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PURPLE MAJESTY

McKinley: Seeing is believing

North America's tallest mountain a breathtaking sight

By Mark Thiessen The Associated Press

TALKEETNA, Alaska — Bob and Sally Corey of Dawsonville, Ga., made sure they were going to see North America's tallest mountain.

That's more of a challenge than you might think.

Mount McKinley is often covered in clouds, and probably only one out of three visitors to interior Alaska gets to see the entire mountain.

So the Coreys planned for their excursion off a cruise ship, doublebooking flightseeing tours on different days in late June, giving them multiple chances to see the 20,320-foot mountain.

Indeed, it was rainy when they first visited Talkeetna, a quirky community about 100 miles south of Denali National Park and Preserve.

Talkeetna offers some of the best viewing of the entire mountain and other Alaska Range peaks — on clear days. Numerous flightseeing tours are based here, offering bird's-eye views of Mount McKinley. On cloudy days, that is the best and only option of seeing the mountain for some visitors.

The Coreys took the flight their first day in Talkeetna, and the pilot was able to clear the cloud cover, allowing them jawdropping gapes at the top of the elusive mountain.

"It was amazing. I said, 'Don't get any closer.' He said, 'We're 10 miles away,'" Sally Corey chuckled during a telephone interview after they had returned to their home north of Atlanta.

"It was like you could almost touch it," Corey said. "It was massive."

Many visitors wind up playing hide-and-seek with Mount McKinley in the heart of Denali National Park, nearly 200 miles north of Anchorage.

The mountain is elusive to visitors partly because of the location of the Alaska Range, park spokeswoman Kris Fister said.

"The range itself bisects the state, and it is the meeting point for those colder, drier systems coming down from the north, and the warmer, moister ones gathering the precipitation from the open ocean coming in from the south," she said.

As the systems collide they often produce lots of clouds, obscuring the mountain. However, visitors should see some part of Mount McKinley as cloud cover changes.

Fister estimated that 45 percent of it is visible during most days, but the figure of one-out-of-three visitors seeing the mountain is skewed to those who see the entire mountain for a prolonged period.

The mountain's top can be seen from Anchorage or Fairbanks on clear days. For those driving to the park, there are plenty of opportunities to see Mount McKinley at popular pullouts along the Parks Highway — the main road that connects Alaska's two largest cities.

There also are incredible sightseeing opportunities from the south and north viewing areas on the Parks Highway in Denali State Park, which abuts the national park.

The mountain can't be seen from the national park headquarters, however.

But there is a road that travels 92 miles into the park. Visitors are allowed to drive their vehicles only the first 15 miles, and the mountain is visible at times only after mile 10. To go farther inside the park than 15 miles, people must get on a bus.

Don't feed the moose

But even as majestic as Mount McKinley is, Fister said that perhaps isn't the biggest priority for park visitors. "They'd like to see a grizzly bear," she said.

She said the bus rides offer not only more chances to see the mountain, but also give riders the best opportunity to see the park's incredible menagerie of wildlife.

"To have the opportunity to see these species of wildlife — moose, caribou, bear, wolf — in their natural habitat, to me is unequivocal. There is nothing to compare with it," Fister said.

"And then, if you get to see this huge mountain, that is the highest peak in North America, that sort of just totally tops it off," she said.

But if seeing Mount McKinley is your goal, you can't beat the views from Talkeetna, about 14 miles off the Parks Highway.

One of the best pullouts to see Mount McKinley is just before driving into the eclectic town, which has 800 residents. Another prime spot is the nearby Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge, where stunning views of the sweeping Alaska Range can be seen on clear days from inside the lodge — behind large windows in the lounge area warmed by a large stone fireplace — and a viewing deck outside.

Mount McKinley is the No. 1 reason tourists visit Talkeetna, said Kris Dupey, who works at the local visitor center.

"If they can't see it, they're pretty upset," said Dupey, who attempts to get tourists hooked up with local flightseeing companies to get above the clouds.

If that isn't possible, she tries to find other things for them to do: river rafting or jet boat tours (Talkeetna is at the confluence of the glacier-fed Susitna, Chulitna and Talkeetna rivers), one of the three museums in town, tourist shops, the new ranger station or miles of hiking trails — with appropriate warnings about moose and bears (grizzly and black).

If you go

TALKEETNA:

talkeetnadenali.com or (800) 660-2688.

DENALI NATIONAL PARK:

nps.gov/dena or (907) 683-2294.



RON BARTA/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS This is part of the Alaska Range as seen from an airplane.



MARK THIESSEN/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS A flightseeing company advertises tours of Mount McKinley in Talkeetna, Alaska.