

HITCHED ❖

by Barry Zander



WHY CARAVAN?

“THIS TRIP TO ALASKA THAT WE’LL NEVER FORGET WAS WELL WORTH THE MONEY WE INVESTED”

Considering your adventurous spirit — you know, the one that got you to buy an RV in the first place — I’m sure you don’t want to travel like a baby duckling following behind mama’s tail feathers. I also know that you don’t want someone telling you where to go and when to arrive at the next RV park. And what you really don’t want is to pay all that money for an RV caravan. It’s just not your style.

Ours either. Freedom. Independence. Budget. Those were the big three reasons we said we would never want to participate in a caravan. However, staring up at that great unknown between the Northwest and Alaska, we took weeks to weigh benefits against prejudices.

What opened us to consideration of a caravan was a chance meeting with a wagonmaster (leader) from one of the top caravan companies. Darn if he didn’t make several good arguments for joining a caravan ... well, after all, that’s his job.

Only thing was, we didn’t feel comfortable with his explanation of how he conducts his caravans. But wait, that’s a

good thing, because while other trailerists would be more comfortable with the security of a regimented trip, that’s not our style. We decided after listening to him that we didn’t want to visit Alaska as part of a group ... but there were enough nuggets in his sales pitch to keep us thinking about it long after we left his motorhome office.

Two things got Monique (the navigator) to research and make a couple of calls to RV caravan companies. First, there was that incredible expanse of the unknown in the Yukon and Alaska. Magazine articles, Mileposts and other sources of information gave us some insight, but the prospect of her spending hours on the road looking at maps, worrying about fuel availability and where we would spend the night seemed like it could make the trip more of a hassle than a pleasure.

Second, a tour company’s brochure she picked up in an RV park laundry room had the itinerary of all of that company’s tours. When I looked at the caravan for New Orleans (my hometown) for the upcoming year, I realized that it was an excellent plan — better than what I would have put together. For me, that qualified the company to be among those we considered.

Next decision for the Alaska trip was the length of the tour and which stops were on the route. Monique found the one she liked best, so we called the company and asked more questions.

Let’s get back to those three concerns I mentioned earlier and go on from there.





Despite our reservations, visiting Alaska in an RV caravan was a wise decision; without it, we may have missed out on fun activities like this raft expedition.



Freedom: We were assured that we could go where we wanted using the daily trip guide to know what we would see each day. In the mornings, we could leave anytime, often between 8:30 and 10, and arrive at the next destination within a reasonable time period. (There is a good reason for that. The staff member, called “the tailgunner,” leaves last and is on the road making sure no one has problems. When problems arise, it’s the tailgunner’s job to get the traveler to the next stop.) The point is, we had a choice of traveling on our own schedule or we could team up with others in our group.

Independence: We stopped at restaurants and attractions on the way at our own pace ... or we didn’t stop. The choice was ours.

Budget: This is the biggest benefit. The trip was, for us, a strain on our financial resources. We had the money, but our priorities made it a tough decision. After having paid all that money, we kept wondering whether we had spent our money wisely. I think the first time I was comfortable with the decision was when we arrived at the Columbia Icefield in British Columbia. If we had been on our own, when we saw the \$49 senior rate to take the Ice Bus to the glaciers, we would have quickly said, “No, way!” But, since it was already paid for with the cost of the caravan, we went — and we’re very glad we did.

Cruises, parks with full hookups at almost every stop, vaudeville shows, walking tours, museums and more ... all that stuff costs money that we would have had to agonize over every time before pulling out the wallet, and in most cases we wouldn’t have done it. This trip to Alaska that we’ll never forget was well worth the money we invested.

Previously, we never even considered traveling with other RVers in our years on the road. Too many personalities in conflict, each with his and her own interests. For us, two months interacting with all these people was not something we wanted to experience. Yet, much to our surprise, we actually loved our group.

It was a special pleasure when we pulled into a donut shop a hundred miles from nowhere to be greeted by our friends who had also stopped. “Did you see that mama bear at mile 136?”

Many evenings we had social gatherings, sometimes with munchies or potlucks; other times, staff-prepared dinners. It was an optional time to relax and talk about the day’s journey.

Three more benefits of taking the caravan:

(1) On trips into the unknown, many people find it comforting to have the tailgunner behind them in case the unexpected happens. They know a friend will be along soon.

(2) The wagonmaster and his company knows where to go and — maybe just as important — where not to go, plus members of the group get guidance on the attractions along the way, whether it’s visiting Alaska, battlefields, national parks, etc.

(3) One wife in our group said she didn’t like the prospect of having only her husband to talk to for two months. Sounds like a joke, but she wasn’t kidding.

If you’re weighing the possibilities of caravanning, besides reputation of the tour company and the route, I suggest that the most important aspect is the wagonmaster. Some are highly regimented. Other tour leaders, like ours, are pretty loose, which takes a special leadership talent considering the different personalities in the caravan.

Never say never. We went to Alaska mainly to check it off on the list of states we’ve visited. About three weeks into the tour, we heard ourselves saying, “When we come back to Alaska,” We were adamant that caravanning was not for us, but we went. And we’ve already signed up for another trip: This one for Mardi Gras in, where else, but N’Awlins. 🗽

Tell us about your RV caravan experience. Write us at NeverBoredRVers@gmail.com.