ALASKA DREAMING

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This book differs from those that I have published in previous years. They were primarily photographic books: *Deserts* in 2011, *China 1985* in 2012, *Nature and Man* (a joint publication with our son Stefano) in 2013 and *Andean Highlands* in 2014. All in a format that had remained unchanged and all centrered on pictures that had originated from different experiences and largely through a selection of images collected in numerous journeys over more than thirty years. By contrast this year's book tells the story of a single journey that was the physical realisation of a childhood dream. The book is different in format and size, with much more text and even 'snaps' of daily life; in effect it is the diary of a family trip to Alaska in 1998. It is, in almost every way, a very different approach.

In the preface to *Deserts,* I wrote that my travels are in some small way an adventure full of challenges, born of the inquisitive mind that I have had since early childhood, of the journeys made as a child with my parents, of the books and films that worked on my imagination. I remember many so clearly: *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (how could Jules Verne have imagined, so cleverly, to locate this story in Iceland?), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and the adventures of Captain Nemo. In real life there were Walter Bonatti, an extraordinary mountaineer - in particular for such adventures as the K2 case, climbing the south west pillar of the Dru alone, his heroism during the terrible tragedy of the Central Pillar of Freney on Mont Blanc in 1961, his climbing of the Grandes Jorasses, and ultimately his record-making solo winter climb up the north face of the Matterhorn in 1965 - and then there was the explorer Father Alberto Maria De Agostini, who left Pollone in Piedmont to become a missionary in Southern Argentina where he went on to explore Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, organising expeditions to conquer Monte Sarmiento and, with Guido Monzino, the North Tower of Cerro Paine in the Patagonian Andes. The Chileans named a great

national park and a fjord in the Tierra del Fuego after Father De Agostini. And I remember as a boy meeting Captain William Anderson who, as commander of the Nautilus, navigated the first nuclear powered submarine beneath the polar ice cap surrounding the North Pole.

It was in those years that I was also captivated by the Klondike Gold Rush, in the late 19th century, in the Yukon Territory in North West Canada and in South East Alaska, as captured in the novels of Jack London; that, for me, gave those distant lands, especially Alaska, a lasting appeal. It was a world of sledge dogs, sledge races around icy tracks and weather conditions that tested the limits of survival, a world of Inuit peoples and other unique characteristics. I read of the Alaska Highway and was so absorbed in its story that I remained enchanted by it. It was the titanic construction, built in a mere eight months in 1942 during the Second World War, that bound the forty eight States more closely to Alaska, across Canadian soil, reinforcing the military installations in Alaska's most remote corners. It took 17,000 men and more than 7,000 machines to achieve this extraordinary project, throwing up 133 bridges along the course of the Highway. The Alaska Highway was officially opened to the public on 20 November 1942, along its full length of about 1,700 miles.

Ever since I first read of it, all those years ago, there had been an irresistible desire to visit Alaska and, above all, to drive along the near magical Alaska Highway (that many now call The Alcan Highway or simply The Alcan). I should say that in all the journeys that I have undertaken over many years I have always favoured travelling by land, seeing the countryside, watching the changes in landscape mile after mile, subjecting myself to thousands of miles of driving rather than hopping on a plane to reach the final destination. I still think that driving is the best way to get a deep appreciation of a country. In Alaska this approach turned out to be twice as valuable - it not only allowed us to see the landscape as it evolved but also I could drive the Alaska Highway. The opportunity finally came in 1988, tacked on after a business trip to Vancouver.

We had already decided that all four of us would go - Rita and I and our two sons, Stefano and Alberto. They were 12 and 10 at the time and they accepted, with good grace, the challenging 'adventure' of the Alaska Highway. The plan was to hire an off-road vehicle in Vancouver and to head north, crossing British Columbia and the Yukon and driving into Alaska on the Alaska Highway. Apart from that we had no specific goals, no set stopping points, no pre-booked hotels. The only ambition (which, I admit, was entirely my own) was to find a way to drive the entire length of the Highway. After fulfilling that ambition, what we did and where we went in Alaska was entirely a function of the distances, the time available and any unforeseen hiccoughs. The deal with the children, as they were then, was simple - they had to take, in their stride, all the possible problems that might arise on an entirely unplanned journey in a region that could be full of surprises, such as unfavourable weather, the possibility of fires (given the vast expanse of the territory, there were often no viable alternative routes), the risk of not finding a bed to sleep in or even being forced to sleep in the car, the chance of an unplanned change of route and so on. The boys took it all in their stride and the die was cast.

This book, diary if you like, is an account of 18 days, constantly on the move with Rita and the boys, from Vancouver to Alaska and back again, by road. We travelled almost 5,600 miles across truly marvellous (and as yet wholly unspoilt) country. We were in nature, among mountains, lakes, glaciers and wild animals. We saw moose, caribou, bears, eagles and much besides. We saw vast open spaces that went further than the eye could see. We also saw the life and communities that have materialised along the Alaska Highway and other Highways, the people, homes and buildings, sledge dogs, traces of the gold rush, Mount Denali/McKinley. But the human signs are dominated by nature in all its beauty and majesty. There were unexpected moments, as we will see, and even a fire that cost us a half-day of travelling, but we achieved everything that I, personally, had hoped and dreamt of achieving. Even, somehow, the persistent mosquitoes and midges were moderately benevolent.

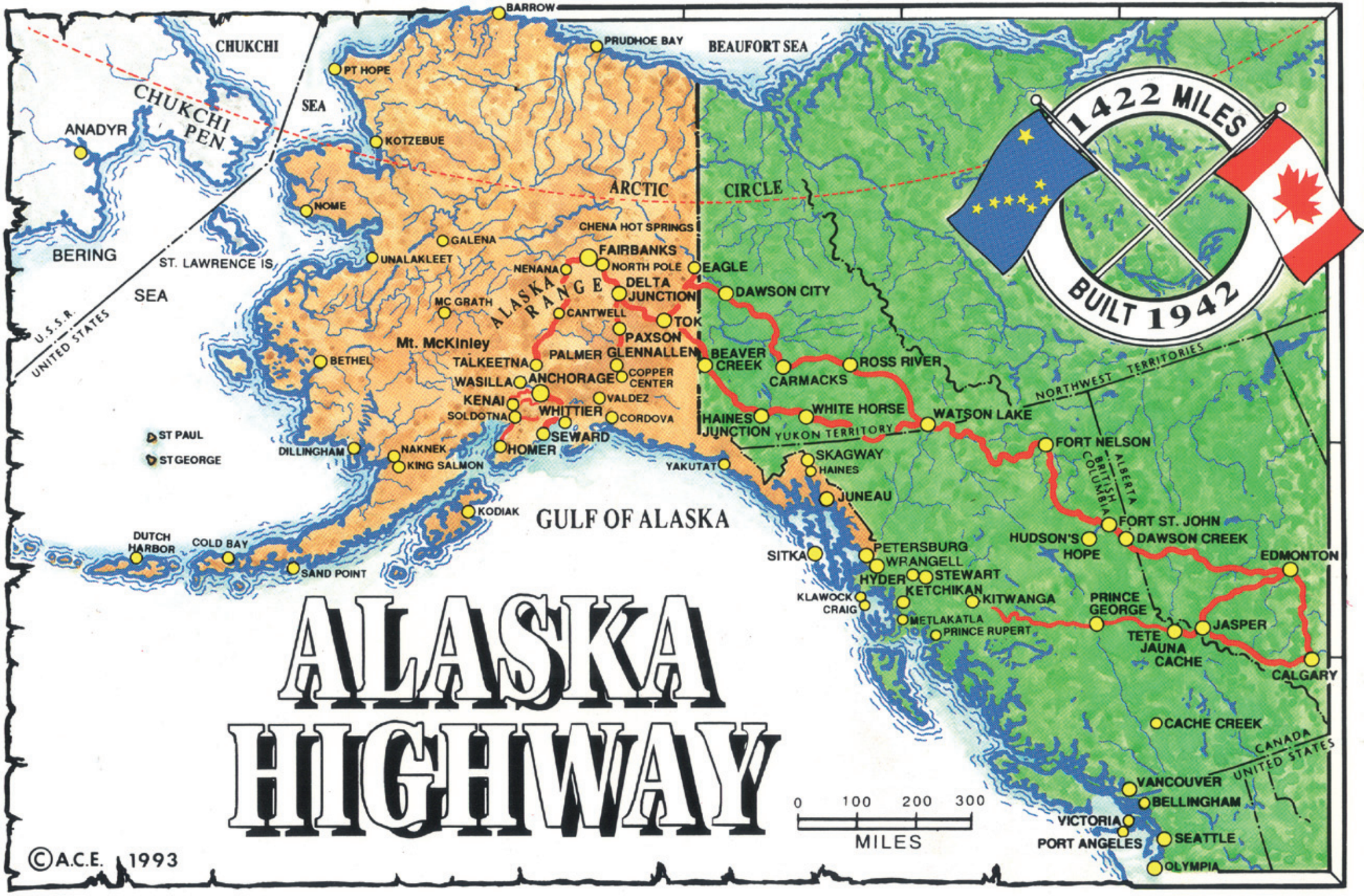
The purpose of this book is to set out the details of this little adventure day by day, just as it was lived out with all the family, with our emotions, the unforeseen

moments, our discoveries – it is a fusion of a diary, a description and pictures of a truly remarkable territory. I hope, we all hope, that we have succeeded in setting out for you something of what we saw and the feelings of admiration that we experienced about the innumerable people who sacrificed so much to create the Alaska Highway in a mere eight months; about the many who followed their lucky star to search for gold in an area that was uninhabited and, in so many ways, backward.

Even now, after all these years, Alaska remains something of a marvel for me. I have had the extraordinary good fortune to realise this childhood dream and to be able to share it with my family and I hope that, in some small measure through the words and pictures in this diary/book, some part of that dream will rub off on others.

Yet again this book is a four-handed undertaking. 'Yet again' because I shared authorship of *Nature and Man*, in 2013, with Stefano, marrying his passion for architecture (and thus the works of Man) with my own love of nature and observing the remarkable frequency with which Nature seems to be an inspiration for what is conceived and constructed by Man. This time my collaborator is Rita, without whose help this diary/book would not have been possible. As I have said before in the prefaces of my previous books, while I hold the camera on our journeys together, Rita wields the pen, recording not only the places we visit but also our thoughts, impressions and feelings at the time. In *Deserts* I wrote 'while I take photographs she [Rita] keeps a travel diary which, perhaps, will one day be published.' Well, that day has arrived. In the new format adopted for this book, Rita's rich diary, kept day after day, was of untold value after all these years in recalling the order in which we saw new vistas, the comments we made at the time, a contemporaneous record of how each of us felt. Without this diary the book would not have been possible; the images, on their own, are not enough to tell the story.

Robin Foà


ALASKA HIGHWAY
1422 MILES
BUILT 1942
BARROW
PRUDHOE BAY
BEAUFORT SEA
CHUKCHI
CHUKCHI PEN.
SEA
ANADYR
PT HOPE
KOTZEBUE
NOME
ARCTIC
CIRCLE
BERING
SEA
ST. LAWRENCE IS.
U.S.S.R.
UNITED STATES
GALENA
UNALAKLEET
CHENA HOT SPRINGS
FAIRBANKS
NORTH POLE
NENANA
ALASKA RANGE
DELTA JUNCTION
EAGLE
DAWSON CITY
MC GRATH
CANTWELL
TOK
PAXSON
Mt. McKinley
GLENNALLEN
PALMER
TALKEETNA
BETHEL
WASILLA
ANCHORAGE
COPPER CENTER
BEAVER CREEK
CARMACKS
ROSS RIVER
KENAI
VALDEZ
SOLDOTNA
WHITTIER
CORDOVA
HAINES JUNCTION
WHITE HORSE
WATSON LAKE
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
YUKON TERRITORY
SEWARD
HOMER
FORT NELSON
ST PAUL
ST GEORGE
DILLINGHAM
NAKNEK
KING SALMON
YAKUTAT
SKAGWAY
HAINES
BRITISH COLUMBIA
ALBERTA
JUNEAU
KODIAK
GULF OF ALASKA
FORT ST. JOHN
DAWSON CREEK
HUDSON'S HOPE
EDMONTON
DUTCH HARBOR
COLD BAY
SAND POINT
SITKA
PETERSBURG
WRANGELL
HYDER
STEWART
KETCHIKAN
KITWANGA
PRINCE GEORGE
KLAWOCK
CRAIG
METLAKATLA
PRINCE RUPERT
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5 August 1998

At long last our journey to Alaska begins!! We pick up our pre-booked 4x4 in Vancouver. And we set off - Rita, Stefano, Alberto and I - driving north.
We are in British Columbia. The original inhabitants of this vast area (that we now call British Columbia) include some 30 tribes of native 'Indians'.
While we make our way towards Clinton, our route is blocked by a massive fire that makes it particularly dangerous to continue on the road that we have to take. Despite the continuous toing and froing of vehicles and a helicopter, dumping water that it had scooped from a nearby river, the road remained impassable for several hours. In the end, we are forced to return to Lillooet and spend the night there. The first unforeseen problem in a region where nature is in charge. A diversion would have involved too many additional miles on the road…

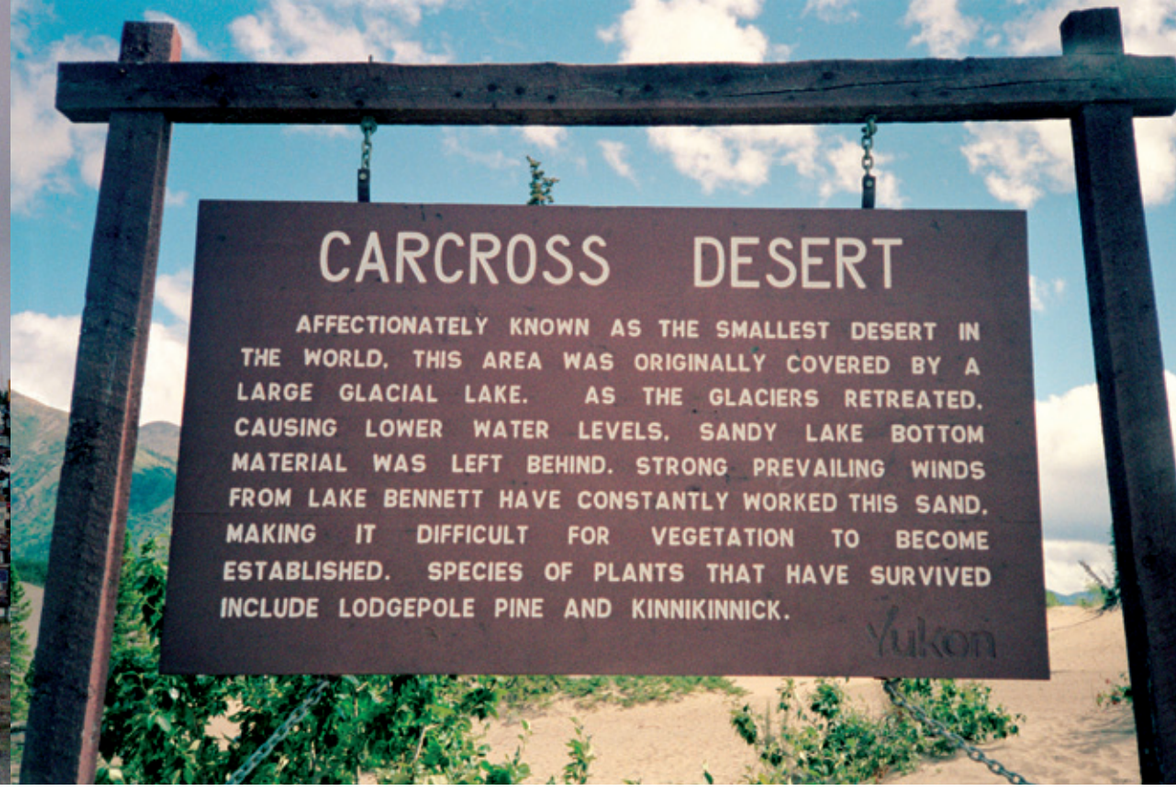
6 August

We leave very early to try to catch up on our timetable. The fire crews have got the fire under control and the road is passable once more. Route 99 North comes to an end; we take Route 97 North through a landscape of trees, grassland and lakes to reach Prince George. From there, we drive along the John Hart Highway. At Chetwynd, we take Route 29 to Fort St. John. The countryside is lovely as we drive along the banks of the Peace River [pp. 16-17]. And we see the first two bears of our journey, as well as deer and eagles. The views begin to feel limitless. We spend the night at Fort St. John, where we finally reach the magic Alaska Highway (the Alcan Military Highway or usually just The Alcan) [pp. 10-11].

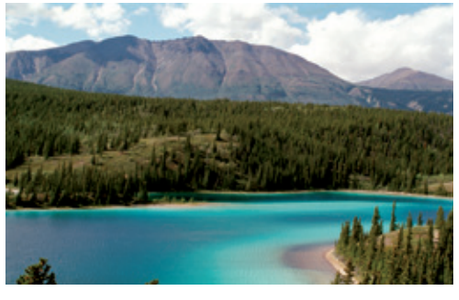
7 August

We drive up the Alaska Highway in the direction of Fort Nelson.
On the way, we see herds of moose and caribou. After Fort Nelson, vaste bare mountains in the Stone Mountain Provincial Park.

We skirt around the beautiful Muncho Lake, with its strikingly blue/green waters, its gravel banks and its surrounding of overlapping mountains [pp. 20-21]. We also come across remarkable stone sheep and a lone wolf, walking along the Alaska Highway! We reach Watson Lake, at the point where British Columbia and the Yukon meet, and there we stop for the night.



8 August

The magic of the Alaska Highway becomes clear when we come across the multitude of sign-posts at a single spot! We leave Watson Lake and cross the Cassiar Mountains. At Tagish, we leave the Alaska Highway to take Route 8 near the bridge over the Tagish River in the direction of Skagway. The views a re stupendous. We make a diversion to reach the Carcross Desert, which holds the record for being called the 'smallest desert in the World' - it measures just one square mile. It was originally the floor of a glacier and then the bed of a lake that dried up.

We carry on for a few more miles to see Emerald Lake, which is truly emerald by name and by colour. The lake has incredible green to turquoise and blue colours, derived from the reflection of light from its shallow bed of a white substance (called 'rock flour') that is a blend of ground seashells and glacial sediment [pp. 24-25].