

Checklist ALASKA: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7...GO!

Checklists are familiar territory for pilots. Here's one for flying your plane to Alaska based on our 2023 trip.

1 Nature's Monument

- 1) Denali is quite literally the pinnacle of the Alaskan experience. The 20,310 ft peak ascends over 3½ miles from the 2000 ft base elevation. The corollary to this is that since it stands alone, the weather surrounding it can be, and frequently is, completely different than on the mountain itself. Good flying days at Denali itself are rare, as only 30% of Park visitors actually succeed in viewing the summit. To fly it safely, advance preparation is vital – you need to know and follow routes, frequencies and procedures.

2 Thoughts on Travelling with Others

- 1) Alaska's unforgiving, remote terrain and fickle weather are powerful incentives to travel with other aircraft. Redundancy to improve safety is a concept all pilots are well acquainted with. However...
- 2) Compatibility is vital. Before heading north, make sure you have similar attitudes regarding risk. Do your goals, objectives, and destinations for the trip mesh well? When (not if) difficult decisions are forced by weather and/or terrain that is not the time to discover that go/no go standards are divergent. If you get weathered in for 3 days somewhere, will you still get along?

3 Unique Alaska flying experiences

- 1) To fly over a glacier defines sensory overload. The depth of the crevasses, the unbelievable blue of the pools, the movement illustrated by the till lines, and the resulting icebergs, rivers, and lakes below illustrate how big nature is and how small we are.
- 2) Off airport operations. Beach, gravel bar, and glacier landings are not for everyone, but they are something you will remember the rest of your life. Acquiring the right equipment, skills, experience, and instruction will go a long way to ensuring pleasant memories. Prudence would suggest initiation to these types of operations is done with a local instructor.
- 3) Wildlife encounters; Alaska's wildlife is legendary. The bears, moose, wolves, eagles, and fish are both plentiful and enormous. Bucket list hunting, fishing, photography, or just watching are all available. Of course, common sense is required.

4 Route options escalating in dramatic and spectacular scenery from east to west that must be balanced against increasing risks approaching the coast.

1. **Alaska Highway:** Easiest option especially if weather further west is unsuitable. It is the lowest, flattest, and has the most emergency options. Scenery not particularly interesting until Watson Lake, but you will see lots of mountains in Alaska, right?
2. **(Rocky Mountain) Trench:** Relatively easy geography and straight line travel to Watson Lake with mountain views throughout. However, getting to the Trench requires traversing at least 1 mountain range and there are relatively long distances between landing options along the route. A little bit of trivia...the Trench is such a dramatic geographical feature that it can be seen from space!
3. **Cassiar Highway:** Spectacular scenery and it follows a highway so there are places to land if required. It provides access to Alaska's southwest coast to see and experience the iconic geography of the Tongass National Forest and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. Good weather

required for successful transit as pass elevation is 4000 ft.

4. **Coast:** High Risk – High Reward. Absolutely stunning views but the absence of emergency landing options for wheeled aircraft makes it a risky option, especially considering the high likelihood of poor weather.

5 Places to See and Experience *(yes, I know some of these are in the Yukon)*

1. Airplane Camping at Tongass National Forest and Wrangell-St Elias National Park fly-in cabins is the ultimate back country flying experience. There is no better way to experience Alaska than to utilize these basic, rustic cabins with your plane just outside the door.
2. Visiting Kennecott Mine will give you an appreciation for the astounding infrastructure construction the accomplished by the pioneers.
3. McCarthy is much more than a fuel stop. The rustic ambience of the town extends to the vehicles on the streets, restaurants, and an old rooming house hotel
4. Watson Lake Signpost Forest is a reminder of the other adventurers from all over the globe captivated by the idea of going to Alaska. Spend some time looking for a sign from your hometown, or better yet, bring one along to add to the collection.
5. Get immersed in the frontier atmosphere of Dawson City. Once in a lifetime experiences like the Sour Toe Cocktail, Gold Tooth Gerty's, gold panning, and marvelling at Dredge #4 will occupy your time. Take a walk on the boardwalk and stroll beside the historic buildings that famous authors like Pierre Burton, Robert Service, and Jack London frequented.

6 Things to Pack. *Weight and space limitations for small aircraft are real. What should you pack? I'll skip over emergency gear, as there is plenty of information elsewhere, except to suggest the use of a survival vest when airborne to guarantee access to essential items.*

- 1) Power & Charging: When phones are cold and reception is marginal, batteries run down quickly. A power bank can fill in until recharging is available. A significant step up is a booster pack, which can boost your airplane battery, charge your devices, and provide lighting – all in a compact package weighing about a pound. Another off-grid option is a solar charger (in sunny weather). Finally, when you do have access to electricity, a power bar will allow you to charge multiple items simultaneously.
- 2) Data overlays for your navigational device showing VFR Routes, unregistered airstrips, and frequencies for busy areas like Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Denali. This will increase safety and reduce stress exponentially. Get them!
- 3) Something to occupy your time if you are weathered in somewhere. Reading material, a game, a deck of cards...
- 4) Satellite communication device. Other than the obvious safety considerations, it's nice to be able to communicate with your family back home when phone service is unavailable. Some brands have short term subscription plans available suitable for an Alaska trip. If travelling with others, have different brands in different aircraft to diversify options.
- 5) Water Purifier. Carrying less water saves a lot of weight, and in a survival situation, clean water resupply is vital
- 6) Border Information. Don't forget your Passport, eAPHIS login password, aircraft and pilot (medical) documentation, firearms paperwork, or time zone information. Having your 'ducks in a row' will make the crossing much quicker and easier.

7 Websites

- 1) ***Fly To Alaska*** Ted Waltman's resource is in a league of it's own. By far the best one I found, it was my primary planning resource. Detailed and comprehensive information on routes, things

- to see, website links. <https://fly2ak.com>
- 2) ***Tundra Pilot*** Navigational device overlays showing routes & unregistered airstrips. Get them. <https://tundrapilot.com>
 - 3) ***Public Use Cabins - Wrangell - St Elias National Park & Preserve*** National Park website listing cabin information including airstrips and surrounding area. A must do experience. <https://www.nps.gov/wrst/planyourvisit/public-use-cabins.htm>
 - 4) ***Tongass National Forest - Camping & Cabins:Cabin Rentals*** Forest Service cabin and airstrip information. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/activity/tongass/recreation/camping-cabins/?recid=78613&actid=101>
 - 5) ***Pilot Information – Denali National Park & Preserve*** Words fail to describe the view and the experience. Do it safely! <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/pilotinformation.htm>
 - 6) ***Crossing the United States/Canada Border by Private Aircraft*** Unfortunately, crossing the border is intimidating enough to many people that it prevents them from even considering the idea of flying their airplane to Alaska. Believe it or not, it usually is a no-hassle experience that can be completed in a few minutes. <https://www.aopa.org/travel/international-travel/canada>
 - 7) ***YouTube video of our 2023 trip*** Documents our route, our experiences, and what we saw. https://youtu.be/3C_ii1ZR5j4?si=1lvVQ10fHWB3JyJU

Checklist complete. Cleared direct to Alaska!