



Catching a lift on one of the mail flights proves a fun and inexpensive way to get a bird’s-eye view of interior Alaska and meet some of the people who live there

PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On the route between Fairbanks and the towns of Circle (population 100) on the Yukon River and Central (population 40), the plane passes over the Fort Knox Gold Mine, which has operated around the clock, 365 days a year, for the past 25 years and produced 7.5 metric tons of gold in 2021 — more than any other gold mine in Alaska.

An Alaskan bush mail run delivers plenty of packages and *one unforgettable experience*

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Flying on a bush mail plane in central Alaska feels like an experience out of another era: No one gives you a boarding pass, scans your lap-size carry-on, or asks you to pass through a security checkpoint. You just pay the fare to Rita at the front desk, step on a scale (the pilot needs to balance the weight onboard), and then follow an airline worker onto the tarmac to board the 10-seat plane.

Warbelow’s Air Ventures flies its twin-engine Piper Navajo Chieftain to seven towns within 110 miles of its Fairbanks base, delivering mail and packages for the US Postal Service and UPS. Even Amazon packages make their way up to these remote locales.

Catching a lift on one of the mail flights proves a fun and inexpensive way to get a bird’s-eye view of interior Alaska and meet some of the people who live there. The plane only stops long enough to swap mail and have a chat with whomever turns up at the airstrip, but it’s worth the adventure.

“Apparently I’m your pilot for today,” said Matt

Anderson, as he walked up to our plane, parked beside a one-room terminal within eyesight of Fairbanks’s airport control tower.

“How many other pilots are there?” I asked him. “You’re looking at him,” Anderson said.

Turns out Anderson is a legend in the area and a hero to some, according to a co-worker. He’s been a pilot for more than 40 years, used to fly Medevac aircraft, and moved to Alaska in 1990 so he could get more airtime. He even married a pilot. He’s flown all along the Alaska coast and to villages and remote outposts throughout the interior. Anderson joins a long list of passionate pilots who have linked off-the-grid communities with mail, food, medical services, police, and global news — and, of course, curious visitors like me.

To prep for our flight, Warbelow’s ground staff pulled unneeded seats out of the plane and loaded about a dozen boxes into their place in the rear of the cabin. Then a California couple (also along for fun), a local named Patrick, and I climbed in and sat behind Anderson for the 2½-hour journey. Locals get priority for empty seats, but passengers can

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Warbelow’s Air Ventures flies a 10-seat plane to seven different communities within 110 miles of Fairbanks to deliver mail and packages. Visitors can pay to go on a bush mail run as long as there’s room – locals get first priority.

For a change of scenery, think Gloucester

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

First in a series of occasional stories looking at closer-to-home destinations with fresh eyes.

It’s hard to get excited about a spring break staycation when you’ve done every jigsaw puzzle, baked every pastry, and binge-watched every show imaginable (including the “Saved by the Bell” reboot and the 9,000th version of “Star Trek.”). You’re picking fights with family members just for some excitement. Please. Stop.

May we suggest ... a visit to Gloucester? “Gloucester is one of those places you *think* you know well, but it’s a very multi-layered city, with a long history as

a working fishing port and as one of America’s oldest art colonies,” says Elizabeth Carey, executive director for Discover Gloucester. This seaport city is having a moment right now; it was the backdrop and primary location for the Academy Award-winning best picture, “CODA.” Local residents worked on the film, and local watering hole Pratty’s Bar and Grill (sure to be a popular stop on tourist itineraries this summer) was the location for a climactic scene in the movie.

Eager for a blast of color after a long winter, we set off for Gloucester to see some vibrant art and devour some golden-brown seafood (because what’s a trip to the home of TV’s “Wicked Tuna” without fish?). Minus our usual Gloucester go-to — splashing in the sea at Good Harbor Beach — would this sea

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LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

A couple strolls along the Gloucester HarborWalk.

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BUMP IN THE ROAD GROUNDED

Passport problem cancels family trip and removes parent’s superhero cape

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VERY PUNNY TSA LETS HUMOR FLY

Security agency’s Instagram account is known for funny tips and quips

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Think TSA is humorless? Check its Instagram.

Followers are in for a pun experience

By Cassandra Brooklyn
NEW YORK TIMES

When the Transportation Security Administration comes to mind, it’s usually in relation to metal detectors, pat-downs, and being told that your bottle of sunscreen has to be trashed because it is larger than 3.4 ounces. Charged with, in its own words, “protecting the nation’s transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce,” the agency’s officers screen millions of passengers each week and are not known for their sense of humor.

But the TSA’s Instagram account is. The agency’s profile describes itself as the “Princess of Puns,” “Teller of Travel Tips,” and “Admirer of Alliteration.” One recent post of a cat inside a traveler’s clear plastic backpack featured the caption, “We let the cat out of the bag ... on our Top 10 Catches of 2021!” It went on to explain that TSA officers found some pretty “a-mewsing” items. “We’d call them a-paw-ling if not packed correctly,” it went on.

Who follows the TSA account? More than 1 million people and, according to comments on a recent post about a bazooka rocket launcher found by TSA’s Threat Elimination officers in North Carolina’s Raleigh-Durham International Airport, the page is followed by (and receives thousands of comments from) travelers across all races, genders, political persuasions, and senses of humor.

In 2021 alone, the page reached 54 million users on Instagram. The “cat out of the bag” post received more than 27,700 likes and 545 comments. Recent TSA posts have been featured on “The Tonight Show” and the “Today” show and shared by well-known leadership expert and motivational speaker Simon Sinek, who has cited the agency “as a great example of how government can have a good relationship with the public on social media.”

According to Daniel Velez, a spokesman for the New England region of



TSA INSTAGRAM

TSA’s Media Operations team, the agency’s Instagram page has enjoyed consistent, considerable growth since it began its humor-based approach about two years ago, when Janis Burl took over as the social media branch manager.

Burl started as an airport transportation security officer and now oversees the social media team from her home office in the Washington, D.C., area.

According to Burl, her six-person Instagram team “posts odd finds, information about what you can and cannot bring through TSA, and travel-related answers to questions we may get” on a daily basis.

And though Burl no longer works the X-ray machine, when she travels, she said, “all of my senses as a former TSO never turn off.”

This interview is based on two conversations that have been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

The TSA shares puns and fun photos on its Instagram account, including these images of a “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” prop at Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta airport.

Why so many puns?

Nobody remembers what was on the news in the morning, but they’ll remember the joke you told them. If it takes humor to help you remember what you can and cannot do when traveling through security, then humor is what we will provide. Whatever the public is talking about, we want to talk about, and we want to provide the public with a travel tip in the process.

Where do you get ideas for your posts?

My team does their own research, searching hashtags and trolling social media. “Trolling” is a terrible word, but

that’s really what they do on any social media platform out there — LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and even apps on their own phones like WhatsApp. I don’t ask them to go to any particular sites to look for anything; I give them freedom to roam. They are often looking on their personal social media accounts to see what’s trending. Ideas are then shared among the team to determine if there is something we can do with it. We are constantly looking for an interesting post that’s trending on any platform, and we also use photos that our followers share. We spend each morning collaborating to determine what is trending and whether there’s an opportunity for an educational moment.

Where do you get the pictures of guns, grenades, and rocket launchers travelers have packed in their luggage?

If we stop something in the airport, a picture of it is taken because reports have to be filed. When we hear about the incident, either through TSA spokespeople or from the airports themselves, then we ask for the picture. We have a vast network, and many of the members of the TSA social media team have been on the team for years, so we also hear about these incidents directly from TSA officers on the ground.

Are that many people really packing guns in their carry-on luggage?

You’d be surprised. When we catch or detect a firearm, we contact local law enforcement, who will determine if the individual has a permit to travel with the gun since rules vary dramatically from state to state. In Connecticut, nine times out of 10, you’ll be arrested if you bring a gun to the airport; but in Texas or Florida, if you have a permit, you may not get through security, but more than likely, you’ll just be asked to give your gun to a friend or asked to secure it in your vehicle.

What sort of posts do especially well?

Any picture that has something that you would not expect to see every day, whatever that may be. For instance, we

just did a post about a mannequin’s parts being folded up and put onto a plane — who’s going to see that every day? Or the guy skateboarding through the airport — literally, while on his phone! — that was priceless. I feel like I should have paid the guy if I could have found him.

Do you have a favorite post?

One of my favorites is the @dude-withasign guy (7.8 million followers) holding up a sign that says “Let me bring my toothpaste on a flight.” Well, you *can* bring your toothpaste on a flight, so we answered him with a post in the same manner in which he asked the question. He is not affiliated with the TSA in any way but has made several travel-related posts that have given us an opportunity to respond with signs.

Who is on your social media team?

We have what I call “two sides of the house” — six people on the proactive side who work on Instagram posts and 12 people on the reactive side who answer questions on Facebook and Twitter.

Can you tell me about Ask TSA?

The 12 social media team members on the reactive side work on Ask TSA, answering questions pretty much “Johnny on the spot” on Ask TSA Twitter and Ask TSA Facebook. For instance, if you’re waiting in line at the airport, wondering if you can get through security with a bottle of frozen water that’s beginning to melt, you can send a message to Ask TSA, and they will instantly let you know that you need to drink all the melted water because everything has to be frozen. They typically answer within less than two minutes.

Is there any particular TSA find that you will never forget?

I will never forget my very first find as a TSO. I was just out of training, and it was my first time running the X-ray machine. A well-dressed woman had a gun in her purse, and when she was questioned, she simply stated that she forgot the gun was in her purse.

Alaskan mail run delivers the goods

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pay to tag along for the experience when there’s space.

You don’t get snacks or drinks on-board and the in-flight entertainment means reading a left-behind copy of the “Fairbanks Daily News-Miner” or peering out the windows at the endless mountains, wild caribou herds, and rivers snaking across the landscape. Even the safety talk feels very matter of fact: Anderson pointed out the three exits, told us smoking wasn’t allowed, and mentioned the emergency locator transmitter situated on top of the fuselage.

“Turn on the switch by my left knee,” he said, suggesting that this would activate the ELT and transmit our position to rescuers, though he didn’t elaborate on that.

“How high do we fly?” I asked Anderson as we prepared to take off.

“Above the mountains,” he said.

That meant we cruised at about 3,500 feet as we flew over the snowy mountains. The loud whir from the twin engines made talking a struggle, so we mostly kept noses pressed to the windows. The 50-minute flight to Circle took us 110 miles northeast of Fairbanks. We flew over treeless snow-covered mountains where dozens of caribou dotted the landscape like sprinkles on ice cream and appeared so close that we could count them as we passed overhead.

We flew so low, at times, we could see the texture of the landscape — the shiny patches on the wind-scoured mountains, stumpy broccoli-shaped trees, a small waterway that squiggled across a valley, and a lone road that followed along a ridgetop for miles.

Anderson pointed out the White Mountains, so-called because of the light-colored limestone deposits that contrast with the range’s dark volcanic rocks. He also pointed out Eagle Summit (3,652 feet), a popular spot during the summer solstice when people come to watch the sun sweep across the horizon and never set — it’s the one spot *below* the Arctic Circle where you can experience the Midnight Sun.

Open mountains gave way to heavily forested hillsides with spruce trees and aspens and eventually a wide valley



Central residents Warren and Dee Hodge load and unload mail and packages and deliver them to the local post office.

KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

called the Yukon Flats. The Yukon River came into view, a huge frozen waterway hundreds of feet wide with a cluster of buildings on the west side of it — the town of Circle, population 100.

As we swooped down to land on the snowy runway, I noticed a mechanical gate across our path that was opening to allow us access to touch down.

“It’s for security,” Sam Swingle from Warbelow’s later told me. “Sometimes people will drive out onto the runway,” whether that’s for fun (“there’s not a lot to do out there,” he said) or because they don’t realize this half-mile strip is a runway. “We try to limit that, to mitigate the risk,” he said.

Patrick hopped out and within five minutes Anderson had stuffed a couple of mail sacks into a compartment above one wing and handed over multiple boxes — including an Amazon Prime box barely held together with string — to two women who had pulled up in a pickup truck.

“It will get to 60 below [zero] here,” Anderson said, though it was considered a balmy 20 degrees on the February day we visited.

We stayed relatively low for the 10-minute flight to Central, a town with 40

people located at the edge of the Yukon Flats between the White Mountains and the Crazy Mountains, as they’re called. The plane briefly swayed side to side because of crosswinds as we descended and then landed on a tiny airstrip hemmed in by massive snow mounds — any kid’s dream.

Dee and Warren Hodge came to meet our plane when it landed. They had moved to Central from Florida more than 40 years earlier.

“We ain’t up to no good,” Dee said when I asked her last name. “We’re not running from the law or anything,” she added with a big smile.

Dee and Warren are contracted by the government to collect the mail. They take it to the post office in town, which also has a small mining museum and the Central Corner, a one-stop shop with a bar, a restaurant, gas, guestrooms, groceries, and a laundromat. Central serves as one of the checkpoints during the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest dog-sled race each year. The town comes to life as mushers and their dog teams briefly stop here on their journey from Fairbanks to Whitehorse, Canada (or on the reverse route, depending on the year).

The arrival of the mail plane around the holidays also creates a buzz.

“It’s a circus when the plane comes to town,” said Dee. “Christmas lasts about two weeks here.”

Dee told me the town is home to people who work in Prudhoe Bay (in the oil industry), senior citizens, people on disability and welfare, and people who work for local businesses.

I asked Dee if she had e-mail so I could send her a note.

“No, I’d have to buy a dish and have a tech person come in from Fairbanks,” she said. “You still have to wait until 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. for service. And then pay \$7.50 for a token if you go over.”

Apparently, few people have Wi-Fi in these remote towns.

“Don’t feel bad for them,” said Anderson, after we took off again. “Some of the people living here have time-shares in Florida. Or you hear ‘Oh, I just got back from Hawaii’ so they’re not as isolated as you think. For the most part, they love their privacy and [sense of] isolation.”

We climbed back into the plane — up the two stairs built into the clamshell back door — and Anderson said, “Dee is my most dangerous person,”

motioning “chitty-chatty” with his fingers. We were 20 minutes behind schedule, but with just three mail flights per day, we wouldn’t exactly cause a backlog at the terminal.

On the flight back to Fairbanks, we cruised over the Fort Knox Gold Mine. Anderson dipped a wing and angled the plane so we could peer down into the gaping hole in the earth. We could see trucks slowly snaking their way up a road inside the crater. The mine has operated around the clock, 365 days a year, for the past 25 years and produced 7.5 metric tons of gold in 2021 — more than any other gold mine in the state.

While much of the bush mail run experience feels like it hails from another era — with people who live without the Internet and the most laid-back, trusting operation (when was the last time you flew without passing through security or having an actual boarding pass?) — hints of modernization creep in. After all, Amazon Prime members can still get free delivery out here — just like anywhere in the country — regardless of how far-flung the destination.

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