



North American Hunting Expedition 2009

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Budapest - Frankfurt
On board flight LH 3441
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Finally, we have set off.

After more than a year of planning, organising, arranging, phoning, emailing, making approvals, then changing them, as well as studying several versions of programme packages and then finalising them, we have come to the point where my plane to Frankfurt has just taken off, and I am sitting on board, firmly fastened into my seat. Soon the flight attendants will start bringing that familiar airline food - low quality, and child-size portions - but before that I might have time to write up my diary. Frankfurt is not my destination: it's only one of the many airports that lie ahead of me in the coming months, and is just a brief chapter in the long course of the journey I have just begun.

In fact, my final destination is the USA - first Alaska, then on to uninhabited country, total wastelands, and the untrodden wildernesses of Canada. That is the practical side of my journey; from an emotional point of view, the goal is to make a trip that I have been dreaming of for the last 25 years.

25 years is a long time, and I honestly hope that all the organisation and preparation of the previous year will have been enough to make my dream come true.

Hopefully, way beneath my seat, locked in its case, lies a gun: the indestructable Peli 1750. I will really need that gun.

Because I'm going hunting in the New World.

I'm not simply going hunting; I'm going on the longest and most extensive hunting expedition ever organised in America and Canada by a Hungarian.

Even the whole of last year was not enough for me to get used to the huge figures involved in the planning of this vast expedition, I still feel dizzy thinking about it. These figures, however, in themselves, are very informative. I plan, during two and a half months, in at least 6 hunting grounds within 4 US states, and 2 within Canada, to shoot 16 examples of big game, whilst on an unbroken continuous journey.

Ambitious plans!

But though they seem unbelievable, I have a good chance of fulfilling them.

Only now, after take-off, do I feel that I am setting out on an almost certainly unforgettable adventure. During all the long months of organising very rarely, if ever, did I realise that it was me that was actually travelling.

Such moments of realization were rare because the whole journey seemed so unlikely, such a fairy tale, that even now I can't believe it's happening to me.

Why am I going hunting at all?

I could just go to the same places, while spending less than 1/10 of the cost, and sacrificing less than a month of my life.

And why America?

I'm going hunting – and what's more, I have become a hunter - because of an excellent Hungarian writer, who besides his important books, made a huge contribution to the creation of the true Hungarian hunting culture. He represented those values that are dearest to me, and the following of which has never caused me any difficulty. A man whose work will define all Hungarian hunting and hunting literature for a long time to come and whose way of looking at things will be an example for the "duller" future generations.

This gentleman was called Zsigmond Széchenyi.

I can't even guess how many times I've read his books, which with their vivid, almost film-like descriptions of the everyday details of his hunts make it as if I was there with him, and all without a trace of boastfulness. He has, however, written one book which is dearer to me than anything else. I read it every year. This, for me, is the Big Book, the pinnacle of hunting literature; anybody is welcome to try to write a better one, but the chances of success are very low. This book is none other than 'Hunting in Alaska', the rich experiences of which provided the reasons for my choice of country for my first foreign hunting trip.

Decades have passed since the publication of his books about his expeditions.

Since then the world, and the world of hunting have changed enormously, and contrary to general opinion, I think, for the better. As I see it, the possibilities for hunting have never been so diverse as today. We can now hunt in places, and for such a variety of game, that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the 20th century. Within 24 hours we are able to reach any part of the globe and if game exists there that can be hunted, we will almost certainly find someone there ready to professionally organize our hunt – due to often maligned business mentality. These advantages are the result of hunting becoming a business, something which is often condemned by many people. I think it important to say this, because when we complain about the increase in the prices and additional costs of hunting, we tend to forget that these prices are what keep in existence the almost unlimited possibilities for hunting throughout the world. Many people make their living through hunting and as long as this continues, we can be sure that our opportunities for hunting will remain.

In Hungarian hunting literature, however, from time to time people look back, searching hopelessly for the moment that can be called the Golden Age of hunting.

One of the aims of this journey of mine is to prove – mainly to myself – that the Golden Age has not yet ended. It has merely changed. There are still to be found even today, I hope, similar hunting adventures that were the privilege, according to many, only of the hunting classes between the two world wars, and before.

But, for me, hunting is first of all a philosophical guiding principle, on which I am basing my journey. What I am looking for – and what I have always been looking for – is Adventure, with a capital A. And what could provide a greater adventure, at the beginning of the 21st century than hunting? For me absolutely nothing!

I cannot say that I was born with a gun in my hand. There were periods of my life when I was able to hunt, but there were also many years when I was unable to get to the forest at all. It would not be true to say that I spend all my free time hunting and that I have no other interests. I have many other hobbies, but it's a fact that nothing gives me as much pleasure as hunting and there is nothing I would spend more money on. (Knowing hunting prices, it would not be easy to find a more expensive pastime, apart perhaps from private space flights.) I have been to many parts of the world, I have seen many mountains with a rucksack on my back, looking for adventure, even without a gun fastened to my pack. In many places I found what I was looking for, but I had to go on because I had the chance to combine my constant search for adventure with hunting.

Why Alaska and the American North?

Because I wanted to find a place on the planet where there is still the chance to organise a lengthy expedition. There are only two such territories still existing on earth: the northern part of the American continent (which includes two countries) and Africa. Africa has never really attracted me, at least not for hunting. Many of my readers might fall on their swords on hearing this, but it is, for me, the truth. This continent is somewhat enervated. Stub said: " Africa is the country for men. " I would change this sentence to: Africa was the country for men. The high-fence shoots of Namibia and South Africa have greatly diminished the hunting reputation of Africa. According to hunters /adventurers, like myself, high-fence shoots have finished Africa. I can already hear the protests and counter-arguments of veteran African hunters.

Yes, I know, jungle hunting can be a real test, as there you cannot shoot from a jeep, but how many good jungle hunting grounds are there, and how many species of game live in a tropical rain- forest that can be hunted? How many days can you extend a jungle hunt so that you can still get the full experience and intensity? Because, contrary to fashion, I prefer long expeditions. High-fence package shoots, when the hunter shoots his quarry almost next to the international airport, and goes home the

next day, is not my cup of tea. The ‘ I came, I saw, I shot ‘ accounts of such trips in hunting magazines I quietly ignore.

To let the adventure evolve, time is required.

I’m not saying that I will never hunt in Africa, but in America it is much easier to find that untouched environment which is what Széchenyi’s books are about. Today it is much more difficult to enter into the spirit of his novel, “ Csui “, than his Alaskan hunting diary. The American wilderness has not yet been tamed. There are no fences and civilization has not arrived. They haven’t let it. These vast forests, taigas and wastelands have barely changed in the last decades, and whoever wants a unique experience will have a good chance of finding it here.

It was an important aspect in my choice of target-area that Americans can provide really high-quality services. Not only for hunting, but as I found, in many other fields as well. America is a true consumer society, where there is huge competition in every field; those providing the services learnt long ago that unless standards are the highest, they will not survive in the market. I don’t think there exists a service in the world which cannot be bought in America, and this is good news for those keen on complicated programs.

When planning my journey, the alternative of an Asian expedition was also a possibility.

My advisors and I saw that there was the chance to make a trip of several months in some of the former Soviet republics, but the problem was that this would have been only mountain hunting. This would have become monotonous by the end, and having previously spent a lot of time in high mountains, I felt that for a while, I wouldn’t miss them. For safety’s sake, however, we included two high-mountain hunts into my American program – so that I wouldn’t forget my mountain skills – and the plans for the Asian trip were postponed.

In the case of such a complex journey, choosing the right organizers is critical. I picked a company called Cabela’s Outdoor Adventures, which, touch wood, seems to have been a wise decision. Cabela’s is a large chain selling hunting equipment and accessories, whose huge stores I have visited several times, and where I have bought various clothes and accessories on my previous visits to America. It is only natural that while shopping there were some complaints and misunderstandings, but they were always handled with flexibility and generosity by Cabela’s staff. The advertised “ 100% satisfaction guaranteed “ slogan was not, as I experienced, an empty promise, but was the actual business policy of a company that knows that it depends on the goodwill of its customers, and serves them accordingly. All this gave me a fundamental trust in Cabela’s and its services, so when I found out that they also organized hunts, I didn’t hesitate over who I would choose to plan my trip.

Actually, Cabela's do not directly organize hunts and they do not employ their own guides. Instead they use the best hunting companies in the world to organize their trips as well as introducing hunters to local companies, on a business basis. If a small hunting company wishes to enter the circle of those employed by Cabela's, they must expect to be very thoroughly vetted. This is because Cabela's will never recommend a company to its clients without having examined it in depth.

These rigorous standards are what make Cabela's so reliable. This comprehensive supervision gives complete reassurance to the hunter, who is trying to participate in an expedition that will take place almost 6000 miles from his home, and will involve huge amounts of money. Thus, I expect the organizers to have complete control of the system responsible for the success of my journey and the quality of my experiences.

I was fortunate enough to have my journey organized by two of Cabela's ace planners, Jennifer 'Jenn' Estrada and Frank Cole, with the assistance of Rebecca 'Becky' Lloyd. In choosing my wardrobe I was advised by Paula Gudahl from the Special Orders Department of Cabela's, who also ensured that the huge parcel was delivered on time to my hotel. The final month of preparation brought so many complex problems that Jenn had to enlist the assistance of Shauna Reker. Jenn is a general organizer for any type of trip, and doesn't know the meaning of the word "impossible": there is no situation in which she could not find a connecting flight, and no city in the world where she would not know the best hotels. Frank is an experienced hunter and organizer of hunting trips, who must have been around the world several times hunting, and who personally knows some of the guides working as sub-contractors for Cabela's.

The common characteristic of Jenn, Rebecca, Shauna, Paula and Frank is that – unlike many other organizers – they were able to solve the numerous problems of the last month independently, without involving me; for this they have my eternal gratitude. They really did a fantastic job. Without them this trip would never have happened.

My only job was to tell them what I wanted. And sometimes they even helped me with that. I didn't have to trouble myself picking the actual times and hunting grounds, and didn't have to make decisions over issues beyond my competence. What I respect most in them is their absolutely professional attitude.

Perhaps the most important thing was that I didn't have to spend the entire last year worrying whether everything would run smoothly. The success of a hunt cannot ever be guaranteed – whoever says that is lying – but it is reassuring to know that during my forthcoming trip I will be hunting with the best guides in Canada and America. If, after all this, it is a failure, I can honestly say that it will be despite the very best abilities of all the excellent participants involved.

Because hunting is such an uncertain sport: there is no guarantee of success.



Frankfurt – Chicago
On board Flight UA 941

Slowly we are leaving Europe behind.

The captain must know that I'm going to Alaska because, as if by magic, he has made the on-board temperature ice cold. Despite the almost record- high temperatures before we took off, some of my fellow passengers, those familiar with the route, are taking out their sheepskin coats from their hand-baggage, while the ill-informed. like me, are shivering under their thin blankets.

You can see from what I have written so far that it is not going to be a hasty journey.

No stress.

This is going to be my motto for the weeks ahead. I have enough stress at home; here and now the only task is for me to enjoy myself.

I haven't planned my first big foreign hunting trip so that I drive immediately from the airport to the forest, and unpack my gun on the first night. I want to spend some days just relaxing and doing nothing. I need a few days for the constant ringing of cell phones to grow fainter in my ears, and to escape from the emails that are chasing me. I must get used to the fact that from now on my main challenge will not be signing contracts, but getting back on time to the campsite every evening. To do this I'll need a few days to clear my mind, so that I can start the hunt with a fresh mind.

A more practical reason is my jet-lag; the time difference between Alaska and Hungary is at least ten hours. It's the sort of difference that's large enough to turn your biological rhythms upside down. Top sportsmen, who are travelling constantly, usually arrive at the competition venue as many days in advance as there are hours in the time difference. This is the only way they can ensure their best performance. Although hunting is not a top sport, if we are well-rested before setting out, it will enhance the accuracy of long-range shots. A well-refreshed man will enjoy the experience far more than his companion who is staggering about due to lack of sleep and exhaustion.

I have all the time in the world, so why should I be in a rush?

My journey-plan was made according to this principle, so the first few days do not include any hunting at all. The first step has taken me as far as Chicago, the capital of Illinois. This brief two-day stop-off was inserted into the journey- plan at the last minute, and it was only due to Jenn's routine that it did not disrupt the tight programme. In Chicago I am going to meet Rick Sweitzer, the head of Polar Explorers. I found Rick's company when I was surfing Google during an idle moment. I was searching for a company organizing trips to the South Pole. After exchanging letters and telephone calls Rick, invited me to visit them at their Chicago offices. Obviously behind the polite invitation was the

intention to get to know the person with whom – if all goes well – they will, in 2011, travel to the Antarctic, and before reaching the South Pole, will climb at least half of the Vinson Massive. There is nothing strange about this curiosity, especially as according to Rick, we can expect a temperature of below -94F on Vinson. I'm also happy that I'm meeting the people who will be guarding my life, for the first time, at the Chilean starting point.

Our plane drones on monotonously to the north of Toronto, over the south-eastern corner of Hudson Bay. Soon we will enter U.S. airspace.

Chicago will be the place where I, together with my gun, will first enter the U.S.

Since last year travelling to the U.S. for Hungarian citizens has been simplified. Because of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) there is no longer a need to acquire a visa, provided that on any previous trips to the U.S. you have not broken any laws, and have a computer-readable e-passport, holding your biometric data, in accordance with the new regulations.

My well-travelled friends had many horror stories of the procedures they had to undergo in front of U.S. immigration officers even with a valid visa. It is worth stating, as it is not well-known, that even with a valid visa and the VWP, entry to the U.S. is not automatically guaranteed. These documents only entitle you to appear in front of the immigration officer, who has his own authority to decide your fate. He does not have to justify his decision. In spite of all this, I must say that I've never had a disagreeable experience with immigration officers or any other officials. Many people make the mistake of treating officials in the U.S. as they would in Hungary. U.S. officials will not tolerate disrespect, being lectured to or patronized, but if they are treated with respect, they will treat you the same way. If you bear this in mind, you won't have any problems.

Despite all this, I am prepared for any eventualities, and have brought with me letters of invitation, both detailed and brief descriptions of itineraries, a long list of hotel and plane reservations, many contact telephone numbers and their accessibility, wads of accounts and receipts of bank transfers and the secret, magic papers from my benefactors, to be used only in dire extremities. In contrast, which is strange, to bring in my gun only one form, called ATF Form 6NIA, has been required: this has been filled in and scanned in Hungary, again in America, printed out in Hungary, and now because of so much copying has become almost unreadable.



Room2034,Hilton Garden Inn
10 East Grand Avenue
Chicago, Illinois
U.S.A.

I have arrived in the US!

I have good news: the ATF Form 6NIA works. I passed through immigration with ease, like a knife through butter. The immigration officer, a surprisingly pretty lady, even wished me good hunting, and the customs officers were also very friendly. My ammunition has not even been checked ...

Now I'm on the dizzy heights of the city center Hilton's 20th floor, shivering with cold. My room is equipped with every hi-tech gadget imaginable, but is so freezing cold that I now think rather kindly of the captain of the Boeing 777. A typical characteristic of American culture is that they are incapable of regulating their air-conditioning; I don't understand why the machines have several settings, if no-one ever uses them. After installation, they set them to maximum, and as long as the machine works, that's how it stays. Another problem is that the machines are too powerful for the rooms. In Hungary, we could run whole refrigeration plants with the unit that is cooling my room.

In the hotel, by the way, is a general chaos: nothing works. Now it's the elevator that's out of order. All the staff, and every guest, is forced to use just one elevator. Everybody thinks twice about going downstairs. One such journey can take up to 30mins. You call the elevator, which takes 15mins to arrive; then the packed car goes either up, or down, stopping at every floor - and there are quite a few - before eventually reaching the ground floor. Regular customers take it in their stride. I decide to walk down to the shore of Lake Michigan, a place where people can relax, and young couples can meet, but being the first day of my arrival, I don't have the energy to do anything else. The weather is hot, and such a humid heat soon makes me start to sweat.

I'm tired.

At home it's about midnight, but I'm not supposed to go to bed yet. It's easier to get acclimatised if you force your body-clock to adjust.

Hilton Garden
Inn Chicago
26th July

It's only 3.30 am. local time, and I am wandering around the corridors like a ghost; I have still not adjusted.

The mystery of yesterday's broken lift has been solved: according to the management's letter of explanation, on the night before I arrived there was an "electric storm" - whatever that means. The point is that it managed to screw up, not only the electrics in the hotel, but in the whole of Chicago; that might be why there are sirens constantly going off. Talking of sirens reminds me to include a few lines about Chicago's shady past.

Its "official nickname" is the Windy City, a name coined in the 1880s, by a newspaper describing the weather conditions of the 1883 World Fair. This originally pejorative adjective was welcomed by the city, although over the last 100 years it has been the basis for many risqué jokes. Most Chicagoans would be pleased if it was only windy weather that people thought of when hearing the city's name, but this, unfortunately, is not the case. The word Chicago has been, up until now, synonymous with the Italian mafia, and organized crime, and I can't see this changing very soon: there are probably hardly any cities in the world which do not have a crime-ridden district called "Chicago" by the local criminals.

The city can attribute the dubious aspects of its name to just one person: Alphonse Gabby May Capone, or, to use his shorter and more familiar names, Al Capone, or Scarface. According to criminologists, Al was, and always will be, the most famous criminal in the history of crime; and as such, he deserves my account of his riveting and varied career.

He was born in the Brooklyn slums in 1899, and with all the constant gang warfare, was immediately plunged into the deep end of criminal life. For him, there was no alternative to becoming a criminal, as being born into a world of crime. As a young man he was a talented streetfighter, gaining his famous scar in a barfight. But even so, despite his well-known career, no murders were ever pinned on him, though, in 1919, he was forced to move to Chicago, because of his involvement in a double-murder trial.

He couldn't have found a better place.

In the Chicago of the 20's, every Italian wanted to be a gangster.

He started by joining John Torrio's gang, and established his fame by having the rival gang-leader, "Big" Colosimo, killed. With his talent for organization, and his merciless brutality, he very soon made it clear to his boss that he would become a talented mafioso. These are two traits that are

absolutely essential if you are to embark on such a nerve-racking career. By 1924, conditions in Chicago had almost reached a state of war, causing Torrio to retire from such a stressful life, and leave the whole of his criminal empire to Al.

Thus, Al, at only 26, became king of Chicago.

His gang had over 1000 members, not one of whom was a debutante. One of the secrets of his instant success was his ability to work easily with the Irish, Polish and Jewish factions, which, for the time, was very unusual. His ruthlessness had no limits: for instance on one occasion, after being accused of betraying him, he himself smashed in the heads of several of his gang-members, with a mace. By 1929 every gang in Chicago, except for one, was under his control. Given his nature, Al knew no way to handle problems and conflicts, other than through violence. Dressing up his gang as policemen, he got them to stop Bugsy Moran, the only man who would not acknowledge his authority. He put the seven men up against a wall, and with a long, machine-gun shot executed them all. This was the infamous St. Valentine's Day Massacre, which proved a turning point in Al's career. The heads of the Italian mafia all over America, previously not over-scrupulous themselves, were deeply shocked by this, especially as it now placed all their gangs in the spotlight. Mafia connections within the police and political system were unhappy about Al's sudden fame. So, at a meeting of the Mafia leaders, in order to smooth things over, and calm down the public, it was decided to make Al "voluntarily" confess to a few petty crimes and go to prison. He did so, although his room looked more like a luxury hotel room than a prison cell; he was also able to make telephone calls, so he could continue to run his gang from the Governor's office.

Al's fall was caused by the fact that he could not recognise any limits.

Almost every major criminal brings about his own downfall, as few of them are able to keep a sober sense of judgement. After a while, they begin to lose contact with reality, and become unable to foresee the consequences of their actions. On one occasion, Al, watched by several corrupt police officers, gave the mayor a kicking, on the steps of his very own office; thus it was not surprising that he thought he could get away with anything.

But one of the special agents in the Treasury, Frank J. Wilson, did not see it that way. When it became clear that the local police had neither the means nor the intention of standing up to Al, Wilson decided to start a legal procedure involving various cases of tax fraud against the world-famous gangster. Al, following his own instincts, and the practices of the time, tried to have Wilson killed, but his plan was discovered by the secret service, resulting in Torrio, his old boss, persuading him to give up the idea. This gave Wilson the opportunity to investigate Al's accounts, which led directly to Al's imprisonment. This time, even his influential friends were unable to help him. He went through several jails before arriving at the legendary prison island of Alcatraz, where his

fellow-inmates showed him no respect whatsoever. A particular cause for their turning against him was his refusal to take part in a prison strike, which increased his isolation from the other inmates even more. His syphilis, contracted earlier, began to develop, increasing his mental deterioration, and so, in 1939, he was released. By then the snake had lost its fangs. He spent most of the remaining eight years of his life in a state of mental confusion, residing at his family's Florida estate until his death in 1948.

This was the brief life and ignominious death of America's first Public Enemy No. 1.

By today, Al Capone's once-feared face has become nothing more than a commercial product, which you can buy on souvenir shop T-shirts for a couple of dollars.

Today, my day started early.

First I went to the Sedd Aquarium. I'd found a brochure somewhere, which mentioned it. It took me just over 15mins by taxi from the hotel, but it was worth the journey. The Sedd was built as an aquarium, and is not a converted building. Its design has made it world-famous, and its glass tank is the envy of all other aquariums.

For those of us who really appreciate water-habitats, it is Eden itself.

The various aquatic communities are grouped according to their geographical area. The tanks are spacious, deep, well-lit and full of rarely seen species. They did not spare the cash when they built this! I saw fish that I only knew from scientific documentaries on television. There were large and small, colourful and plain, meat-eaters and plant-eaters; and all just a few feet from each other, in a top quality environment, with full explanatory texts. There is a separate dolphinarium beside the institution, where the public is given a surprisingly sub-standard show. It is unbelievable how strong dolphins are. With just a quick burst of speed, they can shoot their muscular bodies up to 15 ft. out of the water! Their performance brought enthusiastic gasps from the audience. During their most spectacular stunt, they actually managed to stand on the tips of their tails. Imagine what strength and agility must be needed to do that!

According to the beautiful announcer the show is only just being put together; the animals are being trained continuously, and the final performance is beginning to take shape. To compensate the audience for watching an unfinished show, they are allowed to watch the training session free; thus everyone can see that the animals do these tricks of their own free will: they are not aggressively pressured by their trainers. Also, children are not banned from contact with the creatures: there is a separate area where they can touch them.

One of the Sedd's most spectacular features is their 3-D cinema, which, of course, is all about the

world beneath the sea. The technology involved is so highly developed that it is not called 3-D, but 4-D! It is a really fascinating event.

Complex machinery is installed in the seats, which works in synchronisation with the images on the screen, greatly increasing the quality and realism of the experience. The combination of all these technologies brings about the "4-D" experience, although it's possible a true physicist might not completely agree with the definition. When the Great White Shark sinks back into the ocean, clutching its prey between its jaws, you'll actually get so much sea-spray on your face, you won't be able to wipe it off. The sight of penguins waddling about at the South Pole is accompanied by blasts of cold air. During a raging thunderstorm your seat will shake, and when someone throws a spear on screen, suddenly something will prod you from the back of your seat.

Americans love it all, and so do I. It's interesting to see how intensely and openly they express their feelings. Even mature men, along with their children, will scream at the scary sights on the screen, and, while laughing out loud at the funny parts, they will indignantly boo the scenes they don't like. It's impossible not to get involved yourself, and soon you'll find yourself laughing along at every joke, and the person sitting next to you in the dark will quickly become your good pal.

Everyone is constantly eating or drinking something. The sound of rustling paper-bags, the hiss of fizzy drinks being opened and the slurping of many straws, is non-stop. Compulsive eating is a typical characteristic of everyone here. I have to make sure I don't pick it up, and go home rolling in fat.

There's never any difficulty in finding something to eat. In the aquarium restaurant the menu is so long as to be unreadable; I have to ask the girl at the cash-desk for advice, as I don't want to spend the rest of the day reading it. Everything is super-sized. There's no such thing as a 30ml bottle - they start at 0.5l, and the average is 700ml.

In coming to the aquarium this morning I was not following my original plan, which was for an afternoon visit, but now it is only 12.30 pm. and so I jump in a taxi to go on to the Field Museum, the great treat of my short visit to Chicago.

This is one of the best-known science museums in the world. When I'm abroad I always like to visit the local science museum, if I have the time, and my Chicago trip is no different. The best science museum I've ever seen was in New York, but, apparently, the Field is even better. For hunters, such a visit is a must, especially as Széchenyi came here too, and mentioned it in his Alaskan hunting diary. So, in front of the Sedd I hail a cab and give the driver the address. He starts the meter, and asks me if I know where it is. When I reply "No", he gives a big grin, and, pointing at the building right in front of us, we slowly roll the 1500 ft., for the sum of \$3.00.

Like a true gentleman, I have not walked one step!

For me, the most anticipated diorama of the museum's permanent collection, is the one of the two lions which became famous as the Man-Eaters of Tsavo. These two lions are the most famous pair in the history of hunting. Tsavo, which means "massacre", already has sinister connotations, and the name foreshadows the terror that was to overtake East Africa ...

It so happened that, at the end of the 19th century, the various powers that had colonised Africa began to compete for the last remaining uncolonised territory . This was the area that is now Uganda. The struggle was to be won by whoever first completed the railway. Naturally, the British were part of the fight, and in 1896 construction work began under the leadership of the commissioner, George Whitehouse. Two years later, on the 8th March 1898, another character entered the story: the newly-appointed engineer from the Foreign Office, Colonel Henry Patterson.



Four days after arriving, he noticed, with some irritation, that there was no British flag flying at the work-camp on the banks of the Tsavo River. One of his servants, Narain, volunteered to make one, using pieces of fabric from the storeroom. But Narain was not to receive the rewards of his labours from his master: the day after he finished, he, together with a coolie, disappeared without a trace. They were the first official victims of the man-eaters.

The following day, one of Patterson's staff, out reconnoitering, came upon Narain's blood-stained clothes. It was then that the Colonel realised that his servant had been the victim of a lion attack. Then, again the next day, the attacks continued: the lion - they did not yet know there were two killers - snatched the Colonel's huge Sikh servant Ugan Singh, right from his tent, in front of six terrified onlookers. The eye-witnesses could hear Ugan's hopeless fight against the lion; Patterson even mentions in his book that the Sikh "had a hard death".

After examining the remains they deduced that there were two lions. Further examination showed that the lions had fought over the body of the unfortunate man, whose head, strangely, had remained untouched. These events were impossible to conceal from the inhabitants of the camp and the thousands of workers, especially as Colonel Patterson was seen entering his tent swinging Ugan's head. In the camp, panic had not yet broken out, but the Indian coolies, who comprised the majority of the workers, were already terrified.

According to Whitehouse "the camp is under siege".

Several workers had disappeared previously, but only now did the commander consider the possibility that they were not runaways; this, however, could not be proved at the time. Several security measures were introduced, one of which was that there would be one armed guard for every hundred workers.

But maintaining discipline became more and more difficult. The terrifying lion attacks were only one reason; Patterson, himself, was another. His excessive punishments included refusing to pay the workers, which reduced his popularity and authority, and contributed to the decline in morale. Empathy was definitely not among his virtues. On one occasion, for example, when a coolie claimed to be ill, he had a fire lit beneath his bed, to force him to get up and keep on working. Patterson then had a hide built, where he tethered two live goats as bait, hoping that he would be able to kill at least one of the lions. The lions, however, were after a more valuable quarry, and two more names were added to the list of victims; nor was this the end of the massacre. Because of the increasing frequency of the attacks, he decided to move his headquarters from the banks of the Tsavo. Only 300 workers remained at the camp to try and finish the work on the bridge over the valley.

The remaining residents prepared for a war.

Lions versus men.

Hides, watchtowers and barricades were made, and a strengthened patrol guarded the camp. On one occasion Patterson shot at one of the man-eaters from a train carriage which had been converted into a hide; but he missed, a mistake that was to cost several lives. The courage and intelligence of the lions was amply demonstrated by the way they managed to regularly infiltrate the thorny fences protecting the camp, being quite obviously unafraid of the proximity of tents and people, and several times traces of them were found within the camp. As the lions learnt to work together with increasing harmony, discord in the camp grew accordingly; instead of uniting to try and track down the man-eaters, quarrels and rivalry broke out, leading to several murders.

The attacks went on.

For weeks and months.

They were running out of coolies. Work on the Tsavo bridge almost ceased. The camp residents now slept in huts built in trees, or in heavily protected underground shelters.

To go out at night was to court death.

Whitehouse was under huge pressure from British M.P.s and officials to meet the deadlines, so it became imperative to, somehow, solve the situation. The problem was that no-one could come up with a solution.

Whitehouse could see that Patterson and the other hunters in the camp were incapable of stopping the attacks, and so he decided to offer a bounty for every lion killed in the neighborhood of Tsavo. The call was heard, down to the very dregs of Africa, and soon a forest of tents sprang up beside the river. From information found in a contemporary hunting book, we know that even W.D.M. "Karamojo" Bell, the greatest marksman and hunter in Africa, and a legend in his own lifetime, turned up in the vicinity for a short time. Even if this is true, it's certain that he did not spend much time amongst all the so-called lion hunters, but continued on his way. I'm sure if Bell had seriously decided to get the Tsavo man-eaters, their skins would soon have been hanging on his wall. There was nobody in the world who could shoot better than him, and probably no better hunter in the whole of the dark continent. The policy of extermination began to produce results. Many animals were brought in by those claiming the bounty. In the summer of 1898 the attacks stopped, and it seemed that the war was over. But Patterson still remained out of favor with the coolies, as is shown by the continuation of plots against him; they culminated in an unsuccessful attempt to kill him.

After all this, a sort of calm descended on the shore of the Tsavo. Work continued and nothing more was heard of the lions.

Until the 17th November.

Then, that night, one of the lions cheekily leapt over the fence into the midst of the coolies; ignoring the burning torches thrown at him, as well as the bullets, he snatched one of the men, and with his lion-partner, devoured him within hearing range of the camp.

After that, all hell broke loose.

From then on the lions came nightly for their rations and, without exception, always turned up where they were least expected by the Colonel.

Everybody started to panic.

Every snapping branch signaled the approach of Death. Terror ruled the camp. No-one could work, as everyone lay wide-awake at night. Nobody was safe anywhere. Roaring loudly, the beasts would prowl around the camp each night.

Masses of workers deserted; only the sick and injured remained, and so construction work stopped completely. But the man-eaters continued their attacks.

Then, on the 9th December, the turning point was reached.

On this auspicious day, a native, visiting the camp, managed to spear one of the lions attacking him, which was then killed by another native. But this was a female, whilst Patterson and his men had been looking for males. In the general confusion the lioness's partner managed to snatch a mule and take it off to the jungle. The colonel quickly arranged a hunt with beaters, and took up his double rifle. They managed to drive the lion to him, but then the first barrel jammed. He was about to discharge the other barrel, but succumbed to hunting fever and fired too late. The shot, however, did hit, though the lion escaped and could not be found. By that night, next to the mule's corpse, they had built an Indian-style watchtower and from it managed to shoot one of the man-eaters. Two weeks later, under similar circumstances, the other lion was dispatched to the Happy Hunting Grounds in the Sky, and peace came back to Tsavo. But in fact, to guess at the truth, there had probably been a third man-eater, a male, which was shot not by Patterson, but by a Boer hunter.

The question that then most preoccupied the public, as well as historians now, is: exactly how many people were killed by the infamous man-eaters. Well, according to Patterson the number of the victims was 135. This was his own assessment, and he probably felt that any who disagreed with his total was free to check it himself. Until quite recently this was the accepted figure, but the brave colonel did not take into account current scientific advances. Researchers from the University of California and the Field Museum, using carbon and sodium isotopes, have analysed the teeth, bones and fur of the two dead animals, and have reached a different conclusion. Their examinations prove that during the 9 months prior to their deaths, these animals ate respectively 11 and 24 people, though they only partially consumed them. The estimate of the number of people killed might be as high as 75, but

cannot be more. According to the anthropologist, Nathaniel Dominy, Patterson wanted to use these exaggerated figures to boost his image amongst his contemporaries and for posterity.

As well as all the other mistakes and misunderstandings involving the Tsavo lions was the belief, - incorrect-, that they fed only on human flesh. In fact, the truth is that the diet of one of the lions comprised about one third human flesh, while that of the other was only half that amount of the miserable coolies. Studies of the lions' behavior suggest that the animal that ate the most flesh was the predominant killer and as such would have the right to eat first from the prey.

It is not clear, however, what turned these animals into man-eaters. Damage to their teeth might have reduced their hunting and eating abilities, but what is also certain is that at the turn of the century the number of prey-animals in Kenya, because of various environmental effects, was temporarily reduced. It's a fact that the skins of the two famous lions were bought in 1924 by the Field Museum, who had them stuffed, and it's also a fact that , right now, I am standing in front of them.

Széchenyi mentions that, looking at the skins of the two lions, we can even see the wounds that they got while creeping through the thorny barricades. Well, the wounds really are visible, but only to those who know what to look for. The right shoulder and flank of the standing lion are 'decorated' with parallel scratches that not even the skill of the last century's taxidermist was able to conceal. The two skulls are also part of the exhibition, so you can even see the very teeth that ended the lives of so many workers at the end of the 19th century. Otherwise, the two stuffed animals are in such good condition that they will be admired for generations to come.

Another of the Field's attractions is Sue, the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton, found in excellent condition, and the most complete in the world.

The museum's paleontological exhibition is sensational, even without Sue. Visitors are allowed to stand within arm's reach of the skeletons, so you don't have to try to decipher the details from miles away; we are free to stroll amongst remains of these fabulous creatures, some of which are over one storey in height. But time is running out. Still, I quickly slip into a 3-D cinema showing a film of the life of dinosaurs, as well as the work done by dino-hunters during excavations. Although it was a 3-D and not a 4-D cinema – nothing prodded my back, no water was spat in my eyes – we watched a film that in the fields of special effects and computer-modelling was quite unrivalled. The American public was loudly expressing its opinion at these marvels, and I soon joined the chorus.

It is noticeable that American museums are always crowded; if you arrive after the opening time you will have to stand in a long line. Popular belief says that Americans are not an especially cultured

people. This is another of those negative stereotypes about Yanks which I often found to be untrue. In fact, many of them are able to find Hungary on the map, and what is more, some even know the name of our beautiful capital!

I wonder how many of Hungarians would know the capital of North Dakota or Wyoming?

And let us not forget that most of the people buying tickets to these exhibitions are American. The majority might be tourists, but they are American tourists.

In this country the thing they have learnt to do best is how to sell. Anything.

Anything – even science.

They have found out how to make high-standard exhibitions interesting to even the average person. They make a show of everything, spending a lot of money on display technology, and with these methods pass on to their visitors quantities of information and knowledge that they would not usually absorb. Visiting an American science museum is not a program that is only of interest to professionals and boring to outsiders, but is a great family adventure.

Here they already know what they still do not in Hungary.

A new generation has grown up on video games and the internet which is not receptive to the methods of education that would have worked well twenty years ago. They need experiences which are louder, flashier and more intense; not because they are less clever than previous generations, but because this is the way they have been brought up. When a museum or exhibition opens in Hungary, what do we find? Dioramas and glass cabinets which cannot be touched. The organizers strive to keep the visitors and the exhibits apart. In some cases it might be appropriate, but often it is taken to extremes. The problem with dioramas is that you can't do anything with them; you can only look at the animals or objects exhibited, but no ten-year-old boy will go to a museum just to look at animals. If he wants to look at something, he'll do it on the internet. And then, after the exhibition has opened and the reviews have come out, and the ticket sales should then start producing the revenue needed to maintain the exhibition, we are surprised when it doesn't happen.

The reason being their inability to capture the public's interest.

Fortunately, there have recently been changes. Now more and more exciting exhibitions are opening in Hungary: some are interactive, which makes the objects more interesting, and you don't have to peer at the tiny details from 20ft away. An excellent example was the 'Bodies' shown 6 months ago at the VAM Design Gallery, where you had to wait an hour to get a ticket.

After walking through the Field I took another taxi – this one was a good idea – and told the driver to take me to the Navy Pier Peninsula, which stretches into Lake Michigan. Also, in the brochure I mentioned previously, I had seen an advert for something called SeaDog. This announced that you could race around Lake Michigan in their high-speed boats, but their internet-site was down, so I had

no more information.

Navy Pier is buzzing!

On the pier are moored various boats, from various companies, offering various trips; there is music playing everywhere. There is a McDonald's and a line of other fast-food restaurants and a large crowd strolling around – a ferris-wheel slowly revolves above Chicago – and now here I am at the headquarters of SeaDog.

One of the boats is just being started and the deep rumbling of the engine can be felt down in our stomachs, leaving us onlookers in no doubt of its power. The cashier offers me so many options that after a while I lose track and simply ask her to give me a ticket on their fastest and most challenging boat. I've got 15 minutes before we start; the monster-machine is just reversing up to the jetty: start boarding!

We are given a short security lecture by the attendant, who tells us that anyone who undoes their safety-belt, let alone stands up, he will personally throw overboard. Meanwhile we are leaving the crowded shoreline for the endless mirror of Lake Michigan; the captain pushes the throttle forward ... the passengers start screaming ...



An enormous surge of power pushes the monster forward.

The music volume goes up, the engines are roaring, and the machine speeds over the water. A small motor-boat comes beside and tries to race us, but again the captain flicks the throttle and the brave little boat is left hopelessly behind. We make completely unexpected turns – I can't understand why we don't roll over – then we ride our own wake with the spray coming over us. All the passengers behave like the people in the cinema; everybody is shouting and screaming with their hands in the air, and the atmosphere is electric. My camera is soaked; it's a Sony, so I hope it will survive. We make turn after turn with brief stops in between to listen to the attendant's expert commentary on the sights. The ride lasts just over half an hour, but all good things must come to an end, and after the wild trip we slow down and make a leisurely return to the jetty.

The inhabitants of Chicago are very friendly people.

Whenever I ask someone for directions, I always get them. After chatting for a minute, they'll ask you to a party. If you talk for longer, it's compulsory to take your photo together and exchange email addresses. They are a well-balanced and cheerful bunch of people.

Exhausted, I arrive back at the hotel, where I find a message from Rick Sweitzer: he's having a garden party and I'm invited. I send him a brief note saying that I am tired and all I want is a glass of beer. I hope he won't be offended, but I'm definitely not going anywhere else today.

Tomorrow I'll be in Alaska.

The elevator has been repaired.

Olé!

Chicago – Anchorage
On board flight EQUIP-73H
27 July 2009

This morning I woke up earlier than usual.

It doesn't really bother me, but I can't understand why my jet-lag is lasting so long this time. I never had a problem with it before.

I haven't made any plans for today in Chicago. At 11.00 Rick's company car came to collect me and take me to his office to discuss the planned expedition to the South Pole. The office is outside Chicago in some small town –I've already forgotten its name -, but we drove along a jumble of highways and arrived after half an hour.

These American small towns are always quiet and peaceful. The houses have no fences around them and are in excellent repair, the gardens are always green and well-kept, with lots of trees, and the

cars drive slowly. Life seems to move at a slower pace here.

Rick welcomed me, and did not seem bothered about yesterday. During our endless conversation I picked up a lot of new information about the South Pole, and what trials and ordeals I can expect. Though the South Pole is generally colder than the North, according to Rick the North is the more difficult enterprise.

The reasons for the different temperatures are complex.

The Antarctic – which is where the South Pole is – is an independent continent of ice-covered land. Its highest point above sea-level is over 9000 ft, and cold increases with height, (the higher you go, the colder it gets). Conversely, the North Pole is an icefield which lies at sea level and has no significant heights. Here the cold is alleviated by the surrounding ocean, while the Antarctic is denied this advantage.

Expeditions to the South Pole usually leave in January, as that is the summer there, and sometimes you are greeted by a balmy temperature of between -22 and -40F. The Vinson Massiv can get really cold, but weatherwise, according to Rick, it is the North Pole that is tougher. I believe him, as he's been to both Poles several times, so he must know what he's talking about. The most difficult journey of all is going to the North Pole not on skis, but using a dog-sled. Almost everybody imagines that the dog-sled would be easier – why use this method otherwise – but it's not true. The actual advantage of using dogs is not that it's easier but that it's faster. At the Poles speed can save lives, and also with a dog-sled more supplies can be carried. It's not true that the driver of the sled has nothing to do but sit there and whip the dogs. His main duty is to aid the dogs, because the terrain of the North Pole icefields is so very tough.

The ice floes move, collide and pile up constantly, so you can't expect to travel over a smooth, flat icefield as you could at the South Pole. The surface of the ice has been weathered into waves, and at each one it is the driver's duty to get the sled over the crest. But, at the Antarctic, an expedition on skis is predominantly a mental challenge, and anyway, dogs are not allowed here. The monotonous, unchanging landscape puts a huge burden on the psyche. At the North Pole, one of the greatest difficulties is that the ice is constantly moving south. If you've covered ten miles a day, you'll certainly lose four during the night, as, while you sleep, the ice will move that distance south. This "4 steps forward, 1 step back" progress, many people find hard to bear.

From all I've just heard, I think I'll decide to go to the North Pole on a dog-sled. Rick agrees, and says I'll still have time to do the South Pole, and that, after the North Pole, it will seem easy. Let's hope he's right.

After our discussion, Rick takes me to the local fast-food restaurant, and then one of his staff drives me to O'Hare Airport. On the way, he puts on Motorhead at full blast, which I don't mind at all, as I like this sort of music at that volume.

So, to the sound of rock and roll, I say goodbye to Chicago.

At the airport I am immediately ripped off for \$3.00, this being the price of renting a trolley. The moment I enter, a porter spots my gun case, and ,with suspicious haste, rushes to help me. I soon learn that the gun case will cost me an extra \$40.00. What can I do - I cough up. At security, they open the case in front of me; they admire the gun, and are particularly keen on the artistically air-brushed skulls and snake-heads on the riflescope. They nod and smile broadly, acknowledging the excellent work. I can see things are going well.

However, when I turn to the rest of my luggage, I see that my porter friend is shaking his head in sorrow. I'm over the limit, he says - spitting half-chewed pieces of popcorn at me as he speaks - so I have to pay the excess-baggage charge. This comes to exactly \$40.00! I make a wry face, and try to bargain; I don't like this system. His smile gets wider and wider; he thinks the money is already in his pocket. But there is another solution: if I give him \$20.00, that will sort it all out, and it will also be cheaper for me. Having no other options, I pay up. He disappears with my luggage and gun into the labyrinth of the airport, and I just pray that my \$20.00 has smoothed their journey. Before leaving, he even offers me some popcorn.

In 1935, it took Széchenyi ten days to get from Chicago to Seward, in Alaska. Today, if we take a plane, instead of a boat or train, and go to Anchorage, not Seward, we will fly exactly 2823.5 miles. The plane covers this distance in 6hrs 38mins.

Alaska is still a long, long way away.

200Expedition Headquarters
Room 2162, Anchorage Hilton
500 West 3rd Avenue
Anchorage, Alaska
USA
28th July

I'M IN ALASKA!

Finally, after so many years of waiting, I'm here; my gun has arrived safely, and everything is ready for my big adventure!

My Alaskan welcome is so dramatic, that the moment I leave the airport I'm wide awake, even though, yet again, I've skipped over several time-zones. Now, I'm ten hours behind Hungarian time, and it's difficult to adapt.

Alaska is wonderful.

I knew I was coming to a beautiful country, but the journey from the airport to the hotel is so breathtaking; so like a picture-postcard; so Alaskan, that this Alaska-loving hunter is completely unprepared for the reality of it all. So far, I've experienced almost nothing of this marvellous land, but already, the little that I have seen has exceeded all my hopes and expectations - and they were not small!

Széchenyi, talking about the Taj Mahal, in his book "Nahar", says that reality rarely lives up to your expectations.

But Alaska is special, because it instantly gives far more than you ask for.

Despite it being night-time, the sky is bright with strange light effects. Opposite the road running into the city, I can see the craggy, jagged outline of mountains, with odd cloud-formations behind them; half-way up is a layer of mist, floating like a skirt. At the airport, for the benefit of the newly-arrived hunter, were several display cases showing the local fauna, and in the lobby of hotel there were two stuffed bears standing beside each other, one Brown, one Polar.

This is it: this is Alaska, a real land for hunters, a true wilderness!

It might seem strange that I have such a positive impression of this country after only being here for a few hours, and travelling just a few miles, but it's first impressions that count. Your image of a place can change with time, but it's your first impressions that will define your outlook. I'm sure I'll have a very, very good time, now that I'm finally in Alaska!

At the airport I was met by Andy Morrison, who is organizing my next ten days. My arrival was not entirely smooth, as my gun appeared to have been lost. Luckily, it wasn't, but it did greatly add to my knowledge of gun-transport within America. When I was in Chicago I waited 15 mins. before asking where my gun was, and being told that it was in the oversize-luggage department. And so it was.

Here, in Anchorage, things are different; here they have your gun under the counter of the Alaskan Airlines desk, while you've been waiting beneath the oversize-luggage sign. The lesson is: don't worry if you can't find your gun straight away - it will turn up. My popcorn-eating friend in Chicago did a good job.

While I was chasing around after my gun, Andy - neither of us knew what the other looked like - had me paged several times over the tannoy, but I was so engrossed in my search that I didn't hear any of them. Finally, Andy guessed what was happening, and tracked me down to the airline desk, and the panic was over.

Andy is a professional journey-organizer, a survival-expert and a mountain-guide. He's also an acquaintance of Jennifer Estrada, Cabela's Outdoor Adventure travel organizer. On Jennifer's advice I

got in touch with him because, as I mentioned in the first entry in my diary, I definitely want to spend a few days seeing Alaska before I start to hunt. Jennifer's advice was spot on: Andy arranged "everything" from the first minute.

He literally took the burden from my shoulders when he put my gun-case, and the Peli 1200 box with all my ammunition, into the trunk of his small truck. I shan't be needing them for the next few days, and, as they are large and heavy, they'd get in the way during all the travelling around. Andy will see that the two cases will be waiting for me at the start of my first hunt.

This is such a hunter-friendly country!

There's no need for a special permit to move my gun and ammunition and no need to fill in special forms at the police station, so I don't have to waste half a day there. My general impression is that, here, the authorities do not consider me a potential source of danger, just because I've got a gun.

In twenty minutes, driven by Andy, I was in the Anchorage Hilton, one of the best hotels in the city. This hotel is going to be of key-importance to me in the months to come, so even during this preparatory phase it merits the name "Expedition Headquarters". I'll come back several times, and some of my equipment and civilian clothes will always be kept here. I expected, and am expecting, the arrival of various parcels, either ordered on the internet, or being sent by Cabala's. I've hardly brought any equipment or hunting clothes with me, so it is vitally important that all these things arrive in time.

There were, however, a few problems.

For some reason, Cabela's was the only parcel not to have arrived, and everything I need for my trip is in it. I don't know how the mistake has happened, but when office hours have begun I will call Paula, the only person who knows all about my order, and we'll try to work something out. In this hotel my room is again high up on the 21st floor, in a part called the Anchorage Tower. The view here is so much nicer than the one in Chicago! While I'm writing this, I can see, over on my left, one of the ports of Anchorage. At dawn, half-asleep, I was soon woken up by the ships' sirens. I'm constantly looking out of the window with my binoculars, watching the sea, the city and the harbour. This room is a strategic point, and there is so much to see that it constantly distracts me from writing up my diary. Indeed, for me, this view is a unique experience, with fog lying over the sea, and on the far side of the bay the mountains thrusting their dark peaks up through the mist. It's worth waking up early, just for this!

The railway runs beneath the hotel, but how disturbing it will be, I can't say, as I haven't yet seen anything on the tracks. Grand Central it certainly isn't.

Before going to have breakfast - breakfast is critical for me; if it isn't any good, that's the last time I'll go to that hotel - I'll give you a brief description of the city that I'm about to explore.

Anchorage is an odd place: it's on the coast, but doesn't have a proper sea-shore. At least, not always. Towards the sea are wide mud-flats, visible at low-tide; they have the second highest tidal variation in the world here, around 40ft. - as far as I can judge at the moment, it's high tide - so if anyone wants to go swimming they'll have to struggle over all the mud. It's lucky that very few want to: though, for Alaska, it has mild winters, between 5 and 19F, even in summer it's hardly beach weather. With its population of 227,000, Anchorage deserves the name, The Big Apple of the North (copyright NYC).

What made the city so attractive to me, even before I'd seen it, was the fact that the average age here is only 32, so it is a city of my generation. This is true of all Alaska.

Anchorage is the starting point for every Alaskan expedition, because, as the slogan puts it, "Anchorage: 30 mins. from Alaska". It's easy to get anywhere from here; it is a hub for transport, tourism and the economy, and there's no doubt that it is the beating heart of the state. The city was founded in 1914, to build the railway, and operated as a port to receive all the incoming supplies. That's why it was first called an anchorage, a term which stuck with it, and became its proper name. It's still Alaska's most important port, with 95% of all imports passing through it.

The city, like many others in America, was born on the drawing board, and follows a grid-plan. For many Europeans such a plan makes American cities seem cold and soulless, but this type of lay-out, with its numbered streets, makes it virtually impossible to get lost.

If a foreigner happens to be wandering around Alaska, it's only a matter of time before he bumps into a military institution. The Russians are close by - in fact, few people know that they actually discovered Alaska - and the Americans live in constant fear of a Russian invasion - which will never happen. Having given the Americans Alaska, on 20th June 1867, practically for nothing, they are hardly likely to use force to get it back now. But the locals won't believe this, and would rather build more air-bases. This spring, on the index.hu site, I read that the ex-KGB agent, Igor Panarin, predicts that soon the US will collapse into six parts, and Alaska will return to Russia! This threat really shouldn't be taken too seriously: Panarin resurrects this prophecy every ten years. It's an obsession of his.

In the city, the military side of Alaska confronts the foreigner in no time; there are two bases near by: the Elmendorf Air-Force Base and Fort Richardson.

As I write, planes are practising military exercises in the Alaskan air-space, turning above the bay;

they make my window shake.

27th March 1964 is a black day in the history of Anchorage. The famous Good Friday Earthquake was the second strongest on record, registering 9.2 on the Richter Scale. At the collision point of the Pacific and North American plates terrifying forces were released. In certain places the ground dropped 35 ft. During the quake 131 citizens died, and in the tsunami that followed, a further 106 Alaskans, along with 16 people in other areas, also lost their lives. Later, on my journey, I went to the city of Valdez, which had been completely destroyed, and was then rebuilt 4.5 miles away from its original site.

Anchorage's age of prosperity began with the building of the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline System (TAPS). This monumental undertaking connects Prudhoe Bay, on the Beaufort Sea, with the always ice-free port of Valdez, over a length of 800 miles. In 1968 oil had been found in Prudhoe Bay and this was the only practical way of transporting it. It was built between 1975 and 1977, cost \$8bn, and employed 21,000 construction workers, 31 of whom lost their lives during the work. A few incidents of sabotage occurred during its building and running; for example, on 4th October 2001, a drunken hunter shot a hole in the pipe, releasing 950 cubic meters of oil into the environment. This case is all the more surprising as the TAPS was supposedly bullet-proof ... Anchorage cleverly took advantage of the boom accompanying the building work; living standards shot up, and the infrastructure was expanded. As the sun rises over Anchorage the light changes, and the sea-mist quickly rolls in and soon reaches the city.

Near the large airport is Float Plane Airport, a smaller one for sea-planes. We passed it on our way from the airport. 67% of Alaska can only be reached by air, so without these machines life would come to a standstill. I read somewhere that 6% of Alaskans have some sort of air vehicle; most of these are sea-planes, which start to leave their nests around 7.30 each morning. They fly over the hotel, trying to avoid the fighters.

Afternoon

Anchorage is a very hospitable town!

It reminds me very much of Reykjavik, in Iceland. The houses are no higher than 2 or three stories, so you shouldn't think in terms of a European city. Everything is on a human scale. My hotel is downtown, giving me the opportunity to explore the area. I've got the whole of today off, that's to say, I don't have any fixed plans: this day is for gathering my impressions of the city, and I intend to take full advantage of it.

The locals must think I'm crazy, because, as I walk along, I'm grinning from ear to ear. I like everything! And when I'm standing around in the middle of the road, clutching my map, and the traffic-lights say no-crossing, the cars don't even honk at me. They wait until I've decided what to do, or drive around me. There are about three streets of gift-shops downtown, all next to each other; besides the

usual tourist junk, there are some very tempting, up-market handicrafts, at astronomical prices. I found a fantastic Mommoth tusk carving, which I can just see on my sideboard ;;; \$10,000! The knives here are of very high quality; in the shops I've seen some excellent examples, made by local manufacturers. Everywhere I go there are grizzly bears, giant moose and caribou; sometimes they are made of wood or plush, carved from stone or bone, or just painted. Alaska's most well-known animals turn up everywhere, in endless variations, feeding the local tourist-trade.

Unfortunately, because of their size and weight, my cases are not easily portable. On the way here I had to pay excess-baggage charges, but that's the least of my problems. My suitcases are now so heavy and large, that I'm barely able to move around with them on my own. What makes it even worse, is that tomorrow a huge parcel will arrive from Cabela's. (During the day, Paula found out who had made the mistake, and where, and has arranged for my order to be delivered overnight from another part of the US. This is what I call service!) On top of all this, is the constant arrival of the things I've ordered on the internet. I don't remember buying so much. I've got no idea where I'll put all these new clothes and equipment. As I've already said, anything not needed for the hunt can be left at the hotel, so that should help a bit. During any expedition, the moment always comes when you have to jettison some of your luggage. The storeroom of the Hilton will not be a perfect solution, however, as this morning I've started shopping again ... Never a good sign.

I'll either have to hire a gang of porters, or solve the problem myself. So I went to the nearest post-office and asked the Post-master for his largest box, and started to fill it with all the stuff I want to send home. It's better to get rid of it now, rather than drag it around with me through various airports over the coming months.

In the afternoon I took a taxi to the Alaska Tactical Shop to order a Nightforce NXS 12-44 x 56 tactical riflescope, because while preparing for the trip, I've begun to enjoy long-distance precision shooting so much that I want to take it up more seriously. The taxi-driver is a pleasant, cheerful old chap, who does this work to boost his pension. He's happy with his life; he's hunted a lot and has even shot two bears, which was quite sufficient for him. When he drops me off he makes me promise to call him when I want to go back. I successfully order the riflescope, and the shop-assistants call my taxi-driver friend, who this time arrives with his wife (they are going out somewhere). As we pull up in front of the hotel, I suddenly remember that I've run out of cigars, so I ask my old friend to take me on to a tobacconist's. Then, quite unexpectedly, he switches off the meter, saying that I've paid him enough for today, and I'm his guest for this ride.

This is what Alaskans are really like!

From my room, using a pair of binoculars, I can see as far as the muddy river running beside the port.

On its banks, ignoring the rain, half-in and half-out of the water, are some fishermen, constantly flicking their rods, waiting for their prey.

And not in vain, either!

One of them has just caught a huge fish, though how any fish can survive in this shallow, muddy water, I can't imagine.

Rain-clouds are descending on Anchorage.

Watching the goings-on of a busy port and a cargo railway station is as engrossing as watching big-game. Slowly, I become familiar with the routes, and sirens, of the ships. The heavier the rain or the thicker the fog, the louder the sirens sound. The real racket starts when a train is running along the coastal track, and then the two - one from the sea, the other from the rails - try to outdo each other in noise.

It is a siren competition.





Expedition Headquarters
Anchorage Hilton
29th July
Morning

Today did not start well.

The WiFi in my room packed up. I tried to get it to work, but, despite several attempts, I failed. At my request, they sent up an engineer, who confirmed that it wasn't working. After several brief phone calls, it turned out that there was a problem in the system, and they were already working on it, but they had no idea when the connection would be restored.

It's quite inconvenient, as I'm in the middle of a lengthy correspondence with my organizers, and I won't be in during the day. It's also a bit worrying that the parcel from Cabela's hasn't arrived. I'll be in real trouble if it doesn't get here. The pretty black girl at reception tried to calm me down, explaining that the "overnight express" (the service delivering a parcel within one night), doesn't always work in Alaska, because of the weather.

My meeting last night with Eddie Grasser, the president of Safari Club International, Alaska Chapter, did not take place. At 7.00 I was waiting in the hotel lounge, but he never came, and I didn't know why. By the time I got back to my room there was an email from him waiting for me. According to this, he had been out in his small plane, when the weather became so bad that his take-off from Valdez has been delayed, forcing him to miss our evening appointment. I asked if he could meet me tonight instead, but because of the problem with the internet connection I can't check his reply.

The sky is almost constantly overcast, and, yesterday, we only had a few hours of bright sunshine. It is usually drizzling, but that doesn't seem to bother the locals: for a short walk in the street no-one bothers with a raincoat, and I haven't seen a single umbrella. I saw a young couple walking in one of the parks in Anchorage; when the rain began they did not even alter their pace, but kept on ambling along, oblivious to their surroundings. In Alaska, rain is part of everyday life, but at the same time, it's not very cold, the temperature being around 60 F.

It rarely gets higher.



Expedition Headquarters
Anchorage Hilton
29th July
Afternoon

Today has turned into a fantastic day, which I'll never forget!

At 9.00 I took a taxi to Anchorage Zoo, which cost me a fortune. This is the only zoo in North America which specializes in displaying all the game species in the north. It's an excellent opportunity for a prospective hunter to check out the species he's going after. Body-size can be difficult to judge from a photograph, but it's vital to have some idea when, for instance, considering the angle of fire.

From the very start of my arrangements, I knew I'd come here. I especially asked Andy to make sure this visit was included. I have a small surprise planned, which I hope will repay some of the pleasure I'll get from my visit to this state. I have decided to adopt a wolf! This will enable me to help support the zoo, and indirectly, the game in Alaska.

Carrie Smeldon, the head of the adoption project, was appointed to accompany me, and, to my surprise, when I arrived at the gate she hadn't turned up. So I began phoning around to find out who had misunderstood whom, when I discovered that she was waiting for me in the lounge of the Hilton. That's a journey of at least twenty minutes, so I had time to look around the entrance, read a few notices and talk to some of the employees.

Alaska Zoo is a completely independent institution; they don't get a single dollar in support from the state, and don't even ask for any. Without exception, all the animals live in runs that are identical to their natural habitats; there is absolutely no trace of concrete anywhere. Almost all the animals arrived at the zoo after having some sort of mishap. The park is full of orphaned, abandoned and injured animals, as well as others at risk, and provides an excellent chance for observation and study for both professional, and amateur, researchers. It has been in existence since 1968, and plays an important in giving Anchorage schoolchildren a proper education into the fauna of their land.

When Carrie arrived she handed me the certificate which would make me the adoptive parent of Nikolai, a young male wolf. I received a document giving me the all details of his life as well as those of his pack; then the guided tour began.

We saw all the well-known species of the north, including those that I most wanted to hunt. The Dall sheep - born in captivity - stood watching us just a few paces from the end of its run, giving me a good chance to study it. What was most strange to me was that these animals - unlike those languishing in so many other zoos - were not standing around looking depressed, but were running about, eating

and drinking, enjoying their lives. I got to meet the keepers and found them all to be committed and dedicated people. On my first visit Nikolai welcomed us by jumping about; he obviously likes his his keepers.

I was most impressed by the brown bear. It's a huge animal; I never realised it was so big. The stuffed ones in museums, and the smaller sub-species in european zoos give no indication of its true size.

The damp earth squelches noisily beneath its massive feet which are the size of baking trays; its claws are enormous, and its head is the size of a barrel.

I'd better watch out when I'm hunting.

After looking at a few more animals we walk up a gently rising path and then, suddenly, I spot my greatest enemy: the Yak. Memories come flooding back ...

April 2008

Far from here, over 5000 miles away, I'm climbing a mountain in the ranges of Nepal; loaded with rucksacks, we struggle to complete our daily mileage. We are on our way to the base camp on Mt.

Everest, and have just started our journey on the difficult slope between Phakding and Namche Bazar. Gadjin, the number 2 sherpa leader, and I have left the rest of the group behind. We are both enjoying the challenge and competing between ourselves to get to the finish first. But, up in the mountains it's not a smart idea to compete against a sherpa, especially at a height of over 9500ft., going up a mountain, and loaded with a rucksack. At these altitudes you start to feel the lack of oxygen.

I really do my best, but I can't keep up with Gadjin. He's at least 300ft in front of me, when we suddenly come across a yak caravan ahead of us. The baggage tied to the yaks' backs suggests that they are part of an expedition attempting to reach the summit. Gadjin reaches the line of animals and begins to zigzag between them with confident steps. He has already overtaken the leader, and with this advantage is proceeding unobstructed towards Namche-Bazar.

Now it's my turn.

I overtake the first four or five yaks easily, but then the gaps between the animals get smaller. They block the whole width of the path, climbing slowly under the weight of their huge burdens. Leaping from one side of the path to the other, I am searching for a place to overtake, just like in a Formula 1 race. There is no gap and I have to slow down.

It's no good. Gadjin will reach the finish very soon!

But now... a narrow space has opened between the animals... I jump into the gap. I have to dodge a baggage-laden flank, and then avoid a nervous head. I look to the left hoping there is room for me on the side of the path.

Forward!

With a quick burst of speed I move towards the left side of the path, but then I spot a previously unnoticed yak to my right... too late... a lightening move from the animal... a thump on my thigh... I'm petrified with fear. The yak's horn is stuck in the leg of my mountaineering shorts.

It takes a long moment to realise that I'm not injured, but it was only a question of millimeters.

With one single, desperate jump I leap out of the danger zone. Hearing my frightened yells Gadjin comes running towards me at a breathtaking speed, and then - just like a trained cage-fighter - he aims two kicks at the head of the animal that is bothering me.

I watch all of this standing safely behind a tree and confirm that I am undamaged, apart from a rip in my shorts.

Since then I have had a great respect for yaks.

Later Gadjin tells me that these animals don't like it when someone unexpectedly comes from behind them into their line of vision. They are very easily annoyed. Around yaks you should always move slowly, keeping out of the range of their horns. For him it's second nature, as he grew up with them, and during the following weeks I was constantly having to yell to to him discipline some irritated or rebellious yak.

Anyone looking at this Alaskan yak might well think it a dull, tame creature. Standing there peacefully, no-one could recognise its evil ambitions. I, however, have seen its dark side, and know very well that it is only waiting for its chance.

I find it more reassuring to have the yak fenced in than the grizzly bear.

After a very professional tour, the treat of the day is still waiting for me: I am going to meet Nikolai! Carrie is going to take me to an area closed off to other visitors, and after the usual cell-phone conversations Nikolai's two keepers turn up, a young man and an exceptionally pretty girl (I haven't seen anyone this pretty in Alaska so far). Two wolves, Nikolai and Windy, are called into a lock, which the two keepers also enter. Nikolai is the girl's favourite, and he goes straight to her. The two animals are led out and walked along the meandering path like pet dogs.

The only difference is that their leashes are thick steel chains.

The two beasts are perfectly behaved, and do not try to make use of their huge strength. But if, by chance, they happen to tug on their chains, the keepers are hardly able to hold them back. They're much bigger than I expected, and their proportions are quite different from dogs': they are longer and leaner, and their skulls and jaws are immensely strong. And they do not stink at all - they just have a distinctive smell.

We walk down the hillside, and as I'm not yet allowed to approach them I walk a few feet behind. The girl explains to me that though they are tame, they are still very much wild animals. They aren't yet used to my presence, and my smell and movements are unfamiliar. If a wolf feels threatened its instincts give it only one option: attack.

At the bottom of the hill the keepers make them lie down and start stroking and scratching them as if they were playful puppies. Nikolai is looking at me nervously - perhaps he doesn't know that I've adopted him - but Windy is more relaxed. The young man signals me to approach Windy. My heart is in my mouth and my pulse is racing wildly. Up close she is even bigger than I thought. Carefully, I touch her. Her fur is very coarse, more like bristles; in parts it reminds me of a wild boar. Windy happily tolerates my presence, and seems pleased to be the center of attention of two people. She makes no hostile movements, so I start to relax as well.

We get up and head back towards their run.

The weather is wonderful and the result of the experience is that I'm in feeling quite euphoric. I have stroked a live wolf in Alaska! Windy is a lovely little wolf, and we are now good friends. At the run the girl says it would be a shame for me not to have stroked my adopted wolf, and so she makes Nikolai lie down and starts to scratch him. He doesn't feel a bit threatened. I slowly move forward - the girl tells me to approach his head so that he can see me - and I begin to stroke his enormous head. There is an interesting bump on the top of their heads; supposedly dogs once had it too, but it has now disappeared. They have higher intellectual capacities than dogs, and the ratio of their brains to their bodyweight is also greater, mainly because wolves have to memorise their entire territory and all their smell patterns.

I've never seen such beautiful eyes; Windy's are yellow, like those of a werewolf in a horror movie; Nikolai's are blue. Despite his frightening appearance, Nikolai is now completely relaxed, and I've been scratching his head for ten minutes. He's all muscle, tendons and bone, there's not an ounce of fat on him. He even lets me lift his lips to examine his teeth.

These are serious teeth! Beside these any dogs' teeth would look small.

When I've finished stroking them, my two new pals are returned to the lock, but I however, have other jobs to do: I have to feed the the wolves. There on a trolley is half of a frozen caribou; some pieces are in a bucket but the rest has not been cut up. We walk through the spacious run and at certain places I put down a pile of meat. The girl says that if I shoot something - they know I'm a hunter and do not resent it - I would be welcome to send the meat to them. Unfortunately I cannot promise to do this as I'll be very far from here.

They deliberately do not feed the wolves individually, but let them all eat at the same time. It's important for them to establish their own pack hierarchy. Because the animals are well-kept they share the meat without any dangerous fighting.

I've spent a wonderful day at the Alaska Zoo, and Carrie kindly drives me back to the hotel.

There is news waiting for me.

The good news is that the parcel from Cabela's has arrived.

The bad news is that it is so large and heavy that even the giant-sized hotel porter almost broke his back carrying it, staggering from wall to wall as he came into my room. It contains just about everything that I ordered, though some of the goods were out of stock and I'll have to get them from local hunting shops tomorrow - it looks like I've cleaned out Cabela's!

All the sizes are correct, and the quality is obviously excellent. Certainly, any lack of hunting success will not be due to my clothes or equipment.

I've really bought a huge amount of stuff; I might have overdone it a little. I do like to have the correct clothing for particular activities, weather and field conditions, but I'm not quite sure that six different hunting jackets and coats are really necessary for a successful hunt. After getting rid of all the packing material, the weight, thankfully, is somewhat reduced: they use a lot of it here and I fill an entire box with this junk, which I then have to get removed from my room. Slowly, my second box, which I'm going to send home, is filling up with my excess stuff. Luckily there's a post-office near the hotel, so I won't need to hire a truck to get it there.

The other bit of good news is that the internet is back on.

Eddie - the Alaskan S.C.I. president - apologises again for cancelling the meeting, and we arrange another for 6.30 tomorrow morning in the hotel. Hopefully nothing will happen to stop this one

But there's a message with bad news from Andy .

Because of heavy rains near the town of Seward, large boulders have tumbled on to the rail tracks and so Alaska Rail has stopped all trains until Friday - today is Wednesday - though there are buses to carry the passengers. I'm not pleased about this. One of the aims of my trip is to see some of the places and routes visited by Széchenyi all those years ago. "To follow in his legendary footsteps" as Andy would put it, but Széchenyi travelled between Seward and Anchorage by train, not bus. The apology from Alaska Railroad is scant comfort. Andy says this is just something you have to get used to in Alaska. This is a remote country with little urbanisation, where the unexpected often occurs because of weather and other adverse circumstances. That's why Eddie couldn't get to our meeting, and why, on Friday, I'm obliged to take the bus instead of the more convenient, and interesting, train.

Ted Heinz, the manager of the Alaska Tactical Shop has written to me: my Nightforce order is ready, and when I get back to Anchorage he's willing to bring it to the hotel personally, any day I like. As well as this, should I have a problem moving around Anchorage or getting to the airport, or indeed, if I get into any situation where I need help, I'm welcome to telephone or write to him and he'll do his best to

help me. If I make many more friends here, the Anchorage taxi drivers will be out of a job. Ted also mentions that there is a Hungarian girl - Klara - living in Anchorage, and working at the Paris Bakery Cafe, not far from his shop. It's useful to know, and if I have time I'll pay her visit.

As I've already said, there was a misunderstanding this morning about where I was meeting Carrie, but it all got resolved. Andy has emailed me to say that he's left a message for me on the hotel phone, and that if the red light is on it means there's a message. I had in fact noticed that there was something flashing on the damned phone, but I hadn't bothered with it. In my office at home there's always some gadget flashing or ringing, and I haven't come all this way to watch the local phones blinking away. Anyway, when I listened to the message all I could hear was an incomprehensible mutter. Even if I'd heard it first thing in the morning I wouldn't have been any better informed The weather today has been excellent, and the chill of the morning has gone. When I go out to have a hamburger for my dinner - I always have a hamburger - the bright sunshine is dazzling all the passers-by, and the sky is almost crystal-clear.

Just like Hawaii.

Expedition Headquarters
Anchorage Hilton
30th July

I have some free time this morning, so I'm going to write a few lines on the history of Alaska. I've tried to gather interesting pieces of information about events and history, the sort of things you won't find in Hungarian reference books or on the news.

Alaska joined the Union on 3rd January 1959, exactly fifty years ago, and became the 49th state. This year they're planning huge celebrations all over the state to mark the anniversary. The name of the state comes from a native word, Alyeska, which means dry land, a big field, and big country. As names go, this is perfect as no-one would accuse it of being small and crowded. The area of dry land amounts to almost 580,000 million sq.miles - it's the largest state in the U.S. - and, according to the census of 2000, has a population of only 626,000. From these facts we can see that the average density of population is about 0.92 people per sq.mile. (that's if my calculations are right). In this part of the world your neighbors do not live next door.

To show how immense the distances are, here are some statistics: the greatest measurement from north to south is 1500 miles, and from east to west 800 miles. For a useful comparison, the distance from Budapest (capital of Hungary) to Moscow is 1230 miles.

The indigenous people arrived via the land bridge that once existed in the Bering Strait, which enabled them to walk across from Siberia. Nobody denies that the races of the two continents are related. Alaska was discovered by Vitus Bering, and in the summer of 1741 he anchored his ship at Kodiak Island, famous to hunters for its huge bears. In 1784 the Russians established a permanent settlement on the island, which in 1792 became the administrative center for the area now known as Russian-America. The colonists were constantly fighting with the native peoples, the trade routes were long and dangerous, and on top of all that the Russian Empire was in financial difficulties, all of which made it impossible for them to hold on to their distant colony. The U.S. bought the land and so the Russians left. They didn't sell it for merely for a symbolic sum because of momentary insanity, but because they simply could not afford to finance the military and police authorities needed by this huge country.

Despite all of this, there is still a Russian-speaking minority living in Alaska, and it's easy to find a cemetery containing graves bearing Cyrillic lettering, a reminder of Russia's faded glory.

After the deal was done the U.S. flag was raised on 18th October 1867, in what is now Sitka. This is Alaska Day, the most important day of the year up here, and I'm sorry that I'm not going to be here to experience the hospitality of this great state.

The American political elite have never had much of a soft spot for Alaska, which is why it took so long for it to be recognised as an independent state; before that, for decades it had been a territory, without the rights that it would acquire with statehood.

Between the 6th June 1942 and the 15th August 1943, there took place one of the least-known battles of the 2nd World War, The Battle of the Aleutian Islands. It's called "The Forgotten Battle" because at the time there were many other conflicts of greater strategic importance and size taking place which have since gone on to dominate the history and memoirs of the period.

The Japanese launched their attack on Alaska mainly to divert the attention of the American forces from the Battle of Midway. On the 3rd June 1942 the Japanese began with a bombing raid on Dutch Harbour, on the island of Unalaska, in which 78 people unfortunately died. On the 6th June enemy troops landed at Kiska, going on to the Attu Islands and taking 42 prisoners who were sent to Japanese prison camps. But in fact, the American Government had already forced the local population to leave their homes, putting them in refugee camps in south Alaska, where, disastrously, no proper provision had been made for them, with the result that the majority died from starvation and disease. This is a dark period of Alaskan history.

On the 11th May 1943 the Americans began their campaign to reclaim Attu, from the airbase on Adak Island. This was made more difficult as the Americans didn't have the correct landing craft, and the

equipment that had arrived was unsuitable for the local conditions. By the end of the conflict one quarter of the American forces, 549 men, had died in the battle for Attu. As usual, the Japanese refused to surrender, and eventually only 29 were taken prisoner. The others either died fighting or committed suicide.

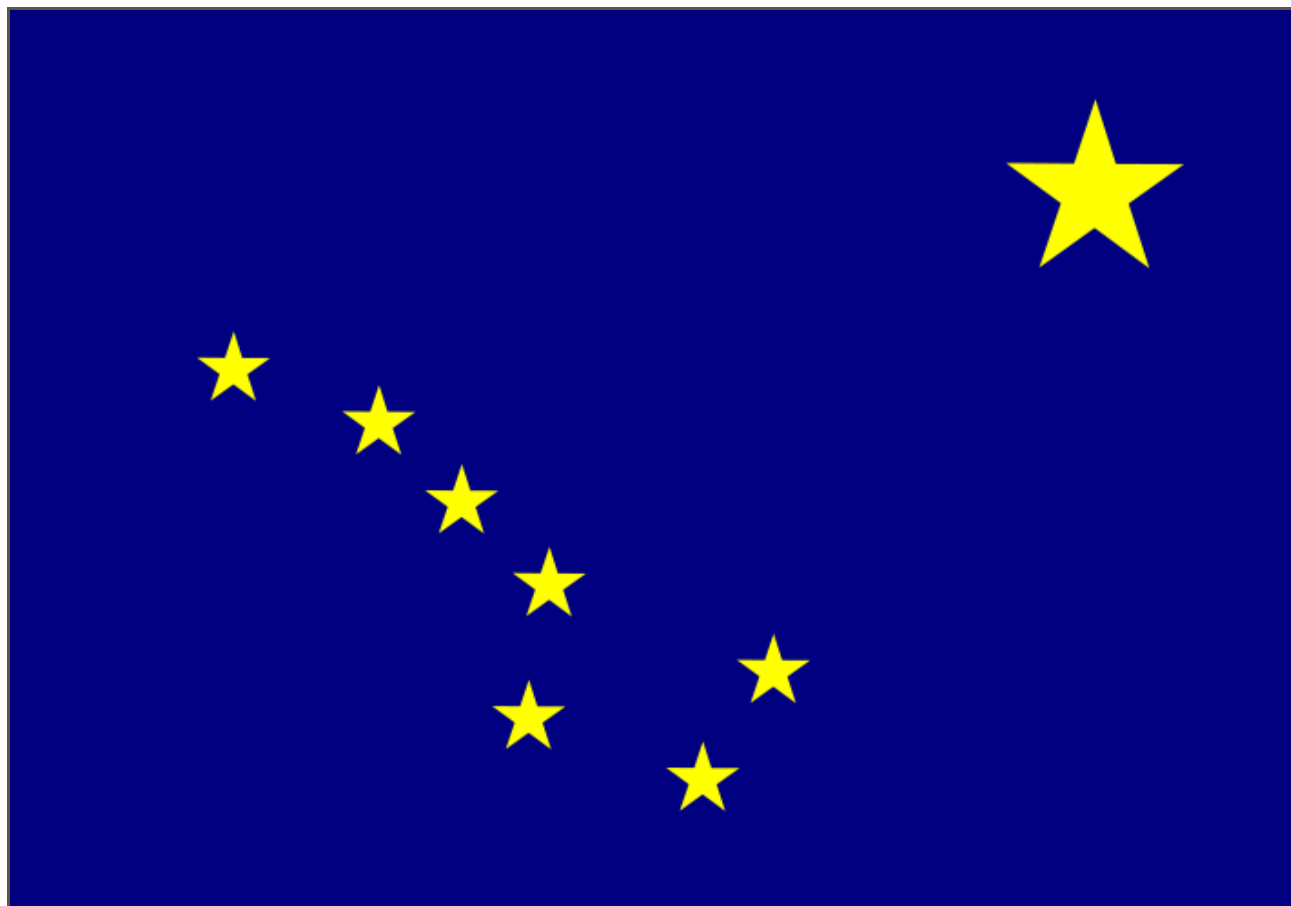
On the 15th August 1943 at the start of Operation Visko, a large American force, including veterans of the Alaskan Combat Intelligence Platoon, (who bore the cheerful nickname "Castner's Cutthroats") arrived in the region. They found Kiska deserted. It turned out that the Japanese had already evacuated their troops on the 28th July, so during the run-up to the operation the Americans had spent a week bombing deserted positions.

That was a brief outline of the Battle of the Aleutian Islands, which perhaps shows that it was yet another battle of the 2nd World War that was pointless, misguided, expensive and high in casualties.

Alaska's departing governor is Sarah Palin, the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate for 2008. Now we know the election results, but a small consolation for Sarah might be that her trademark glasses have become a cult object in America, to the delight of both the designer and manufacturer. But what endears Sarah to hunters is not her glasses, but her policies and ideas on hunting. In 2007 she approved a bounty of \$150 for every wolf shot from a helicopter. Sarah has very good connections with the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game, which is in charge of hunting affairs, and backed by expert opinion, she permitted biologists to shoot wolves from helicopters to regulate their numbers. In doing this she contravened a 35 year-old federal prohibition.

The militant and ultra-green organisation, The Defenders of Wildlife, prepared for a battle, during the course of which, George Miller, the Representative for California, proposed another federal bill which would have stopped such hunting permanently. Unfortunately for him, a federal judge ruled in 2008 that this type of hunting was legal, though he did set limits to its extent.

What's certain is that I will never hunt a wolf on the ground, let alone from a helicopter, in Alaska or anywhere else in the world. But I'm pleased that Alaska is governed by a woman who supports hunting on a scientific basis, rather than by those misguided environmentalists who want to have all hunting banned. Sarah - who often goes hunting herself - voluntarily ended her term as governor on 26th July 2009, but I truly hope that her ideas will have a lasting effect on the hunting policies of the Alaskan state.



Her resignation is one of the current mysteries of internal politics in America, and she herself has done little to clarify the matter. There are various theories, one of which is that she is preparing for a presidential bid in 2012. If it happens, and she wins, that will be the end of those organisations advocating control of guns and hunting.

The Alaskan flag is definitely one of the most beautiful in the world. You hardly ever find a flag which sums up a country so simply, completely, clearly and appropriately, and which doesn't force the viewer into attempting to decode various abstract concepts.

In 1926 Alaska held a competition to design its flag. The winner was a 13 year-old boy, Bennie Benson, from the village of Chgnik, and the flag's clarity is probably due to his young age.

The blue ground symbolises the sky, the endless polar nights, the sea, the lakes and the rivers, as well as the Forget-me-not , the state flower. There are eight stars, seven small and one large, all a golden color, referring to the importance of that precious metal in the history of the state. The seven small stars show one the most easily recognizable and best-known constellations of the Northern

Hemisphere, the Great Bear, which Alaskans can see for months on end during the long, dark polar nights.

The Great Bear also suggests strength and perseverance, virtues without which this remote land would never have been made habitable. The eighth and largest star, placed in the flag's top right corner, is the North Star, which has always guided hunters, explorers and gold-prospectors while they penetrate and travel through the Alaskan wilderness. Alaskans take their flag very seriously, and are so proud of it that even the state anthem is based on it. The title is "Alaska's Flag" and the words were written in 1935, and the music in 1955. The text not only describes the flag, but emphasises the unity between the native population and the later immigrants. It's worth listening to it on youtube.com; it's a beautiful melody.

" Alaska's flag – to Alaskans dear,
The simple flag of a last frontier"
(Alaska's Flag)

Finally, this morning, I managed to meet up with Eddie, the Alaskan S.C.I. president, and we had breakfast together.

His post is very prestigious because, despite the fact that it is an international organisation, it is mainly an American body, and its presence is visible everywhere. Alaska holds a special place in the American hunting community and its culture. Eddie, however - like every other Alaskan I've met - is an informal and cheerful man and we become friends within minutes. He gives me some interesting facts about local hunting, such as that, in Alaska, 2000 women - that's not a mistake - hunt regularly. The voices of those opposed to hunting get stronger and stronger, but Eddie feels that in Alaska its future is safe. At present he is a state official, but he used to be a professional hunting guide. Sadly, he has never hunted in Hungary, but I made him promise that one day he would come to visit us. On saying goodbye he presents me with a cap, and an invaluable introduction.

The introduction is to Gus Gillespe, who is also one of the top officials of the Alaskan S.C.I., and a co-owner of the Alaskan Fur Exchange. Concerning Gus, they say that everything to do with hunting in Alaska is under his control, including the weather, the movements of animals and even the way the trees grow. Anyone Gus does not know is not worth knowing, and if he cannot arrange it, then it cannot be arranged. He is the central figure of Alaskan hunting and I plan to visit him later today. After leaving Eddie I go to my first appointment of the day, at the headquarters of Salmon Berry Tours. I don't have to walk far as their office is on 3rd Avenue, the same as the Hilton: I just have to cross the street. I'm here to meet Candice McDonald who will assist me during the day.

Today I shall live like a king.

Candice will be my chauffeuse and tour guide, all-in-one; she's a good local organizer and a close friend of Andy's. Besides doing today's program I also have the chance to sort out all my unsolved problems, as they say that for Candice nothing is impossible.

On seeing her vehicle I have to ask myself the question: just how much bigger can American jeeps get? It's not a jeep, it's a monster. It's as large as a truck, but even wider. I open the trunk to find a storage space the size of the deck of an aircraft carrier. I'm nervous about putting my camera in there as I don't think I'll ever find it again - it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. So, I place a box of excess clothes and equipment, yet to be sent home, beside it. I walk around the jeep (it takes 30 seconds!:) and climb up into the passenger section which is as big as a coach. Candice is sitting on my left; actually, it might be her or it might not. I haven't got my binoculars.

I shout over to her, asking where we are going first. "To the Alaskan Native Heritage Center", comes the faint reply out of the distance. The monster starts up surprisingly quietly; it turns out that it's a hybrid. It moves stealthily, and I've never felt so safe, not even in a tank. Candice drives slowly, which I'm happy with, as when this machine gets going, nothing will stop it. The Alaskan Native Heritage Center, as the name suggests, introduces visitors to the culture of the original inhabitants of the land. Candice tells me that the conflicts between them and the whites are still going on. Beyonds the romantic stories the basic disagreements are still about money.

Oil reserves, possibly the world's largest, lie beneath the native villages. And the natives don't intend handing it over to the whites for nothing. What can I say? If I were them I might feel the same.

Supposedly, large parts of the world's major oil companies are owned by native Alaskans. Here, if you were born in the right place in the right village, you'll never have any financial worries in your life. You will also inherit various privileges allowing you to hunt various species that at times are forbidden to everyone else, along with a number of other hunting advantages. This does not go down well with many influential whites, so keeping the peace between the two groups is not easy.

When we arrive visitors are watching a display of Alaska Native Games, a sort of local olympics.

The exercises might appear simple, but anyone with a minimal knowledge of of sport will recognise the years of practice behind every movement. When the display ends the stage is filled with dancers.

Their only instrument is a drum, but it sounds so sharp that the room seems full of gun-fire. Both performances were superb, but we have to leave to go on to the center's cinema where a film is about to begin!



The film is based on romanticised ideals of Indian life, but it also accurately depicts the hard existence faced by people living so close to nature; even modern conveniences cannot completely overcome these hardships. The main message of the film is that life in the wilderness is a constant struggle for survival. It's difficult to argue with these sentiments.

Our next stop is the Alaska Aviation Museum, which, as we can tell from the name, tries to bring the world of flying to interested visitors.

The museum is built right next to the float plane airport, so the sound of engines provides the background music. Here we can trace the story of Alaska's unsung heroes, the bush pilots. The name refers to those pilots whose speciality is landing and taking off in remote areas of scrubland, on uneven glaciers, on the taiga, on water, and on temporary runways laid down on distant mountains. These highly experienced pilots can land their machines in places I wouldn't dare go to even in a jeep. Originally they used to modify their planes themselves, by strengthening the landing gear. Now real bush-planes are readily available; Andy has one. Each year they organize a competition amongst

themselves to see who can take off and land within the shortest distance. The last winner managed, after landing, to stop in a shorter space than a car with its modern brakes could. The museum also runs a film, from which I learn that Anchorage is the city where there are the most float planes. The museum also has a restoration workshop which we visit, but even after wandering around for ten minutes we see no sign of anyone.

We could have stolen the entire workshop.



After visiting these two museums I'd like to revise a statement I made in Chicago.

Both of these institutions provide an exciting and entertaining experience for those buying the inexpensive tickets. The non-stop program at the ANHC and the cinema at the Aviation Museum - where the film begins when the visitor wants, and shows what he wants to see - are both successful examples of how to bring in the public. And the Aviation Museum, for example, also has a flight-simulator, to the delight of all children: here, they learn more about piloting in ten minutes than they would in a week of reading information boards. The planes on display are not cordoned off from the public, but can be touched as - museum staff take note - no real harm can be done to them.

It's time to visit Gus, the great hunter, so we drive to his shop. He assures me of his support, and says if I ever get stuck, in any way, he will help me out. He gives me two business cards which I carefully put aside as they might prove useful in the future. In his shop I buy a belt of wapati skin, and a buckle made of mammoth tusk. Both are beautiful, high-quality pieces of craftsmanship.

To replace my missing items of equipment Candice and I drive to the to the largest hunting shop in Anchorage, The Sportsman Warehouse. By coincidence, the manager here is also a friend of Eddie's, but unfortunately he's not in. I kiss goodbye to yet more dollars, and more parcels are added to my growing baggage, so afterwards we set off to the post-office. Nerve-racking moments are approaching.

I forgot to mention that the number of boxes I have has now increased to two. The post-office clerk accepts the smaller one without much trouble - there's a slight fuss because it contains a knife - but he won't take the larger one. It's one inch over the maximum size. All attempts at begging and persuasion are in vain. Candice tries everything, but, for now, the parcel is staying in Alaska. Those clerks will drive me to my grave. Candice suddenly has a flash of inspiration: there's a huge box in her office, but it's still smaller than this; we can repack everything into it. We jump into the car and go straight to her headquarters. We find the box, but it's too small. It doesn't matter; what won't fit into it I'll leave with Candice, or give to a local charity. Candice will see to it all.

By the time we finish the post-office has closed.

I think I'll go crazy: I'm leaving tomorrow and what am I going to do with this box?

The wonderful Candice has a solution: I mustn't worry, she will post it tomorrow! Huge Relief! I leave her some money for any expenses, and I'll sort the rest out on my return to Anchorage. The ordeals that a hunter has to go through!



Alaska, Seward
Van Guilder Hotel
31st July

Today I will leave the Hilton and continue my adventures in Alaska.

It's chilly - a real Alaskan morning.

I take a taxi to the station where, because the trains are still not running, there are replacement buses laid on for passengers.

I am met by a scene of complete anarchy.

Passengers wander about aimlessly, joining any line they happen to come across. The staff of Alaska Railroad - the railway company - are trying to inject some order into the chaos, but it is a difficult situation. The cause of the problem is that, in Alaska, we have to check in our luggage just like at the airport. This means that we can only keep our hand-baggage; everything else must be checked in.

Strong hands grab the suitcases and place them on carts which then disappear from sight.

This makes everybody tense, right from the start.

The luggage-loading platform has been moved outside the station, and rioting passengers have to be ordered to the correct check-in line or directed to the right bus.

Eventually people begin to relax, and find the right line; buses are coming and we are boarding. In America all the cars are huge, and buses don't want to be left out. Beside me the enormous engine roars. Our driver is a portly, elderly man; his Texan hat looks slightly out of place here, and - probably to compensate for the inconvenience - he gives us a running commentary as we go along. We go south along the Alaska Highway; on our right is a tidal marshland, and on the left are mountains, towering up over the road.

I began my day feeling tired, so it doesn't take long for me to doze off. I am almost fast asleep, when the driver's monotonous drone suddenly changes. "MOUNTAIN GOATS ON THE LEFT SIDE!" He yells.

I'm on the left side, staring up the mountainside, and yes, there actually are three white goats - a shortsighted Japanese man next to me shouts that they are deer - grazing on the neck-breakingly steep rock wall. There's one female, another I'm not sure about, and I can only see the rump of the third. But they are definitely mountain goats! Having seen them in the zoo, I am now seeing my quarry in the wild for the first time! Standing so high above us it would be very difficult to work out the correct angle of fire. Both of us are lucky that I wasn't carrying my gun at the time. I have to say that the female Dall sheep is easily mistaken for a mountain goat, especially at a distance, and in fog; I shall have to take care. I decide that I must ask my guides to explain how to spot the difference quickly.

After two hours on the bus we finally arrive at Seward. The weather has not improved; it's cold and rainy. As usual I'm wearing shorts; not a good choice for my journey today.



At the final bus-stop the anarchy of Anchorage continues.

According to the original plan we are to be met by representatives from Kenai Fjords Travel who will drive us by minibus to the harbour, where we will start the day's program immediately. Normally this goes simply and smoothly, but the damned rockfall has upset everything. Our bus arrives, not at the railway station, but at some kind of tent city, where again chaos rules. The local staff of Alaska Railroad are having an argument with the drivers of the replacement buses; the employees of Kenai Fjord Travel are quarrelling with both of them, and the passengers are falling out with everybody, especially each other. Finally, I discover which minibus to get on to take me to the harbour, but ... my checked-in suitcases are not here! It turns out that, by mistake, they have been put on another bus, but I'm not to worry as that bus should also be on its way to Seward - or not, opinions

vary - only a little later. This is not good; it won't work . My schedule is very tight and I won't have time to spend searching for my suitcases in Alaska. I try to persuade the driver of the KFT minibus to wait for a while in case the bus carrying my cases turns up. My lobbying is successful, and we wait, while the other passengers on the minibus glare at me with undisguised hostility. Finally, the other bus arrives. I push aside the porter and pull out my huge bag - it's so heavy that I seriously consider hiring a trolley - and take it over to the minibus.

Now we can go!

And as we have time, we are going to the Van Guilder Hotel first!

It's just like a madhouse.

I reach the Van Guilder and everything's fine with the booking, though I can't move into my room as it's too early. I change in the hotel kitchen, and then, while searching for my gloves, I end up scattering my clothes all over the lounge; by the time I've found them I get the good news that my room is ready. But none of this matters anymore, as now I am on board my ship. It is a real tourist ship, with two levels; everyone finds a place, the majority heading for the buffet counter. We've been sailing towards Fox Island for forty minutes.

Because of all the islands nearby the sea is calm and quiet; sadly I can't say the same about my fellow passengers. Shouting is a national sport in America. Everybody has calmed down, and the turmoil of the bus station has disappeared. They're not shouting because they're angry, but because for them it's normal.

Just after setting off I head to the captain's cabin - this is the most peaceful place on the boat - as I want to find out more about Alaska. The female captain - there are so many beautiful women here! - happily answers all my questions. There's no denying that if you want to get to know a place you needn't buy dozens of guide books, but instead you should get out and meet the locals. I even borrow her binoculars and use them to scrutinise the unfamiliar waters, islands and shorelines of the distant bay.

After arriving at Fox Harbour we are welcomed onshore with a huge buffet lunch - in America eating and drinking are integral parts of every activity - and after finishing, most of the passengers noisily return to the ship to head back to Seward. For them the trip is over, and now they can say that they have been to the Alaskan wilderness, as no-one is likely to ask them how far along its unknown paths they actually went. Apart from the staff, there are only four of us staying on the island, two brothers and a sister from Ohio, and myself.

We are getting ready to go kayaking in the sea surrounding Fox Island.

A petite girl turns up; she will be our kayaking guide.



She greets us with a broad smile; she's the sort of person you can't help but like. Following some brief instructions we put on rubber boots and the "skirt" used by all kayakers (stretched over and around the seat, it prevents water entering the kayak) and then set off. The kayaks are two-seaters, and I get the girl from Ohio. Unlike me, who has never been in a kayak before, she does have some experience, so she takes the most responsible position, that of cox. They don't fuss about when launching the boats. The crew gets in and settles down, and then our guide gives a strong push at the back which sends us sliding over the uneven pebbles into the water.

The water is calm.

After a few minutes I can feel my muscles slowly warming up; I'm beginning to get used to the unfamiliar movements, and the rowing goes well.

The Alaskan fauna welcomes us without any signs of fear, and we stay close to the shore: not only is it safer, but we can see more. While kayaking amongst the various water birds in the bay an inquisitive seal pops its head up. It stares at us with curiosity, but absolutely no fear, and lets us get within fifty feet. Then it dives, and I can still see the blurred outline of its body in the clear water. Meanwhile, there are some yellow jellyfish, whose name I can't remember, drifting all around us.

There are lots of them and our guide tells us that they are poisonous, but even so, I still manage to almost capsize us.

It was a very close call.

Not far from us ships are cruising by, showing the sights to tourists. Their apparently random movement is developing a pattern. They are definitely heading for a particular point, and slowly form

into a semi-circle What on earth is going on?

I'm down at water-level, which is not the best place for observation. My eyes are on stalks, but I can't make anything out But something is going on over there.

There is a sharp call from our guide: There she blows!

A whale!

There's a whale in front of us!

I can already see the huge waterspout, the fountain made by those giant lungs, as it shoots up tens of feet above the sea. The whale slowly dives, flipping up its gigantic tail

This tail fin - it's really big. It's larger than the ships nearby, and bigger than any tail fin has a right to be.

Judging distance on the sea is very difficult - it isn't easy even on land - but I don't think it's more than two thousand feet away from us. We can get there and back in one mad dash. I tell my partner we have to try our hardest and she readily agrees. I grasp my paddle, and can tell that behind me she is also paddling furiously. We start to go faster, the kayak speeds along and we are eating up the distance.

- STOP!!!

Our guide won't let us go any closer. I put down my paddle at once, but I'm disappointed. I know we could have caught up with it. The whale surfaces again, and we can see more of its huge body; then it waves its tale, as if saying goodbye, and vanishes from our sight for good.

Slowly we float back to our base, feeling relaxed and talking about our adventure. Our group has made good speed so we have time to explore some waterfalls in the area. Meanwhile, the ship that brought us here has returned and a new group is arriving on the island: we can already hear the noise. Our kayaking is over so we join them, and all have dinner together. I'm the first to board the ship, and go forward to greet the captain again, who says nothing, but points towards the gangway. A black bear!

I can hardly believe my eyes! Just a few feet from the rowdy tourists a black bear is foraging in the bushes for its dinner! Clutching my binoculars tightly I stare at this phenomenon. The tourists, meanwhile, are straggling up the gangplank, and soon notice the creature. I've never seen a bear in the wild before - neither black, nor any other kind - but there's now time for some silent observation.

But shouts of alarm begin to come from the crowd. It's not certain where it started, but the news is spreading: the bear might attack at any moment!

Panic has almost broken out.

Screaming mothers clutching children are running to escape; the braver fathers are filling up the memory cards of their cameras non-stop, and the remainder are just seeking shelter from the threatening monster. There are some running towards the house on the shore and others heading

towards the ship. The people on the gangplank are in the most difficult position, as they don't know which way to go. Those nearest the ship are heading back to the island, while the ones closest to the shore are trying to get on board: they all collide.

The ship's crew tries to calm everybody down, and succeeds. Now, we can all see that the bear isn't after the children, or anybody else, but is just pottering about in the bushes, quite undisturbed.

Eventually it gets bored and wanders off into a thicket.

It's difficult for the group to relax.

Finally, after all this unexpected excitement, the boat sets off to do some whale-watching. Of course, now we don't see anything. Our whale has obviously decided only to show itself to those who have worked for the sight. Lazy cruise passengers will not be allowed to look at it! I agree with its decision, but it's a shame we had to waste two hours pointlessly cruising about searching for it. I'm tired, but, because of all the racket on board, I can't fall asleep.

At last we reach the harbour, and I'd like to mention that the captain docked the boat so expertly that I don't believe any experienced old sea-dog could have done it better!

I get a taxi and head off to the Van Guilder.

Now that I am in quiet and peaceful surroundings, I have a chance to say something about Seward.

The city was named after the statesman who, with great perspicacity, recognised Alaska's potential and strategic importance before anyone else.

William Henry Seward was Foreign Minister during Lincoln's administration, and the purchase of Alaska was entirely due to him. But no-one is a prophet in his own country, and Seward was no exception to this rule. The American public and the political elite considered it a mistake, and an unnecessary waste of money. Sadly, Seward did live not to see Alaska flourish as he died in 1872, and posterity, out of guilt, erected a statue to him four years later, in Madison Square Park, New York.

With its population of 2540, Seward is considered, within the state, to be a large city. It's the starting point of the Seward-Anchorage-Fairbanks railway line (Alaska Railroad) and the Alaska Marine HWY, the number one shipping lane, also goes there, making the city a hub of transportation.

Next to the city is found the infamous Spring Creek Correctional Center, the state's level 3, maximum security prison.

In vain did we search for this institution in our guide books. It's no summer camp: whoever ends up here is the worst of the worst. The convicts sent here are either those who have committed the most awful and cruel crimes, or who, because of their extremely violent natures, cannot be placed in a lower security prison. The tough guy's "hotel" cost the taxpayer \$44 m. to build in 1988. It contains

500 inmates, and a staff of 200 ensures they remain there until their sentence has been served. It's a strange but true fact that most of Seward's adult population has some connection with the prison. They either work in it, or for a sub-contractor supplying it, or are themselves inmates of the "Beehive". As I returned from Fox Island I was able to glimpse a part of the prison. The blue watchtower rises over the tree-tops, keeping an eye on the surrounding area, and the piercing searchlights are easily visible from the shore, but the buildings themselves are hidden by a swathe of trees.

My captain told me the story of the only successful escape.

At some point three gangsters decided that they had had enough of their "rest". They were going to break out. Carefully, they began to analyse the prison's security, looking for its weak points, and their success was down to a fact not considered by the prison's designers. All the sheets in the prison were white.

Just like snow

All they had to do was to wait for a chance, which came on a cold, snowy day. They skillfully evaded all the mechanical and electronic surveillance equipment, and hid themselves from the guards' watchful eyes with their white sheets. The authorities would still be searching for them today, if they had not made a very banal mistake.

After their escape, they broke into a private house, and there they came across various bottles of booze. So they had a drink. To be frank, they got plastered. And when the police arrived they had no trouble in rounding them all up.

They soon found themselves back in the "Beehive".

Crime doesn't pay.

Room 306, Van Guilder Hotel
Seward
1st August

I'd rather not write too much about today.

It was horrible.

This has been the worst day I've had so far in America, possibly the longest and most difficult I've had in my life. I should have realised this morning that it wasn't going to go smoothly, and that I should have stayed at home.

I had arranged with Andy that I would try some sea-fishing, and with my expert instructors I'd try to master the basics of the sport. I don't know who first came up with this idiotic idea, but, according to Andy, sea-fishing is so "Alaskan" that I had to give it a try.

To start with, I couldn't find the boat. I was running up and down the harbour for ages, until I finally

learnt that it had all been re-arranged and the boats were moored in a different place.

A helpful lady tries to call the organizers to ask them not to leave without me, but she can't get through. We are running towards what might be the right dock when she asks me, en passant, whether I have a fishing permit. Of course I haven't; I don't even know what it is. In theory the organizers should arrange everything. But not this, unfortunately: I have to buy it myself. I'm pouring with sweat, and running back to the place I started from on the quay. I rush into a grocery store where the permits are sold. They rip me off for \$20, but it doesn't matter, I have the permit in my pocket, and I run back along the harbour. Luckily, the boat is still waiting for me, but the fishermen crammed on to the dock do not seem very happy about the delay.

It's a high-powered boat with an engine the size of a doghouse. The captain is revving the engine, and we are flying over the waves; the best fishing waters are a long way from here.

I first threw up an hour after we had left.

And after that I couldn't stop.

I couldn't even hold a rod, I just staggered about the deck. I would have loved to go back at once, but it was impossible. They wouldn't waste another couple of hours going back and forth, just for me.

They gave me some medicine, but it was useless.

I spent the next eight hours slouched over the table in the cabin, as I couldn't even lie down. I was half-awake and half-asleep, and basically in some sort of coma. I only ever stood up to throw up. I thought the day would never end. I don't want to remember it, ever, even in my worst nightmares. I've never felt so bad in my life, and I hope I never do again. At last I got back to dry land and the Van Guilder Hotel.

I cancel all my late-afternoon and evening engagements.

I feel like death.

Room 852, Hotel Alyeska
1000, Arlberg Avenue
Girdwood, Alaska
2nd August

I've arrived at the most important day of my journey.

There are many things I have planned, not only to explore Alaska, and other states, as well as hunting, but also to see all the places that Széchenyi visited in 1935. Or, at least, those that are not too far from my route, and are identifiable from his diary. That's why I went to the Van Guilder, and is the reason for my program today. But let's keep everything in sequence.

After sleeping for eleven hours, I am more or less recovered, but I still feel a little dizzy. Andy comes to meet me at 9.00, and I've just managed to finish my packing. I go down to the lounge of the Van

Guilder and he is there with a friend, ready to set off. But before we do that we have an important task to do.

I have to find Széchenyi Zsigmond's signature in the hotel register. There's no doubt about it, as my brother was here a couple of years ago and it was there then. When I arrived a couple of days ago, during the rush I asked the staff to find me the register for 1935, which they have done. Many thanks for that. I couldn't deal with it yesterday, as I was dying, so I must make time to do it today. Because I'm not leaving Seward without seeing Széchenyi's signature.

I told Andy in advance, so we wouldn't have to argue about it later.

The perpetually smiling receptionist - who the day before had given cries of enthusiasm on hearing about the Hungarian Hunter who came here seventy years ago - produces the book. And behold!! I've found it; it's here right in front of my eyes: Zsigmond Széchenyi from Budapest, Hungary, checked into this hotel and was given room 8!



However, my brother had drawn my attention to a contradiction which I now intend to sort out. Széchenyi's ship, the Yukon, entered Seward's harbour on the 16th August 1935. That is a fact. It's also a fact that his diary entry tells us that he checked into the Van Gilder on that day. It is not written down precisely, but on reading his entries before and after that day, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion.

But according to the Van Guilder's register he checked in on the 11th. I made a copy of the page to show any unbelievers.

The contradiction is obvious.

After lengthy consideration, this is my theory: Széchenyi was writing up his diary continuously.

Although it is clear in the book that there were some days when his entries were delayed - I do the same - common sense tells us that these were probably times when he was out hunting in the wilds. I don't see any reason for a delay in his entries while he was living in civilized conditions, in a convenient hotel. Even if they had been somehow delayed, we can't seriously believe that he didn't know the exact date of his arrival, rather than making a mistake of several days. I think that's nonsense.

What I think is that the Van Guilder's register is not accurate. It shows that there were very few guests arriving on the 11th August.

Mr. Van Guilder might have thought it not worth starting a new page every day. I must mention that we are not talking about an actual book, but a collection of individual pages. When one page filled up, he simply started another. Quite possibly, he wasn't bothered if guests arrived at a later date than that shown at the top of the page; they simply used that page to register.

I think that is what happened.

During the last few decades the Van Guilder has quietly undergone a noticeable improvement.

They've managed to solve the difficulty of providing breakfast for their guests, but it's still not up to the normal standard found in good hotels. Whoever stays here shouldn't expect much more than some tired muffins and a cup of coffee. Also, on the ground floor there is WiFi. It's advisable to choose room 306, as this is still within WiFi range, and so we can use the internet in our room.

I explain to Andy that today - as in my original plans - we must follow Széchenyi's route as far as Camp Stetson Creek, using all the information and data available. Earlier, Andy had discovered the probable co-ordinates of his camp-site, but there's no way of guessing the whereabouts of the house of his guide, Andy Simmons. But this has to be found, as it is where they set out from on their boat trip on Lake Keni; our starting point cannot be anywhere else.

After making several enquiries we are directed to the Seward Museum. Its elderly director, a retired history teacher, is apparently a fount of local knowledge about Seward and its environs. The museum is not far from the Van Guilder, so it's just a quick walk to get there.

Like everybody I've met so far in Alaska, the museum director is very helpful. He immediately produces the file on Andy Simmons from his own archive. Now the life and death of this man has

become an open book to us. Unfortunately, it's not possible to find the house as its actual site has disappeared. When I was talking about Anchorage before, I mentioned that the region had been hit by a massive earthquake in 1964. This produced such a violent movement of the earth, that a nearby mountain - now known as Andy Simmons Mountain - toppled over, burying his house and the surrounding area under many feet of rubble. No path or track leads there anymore. It is just untrodden wilderness, and even if we could struggle through it, we couldn't say where the house stood as the very place no longer exists; the field was completely changed by the quake.

It's difficult to tear myself away from the museum as there are so many documents here relating to Simmons, Alaska's number one hunting guide; but none have been translated into Hungarian.

But we must go.

We get into Andy's beaten-up, four-wheel drive minibus, and, towing the boat behind us, we leave for Lake Kenai.

The spirits of Alaska are supporting us in our explorations, and send us trackers excellent, sunny weather.

We reach the lake, close to where Simmons house must have been, and begin the complicated manoeuvre of launching the boat.

"Before leaving, Andy tells the engine-driver where to stop, as there is no station at the place we want to get off" (Széchenyi : Hunting in Alaska)

" On our left is a huge blue lake." (Széchenyi)

My Andy makes short work of launching the boat; he reverses the trailer into the water, which bubbles and gurgles as the trailer submerges. When the boat's engine is in the water, Andy starts it, reverses off the trailer, and then the little boat begins cheerfully chugging across the glass-like surface of Lake Kenai. I'm especially delighted that heaven has sent us such good weather, as, after the horrors of yesterday, I had serious worries about being able to manage the trip today. As usual, there was no need to worry about what the future might hold, as it turns out the water could not be smoother.

"We carry our luggage to the shore of Lake Kenai, and pack everything into Andy's motorboat - from here we will continue our journey in it, this boat that Andy built himself." (Széchenyi)

"This time, however, the engine attached to the stern of the boat will not start." (Széchenyi)

Andy's little boat is not unlike the beaten-up craft of his famous predecessor. It's quite tatty, and doesn't look to be in great health. As I sit down on the first seat on the right, it immediately rocks back, as the screws fixing it came out long ago. The old engine is so loud that Andy hands out earplugs, in the desperate hope that we won't get deafened right away.

I have to admit that the little boat, despite looking rather unseaworthy, goes on heroically. It moves over the water at a speed that is surprising for its size, and the resulting breeze blows my hat off. We

have to fish it out of the water. We have set out on Lake Kenai.

"We are lying on the deck ... " (Széchenyi)

The unexpectedly good weather gives us the chance to change our original plan, and meander up on of the rivers flowing into the lake. Andy daringly steers the boat up the narrow river, and we bravely navigate its curves. We come to some fast rapids, and acknowledging that the situation is getting dangerous, Andy insists that we wear life-jackets. After we put them on Andy turns up the throttle and the boat rushes over the wild rapids of the flooding river. We reach a bridge, underneath which the water starts to toss the boat about violently; I'm very nearly thrown out. After our white-water detour, we return to the calm waters of Kenai, where Andy demonstrates amazing courage ...

He lets me steer the boat!

I've never steered a motor-boat before in my life; where else would I do it if not in Alaska? I push the throttle and the boat reacts at once; the lever is very sensitive. Andy encourages me to step on the gas, to quickly change direction and generally speed about the lake. I don't need much encouragement to start rapidly spinning the steering wheel, and I get a rush of adrenalin. A right turn, a left curve: the water bubbles behind us in our wake!

"Lake Kenai is confined between high mountains, but meanders for long distances; it is only 0.8 miles wide, but over 21 miles long" (Széchenyi)

Our rushing about ends when the sharp-sighted Andy spots two bald eagles, the heraldic emblem of the US, perched on a tree on the shore. They are completely unafraid, not even disturbed by the noise of our boat. I take out my binoculars and study the two imperial creatures for ten minutes. I get an idea of their true size when they take flight, one after the other, moving to another tree 300 feet away. They are huge, seemingly slow-moving birds of prey, but they must be capable of faster maneuvering when it comes to catching their food.

It takes us under two hours, including making our detour and watching the birds, to go around Lake Kenai. The same journey took Széchenyi four hours.

"During our four hour sale..." (Széchenyi)

This shows how fast boats have become over the last seventy years. The end of the lake is marked by a bridge, which is also the start of the Kenai River.

"It contracts into a narrow, fast-flowing river, which runs from here towards the sea under the name of the Kenai River. (...) This is Cooper's Landing, the home of the fur-trapper Jack Mclean." (Széchenyi)

There's no sign of Jack anymore, but we still go ashore ... At least, that's what we'd like to do, but we only succeed in mooring the boat after several failed attempts; Andy's loud commands finally produce a result. The boat is put back back on the trailer - which has been brought here in the meantime by a

friend of Andy's - and we set off to find Stetson Creek Trail. This is the route used by Simmons and others in 1935; and following it is the most likely way to find their old camp-site. "For the moment we are following the course of the bubbling and meandering River Kenai, along an easily walkable path" (Széchenyi)

While we're searching for the path, there is a small misunderstanding. I have already installed the latest map of North America on my GARMIN OREGON 300 GPS, and it clearly shows the path starting 300 feet from our present position.

Andy, however, is studying a paper map - I can't imagine what he's looking at for 15 minutes - before he decides which way to go. We turn the car around and head off in exactly the opposite direction to that on my GPS. I show it to Andy, and eventually convince him; so he tosses aside his redundant paper map, and from now on we will rely on my GPS. We succeed in finding the start of the path.

"... we turn into the forest on an old, barely visible path." (Széchenyi)

We've spend so much time at the museum, travelling, sailing and getting lost, that it is now after 3.00pm, and we are only just setting out on the trail. Széchenyi and his companions spent a night at the end of Lake Kenai, but we do not have time to do this. We'd like to get to the camp and back today, as my tight schedule does not allow for an extra, unplanned night. So, we set off at a very brisk pace. There's no opportunity for our muscles to warm up gradually, as the Stetson Creek Trail starts with a steep slope.

"We have been climbing up a steep mountain for one and a half hours." (Széchenyi) We are all carrying light packs, and I can see that both of my companions are in very good shape. We're walking over firm ground in the forest, and the pine needles are soft under the soles of our boots. In places there are rocks sticking up out of the ground; Andy says that the earth will not get really hard because of the constant rain.

In Alaska, the rule that you must be silent in a forest is not enforced. Quite the opposite, in fact - here, shouting can save your life. One of the most frequent causes of bear-attacks is because the forest-walker approaches the animal unnoticed, and by the time it does see him it will be so frightened that it attacks at once. According to "SCI Eddie", bears mainly become dangerous in those areas where they are not hunted. In these places they have no respect for humans; but, in the hunting grounds, the bears have learned that people carry something that can easily kill them. There they keep a healthy distance, and attacks are rare. The most dangerous scenario possible is when a person gets between a mother and her cubs; then an attack is virtually impossible to avoid. It's best to try and prevent it, and the best way to do this is to make a noise. The bear will know well in advance that someone is approaching, and there is time for a mother and her cubs to run off. My companions uphold this rule, and with loud shouts and whistles, they scare off all the forest creatures.

I even have some anti-bear spray. It's dangling from my belt, and is the size of a small fire-extinguisher. If a bear does come, I must spray it right between the eyes, and then it will run off - at least, that's what I've been told.

I'm not completely convinced by this, but I don't have my gun to hand, so it's probably better than nothing.

We are ascending the slope.

The pines will soon give way to the alders described in Széchenyi's book.

"We are coming to dense and almost impenetrable alder thickets ..." (Széchenyi)

"The alder thickets begin above the forest-belt." (Széchenyi)

Luckily, we do not have to cut our way through, because motor-cyclists have already done it for us, and the path is now easy to walk. The Stetson Creek Trail is one of the favourite practice runs for ATV-machines, but right now they're off somewhere else.

"Now, the most unpleasant part of our journey starts: the passage through the alder thickets."
(Széchenyi)

The higher we go the more difficult and unpassable the trail becomes. Eventually, I can only tell that we're still on the path by consulting my GPS. We have to climb over fallen trees and struggle through undergrowth taller than a man, and we even have to ford a creek. Many, many years ago there was a bridge over it, but, now, only the main cable is intact. Once on the other side, we have to climb a short, steep wall of rock. We slide back a couple of steps and then, try again.

"There are two of us to help each horse, one pulling the head, the other pushing the rump of the animal, which can climb with the skill of a chamois." (Széchenyi)

In the difficult struggle through the undergrowth I even lose my sunglasses. The plants scratch our faces, and we clutch at prickly branches; the cold water bites our ankles as our boots sink into the mud. But we just keep on going. The path now runs very close to Stetson Creek, and Andy says the co-ordinates, that we'd worked out in advance, cannot be far away.

Finally, we get there.

"We arrive dog-tired." (Széchenyi)

Here we are; according to both the GPS, and common-sense, this is where they must have made camp. There's nowhere else more suitable anywhere near.

"We pitched our tents in a shallow, semi-exposed trench in the middle of a wind-blown alpine meadow, in the shelter of some wizened alder thickets. Right in front of the tents flows a foaming mountain creek, which exhales the breath of the glacier with its eternal snows, from where it begins. Its name is Stetson Creek." (Széchenyi)

We're just a few feet beyond the Stetson, and every detail tallies. We've studied all the available



documents, considered where we would have set up our camp, if we'd been them, and that is now where we are standing. According to our best knowledge, the camp had to be there. Count Széchenyi camped here - in this very place - from the 18th to the 24th of August, 1935.

It is a moving moment.

I'm here!

For most of my short life, I have been waiting to come here. We have found Széchenyi's camp.

With his companions he set out each morning, throughout August 1935, to hunt rams. Exactly forty years before I was born. Andy and his friend give me a little time to compose my thoughts, but we don't have very long. We still have something else to do.

I've brought a memorial plaque along with me. It's a copper tablet mounted on wood, with both Hungarian, and English, text. I shall leave it here, in a place that no other Hungarian has visited since Széchenyi. We look for a tree to fasten it to, but we can't find one. I'd be happy just to tie it to an alder bush, but Andy talks me out of it. The bushes are not growing in a safe place; if we attach it to one of these it would be destroyed by the first spring avalanche.

Finally, we decide to screw it to the trunk of a suitable tree, a few hundred feet away. Andy does most of the work, but the finishing touches are left for me. They are, in fact, largely unnecessary as it is already firmly fixed. How long it will stay there, I don't know. But, perhaps, that's not really the point.

In remembrance of Earl Zsigmond Széchenyi who is the greatest Hungarian hunter of all time and his legendary Alaskan guide Andy Simmons. They were both exquisite who hunted here together in August 1935.

August 2009



This text is written on the plaque in both Hungarian and English.

We have logged the co-ordinates of both the camp and the plaque, so that from now on, anybody, with the energy and the inclination, can visit this place, a memorial to the history of Hungarian hunting, here in the heart of Alaska, thousands of miles away from Hungary.

We head back.

Who knows if I will ever come here again?

I make Andy promise that if he is ever wandering around this area again, he will come and have a look at our plaque. He is a conscientious man, and I know he will do it.

On the way back we are almost running, and I am buoyed up by the feeling of work well-done, and a dream fulfilled.

The lack of time is now constant. We get into Andy's stationwagon - the battered old boat stares at us from behind the car - and in under two hours we are in Andy's office in Girdwood. Girdwood is only a small village, but it has everything. There's no lack of space, and it's certainly not an overcrowded place.

- This is the town center - explains Andy, as he points out four houses.

You definitely wouldn't say that the houses are crammed together. Then we take a left turn and go

down a winding road. Suddenly, a huge building appears: the Hotel Alyeska - you really don't expect such a place in a small village. It will be my new home for the next two days.

It's a very modern hotel, with all conveniences. The lounge ceiling depicts the constellations of the Alaskan sky. A few feet below it a stuffed Polar bear menaces the hotel guests. My first impression is that it surpasses the Anchorage Hilton. Andy and his friends act as if they are my porters, and bring my luggage up to my room. I'm very tired but we still have to arrange the schedule for tomorrow. As usual, changes have been made to the plan, but nothing has been completely cancelled, and that's the main thing. I want to go to bed right now, it's so late. I shoo Andy and his friends out of my room, and begin my daily diary.

ps. Night

I hereby take back all the good things I've said about this hotel.

At midnight I wanted to get something to eat, but it proved impossible. There are several kitchens within the hotel, but during the night you simply can't get any food. They don't even have a packet of peanuts. And the minibar is an unknown item in Alaskan hotel rooms.

The receptionist suggested that I should get something from the vending machine. From a vending machine! I've never experienced that before. They've actually installed a vending machine in a five-star hotel! And it only sells drinks in plastic bottles. Just like in some subway. Tonight I'm having apple juice for dinner.

Containing 100% apple.

Room 852, Hotel Alyeska
1000, Arlberg Avenue
Girdwood
3rd August

I don't know why, but the hotel has given me two breakfast tickets for each day that I'm here. Perhaps they're trying to compensate for starving me last night. So, today, I'm inviting my new guide, Amanda Tuttle, to join me for breakfast. Amanda is slim, blonde, athletic, worked-out, beautiful girl. I'd have a big problem if I had to decide who is the prettiest: her, or the wolf-training girl from the Anchorage Zoo.

I definitely make up for my lack of dinner last night - I just can't leave that subject alone - and then we set off for our hike.

I haven't been given any details about today's hike, and so I am not wearing my professional-technical clothing. I thought we'd take a walk around the area, and perhaps visit a study-path, or maybe a museum.

But this is not what happened.

Ignoring whatever the original plans were, Amanda has decided that we will go to the top of Mt. Alyeska, which is right behind my hotel. I've just seen it this morning, as my room is facing that direction. Even though there are several cable-cars - I don't know how many exactly, perhaps four or six - we decide to walk. Amanda thinks that a little training-session before my mountain hunting will be good for me. The path begins on a gently rising road, bulldozed through the forest, but, after half a mile, it starts to get tough. Luckily, I'm only carrying a small pack, because Amanda is in fantastic shape, tirelessly striding forward, and setting a pace I find difficult to match. I'm trying my best, as it wouldn't look good to get left behind. I'm pouring with sweat, and starting to regret that I'm not wearing the proper clothing. My cotton T-shirt actually traps the moisture and it won't evaporate; I'm feeling very uncomfortable, but I still keep up.

Within an hour and a half, we have completed a 2500 ft. climb. The hike was made harder by the path's unforgiving nature, which, rather than winding gently, tended to go sharply upwards. At the top, however, the view is fantastic, and, what's more, waiting for me in the cafe is a huge, well-deserved, ice-cold bottle of Gatorade.

To get down we take a closed-cabin cable-car, and so I'm back in my room by 11.00. After a quick shower I head off for the jacuzzi, but I can't bear it for long, as the water is too hot for me.



At 1.15 I'm back in the lounge, where another Amanda is waiting to drive me to Girdwood Airport. Exciting things lie ahead.

We're going to take a helicopter up to a glacier, where we will be given a lesson in the tricks of driving a dog-sled, after which we'll all have a try. I've never been in a helicopter, so I view the tiny, red machine with a healthy mix of anxiety and worry. The pilot is a German guy - he once had a Hungarian girlfriend - and we share a laugh over his memories of Budapest. The helicopter, apparently, is brand new, and he begs us to take care not to scratch the delicate plexiglass with our cameras! We get in, the pilot speeds up the rotors, and we are already airborne!

It's a fantastic feeling!

The great thing about a helicopter is that, unlike the side-to-side view in an aeroplane, here you can see all around. It gives flying a brand new perspective. The pilot makes the machine ascend, and we speed off towards the mountains; my ears start to pop. He is definitely not easily scared, as when we reach the mountain ridge we fly so low over it, that, if I reached out, I could touch the rocks. Beyond the ridge I see the surface of the glacier, lying in an eternal empire of ice. Standing on the ice are three tents, comprising the sled-drivers' base. The view looks like an advertisement for a polar

expedition. I just wish it wasn't so hot. It's a real heat-wave; not just an Alaskan one, but one that would be considered hot anywhere. In the sun the temperature must be over 85 F, and my warm jacket is feeling a bit of a burden. This morning Amanda had mentioned that this summer was the hottest so far in Alaska, while last year's was the coldest.

The helicopter gently lands on the snow, like a giant dragonfly, and we get out. We are welcomed by two young men with broad grins, and deep tans from the blinding reflections of the glacier. They will be our hosts during our brief stay: the Lords of the Glacier, the drivers of the dogs. One of them is from Colorado, and tells us he is a keen hunter, and becomes very enthusiastic when he hears the purpose of my journey. We are all wearing dark glasses, as the fun of sledding on a glacier would be spoilt by that constant nightmare for polar explorers, which will creep up unawares: snow-blindness.

It's a sneaky condition as the first symptoms do not appear until 8 - 12 hours after the cornea has already been damaged, and the result is severe pain. The clear air does not filter out the sun's UV rays, which, reflected by all the snow, burn the cornea, causing serious injury. Captain Scott, who died a hero's death while exploring the South Pole, wrote in his diary that not only his men, but even his dogs, suffered from snow-blindness. The danger increases with altitude, as the strength of UV rays rises, on average, 5% for every 1000ft. Most mountaineers are prepared for this, and wear special glasses that also protect from the sides; the better-prepared mountain hunters follow their example. It's a little-known fact that the eye is more vulnerable during overcast conditions, so at high altitudes wise mountaineers protect themselves even when it is cloudy.

The dogs - there are about fifty of them - are housed in individual kennels, little plastic bunkers. They fix a bucket of water to the outside of each kennel, so that when the dog gets thirsty, it won't lick the snow. This is because, being on short chains, when nature calls, the dogs have to use the area immediately around them, and the icy snow of the glacier conveniently absorbs everything. Even though the chains are long enough for them to socialise with each other, fights are unknown. Our drivers start to tell us about the construction and use of the sledges. Firstly, the driver stands at the back. Somebody else stands in front of him, and this person plays an important part in steering, as he can determine the sledge's center of gravity better than the driver at the rear. I choose this position. There's a comfortable seat at the front, and whoever gets this has nothing more to do than enjoy the view. Before we go on with the practical side, I just want to describe a very important event: the annual meeting of the Alaskan Sled Drivers.

There is a competition held in Alaska.

This is a competition for dog-sleds, and in the last few decades has become world-famous, achieving legendary status.

It is a competition worthy of bearing the name : The Last Great Race in the World.

This competition has difficulties which the average person cannot even conceive.

It's a challenge, and an adventure, to which nothing else in the world can be compared.

The Iditarod.

It pushes both the competitor, and the dogs, to their physical and mental limits.

Participants have to cover about 1000 hazardous miles, through the most hostile country imaginable. Over high mountains, frozen rivers, barren tundras, windswept shores, and through the thickest forests, where the driver and dogs have no-one to rely on but each other. Add to this unbelievable cold; wind and snowstorms - which can reduce visibility to zero - the constant threat of total exhaustion and hypothermia; long, solitary hours of complete darkness standing on the sled; merciless hills and treacherous slopes; hunger, and a body that aches all over: this is the Iditarod! It's a race that requires the very best of the qualities of the early Alaskan pioneers from each participant, and could not take place anywhere else in the world.

It starts in Anchorage, and ends in the town of Nome on the Seward Peninsula, on the west coast, and is one of the main attractions of the Alaskan calendar, generating huge media coverage around the world.

The competitors are international and from all levels of society, and the race is organized by thousands of volunteers who supervise the proceedings from five headquarters: Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Nome and Wasilla.

It is said, and not without justification, that the Iditarod is more than just a race - it's a commemoration. It provides a link to the past, to Alaska's heroic age, a time when the inhabitants could not rely on any outside help... The Iditarod's route - now called the National Historic Route - has, from its very beginning, provided the link between the Seward Peninsula and the southern coastal settlements.

Gold from the west was brought along this trail, and it was the main supply route for the gold prospector's camps. All traffic took place on dog-sleds, in the most extreme conditions. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this trail created not a few heroes and legends.

In 1925 the town of Nome was struck by a devastating diphtheria epidemic, and no medicine was available. Once more the community looked to the famous drivers, and their faithful dogs, for help.

And the drivers - the best in Alaska - did not let them down: they fetched the medicine, and, by doing so, immortalised themselves. The world began to learn about, and to respect, these excellent men and their dogs.

This crazy race is run in memory of those wonderful drivers and their dogs.

The trail changes from year to year.

One year it will go along the Northern Route (through Cripple, Ruby and Galena), and the next it switches to the Southern Route (through Shageluk and Anvil). It's no exaggeration to say that just about everybody who lives in a settlement near, or on, the route, takes part in its organisation. In this part of the world it's every child's dream to take part in the race when they grow up.

Several years ago, a group of somewhat deluded animal-rights campaigners tried to have the race banned, on the grounds that the ordeal was cruel to the dogs. The drivers were so incensed by this nonsense, that without even holding a debate, they unanimously declared all the objectors to be idiots.

And they were most probably right.

It's true that there is a huge mental and physical burden placed on the dogs, and for this very reason they cannot be forced to do it. They want to do it. At the start, and after each rest, the dogs, which are in the very peak of mental and physical health, are all impatiently straining to continue. They pull at the harness again and again, and can hardly wait to set off. Often the drivers do not need to give any encouragement, but have to restrain them, to avoid their early exhaustion. These dogs were bred for the Iditarod, and if they can't pull sleds they start to get depressed. Twelve to sixteen dogs will cover the distance in ten to seventeen days, and whoever thinks that the fastest sled will always win the competition, is wrong. At the start of the race the speed of each sled is almost the same. The Iditarod is a race of intelligence.

Each competitor has his own complex and secret tactics, and the race will be won by the person who best adapts his plans to the conditions and other variables of that year.

The composition of the dogs' food, the maintenance of the health of dogs and driver, the length and frequency of the rest periods, the chosen speeds over certain stretches, the preservation of the dogs' morale and being able to judge accurately the minimum weight and volume of equipment needed, are just some of the many decisions that must be correctly made to ensure victory.

The driver must combine all these factors with the dogs' training and his own abilities, and must always be prepared to adapt his carefully thought-out tactics to unexpected circumstances. He also has to bear the burden of knowing that at certain times, other competitors, using different methods, will have a lead over him. They are constantly having to make exactly the right decision, which is not an easy thing to do during 7 - 8 exhausting and stressful days spent in the Alaskan wilderness. It's also important for a competitor to employ psychology as a weapon against his rivals; once of the basic, unwritten rules of the Iditarod is to force your rival into making a mistake. The intention throughout the race should be that your manoeuvres appear unintelligible, incomprehensible and

unpredictable to your fellow competitors. This can put so much pressure on your rival, that he will be forced, unwisely, to change his own carefully planned tactics, and if he does, there is a good chance that he will lose the race.

But the winner takes all.

A lot of money, cars, and countless offers of sponsorship; but above all Glory. Because, throughout the whole of Alaska, the winner will enjoy the unprecedented respect of his peers.

He will become a national hero, be placed on a pedestal by his fellow Alaskans, and his name will go down in Alaskan history. But all competitors will be acknowledged, and each will receive the coveted belt buckle, honoring their participation.

Andy and his team regularly help to organize the Iditarod.

They follow the competitors on motorised sleds, and so become part of the great adventure themselves. One year their presence proved particularly useful. That year the Discovery Channel, my favorite, was shooting an exciting, and very interesting, 6-part series about the Iditarod. In the series they apparently forgot to mention that the staff helicopter had crashed in a place called Dalzell Gorge. A rescue operation was mounted at once, and the rescue team, led by Andy, finally found them and brought them back to safety.

The sled belonging to the Colorado hunter is ready to go; the command to start is a loud "OK", and they're off. There are no squabbles amongst the dogs pulling the sled; the only miserable ones are those still chained up, and they lunge enviously after their companions. We travel at a moderate speed, as our dogs have just woken up. After 300 ft. we stop. It's almost getting hot on the glacier, and the dogs aren't used to it. As their bodies are heating up too quickly, we must not drive them too hard. It'll take a few minutes for them to cool down, so we now have some time to look around the glacier.

The weather is perfect, and everything glistens.

There's not a cloud in the sky. The sun is so strong that I dare not take my glasses off, just for a test, even for a short time. The light is very intense, and it's so hot that I feel like taking off the waterproof pants that the organizers have given me.

We go on. I'm beginning to get the hang of it, when and where I have to lean to keep the sled stable, and I feel that the dogs and I are moving as one. The animals are going at a comfortable trot, but their mood seems to drop when we come to a small hill.

The dogs have developed a special procedure in case nature calls when they are on the move. The sled can't stop for each dog, so the dog must work things out for itself. It spreads its hind-legs, using its protective shoes as skis, while continuing to run with its forelegs. then, as it is being towed by its

companions, the dog can relieve itself. I'm laughing so hard, I almost fall off the sled.

At the top of the hill we take another rest, during which our driver talks about the construction of the sled. In the dog team each animal has its own place and job. The animals cannot be randomly moved around within the team; each one is picked for its position on the basis of its particular abilities. They work as a team, but the first pair, the leaders, have the most important task: they must dictate the pace for the others, and - following their driver's orders - the direction to take. As I've already said, they are all docile and friendly, and can be stroked without worry. Some are obviously timid, moving away from an outstretched hand, and our driver tells us that very often these dogs are the best workers.

Now that we are going downhill the dogs are happier, and we have to put the brakes on the sled. This time I'm doing it, as I'm now in the rear position.

I have become a driver!

The dogs have no trouble with my strong accent, and obey each command. We are whizzing along! By the time we get back to the camp with its plastic kennels, we have made a huge circle over the glacier.

At the camp I notice a motorised sled, used for doing jobs around the place. As our helicopter is late arriving, our hosts take each of us for a ride on the powerful machine; it speeds along so fast, even up steep hills, that I can hardly manage to hold on. My driver is happy to go even faster. These guys are completely crazy, living alone up here on the glacier, with absolutely no washing facilities. They leave once a week to go back to civilization, and between each visit they just have to put up with each other's smell.

A red dot appears over the mountain ridge, and, gradually, the noise increases. On the way back, I sit in the front, beside the German Pilot. It's a scary experience, if you're not used to it. The machine flies low, following the contours of the ridge, and, suddenly the view opens up, and beneath us the ground drops from a few feet to several hundred. Your instincts tell you that you're going to tumble into a bottomless abyss. It takes a moment or two to realise that the pilot is in complete control, but you still feel slightly anxious.

After landing, there's no time to reflect on the trip; Andy is waiting for us at the airport, and we set off for our next location at once.

Before we get there, we stop off at Andy's office; his headquarters are based in this town. Here I am reunited with my Peli 1200 ammunition case, which I had given them, together with my gun, the day I arrived, asking them to somehow get them all delivered to Fairbanks.

Both of the Peli locks on the case are missing.

It's not clear what has happened. They were there when I gave it to Andy. He says they weren't. The

locks are irretrievably lost, but all the ammunition is intact. As Comrade Pelican, in the satirical Hungarian movie "The Witness", would say: "For the life of me, I just don't understand it!"

This is all very embarrassing, as it was Frank who insisted that I put the ammunition in a separate, locked case, to meet the requirements of some of the domestic airlines. I'll have to sort it out.

Bad news never comes alone: my gun has not arrived in Fairbanks, and nobody knows where it is. The conscientious Andy, when he arranged for my gun to be sent to Fairbanks, did not take a lot of trouble over it: he just put it in the mail. Over here it's completely normal, and legal, and not at all unusual to do that. Here people regularly mail guns to each other from state to state. Near Girdwood there is a goldmine still operating, and this is where we're about to go.

"Even Hell can't be worse than this. I'll risk it. "

(Words spoken by an unknown gold-pro prospector, who later killed himself.)

Travelling around Alaska, sooner or later - but generally sooner than later - you will come across the remains of old mines, which nowadays are, along with the anecdotes and stories from the time, just memorials to the gold-rush of the late nineteenth century.

The name Alaska, even today, viewed from a perspective of a hundred years, is still closely associated with gold. It was the gold-rush that made the state world famous, and gold still remains an important symbol of the state, even being incorporated into the flag. So, it's time to give a short outline of what really happened, the great discoveries, and what the famous Alaskan gold-rush was all about!

An unusual feature of the gold-rush was that it began in the Canadian province of Yukon, about fifty to sixty miles from the Alaskan border. It's still referred to as "Alaskan" as the original discovery was made by Alaskans, and the majority of the later prospectors - gold miners - were American citizens. Also, most of the trails to the mines ran through Alaska.

For us hunters, the Yukon River conjures up images of a hunting paradise; but it was not always so.

This river valley was once the center of the most hysterical gold-fever in history.

The whole length of the river, including its tributaries, extends for almost 330,000 miles(!), and even today there are many parts that have not been thoroughly explored.

The source of the river is in Canada, and after crossing the border it cuts Alaska in two; it is now, and always has been, the state's main shipping route. The Yukon River itself is 2300 miles long. It is so long that the early settlers did not know that the trading centers of Fort Yukon and Fort Selkirk were on the same river; because of the huge distances involved, for many years they thought that there were two separate rivers.

Contrary to popular belief, gold had been found in Alaska and the Yukon long before the gold-rush

began; in 1880, near the then Alaskan capital of Juneau, in the area known as Panhandle; and even earlier, during the period of Russian ownership, under the rule of the all-powerful Baranov, a large quantity had been mined. But Baranov did not want to draw too much attention to his little kingdom, and had the apparently fortunate prospector executed for safety's sake.

Between 1870 and 1880, prospectors, constantly on the search for new seams, reached, and began to partially explore, the Yukon region. One of the first treasure-hunters, Arthur Harper, reached the Yukon in 1873 and spent twenty-three years prospecting in the region, with very little success. In 1878 George Molt, managing to evade the vigilant Chilkoot sentries, over 3000 of them, became the first white man to cross the then unexplored Chilkoot Pass, later to become part of the Alaskan/Canadian border. This was another step in the search to find the source of the Yukon River. This pass was to become one of the most important routes for prospectors, and its name is entwined in the history of the gold-rush. At the time of the greatest activity, ten years after Molt's arrival, around 10,000 men had crossed the pass, with its gradients of thirty five degrees, and covering of ice for eight months of the year.

Despite these efforts, which should not be underestimated, only small pockets of gold were occasionally found, just enough to keep the miners from starving; and sometimes, not even that. Before the arrival of the miners, fur-trappers had already set up trading-stations within the area, making further exploration of the more remote parts easier to carry out. In 1886, at the mouth of the Stewart River, gold valued at \$10,000 was found - and the dollar was at that time of a much higher value - and then, at Fortymille River, an even more promising sample was dredged up. As a result, large crowds arrived at the town of Fortymille, turning it into the first gold-rush city of Alaska. The lives of the Fortymille miners were governed by strict rules and regulations. There were no official authorities in the area, and so it was left to an assembly of miners to deliver the verdicts in criminal cases. According to the local customs of the time, if a man ordered a drink in any one of the ten bars in the town, etiquette obliged him to buy a drink for every other person present, even if he ended up spending over \$100. It was all paid for in gold dust, and while the barman weighed it out, the customer would ostentatiously turn his back, disdaining to oversee the transaction; showing equal trust, trading-stations would often provide unlimited and unsecured loans to any prospector, and there are no known cases of anybody not getting their money back.

A strong bond kept the community together; they all looked after each other, and no-one ever starved to death. If a prospector struck gold, he was supposed to share the news with the whole community - keeping your gold-strike secret was not a characteristic of this time. The miners' homes were always open to each other, and if a stranger arrived, he would be able to find shelter in one of the huts, even if the owner happened to be away.

In spite of appearances, these men were not really looking for gold; they were true adventurers, or, as William Judge Jesuit Monk put it: "They were running away from westward-expanding civilization, and when, finally, there was nowhere else to go, they had to stop."

In the year of 1893, near Birch Brook, gold valued at \$400,000 was found, resulting in the founding of Circle City, one of the most famous gold-rush cities.

The ferocious behaviour of the Circle City miners can be illustrated by one of their favorite pastimes, which usually took place in a the bar. The company divided itself in two, and lined up against opposite walls. The essence of the "game" was to hurl large logs of wood at each other, and after it had finished, the bill, which included all damage done, was paid. A figure as high as \$2,900 was not unknown.

In Circle City, as in Fortymille, society was also self-regulating; so high were standards of public order, that no doors were ever locked.

There were no thermometers in the city, and the cold was measured in the following ways: with mercury, whisky, petroleum and the Perry Davis Pain-Killer. The liquids all froze in that sequence, and if, finally, the Perry Davis Pain-Killer froze too, then you knew that it was really cold.

There was complete personal freedom; for example, when "Throat-cutting" Johnson once tried to cut his own throat in public, no-one even bothered to intervene. His companions did gently point out that his attempt had failed, but nevertheless, his nickname remained with him for the rest of his life.

They had no courts, police or written law, only the miners' convention, which had the power to impose a sentence for theft, for example, of exile, or even death. Interestingly, these sentences were given approval at a later date by the Washington DC politicians, thus tacitly acknowledging the right of the assemblies to carry out their own judgements.

When the Miners' Association was founded it became the foremost law-making body of the city, and, soon, Circle City was being called the Paris of Alaska.

All these events preceded the major gold-rush, and is how most miners were living during the winter of 1896-97, when news began to arrive about unusual happenings taking place in a small river up in the Yukon. At this point, there were few miners who knew how the stream's name was even pronounced; but within months it was world-famous.

The river was called the Klondike.

George Washington Carmack was a legendary figure, whose name will be forever linked to the discovery of the unbelievably rich Klondike gold-fields. Contrary to the spirit of the age, Carmack actually wanted to become an indian, and his gold-prospecting activities were somewhat accidental.

On the 16th August 1896, with his Siwash Indian friends, he was exploring around Rabbit Brook, a river near Klondike, and while sitting down for a rest he spotted a thumb-sized nugget sticking out of the ground. They began searching, and found that when panning, each dish was producing an

average of \$4 worth of gold.

This was a sensational discovery, as for most miners, a yield of 10cents per pan was considered to be high. Carmack staked out his claim, and on a nearby pine tree nailed up the following historic notice:

" TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I do this day, locate and claim,by right of discovery, five hundred feet,running up stream from this notice. Located this 17th day of August,1896."

The news spread throughout the north like wildfire. A merchant named Ladue quickly set up a trading-post near Carmack's stake, and named it Dawson City, after the geographer George M. Dawson; it went on to become the most famous of all the gold-rush cities. Rabbit Brook was renamed Bonanza by the romantic prospectors, and the whole area started to be parcelled out. With a few exceptions, all the miners working in the Upper Yukon moved their headquarters to Dawson, which seemed a little premature, as neither Carmack nor anyone else had yet found really substantial amounts of gold, and the value of the gold-field had still not been proven. Similar rumors of great discoveries often spread through the mining communities, and were generally discounted by the miners.

But in this case the rumor was true ...

Often stakes were made and sold on without the land being properly surveyed, which meant that sometimes people could buy parcels of land for almost nothing, which only months later turned out to be hugely valuable. There were many other examples of people desperate for money, vainly trying to sell their stakes, which again, months later, turned out to be some of the most valuable in history.

But the Klondike had not yet revealed its treasures.

Soon, just by surface-mining, Carmack was producing \$1400 of gold a month; but still many were sceptical about the Klondike.

And it turned out that in a way, they were right - the best was yet to come!

A series of unbelievable events then occurred, forever changing the American north and the history of Alaska.

A poor, half-starved, badly-equipped miner, by the name of Anton Sadler, considerably shabbier than most of his colleagues, couldn't find an unstaked plot of land anywhere in the vicinity of Bonanza. He had come to the area intending to make a claim nearby, but this now looked hopeless.

Disappointed, he continued north for a few more miles, to a tributary of the Bonanza, called "Kid Bonanza" by the miners. With four other companions, all in an equally run-down condition, he set up camp, and, unenthusiastically, they began to stake out their claims.

As they hammered their pegs into the frozen ground they had no idea that, literally, they were walking on gold. Beneath the worn-out soles of their boots, just below a thin layer of earth, the ground was solid gold.

This impoverished group of men, long-deprived of any form of comfort, and always living in life's shade, were suddenly within arm's length of staggering wealth!

Then, they could not possibly have foreseen that this would be the most profitable mining area of all time, the richest in recorded history, and that very soon they would acquire fortunes that would place them among the wealthiest citizens in America. They began the wearisome process of panning ... and couldn't believe their eyes. Soon, in the new mine shafts, in the flickering light of their torches and lamps, the earth shone with a yellow glow. Each time they touched the wall of a shaft they were touching gold ...

Every single one of the five plots held a minimum of \$1million worth of gold - and, I repeat, we are talking about the value of a dollar in 1897! - and most of it was found in the unusually rare form of nuggets. In places the ground was virtually pure gold. As I've already said, the success of their first investigations was instantaneous, and even surprised the impeturbable people of Dawson.

The city burst into life.

Soon Anton and his friends were making \$4.00 a pan, and the famous Plot 30 was producing \$5000 a day! In the best areas they achieved the almost fabulous figure of \$800 per pan!

In the US, at that time, the daily wage for the average worker was \$1.25, so you can just imagine the purchasing power given by these huge amounts of gold. Plot 30, in just one day, would pay the wages of a single worker, in pure gold, for eleven years.

Kid Bonanza was soon renamed El Dorado.

The rumors finally reached Circle City, but were treated with disbelief by its inhabitants. However, when they were finally confirmed by reliable sources, one bar-owner promptly jumped over his counter, bequeathing all the bottles of drink to his delighted customers, and ran off to stake his claim. Several letters from officials in Dawson City were sent to the authorities in Ottawa, but the bureaucrats did not take them seriously, and the reports lay ignored on the shelves, gathering dust.

In Dawson, meanwhile, there was a shortage of everything but gold.

Supply routes to the city were not properly established, and yet the population had exploded. The famous Klondike Kings - men who had either got there at the beginning, or had been lucky enough to find a good plot - were forced to pay their workers \$150 a day, because there was simply too much gold for them to bring up on their own. As \$150 at that time was the equivalent of six months salary for a government clerk, there were no worries about the workers going on strike.

The early months of Dawson City were the only time when the worth of dollar bills actually exceeded their nominal value. Nobody had any cash, though they were all up to their knees in gold, so if by chance a \$20 note appeared it would be bought at once for \$25 by some filthy-rich miner. Land prices

rocketed. In Dawson City, the Alaskan Commercial Company managed to sell a warehouse which they had built, for \$93,000; a similar building in any west-coast city could be bought for just \$4000.

By the summer of 1897 the population of Dawson had reached 350,000; they were described by a contemporary source as "looking like the remnants of a prison riot."

The rest of the world, meanwhile, remained unaware of all these events, due to the difficulties of travel and communication, until the first two ships got back to civilization carrying the now fantastically wealthy miners.

On the 15th July 1897 the Excelsior reached San Francisco - this is where Jack London's novel "Smoke Bellow" begins - then two days later, on the 17th, the Portland arrived in Seattle.

The Portland had on board sixty-eight of the Klondike Kings, and its hold was laden with gold.

A staggering amount of gold.

Calculations show that, between them, the sixty-eight miners arrived with two tons of pure gold. At the current (2009) value of 935 an oz. this makes the cargo worth \$66 million today.

Gold-fever broke out in Alaska.

The Kings were courted by everybody, began to spend like crazy, and behaved like stars. King Berry, for instance, yelled at the frightened management of the Great Northern Hotel, in Chicago, that nothing there was good enough for him. Another of his colleagues, King Miller, had a nervous breakdown, brought on by the constant interest in them.

Life in Portland practically ground to a halt.

Masses of people left their jobs, sometimes quite unexpectedly, right in the middle of a task. The phenomenon occurred at every level of society, contrary to popular belief; it wasn't only the poor who went off prospecting. The mayor of Seattle, W.D. Wood, for instance, merely sent a telegram announcing his resignation, before setting off for the north. Ships loaded with people went north, but were unable to return as their crews jumped-ship to become prospectors. Whaling ceased, canning factories closed, and, in certain areas, all agriculture stopped: America had gone gold-mining.

Amongst those heading north were the ex-president of the First National Bank of Seattle, a senatorial candidate and even a Brigadier-General. The multi-millionaire hotelier, E.J. "Lucky" Baldwin, was also planning to go, and the streets of Portland were littered with the equipment of all those about to leave. Because of the rush, travel companies were thrown into a state of emergency.

In a very short space of time eight large mining companies were established to oversee gold production: their combined value exceeded \$25 million.

Within weeks the economies of the cities from where the prospectors set out began to boom. Almost

anything bearing the label "Klondike" could be sold, and interestingly, all over America, people suddenly began to imagine that they too had discovered gold. In the province of British Columbia in Canada, in the town of Victoria, a madman wanted to dig a mine in the middle of the main street, as he thought he'd seen gold in the ditch running alongside. There was, however, surprising ignorance about Klondike; the Alaskan explorer Harry De Windt was asked if the Chilkoot Pass could be crossed on a bicycle.

This ignorance forshadowed the tragedy that was to come.

On 28th July 1897 Louis Schloss, a co-founder of the Alaskan Commercial Company, said:

"...whoever encourages anyone to travel to the Yukon this autumn commits a crime."

This was said by a man who had made huge profits equipping miners, so his opinion should not be considered biased or pessimistic.

The Traveller's Insurance Co., which specialized in insurance for journeys, began to refuse to issue policies to those leaving for the Alaskan gold-fields.

But even this did not discourage the urban-dwelling, comfort-loving masses from setting off into one of the most hostile environments in nature. The Excelsior added to the general hysteria by arriving, once more, laden with gold. By the 1st September around 9000 people, carrying 3000 tons of equipment, had gone north; they had no idea that one of the coldest winters on record was approaching. Nor was that fact known by the million, or so, making their plans to leave, or by the 100,000 who left that autumn. By 1898 over \$60 million had been spent on equipment, but that year, as it later turned out, the Klondike yielded only \$10 million. It was a hugely profitable business for shopkeepers, who used organised propaganda to actively encourage people to leave as soon as possible. These companies must bear an everlasting responsibility for their contribution to the human tragedies that were to occur up in the north.

Even a fully-equipped diver went off to the Yukon; he thought he'd be able to stroll along the river-bed, collecting apple-sized nuggets of gold along the way. This shows the general level of ignorance of a public that believed such a thing was even possible. The Alaskan Gopher Co. intended to head north with trained hamsters, and planned to use the poor creatures to bring the precious metal up to the surface...

A grotesque sort of fleet, something never seen before, was making its way north; in the words of a contemporary description, it was "a floating lunatic asylum, hell let loose in a polar environment." Tickets to join this crazy armada were in huge demand, and were selling for ten-times their face-value, despite the fact that the vessels were in terrible condition. A typical example was the Eliza Anderson, which, despite having to navigate the dangerous northern waters, had - this is not a mistake - no propeller, no furnaces, no water purifiers, no steam-crane, no electricity, no refrigeration

and not even a compass!

One of the main routes in Alaska leading to the Klondike begins at Skagway and continues along the White Path. Széchenyi, when he travelled through Skagway, was fast asleep, a fact he later lamented in his diary:

"... at dawn we stopped in Skagway for half an hour. It's true that it was still dark, so we wouldn't have seen much anyway, but I still regret it. The only thing I know about Skagway is that, during the Klondike gold-rush of 1899, it was the main starting point. From there they set out for the terrifying, 3000 ft. high Chilkoot Pass - the worst journey this side of Hell " (Széchenyi)

I'd like to slightly amend this, because, as I said earlier, the route from Skagway goes to the White Pass, not to Chilkoot.

One awful section of the trail, leading to White Pass, was known as Dead Horse Trail, a track where the most brutal and inhuman treatment of animals was commonplace. Men acted like brutes. During my researches I have read many true stories about the monstrous acts that took place there; I'm not going to say any more, and those who are interested can make their own investigations.

Also on this route were the true profiteers of the Klondike, people who, through money-lending and the sale of alcohol, were able to earn up to \$5000 a day. Although it was forbidden to import, produce or sell alcohol in Alaska, no-one in Skagway took the slightest notice. In fact, the town actually contained five breweries, and one hundred and forty-two bars. It was here that the first mafia, in the modern sense, was seen in America; they were a very highly organized group of criminals, led by a man called "Soapy" Smith, whose activities involved all types of businesses, and whose henchmen were relentless in trying everything possible to part the prospectors from their valuables. As the English traveller Alexander MacDonald wrote:"... I've been to many dangerous places around the world, but I can honestly say that I found the greatest center of illegality to be in Skagway. There was no law at all; the strong were always right; and only a good marksman could feel safe."

Both passes, the White and the Chilkoot, led to the shores of Bennett Lake, and from here the journeys continued by little crafts built on the spot. Those who could not afford porters or horses had to get their own equipment and food, which might weigh up to a ton, to the lake's shores; this could take several trips of over 2500 miles there and back, over a number of months, while carrying huge amounts of baggage. Only a very few managed it.

In the autumn of 1897 disturbing news began to circulate amongst the itinerant miners: there was no food in Dawson City!

All the miners' money and the Klondike Kings' piles of gold were useless: they couldn't spend it. In a bizarre twist of fate, people, who previously would have given anything to get to Dawson, now would

have given anything to get away from the accursed place, back to civilization. One of the problems in getting to, and from, Dawson, is shown by the fact that on the 29th November the temperature in the general Klondike area was -88.5 F ! Incredible, absurd and chaotic situations arose all over the region, but there was one common desire amongst everyone: they were all waiting for spring. Very few actually made it to Dawson, and those who did, did so by a variety of different routes, over several dozen. And we must not forget that these people were the very ones whose wanderings led to the exploration and opening up of the North-west. Nothing could distract those in the grip of gold-fever, and they frequently ended up in places where no man had ever been before, or has been, since.

But they paid a great price.

One of the saddest stories tells of an old man on the Ashcroft Trail to Klondike. He would ask everyone he met, in a plaintive voice, "Where is the gold?". Finally, after being told that Klondike was still 1000 miles away, he took out his gun and shot himself.

Other routes were no less arduous, either. Between 1897-98, twenty-two thousand people tried to cross the Chilkoot Pass, sixty of whom were killed in one single day, 3rd April 1898, by an avalanche. "... in the blizzards and avalanches, in which hundreds of people, and thousands of pack-animals lost their lives." (Széchenyi)

On the 29th May 1898, at least 7000 home-made rafts and boats, of various sizes and degrees of stability, set off from the shore of Bennett Lake towards the Yukon and Dawson City. Nothing like it had ever been seen in the world before. There were still, however, at least 500 miles to go to the Klondike, and some of the river-route was virtually unnavigable. Partly because of the terrible ordeals that lay ahead, and partly because the major gold-fields had already been claimed, many prospectors, on arriving at Dawson, turned back immediately.

Meanwhile, Dawson had turned into a real metropolis.

There were sixty-five steamers working on the Yukon River, carrying supplies, and anything else you can imagine, to the 18,000 inhabitants and 5000 miners . Luxury hotels sprang up in the city, but, because of the lack of building materials, and expertise, many had no internal walls, a fact that didn't seem to bother anyone.

The area's tourist trade began with the arrival of two ladies, who just wanted to see the site of the famous gold-rush.

One of the most common misconceptions about Dawson is that the city was a hotbed of crime, and that public order was negligible, even by the standards of the Wild West. Well, the image of: "Dawson, the violent gold-rush city," is far from true, and was invented by historians. If you have read such stories, it's obvious that the writer had either never been to the city, or if he had, did not let the facts

get in the way of a good story.

Dawson was not Skagway.

The famous, sometimes notorious, Mounties, the Canadian Mounted Police, had full power in the area, keeping order with an iron grip, and, if necessary, occasionally bending the laws. Generally, they carried out their work to the highest of standards, being consistent, just and incorruptible, and the fact that at this time there was not one murder in the city is due entirely to them. Their work was much appreciated, as they not only prevented the spread of other "Soapy" Smith-like characters, but also kept the several hundred miles of waterway, from the border to the city, safe and secure; they had a knack for popping up wherever trouble was brewing. In fact, Dawson was so safe that even instances of common theft were rare; almost nothing was ever stolen, even from the miners' tents.

One miner, a New Zealander named James Dalziell, always left his jacket hanging in a prominent position on the outside of his hut whenever he went off prospecting, sometimes for up to a month; and even though he left his huge, solid-gold watch in one of the pockets, it was never touched during his absence. The carrying of knives, spears or side-arms, let alone shotguns or handguns, was forbidden; though there were actually a few rare exceptions where handguns were allowed. Sam Steele, a police commander, even punished people for swearing. Bars were closed on Sundays, and the citizens spent the time peacefully singing psalms. On one occasion, a group of people, of a rather boisterous nature, travelled fifty miles down the Yukon River to American territory, just to have a good party, and escape Steele's watchful eyes.

Serious crime, all controlled by "Soapy", still flourished at Skagway, the start of the White Pass trail. But on the 8th July 1898, public sentiment changed. J.D.Stewart, a newly-enriched prospector on his way back from the gold-fields, was forced to hand over a bag of his gold to the criminals in Skagway, an occurrence that he refused to accept quietly. He began organizing people, and soon the city began to turn against Soapy. Eventually, Frank Reid, the head of the city's self-organized police force, shot "Soapy" dead, in a street duel straight out of a Wild West movie. Reid himself took two bullets, and did not survive. The two adversaries ended up being buried side-by-side, and the following sentence was inscribed on Reid's tombstone : "He gave his life for the honour of Skagway."

Meanwhile, until the spring of 1899, Dawson continued to flourish. There was so much gold around the place that, fifty years later, it was possible to sift out several thousand dollars worth of gold from the earth beneath the floorboards of a bar; and during the economic crash of the 30's some people managed to find significant amounts by sieving the mud of Dawson's main street.

From July 1897 to July 1898 Dawson was the San Francisco of the north, and for this twelve months it was one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. It's citizens could have stepped straight out of the

pages of a novel by Jenő Rejtő. There was one who made \$150,000 in a single night at a game of poker.

When, in the spring of 1899, the gold began to run out in the Klondike region, more was discovered, almost simultaneously, in Alaska, near Nome, at Norton Bay, close to where the Iditarod ends today. In the August of that year, in just one week, 8000 people left Dawson. Almost three years after Carmack's original discovery, the Alaskan gold-rush had ended.

Nearly 100,000 people had set out for Dawson during this time, but only 30-40,000 actually had made it. Around 400 had managed to make their dreams of gold come true, and succeeded in finding the precious metal, but of those, only a few hundred became really rich. The number of prospectors who actually managed to hang onto their newly-acquired fortunes was only about a dozen. Most of the Klondike Kings ended their lives in prison, or working in misery as common laborers. Even Anton Sadler, who discovered El Dorado, died in poverty.

Carmack, however, was one of the lucky ones, and became a successful property developer in Seattle, until his death in 1922.

In the word of Elizabeth Barret Browning:

"All actual heroes are essential men, And all men possible heroes..."

Every man who took part in the Alaskan gold-rush was, without exception, a hero.

As Pierre Burton wrote: "Today, if someone ... wants to get his photograph into a sensational magazine article, he need do no more than repeat the deeds of the early prospectors: to tow a ton of baggage along the Dyea Trail and the Chilkoot Pass during coldest winter; to saw planks out of trees that he cut down himself; and on the shore of Bennett Lake build from them a usable boat; to struggle with the currents of a fast-flowing river for more than 500 miles, and on reaching the mouth of the Klondike, to construct a wooden hut in which he can survive the temperatures of -76 F. I very much doubt if, since the end of the nineteenth century, anyone has done this. But, ... 20,000 greenhorns did just this."

I've written this short summary of the gold-rush as a reminder to us all.

To remind every hunter and tourist who comes to this beautiful region, and went home with nothing but happy memories. They should remember those to whom this wonderful frozen land was a hell, and who never made it back to their loved-ones.

They should remember the awful suffering; the total desolation and hopelessness; the frozen limbs, the starvation, the struggling and the insanity; the disappointment and exhaustion that awaited the miners in Alaska.

They should remember the two unfortunate men found frozen to death in their hut after walking 2500 miles across Canada; in their cooking-pot was a pair of half-cooked moccasins...

Now, with Andy's help, I'm going to try my hand the difficult life and hard work of a miner.

In the little mining colony near Girdwood a lot of the original equipment and entire huts have been kept intact for posterity. Anyone can have a go at panning, and whatever they find, they can keep. Apparently, there aren't many people who've become millionaires by doing this.

I'm studying the technique of using the pan. All traditional methods of gold-washing are based on the fact that gold will be the heaviest material in the pan. You have to swirl the water around the pan until the gold separates from the silt and gravel. I was perseveringly swirling the water and struggling with the pan for twenty minutes.

But look! What's that at the bottom? Tiny yellow granules ... I've struck gold!

I've become a genuine Alaskan gold-miner!

(my feeling of achievement is not diminished by the knowledge that Andy had bought me a bag of earth carefully laced, by hands unknown, with several granules of the precious metal, to ensure my success.)

Just a couple of feet down from me some locals are also panning; they manage to live on whatever amateurs like me carelessly pour back into the stream.



Then we set off for the lower stretch of Glacier Creek; to end the day I'm going to try white-water rafting. While I was doing my gold-panning, Aaron, one of Andy's lieutenants, was preparing the boats. As we drive down the river-valley I can see a strange construction. It's a bucket, hanging precariously from a cable stretched over the foaming river. It's moved by the power of human muscle. Running through the bucket, at waist-height, is another cable, which the person standing inside pulls, thus moving the whole thing. If you get tired mid-stream, you'll have all night to decide whether it was a good idea to leave the shore. We get in. I just have to try this. I leave the rope to Andy. We move out over the river, and I can see Aaron beneath us struggling to get the boats ready. The bucket is rocking and rolling: it's not to be recommended to anyone who gets vertigo, and I soon end the fun by asking Andy to take me back to the shore.

It's lucky the boats aren't on the other side.

We set off in two boats.

One takes four people, and is captained by Aaron, with two of his friends as crew, and I'm in a two-seater kayak with Andy. We're all wearing helmets, and so many clothes that we look like over-dressed medieval knights. We are carried along by the current, shooting past walls of rock just inches away - to help me relax they tell me that last week someone broke their leg after capsizing. That's just what I want to hear before I go hunting! I can't do much to steer; the water is very fast, and I've no experience of white-water. But Andy is very competent with his paddle, and I survive the one-hour trip uninjured.

As we travel down the river, we come across some unusual members of the local fauna; there is a family of ducks floating in front of the kayak. This, in itself, is not particularly strange, but these ducks are swimming through the roughest rapids as they follow the current. The water bubbles and foams beneath them, but the little group doesn't separate. Andy calls them "Wildwater Ducks".

That evening I don't really feel like writing my diary.

It's been another long Alaskan day - exhausting, but rich with experiences.

Room 2 (at least I think so: I can't find the key)

Colony Inn

325 E. Elmwood

Palmer

4th August

I now have an abundance of breakfast vouchers, so I invite Aaron to join me at the buffet table of the Alyeska Hotel.

Today I go on to Palmer, and when breakfast is over, we start. I'm sitting in the front of Andy's car, in the familiar right-hand seat. Aaron is driving as Andy has gone on ahead to arrange everything. Today's program includes a ride on what Hungarians call quad-bikes, but are known over here as ATVs. At home they are not very popular amongst hunters, as their loud noise makes hunting impossible; but the fault really lies with the drivers, not the vehicles.

In Alaska an ATV is an almost indispensable piece of hunting equipment, as many remote areas are inaccessible by jeep, and planes cannot land in dense forest. These vehicles have been designed to cope with the roughest terrain, and I soon learn just how capable they are.

Andy comes to collect me in a giga-sized pickup - it's bigger than any mini-van I've seen so far. A 6000cc. engine is rumbling away in the white GMC monster, which takes up half the road. A trailer has been attached, and on it, in two rows, stand five ATVs, firmly tied down with ropes. We set off to the sound of "Midnight Special", and stop at the first gas-station we see to get our supply of Gatorade. My new friends are getting to know me, and realise that I can't function without it. During our conversation we discuss the animosity in Hungary between ATV drivers and hunters, but they don't really understand the problem. This is a huge country, and there's room for everyone.

The machines we're given are 500cc. semi-automatic Hondas. After a short practice run I get quite good at it, even though I don't drive much at home; there I drive at an old man's speed. So I do not go at full-throttle. There's no need: these machines are extremely powerful. As I'm not yet totally familiar with it, I follow Andy's lead, watching the trail he picks, and how the bike behaves beneath him, and try to do the same.

We soon leave the forest, and are riding along the coast. The tide has created islands, separated from each other by channels of varying depth; Andy gets off his ATV, and in his long, rubber waders, searches for a place to cross. It's no good here as the water's too deep, so we go on; but it's all hopeless; the water is always too deep. There doesn't seem to be any solution. Eventually, we come back to the first place we tried, and see a couple of local fishermen trying to cross on their ATVs.

A brief discussion ensues.

Finally, we make a decision. One of the fishermen is out in the water, testing the depth step-by-step.

We follow on our machines, trying to keep exactly to his path. Each ATV manages to get over, and we are soon on a beach that is sometimes underwater, but right now is dry and smooth, except for the occasional pebble.

And now we can really go for it!

I increase the throttle, the tyres bite into the ground, and I move into top-gear. It's an excellently designed, stable, piece of machinery. We've been using rear-wheel drive, but as the terrain becomes more challenging, we switch to four-wheel drive.

We race across the flats; struggle through the mud; reverse on the sand; ride over rotten trees, and nothing seems able to stop us. At one point we plunge into a thicket and go through it as if we were driving tanks. We come to a sandy beach, but because of all the dust we're making I can't see a thing. I catch up with Andy and ride along, sometimes beside, and sometimes behind him, like in the Paris-Dakar Rally, leaving dust-trails that rise several feet in the air behind us, as our speed hits 60mph. The sandy part ends, and we are now racing over stones the size of a child's head. Imagine how strong these chassis must be to take all this!



There's a sudden bend, and, as we go round it, a glacier appears, filling the horizon, and exhaling an ice-cold breath over us. Huge blocks of ice, thousands of years old, have crashed to the ground, and now form bizarre shapes. We take a break, man and machine resting together. Out come our bags of food, and Andy lights a fire. Nature-lovers speak the same language all over the world, even if they do live several thousand miles apart. The ATVs standing beside the fire remind me of the times when the only method of transport was the horse. Right now, at this very moment, we're not really any different from our ancestors, who also sat around similar camp-fires; perhaps in this exact spot by the glacier. Except that the veins of our horses carry gas, rather than blood.

During our rest I fire my first shots in Alaska. The gun is a Mossberg pump-action shotgun, in a somewhat neglected condition. Even Andy, its owner, admits this, but says it is only his working gun. He takes it everywhere; it's either dumped in the back of his car, or, like now, tied to his ATV. Because of his work, he often has to spend the night out in the open air, and sometimes, using his gun, he has to find his own food. Also, it could come in useful to scare off bears, though it is doubtful how effective a 20 Gauge shotgun, loaded with light pellets, would actually be against one.

What's certain, is that I have managed to demolish a dead bush with it.

On the way back I'm beginning to feel so tired that I start to lose concentration. It's a tough job riding an ATV all day. Suddenly, on a steep hillside I almost get into trouble.

Forgetting that my ATV has four wheels, I lean sharply to the left and immediately feel that I'm going to tip over. Quickly, I decide to put down my left foot. The machine continues to lean to the left. My foot gets trapped between the ground and the footrest ... and then the machine gently tilts itself back to the right. I got away with it that time, but I must concentrate more, and drive more slowly. Breaking my leg is not something I'd like to do. I deliberately fall back to the end of the line of ATVs, and, for the remainder of the long journey back, I focus solely on keeping the Honda firmly on the ground.

A moose appears, evidently not frightened by the rumbling of our machines. It's the second one I've seen in the wild; the first was near Anchorage, and we almost ran it over. This is a young animal, and stares at us with a puzzled expression. It doesn't seem sure what to do at first, but then decides it has seen enough and lumbers off into the forest. Back at my hotel, I take my leave of Andy and the others.

The Colony Inn is an old, wooden two-storey building, and has comfortable, nicely-furnished rooms. It's proud of its history, and maintains its old-world look throughout the hotel. I have to collect my key from a different building; I'm alone in the hotel.

Completely alone.

There's nobody here, not even a single member of staff.



I go into the bathroom, but I can't get the shower to work. Over here, showers are generally pretty sophisticated things, and this one, I have to say, has completely defeated me. I'm running about with a towel wrapped around me, searching for somebody, anybody, but I can't find a soul. Finally, I come across a telephone, call reception, and they promise to send someone over.

Soon a cheerful-looking man arrives to help me, criticizing the way the shower works; he says he can't remember anyone in the last few years who has managed to figure it out.

He also says that to compensate me for my inconvenience they will launder all my clothes free of charge. This is just in time - they were last washed at the Anchorage Hilton, and that was a while ago.

In the evening we drive to an old mine called Hatchet Pass. Not a very interesting sight. It was exhausted years ago, but they have kept all the mining machinery and the miners' huts; some years later they put down walkways, called it an exhibition, and now you can go there to see the remains. They obviously didn't spend much, so it probably won't run at a loss.

It's a partial success.

There's still no news of my gun.



One of the Two Upstairs Rooms
Talkeetna Roadhouse
Talkeetna, Alaska
5th August

Andy and Aaron come to collect me at 7.45 in the morning.

Aaron is driving again today, and Andy is talking continuously on his cellphone. I manage to pick up from his conversation that it's about my gun. We go to have breakfast in one of Palmer's non-stop restaurants. I've never had steak for breakfast before, but it's one of the choices on the menu, and Andy tells me that it's not unusual here. I order one, as I like a big breakfast.

Our breakfasts have almost arrived by the time Andy finishes his call. It's the best news possible: my gun has arrived at Deadhorse, and is safe with the wife of my future guide. So Andy was quite right when he said that, in Alaska, the postal service works slowly, but surely.

The weather rapidly changes, and the heat of a few days ago becomes just a memory. Yesterday, after our trip on the ATVs, the weather broke, and during our visit to the mine we had the pleasure of a complete downpour.

It's pouring down at the moment, and the clouds are so low I feel we'll crash into them.

Aaron is driving us to Talkeetna.

Talkeetna is probably the place that comes closest to a foreigner's idea of a typical Alaskan town. Like the other large Alaskan settlements, it was founded during the gold-rush. The gold-rush is long gone, but fortunately, Talkeetna remains. There may be a Hungarian hunter treading its sidewalks, but it is best known as a base for Alaskan mountaineers. It is where they start from when they set out to conquer the local peaks, which include Mt. McKinley, a.k.a. The Great One.

The 20,320ft. mountain is the highest point in North America, and is officially known as Mt. Denali, which in the native language means "High/Snowy Mountain". It got the name McKinley in 1896 from a prospector, who named it after the Republican presidential candidate. The miner's propaganda worked so well that McKinley was elected the 25th President of the USA, and was in office from 1897 until 1901. The indigenous people naturally have their own mythology about both their origins, and that of the mountain; as well, they have a story explaining the birth of mankind.



It goes like this:

In a village there lived an Indian boy and his three cousins; far away, over the sea, dwelt a beautiful maiden, of a cold and haughty nature, famous for having no interest in men (or women, either... – G.K.) . The boy must have liked a challenge, because he decided that he would marry nobody but that girl. One day he set out over the sea, taking his three relatives with him for assistance. But, as expected, the maiden rejected him.

The next morning, as they were preparing to leave for home, a mother approached, and offered them her baby daughter, saying she no longer needed her(???). By chance, at that very moment, the cold-hearted maiden went down to the shore to get water, just as the little group was standing there. But, as she was drawing the water, she began to sink into the mud. The boy, in revenge, ignored her cries, (as did the other villagers standing about, though the story doesn't explain why), so the beautiful girl drowned. Watching all this, the girl's father became very angry, and sent his giant black bears down to the shore to create a windstorm. The evil beasts caused such huge waves that the boy's little boat

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almost capsized. But our hero then took out a stone and threw it into the water (we don't know how he got it, where it came from, or what its magic powers were). Unfortunately the stone's effect only worked around the boy's canoe: those of his cousins were capsized and they all drowned. (Up until now, the three cousins haven't done anything in the story, or appeared in any of its scenes - it's a mystery why they were included at all). But the bears, it seems, rather overdid it, and the waves wiped out the whole village, except for their master, the father of the drowned girl, and his wife; exactly how they managed to survive is not revealed in the story. Meanwhile, the boy, with the baby, was rowing homewards. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he jumped up and plunged his harpoon into the crest of a wave. He must have thrown it with great force, because it remained fixed in the wave; then the boy, exhausted from such exertion, fell asleep. When he woke up, marvel of marvels, the canoe was resting amongst the branches of a pine tree, and the wave, into which he had flung his harpoon, had become a mountain. The harpoon then flew out of the mountain, and plunged into yet another wave which, once more, became mountain.

This second mountain was Denali.

But the harpoon didn't stop there; it flew far up into the sky, to a place where ordinary mortals cannot see it, but shamans can.

To complete the happy ending, the boy - still sitting up in the tree - turned around and, to his surprise, found that the baby girl had become a beautiful young woman. And it is from this couple that the whole of mankind originates. (Where all the other people in the tale came from we are not told).

The bad news is that the evil owner of the bears, and his wife, are still alive, but, thankfully, live far away from us.

The mountain is in the Denali National Park, established on 26th February 1907. In 1976 it was classified as a biosphere reserve, though it's not really certain if it was a good idea. Unesco creates these reserves under its Humans and Nature Project, which gives extra protection to the chosen area. The other aim of the Project, according to the basic deed of foundation of these reserves, is: "They must encourage and demonstrate the balance between the biosphere and human activity." This means that these areas are specially promoted as tourist attractions. The authorities prefer to keep the tourists in a single area, where, for example, they can observe the grizzlies under controlled conditions. For the national parks, this is the best solution, rather than having tourists wandering about all over Alaska, getting into trouble and frightening the game. In figures, this policy results in Denali Park receiving 300,000 visitors per year.

Naturally, I wanted it included in my schedule, and asked Andy to organize a trip. Fortunately he talked me out of it, because the area is now so overcrowded that it no longer truly represents "Alaska". As there are still many places in the state to visit, which are not tourist paradises, we removed Denali from my program.

Returning to the subject of Talkeetna, it's worth mentioning the motto of this town of 844 people:

"Talkeetna where the road ends and life begins."

I doubt if there are many cities in the world which can sum up the philosophy of the local population so precisely and succinctly.

My room will be in the Talkeetna Roadhouse, built in 1917. Apparently, as hotels go, it's a pretty cool place; I hope that's true. Half-way to Talkeetna we get some bad news: the so-called Whistle Stop Train is not running. This train is a special service run by Alaska Railroad, the speciality being that it only stops at places requested in advance by the passengers, and not at ordinary stations. This can even be right in the middle of nowhere. There are many people living out in the wilds, as well as others going there for long, or short, periods. The regular travellers on the train are composed of mountaineers, anglers, voluntary hermits and rafting enthusiasts.

We wanted to use this train to get to Curry, another Széchenyi memorial spot. Yes, this is the place where, on 31st August 1935, Széchenyi broke his train journey for a night, staying in a hotel where there was a morning wake-up alarm that apparently woke up everybody.

"It's already dark when we reach Curry. Instead of a station, a nice, modern hotel stands beside the tracks, all alone in the depths of the forest." (Széchenyi)

"It's a neat and clean hotel, the best I've seen since I arrived here." (Széchenyi)

The news about the train is very annoying, as the only reason we're going to Talkeetna is to get to Curry.

Yet again we have to alter the program.

Andy starts making some calls while I watch the rain through the windscreen.

We arrive at the Talkeetna Roadhouse.

I would not call it a good hotel.

It is not a good hotel; not even average.

Let's be honest: it's a youth hostel.

It has two, so-called, "deluxe" rooms, and I take one of them; which means I don't have to share my dreams with three other people.

The stink of grease from the kitchen permeates the entire building, and my room is probably right over it, as the smell seems stronger here. After examining the bathroom, I decide to skip my bath today.

Like my previous hotel, it is built of wood, which means that anyone walking along the ground floor makes the whole building reverberate. But unlike at the Colony Inn, I'm not alone here. There's always someone walking around.

I dump my bags and escape into the fresh air. Andy listens patiently to my complaints. There's been a bit of a misunderstanding, as Andy thought that I liked these "historic" hotels. He came to this conclusion because in Seward I had insisted on the Van Guilder, which is also considered "historic".

But I only chose that place because of the Széchenyi connection; otherwise I like big, modern,

comfortable hotels.

Those that have lifts, jacuzzis and large buffet breakfasts. And this isn't one of those. I'll survive one night, somehow, but I'll have to give my all clothes a good airing.



Andy asks me to make a decision.

We can cancel the trip to Curry and stay in the area, as he says there are lots of things to do and I won't be bored.

But I want to go on. I MUST get to Curry.

The only thing to do is to hire a helicopter.

Unfortunately, the weather does not improve, and even the famous bush-pilots are reluctant to take off, but they reassure me that : "Everything is possible, but everything has a price."

Finally, one of the experienced Denali Helicopters pilots, the brave John, agrees to undertake the 25 minute journey. We drive to the airport, and seeing John's machine inspires our confidence. It looks very modern, though it is not much more than a tubular frame, an engine and a fuel tank. Its jet engine makes so much noise that we put in ear-plugs at once, before we even get around to

putting on our headphones. Our equipment is put into containers hanging outside the machine, and John takes great care to distribute the weight evenly. Each bag is weighed several times, and the contents of the containers is constantly rearranged.

At last we take off.

Now that I have some experience of flying in a helicopter I'm no longer nervous and enjoy it much more. We are flying very close to the ground; we have no choice, as the clouds are very low. We find the tracks of Alaska Railroad, and follow them. Below us, the River Sustina appears, and I can see a jet-boat speeding along it.

There's no airport near Curry, so John lands the helicopter on a small, stony patch of riverbank, just a few square feet. We quickly unload everything, and then John is gone, back to civilization.

And we are left here in the wilderness.

Curry station is only a few hundred feet away, so we head off to it, across a small strip of forest. The hotel is no longer there, sadly; it burned to the ground a few decades ago. This is one of the drawbacks of building everything out of wood. It's hard to find old buildings in Alaska - sooner or later they all burn down. We wander around the vicinity of the station trying to find the site of the hotel. We come across some foundations, but they are clearly of a later date, though Andy thinks it very possible that they were built over the ruins of the hotel. This seems quite plausible, as there is no other flat, open area that would be suitable for a building. Wherever it was, it must have been within a couple of hundred feet of where we are standing.

So I did actually make it.

The pages of his book are coming to life ...

Looking around, I see the same landscape that Széchenyi must have seen in the morning, before he boarded the train. The trees have probably grown a bit, but the river must be exactly the same. We complete the necessary photographic and video records, and then make our way down to the river, where Aaron has already assembled the boat. It's one of the boats we used for white-water rafting, but not the one I was in.



Ahead of us lie 25 miles, almost 40 km., of river, the distance back to Talkeetna, all to be covered by boat.

What took 25 minutes by helicopter will take four hours by water. We set off downstream at an average speed of 5mph. It has been raining non-stop since last night. Idiot that I am, I haven't brought my waterproof clothes and boots. Perhaps because Andy only reminded me three times that I'd need them. My companions produce some spare clothing from their bottomless packs, but my feet are still being washed by the cold Sustina. It's a real rafting boat, with holes in the bottom so that any water that splashes in can drain away, but, of course, now the freezing water does not drain away, but stays there, keeping my feet nice and cool.

Andy then produces some Miller beer; so there we are, sitting in the boat with numbed limbs, but warm insides; it feels great.

Along the way, on the left bank, I spot my second black bear. It's the size of small pig, and watches our boat with curiosity.

It's not bothered when I raise my oar like a gun, and shout "Bang".

It's a long four hours.

I'm constantly teasing Andy about his old GPS, which tells us everything but the right directions. Sometimes it even tells us we are going away from our destination, but there's always some explanation for its readings - the rain, the clouds, the mountains, whatever - but it still never gets anything right.

To warm myself up, I pretend to row for a while, but I have some bad blisters on my palms from gripping the handlebars of the ATV; I try to get some sympathy from my guides.

I stare at the endless wilderness

This must be what the miners, and the Indians before them, saw. They heard the same silence, looked at the same trees, and the same currents pulled their boats along. But times have changed, and today the boats are made of plastic; the Sustina does not care, and stays the same as ever. Generations of hunters come and go, but the rivers always remain ...

At 7.00 pm, right on time, despite all the delays, we arrive at our mooring.

The only good thing about my smelly room is that it has WiFi coverage.

Switching on my computer I find an email from Frank Cole, the main organizer of my trip. To go hunting in Canada I have to fill in yet another application for a permit, or whatever, but I really don't feel like doing it right now. I send a reply telling them to sort it out themselves, as I prefer to go off with Andy and his friends for a farewell party at a nearby bar, where there's live music from a singer who sounds just like Chris Rea.

We get very drunk.

Room 327, Pike's Waterfront Lodge
1850 Hoselton Road
Fairbanks
6th August

I rise early, woken up by the stink, stagger down to breakfast, and then go to the souvenir shop next door. The manager there is a great friend of Andy's, and we're going to take all my luggage, which weighs a ton, to the station in his minibus.

Andy; fantastic Andy!

I'm no longer under the protection of my guardian angel - he's not my guide anymore.

From here on I'm on my own.

There's no denying that I feel sad about it. While my fate was in his capable hands I knew I wouldn't have any trouble. In my mind I can still see his careworn face, with beard and glasses, as he stares at

the screen of his iPhone, while turning the pages of his waterproof notebook. He's a brilliant organizer and a wonderful man who doesn't know the meaning of the word "impossible". Alaska is a place where things are constantly changing, and only someone who is able to adapt themselves to this will be a successful organizer.

Andy is just such an expert, and carries out his work with enthusiasm, great care and attention to details, and an ever-present smile. The achievements of the last few days, exploring the Széchenyi memorial places, are all due to him. I could not have had a better partner than him for all these programs. If my future guides turn out to be half as good as Andy, it's going to be a perfect expedition. If Alaska is the question, then Andy Morrison is the answer.

I'm sitting at the station waiting for the train.

I'm far to the north of Seward, so the landslide which originally prevented me from travelling by train no longer poses a problem, and I've been told that the tracks are already clear. According to my itinerary, I shall be travelling all day, right up to the northern terminus, Fairbanks. I shall be rattling around on the train for at least eight hours. There's no need to worry about going too fast - we never seem to go over 30 - 35 mph. Some people say that this is one of the most beautiful train journeys in the world, which is why I've chosen to do it, rather than fly. Just after 11.00, with a deafening whistle, the Alaska Railroad train, painted blue and yellow, the state colors, pulls into Talkeetna station. It is pulled by two giant engines, and the platform shakes as they go past. I have a 1st class ticket, known here as Gold Star Service, and I've been given a little badge, which I must - at least, I'm supposed to - wear all the time to prove I'm a first-class passenger.

The carriage is so high above the platform that you'd need to be a bit of a mountaineer to reach the second storey, if steps weren't provided. My bags have been taken away, and have disappeared into the belly of one of the carriages; only hand-baggage is permitted on board. Downstairs there is a pleasant restaurant, and all the seats are upstairs.

The rear-half of the top floor is open, making it the best place to view the passing scenery, but there are no seats here, you have to stand; all of the seats are in the covered section, but even there you won't miss anything.

Almost all of the carriage is made of glass.

Wherever you look you see glass, and behind it, Alaska. Even the roof is plexiglass. An attendant constantly serves refreshment, and a guide explains to us all the sights passing by. The train is very comfortable, even though it's almost completely full. There are only tourists on the train, as the locals stopped using it years ago; for them it's cheaper and faster to travel by plane, within the state. However, visiting foreigners enjoy it as they are able to see the wilderness, without experiencing any

of its discomforts. Outside, right now, a storm is raging, and the wind is hurling rain against the windows; but, here inside, we don't feel a thing. I watch the sodden countryside pass by, as I sip a nice ice-cold beer.

As far as I'm concerned it can rain all it likes.

As long as there's a break on the days I want to go hunting.

On some of the hills we slow down so much I think it would be faster to walk. Most of the other passengers are tourists going to Denali Park, and will get off in a couple of hours, leaving me almost alone. I start talking to a man, a local hunter, who has noticed the SCI sticker on the 1080 Peli bag holding my netbook. We chat away; he knows Eddie very well (here everybody knows everybody), and he gives me a lot of tips about hunting here.

I kind of envy the locals.

Alaskans don't have to get all these really expensive permits each time they go hunting, and it's not compulsory to hire a professional guide either. With a few exceptions, absolutely anyone can go hunting, and most usually do. I haven't come across any hostility towards hunters since I've been here. For these people it is a natural part of their life, and there's at least one hunter in every single family.

After leaving Denali the air becomes thick with smoke.

Huge forest fires are burning across the state, and the smell of burning wood gets into the air-conditioning and fills the carriage. Really vast areas are in flames, and though we are many miles from the actual fire there is a thick curtain of smoke hanging over the landscape; meanwhile, the two strong engines push their way through the swirling, dark air. Yesterday, Andy gave me a scare by saying that my flight from Fairbanks might not be possible. Some days even the large passenger planes don't fly.

That afternoon I have a very good chili in the empty restaurant downstairs.

As we get near to Fairbanks the scenery starts to change. There are agricultural notice-boards and tractors, and we go pass the building of the University of Alaska. We are getting into civilization. We do the last few miles at a snail's pace, and I feel that we'll never arrive.

Fairbanks station looks good, and the first-class service continues. At my request they call my hotel, Pike's Lodge, for a minibus; it arrives, and the driver and I almost cripple ourselves lifting my huge "The North Face" bag into the trunk. The station is some distance from the city, and looking round me, I wouldn't really call it an urban area. There are houses, set well apart in large gardens. I'm greeted by warm, sultry air, and the smell of burning forest.

Perhaps Fairbanks is best summed up by the motto of the local tourist center: "Extremely Alaska". Although, with its population of 85,000, it is the state's second largest city, it's not among the more popular tourist destinations. Nevertheless, it contains everything that Alaska has to offer, and I'll end my already-unforgettable pre-hunting vacation here. The city is very close to the arctic circle, so during the summer it is light for 22 hrs. a day, a fact the inhabitants make full use of. Baseball matches and golf tournaments go on all night, and all the night-life takes place in broad daylight. The people of this remote city are independent and courageous, and still retain the virtues of their Alaskan past. They are loud and colorful, and perhaps a little more boastful than other Alaskans, but what's certain is that they keep to the old traditions of working hard, playing hard and drinking hard. I'm really only any good at the last two, so at least our characters are two thirds the same.

According to the guide books a visitor should have at least one friend in the city who can take him to its secret places, and show him the nearby rivers, springs and mountains, so that he will then understand why it's worth living in such an isolated place.

It's said that there are more sled-dogs here than horses in Kentucky. I've no idea if that's true, as Kentucky only makes me think of Kentucky Fried Chicken, but I'm quite willing to believe it. The city and its environs are some of the warmest and driest places in Alaska; this might sound unbelievable, but in summer the temperature can go above 86 F . It's hot enough to go swimming outside, and a pair of shorts is a necessity.

And if you've been reading this book so far, you won't be surprised to learn that Fairbanks owes its existence entirely to gold.

In 1901 the S.S.Lavelle Young was travelling up the Tanana River, carrying 130 tons of equipment destined for the Tanacross gold-fields. On board was a certain E.T. Barnett. The Tanana soon became too shallow for the heavily laden ship to navigate, so the captain decided to try the Chena River. This route also proved unsuccessful because of the low water level. It seemed to be impossible to reach their destination, so the captain was obliged to order Barnett and his wife, equipped with the necessary supplies, to leave the ship.

The famous disembarkation of the Barnetts took place at what is now the corner of 1st Avenue and Cushman St.,so today anyone can easily visit this historic spot. Barnett was not lucky in his search for gold, but the following year an Italian named Felix Pedro discovered a significant deposit only twelve miles away. From that moment on the story continues in the familiar gold-rush pattern. By 1908 Fairbanks had a population of over 18,000, all trying their luck in the Fairbanks Mining Region. During the next decade, more, distant gold-finds enticed away the majority of the people, but ironically, Fairbanks was the place where gold-mining continued the longest. The big mining companies, with their large scale industrial methods began to arrive, together with the railway, in 1923. The most

productive field, the Gold Dredge No.8, yielded 7.8million ounces of pure gold between 1928 and 1959. Today, this disused mine is the biggest tourist attraction in the state, but having missed all the action by several decades I had no great interest in going to see it.

However, the gold-rush in Fairbanks isn't over yet. They still have the largest functioning mine in the state, the Fort Knox Gold Mine, which in 2004 yielded \$140m worth of gold.

Fairbanks lies more or less in the center of Alaska's north-south axis - slightly south, in fact - with virtually no towns above it. Going north, you only come across scattered settlements of just a few houses, and some military bases and research stations; but even these are hundreds of miles apart. Running north from here is a single unpaved road, No. 11, known, with a degree of exaggeration, as the Dalton Highway. It is a wide bulldozed road that runs to the starting-point of the TAPS, in Prudhoe Bay. This is the main supply and service route for the TAPS, as well as being an integral part of the road system coming from Canada, and which, in the event of a war against Russia, would be used to deploy US troops.

Instead of visits to mines, Andy has arranged a different program for me, but more about that later. This time Andy has not made a mistake with the hotel. Again, it's built of wood, but the interior is beautifully designed, and the rooms are well-furnished. After taking my luggage up to my room, I don't have much time left for sightseeing, as I've got a busy evening coming up.

Soon the hunt will begin.

Room 327, Pike's Waterfront Lodge

7th August

Afternoon

Today I have almost the whole day free.

I've got enough time to think about the hunting trip coming up, and the expedition as a whole, which is just starting.

I've prepared a lot for this trip, but there's no guarantee of success. I think I'm as fit as I can be; I haven't missed one training session or target practice. I've come with the best equipment available, and I'll be led by the best guides. I have decided that I'll do anything, and more, for success. Whether it will be enough, or not, will be decided by the future. I'm sure it will be enough. After long consideration, I've come to the conclusion that unless someone puts a curse on me, or I have an accident, I might well become a successful hunter here in Alaska.

Or rather, I hope so.

After my usual mega-breakfast I go into town to the local branch of the Sportsman Warehouse. Back in their shop in Anchorage I bought four pairs of professional mountaineering socks, but one pair

developed a hole after just a day. Socks with holes are not what a man takes hunting. The hotel has a generous offer, whereby, for \$5, I can travel all day on their private buses. These vehicles drive around Fairbanks in circles, cruising around the city non-stop, collecting up the hotel guests scattered about, and then delivering these honoured customers to wherever it is they want to go. The downside of this is that you sometimes have a long wait until one comes, and then it might not be going straight to your destination.

I'm taken for a longer drive than I expected. Before we reach the shop, we pop out to the international airport to collect a newly-arrived hotel guest.

The situation here is serious.

The range of vision on the runway is down to a few feet, and the smell of burning is everywhere. I'm getting worried about my journey tomorrow. My schedule is so tight that if even one day is missed it will affect the the whole expedition ahead. It looks almost certain that I'm going to lose a day's hunting. It wouldn't be a problem if I wasn't starting with the mountain hunting. For the best results I'll probably need every single day I've got, and unfortunately I simply won't be able to make up any days lost mountain hunting because of a delayed take-off; the expedition schedule won't allow it.



When we were planning all this we were fully aware of the risk, and that there was no flex-day, that is to say, a spare day. I had to decide whether to accept it or not. I did accept it, as if I hadn't, I would have had to give up other hunting trips during my trip. The mountain hunt coming up is the riskiest part of the program, as there is no guarantee that, even without all the damned smoke, my little plane will be able to collect me to bring me back from the camp on time. The weather conditions there are

usually bad anyway, but now there is also the added possibility of a delay because of the smoke. The bus-driver tries to reassure me that at my camp - up in Brooks Range, known as a ram paradise for hunters - there won't be any smoke; but it will be just as bad if I'm stuck here in the city, and can't get there.

One of the managers at the Sportsman Warehouse is almost shocked when I show him my poor, wounded sock. He can't understand it; he says these are the best socks they sell. He also hunts, and always uses these. Needless to say, he immediately exchanges my battle-worn sock for a new pair, and assures me that I'll have no problems with my three other pairs.

This morning I notice that I don't have any rifle-oil and batteries. I buy another pair of gloves, and continue to look around the shop with increasing astonishment. It's as big as a Tesco supermarket in Hungary, and what you can't find here doesn't exist. The selection is ... endless. Cabela's is similar in size, with a similar selection; you could spend a fortune in these places.

After my successful sock-exchange, I continue chatting with the manager about the latest smoke-update. Well, yesterday, even the large Boeing 737s couldn't take off. I don't want to hear any more, so I go back to the hotel - because of this unexpected news I cancel my visit to the museum. I've just realized that the most pointless question to ask anyone in Fairbanks is whether he hunts or not. In this city that's what you're born to do. Everywhere, there are men walking around wearing camouflage clothes, and while I was in the shop, two young men, locals, strolled in, carrying guns over their shoulders. They just dropped in to get some ammunition, which is lying around in piles.

It's not locked away, or supervised or anything.

The minibus is not coming.

Over the phone the receptionist advises me to take a taxi, which they will pay for, as it's their fault. And so I do; that's the way things should be done. My taxi-driver also hunts: he has nine guns and four pistols at home. He can't understand these foreign "trophy" hunters - here they just hunt for meat. He's allowed to shoot five caribou each year, and he does. He thinks I'd better get used to the idea that I'll be staying here for several more days because of the smoke, but I'm not to worry because it's such an hospitable city.

Ha ha ha! He's a very funny man.

I flop down and get out my netbook - my room has WiFi - and email everyone I know at Cabela's to find out more about the situation. Will I be able to leave Fairbanks tomorrow? Replies start pouring in; they come so fast I hardly have time to read them all.

The situation is becoming clearer; the air, unfortunately, is not.

This is what's happening.

The safest solution is to fly back to Anchorage today, as, in that direction, the air is clear. Then tomorrow I can go on to Deadhorse (this would suit me, as I'd planned to go there from Fairbanks, because it's the nearest settlement to the part of Brooks Range that I want to visit), and as it is unaffected by all the smoke, I can easily fly from there to the camp. This is only possible because planes flying from Anchorage can avoid Fairbanks and all the smoke, if the wind is in the right direction. If I do this, I will forfeit my accommodation tonight in Fairbanks (already paid for) and will have to book, and pay for, another room in Anchorage; as well as this, I will incur extra charges for the plane fares. I wouldn't mind doing this, but I have something very special planned for tonight: I'm going hot-air ballooning. Andy arranged it all for me, and I don't want to cancel it.

The other possibility is to wait until tomorrow and just hope for the best. According to Alaska Airlines, their big planes will be flying, but if the wind changes they could well be stuck on the ground.

To complete the chaos, I hear that my guide, Greg Jennen, is in Fairbanks too. This means that either we'll both be able to get away, or I'll have to do my hunting here in Fairbanks. There's always something ...

What a country this is!

It's still as huge and wild as it ever was.

It's because of all these unforeseen problems that I chose Cabela's to be my organizers, as these sort of things can only be sorted out by local companies who understand the local conditions. Here it is 3.00 in the afternoon; at home it is 1.00 in the morning.

How would a European company be able to help me now? By the time I got a reply from them it would be far too late ...

Room 327, Pike's Waterfront Lodge

7th August

Afternoon

Things are looking hopeful!

The weather has cleared up and the local pilots are taking advantage of the fact. At the airport nearby, the planes are taking off one after the other. This is great news! Keep on flying, you birds! You can still smell the smoke, but now, at last, the clouds are visible, and, sometimes, even the sun. We haven't seen it for a long time. Meanwhile, I've learnt that Greg Jenner is not a guide, but an outfitter. The difference between them is that a guide actually goes with you, while an outfitter is the main organizer in charge of the guides, the head of the organizing company. Greg has managed to leave Fairbanks, and Petra, his wife, and I, hope that he gets through the smoke. There is a danger that he might get

stuck in Deadhorse for a few days, as there the weather is bad. Petra reassures me that a solution will be found. It's difficult to keep up with all these events coming one on top of the other, but I still seem to be on track.

The hot-air ballooning, planned for 7.00 tonight is not going to happen. The balloon-man has completely disappeared, and there is no news of him at all. I'm really sorry about this, as I've never been ballooning, and would have liked to have tried it. Andy has put him on his black-list, which will give this crook serious problems in the future. One of the few bits of good news to arrive today, is that my gun will go directly to the camp, so I won't have to collect it from Deadhorse, or anywhere else. My opinion of the hotel is becoming slightly jaded. I wasn't allowed to eat a hamburger in the bar because I didn't have my passport on me (!). I was sent to the restaurant, but they wouldn't give me one either.

My despair was made complete when I went to the sauna, and found that that wasn't working. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I really hope I'll get to the camp. If I do, this will be my last day in civilization.

The Chena River flows right past my window, and there is an old-fashioned paddle-steamer sailing on it, carrying noisy tourists back and forth. The boat always whistles as it goes past my room.

If it does it once more, I'll throw something at it.