

# ALASKA 2023

## Positive outlook as ARR marks the centennial of its completion

by Frank Keller

Photographs by the author

Much has been written about Alaska, and nicknames abound: Land of the Midnight Sun; The Last Frontier; The Great Land; Seward's Folly. But no matter what you call it, Alaska is large — bigger than the next three largest states (California, Texas, and Montana) combined, or roughly one-fifth the size of the entire Lower 48 states. Located within Alaska are more than three million lakes; the tallest peak in North America, Denali (formerly known as Mt. McKinley); the largest road-accessible glacier in the U.S. (Juneau's Mendenhall Glacier); along with roughly 130,000 grizzly and black bears, a ratio of about one bear to every six residents. Throw in some 130 volcanoes, and Alaska is a place most people would love to visit. If I were to guess, it is likely on most folks' bucket list. In my 15-year association with Alaska, I have become an avid promoter of the state and think everyone should visit at least once — and, more importantly, ride an Alaska Railroad passenger train. In doing so, you can really enjoy the beauty that surrounds the railroad, from Seward in the south to Fairbanks in the north.

### A century in the making

Construction of the Alaska Railroad goes all the way back to 1903, beginning with Alaska Central Railroad before being reorganized a couple of times, eventually becoming the Alaska Railroad in 1914. On July 15, 1923, President Warren G. Harding drove home the gold spike signifying completion of the Alaska Railroad.

467 miles of route built through some of the toughest conditions known, at a cost of approximately \$60,000,000 — some \$25,000,000 more than the original mandate called for.

Much has changed since the driving of that gold spike 100 years ago, but one thing remains the same: the Alaska Railroad still carries passengers and freight between Anchorage and Fairbanks year round.

Fortunately, it appears that during the Alaska Railroad's centennial celebration year in 2023 the low passenger counts of the Covid pandemic are mostly behind it. Passenger traffic had steadily been building prior to the onset of Covid, culminating in 2018 with 531,611 total passengers. In 2019, the last full season before Covid-related shutdowns, passenger traffic declined slightly (by roughly 1.8 percent) to a still-impressive total of 522,101. However, as you might expect, traffic took a real downturn in 2020.

The Alaska Railroad's passenger season begins in mid-May, and since Alaska generally, and the Alaska Railroad in particular, are so tourist-dependent, it wasn't long before what had promised to be a prosperous 2020 season went up in smoke. Cancellations of existing bookings poured in to the railroad. People were afraid to travel, and for those still willing, transportation with airlines and cruise lines was extremely limited.

The year 2020 was a horrible year for passenger traffic on the railroad. Passengers carried totaled a dismal 32,069, roughly a 94 percent decrease from the



RIGHT Alaska Railroad's *Coastal Classic* runs north of Portage en route from Seward to Anchorage. SD70MAC 4318 and GP40-2 3014 power the train, which includes a mix of Ultra Dome, bilevel, vintage dome, and conventional cars.



LEFT Another SD70MAC / GP40-2 duo leads the southbound *Coastal Classic* at Portage on May 7, 2016, with Turnagain Arm (a tidal branch of Cook Inlet) in the background. Alaska Highway 1 closely parallels ARR's main line here.

ABOVE The northbound *Denali Star* will soon arrive at Fairbanks under an impending storm which before long will dump several inches of rain on Fairbanks and the surrounding areas. Seen here at Happy along the former Tanana Valley lines which were once narrow gauge.

BELOW The southbound *Denali Star* departs Denali Park, crossing Riley Creek on a steel trestle and curving through beautiful fall colors, all within the first half-mile of departure and setting the tone for the rest of the trip. Led by the standard pair of SD70MACs, in about nine hours the train will arrive in Anchorage.



previous year. Nearly 100 percent of those passengers were locals brought to the railroad by marketing to the local population, and a rigid Covid policy that allowed folks to travel safely aboard Alaska Railroad's well-appointed trains. Much as the airlines had done, the railroad required passengers to wear a mask (unless actively eating or drinking) and maintain safe distances from the other passengers. The railroad reduced capacity on all trains to 50 percent and kept passengers not traveling together well separated from each other. This was much easier to do on a train than an airplane, and the 50 percent capacity restriction really allowed for true separation.

Obviously, the reduced number of travelers had a direct impact on the rail-

road's bottom line but it also affected the railroad in a much deeper way. The Alaska Railroad is a seasonal operation — a Jekyll and Hyde, if you will, busy during the summer tourist season and slower during the cold winter months. Many of the operating employees are seasonal and, as such, work mostly during the passenger season. The difference between winter and summer employees on the transportation side of the ledger is 50 percent. The railroad employs about 130 conductors and engineers during the summer and roughly half that number once passenger season has ended. The railroad normally starts gearing up for summer by recalling employees laid off in the fall, but not knowing the outcome and being unsure of the duration

of the pandemic they were unsure on exactly how to proceed. Ultimately, a decision was made to delay the start of the passenger season until July 1 and offer abbreviated passenger service; normally service begins about mid-May. The trains that ran had reduced schedules; there were no cruise trains for the year as a result of no cruise ships calling on Alaska Railroad-served ports. As a result of the smaller passenger counts, as well as reduced crew needs, it did not make sense to recall every employee laid off at the end of the previous season. The passenger season ended early as well, with trains not running past the end of August.

While Covid was still prevalent in 2021, bookings for ARR's passenger trains had increased sufficiently that the

railroad was hopeful for a return to a more normal passenger season. Indeed, after much thought the railroad decided to run a full schedule of trains. A big part of the decision-making process was the return of cruise ships to ARR-served ports, as well as the previously mentioned increase in pre-season bookings. Total passengers carried in 2021 were 200,381 — more than a five-fold increase in ridership from the previous year. All normal trains were run with a full summer contingent of employees. While the railroad's non-cruise passenger business had rebounded from 32,069 to 166,715 riders, the cruise-related business increased from zero to 33,666 passengers. Certainly a dramatic increase, but far from the highs of 2018-19, when cruise



ABOVE The Alaska Railroad extends from Seward to Eielson, with short branches to Whittier, Palmer, and Suntrana. ARR's gold spike was driven at Nenana on July 15, 1923. ARR

TOP RIGHT On Valentine's Day 2021, the *Aurora* rolls past MP 204 and is about to pass under the Parks Highway. Denali and the Alaska Range can be seen in the distance at left.

RIGHT The *Fair Train* is at Milepost A1 on the Palmer Branch, just as the sun drops under the clouds and lights up the train and the Chugach Mountains.

FAR RIGHT On the three Saturdays preceding Christmas in 2022, Alaska Railroad's *Holiday Trains* returned after a pandemic hiatus. Run in push-pull fashion from Anchorage to Indian, the second train of the day's arrival coincides with sunset on the short winter day.



passengers averaged about 250,000 per year, and a normal non-cruise passenger count was about 275,000.

As planning began for the 2022 passenger season there was much to be hopeful about. Covid cases continued to decrease and travel had begun to return to a more normal volume. Airlines and the cruise industry were showing marked increases in the numbers of travelers, always a good thing for Alaska as driving to Alaska is a rarity unless one plans to spend a significant amount of time in the 49th state. In fact, the railroad expected to have one additional cruise ship in both Whittier and Seward as compared to the last pre-Covid year of 2019. As a result of the increase in cruise ship dockings, the railroad added an additional train to the mix: total passengers carried for the 2022 season were 461,949; non-cruise passengers were 268,459; and cruise passengers were a remarkable 193,490. Obviously, cruising had returned to Alaska in a big way. Total passenger counts were 130 percent above 2021 levels. Still roughly 11 percent below 2019, levels but certainly a success by any standard, and a remarkable accomplishment given the circumstances.

As planning for the 2023 passenger season was well underway, hopes were running high for increased passenger counts. Cruise-ship dockings are up and the railroad's pre-bookings have continued to increase. Much like last year, the railroad has added an additional cruise train to the mix of regularly scheduled passenger trains. ARR hopes that 2023



is the year that passenger counts will be able to exceed pre-pandemic levels.

#### Coastal Classic

ARR's most popular train is the daily trip from Anchorage to Seward and return. It runs along scenic Turnagain Arm south of Anchorage for roughly 50 miles before turning inland at Portage. South of there, the line pierces the Kenai Mountains through five tunnels, crosses numerous bridges, and passes glaciers and other scenic delights — not to mention a couple of near 3 percent grades — all within the span of 110 miles before finally arriving in the port town of Seward, ARR's southern terminus.

Ridership on this train for the first year of the pandemic was a dismal 9,489 passengers. In 2021, numbers rebounded nicely to 57,864 passengers, followed

by 76,123 passengers in 2022, which was actually about 10 percent higher than the last pre-pandemic year of 2019.

#### Denali Star

ARR's train that runs between Anchorage and Fairbanks departs each day from Anchorage as well as Fairbanks and is the railroad's next most popular train. While it carries nearly the same total passengers as the *Coastal Classic*, it does so with two trains each day, one in each direction. Popular sights along its route are the Talkeetna Mountains, the Alaska Range — which includes North America's highest peak, Denali — as well as the railroad's iconic cantilever bridge over Hurricane Gulch. There is much to see along the *Denali Star*'s 358 miles between Alaska's two largest cities. Those willing to travel the entire 12-hour route

are indeed hearty, adventurous souls. Passenger counts for 2020, the first year of the pandemic, were a paltry 5,013. In 2021, ridership rebounded to 48,826 passengers, followed by 74,528 passengers in 2022, roughly 20 percent higher than 2019's total of 62,630.

Running the same route in the winter is the *Aurora*, which runs north to Anchorage on Saturdays and south to Fairbanks on Sundays during the long winter months, with six-days-a-week service during March to cover spring break. Passenger counts for this service before the pandemic were 12,383, with counts dropping to 5,865 in 2020, but rebounding to 11,596 for 2022.

#### Glacier Discovery

This train runs on a daily schedule between Anchorage, Whittier, and Grand-



ABOVE Approaching Portage at MP 61.5, the northbound *Coastal Classic* exits the Placer Valley, with the Kenai Mountains in the background.

TOP RIGHT Fall colors are at their peak as the *Denali Star* twists and turns through the narrow confines of Healy Canyon approaching the Garner Section House.

RIGHT GP40-2 3011 leads the *Glacier Discovery* through Anchorage's unique Oceanview neighborhood on June 24, 2021.

view in the Kenai Mountains. This train operates in conjunction with the Chugach Park services as well as a few adventure companies that take riders out for backpacking, glacier viewing, river floats, and a variety of other outdoor activities. The first 50 miles of the trip travels the same route as the *Coastal Classic*; however, at Portage they take the Whittier Branch to Whittier, where many folks disembark to catch glacier or wildlife cruises. After



dropping Whittier-bound passengers, the train will return to Portage and pick up the adventure travelers for the trip to Spencer and Grandview in the Kenai Mountains. With the exception of 2020, when passenger counts dipped from 47,613 to 9,437, the *Glacier Discovery* did very well, with above-normal passenger counts in 2021 and 2022 averaging about 50,000 passengers.

#### Hurricane Turn

Running from the eclectic town of Talkeetna to Hurricane and return, the *Hurricane Turn* provides flag stop service between those two points. In addition to offering tourists a glimpse of the interior of Alaska, this train provides a way for many of the locals, who live off the grid or who have cabins in the area, to access their homes. It is a very remote and beautiful part of Alaska. Previously home to Alaska Railroad's trio of Budd RDCs, this train is now operated with conventional equipment. Passenger counts in 2019 amounted to about 10,800 riders,

and in 2022 recovered to 7,953 from a pandemic low point of 2,156.

#### Cruise trains

Special trains operated in conjunction with various cruise lines, as well as ARR's own cruise trains, all have recovered nicely. From a low point of zero passengers in 2020, ARR's and four company cruise trains saw increased passenger counts, to 44,866 and 193,490 respectively, in 2022. Cruise trains operate over the entire ARR route from Seward to Fairbanks, and the variety of available rail packages is impressive, with something for everyone's taste.

Most years have seen a smattering of special charter and holiday themed trains. In 2020-21 there were very few, with less than 600 total passengers for both years. ARR's popular Holiday trains are back in 2023, along with the well-patronized Beer Trains.

With 2023 being the railroad's centennial year, ARR has planned several surprises in an effort to help celebrate

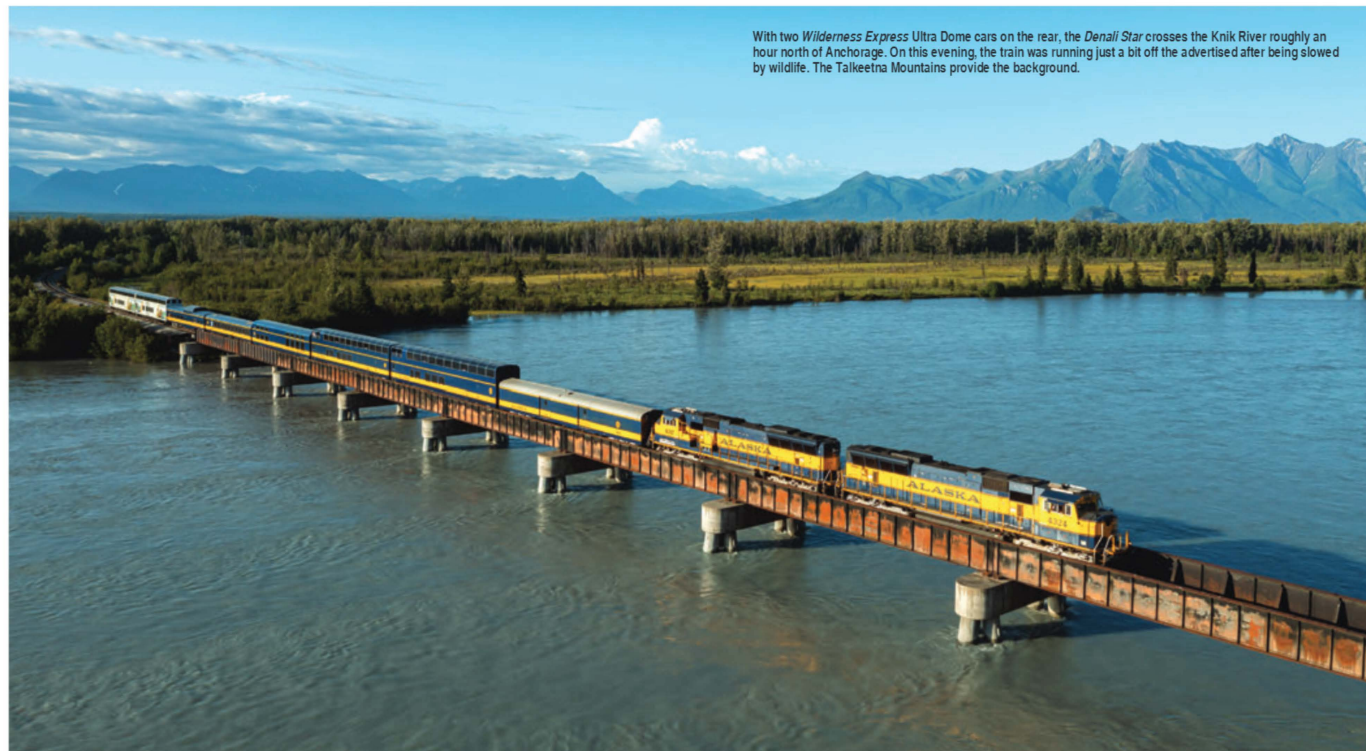
its 100th year of hauling passengers and freight in the Last Frontier. Details can be found at [www.alaskarailroad.com](http://www.alaskarailroad.com).

#### Heading north

If Alaska is on your bucket list, I would encourage you to visit. If not in 2023, as the season winds down, then maybe next year. Anchorage (ANC) is well served by Alaska Airlines and other carriers, and is only a 3½-hour flight from Seattle. I promise you will not be disappointed. Perhaps, much like I did 15 years ago, once you arrive you'll decide to never leave. 🚂

LOWER LEFT The *Denali Star* crosses Riley Creek on a spectacular steel trestle and pulls into the Denali Park depot. This scene can be witnessed with a short drive on the road within Denali National Park & Preserve. It is such a popular location that a pullout was added during repaving to provide a place for photographers to wait for the arrival of the train.

RIGHT May/June weather and long days often cooperate to provide dynamic results. The *Coastal Classic* rolls through the sweeping curve at MP 102 near Potter. In the background is Cook Inlet and the Alaska Range.



With two *Wilderness Express* Ultra Dome cars on the rear, the *Denali Star* crosses the Knik River roughly an hour north of Anchorage. On this evening, the train was running just a bit off the advertised after being slowed by wildlife. The Talkeetna Mountains provide the background.