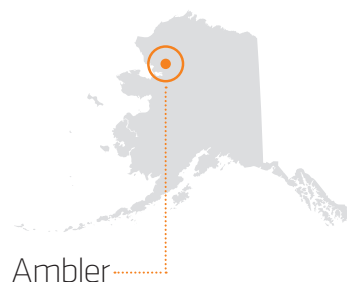




Road Trip, Arctic Style

A road trip in a land beyond roads

BY NICK JANS



Got roads? Most of Alaska lies beyond the road system, and getting from one place to another requires following known trails or a willingness to make your own.

I PULLED MY HOOD PARKA AND squeezed the snowmobile's throttle. Steering past a clutter of homes, cabins, sheds, storage containers, and machinery, I rattled down the snow-covered trail that dead-ended at Swan Lake and headed across the ice. On the other side, I could see the stakes that marked the trail leading over rolling, lake-speckled tundra toward the mouth of the Kobuk River. Kotzebue, Alaska, population 3,200, faded from sight, and the country stretched ahead. It was a chilly February day—fifteen below zero and a sharp western wind hurling spatters of ice crystals below a lowering sky. I turned out my hood's fur ruff to shield my face. I could already feel the tingle of my nose freezing. But no big deal; I'd traveled in weather three times as cold.

The destination was my home village of Ambler on the upper Kobuk, roughly 150 trail miles inland from my starting point, on the coast of the Chukchi Sea. Over that

distance, I'd pass through the village of Selawik and over a low pass to Kiana, and drive past occasional cabins, all but one or two empty and boarded up. The trail I followed was no more than a swath of hard-packed snow marked with stakes or tripods. If a blizzard swept in, that ribbon of trail would vanish within minutes and the markers disappear in the white-out. I could expect to pass several fellow travelers over that distance; and if all went well, I'd make it home in under six hours, just as darkness was falling.

Was I off on some grand expedition, the trip of a lifetime? Well, more like a road trip on the northwest Arctic equivalent of I-75. A fellow teacher, new to village life, had bought a snowmachine; and to save her the 700 bucks in air freight between Kotzebue and Ambler, I'd volunteered to fly down on the morning mail plane and drive it back via the network of village-to-village trails. Seemed like a good way to spend a

Nick's home of Ambler is among the dozens of off-grid villages statewide. People travel between communities, sometimes hundreds of miles, via a network of trails, some ancient.

Saturday: a joyride on a brand-new machine up the Kobuk valley, along the face of the western Brooks Range. I'd made the winter trip between Ambler and Kotzebue several times over the years, and knew it scarcely compared to the forays I often made, sometimes alone, far beyond established trails. For this errand, I didn't bother to take along more than a bag of basic tools, a survival pack, and my full set of cold-weather gear—arctic boots and mitts, insulated coveralls and parka over layers of moisture-wicking fleece. I flew down, picked up the snowmachine (which itself had been air-freighted 550 miles from Anchorage), checked it over, bought gas, suited up, and set out for home.

While roughly three-quarters of Alaska's people are connected by the same sort of road system as folks in the Lower 48, the vast majority of the state's subcontinental sprawl lies a hundred miles or more off that grid. Deep wilderness enfolds dozens of villages, as well as regional hubs such as Kotzebue, Bethel, Ketchikan, Nome, and Barrow. Each of the latter are surrounded by a constellation of smaller, even more remote communities. Goods, fuel, and travelers generally come in to the hubs from the nearest of the Big Three: Anchorage, Fairbanks, or Juneau (though Juneau itself, the state capital, lies off the road system). Then people and freight flow out to villages via regularly scheduled small aircraft, ferries (in the case of Southeast and Southwest coastal Alaska), and barges. With few exceptions, Bush Alaska communities, whether small or relatively large, lie either on the coast or along a navigable river. The reason is obvious: in a land without roads, water, whether liquid or frozen, is the path of least resistance.

Long before the arrival of the first European explorers, Alaska Natives, from the Inupiat in the far north to the Tlingit



and Haida of the southeastern rain forests, traveled prodigious distances, summer and winter, in the course of gathering food, trading, socializing, and waging war. The lack of the roads was no deterrent. Often they traveled light and fast; but they also had the technology, including huge ocean-going canoes down south, and sleds and *umiat* (skin-covered large boats) in the Arctic that could transport heavy loads. A web of travel routes stretched across mountain passes and flats, up rivers, and along the coast. And just as today, they connected settlements and encampments with strategically located trading hubs, some of which remain in use to this day. Kotzebue, for example, was once the site of a centuries-old summer gathering place that drew travelers of many Native cultures and nations from as far as Russia and northwestern Canada.

The winter trail I rode traced, at least in part, those old trails. While most were not formally marked back then, knowledge of them, including potential problems, safe camping places, and the location of resources, were passed across generations. And long ago, as now, there were individuals or even entire clans or villages known for their encyclopedic knowledge of traveling the land and water. My old Inupiat friend and traveling partner, Clarence Wood, comes to mind as an example, as do the people of Anaktuvuk

Pass, the seafaring Tlingit of Hoonah, the Athabaskan people of the upper Koyukuk, and the whalers of Point Hope.

The rich, specialized knowledge of traditional routes and travel is inevitably fading with the passing of elders and the introduction of modern machines and technology. Handheld GPS units, with their abilities to navigate unerringly, are jokingly referred to by young Inupiat men as “elder in a can.” But though they're far more likely to catch the afternoon mail plane between towns, and few walk, drive dog teams, or paddle long distances except for entertainment, bush residents across the state still travel vast distances through roadless, wild country by snowmobile and power skiff, often following those same ancient routes, suggested by the shape of the land. Some of these, including many of the last overland miles I rode between Kiana and Ambler, are marked on land-use maps to become the roads of tomorrow. As I passed those stakes identifying the state's claimed easement, I was reminded of the great engines of progress, poised somewhere over the horizon, waiting for the upper Kobuk to become one with the grid.

I swung open my cabin door in Ambler, filled the wood stove, got a kettle of water going, and, as a crackling blaze radiated heat, peeled off layers of frost-coated clothing to steam dry. Aside from some fresh wolverine tracks and a bit more frostbite than I'd hoped for, there wasn't much to mention to Clarence or anyone else. It was just another day, and another road trip, in a land beyond roads. 🐾

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Nick is a longtime contributing editor to Alaska. His latest book, The Giant's Hand, is available from nickjans.com