

# Alaska – The Last Frontier

On the 21st May 1990 I'm standing at Luxembourg airport with my brother and my father and I'm impatient. None of us talk a lot and one hour later I am on the plane to Amsterdam. At exactly 1.15pm KLM's Boeing 747 takes off. The long road to the start of the journey has come to an end. According to the captain's announcement the temperature in Anchorage, Alaska, the place where my journey will begin, is around 12 to 13 degrees Celsius.

At the airport in Anchorage I pick up my luggage and take my bike out of the box. A Dutch pilot lends me a hand and asks me what I want with that. 'From here to Mexico? I'm getting jealous!' He wishes me luck.

At the border, the officer looks me up and down and asks for my return ticket, which I've decided to buy when it's time to go home. Usually it's not possible to enter the country without a return ticket and I'm asked a lot of questions. Why Alaska? Why by bike? Have you got any family or friends here? Where do you work? How much money have you got on you? How much is there in your account in Europe? And so on and so forth. A round sign with the phrase 'We Are Proud Of Our Service'

hangs on the wall. After an hour of calculations, telephone calls and considerations I am given permission to leave the Immigration Office. Feeling relieved, I leave the office, get on my bike and ask for directions. The temperature is six degrees Celsius. I cycle the five kilometres to the centre of Anchorage, a city with 230,000<sup>1</sup> inhabitants.

The youth hostel is closed. The sky is grey and the wind is ice cold.

I am standing alone on the pavement with my bike, which is packed with my stuff. I ask myself whether I should really travel from here to Mexico. I am overcome with fear, fear of what lies ahead or maybe even the fear of never seeing my friends and family again.

My thoughts are racing, and for a moment I am considering taking the next flight home.

The youth hostel opens at 5pm. I don't talk much, I just want to be left in peace and go to sleep.

## 22<sup>ND</sup> MAY

It is still light at midnight and this morning at 6am, it's already daylight. There is not a single cloud in the sky. I take out my map of Alaska and stare at it for an hour. It is a 688-kilometre journey to the border with Canada.

In order to take my mind off things I take a walk through the city. I visit the *James Cook Monument* on Third Avenue and on the information panel I read, among other things, that he explored the coast of Alaska in 1778 and dropped his anchor in front of what was to become the city of Anchorage.

More than 130 years later, the construction site of the railway line slowly turned into a proper city. After the severe drought of 1934, farmers from the southern Prairie states moved to the Matanuska valley close by. This part of Alaska is now the agricultural centre and supply area for the 49th US state. After the discovery of oil in the region and the construction of the Trans-Alaska-Pipeline, Anchorage became the economic centre of the entire state. Traces of the severe earthquake of 1964 can still be seen nowadays. Little, old houses stand next to modern skyscrapers. Another stark contrast originates in the uprooted

culture of the region, which is particularly noticeable in the city centre. Alcoholism is a problem that mainly affects the first inhabitants of this continent.

On the way back, I notice that everyone I meet on the way says 'Hi!' It is something I'm not used to at all. I am also the only person wearing winter clothes and the only guy without tattoos on his arms or hands. It's sunny and the temperature is around eight degrees Celsius. People are walking around in shorts and t-shirts.

At the youth hostel I'm asked whether I'm looking for a job. A trapper in the north of Alaska is looking for someone to look after his huskies for a couple of months. It's not the last time people ask me if I need a job, without a permit of course. It seems like the money is good here and that it's easy to find work.

I get my bike<sup>2</sup> ready in the evening, as I want to get going the following morning. I went to the supermarket today to buy some food and my bags are so full that I'm even considering getting rid of the small bottle of champagne, which every passenger received on the plane. I ask around and a guy called Charly takes the bottle and shakes my hand. 'Where are you from?' Luxembourg. 'Oh!' he says, 'I was sure you were from Minnesota!' Well, now I know what people from Minnesota look like.

## **23<sup>RD</sup> MAY**

Two bags with clothes, a first-aid-kit, a water filter, a sleeping bag, a tent and a spare tire are attached to the bike rack. Two more bags with cooking utensils and food are at the front of the bike. The camera bag<sup>3</sup> containing road maps and my documents is hanging from the handlebar.

It's five degrees Celsius this morning. After a few kilometres, I am used to the heavy bike. Suddenly, I'm standing in front of a road sign saying 'Pedestrians And Bicycles Prohibited'. A six-lane highway stretches ahead of me. My road map indicates only this road towards Glennallen and so I cycle on. A police car drives past without taking any notice. The highway ends twenty kilometres further on. The few cars driving



*Granite Creek, on Glenn Highway, near Palmer*

in the opposite direction honk and wave. Among them is a dark blue VW beetle with an Argentinian number plate. While overtaking me, the driver gives me the thumbs up. In the rear window of the car it says 'Argentina-Alaska' in big white letters.

I cycle through Palmer, through the Matanuska Valley, past pastures, fields and what look like European fir trees. Only the very top of the mountains is covered in snow. In the south-east of Alaska, the mountains are up to 6,000 metres high it says on my map.

In the evening, after cycling about 110 kilometres<sup>4</sup>, I set up my one-man tent between a few trees. Camping is free here; no shower, no toilet, and not a soul around. I read that there are lots of wolves and grizzly bears here. I listen to the unfamiliar noises around me for a while. Hopefully I'll stay safe till tomorrow morning. 'Take it easy!' I've heard it several times this morning and tell it to myself a few more times this