



DENALI: WHO WE ARE

By Vanessa Juszczak

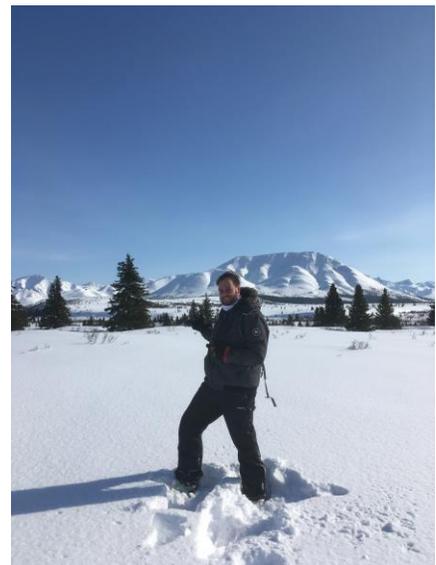
*There is a long list of reasons people are drawn to Denali and its surrounding areas: adventure - wilderness - stillness - wildlife. But whether you were born here, or transplanted here, there is always one answer near the top of the list, when asked "why did you stay". **The people.***



Jakub Klimes, from Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, says it was always a dream of his, to visit Alaska. His home town, a city of 100,000 people, is a large city for Czech and covers about the same area as Healy, Alaska. But the two towns couldn't be more different. Jakub speaks about the differences: the weather, the seasons, the pace of life, and the scale: "Everything is so big here. When I saw Alaska on TV it was always something amazing and so different."

When I asked him how he ended up here, so far from home and in such a different community, he spoke of his acceptance into the Work & Travel Student Program (known also as the J-1 program). While attending Masaryk University in Brno, Czech for Sports Management, he met a friend who had spent a summer in America as a lifeguard on the east coast. Jakub thought he could do the same, but when reviewing his options with the job placement agency he saw Alaska on the list of options, and his decision was made. Jakub packed his bags and arrived in the Denali area in May 2015 to work for Black Diamond Resort Company, located near Otto Lake in Healy. They offer a variety of tours for visitors in the area, and their employees come from across the world, and across the street.

I met Jakub at his work for this interview. We sat at a window, with a view of Mt. Healy and Otto Lake, and it isn't hard to see Alaska has taken ahold of him in the way we so often hear. His face takes on a wistful expression and his eyes strayed out the window to the mountains as we talked. "I had never hiked somewhere off trails before, through the tundra. This was a first experience for me – to be



surrounded by wildlife, to meet a bear in the wilderness – out of nowhere, that was a pretty cool experience.” He talks in earnest about the things he has done, and the experiences he still wants to have – he isn’t done exploring Alaska. He tells me he does something new whenever he gets the chance, which isn’t easy. The days are many and the hours sometimes long, but his attitude is still one of gratitude. “Once I was here, I just fell in love with Alaska and that’s why it’s my fourth season here. The mountains, the nature, the people, and the work. To drive ATV’s and get paid for that? I think it’s a pretty cool job.”

When I asked Jakub what surprised him most about coming to Denali, he replied immediately “probably seeing a moose walk right through camp, in front of your house. And also the people - they are so nice. Everybody seems happy here. You meet people from so many different countries and see people from everywhere and make new friends. I’ve seen people here, who I’ve made a friendship with, I would say for life. I have already had some friends visit Czech Republic from America. It gives you so many opportunities to travel the world and spend time with people you’ve met.”



When asked what his family and friends think of his Alaskan adventures, Jakub smiled. “My family actually supports me a lot in that, my brother Matej came this year and he seems happy here too. But some of my friends from school, they think I’m crazy to come to Alaska, since they think it’s always cold here.”

I asked Jakub what advice he would give to another international worker coming to Alaska for the first time. “Do it. Be ready to be out in the middle of nowhere. I know people think it’s cool, but I also see people who aren’t ready for that. So, make sure you really want that. I did research. Make sure you know where you are going.”



When he is home in Hradec Králové he works for a local sports club in marketing, but he isn't sure what the future holds. His intern visa, that he returned on this year, allows him to stay for a full year and he is considering the winter in Denali. "This year we will see if I stay the winter here. I think it is not hard to spend one winter here. Maybe I'm wrong, but I believe one winter never killed anybody. If I don't like it, I don't have to do it anymore.

I see myself returning for a couple years, but you never know – I believe real life has to begin soon also – but it's going to be hard to say a last goodbye to Alaska."

Did you know? Nationally the J-1 Visa program hosts over 300,000 individuals from nearly every country in the world! In 2017, Alaska hosted 2356 individuals, 1965 of who worked in seasonal summer positions. The Denali area businesses employed 509 of those individuals.

The multifaceted program attracts international individuals looking to travel and gain experience in the United States. They come to the U.S. to teach, study, conduct research, demonstrate special skills or receive on the job training for periods ranging from a few weeks to several years.