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Alaska Ultimate Safaris

by Russ Young

We're buckled in our seats, headsets on so we can hear our pilot talking to us. The engine starts, and the overhead rotor

begins turning slowly, gaining speed with each rotation.

We're going to take off soon, flying across Beluga Lake and the Homer

Spit, then Alaska's Kachemak Bay, toward the glaciers that still carve up the Kenai Mountains.

And there is only one thing on my



mind right now: my first helicopter ride, in 1977.

I was a 22 year-old civilian contractor working for the United States Navy. We were working on a video about the Navy's research-and-development facilities on San Diego's Point Loma, and I was rapidly regretting that I had suggested we include some aerial footage.

The sliding door of the Navy Sikorsky Seahorse helicopter was open wide, as we are flying around several hundred feet off the ground at what

seemed like a 90-degree bank angle. The cameraman (a Marine Corps veteran who had served in Vietnam) and the Navy crew chief (a grizzled chief petty officer who was chomping on an unlit cigar) were both sitting on the threshold with their legs dangling.

All three of us were wearing sturdy safety harnesses, but I pinned myself against the other side of the fuselage, hoping that the experience would end sooner than later.

Even as we hovered with the helicopter level, the "yaw"—the side-to-side motion

of the aircraft—seemed to describe well the way my stomach was feeling.

So although I have since flown hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions?—of miles in airplanes, there was no shortage of trepidation as we were about to lift off on my second helicopter flight with Eric Lee, our pilot/guide and owner of Alaska Ultimate Safaris.

Surprisingly, my apprehension disappeared within a nanosecond. (Well, okay ... maybe it took a minute or two.)

Eric's five-seat Robinson RH-66 helicopter is the lap of luxury, at least when



compared to a US Navy Seahorse. There is no sliding door to leave open, but the ample windows and the comfortable seats are well-suited to aerial sightseeing. The cabin temperature was very comfortable; the noise level was a fraction of the vintage Navy helicopter.

And then there is Eric himself—a steady hand at the controls, who comes off as laser-focused on his passengers' safety as he is easygoing and humorous. He took full advantage of his bright-red helicopter's capabilities to show us some amazing scenery, including "rafts" of otters on the bay, sheer cliffs, soaring bald eagles, mountain goats that also seem to defy gravity, the deep crevasses that cleave the glacial ribbons of ice and amazing moraines—"rivers of rock" formed where glaciers have rolled and shaped them.

Although our flight was in late August, the unmistakable colors of autumn were splashed on the landscape, along with the white of the snow and the puffy clouds, and the patches of blue sky. Many of the rivers and streams run gray, evidence that they are full of glacial silt. They make amazing plumes where they empty into Kachemak Bay—especially when viewed from above at a slow hover.

Eric and his partner Kirsten Rasmussen (see sidebar) specialize in helicopter bear viewing—they guarantee you'll see Alaska's ursine wonders—to Katmai and Lake Clark National Parks. You depart from their wooden helipad at the edge of Beluga Lake in Homer on a trip of up to seven hours, including up to five hours on the ground with the bears and some "unmatched" scenery on your way to and from the bears.

Although prices starting at \$699 per person may seem daunting, they include snacks, non-alcoholic beverages, binoculars, hip waders, rain pants and jackets, and even extra batteries and data cards that are compatible with most cameras.

And of course, the prices include the experience, knowledge and training

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that Kirsten and Eric bring both in the air and on the ground. (Once they have landed and secured the helicopter, rest assured that your pilot will be accompanying you as a bear guide.)

But there's more: they also offer "fire safaris" to the Augustine Volcano in the Cook Inlet, "ice safaris" to the Harding Icefield in the Kenai Mountains and guided heli-hikes that offer memorable views from the air, mountaintops, glaciers and/or flat ground.

But today, Eric has a surprise detour on our sightseeing flight: we're about to land at the base of the Dixon Glacier. After a baby-soft landing on flat, rocky ground near the ice, we realize that Shyla, my traveling companion, has worn high-heeled boots because she thought we were going to stay aloft for the afternoon. But Shyla's not going to miss out on the opportunity to walk up to this incredible moving river of ice, so she sets off across the rocky ground. (I'm wearing my hiking boots, so I have her arm in case she stumbles. She doesn't ... although I do, at least a half-dozen times. Eric is so impressed he takes a few close-up photos of her footwear, while trying not to chuckle at my footfalls.)

Finding yourself face-to-face with a glacier is an amazing experience. Although you can't sense any motion, you know the ice is flowing, with such incredible power that it is moving and grinding solid rock. And although it may be difficult to realize the scale, once you realize that the stream running from beneath the ice is really a small river, you begin to grasp the natural wonder that you're there to behold. I could have stood there in amazement for hours, but I was equally eager to take in more aerial views of the 49th State.

I've now flown on helicopters twice in my life. They will be both be lifelong memories, for completely opposite reasons. I can't wait for another opportunity to have Alaska Ultimate Safaris make it two out of three positive experiences. ✈️



Eric Lee and Kirsten Rasmussen

Alaska Ultimate Safaris — Homer, Alaska



When you meet Kirsten and Eric, it's almost guaranteed that the first thing you will think is that they look far too young to have more than 40 years of combined piloting experience. That's due in part to the fact that he began flying when he was 15; the explanation for her is that she absolutely loves what she does and where she lives.

Kirsten's an Alaska native—who she's originally from Fairbanks—who

learned to fly near the mountains of Utah, while Eric is a Wisconsin transplant of more than 20 years. He pioneered helicopter bear viewing, while she also works as a medevac (medical evacuation) pilot. And while, like so many Alaskans, they both fish, Eric says that Kirsten "is really, really good."

Although much of their aviation experience comes from flying fixed-wing airplanes, they were

both quick to realize the opportunity that the vertical takeoff and landing capability of helicopters offers in terms of accessing the wildlife and amazing scenery of the Last Frontier.

As a result, they like to add the word "heli-" to describing the experiences they share with their passengers: "heli-hiking," "heli-fishing," "heli-camping."

And "heli-fun."



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