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# LIVING LARGE

Two humans, one LR3 and decades of history collide in the heart of Alaska's most expansive national park.

**P**oor, poor Mr. Suzuki Forenza. Forty-five glorious miles into Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park along the fabled McCarthy Road, and this dude in his little Japanese compact had bitten the big one—a flat tire, with no repair shop in sight.

Maybe the poor guy didn't expect an afternoon of teech-chattering bumps and ruts and divots. Maybe he hadn't read those signs that

strongly recommended against taking two-wheel-drive vehicles beyond a certain point. Who knows? Maybe he had a death wish and wanted to break down, become stranded in the wilderness and ultimately get gored by rabid grizzly bears.

When I pulled alongside in my LR3 and offered to help him change the spare, the man dismissed me, insisting he "had things under control." I never saw the guy again.

TEXT BY MATT VILLANO

PHOTO BY Amanda Bauer

Rumor has it that this sucker wasn't the first-ever casualty of the McCarthy Road; for the last decade, friends in Alaska have been telling me horror stories of trips along this 61-mile dirt road that is one of two ways into Wrangell-St. Elias, the largest national park in the U.S.

The best of the stories have revolved around breakdowns, and usually mention sharp rocks or anchoring spikes from an old railroad that pop a tire, snap an axle or leave a vehicle otherwise incapacitated. Other stories have revolved around wildlife—moose and elk and other large mammals that unknowingly act as American Gladiators during impromptu face-offs with automobiles, also incapacitating the vehicles indefinitely.

All of these anecdotes piqued my curiosity. Was the McCarthy Road bad? Was there really that much danger? How could a park the size of six Yellowstone be so remote? And what the heck was out there anyway?

Over the years, I have read enough history books to know that the road was once a route for the Copper River and Northwest Railway, which lugged copper ore out of the most successful mine in the world between 1913 and 1928. Beyond that, however, my knowledge was spotty at best.

And so this summer, my wife, Nikki, and I set out to learn about the road by driving it ourselves. Our goals for the trip were simple: We'd take the road from its start in Chitina to the eccentric and historic mining towns of McCarthy and Kennicott, hop out, and spend a few days exploring the majesty and geology of Wrangell-St. Elias from there. We were ready for everything Alaska could throw our way.

## GETTING STARTED

Our epic journey began in Anchorage, the state capital and Alaska's biggest urban center. The city is home to nearly 280,000 people—a population that represents just about half of the total number living in Alaska today. It also boasts Land Rover of Anchorage, the state's only Land Rover retailer, where General Manager Mike McKean was kind enough to lend us a sand-colored 2006 LR3 for our jaunt into the woods.

From the retailer, we headed northeast along the Glenn Highway toward the Matanuska Valley, Alaska's heartland. This area was settled by families from the Midwest as part of a New Deal relief program in 1935, and today is one of the most fertile areas in the entire state. It is the birthplace of some of Alaska's largest veggies, including a world-record 76-pound cabbage a decade ago.

Neither Nikki nor I wanted greens that large, but we did want to sample some of the region's produce. On a friend's suggestion, we motored past Chugach State Park into Butte, and followed windy back roads in the shadow of 6,394-foot Pioneer Peak to Pynah's Pioneer Peak U-Pick Farm, where we set out to grab some veggies for the road.

A sprightly septuagenarian explained how the farm worked: Take a bag, hit the fields, pick some goodies, pay and go. We gave ourselves 30 minutes. Our bounty: a hulking bag of fresh snap peas that cost a whopping \$2 cents.

On our way back to the highway, we made another side trip, this time to the Williams Reindeer Farm. During a tour of the facility, we learned that

the only difference between regular old caribou and Dasher, Prancer, Comet and Blitzen is that reindeer are domesticated.

Later, we got to feed and pet the animals; to my surprise, their bony ankles were covered in a fur as soft as velvet.

After lunch in Palmer, we continued northeast along the Glenn Highway, which near

Sutton, offered stunning views of the 24-mile-long Matanuska Glacier. This is the glacier that carved the eponymous valley, the glacier that today feeds the mighty Matanuska River. It is also the largest glacier accessible by car in the entire state; we were able to drive the LR3 to a parking lot at the base of the dirt-covered terminal moraine. From this area, the ice stretches 12,000 feet up and over the Chugach Mountains to its origin. Nikki marveled that it was like a white pathway to oblivion.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER RIGHT: Nikki, the author's wife, in a patch of peas at Pynah's; a tractor at rest in the Matanuska Valley, one of the many snap peas ready for picking at Pynah's.



The following day, after taking the Glenn Highway to its northern end and heading south on the Richardson Highway, we arrived in Copper Center, gateway to the Copper River Valley. This area became famous to the rest of the world in the 1990s, when food purveyors in Seattle (and the rest of the U.S.) discovered that salmon from the surrounding watershed were particularly fatty and flavorful and could fetch top dollar at restaurants and markets.

Having tasted these prized salmon, I set out to experience their water for myself, signing up for a rafting trip along the Klutina River with an outfitter called Alaska River Wranglers.

Talk about invigorating! Five minutes after we put in, our guide, Brandon, steered us toward a hole that sent ice-cold river water rushing into my boots. I spent the next 14 miles of Class III rapids clutching the stem rope as the raft lurched, bobbed and kicked.

As we floated downstream, we spotted dozens of bald eagles, patiently scanning the current for breakfast. For these majestic birds, Copper River salmon always are free.



TOP: Niki, the author's wife, feeds forested and other greens to a hungry for elk at the Williams Rounder Farm. BOTTOM: A pedestrian-only bridge spans the Kenai River inside Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. This is the end of famed McCarthy Road, and the only (affordable) way for visitors to get to the town of McCarthy and Kennecott.

## ROAD TRIP

After my ride down the Klutina, I was raring to get moving toward the park. We fueled the vehicle (at \$4.55 per gallon) in Copper Center, and continued along the Richardson Highway toward the Edgerton Highway, where we turned east. This road ended in Chitina, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town that is the unofficial gateway town to Wrangell-St. Elias.

Just outside of town, on the far side of a bridge that spans the Copper River near its confluence with the Chitina River, we passed a big sign that read, "Pavement Ends."

No more than ten yards further, another sign stated simply, "McCarthy Road." From this spot, the road ran west along the Chitina River Valley between the Wrangell and Chugach mountains (see map).

Hand-drawn mileposts ticked off mileage as we sped along. The first 15 miles weren't bad—some washboard stretches here and there, an occasional patch of ruts. If I squinted, I could even make out some of the original railroad ties in the roadbed; state and federal officials removed the rails in the 1960s, but many of the original ties remain.

At Mile 17, we came upon the one-lane Kuskulana Bridge, a 525-foot span over the Kuskulana River. When the bridge was completed in 1910, it was built as a basic wooden trestle—no railings or guardrails of any kind. Park officials have since replaced the car deck with metal, soldered on railings and covered the bed with wooden planks, enabling vehicles to drive (very slowly) across.

The next crossing—remnants of another original wooden trestle—spanned the Galihina River around Mile 29. Because part of this dinosaur had collapsed, the road stretched across a new bridge slightly downriver, providing incredible views of the historic span.

For about 15 miles from this second bridge, the driving was easy: a flat stretch that hugged the shoulder of a huge granite mountain. At times, we cruised up to 45 or 50 miles per hour, kicking up a cloud of dust in our wake. Every time we passed a slow-going compact, Nikki and I looked at each other and smirked.

Eat our dust, we thought.

Around Mile 44, just beyond a third bridge over the Lakina River, we spotted a homemade sign for an ice cream stand and pulled over to take a peek. Here, in the parking lot, we ran into Mr. Suzuki, changing his tire. We also met shop proprietor Lindsay Jensen, who welcomed us inside and offered us goodies for the road.

"By the time people reach this point in the drive, they can usually use a treat," she said, handing us two cones of mocha chip. "People



either come in dying for a break, or they come in with these quizzical looks saying, 'There's an ice cream shop? Here!'"

Conditions worsened considerably after the ice cream stop. Past Long Lake, in a section with water-filled potholes, I hit the puddles too fast and repeatedly splashed the windshield with wet mud. In another section that ran close to the Nizina River, I was forced to raise the vehicle to off-road suspension and engage the Terrain Response mud and ruts special program to ease the climb over a stretch of small muddy boulders.

Finally, beyond Mile 60, we reached a gravel parking lot. The attendant, Jim Drury, explained that unless we wanted to pay \$250 to use a private toll bridge downtown, we had to park the Land Rover and walk across a metal footbridge spanning the Kennicott River to get to the other side.

"There really aren't private cars in McCarthy," he said. "For all intents and purposes, you've reached the end of the road."

## A LIVING MUSEUM

A white van awaited us on the east side of the footbridge—our chariot through the town of McCarthy to the Kennicott, where we planned to spend the bulk of our trip. On this bumpy 25-minute journey, our driver, Kristen, gave us a general history of the area.

We received a more detailed education the moment we climbed out of the van, smack in the middle of a modern-day ghost town.

In the 1920s and '30s, this town was the epicenter of the most productive copper operation in the world. Today, save for some damage from a flood in 2006, the place looks almost exactly the way it did when the last train left in 1938. Nearly 40 original buildings, including the 14-story mill that concentrated raw copper into ore, are still standing.



Ore buckets from overhead tramways that connected the mill to mines in the mountainsides still litter the site.

While many of these buildings are in various states of disrepair, the National Park Service has rehabilitated a few that are now open to the public on a limited basis. It was too late to see any of these buildings by the time we arrived, but the Kennicott Glacier Lodge, a circa-1985 replica of an original lodge, was open and expecting us. This was where Nikki and I spent the next few nights.

We arrived just in time for dinner—a rollicking, family-style feast with eight other guests from places like Italy, Holland, Alabama and Oregon. Afterward, historian Terry Have took a small group of us on a tour of the Kennicott site.

Have's tour was both engaging and comprehensive. Over two hours, Have walked us through every step of the town's history from the summer of 1900, when prospectors found copper in the region, until that last day in 1938. He explained how the Kennicott Copper Company built a railroad specifically to carry copper from these mines to Cordova on the Pacific, likening this project to the "Alaska [oil] pipeline of its day."

Have also outlined the concentrating process, which consists of pulverizing rocks to find the best ore, then using ammonia to leach even more precious metal out of the scraps.

The next day, Nikki and I hired a guide from St. Elias Alpine Guides to help us explore another one of Kennicott's attractions: the seven-mile-long Root Glacier. The glacier feeds the Kennicott River and ends right in front of town. The lodge's quaint covered porch looks out on the terminal moraine.

Our excursion began with a two-mile hike to the glacier's face. From there, we strapped on crampons and followed our guide, Todd, up and onto the glacier itself.

We spent the better part of the day hiking around and marveling at azure pools and moulins that resembled Superman's Fortress of Solitude. Around lunchtime, we broke out sack lunches and drank freshly born water from rivulets rushing straight out of the ice.

That evening, we ventured into McCarthy. Back in the day, this place was a burgeoning metropolis of mayhem, offering booze, drugs and sex for folks from the dry corporate town. Today, however, McCarthy isn't nearly as bustling: The permanent population rarely climbs over 70.

On the outdoor patio of the New Golden Saloon—the only bar in town—Nikki and I kicked back and celebrated our day with two pints of beer from Alaska's Midnight Sun Brewing Company. From this perch, we were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one of McCarthy's makeshift taxis: an ATV. Alaskans certainly are nothing if not resourceful.

## HEADING FOR HOME

We spent the rest of the week exploring the area around Kennicott: One day, we took a grueling Nike to the mouths of the Bonanza mine; another day, we tromped to the mouth of the Jumbo mine.

All of our adventures began with coffee and breakfast on the lodge porch, where we sat while we watched the fog float through the valley. Every day ended with another scrumptious family-style dinner and laughs around the table with our new friends from all over the world.

On our morning of departure, Nikki and I packed our bags reluctantly: We didn't want to go. In this state of mind, the drive out on the McCarthy Road was far less enjoyable than our drive in.

The rough stretch between the parking lot and Mile 48 had gotten worse in four days; there was considerably more rock debris on the road, and rains had made those nasty potholes even bigger and deeper. When we passed the ice cream stand, Mr. Suzuki was gone, meaning he either fixed his tire, or he and his vehicle had been devoured by creatures from the woods.

We made it back to Chitina in less than three hours; almost 45 minutes faster than our trip in. From there, we double-timed it back up the Edgerton to the Richardson and turned south, heading for the oceanfront city of Valdez.

If the name Valdez sounds familiar, it should. On Good Friday in 1989, Exxon Capt. Joseph Hazelwood ran a



ON OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The old mill buildings in Kennicott remain as they were in 1938, though in a state of disrepair; The New Golden Saloon, the only bar in McCarthy; the ammonia leaching plant in Kennicott. Above: Under the watchful eye of guides from St. Elias Alpine Guides, visitors climb down into a moulin on the Root Glacier just outside of the Kennicott Glacier Lodge.

full oil tanker aground outside the city's harbor, spilling 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sea. To this date, the episode is remembered as one of the worst environmental disasters in American history. (Unfortunately, the Supreme Court recently slashed a \$2.5 billion settlement for local fishermen to \$500 million.)

Surprisingly, however, the area has recovered wonderfully; biologists say the local ecosystem is virtually back to normal.

As proof of this comeback, we were greeted in Valdez by two black bears near a creek we passed on the outskirts of town. The creek was literally swollen with silver salmon—hundreds of flapping and flopping bodies, splashing and thrashing around as they tried to swim upstream to spawn. I tried counting the fish; I lost track after 300.

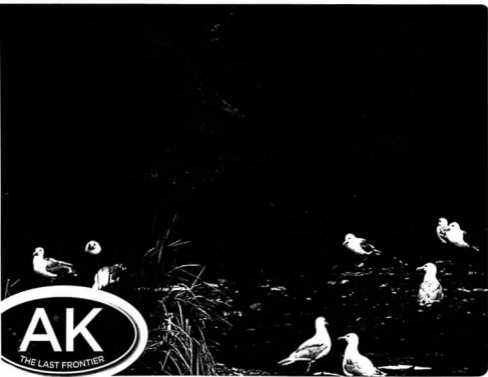
For the bears, the scene was like a buffet at Sizzler, and their strategy was simple: lumber over, swipe fish, devour and repeat. Despite the crowds of other tourists descending on the spot, we watched them chow down for what seemed like hours.

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Nikki, who has an irrational fear of bears, watched most of the action from the safety of the IRS. Between snapping pictures, I'd look back at her and see her peering through the passenger window with a half-smile that revealed a mix of incredulity and sheer terror.

On at least one occasion, when one of the bears waddled halfway out into the creek, my wife rolled up the window and locked the doors.

The next day, as we ferried back toward Anchorage aboard the FV *Chenega*, part of the über-efficient Alaska Marine Highway System, I taunted



Nikki about her behavior out at the creek, and joked that all of those crazy wildlife stories we had heard before the trip had come true.

"They knew not to mess with the Land Rover," she said of the bears. If only Mr. Suzuki had known.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A black bear feasts on the salmon buffet in a creek outside Valdez as seagulls look on and wait for some scraps. Below, in descending order: The front of the Copper River Princess Wilderness Lodge; the outside of the Sheep Mountain Lodge; the back license plate of the author's chariot through the Alaskan Interior, a 2006 LR3.



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## IF YOU GO

For general information about visiting Alaska, contact the Alaska Travel Industry Association at [www.travelalaska.com](http://www.travelalaska.com).

Lodging is plentiful in Alaska, but don't expect any five-star resorts; because the tourist season is generally confined to three or four months of summer, most accommodations across the state focus on function over form. Here are the properties at which we stayed on our trip:

### Historic Anchorage Hotel

330 E St.

Anchorage, AK 99501

907/272-4553 or [historicanchoragehotel.com](http://historicanchoragehotel.com)

### Sheep Mountain Lodge

17701 Glenn Highway

Sutton, AK 99674

907/745-5121 or [sheepmountain.com](http://sheepmountain.com)

### Copper River Princess Wilderness Lodge

(open May through September)

P.O. Box 422

Copper Center, AK 99573

907/822-4000 or

[princesslodges.com/copper\\_river\\_lodge.cfm](http://princesslodges.com/copper_river_lodge.cfm)

### Kennicott Glacier Lodge

(located inside Wrangell-St. Elias National Park)

P.O. Box 103940

Anchorage, AK 99510

907/258-2350 or [kennicottlodge.com](http://kennicottlodge.com)

### Mountain Sky Hotel & Suites

100 Meals Ave.

Valdez, AK 99686

907/835-4445 or [mountainskyhotelsuite.com](http://mountainskyhotelsuite.com)

Also, special thanks go to Mike McKean, General Manager at Land Rover of Anchorage ([landroverofanchorage.com](http://landroverofanchorage.com)), for lending such an intrepid vehicle. McKean can be reached at [mikemckean@kendallauto.com](mailto:mikemckean@kendallauto.com) or 907/279-8506.