



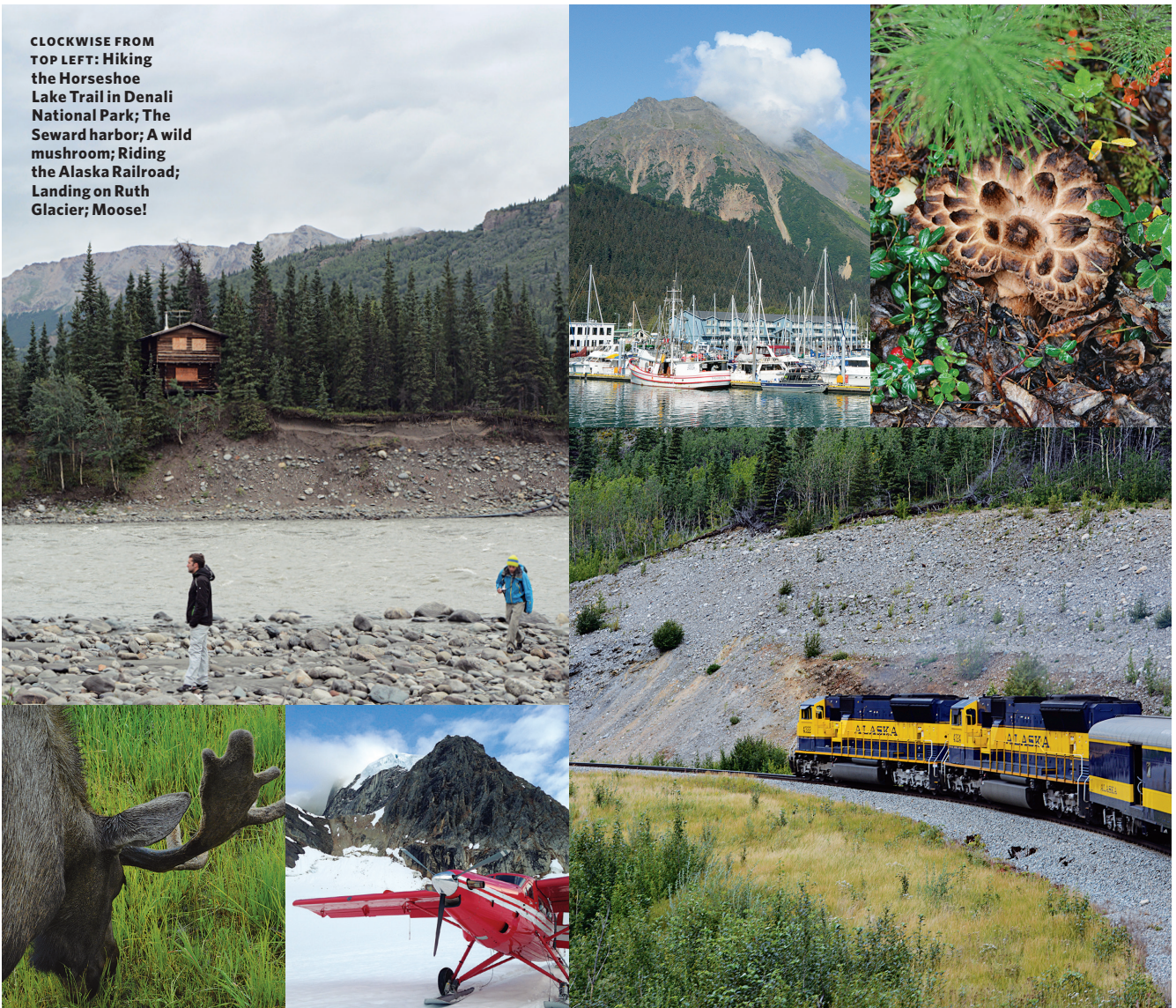
# RIDING ALASKA'S RAILS

Sky's deputy editor embraces adventure while traveling through Alaska by train. **BY JENNIFER BUEGE**

**AS THE TRAIN ROUNDED THE BEND,** the call went out: "Moose!" It was the word I had been waiting to hear since landing in Alaska days earlier. And there it was off to the left, a big male grazing in belly-high grasses. I was able to shoot a couple of quick photos before he faded into the distance and the train chugged away toward Denali National Park and Preserve, one of several stops on my weeklong Fairbanks to Anchorage to Seward rail journey.

Alaska had been on my dream list for years, and I was beyond

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hiking the Horseshoe Lake Trail in Denali National Park; The Seward harbor; A wild mushroom; Riding the Alaska Railroad; Landing on Ruth Glacier; Moose!**





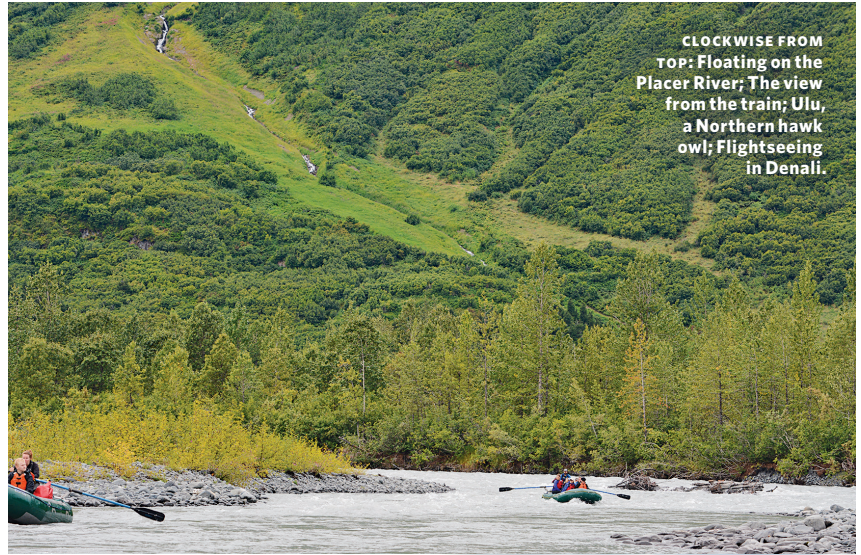
giddy to finally have made it. Although the trip had started off somewhat inauspiciously—bad weather in Fairbanks had forced the cancellation of a much-anticipated flightseeing tour to the Arctic Circle—today the sun was breaking through the clouds and the magic of Denali National Park lay ahead.

Taking up a mind-blowing 6 million acres, with only 92 miles of road, Denali—home to the peak of the same name, North America’s highest at just over 20,000 feet—is not a park that’s easy to get to know, especially when you have less than two days to explore. But my fellow Alaskan adventurers and I packed them full of hiking, managing to spy a few more moose, several bald eagles and some creamy white Dall sheep nimbly scaling the side of a mountain.

Alaska is generous with its awe-inspiring moments. A few days later, I found myself onboard a Kenai Fjords Tours boat. The captain had just spotted a humpback breaching off the port side, and we were waiting anxiously to see if it would happen again. Minutes passed. Then pow! Starboard! I turned and caught sight of it just as it reentered the water. We waited a while longer but the whale show—at least that one—was done.

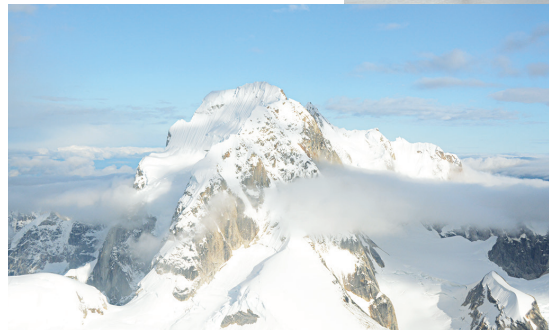
To get to the fjords, we had taken the Alaska Railroad south from Denali through Anchorage to Seward, then boarded a boat to Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge, a remote retreat on Fox Island where we spent the night. With only eight cabins and a maximum of 32 guests at any one time, the resort—the only lodging on the island—fosters an incredibly intimate atmosphere. Sitting in an Adirondack chair looking out at Resurrection Bay before dinner, I thought that this must be what it’s like to live on your own private island. Or almost.

The day of the fjords cruise dawned chilly and a bit rainy, but that didn’t seem to bother the sea life. Within an hour, we found ourselves floating past a colony of sea lions dozing on a scattering of rocks. There were also plenty of birds on display, including cormorants, murrens and—my favorite—both horned



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Floating on the Placer River; The view from the train; Ulu, a Northern hawk owl; Flightseeing in Denali.

“AS WE GOT CLOSER, I COULD SEE THE CRYSTALLINE QUALITY OF THE ICE, THE SHARP POINTS AND ANGLES, THE NOOKS AND CRANNIES.”



and tufted puffins. A little farther along, one of the passengers pointed out a black fin cutting through the water: an orca, or killer whale. We watched as a pod of them swam among several playful Dall’s porpoises.

Despite the wildlife sightings that continued for hours, it was our final stop, Northwestern Glacier, that impressed the most. From a distance, it looked like massive piles of sky blue and white snow, streaked with silty

gray. But as we got closer, I could see the crystalline quality of the ice, the sharp points and angles, the nooks and crannies—moments in geological time spilling down over the mountains. It was breathtaking: vast and overwhelming, captivating and a bit beyond comprehension, much like Alaska itself.

Too soon, we turned around and headed back to Seward, where I hit the rails one last time before leaving adventure behind and flying home. ▾