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LIFE/TRAVEL Travel: This Week

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Hit Alaska's highways and see the sights on a Gray Line bus tour

10:33 AM CDT on Tuesday, May 4, 2010

By ANNE Z. COOKE / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

GIRDWOOD, Alaska – Gray Line to the rescue? Not likely.

Even if long-haul bus travel were my style, I wouldn't have thought it possible in Alaska, where highways are few and far between. Yet there we were in Anchorage, at the start of a nine-day bus and train trip planned by Gray Line, Holland America Line's transportation company.

Unlikely, indeed, but fortunate for my friend, Dorothy Hitchcock, and me. A week earlier, I'd been packing my duffel when the phone rang. "Your trip's off, I'm afraid," said the voice of a friend who'd promised the loan of a rental cabin on the Kenai Peninsula. "Something about plumbing problems."

Talk about shock and awe. We'd been dreaming of Alaska for months, had paid for no-refund plane tickets, bought guidebooks, made lists. I'd set aside vacation time, and Dorrie, a family counselor, had rescheduled client appointments. As I contemplated delivering the bad news, I imagined her disappointment.

Whenever people ask about my favorite destination, Alaska makes the A-list. Larger than Texas, California and Montana combined, this unspoiled wilderness is a tonic for city-weary spirits. I'm rarely too busy to drop everything and head north, never too tired to look at another tidewater glacier or rushing stream.

The marvels that Alaskans enjoy daily – salmon swimming upstream, bald eagles perched in the trees, majestic mountain peaks – never grow dull. When a friend offered a rustic cabin, I jumped. That he'd back out at the last minute – and in August, when there isn't a rental car to be had – never crossed my mind.

But Dorrie isn't a quitter. "How about Gray Line?" she asked. "Don't

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Gray Line of Alaska

Alaska doesn't have an extensive highway system, but the view from the road is often stunning.

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they have offices in Anchorage? Can't we get around by bus?"

She was right. Gray Line of Alaska provides bus and train transportation for Holland America's pre- and post-cruise land tours. Over a single summer, it carries tens of thousands of passengers. What I didn't know was that individual, noncruise travelers can also buy rides.

"Absolutely, if Gray Line goes there we'll take you," said Mark Mumm in the Seattle office. "Customizing your tour is what we're all about. You decide where you want to go, and we'll put it together."

"This is pretty last-minute, but I'm sure we can come up with something," said Sandra in Gray Line's reservations department. "You'll be traveling with cruise passengers, but you'll be independent," she said. "This wouldn't work in the Lower 48, but we can do it here because there's only so many places you can go by road."

Our itinerary, ready the next morning, included two days in Anchorage, two in Denali National Park, two in Fairbanks, two in Nome (on the Bering Sea) and a last night in Anchorage. Sandra also added vouchers for some special excursions, the kind of group events I confess I try to avoid. To my surprise, we enjoyed every one, from the rollicking Cabin Nite pioneer dinner and musical revue in Denali to the historic riverboat cruise in Fairbanks.

Whether it was the expansive itinerary or the faultless organization, Gray Line's planning was liberating. We toured museums, gawked at the lush flowers and wheelbarrow-size cabbages grown under the midnight sun, and visited a re-created Athabascan village. The glacier discovery cruise in Prince William Sound was a highlight.

Boarding Holland America's Dome Car in Anchorage, we watched the landscape roll by while waitresses took drink orders and served dinner. The Denali sightseeing flight tour, on a clear, sunny day, was a knockout, with close views of 20,320-foot Mount McKinley's immense glaciers and knife-edge ridges.

"This is the workhorse of Alaska," said pilot Kevin Colson, patting the Cessna 207's fuselage. "The safest plane there is. I've hauled sled dogs and school kids, even had a baby born. But this isn't Disneyland," he noted, pointing out the emergency flares, a shotgun and food for six. Then, slightly sobered, we were up and away.

Later, on the bus trip into the national park, the driver pointed out two wolves, herds of mountain sheep and a grizzly bear wading in a creek.

By the third day we were in the zone: Rafting, hiking and touring until midafternoon, followed by city walks and leisurely dinners. In Fairbanks, a friend took us to Chena Hot Springs, a pioneer-era log lodge and spa with cabins. Driving back, we spotted a half-dozen moose in a bog. In Nome (Gray Line booked the flight), we visited a sled dog kennel and panned for gold. In Seward, we cruised into Resurrection Bay to see whales and otters, spotting puffins along the way.

Was our Gray Line adventure a success? Of course. We met a lot of people and covered a lot of ground. The buses were comfortable, and our names were on every reservations list. Gray Line's hotels were big and a bit impersonal, but they are attractive, squeaky-clean and up-to-date.

We saw Alaska the easy way – by bus.

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in California.

When you go

Getting there

Fly to Anchorage, where most bus trips begin. To add extra days in Anchorage, stay at the Anchorage Hotel (330 E St.; 1-800-544-0988) or at the Anchorage Hilton (500 W. Third Ave.; 1-800-445-8667).

Where to eat

- Glacier Brewhouse, Fifth and H. Steaks, pasta, salmon and salads.
- Downtown Deli, 525 W. Fourth. Man-size breakfasts, home-cooked



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Booking a bus trip

Gray Line operates from May to September, when roads are snow-free, taking independent travelers on all of its regular routes, and booking hotels, meals and excursions as requested. Contact: 1-888-452-1737 or 1-800-544-2206; www.graylinealaska.com.

Rescuing your vacation

It happens. Hotels burn down, ships run aground, and travel plans get canceled. Don't panic, give up vacation weeks or rip up those nonrefundable tickets until you've checked out alternatives.

- Contact the Chamber of Commerce or the Convention and Visitors' Bureau at your planned destination. These and similar agencies maintain lists of hotels and restaurants, as well as information on regional sightseeing, shopping and entertainment.
- Ask a travel agent. These professionals have lists of hotels, resorts, tour outfitters and transportation providers. With a few telephone calls, they usually can come up with things to do and places to stay.
- Check your destination's website. Most states, towns, resorts, hotels and outfitters offer travel information, maps and suggested sightseeing.
- Call your airline. Some sell vacation packages, a service created to help sell air tickets. They reserve blocks of hotel rooms and can provide space on short notice.
- Be flexible about lodging. If hotels and resorts are sold out, local inns, guesthouses and B&Bs are likely to have space.

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