

Willis's Walkabouts Western Arctic Spring

4 Weeks: March 2009

It cannot get public liability insurance for North America. In spite of that, I (Russell Willis) enjoyed the last one so much that **I will run it as a private trip without liability insurance.**

There are no other tours like these on the market. Instead of a fixed itinerary, there is a general outline and a rough indication of how much time each section will take. If one area turns out to be especially good, we have the flexibility to spend extra time there. Transport during the trip will be mainly by Alaskan ferry boats, dog sleds, whatever vehicle transport I can arrange and, of course, your own feet while carrying a backpack.

Why use a Darwin-based firm for an Arctic tour?

Since 1969 I, Russell Willis, have made a number of trips to the far north. I've worked as a deck hand on a river boat on the Mackenzie River (second longest in North America) in Canada's Northwest Territories, remaining until the river had frozen solid in early November. I've paddled over 300 kilometres on a solo canoe trip down the Yukon River. I've met a grizzly bear at close range while walking in Denali National Park in Alaska. I knew what to do and walked away to tell the tale. Would you do the same? I hiked through the snow to Alaskan cabins in March 1994. I led a six week expedition to the Northwest Territories in July & August 1996. I led a spring trip which included snowshoeing outside Yellowknife and 10 days by dogsled across Baffin Island in March 2000. Most recently, I did almost the exact version of this trip in March 2006.

Itinerary

The following itinerary is still a preliminary draft. **I welcome suggestions from anyone, especially those who might be interested in taking part.** It is subject to change depending on such things as weather and finding exceptional deals on transport, etc. Part of the reason I've chosen this general route is that the transport costs are substantially lower than some of the other possibilities.

We'll begin in Prince Rupert where we hop onto an Alaska Ferry and head north, stopping in two or more of the towns along the way and trekking out to some of the Tongass National Forest cabins. I stayed in the Dan Moller and John Muir cabins outside Juneau in March 1994 and in the Ravens Roost cabin outside Petersburg in September some years earlier. All were great places to stay.

On my only previous March trip, we saw a number of whales from the boat. If the weather is good, the scenery is fantastic. Daylight is the best time to enjoy the boat ride. Arriving or departing in the wee hours of the morning is less than pleasant. I have based my draft itinerary on the ferry timetable. For more info about the Alaska Ferry system see www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/ and look for the winter timetable.

For more info about the forest service cabins see see <http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/cabins/cabinlist.shtml>

The northernmost point on the ferry is the small town of Skagway. From here, we'll head further north into the Yukon where we'll do a dog sled trip. The Baffin Island dog sled trip on our 2000 trip was the true highlight of that trip. This should be the same.

Based on information from some Whitehorse locals, I decided to go with with Cathers Wilderness Adventures, www.cathersadventures.com. This will be a hands on experience, "Each guest drives their own team of huskies. Instruction is given each day on dog and sled handling."

After the dog sled trip, for of us plan to return south to Skagway for the Buckwheat Ski Classic on 25 March. If you are a cross country skier, you might be interested in the 10, 25 or even the 50 km ski race. If not, maybe the 5 km showshoe race. The winning time was about half an hour. I won the men's division of the snow shoe race in 2006 (beating the only other male competitor but behind two of the women.) I'm considering entering it again just for the fun of it. One of the other members of the group who had never been on skis before entered and finished the 10 km ski race – not bad for age 62.

The trip ends in Skagway, or, if you are not interested in the Ski Classic, you can finish in Whitehorse a few days earlier. See the itinerary at the end for more information.

General Information

We will, whenever possible, stay in reasonably priced accommodation when we are in town. This will be a mix of bed and breakfast, hostels and hotels. The cost will range from about US\$20 to US\$50 per person per night.

What does it cost?

My fee is \$1000. This covers only my services as guide, organiser and cook. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, transport, accommodation, etc.

I will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort and reliability will allow. The total cost, including airfares, will probably be of the order of \$7500–8500.

Rather than working out an exact cost for each meal while we are out bush, I propose to charge a set fee for the food I provide and cook. Given the conditions we expect to experience and the likelihood of wanting a cooked breakfast and possibly a cooked lunch, I do not think our normal system of everyone providing their own breakfasts and lunches would work very well. Obviously, this fee will not cover meals in restaurants.

A **very rough** breakdown of estimated costs (Australian dollars) is as follows:

\$2400 Airfare to North America

\$3200 Dog sled trip.

\$ 500 Other transport

\$1000 Walkabouts Fee

\$ 500 Accommodation and restaurant meals

\$ 100 Meals WW provides & cooks

\$ 500 Misc expenses

\$8200 Total above. This does **not** include any souvenirs, equipment or clothing hire, alcoholic drinks.

Note. The preceding prices assumed that the Aussie dollar does not drop substantially compared to the Canadian or American dollar and that there are no dramatic prices in any segment of the trip. The change of dog sled operators and an increase in the length of the dog sled trip means this will rise.

What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off sightseeing or simply relax while I am doing the food shopping or standing in line for tickets etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join me while I do these things. Finally, you get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses.

What don't you get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including myself, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A few examples may help you understand just how important this is.

I am quite happy to carry a full pack while on snowshoes. (If you can carry a pack, you can carry it on snowshoes, no experience necessary.) I am not, however, a competent cross-country skier. On open level ground or going downhill, a person on skis is going to be a lot faster than someone on snowshoes. If some members of the group wish to travel on cross country skis, fine — but those people will have to be able to look after themselves and **wait** at appointed meeting places.

Hypothermia is another potential problem. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he or she will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

I once drove a dog team for a couple of hours. This was under supervision in an area close to a town. I am not a qualified dog sled guide. I have left that part to the experts. In the unlikely event that our local guide(s) were to become incapacitated, we would have to get ourselves (and them) through the park and out to civilisation. I will have a satellite phone but batteries don't work well in extreme cold so we might be unable to contact the outside world in an emergency. On a trip like this, everyone must be a team player. It is absolutely essential that every individual helps look after every other member of the group.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

A Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. There are too many variables for this to be possible. A single storm could change our pick up or drop off time by a day or more.

Willis's Walkabouts is not covered by public liability insurance in North America. However, the local operators we use there are covered.

Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. Final payment is due by 1 November. **The trip will not run unless there are at least three confirmed bookings by 1 November.** Your deposit will be refunded in full if we do not have the bookings to run the trip.
2. Cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 November, \$500 before 1 December and the full \$1000 after that. Additional cancellation fees may apply to the dog sled trip.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and travel documents. Everyone must have some form of travel insurance. Illness or injury in North America can be catastrophic without adequate cover.

2006 New Draft Itinerary – 2009 will be similar but we can't give a detailed itinerary until the ferry timetable is finalised. This is unlikely to be before August 2008.

2 Mar	Thur	8 am. Leave Prince Rupert for Ketchikan by boat. This date is now definite. 2 pm approx. Arrive Ketchikan. We get off here to avoid arriving in Petersburg at 1 am. Those booked were in favour of the date and stop off. Overnight Ketchikan.
3 Mar	Fri	8.15 am boat to Petersburg. Arrive 1 pm. Overnight in Petersburg.
4 Mar	Sat	Walk about 6½ km to Ravens Roost Cabin. Overnight at cabin. See http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/cabins/petersburg/ravens.shtml
5 Mar	Sun	Morning explore and walk back to Petersburg. Overnight in Petersburg.
6 Mar	Mon	7.15 am boat to Sitka. Arrive about 7-7.30 pm. Overnight in Sitka.
7 Mar	Tue	Boat to nearby Forest Service cabin. Several possibles. An alternative is to spend two nights in a B&B in Sitka. Comment. I looked at a variety of possibilities. Given the ferry timetables and that I wanted to avoid arrivals and departures in the middle of the night, this was the best that I could come up with.
8 Mar	Wed	Return to Sitka in time to catch ferry to Juneau at 1.30 pm. Arrive Juneau about 5.30 pm
9 Mar	Thur	Exploring Juneau
10 Mar	Fri	Walk to John Muir Cabin from Juneau. Approx 5 km. Fairly steep climb. Overnight in Cabin.
11 Mar	Sat	Exploring the area near the John Muir cabin. Comment. If everyone was feeling very energetic and liked the idea of carrying full packs up and down more hills, we could stop in both the John Muir and Dan Moller cabins. Personally, I'm in favour of this more relaxed approach.
12 Mar	Su	Walk back to road and bus to Juneau. 1.15 pm boat from Juneau to Skagway. Arrive 7.45 pm. Overnight in Skagway.
13 Mar	Mon	To Whitehorse. Overnight in town.
14-23 Mar		Dog sled trip. I've made some suggestions to Cathers and am waiting on a reply.
24 Mar	Fri	To Skagway
25 Mar	Sat	Buckwheat Ski Classic in Skagway.
26 Mar	Sun	At this point, the ferry timetables have me beat. The next boat to Prince Rupert gets there at 7.15 am on Thur, 30 March. I've never been to Wrangell. It might make a good stop.

Connections to and from the trip.

There are boats between Vancouver Island and Prince Rupert. Going North, the only connection leaves on 25 Feb at 6 pm. The only possible southbound connection leaves Prince Rupert at 11:30 am on 31 March. North is far too soon. Southbound, it's a nice journey if you have extra time. I believe that it's an overnight trip. The fare is C\$85, with an extra \$55 or \$65 for a twin share cabin. (Price is without or with a shower.) From Port Hardy you take a bus south on Vancouver Island then a ferry across to Vancouver. See http://www.bcferries.com/fares/Inside_Passage_fws.html

Rail. I'm a bit of a rail buff. There's a long way to get from Vancouver to Prince Rupert by rail, but the connecting times are bad. If anyone is interested, I'll provide more info.

Flights. This is the fastest way to go. For those who want to finish in Whitehorse, my best guess is that you should fly Vancouver to Prince Rupert and Whitehorse to Vancouver. For those interested in the Buckwheat Ski Classic, Vancouver-Prince Rupert Return. For those interested only in the dog sled trip, Vancouver-Whitehorse return unless interested in spending a couple of extra days with the ski classic and ferry south. **The details of the dog sled trip have not yet been confirmed.** This could change the end of the trip. Please do not fix your return yet.

Questions? Please contact me ASAP.

Russell Willis