

Trip Planning and Preparedness

by Alisa Clickenger, photos by Edward Wilkinson

ALASKA HAS BEEN a popular adventure motorcycle destination because it is stunningly beautiful and is just far enough away to be reached within the typical constraints of an extended vacation. Nevertheless, the terrain is not always easy to negotiate and riding conditions can change on a daily, even hourly, basis. Melting permafrost or rain can make the Alaskan Highway all but impassable at certain times, so you really need to plan your trip carefully. Gas stations can be few and far between, as well, and there is limited cell phone service and even more limited 911 services. The formula we used to plan our trip to Alaska has served us well over the years, and we had an awesome adventure despite several adverse conditions. Here's the gist of our method:

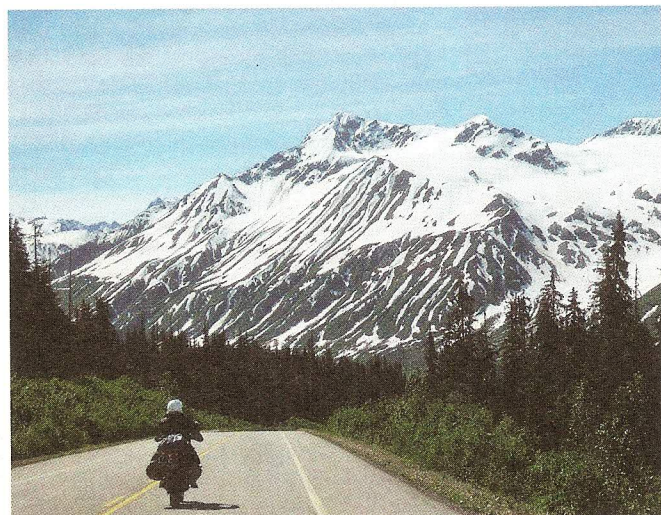


Beautiful desolation: Valdez Creek, off the Denali Highway.

Time for Some Miles

Once you've decided on your destination, it helps to break out the maps and get a view of the bigger picture of where you're going. Whether you're a paper map kind of person or a Google Earth junkie, looking at the lay of the land from several angles will help your overall plan enormously. The first—and most basic—thing you need to do is make a rough calculation of the mileage involved against the amount of time you can allow. Personally I prefer paper maps for this, even if the entire day-to-day plan will eventually get loaded into a GPS.

"Enough time" is a relative thing; if your back is in agony after 200 miles of riding and your planned schedule dictates that you'll have to ride 400+ miles each day in order to be back to work in time, chances are you won't have an enjoyable trip. There's no point in pushing your limits every single day—that gets old, plus, it will eventually become a recipe for disaster. On the other hand, you don't want to end your trip thinking it was unsuccessful because you didn't get enough time in the saddle. On our ride to Alaska, Edward and I were coming from very different places as we pre-negotiated our daily mileages. I'd spent the prior seven months riding solo from New York to Argentina, while he was at home getting daily updates about my adventures. I was weary from traveling while Edward was jonesing for his next big trip. Our compromise for the Alaska trip; no more than 300 miles per day.



Above: Canada's Yukon Territory is vast and quite picturesque.

Research

Here's where the fun begins (or at least it should because planning the trip can be as fun as the trip itself.) You need to know the mundane things (average temperatures, local weather conditions, distance between gas stops, where the campgrounds or hotels are) and mirthful things (where the best hamburgers are served, where the optimal photo opportunities are, what local highlights you want to see). Information is power, and it doesn't add any extra weight to bring it along.

International trips require their very own form of research into things such as insurance, border crossings and their attendant paperwork, international driving licenses, etc. And you can't get to Alaska overland without riding through Canada, so you'll need to know what's required of travelers. Short on time? Shipping your bike and riding one way can be a good option. So can taking a ferry as a shortcut. Perhaps you want to ride up to Alaska on one trip, and take another trip home in the future. This, too, requires some advance planning to know what your best options are for bike storage. You could also fly and rent a motorcycle in Alaska. All are good choices, and only research will tell you which one fits your sensibilities, schedules and your wallet.

When we rode to Alaska we endured, *er*, enjoyed eleven straight days of rain. If you don't have motorcycle gear that's proven waterproof, it's time to start shopping. Perhaps it's time to pick up a second pair of gloves, too, so one can be "drying" while the other is getting wet. Same goes for your motorcycle luggage. If it isn't weather-proof, perhaps it's time to start searching the forums to find out how to make it so. Or, if you are planning a trip to arid climes, perhaps you want to look into mesh gear and dromedary bags to carry extra water. In all cases, know the climate and be prepared for everything, not just what the weatherman says.

Overview-Highlights of the Ride

Many people plan their trips around special interests. For instance, Edward is a fan of anything space and defense related. He starts his research months ahead of time and our trips always include public-accessible air force displays, historical places, submarines and such. A great place to look for the weird and wonderful is RoadsideAmerica.com.

We have friends that are do-it-yourself history travelers. They plan their trip around visiting all the historical places of interest along the way. These places then morph into the reason for their ride, giving it a theme, so to speak. When Edward and I were



Above: Mid-trip tire changes sometimes become a community event.

living in Idaho, we became enchanted with the vast emptiness of the western states, so we decided to plan a trip around that theme, visiting all the places in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming that looked the emptiest on the map. Whatever your theme, it could easily emerge as the icing on the cake of your ride.

Making Tracks

As you start accumulating places and things you'd like to see along the way, one of the very best ways to keep them all organized is to start putting them into GPS software as waypoints. Gas stops, points of interest (POIs), lodgings, restaurants, etc. The ideas for organization are endless, limited only by your imagination and your GPS's maximum number of waypoints. GPS waypoints can be shared, and there are sites where you can download all the dealerships of your given brand, for instance, for free. Our personal favorite is the free list of GPS waypoints for natural hot springs. You can also record the positions of things encountered along the way.

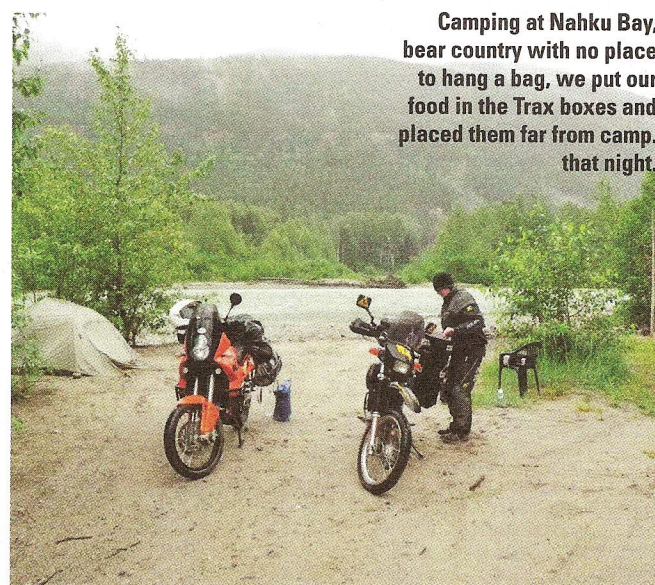
Avoiding Mechanical Meltdown

Don't forget to calculate how far your bike's particular consumables such as tires, chains, and service intervals will get you and make a plan for maintenance along the way. Your motorcycle's stock setup might be fine for your daily commute, but will its gastank get you to the far-flung gas stations you need to reach? There's a solution for everything, and admittedly going ghetto works great, but it's still nice to know beforehand whether you have to hang an extra gas can off the back of your bike on a given day.

I love the KTM 950 Adventure, but sadly it has a reputation for failing fuel pumps. As insurance against a lengthy delay while traveling, we now travel with a spare one underneath the seat. Carry the often-broken or spare-parts-known-for-failure as a backup. If you don't know what they are, get online and do a Google search for your bike. Most models have an enthusiast website or fan forum in which others are more than happy to share their technical expertise with you.

Adaptability Is Essential

Smart phones have certainly changed the landscape of adventure travel, and they can be a great tool for "winging it" (read that as *not* pre-planning). Mobile phones are only as good as your cell service, and it behooves you to know your carrier's coverage area. If you or your loved ones like the security of knowing where you are at all times, consider a device such as



Camping at Nahku Bay, bear country with no place to hang a bag, we put our food in the Trax boxes and placed them far from camp that night.

a SPOT Tracker or a DeLorme inReach Explorer 2-Way Satellite Communicator. Your local motorcycle dealer or electronics store should be able to advise you on which device best suits your needs.

While it's important to know as much about your journey as possible before your trip, you simply cannot be prepared for every single eventuality that may arise. After you've planned and researched and waypointed as best as you can, put all of that in your panniers and go. The journey is every bit as important as the destination. Indeed, that's one of the many reasons why these trips are called "adventures."

And whatever you do, don't forget to pack your sense of humor, and keep in mind that all the crazy things that happen to you along the way are the very things that make for the best stories once you return.

Happy trails! 🍷

GUIDE BOOKS:

- The MILEPOST: Alaska Travel Guide and Trip Planner
- Moon Anchorage, Denali & the Kenai Peninsula (Moon Handbooks)
- Adventure Guide to the Alaska Highway
- Fodor's Alaska

GPS WAYPOINT SHARING

- www.gpsxchange.com

MAPS:

- Mad Maps ■ Butler Map ■ Benchmark Maps
- DeLorme Atlas & Gazetteers

INSURANCE:

- MedJetAssist.com ■ GlobalRescue.com

SATELLITE COMMUNICATIONS:

- SPOT Tracker ■ DeLorme inReach Explorer 2-Way Satellite Communicator

MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURE FORUMS:

- ADVRider.com ■ HorizonsUnlimited.com

SMART PHONE APPS:

- The Alaska App
(Official Mobile Guide to Alaska's Best Places)
- Travel Alaska App
- Scenic Map Alaska (3D topo map)
- Aurora Forecast App