trip so challenging. Alaska is so very far away and it's so big

The Alaska Marine Highway stretches from the northern border of the "Lower 48" to the Aleutian Islands. Driving the Alaska Highway requires traversing two Canadian provinces. Prior to any extended trip, do your homework and learn all you can about both the destination and the region you will be passing through. State tourism agencies and local visitors bureaus are excellent sources of information.



PHOTOS: RON & JUDY MENET

# Alaskabound

Preparing for the ultimate RV adventure

■ RON & JUDY MENET



# Alaskabound

(roughly five times the size of Texas). A road trip to Alaska is no small undertaking; as we learned, extensive planning is the secret to a great journey.

Two major highways link Alaska to Canada and “the Lower 48,” as Alaskans refer to the remainder of the nation: the famous Alaska Highway and the Alaska Marine Highway. We chose to experience both, thereby leaving the “driving” on one long leg of the trip to the competent crews of the remarkable ships of the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS).

Although the Alaska Marine Highway is entirely on the water, it is no less a highway than if it sported lane markers. In 2002, it was added to the National Scenic Byways Program. The AMHS, a fleet of ships operated by the state of Alaska, provides RVers with the only means of visiting the coastal communities of Alaska’s Panhandle region. Even though they are not connected to the rest of the state by roads, each

of these communities offers at least one private RV park plus a number of government-operated campgrounds.

The route taken by the ferries begins either in Bellingham, Washington, or Prince Rupert, British Columbia, then follows the coast north and west. How far you venture is really up to you; the Marine Highway extends for nearly 3,500 miles, all the way to Dutch Harbor near the end of Alaska’s Aleutian Islands. Ferry service divides the route into three distinct sections: southeast Alaska, which parallels the Inside Passage; south-central Alaska, tying together Cordova on the east with Kodiak on the west; and southwest Alaska, which takes visitors all the way to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor.

The only gap in service is between Skagway, the debarking point of the Inside Passage run, and Cordova. Once a month, however, the *M/V Kennicott*, one of the nine AMHS ferries, connects all the dots by mak-

ing a cross-gulf trip from Juneau (a southeast stop) to Valdez and Seward (ports on the south-central route).

Or, you can drive yourself. Both Haines and Skagway, at the northern end of the Inside Passage route, connect with the Alaska Highway, which is why we chose this leg.

We elected to sail north, but many RVers with whom we spoke used the ferries as a relaxing means to go south at the end of their journey. Whichever you prefer, leave yourself some time to make side trips en route; each ferry stops at several ports along the way, providing lots of opportunities to explore on shore.

## Getting Your Sea Legs

**A**dvance reservations are an absolute must if you’re taking your motorhome on the ferries. Walk-ons can always be accommodated, but space on the car deck is limited by the size

# Alaskabound

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of the ship (which, on long hauls, range from the 296-foot-long *M/V Tustumena* to the 418-foot-long *M/V Columbia*). While the largest motorhome on today's road should encounter no problem driving on and off these remarkable vessels, the ships run full, or close to it, all summer; without reservations, you'll be placed on a standby list that might involve a long wait. Make your reservations as far in advance as possible, certainly by the end of the February preceding your trip. Sleeping cabins are always in short supply and are almost never available on a walk-up basis, so reservations for those should be made no later than the preceding December.

Plan your itinerary carefully; changes can be costly and involve being placed on that dreaded standby list again.

The season for Alaska travel runs from May through September. At either end of that spectrum you may experience winter weather. The

best conditions can usually be expected from June through August, but there *are* advantages to traveling outside that time envelope. In September, you'll see more color in the foliage and the crowds will be smaller, making it easier to get around.

The weather along the coast is incredibly rainy throughout the season, so no particular month is better than the next.

If you have only a few weeks, plan a round-trip ferry cruise along the Inside Passage or consider renting a motorhome in Alaska. If you have a month, you should be able to see most of the highlights and countryside.

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## RV Prep & Parks

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If your motorhome is mechanically sound and capable of a cross-country trip, you're ready for an Alaska adventure. Just make sure your on-

board supply of replacement parts includes an extra set of all belts and hoses; repairs can be very expensive in this part of the world.

There are no superhighways on which to travel great distances in a day, which is as it should be. A trip to Alaska is best done at a slow pace, allowing time to enjoy it. Trying to drive the existing highways at high speed will invariably result in mechanical breakage.

Check with your insurance agent to make sure your coverage includes windshield damage; there's a strong possibility that it's going to take a rock. Plastic headlight covers are recommended. Since you also will encounter swarms of bugs, a deflector might help, along with a bra to protect the nose of your rig against rocks from passing vehicles. Motorhomes with front radiators should have some sort of screen to prevent getting clogged. If you're towing a dinghy, provide protection for the front of it.

# Alaskabound

Much of Alaska is still a wilderness, but it isn't the Australian Outback. Fuel stops are usually no more than 50 miles apart, and many of these locations have mechanics on duty (although you still may experience long delays if you need to have a part shipped in). The wise RVer will keep an eye on the fuel gauge and refill whenever the price looks good.

Reservations are strongly recommended if you want to stay in an RV park with hookups. Once you've purchased AMHS tickets and have your itinerary, make your campground reservations for each port in which you plan to stay. Again, the earlier you make them the better.

Many of the inland RV parks on the route are quite expansive (150 or more spaces), but RV groups frequently travel throughout the area and book large numbers of spaces in advance. Plan your inland travels at least a week ahead, especially during June and July, and make reservations as you go.

Once you've made your RV park reservations, consider booking the tours you want to take at each port in which you'll be staying. Commercial tours and side trips tend to have extremely limited seat availability because of the demand placed on them by passengers from the cruise ships (this is even true inland).

## Other Details

If you require medical treatment in Canada, be prepared to pay cash or put the charges on your credit card. U.S. health insurance programs usually will not cover expenses incurred outside our borders.

The Good Sam Club and others

offer inexpensive insurance to help with emergency transportation costs if you become ill. Some of these policies will pay for the return of your RV, should you become incapacitated.

As this was written, we learned that the statute regarding pets was undergoing revision; for now, however, the old regulation is still in

### Recommended Reading

The finest resource we found for planning an Alaska Marine Highway trip is *Inside Passage & Coastal Alaska Adventure Guide*, 4th Edition, by Lynn and Ed Readicker-Henderson. It's found in most bookstores, or through Hunter Publishing Inc., (800) 255-0343, [hunterpublishing.com](http://hunterpublishing.com). The 460-page softcover book includes everything you'll need to begin planning your trip on the ferries.

The most-valuable resource for anyone driving to Alaska is *The Milepost*. The annually updated book contains highway logs and route-planning guides, in addition to mile-by-mile descriptions of the roads and roadside services; (907) 272-6070, [themilepost.com](http://themilepost.com).

# Alaskabound

effect: All pets are required to have a certificate of health issued and signed by a veterinarian within 30 days of your entry into Alaska. Of course, they also must have proof of current vaccination against rabies.

You'll want to be ready for customs and immigration inspections at all border crossings between the Unit-

ed States and Canada. Even if you board the ferry in Washington and don't disembark before arriving in either Haines or Skagway, you're going to have to pass through Canadian border-inspection stations to access the rest of Alaska. Although a passport is best, it's not a requirement; U.S. citizens should carry at minimum a

photo identification card and a certified birth certificate.

If your driver's license is valid in the state of issue, it is valid in all of the provinces of Canada. There is some confusion concerning an endorsement for drivers operating vehicles with air brakes in Canada. If your current driver's license allows you to operate such a vehicle in your home state, you need nothing more in Canada; if your home state requires an air-brake certification, however, you must have it. Every vehicle must carry proof of liability insurance; your insurance agent can provide you with the forms recognized by Canadian authorities.

There are a few other factors to consider when crossing into Canada. Vegetables and fruits can be confiscated, so keep your supplies of these items low. Also, handguns are prohibited, but hunting rifles are allowed.

You also need to know that there are items sold in Alaska that cannot be carried through Canada. Most merchants will tell you if the item you are purchasing is one of these, in which case you'll have to ship it home.

The ultimate RV adventure is a big trip that, to be fully enjoyed, requires adequate planning. Prepare your motorhome, set your itinerary, make your reservations — and get set for the adventure of your lifetime. ■

## For More Info

- Alaska Department of Transportation (ferry reservations/schedules), (800) 642-0066, [dot.state.ak.us/amhs](http://dot.state.ak.us/amhs).
- Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, (907) 269-8400, [dnr.state.ak.us/parks](http://dnr.state.ak.us/parks).
- Alaska Division of Tourism, (888) 921-8771, [travelalaska.com](http://travelalaska.com). *Circle 213 on Reader Service Card.*
- Alaska Marine Highway System, (800) 382-9229, [akmhs.com](http://akmhs.com).
- National Recreation Reservation Center (U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers outdoor recreation facilities), (877) 444-6777, [reserveusa.com](http://reserveusa.com).
- Refer to the 2004 *Trailer Life Directory* for private and public RV campground listings.