

Packrafting the Placer River

Rail to trail, on the water, and back again—in a day

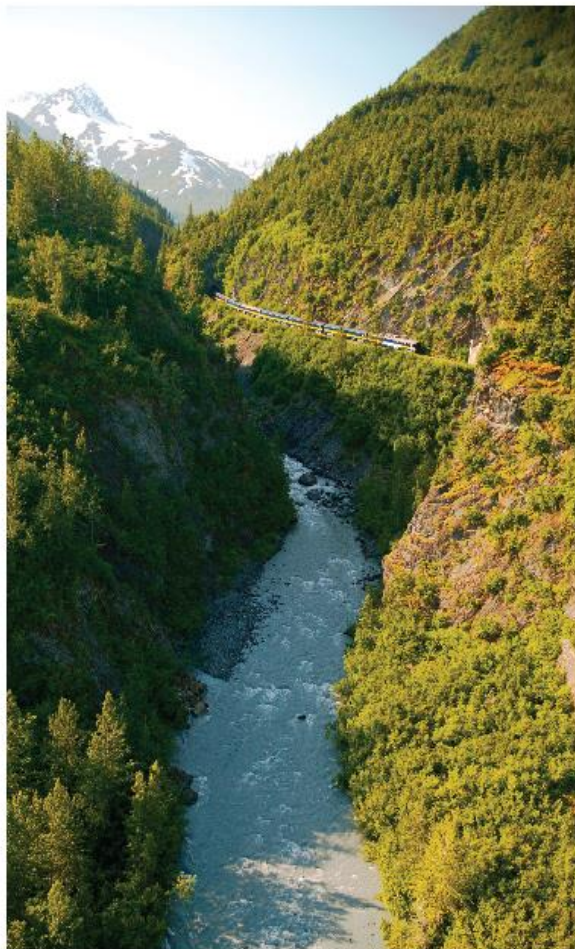
BY VIVIAN WAGNER

MY BOYFRIEND, ARUN, AND I stopped hiking for a moment to look at the iceberg-filled lake in front of us. In the distance, the white and blue cliffs of Spencer Glacier rose high out of the water. A tiny duckling, separated from its mother, bobbed courageously near us in the waves. We pulled two small inflatable rafts (packrafts) out of our backpacks, and donned our drysuits.

Spencer Lake and the Placer River are accessible only by the Alaska Railroad, or an 11-mile uphill walk. A few hours earlier, Arun had dropped me and our backpacks off at the Portage train station, parked his truck by the bridge where Seward Highway crosses the Placer River, before it empties into Turnagain Arm, and rode his bike less than a mile back to the station to catch the train with me.

Most of the passengers had planned to see the glacier on a guided ranger hike, and a few were headed on to Grandview for sight-seeing. We had something a little different in mind—we wanted to paddle a glacial meltwater stream back to where we had started.

On the 20-minute train ride up, we walked between the cars to a viewing platform to look out at the snow-stripped mountains, the dark green spruce trees, an eagle's nest, and the braided, silty river that would be our passage back.



Aerial view of the Placer River and the Alaska Railroad passenger train en route to Seward near Spencer Glacier.

Once at the Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop, we gathered our gear and stepped out into the warm sun where we bypassed the ranger hike and headed up the wide, well-maintained, one-mile trail toward the glacier, stopping along the way to scope out a few of the river's fast-moving, Class II rapids.

After inflating our rafts, we headed

out onto the lake, past the duckling, paddling through a maze of icebergs toward the headwaters of the river. I followed Arun through the first set of rapids we'd sized up earlier, paddling around rocks and hitting the tall waves straight on, the cold water splashing into my boat. We eddied out on a gravel island, studying the river ahead. The water looked to be moving slower, but it was filled with downed trees and branched off into multiple, alder-lined channels.

Paddling back into the current, we navigated around spindly, partially submerged trees and worked our way through innumerable braided channels. The snowy mountains rose up in the distance as we left the glacier behind and gradually entered a broad delta. The channels kept getting narrower and shallower, closing in on us. It was difficult to know exactly where we were, but we knew we were going in the right general direction: downhill. At one point, Arun saw the backside of a little brown bear running into the brush. By the time I paddled up, though, the bear was gone.

We heard the roar of rapids ahead and decided to get out and take a look. We paddled to the muddy shore marked by deep moose and bear tracks and climbed out of our rafts, swatting at a cloud of large, aggressive mosquitoes. A small waterfall dropped a few feet into a swirling brown pool in front of us. I decided to portage around it, but Arun wanted to give it a try. He got back in his raft, as I dragged mine along the shore, hoping no bears were watching me from the brush. I watched as Arun easily splashed over the falls.

After the river's channels got more numerous, narrow, and shallow. We were relieved when we finally saw the Placer River Bridge and the truck parked up on the bank. Then unexpectedly, the water began pushing us back. It took us a few moments to realize we were battling a swiftly rising tide coming up the Turnagain Arm. No matter how hard we paddled, we couldn't move forward. We tested the river in different spots, eventually discovering that we could make progress if we stayed along the bank.



[TOP] Packrafts ready to launch on the Placer River with Spencer Glacier in the background. [CENTER] Arun scoping out rapids on the route. [BOTTOM] Paddling the Placer River rapids.

After long minutes battling the current, we finally arrived, exhausted, at the shore by the bridge.

We had ridden a train to a remote glacier, rafted down a fast-moving, unpredictable river, past snowy mountains and bears and through clouds of mosquitoes, to land on a muddy shore, all in an afternoon.

Not bad for a day trip, I thought. ☺

If You Go

📍 **Location:** Southcentral

📏 **Distance:** 20-minute train ride/11-mile paddle

📅 **Timing:** June–September

📍 **Getting There:** The Alaska Railroad offers daily service from June 1 to Sept. 14 on its Glacier Discovery train from Portage to the Spencer Whistle Stop. The Adventure Class fare is \$70, with discounts for Alaska residents, seniors, military service personnel, and others. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit alaskarailroad.com or call 907-265-2494.

📖 **Training and Guided Trips:** For those just getting started with packrafting, the Alaska Kayak Academy (kayakcenterak.com) offers classes and training. If you'd prefer to take a guided trip down the Placer River, check out Chugach Adventures (alaskanrafting.com).

⚠️ **Important Safety Note:** Do not under any circumstances paddle or walk out onto the mudflats of Turnagain Arm after reaching the Placer River Bridge—the mud, made of glacial silt, acts like quicksand, and can be fatal.