

What I Did on my Summer Vacation

LuAnn and I just returned from a two-week trip to Alaska. I can't bore you in person with our photos, but I'll bet I can do it with just the descriptions...

□ Here's a snapshot of Holly, a 23-year-old Fairbanks resident and our chatty seatmate on the 5-hour plane ride from Minneapolis. One of her alarming comments was that there are no Dairy Queens in Fairbanks! I assumed it was a little primitive in Alaska, but what kind of third-world city has no Dairy Queens?

□ In this gift shop in Seward, a tall young Lithuanian girl named Ruta was helping LuAnn select a native silver bracelet. As we left, I asked LuAnn if she had noticed Ruta's cat's paw tattoo, because LuAnn had been considering having a tasteful one done some day. When LuAnn said that she hadn't noticed it, I remarked, "That's because you weren't looking down her blouse."

□ Both LuAnn and I had a few tanning sessions before we left Iowa City so we wouldn't get fried being outdoors day after day. After the first few days of cloudy weather, we passed this business sign (as you can see) that says, "Tundra Tanning and Taxidermy." We ultimately decided that this business would probably not be the best place to supplement our tans.

□ Here's a photo of the very realistic animal diorama at the Denali National Park Visitor's Center. A lady who was complaining about the lack of visible wildlife on the previous day's park bus tour was photographing each stuffed animal close up. "I'll just tell my friends I took these on the tour," she said. "They'll never know the difference."

□ In this photo you can see all four blocks of downtown Talkeetna, which served as the set for the first four episodes of the TV series "Northern Exposure." Evidently its other claim to fame is its annual charity bachelor auction, which is a little weird because women outnumber men 2 to 1 and the men aren't famous for having full sets of teeth. The auction's motto: "Your odds are good, and your goods are odd."

□ The U of I Alumni Association likes to have members of its Voyagers tours take a small stuffed Herky along and send them photos of him in exotic locations. After visiting the El Dorado mine, I posted this picture of Herky on Facebook - he's holding a pan of what looks like dirt and gravel, and my unimaginative caption was "Herky pans for gold." One of my Facebook friends suggested an alternate caption, "Herky, after eating a bad taco."

□ After a few days we ran out of conventional photo ops for Herky and we became creative. We have a series of Herky disaster photos, including Herky being eaten by bear, eagle and wolf statues, getting his tail caught in an antique wringer and this one (my favorite) of Herky being crushed underneath the dual wheels of our motor coach.

□ This restored house in Skagway used to have a bakery on the main floor and a brothel upstairs. Thus, this historical sign, "Hot Buns 24/7."

□ On the cruise portion of our trip, our first day aboard the Island Princess featured a required muster drill, where we simulate abandoning ship should it become necessary. Here's a group photo of about 50 of us standing around wearing orange life vests. I couldn't resist saying nervously, "Does anyone else hear a string quartet playing?"

□ During a conversation with Joe, the Princess tour guide pictured here, we asked what the dumbest question was that a tourist had ever asked him. He thought for a moment and then said that a passenger recently wanted to know what the elevation of the cruise ship was.

□ This earnest young man is Walter, our cabin steward from Mexico. His relationship with the English language is somewhat casual. No matter what we ask Walter, even if we go into great detail, he smiles and nods and when we come back to our cabin later, we have extra towels (again).

□ After disembarking in Vancouver, LuAnn is trying to talk this Canadian customs officer out of performing a body-cavity search after a chemical swipe of her carry-on luggage came up positive. It turned out to be caused by the pepper-garlic salmon spread we were bringing home as gifts.

□ This last image is a screen shot of my computer's Outlook Inbox on my first day back at work after being gone for two weeks - note the 347 unread e-mails. Even so, it's great to be back!