



Dutch Harbor, Alaska

Story and photos by Donna Bush

I've always been enthralled with Alaska – the vast remoteness, the untouched beauty, the pristine scenery, the spectacular wildlife and more. Our 49th state definitely deserves its nickname “The Last Frontier.” Of the 656,000 square miles, there are only 5,676 state highway miles!

This magnificent state has been the subject of numerous TV shows, movies and books. As a young child, I enthusiastically read books written by Jack London set in Alaska and the Yukon. On Sunday afternoons, I would watch John Wayne in “North to Alaska” and, later in life, I was thrilled with the scenes in “Snow Dogs,” “The Proposal,” and Disneynature “Bears.” Of course, with movie magic, most movies set in Alaska are filmed elsewhere, with the exception of “Bears.” It truly was captured in Alaska, in many areas that I have visited.


On a recent trip to “The Land of the Midnight Sun,” I was fortunate to see a special place I've always wanted to explore, but never had the opportunity. That place was the Port of Dutch Harbor, in the city and on the island of Unalaska, which is about 800

miles southwest of Anchorage. Nearby Amaknak Island also houses a part of the city. It is located a little past the midpoint of the 1100-mile long Aleutian Chain, which is a string of small islands that separate the Bering Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south. The last four islands of the chain are owned by Russia, known as the Commander Islands.

Why my fascination with visiting Dutch Harbor? I have always heard how difficult it is to fly out to the Aleutian Islands. Sure, it is remote, but weather can make a huge difference in whether you actually land or turn around and fly somewhere else! They are renowned for unpredictable stormy weather – rain, fog and high winds are common; not to mention active volcanoes – often grounding flights. Flights into the airport at Dutch Harbor bring their own set of challenges. It's a short runway of about 4500 feet with boat traffic, vehicle traffic and mountains all around; not to mention, the numerous birds in flight on take-off and landing. I flew with Ravn Air, which uses 37-seat DASH 8-100 twin turboprop

hybrid jets and now DASH 8-300 for this difficult route. If your flight is full, you might not see your luggage when you land. We were lucky! We had amazing weather and about 10 passengers didn't show, so our luggage arrived with us! Depending on weather and winds, if you are in the Dash 8-100 you might have to stop en route for fuel at either King Salmon or Cold Bay. Oh! And not to forget, if you're flying to Dutch Harbor and the weather gets bad, there's also the matter of scarcity of alternative airports. Our flight from Anchorage took approximately 3-1/2 hours with no stops and no time change. Thanks to a favorable tail wind, we didn't need to stop for fuel!

Many people traveling to Dutch, as it is fondly called, are fishermen. Have you ever watched the adventure reality TV show, “Deadliest Catch”? This port town is the home base for the series about the harshness of crab fishing in the Bering Sea. Is the show realistic? According to several locals I spoke with, “No self-respecting captain would risk their crews' lives as the drama portrays.”



TV shows aside, Dutch is a huge fishing community, primarily for the pollock fishing industry. In fact, this international port is the #1 fishing port in the United States and has received this honor for the 23rd year in a row! While some of the data is a bit dated, the latest numbers I found were from 2019, showing Dutch landing 763 million pounds of seafood, valued at \$190 million! Trying to figure out what that many pounds of seafood would look like? Think 50,000 large elephants or 1000 Boeing 747 jets. Ninety-three percent of that seafood was pollock, which is used to make fish sticks, fish sandwiches and sushi. Of course, their catch could quickly change with an oil spill or the onset of climate change affecting the fisheries. The seafood industry is their only economic source. While the location is beautiful, their remoteness and travel difficulties keep it from being a high tourist destination.

How was my trip to Dutch? Absolutely amazing!! The weather forecast was 60% chance of rain each day of our trip. In my opinion, we had the best weather days probably ever seen there! We arrived at the Anchorage airport early, having been warned that it might be full, and we could get bumped. We checked in, checked our luggage and received seat assignments. All very positive! We hung out in the waiting area, anxiously watching the luggage conveyer belt, hoping to see our bags make it into the cargo area. YES! We are looking good. It just gets better. As I said earlier, there were about 10 no-shows for our flight. I asked our cute flight attendant if we could change seats and he said "Yes." We moved to the last window seats of the plane, so we could shoot photos en route. Despite some cloud cover, we had occasional views of the various volcanoes along the way and a smooth flight. I have to mention that Ravn Air provides the most delicious in-flight cookies. I had chocolate chip and saved their new pineapple cookie for later. After retrieving our luggage, we headed to the car rental site, a short walk across the parking lot from the terminal.

Welcome to Dutch Harbor! I made it, finally!

Our rental vehicle was a Ford Explorer, vintage 1980-something, maybe 1990. At any rate, there was no backup camera. No push-button start or keyfob. It did have power windows and power seats. We didn't make it a full day before needing to swap out the vehicle. But, more about that later!

I drove to prevent further stress on Cathy's right ankle injury. First up, hotel check-in at The Grand Aleutian, and some lunch. Afterwards, we organized our camera gear and headed to visit the Unalaska Visitors Bureau to meet Director, Carlin Enlow, who had offered to show us around the island.

We started our tour with the Port of Dutch Harbor, stopping along the way for photographs. Bald eagles were everywhere! What a feast for them, living on an island full of fishermen and seafood industries in every direction they could look or fly. I regret now that I didn't count all the eagles we saw, but I can safely say there must have been 100 or more. They were perched on light poles along the road, crab traps in the harbor, garbage dumpsters, church steeples, fishing boats and occasionally even on a rock or a tree. We saw a couple of nests, but it looked like the young had already fledged. Speaking of young, there were tons of juvenile eagles as well. During the tour, Carlin pointed out signs alerting visitors and locals to the danger of approaching an active eagle nest.

After our drive around Dutch, we took Airport Beach Road over Captain's Bay to visit the town and island of Unalaska. Locals know this as "the bridge to the other side."

Contrary to the name, Unalaska does not mean 'not-Alaska.' It dates back to various spellings over the years with both Russian and Aleut backgrounds. Dutch Harbor is said to have received its name because a Dutch flagged ship was the first to dock there. During the 1890's, a dock was erected and those traveling to Unalaska booked passage to Dutch Harbor. With airlines, shipping companies, and the FAA calling it Dutch, the name became synonymous with Unalaska. Residents

refer to it as Unalaska, but most visitors call it Dutch. As you might expect on an island, there are multiple harbors along with many fishing operations.

In 1911, the Navy constructed a radio station on the island. With the threat of Japanese invasion ramping up, the United States military began construction of a Naval Operating Base and Fort Myers Army Base in 1940. A runway was built not far from the dock. After the war ended, private airlines took over the airstrip. While I knew that Dutch Harbor played an integral part during WWII, I learned so much more. Actually, it was the only other location in the U.S. bombed during the War! Just six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the assault occurred June 3 - 4, 1942 when Japanese aircraft departed their two carriers headed for attack. This was the first step in the Aleutian Island Campaign. In the following days, Japanese forces invaded and occupied Kiska Island and Attu Island, taking many prisoners.

Sadly, the Aleutian WWII Visitors Center was closed for roof repairs during my visit.

The hotel in which we stayed was built on the ground that housed Fort Mears,

where 16 bombs were dropped that first day. The second day they took out fuel sources and power supplies.

The S.S. Northwestern, a refurbished 1889 freight and passenger ship, had housed workers during the construction of the military bases and continued to provide electricity to the naval base. The ship was bombed, resulting in a fire that lasted for three days. As a result of the irreparable damage, the ship was towed to Captains Bay, where it can be seen today, partially submerged with plants growing forth. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

Many remnants of the military presence still exist today, despite a campaign in recent years to clean up some of the more dangerous items that could be hazardous to hikers or curious visitors. Remains that can be found around the island are various buildings used as bomb shelters (pill boxes), munitions magazines, gun mounts, and an underground hospital.

The pill boxes were hexagon-shaped, reinforced concrete structures utilized as emergency shelters during enemy bombing and looked exactly as their name would lead

you to believe, like a woman's hat! They were also used as machine gun bunkers.

Still visible are Panama mounts – a circular track that supported a 155-mm gun and able to rotate 360 degrees. Three men were needed to operate these guns – one to aim, one to set the angle depending on the range of the target and one to fire the gun.

During my visit, I learned something that I would venture to say most Americans are totally unaware of. This was the internment of Unalaska and Amaknak Island Natives after the Japanese bombing. This happened to many Natives throughout the Aleutian Islands. I knew the U.S. interned Japanese residents of our country after Pearl Harbor was bombed. But, prior to my visit, I had no idea local Natives of the islands were confined, even while their family members were enlisted in our military and fighting for our country! Why was this done? The best that I've been able to learn was that it was in their best interest to prevent further endangerment from another Japanese attack. Is that true? We will probably never know for sure the answer to that question. What do we know? They were





given 24 hours or less to gather what they could carry in one suitcase per person along with blankets, before they were loaded on a ship. They traveled roughly 1500 miles, and were relocated in unused canneries, dilapidated gold mines, and abandoned herring fisheries throughout the SE Alaskan rainforest. After leaving their homes, precious belongings and memories, their residences were torched to prevent the Japanese from using them. Their "new" homes were less than adequate and completely unsanitary. Many families resided in one small room with no suitable toilet facilities, no heat, no drinkable water, no food or cooking ability. Many of the 800+ relocated residents became ill and/or died. It was roughly 2 ½ years before they were able to return.

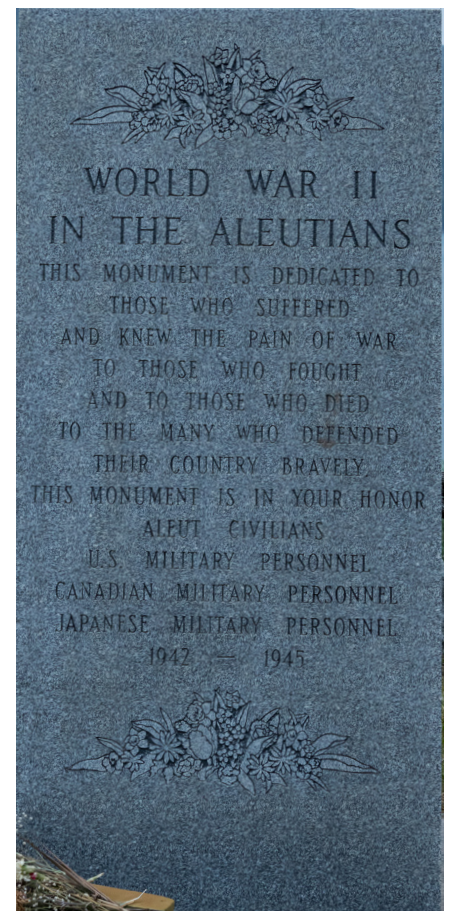
Their new location was drastically different from their beloved islands. Out in the Aleutian chain, the landscapes are treeless tundra with beautiful mountain vistas. The rainforest of SE Alaska was a shock – persistent rain, bone-chilling cold temperatures with a dampness that made it feel colder.

Unangaꥯ, as the Natives of the Aleutian Islands are known, are a proud and patriotic culture. Despite their deplorable living conditions, they refused to sink into despair. Instead, they constructed an improvised church and named it after their treasured Church of the Holy Ascension. Twenty-five of the men joined the U.S. Armed Forces, with several awarded the Bronze Star.

Memorial Day of 2022, Private George Fox, the only Unangaꥯ soldier killed during WWII and any war since, was finally recognized with an official burial marker at Memorial Park in Dutch Harbor. For 80 years, his grave was unmarked. This ceremony was in the works for nearly a decade. There were speeches from friends and officials, a 21-gun salute, followed by the playing of Taps. He joined the Army at 21 years of age and was killed fighting Germans in Ardea, Italy, three days before the American forces took the city on June 4, 1944. Five years later, his body was returned to Unalaska to be buried in an unmarked grave next to his mother.

91-year old Unangaꥯ elder, Gertrude Svamy, attended. She was Fox's neighbor growing up, with he and her brother being friends. Each year, she would make the walk to his grave to place a small American flag on his unmarked plot. Gertrude and her family survived the Japanese bombing and were among the Natives forced into an internment camp. An official burial marker was quite a victory and celebration for the Unangaꥯ people. Unveiled by Gertrude, the marker listed Fox's name, date of birth, his honors (including a Purple Heart), and his recognition as an "Unangaꥯ warrior."

Join me in a future edition as I share more about my adventures in Dutch Harbor.





Dutch Harbor: Ravn Airlines

Started in 1948 as Economy Helicopters, Ravn Airlines serviced offshore oil drilling in Alaska. Eventually, they added twin otters and convair aircraft to assist with building the Alyeska Pipeline. With the completion of the pipeline, they expanded to passenger service, connecting remote communities across Alaska. They experienced a few name changes over the years but became Ravn Connect in 2014.

In April of 2020, the Covid pandemic forced the company to enter bankruptcy protection. This didn't stop them from coming back stronger. By August of the same year, they had re-emerged bigger, better and streamlined for the future to serve their Alaskan communities. You can think of Ravn Air as the highways of Alaska, like our road-system in the lower 48. They just happen to fly on their highways. They are the conduit for Alaskans, locals and visitors to do business, obtain medical treatment, as well as move cargo, mail, etc.

Servicing 11 different communities including Anchorage, Dutch Harbor is their furthest route and perhaps one of the trickiest due to weather. Safety is Ravn's #1 core value and they will take no chances with their passengers.

Later this year, Ravn's parent company, Northern Pacific Airways, plans to launch direct service from cities in New York, Nevada, California and Florida through Anchorage to cities in Korea and Japan, utilizing the northern route.