

## **WATERMELONS: FROM ALABAMA TO ALASKA!**

by  
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While planning our first trip to Alaska, I threw in something a little different – a do-it-yourself crossing of the Arctic Circle. I figured it'd be a simple daylong diversion, and perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime experience that we'd never forget. But several days later, poring over topographic maps, that harmless little trip suddenly loomed tough. Not only would it require a full day of driving over a questionable road, we'd also have to spend a night in tiny Coldfoot, an isolated settlement in the middle of the tundra some sixty miles north of the Circle. Then we'd have to devote another full day just to getting back. But having determined it could be done, and already infected with Alaska, I felt the undeniable challenge.

I called the Arctic Acres Inn in faraway Coldfoot. The manager politely told me that if we really wanted to do it, we'd have to come up over the Haul Road, an unpaved surface that was wash-boarded for miles on end, and no matter how good the weather, could be outright dangerous. Moreover, except for the road itself and a primitive gas station at the Yukon River, there was nothing, absolutely nothing for the entirety of the 260-mile drive between Fairbanks and Coldfoot – no McDonald's, no telephones, no rest stops or toilets . . . nothing. Listening to her sound the warning, it became all too apparent that my hoped-for mini-adventure might be more a foolhardy escapade than the innocent lark I'd originally bargained for.

"What happens if we have car trouble?" I asked.

"Just hope you don't," she replied, speaking very quickly at that point. "And call before you leave Fairbanks. If you don't get here by the next day, we'll alert the authorities. Someone will come looking for you." There was a long silence. Almost under her breath, she added, "And watch out for the slippery spots. Sometimes there's mud in the low areas."

By that time, I was wary. But intrigued. "Slippery spots? Mud? What, exactly, are we talking about?"

She hesitated. Whispering – afraid of scaring off a potential customer? – she said, "Depending on the rain, there're usually three of them. About ten miles each. You'll need a front-wheel drive to get through."

It was then I knew we were in for a genuine modern-day adventure that only Alaska could provide. I took a deep breath, wondered if the rest of my family (all females) would ever forgive me, and made reservations.

During the course of our conversation, I detected a southern accent in the manager's voice. Sure enough, she was originally from Louisiana, but through marriage to a musher, had been transplanted to Alaska. Thinking she might like something from her native South – a box of grits, jar of some Creole sauce, something easy to pack in a suitcase – I asked if we could bring her anything.

She thought about it, then caught me by surprise. "Ooooooh. A big, fat watermelon would be nice. We don't have any of those this far north."

Without considering how on earth I'd transport an Alabama watermelon all the way to the northern reaches of Alaska, I called it a deal. Then wondered: But what if we do encounter trouble?

Safety having become a priority, I invited my wife's brother and his wife to join us. Jay, otherwise known as Big John because of his imposing size, is an avid fisherman and hunter who, as a professional forester, spends a lot of time in the woods. And Dot (his wife) has been a friend of my wife longer than either would care to remember. Family, they would be good traveling companions.

Weeks later, when I called to reconfirm the reservation, the innkeeper was unavailable. But the cook (who answered the phone) said she could verify the arrangements. As she leafed through the registration book, I casually mentioned the watermelon. She had already heard about it.

"So you're the one!" she exclaimed. "Gonna bring me one, too?"

The horse-trading began. The cook promised that if I brought her a watermelon, too, she'd give me a free breakfast. That represented quite a bargain since breakfast in Coldfoot went for an easy eight to ten bucks, and a watermelon in Alabama only two. So I upped the ante: one breakfast for each watermelon delivered, up to four meals – one for me, and one each for my wife and two daughters. Another deal was struck.

Days later, when I tried to sneak it by Linda, my normally anything-goes wife, that we'd be taking watermelons as carry-on baggage for ultimate delivery in Coldfoot, I was taken back by her immediate, unconditional response. She'd not be caught dead lugging a watermelon through an airport! I received similar reactions from the girls, but since Dad was the one footing the bill for the family's first-ever dream vacation, they begrudgingly accepted watermelon hauling as part of the deal.

The much awaited day finally arrived. We had planned on taking four melons: the one promised to the manager and three to exchange for breakfasts while Linda looked on, hopefully on the brink of starvation. But loaded down with more than the legal limit of carry-on items, we settled for two. One for the innkeeper, the other for my breakfast. And since the girls had been such good sports about it, I agreed, with much fanfare (for Linda's benefit) to buy their breakfasts. Would've anyway. As for Linda, because she had been such a sourpuss, well, she'd be on her own for that particular meal.

On the way to the airport, something kept nagging at me. Like I'd forgotten something. I knew what it was when I saw a roadside vegetable stand. An automatic reaction, I wheeled in, bought a last-minute insurance policy – another watermelon. Something just told me to do it. The heck with carry-on limits!

Huge melons wrapped in plain white pillowcases slung over our shoulders, the girls and I smiled down curious stares from other passengers as they eyed our unusual luggage. But gracious, albeit amused flight attendants made it easy, and aided and abetted as we continued our journey. In the overhead bins of jetliners and in cubby holes that only stewardesses seem to know about, the Alabama watermelons flew 4,038 miles: from Montgomery to Atlanta, then Seattle and Anchorage. Finally, Fairbanks.

The plane touched down at 3:00 A.M. Adrenaline pumping, we had arrived – Alaska! As Linda and the girls wrestled with luggage and melons, I sauntered over to take care of the truck rental, but got nowhere – fast. Despite the confirmed reservation, a four-wheel truck was not available.

"Would a mini-van be acceptable, sir?"

"No," I replied, my chest puffing out. "We need something heavy-duty because we're going to Coldfoot."

"Coldfoot?"

"Yeah, Coldfoot," I sneered, offering what I'm sure was a triumphant grin. "You know, north of the Arctic Circle."

"Huh? You're gonna be driving on an unpaved surface?"

"Yeah." My bloodshot eyes – we'd been traveling for twelve hours – were probably glazed over by then. "I've heard it can be nasty, too. That's why we'll be needing a four-wheel drive."

"No, sir," the clerk replied, slowly shaking his head. "We can't let you do that."

My temper got the best of me. "And why the #&# not?"

"Because it isn't safe. And the contract here —" There it was. In big, boldfaced print. "It says you can't take a rental off a paved surface."

Disgusted, perplexed, argumentative, not wanting to take no for an answer, I worked my way down the rental counters only to meet the same frustration at each stop. By the time I got back to where I'd started out from, it was almost too late. Ours had been the last flight in. All the other car rental customers had been helped, and everyone was shutting down. Our only options were to either rent the mini-van, or sleep on the floor of the airport and take our chances in the morning. We did both because 1) I wanted a vehicle right then and there and a

mini-van was the closest thing to a truck, and 2) every hotel, motel and boarding house in Fairbanks was full; we hadn't planned on spending the night anyway. After all, we were supposed to be on the road to Coldfoot.

I was there when the rental places opened the next morning and heard about the tragedy first-hand. A couple of know-it-alls from Connecticut rented a compact from Avis the day before, and despite having been warned not to, drove up the Haul Road in the direction of the Circle only to meet disaster. They misjudged one of the turns in the road and ran off, flipping over and over and over as their car careened into a ravine. Luckily, a trucker came along shortly after the accident, and thank God no one had been killed; they'd been wearing seat belts. But the renters, personal injuries notwithstanding, would have to come up with the cash money to make lump-sum payment for the car. It was totaled, and insurance covered nothing. That's what the big boldfaced print said in their contract, too. Adding insult to injury, they'd also have to pay a two-dollar a mile towing charge – in each direction – just to get the heap back to Fairbanks.

Heart sinking into my stomach, I wondered if it was worth it. It seemed such a risk. But with watermelons to deliver to Coldfoot, there was no other choice. Besides, I considered myself a good driver, had packed all kinds of tools in case of breakdown and planned on picking up extra food, water and ammo in case any of that was needed on down the road. Too, Big John would be riding shotgun. But more than anything, I wanted to cross the Arctic Circle just to say I'd done it.

An hour or so later, noticing a fresh face behind the rental counter, I moved in and fast-talked my way into a battered four-wheel drive sport utility truck, and – hallelujah! – got the big print removed from the contract. Scurrying away before anyone could change their minds, I shoved the keys in my pocket. Dashed upstairs to the airport restaurant to fetch Linda and the girls and Jay and Dot. After a couple of false starts, we were finally on the way to Coldfoot.

Before leaving Fairbanks, we checked out the truck. One of the tires seemed low, and wouldn't you know it, a valve stem was leaking. We got it fixed. Then we stopped at Carr's grocery store for last-minute supplies. To my surprise, almost chagrin, they had everything, including . . . watermelons. And did Linda – she can be pretty catty sometimes – ever enjoy pointing them out to me.

Then came the tricky drive up the sometimes treacherous North Slope Haul Road. As we soon discovered, parts were rougher than anticipated. A few miles north of Fairbanks, wavy macadam gave way to crushed stone, then large stones and boulders worn flat by heavy trucks hauling freight to the oil fields up on the North Slope; hence the name North Slope Haul Road. At that point, we wondered whether or not to proceed. Particularly since a steady, foreboding rain had set in, making the already dicey road slippery, so much as to make it frighteningly dangerous. In fact, once, while sitting at a dead stop in the middle of the road, the truck started sliding sideways in the direction of a twenty-foot drop-off. And though no one said it aloud, the grim reminder of what had happened to the Connecticut Yankees the previous day was weighing heavily on everyone's minds.

But we'd come so far. Gritting our teeth, mumbling silent prayers, tightening our seat belts, we forged ahead. And a few miles later, much to our relief, the road improved. As did the weather. In fact, it got downright hot the further north we went. We'd presumed mid-August temperatures in Alaska's interior might reach the sixties on a warm day. Were we ever wrong! The afternoon high was 88 the day we crossed the Circle.

"No wonder they want watermelon in Coldfoot," I muttered to myself.

After ten grueling hours of bouncing around in a truck, having eye-witnessed the aftermath of the wrecked rental, we coasted into Coldfoot, population 39. The manager of the Arctic Acres Inn giggled like a little girl when I produced her watermelon, and held it over her head for everyone to see. But to my bitter disappointment, one of the melons hadn't survived. Half of it collapsed during the long drive, and thoroughly soaked a sleeping bag. So much for one free breakfast.

As I examined the remaining melon for damage, the cook, having heard watermelons had come to town, rushed over to collect hers. Mercifully, it was still in tact. That last-minute insurance policy picked up at the roadside vegetable stand way back in Montgomery, Alabama, had paid off handsomely. Clutching the precious melon in her arms, she shouted, "A deal's a deal. Breakfast on the house! See ya tomorrow!" Like a child who'd just nabbed the only present under the Christmas tree, she scurried off to treasure her prize.

There remained the matter of the battered watermelon. Though damaged, it still had value. I took what was left inside the only bar in Coldfoot, and after swapping stories with the bartender (who turned out to be the cook's husband), traded it for a couple of beers before heading off to bed. It had been a long, tiring day.

In the end, everyone lucked out. The locals enjoyed fresh watermelon that night, and the next morning, some sixty miles north of the Arctic Circle, smack in the middle of nowhere, we – Linda included – enjoyed one of the most memorable breakfasts ever.

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