

Training Trip to Alaska (March 2004)
Preparation for the Bering Strait Odyssey, March 2005
Logbook by Julie Brown

Monday, 22 March 2004

No matter how much combined travel experience we have, Dixie and I always find that any departure from our home remains hectic and full of unexpected last minute details. Yet somehow this time we both feel surprisingly organized and ready to go, fuelled by a precious and rare full night's rest.

Our older children are with their mother, which of course brings peace of mind to know that they are where they belong. But in the situation of our 22-month-old daughter, Robin, we must for the first time leave her behind for such a long trip together (two weeks in total). We confidently know that the grueling voyage is just too complicated for her at this wiggly and active stage of her life, but Dixie and I plan to bring her along for next year's expedition. For now we have trusted her care to a loving and warm family in our town of Huldenberg, a home which is familiar to her as the mother is her regular daycare guardian.

The Accidental Adventurer is a wonderful memoir by Barbara Washburn, the wife of explorer Bradford Washburn. Barbara was the first woman to summit Alaska's 6194 meter (20,320 feet) Denali, which was then known as Mount McKinley. Denali is North America's highest peak, one known to be challenging due to among other things its extreme weather conditions. But unlike the typical stories of male adventurers, Barbara begins her memoir with the wrenching details of leaving her three young children behind, something so stressful that she broke out in hives before her departure.

I have read other interesting accounts of both male and female explorers, but it appears that the women feel more societal demand to justify their decision to leave their children in the care of others. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of Charles Lindbergh, left her firstborn son for several months while she served as co-pilot on her husband's Arctic flight route expedition. The tragic side of the story is that her son was kidnapped and murdered shortly after their return, an incomprehensible and horrible event. Human nature leads people to judge that Anne and Charles took unnecessary risks and wasted precious time in their son's short life, but those same people rarely criticize parents who get in their cars each day to drive to work, an action statistically higher as a potentially fatal risk.

Luckily, Dixie and I agree on the responsibility we have toward our four children: to ensure that we expose them to a world filled with more good than bad. We know that by carefully choosing kind and loving individuals to care for them in our place we are preparing them to live a life filled with trust. But all of these beliefs do not negate the ache of missing and the physical and soulful desire to caress each child on a daily basis.

We depart on a journey encompassing five flights and ten time zones. Our first flight leaves from Brussels and lands in Atlanta, Georgia about 10 hours later. We are fully aware that we are leaving Belgium during its most beautiful spring weather, with daffodils, crocuses and tulips bursting from the landscape and the predominant color of green all around. We arrive to the less naturally vibrant countryside of Atlanta, which still reflects the dormant brown color of winter. I know from experience that the Georgia landscape will soon explode with spring, but we will miss it on this March day. Magnolia blossoms must stay in my memory.

Dixie has carefully packed the two sleds he hopes to use during next year's expedition. Unfortunately, their bulky size creates frustration for the airline baggage handlers in Brussels. Costs mount due to excess baggage but their transportation is ultimately flawless and grows much easier on the American side of the Atlantic.

Our next flight lasts over five hours as we cross the States to the extreme northwest corner of Seattle, Washington. Fatigue starts to play with us and we attempt to rest but we are often interrupted by announcements, films and other details of modern airline travel. We are met in Seattle by a dear friend who takes us to a nearby restaurant for a good pub dinner. The local beer is refreshing but our time together is short; our next flight to Fairbanks, Alaska departs at 23:00.

Before our flight up to Fairbanks we experience a humiliating security search in the Seattle airport. Perhaps it is also due to the accumulated fatigue, but I cannot mask the sadness that I feel as I submit to a body search which involves the touching of my breasts. I watch helplessly as our bags are completely emptied, photos of our children loosely falling out of my wallet. Since I have moved abroad I have seen my country change and evolve in many ways, but the paranoia since the terrorist attacks in September 2001 is mind-boggling. Once the search is over I uncontrollably silently weep as we head to our aircraft, and Dixie lets the moment pass. His own disgust is understood with a touch of his hand on my shoulder.

Tuesday, 23 March 2004

We arrive into Fairbanks at 01:30 and smile as we step onto Alaskan soil (well actually our boots crunch onto snow and ice). The frigid temperatures awaken us instantly as we exit the airport terminal.

Troy Henkels, Dixie's expedition partner, is waiting for us with his pickup truck. Troy is a resident of Eagle River, a town just outside of Anchorage. He drove six hours to meet us in Fairbanks and has taken rooms at Pike's Waterfront Lodge, a cozy hotel close to the airport.

Even though it is the middle of the night before we can check-in, the hotel still supplies fresh coffee, tea, cocoa and cookies in the reception area. We stow the sleds and bulky equipment in a large storage room next to the lobby and we all sit together on an overstuffed couch in front of the hotel lobby fireplace, Dixie gleefully crunching on American-style cookies. We are too excited to sleep right away even though Dixie and I have been underway for almost 30 hours.

No one hesitates to discuss the intricacies of this expedition and we all begin to take notes in our personal journals. From experience we know that these journals will fill with indispensable details including names, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, websites, comments and ideas. Scribbles will become lifelines. Soon, however, sleep beckons.

We spend the rest of the day in Fairbanks just having a look around and getting used to Alaskan culture. Dixie and I are thrilled to have Troy act as tour guide and he does not disappoint us. We spend quite a bit of time at an outdoor ice sculpture competition and are simply blown away by the creativity and craftsmanship behind the myriad of sculptures.

We also spend quite a bit of time at the Arctic Museum run by the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Well-researched exhibits provide us with a taste of native cultures throughout Alaska. Unique cultural traits among the huge variety of native people emerge as we try in just a few short hours to submerge into their homeland. The vastness of the state is impossible to describe, especially since we have just arrived from the tiny country of Belgium.

We also slowly absorb the fact that Fairbanks is the closest big city to the site of the expedition, a daunting distance which reinforces the complexity of the expedition's logistics. We spend the later part of the afternoon in a cozy little bookstore where we submerge ourselves in local literature.

At about 19:00 our friend Art Mortvedt lands into Fairbanks from an Explorers Club reunion in New York City. Art is a pilot who has offered to assist the expedition with air support, but it is his general knowledge of all things Alaska which is crucial to our success. He takes us to his home in Manley, a journey of over four hours in his truck.

The drive to Manley immerses us into the barren landscape that is much of Alaska. Self-sufficiency is a must. An automobile breakdown could mean hours or days before assistance arrives, so the truck is always equipped with sleeping bags, a tent, and a small supply of snacks.

By the time we arrive at Art's cozy dream home we all fall heavily into our beds and sleep deeply amidst Alaska's wild interior.

Wednesday, 24 March 2004

We awaken in paradise. Bright sunshine streams through our bedroom window and Dixie sneaks me out for an early morning tour of the tiny community of Manley, with an outside temperature of -20 degrees Celsius. Many impressions make their impact: the modern red school house and the even brighter red fire shed, the post office which also serves as shopping mall, the air strip, the decadent natural hot springs and the grape-vine winding around the green house where we bathe, and the kind and welcoming folk.

Art encourages the three of us to sample the hot springs, but none of us understand just how special the experience will be. He takes us via snowmobile to a sort of greenhouse, something so precious in this barren winter environment. We enter and instantly our goggles steam up, but as soon as we remove them our eyes feast on the plant life all around. Stone tubs filled with steaming water await us and we all soak for about an hour.

The gentleman who maintains the springs lives in a beautiful log cabin just up the hill from the greenhouse and we stop in to visit him before we leave. He is a fervent polar bear observer and he shares his photos and videos with us. His kind offer of cookies and milk must be refused due to our time constraint of this short visit, but we hope to have the chance to listen to his stories on our next trip to Manley.

At about 16:00 we return to Fairbanks, repeating the long and desolate drive from the evening before. Just outside of Manley the weather turns and we find the road conditions deteriorate with each mile. While the snowfall is relatively light it is the blowing and drifting snow that

makes for treacherous driving. Still, we arrive about four hours later into Fairbanks where we enjoy a sumptuous dinner at a roadside restaurant. The prime rib served to both Art and Troy is cut in chunks bigger than my head and the amount of halibut on my plate could serve our whole family of six! Observations such as this predominate our stay in the States, without judgment, but simply with awareness. Everything is simply big.

Art's lovely wife lands into Fairbanks from a family visit to Illinois at around midnight and we all settle back into the nearby airport hotel. Dixie and I find ourselves unable to stay awake very long after dinner and we sleep deeply.

Thursday, 25 March 2004

Our day begins with a brief but charming visit with Art and Damaris Mortvedt over a cup of coffee in the hotel lobby. We leave for the airport at around 07:30 and begin the last of our travel to get to the Bering Strait. The short stay in and around Fairbanks has allowed us to slowly acclimate to the new time zone and to rest-up from the long journey over from Belgium. Dixie is visibly ready to get to work.

Our first flight of the day is on a tiny 19-seater from Fairbanks to Nome. We cannot stand up straight on the plane and we need a few minutes to get used to the tiny confined space. The flight is truly one of the most beautiful of my life: Denali makes herself known and guides us for much of the way. We follow the mighty Yukon River, a breathtaking body of water. The gigantic size of both Denali and the Yukon force us to lose perspective and scope. Alaska has a way of doing this to its visitors.

We arrive into Nome and discover that there is no terminal. Our airline agent at Frontier Flying Service generously offers us a ride over to the new airline, Bering Air. We sense that people up here are used to helping one another and their spirit fills us with hope.

The flight up to Wales provides us with gorgeous scenery of the entire Bering Strait. We can see Russia in the far distance and have excellent views of both Little and Big Diomedes, the two islands in the middle of the strait. The incessant wind pummels our tiny airplane and the choppy water below us announces a "wild and woolly" atmosphere. Troy and Dixie study carefully what lies beneath and we all silently nod in respect of the daunting task ahead. It is a rugged trip to get here on a small airplane with little comfort, but safe and gorgeous flying!

We arrive to beautiful downtown Wales, population 170 and about 90% Inupiat Eskimo, on a bright and sunny afternoon. The wind stings our exposed skin as we step off of the airplane. A young man named Jason meets us and has to shout to convey the message that he is our taxi driver; he points to his snow mobile at the end of the runway.

We are whisked to the home of Dan and Ellen Richard, an amazingly kind and generous couple with plenty of space. Our room has two bunk beds with place for four to sleep. Dan explains that we are welcome to make ourselves at home and he shows us his exceptional communications center. We soon discover that meals are informal and that we are free to cook as we please. Ellen prepares a chicken soup with cornbread for our first dinner and offers us milk or KoolAid to drink with it.

Wales is a dry community due to horrible social problems related to alcohol, so we choose to respect their wishes and not bring any wine or beer with us. Ellen is an Eskimo and has already told us several stories of domestic violence and family breakup due to alcohol, really tragic stuff. Dan is originally from California and has contentedly settled here in Wales.

Polar bears are active in the area and we need to be aware when walking around, but I have not seen any since our arrival. Travel is on snowmobiles and we need full protective body wear due to the cold temperatures and snow spray during the ride. Ambient temperature is -17 F. The houses are warm and cozy with electricity but no running water or sewage facilities. The toilets are "honey buckets" which must be dumped in a community pit but there is a shower at the Richard's residence.

Troy, Dixie and I begin to set up for next year's expedition. This will be our "base camp" and we have much to do to be ready in just a short year. While Dixie and Troy start to fuss with equipment, I spend hours in Dan's computer room. With pleasure I discover that the communications end of the expedition will be easier than I could have dreamed. I have relatively high-speed internet access, telephone lines seem reliable, and Dan is himself a technical wizard.

We fall asleep early in our new home, each of us filled with plans for the coming days. Before we retire, we receive our first piece of Eskimo wisdom: "Look, listen and learn."

Friday, 26 March 2004 - Sunday, 28 March 2004

An overwhelming amount of experiences leaves us scrambling to keep up during the weekend. We find ourselves trying to believe our eyes and ears when we awaken on Friday morning to the blaring sounds of Dan's big screen television and surround-sound system. Nothing quite matches our preconceived impressions of an Eskimo village and so we try to absorb each new event with the openness it deserves.

The sleds do not arrive until Saturday due to limited space on the tiny airplanes, but our time is easily filled with other necessary activities. We remark that the wind is omnipresent and that a walk around Wales is much more uncomfortable than a windless Antarctic day. We take a hike up Cape Mountain (2500 feet or about 770 meters) and enjoy its views of tiny Wales below and the mighty Bering Strait spread before us.

We check out the local stores and discover that we will need to bring many supplies with us next year. Our stay for the actual expedition will be of an indeterminate length as we wait for nature's departure notice. Fresh foods from Fairbanks or Nome will be welcome, but the stores here have a wide variety of basics.

Friday evening we are invited to an Eskimo dance in the village school, a modern building with a large gymnasium. We soon discover that the seeming lack of order of the evening is actually just the way that things are done here. The young people of Wales have only recently re-discovered their ancestors' dances and songs and their determination to keep these cultural treasures alive is admirable. Before the evening is over we are invited to join them on the dance floor and we all sense their willingness to accept us into their midst.

The sleds arrive on Saturday and all of our stowed equipment within them seems to be perfect order. After a quick but thorough inventory, Dixie and Troy decide to spend one night out on the ice. Before they depart they join me for an Eskimo potluck supper back at the school. Since we have not had the time to prepare anything ourselves, we take several boxes of Belgian chocolates to share with our hosts. After supper one of the village elders shows a slide presentation of Wales recent history.

Dixie and Troy depart on Saturday evening before the light diminishes for a night out on the ice. They arrive back on Sunday afternoon with a look of satisfaction. The testing of the equipment has been valuable and their new dry-suits particularly please them.

Sunday ends with a final bit of filming and then a pack-up of equipment. Our flight back to Nome is scheduled for Monday 29 March and from there it will take us four more days before we will arrive back in Belgium. We plan to use our remaining time in Nome and Fairbanks to take care of logistics and to solidify relationships with those who can help us. Our long trip back to Europe will begin on Thursday night, with stops in Seattle and New York en route to Brussels.

We will take home with us many impressions of Wales, of the Inupiat Eskimos, and of Alaska's various cultures. But it is nature's imprints that leave the strongest impact on us. As we consistently discover in the expedition world, it is nature who commands the most respect. Cultures that co-exist with nature's fury in these extreme conditions earn our fullest respect as well, but we know that all humans eventually must humble themselves to nature's demands.

The task of crossing the Bering Strait appears to be an unparalleled challenge for both Dixie and Troy. We all agree that the relatively small quantity of miles masks the challenge of the treacherous waters and violent wind conditions. Just like all things Alaska, this expedition appears to be untamed and unpredictable. Adventure at its best awaits!