Walk on the wild side

If you go down to the woods today you're sure of a big surprise... and that's just what Michelle got when she hiked into the Alaskan wilderness.

After a month trekking through the back country of Alaska, the words to the popular children's song, The Teddy Bears' Picnic, were well-known to my good friend, Sue, and I. They actually helped us out of a sticky situation a couple of times, but more about that later.

We had decided to travel in Alaska after becoming entranced by photographs of its vast, wild, landscapes. We are both married with children, but Sue and I have rediscovered our adventurous, youthful sides over the last few years and have done several trips together. We're always looking for new and exciting destinations and Alaska fitted the bill.

We saved for 18 months so we could really make the most of the time, and read anything we could get our hands on about the remote US state otherwise known as 'The Great Land'. Our plan was to hike and camp for most of the time, both on guided treks and on our own. We'd always loved the outdoors and had done plenty of treks in Australia. But Alaska was a whole different ball game.

For a start, I had never seen snow before. So striding into the wilderness, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and glaciers, was something of an experience. The terrain was totally different to what we were used to. It was so much more rugged and I've never climbed so high uphill in my life. The bush, or brush as they call it, is also much tougher. Some days I had bruises down both arms from bashing my way through it. But one of the biggest differences between hiking in Australia and Alaska is the wildlife.

At home we know that we'll probably see an emu or kangaroo somewhere, but they usually bolt as soon as they hear us coming. It's the tiny things that you have to watch out for – the scorpions, spiders and snakes. But in Alaska, it's the big, brown hairy things with lots of teeth that pose a problem. Bears.

When we landed in the capital, Anchorage, more than 30 hours after leaving home, we had initially planned to relax for a
INTO THE WILD:
The views from the train to Seward are spectacular. Camping in Denali National Park (above) is idyllic, but can be hair-raising when encountering inquisitive young grizzly bears.
A potentially lethal animal was looking quizzically at us, sizing up two intruders.

**Hiking in Alaska**

**The Bear Facts**

- When you're hiking, make plenty of noise to reduce your risk of a surprise bear encounter.
- Never run from a bear — but it's okay to run from a moose. Stand your ground, and make yourself as tall as you can by lifting your arms high, then slowly back away while talking calmly to the bear.
- It's a good idea to carry bear spray, which is like pepper spray, and bear bells to make even more noise.
- If a bear feels threatened and attacks, play dead. Lie on the ground, face down, and cover the back of your neck with your hands.
- When camping in the back country, only take what you literally can't survive without. Everything — even small stuff — weighs something. We carried 18 kg each and really felt it on the uphill stretches.
- You might be surrounded by snow and glaciers, but you still need to carry plenty of water.
- The best time to visit is between mid-May and mid-September, when it's warmer and more places are accessible. We hiked through the back country and kayaked among glaciers in Prince William Sound, but this isn't possible when the weather is bad.
- For a small entrance fee, anyone can stay at the camp sites in Alaska's national parks. But if you want to camp in the back country, you will need a special permit and are also required to watch a short film about survival skills.
THE BIG BEYOND: Traveilers taking in the views at the Polychrome Overlook in Denali National Park.

few days. We were doing a five-day guided trek a couple of days later, so thought we'd just hang out and get over the jet lag.

But we were so wired when we arrived that we decided to start exploring straightaway. We'd read about a famous rail journey from Anchorage to the fishing town of Seward, four hours south, so we jumped on the train and ooh-ed and aah-ed at the magical land we passed through.

It's easy to see why they call it one of the most scenic journeys in the world. We saw mountain after mountain, and plenty of wildlife, including moose and even bears playing on a glacier. Little did we realize that we'd shortly be getting much more up close and personal with them.

From Seward, we took a 30-minute shuttle bus out to Exit Glacier, where there are a few trails to explore. We did the basic tourist trails first, then decided to take the path less travelled up the mountain. It was a glorious day and there were amazing views all around. We trudged happily along, chatting and laughing, then the conversation turned to bears. During our research, we had read that seeing bears was a real possibility but, being two sceptical Aussies, we still had that 'Yeah, right, I wouldn't expect to see any here' attitude... until we rounded a corner. There, not more than 10m away, was a black bear.

Strangely, my first reaction wasn't fear. Instead, I thought this wondrous sight would make an amazing photo, so I started unzipping my camera case. Then common sense took over as I realized a potentially lethal animal was looking quizzically at us, sizing up two intruders.

Slowly, talking calmly to the bear the whole time, we backed away and he returned to the task at hand - eating berries, not tourists. When we were a safe distance away, the severity of the situation dawned on us and, after some laughing, crying, and jumping up and down in excitement, we started to wonder how on earth we'd get past him.

There was only one way down the mountain, and right at the moment it was blocked by one scary bear! If we didn't get down soon we'd miss the shuttle back to Seward, so there was only one thing to do - we had to sing.

We'd read that making noise is the best way to scare bears off,
You can understand why it's called ‘The Last Frontier’

so we burst into a loud rendition of The Teddy Bears' Picnic. Our horrific singing voices would scare anything and, sure enough, the bear ambled away and we got down safely.

Our encounter was a huge wake-up call. We realised how naive we'd been to think we could spend a month hiking in Alaska and not encounter a bear - we'd seen one on our second day. It turned out to be the first of many, but from then on we armed ourselves with our noisy song and some bear spray (in case we found a bear that actually liked our singing).

Our second bear encounter was with another black bear. We were on a five-day glacier trek, where we actually camped on the glaciers. One day a bear came into our camp and didn't want to leave. He was a juvenile and hadn't yet learnt to be afraid of humans, but this time we were on a guided tour. The guide, our 'mountain man' as we christened him, knew exactly what to do. He told us to throw stones in the bear's direction to scare him and he scooted off.

We saw a few grizzlies, too. The most memorable was in Denali National Park. It's a huge place that covers more than 24,000sqkm. When you see it you can understand why Alaska is called 'The Last Frontier'.

We went there under our own steam, not as part of a tour. An old yellow school bus dropped us off in the back country and, as our only contact with the outside world departed in a cloud of dust, we looked at the immense wilderness around us and thought, what have we done? We thought about that even more when we stumbled on a grizzly with her two cubs. We knew that a mother protecting her cubs is one of the most dangerous bears to come across. If she feels they are threatened in any way, she'll attack. This was the first grizzly we'd seen without the presence of a guide and we felt so alone and unsure of what to do. But miraculously, she didn't see us.

The wind was blowing in the opposite direction so she didn't catch our scent and had no idea we were there. Sitting on a ridge watching the two cubs play just 300m away was one of the most memorable moments of my life. We took hundreds of photos and simply couldn't stop smiling at such an amazing sight.

Our whole adventure was like that. We felt so excited every morning when we opened our eyes and saw our glorious surroundings. Alaska is a truly magical place you'll never, ever forget. Even now when we talk about it we can't wipe the grins off our faces!
AUTUMN HUES: The majestic Mt. McKinley and tranquil surroundings are more picturesque than some of our camping stops, like this one by the highway (below).

AQUA POOLS: Melting ice created the most amazing azure waterholes.

THE THREE BEARS: A mother grizzly and her two cubs quietly foraging.