



# MALIBU TO ALASKA

BY ROBERT MILLS

## **BIG SKY FRIENDLY**

Alaska is a vast, exotic land, boasting dimensions beyond normal experience. Endless acres offer pristine charm and unspoiled wonders, largely preserved because the wilderness is completely inaccessible to even the best four-wheel drive vehicle. But this land of breath-taking beauty is readily accessible to general aviation pilots. With over 500 airstrips, and ubiquitous Remote Communications Outlets (RCOS), the Last Frontier is without doubt the most general aviation-friendly place on earth. Amazingly, avgas generally costs less in Alaska than in the lower 48, and is readily available. The 49th state is closer than you might think (only about 3 hours from Washington); is less expensive and more user-friendly than many places in Europe; the population speaks English (mostly); and you do not fly over oceans to get there. As an added bonus, if you arrive during summer, the sun never sets.

### LAND FOR VODKA

William Seward, Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State, astutely grabbed the chance to buy Russia's piece of the American pie from cash-strapped Czar Alexander II. His eminence's desperation caused him to sell low, for what, even then, was a ridiculous giveaway at \$7.2 million, or less than 2 cents per acre. Seward was savagely ridiculed for the purchase, and the transaction was soon labeled as "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Ice Box" by political opponents. But gold discoveries returned the purchase price a dozen times over within a few short years, making this instead, "Seward's Cash Box."

From this humble beginning sprang numerous myths about Alaska, many of which persist today, at least in the lower 48. Before setting off for our aerial adventure, let's set the record straight by exposing the truth about the most common misunderstandings.

### ALASKA IS ALL ICE AND SNOW.

Indeed, ice and snow are plentiful in the high mountains. Flying over the 100-plus-mile Bradley Ice Field in July is definitely like a trip over Antarctica. But the coastal and interior lowlands offer a stark contrast, with plentiful rainfall and long, warm days of summer, lush vegetation, dense forests, and some of the greenest meadows and prodigious riots of wildflowers imaginable.

### THE STATE'S 60,000 BEARS ARE A THREAT.

Wild bears are generally not interested in humans. Unless threatened or provoked, bears will avoid contact. Attacks are extremely rare, and usually involve some provocation or misconduct on part of the victim. Fatal maulings occur on average only once every four years. A person is 10 times more likely to be mauled to death in Alaska by a domestic dog than by a bear.

### ALASKA IS EXPENSIVE.

Prices in Alaska are generally on the par with San Francisco and New York. In other words, yes, Alaska is expensive, but no more so than many states in the lower 48.

### THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

With myths demystified, I set off for Alaska in early July from my home base in Novato, California (KDVO), which sits at the edge of the wine country about 20 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Even after dodging embedded thunderstorms, my '99 Mirage had added only 2.9 hours to the Hobbs before it was on the ground in Port Arthur, Washington. Victoria, the provincial capital of British Columbia was visible across the Straights of San Juan de Fuca. After a quick refuel and activating an international flight plan, we were airborne and "radar identified" in Canadian parlance. Our friends north of the border use slightly different GA terminology, such as "line up and wait" as opposed

## THE LAST FRONTIER IS WITHOUT DOUBT THE MOST GENERAL AVIATION-FRIENDLY PLACE ON EARTH

The author enjoying the natural beauty of Alaska's bountiful wildflowers.



### ALASKA HAS ONLY A FEW SUITABLE AIRPORTS FOR MALIBU-TYPE AIRCRAFT.

As mentioned earlier, Alaska is home to more than 500 airstrips. Many of the dirt/gravel strips are in better condition than some of the paved strips in the lower 48. In addition, ATC caters to general aviation in Alaska. Expect to be treated like royalty.

### ALASKA IS FULL OF BUGS.

No, the Alaska state bird is not the mosquito. In lowland areas, particularly near standing water in the summer, bugs are plentiful and big, but sprays and mosquito netting easily address the problem. Away from these areas, there are few bugs and all insects are gone by late August.

### ALASKA HAS BAD WEATHER ALL THE TIME.

Bad storms in winter and spring are common, yes. Rain is plentiful in August, but less so from May to early July, or from late August through September. The interior is much drier, and the entire North Slope is basically a desert. Even during summer rainstorms, tops are rarely above 11,000 feet. We experienced no serious turbulence anywhere, even flying circles around Mt. McKinley.

to "position and hold." Their regulations are not identical to those of the FAA, but American pilots who take just a few moments to familiarize themselves at the AOPA sites about Canadian air traffic rules should expect no problems. The controllers were courteous and helpful.

### BREAKING THROUGH

The coastal mountains just north of Vancouver hide under almost perpetual stratus cover. The weather is so bad in this area that Mt. Waddington, British Columbia's highest peak, is visible, on average, only about 5 days per year. The mountain is so avalanche prone, inaccessible, and shrouded in dense mist that despite dozens of attempts by large parties, the peak has been attained successfully only twice.

About 90 minutes north of the Canadian border, the clouds gave way to sparkling clear skies. Before us lay the Alexander Archipelago, an ensemble of hundreds of verdantly green, heavily forested, and largely uninhabited islands in Southeast Alaska. Separated by deep blue fjords between towering mountains, these narrow channels often take on a mirror-like surface in the absence of wind. The islands range in size from tiny, with only a few trees, to a

hundred miles across. Some islands sport snow capped mountains, and most are dotted with lakes and lush meadows. Inland are heavily glaciated peaks stretching to a distant horizon, seen through crystal skies with visibilities (at altitude) of 150 miles or more. That sight alone is worth the price of admission.

#### FURRY ALUMINUM

After only a few short hours, with the airport in sight, we were handed off to Ketchikan radio, which advised us that a Beaver was on the runway and an Otter was "in the channel." Having never seen such aircraft in operation, I am embarrassed to confess my first thoughts went to fur rather than aluminum. This was also my first experience with Alaska's "radios." Throughout Alaska, flight service stations are located on-site at all the busier airports. Their personnel function in an all-purpose role as a sort of advisory class Delta tower/ground control/clearance delivery and flight watch.

With RCOS in many bush locations, they also take position reports frequently from pilots on VFR flight plans. With real wilderness beginning at the edge of town, most pilots in Alaska, especially the air taxis and tour-pilots, routinely file VFR flight plans, and update them enroute. Consistent with their unique status in Alaska, the major airports have accommodated the ubiquitous float planes by either creating ponds paralleling at least one runway, as at Fairbanks and Juneau, or designating an area in a waterway adjacent to the field for such aircraft to land and take off. At all major Alaska airports, slow-moving float planes mix it up with commercial jets and land-locked GA aircraft.

Juneau is an improbable place for a state capital. Located on the steep, heavily forested banks of a narrow channel, the town is surrounded by wilderness and utterly inaccessible by land. Only in GA-oriented Alaska would citizens choose a capital accessible only by air or boat. In downtown Juneau, we took the tramway up the sides of Robert's mountain. From there we hiked until near midnight in the meadows of wildflowers and snow drifts high above the cruise ships docked securely in the channel.

#### TOES OF TWO

The following day we were blessed with cloudless skies, and we headed north over some of the world's most awesome and spectacular scenery. Only minutes northwest of Juneau we banked and weaved over Glacier Bay National Park, famous for the immense 30 mile-long rivers of ice pushing huge icebergs into deep fjords. We hooked left around the ornamental curtains of white glaciers draping Mt. Fairweather, an imposing black rock that leaps straight out of the Pacific to 15,300 ft in only 13 nautical miles. Next the giants of the Wrangell-St. Elias and Kluane National Parks came into view. St. Elias at 18,008' and Mt. Logan, the highest peak in Canada at 19,551' are hard to miss. Prodigious glaciers fan out of these mountains and spread disc-like across the costal plain. The so-called toes of two, the Malaspina and Bering Glaciers, are each larger in area than the state of Rhode Island. The scale is hard to grasp.

Emboldened by the smooth air and unlimited visibility, we impulsively angled north into the Yukon for a breath-taking tour over the vast Bradley ice field, which runs 100 miles east and west, and right between Mount St. Elias and Mount Logan. In this vast polar icecap region, where only mountains have the strength to poke through thousands of feet of thick glacier ice, we could be excused for believing we were approaching the North Pole.

**A PERSON IS 10 TIMES MORE  
LIKELY TO BE MAULED TO DEATH  
IN ALASKA BY A DOMESTIC DOG  
THAN BY A BEAR**

#### JUNEAU, GLACIERS AND BLUE ICE

We touched down at Ketchikan, making Alaska the 49th state visited by my Mirage. We then headed up the inside passage to Juneau. Motoring along in a cloudless sky over cobalt-blue waterways, we soon spotted icebergs calved from the LeConte glacier, the southernmost tidewater glacier in the world. Closer to Juneau, we could not resist a quick sightseeing flight over the icecap glaciers in the mountains above Juneau. At this point, Juneau tower directed us to follow the Mendenhall Glacier, a mile wide channel of jumbled blue ice, down out of the mountains and nearly all the way to the airport. This glacier nearly comes into town in Juneau. A hundred-plus years ago, it in fact did. Pictures taken only 50 years earlier show the glacier's snout a mile or so closer to town, and hundreds of feet higher. The vast retreat in the face of a warming climate is truly impressive.

#### HALIBUT

Yet just a few hours later we were eating fresh Halibut in a restaurant overlooking the Nenana River in Fairbanks. After refueling ourselves and the plane, we were northbound again over the flat, lush green, heavily forested Yukon River Valley. This is upstate New York with thicker vegetation and more lakes and meadows. The land eventually began to rise and transition into the green foothills of the Brooks Range. We flew low, right up the grassy, treeless valleys and barren passes. The highest summits were covered with mist and clouds, so we climbed up over a stratus deck. When the clouds cleared about an hour later we were over the brown, flat boggy North Slope tundra. Down below, stretching to the horizon, were a series of large lakes so numerous that one blended into the next. Despite the fact of mid-summer, some of the lakes stubbornly held onto ice along the shores. Soon, just a little further north, the lakes below were entirely encrusted in ice.

## NORTHERNMOST COMMUNITY

At that point we were close to Barrow but still had no visual contact. We looked ahead and saw what we thought was fog where the Arctic Ocean should be. In a few moments we realized that the white was arctic pack ice. Although as late in the season as July 9th, the Arctic Ocean coastline was still ice covered over large areas. The downwind to runway 09 Wiley Post Memorial Airport takes you out over that icy ocean. When you turn base you look back at the tiny coastal village of Barrow. The ice-covered Arctic ocean stretches to the north. To the south is a vast, swampy brownish-green tundra pocked with white, still frozen-over lakes as far as the eye can see.

The northernmost community in the Western Hemisphere, Barrow is an extreme place with an edge-of-the-planet feel. The sun rises in May and does not set again until August. Despite the perpetual daylight, snow flurries had fallen every day in July except the 9th and 10th when we were there, and temperatures ranged from highs in the thirties to a low of 25 F with 20 knot gusts. With wind chill factored in, it was parka-and-gloves cold.

Less than 4000 souls live in isolated Barrow and Browerville, its co-village across a small frozen lagoon. About 65% of the residents are native Inupiat. About half of the natives live a subsistence lifestyle largely outside the cash economy. We witnessed local Inupiat hunting seals amidst the ice flows in native dress. Seal meat is strung up to dry like laundry on lines throughout town.

The pack ice retreats off-shore for a short time in August, allowing a short ice-free period for barges and ships to bring Barrow its yearly re-supply. In late September the narrow channel of open water between the coast and the permanent polar ice-pack quickly refreezes and Barrow is again cut-off from the world except by air. Each year, on November 18th the sun sets and it does not rise again until January 24th.

## THE RITZ 66

Our rooms had "ocean front" views at the Top of the World Hotel in Barrow, where we enjoyed Route 66 motel-type accommodations for suite-at-the-Ritz prices. The local Inupiat Heritage Center provided a sophisticated cultural program, including native dancing and a tour of town in a bus. We chartered a Humvee and ventured out to Point Barrow, the Northernmost point in North America, located at the tip of the 15 mile long black sand spit jutting into the Arctic Ocean. Huge 15 ft. high ice slaps from "pressure ridges" that had washed ashore from the ice-pack littered the foggy, windswept beach. This is an

eerie, forbidding place. Along the route, piles a whale meat are placed to distract the polar bears from coming into town. We were promised a chance to see polar bears, and the previous clients that day had seen three, but we had to content ourselves with footprints in the beach sand.

## BROOKS RANGE CLIMBING

To avoid another night at the Ritz we flew back to Fairbanks late at "night" under a blazing sun. Smoke from forest fires in the Yukon valley teamed up with virga falling from alto cumulous to create strange, fiery red rainbows at 1:13 am.

As a life-long mountain climber and hiker, I had always wanted to climb in the Brooks range. So after a day's rest and some food purchases we pointed the Mirage north again over the Brooks and landed in the tiny, isolated village of Anaktuvuk Pass, the last remaining settlement of the Nunamiut Eskimos, in inland Inupiat whose ancestors dateto 500 B.C. Located at the northern boundary of Gates of the Arctic National Park, the town is 300 miles north of the arctic circle and 100 miles from the nearest road. Yet this desolate hamlet of 248 people, like nearly all such remote villages, maintains a meticulously groomed, lighted, 5000 foot gravel runway with an NDB on the field. Large commercial aircraft regularly use the strip. In town wevisited the Simon Paneak Museum and the headquarters of the national park.

## TRIBAL GATHERING

While wandering about, I met an oil company executive who informed me that a meeting was taking place in the village that day of all of the tribal leaders of the North Slope Borough, the county-like governing body for a Nebraska sized area of the north coast of Alaska. The oil man was in the village to negotiate business transactions at the government-sponsored gathering. After the meetings a native dance was planned at the community center. I finagled an invitation, and we slipped in, the only tourists. We watched in fascination as the locals, a few clad in native dress, sang songs in local dialects and danced a distinctive Eskimo dance, while the men beat caribou skin drums and chanted mysteriously.

## WALKING IN TWO WORLDS

Few Malibus travel to Alaska, so the plane was the object of great curiosity. This little village was no exception. After the dance, when some of the Borough leaders learned that the Malibu parked on the ramp was mine, they asked for a peek inside. During the walk to the ramp, three of the young Eskimo men, all pilots with a variety of



# BARROW IS AN EXTREME PLACE WITH AN EDGE-OF-THE-PLANET FEEL



certifications, explained that they had collectively flown commercially 600,000 miles on business for the native Inupiat corporation during the past 6 months. After totaling the expense of these commercial flights, the community had decided to acquire its own aircraft. After politely examining the Mirage they concluded that their best bet was still a Citation.

The North Slope Borough receives a percentage royalty from the oil flowing through the Alaska pipeline. While that royalty has declined about a third in the past decade, it is still a vast fortune, and is paid annually to the native Inupiat corporation. These young leaders, one a Stanford grad, said that they had recently been in Silicon Valley to



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## HUGE GLACIERS, SPILLING INTO THE BAY IN DRAMATIC WATERFALLS

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purchase software companies on behalf of the native corporation. What was it like, I asked, having been raised in tiny, primitive isolated villages on the North Slope to fly in jets and buy high tech companies? This question touched a cord. Looking me in the eye they spoke passionately and eloquently of the difficulty of what the Inupiat refer to as “walking in two worlds.”

### ANTLERS GALORE

We camped in dwarf elders next to our plane on the ramp. I wore a black nightshade over my eyes to handle the fact that the sun shone all night. The following day my brother, his girlfriend, Cindy, and I struck out across the wildflower-covered, grassy tundra toward the mountain range overlooking the village. There were Caribou antlers scattered everywhere. This is the pass through which one of the huge North Slope Caribou herds migrates each year. We hiked up a creek to steep rock and scrambled to the top for a dazzling view of the northern Brooks Range and, to the north, the North Slope plain.

### COMPANION SWITCH

I returned to Anchorage and switched companions. My brother and girlfriend flew home and my wife and another couple joined me. The four of us then flew from Anchorage across the heavily glaciated Chugot range just east of Anchorage to a 3100' gravel strip next to McCarthy, a village of about 30, at the edge of the new, Wrangall-St. Elias National Park. From there we were picked up by van and taken 4 miles to the Kennicott Glacier Lodge. Kennicott is the largest ghost town in Alaska, consisting of the remnants of the vast Kennicott coppermine complex, an engineering marvel of the early 20th century. The mine closed during the Depression.

The lodge is situated on a forested mountainside looking down at the 25 mile Root glacier, and up at 16,000 foot peaks in the Wrangall Mountains. Sitting on the porch I could see Dall sheep grazing on the mountains through my binoculars. The lodge provided outstanding food in a rustic dining room, where guests were seated together around large tables. This arrangement provides the opportunity to meet and talk with interesting people from around the world. The Wrangall-St. Elias National Park is continuous with the Canadian Klane National Park. The American side of the park is seven times larger than Yellowstone, and contains nine of the 16 highest peaks in North America. The entire park is utter wilderness, without even a single improved campground. In my opinion, it is the most spectacular place in Alaska.

From there we did a sightseeing flight over the park and down to the coast, where we flew low over Icy Bay, a tidewater bay even more spectacular than Glacier Bay National Park. From the Mirage we watched small avalanches cascading from the hanging glaciers, and small rivers of water pouring out from underneath huge glaciers, spilling into the bay in dramatic waterfalls. We landed in Yakayat, a coastal fishing village, which boasts a 7000' paved runway. After sampling the ubiquitous fresh halibut, the local taxi driver took us to the nearby landfill where we were treated to the sad spectacle of 5 large brown bears eating garbage.

### GOURMET PERFECTION

I had no problems taking off or landing at McCarthy's tiny dirt strip with four adults and luggage. Leaving McCarthy, we flew to Talkeetna, a charming, quirky and delightful little town on the road between Anchorage and Denali National Park. Coming in we ran into unforecasted weather, but encountered no ice at 0 degrees C in dense clouds at 10,000 ft, and no turbulence descending through high mountains. We broke out at about 1700 AGL in moderate rain at Talkeetna. The ramp is only two short blocks from downtown, and we had lunch at Michelle's, a restaurant owned by, Michelle, of course, a transplanted, and very New York New Yorker, with a passion for gourmet perfection.

### WHITE FANGS

The next morning we climbed through stratus to about 13,000 ft to breakout in clear sky. Ahead at 12 o'clock was the breathtaking site of the twin summits of Mt. McKinley. At 20,300 feet, this is the biggest mountain on the planet. It's not the highest above sea level, that's Everest, but McKinley has the largest relief from base to top. The Himalayan Mountains rise from the 14,000 feet Tibetan plain. The actual base of the mass if of the world's highest mountain is about 17,000 feet, so at 29,009 feet, Mt. Everest itself is only about 12,000 feet top to bottom. McKinley is 50% bigger, rising from a 1400 feet plain to 20,300 feet, for a 19,000 feet vertical spread from base to summit.

I climbed the Mirage to just a tad under class A airspace at 17,800 feet, and circled the white giant as close as I dared, given the wind driven snow streaming from the summits. Pictures can barely capture the immensity of this gleaming white fang of shear ice and snow rising from green lowlands to almost a half mile above me in the clear blue sky, even when I am at the edge of the flight levels. On the lee side I warned my passengers to brace as we hit the jarring chop from the mountain's slipstream. As expected, the bumps stopped instantly the moment we cleared the downwind side, and completed our circumnavigation.

I landed inside Denali National Park at the 2700 feet gravel Mt. McKinley airstrip, only a short walk from the visitor's center at the main entrance. We jumped on one of the tour buses (private vehicles are not allowed in the park) and toured the park, the largest open air zoo outside of Africa. The huge park is filled with wildlife. We saw sheep, goats, caribou, and moose before being picked up by the McKinley Glacier View Lodge, which took us up to the hotel up overlooking the park entrance.

### PLAYFUL CALVES

The next day we dropped our friends at their connecting flight at Anchorage International, and my wife and I headed down the Kanai peninsula to Homer. I flew low and slow over the forests so that I could point out moose to my wife as they munched away. On final, we spotted a moose standing near the approach end of runway 26. Homer is a halibut fishing Mecca, a strange little town full of art galleries and friendly people. Homer, the warmest town in Alaska, is located on the very tip end of the Kanai peninsula, with a killer view of water, glaciers and mountains. A sand spit juts about 5 miles into Kachemak Bay, home to a clutter of fishing charters, art galleries, fisherman's motor homes, tourist traps and restaurants offering, yes, fresh halibut.

My wife is a hiker, so we chartered a water taxi to take us across the bay to hike in Kachemak State Park. We climbed up through dense rain forest across opulent meadows to an iceberg-filled fresh water lake at the snout of a glacier. There we took pictures of a mother moose frolicking with her two calves. We watched as they swam in the lake, nibbled on the tree leaves, and the little ones chased each other and splashed about along the lakeshore.

Before leaving Homer in light rain, I stopped at an Internet café, as I had many times on this trip, to use Alaska's cool weather cams. The FAA now has 24 weather cams operating in Alaska in key mountain passes and airports. With real-time current weather, picture really is worth a thousand words. If this system proves popular, and it is, the FAA says it may implement a similar system in the lower 48.

### GRIZZLIES

Departing Homer we headed to Haines, in SE Alaska, climbing up through dense stratus to break out, as we so often did, in blinding sunshine at 11,000 feet. Haines is a picturesque community located on a narrow forested peninsula between two deep blue fjords. One night for dinner we flew up the fjord to the famous gold-rush village of Skagway. Returning after midnight VFR under a heavy overcast, we flew low over a cruise ship in the gloomy, near dark, and the ship's brilliant lights reflected its sleek white body against the black mirror-like water. The following day, near a lake north of town, we saw two baby grizzlies. The locals told us that their mother and another sibling had died, and that they were now abandoned to fend for themselves. The cubs looked hungry and lonely.

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## ACROSS THE WILDFLOWER-COVERED, GRASSY TUNDRA TOWARD THE MOUNTAIN RANGE ... THERE WERE CARIBOU ANTLERS SCATTERED EVERYWHERE



## PARIS OF THE PACIFIC

We returned to Juneau to stay at Person's Pond, a most delightful bed and breakfast. Actress Olympia Dukakis had stayed there the previous night. We hiked up to the Mendenhall glacier and explored about. We left Juneau under low ceilings and flew VFR around Admiralty Island, which has the densest concentration of brown bears in the world, and alongside the edges of various islands to Sitka, the former capital of Russian America. Only 160 years ago, Sitka was called the Paris of the Pacific. When San Francisco was a muddy collection of adobe huts, Sitka had theatre, libraries, a local symphony, and its citizens boasted of their fine wine collections. Sitka's iron works made bells for California churches and launched the first steamship on the west coast. When the Russians left, everything was uprooted and hauled away. Today, the National Park Service has restored the Russian barracks and government buildings. You can tour the Russian Orthodox church in downtown. Sitka has a forested park along the waterfront with the best collection of totems in Alaska. The park holds a monument marking the spot where local Tlingit natives rebelled against Russian cruelty, slaughtering every single Russian in Sitka in 1804. Given Russia's treatment of the natives (they enslaved and virtually wiped out the nearby Aleutian culture), it is not surprising that the historical legacy and impact of Russian influence in Alaskan culture and population was minimal.

## SCUD RUNNING

The mountains on the islands of SE Alaska are usually cloud obscured. An IFR plan would require me to go high enough so that ice would be a factor. So, leaving Sitka I again followed the local custom and flew low on a VFR flight plan under a rainy overcast. I followed the water's edge around the islands and up the narrow fjords to Petersburg, a muscular fishing village where even the women walk the muddy streets wearing huge rubber hip boots. By switching to the RCO frequencies, I could stay in constant voice contact with Sitka radio and advise them incrementally of my progress. I was amazed how exciting and fun this type of flying is.

We flew the same way to Wrangel, another picturesque, unspoiled village surrounded by vast wilderness. On the beach at Wrangel are petroglyphs, paintings carved into the beach rocks. Given the hardness of the rocks and the erosion of the drawings, archeologists are able to date these art works to a lost civilization which far pre-dated the Tlingit natives who greeted the first white settlers. Virtually nothing is known of these pre-ancestors, people who may have been part of the earliest human visitors to the Western Hemisphere, who first crossed the Bering Sea land bridge from Asia over 12,000 years ago.

## FLOAT PLANES

In Wrangel, we chartered a float plane for an 18 minute ride to Anan, basically just a salmon creek on a desolate island. Next to a beautiful lagoon with otters and seals splashing about lily pads, under the

watchful eye of abundant bald eagles, lies a large creek choked with millions of two-foot-long salmon surging up the tiny river to spawn. A small rapids impedes their travel, and at that choke point dozens of bears, both black and brown, come down to fish. A small trail leads through the rain forest to an observation platform overlooking the rapids. The observation deck is covered with camouflage except for windows for cameras. We watched in fascination as, within minutes of our arrival, a dozen black bears came out of the forest one by one to snatch a huge silvery salmon from the creek and walk off with the fish flapping in their mouths. Bald eagles waited their turn and went hungrily at the bear's sushi leftovers.

To leave, I climbed up the stairs to the trail while, unbeknownst to me, a black bear was doing the same thing on the other side of the small barrier. Neither one of us saw the other coming. At the top we nearly walked right into each other. We both jumped back startled. The bear stared at me for a moment with a quizzical look on its face, snorted, and then walked off. On the way back to the lagoon, we encountered a huge grizzly teaching her two cubs to fish in the river. I started taking pictures. My wife gestured to me to leave. The mother bear noticed this and turned to look at me, as my camera clicked away. She assessed whether I was danger to her cubs and then lead them away up the creek. Rangers said that in over 27 years at Anan, despite the very close proximity of people and bears, there has never been an attack of any nature upon the many people photographing the bears. Visitors must often wait to leave, however, because large grizzlies often block the exit by sitting stubbornly in the middle of the narrow trail to eat. Two legged shutterbugs are understandably reluctant to press their easement rights with the 1000 pound adult bears.

## BACK HOME

Only 3 hours from Wrangel we began the approach into Vancouver International. Ironically, here is where I encountered my only pucker moment on the trip. We arrived at night in pouring rain, with high winds and low visibilities, all topped off with some nice turbulence. Because of airport construction, only one runway was open at YVCR. My airbrakes failed while I was being slam-dunked into the crowded ILS conga-line with jet heavies from Asia. "Malibu N962WF keep your speed up" was the constant refrain all the way to the marker. Once on the ground in heavy rain, I could not find my way along the poorly lit taxiways. After more tense moments, and a mile or so of taxing in torrential rain to the far opposite end of the sprawling airport, I was finally at the FBO, and ready for a stiff drink to cap off the night. ■

**EMBOLDENED  
BY THE  
SMOOTH AIR  
AND UNLIMITED  
VISIBILITY**

