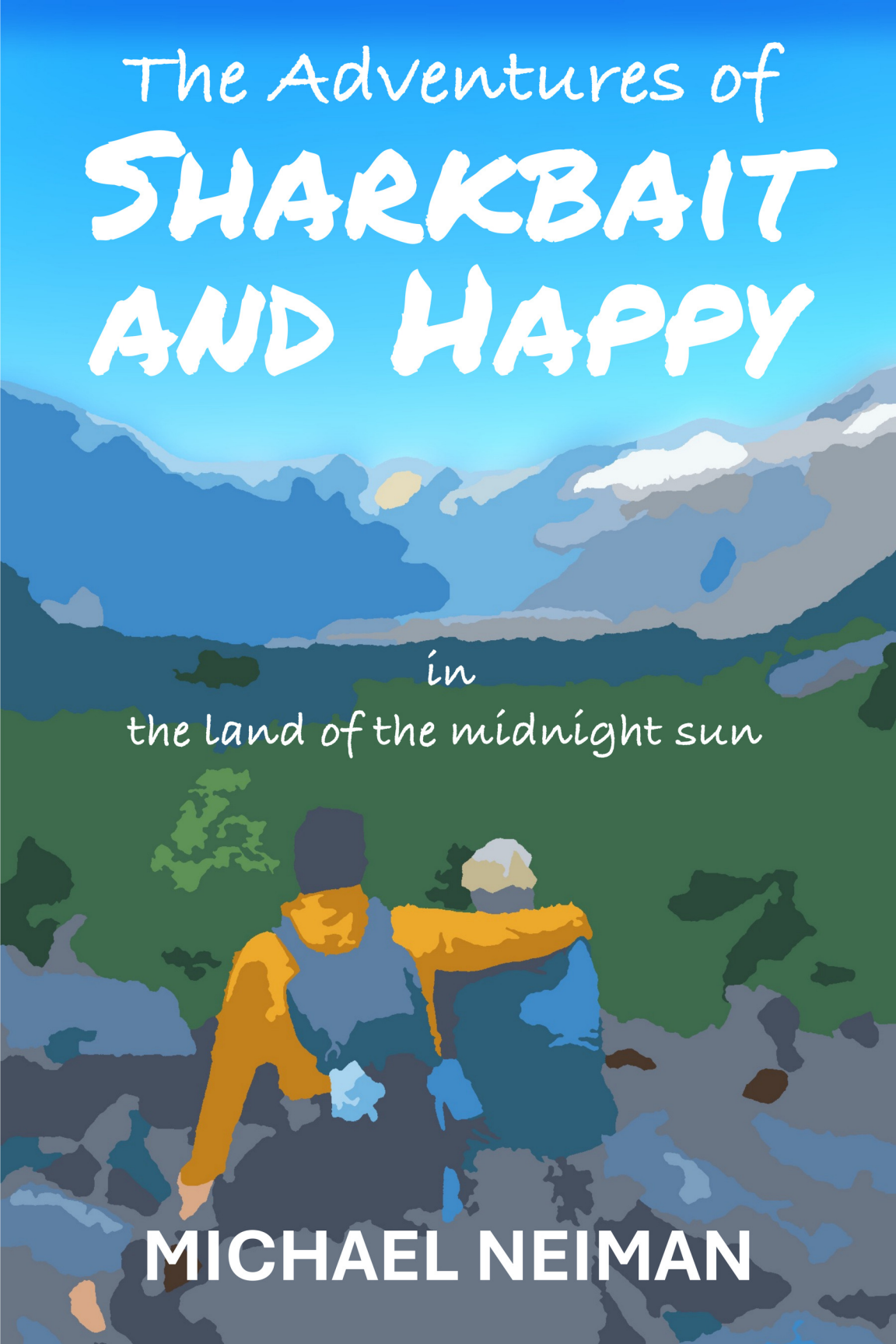




The Adventures of **SHARKBAIT AND HAPPY**

in
the land of the midnight sun

MICHAEL NEIMAN

THE ADVENTURES OF SHARKBAIT AND HAPPY

IN THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN

A SHORT STORY BY

MICHAEL NEIMAN

HN PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2026 by Michael Neiman

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction, based on true events that reflect the author's personal experience and memory. No generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in the writing of this work.

For additional information, contact michael@helloneiman.com or visit <https://helloneiman.com>.

*American Child, does the call of the wild
Ever sing through the mist of your dreams
Does it fly with the wind when you waken again
When it's gone do you know what it means*

JOHN DENVER

CHAPTER 1

AN ADVENTURE... BEGINS?



O *h shit. Not again.*
I buried my head in my hands, keeping the curse to just my thoughts in the backseat of my Uber. Memories flashed through my mind of that day all those years ago, when I boarded the plane for Atlanta and the start of my Appalachian Trail thru-hike. A day that felt all too similar to this one, when a perfectly planned itinerary was getting derailed before it even started.

Now it's 2026, early August. And hot, hotter than usual for this time of year. I was sweating badly, and it wasn't just from the

heat. I had been planning this trip for almost a year, but apparently all that prep couldn't keep the same anxious start from repeating itself. And although this time I wasn't hiking across America, it carried the same weight, because this trip was special. We were going to Glacier National Park, Montana. Or as Dad liked to say, we were going Home.

For my family, hiking in Glacier Park is familiar territory. It wasn't the unknown of the AT. Because of his work trips, Dad had been there close to 25 times. And although my visits were split between family trips as a kid and a few backpacking adventures since, this would be my 10th trip to the national park. In Glacier, it was simpler for us—the preparations were known and the terrain more familiar. Between the two of us, we had probably walked all the popular trails in the park. We knew where the berries were ripest, which waterfalls were best for a quick dip, and which trails were overrun with mosquitoes. Kootenai Lake, trust me... stay away.

Yes, Glacier was something special growing up. Dad was regularly discussing plans with Mom or reliving memories with friends. And a week didn't go by, it seemed, when I couldn't hear him coordinating logistics over the phone. Montana was simply a constant topic in the air. And you don't spend your formative years idealizing a place without eventually romanticizing it as your home away from home. And that's what it was to our family. We didn't talk about going on a hiking trip to Montana. No, our common vernacular for the park was Home. With a capital H.

So to say the excitement and anticipation were high for this trip, well that's a big understatement. After Dad joined me on the Appalachian Trail back in 2018, he wasn't eager to do much more East Coast hiking. The Appalachian Mountains lacked the majesty of the Rockies, and let's just say trail conditions were less friendly. So following the two weeks he spent hiking with me in New York and Connecticut, he made it clear there would be no

return trip. His passion for hiking in the mountains remained singular for the Rockies.

But life is also different now. In the time since, I had moved cross-country twice. Dana and I live in Connecticut, ironically closest to the AT sections that Dad hiked with me. We have two little girls now too. Chloe just turned six this summer, and Hannah four. They are my everything, and since I had to travel a lot for work, taking more time away from them for personal trips was harder and harder each year.

Things had changed a lot for Dad since that hike also. He was older now, nearly 80. Both he and Mom were long since retired and now focused on simpler things... maintaining the garden, walking the neighborhood, and creating memories with their grandkids. They both had minor medical issues, thankfully nothing serious, but the kind that isn't so forgiving of a strenuous day scaling 7,000-foot mountain passes.

Yet the longing for Glacier's mountains was still there. Because a passion for sweet huckleberries, friendly marmots, and crystal blue glacial lakes doesn't fade away as much as echo across your mind. So when I asked Dad, six months ago, if he was interested in one more backpacking trip together, he couldn't say yes fast enough.

CHAPTER 2

A PLAN EMERGES



It was early January, and I had just published the memoir of my Appalachian Trail thru-hike. Memories were flooding in as friends and family read my story, and conversations eventually ended with the same questions: *When are you going to do another hike? Will you write a sequel?*

It didn't take long to convince me, so I picked up the phone and called the first person I could think of to discuss it.

"Hey Dad," I said into my phone, after he picked up my call.

And even though his caller ID had long ago told him it was me calling, he still answered with surprise to hear my voice.

“Sharkbait!” It was the reply he loved to give now, having fully embraced my AT trail name in our daily conversations.

Dad had a trail name too. He’d taken Happy, which fit him better than any nickname ever has. It still felt more natural to call him Dad in regular conversation, but if anyone made the mistake of saying they were happy around him, he was quick to remind them it was his name first.

“Have any good plans this summer?” I said with a hint of drama in my voice. “I was thinking about going... Home.”

I let the air catch before that last word, giving it the dramatic gusto it deserved.

“Montana? What could I possibly be doing that’s better than that?!” he belted. “To be honest, ever since reading your book, it’s all I’ve been thinking about. Even told your mother to mark the calendar for when they open reservations to Granite Park Chalet. Figured if I got lucky enough to snag a night atop the Continental Divide again, I’d plan a whole trip around it!”

“Well, let’s do it. I had the same idea,” I said quickly. “People keep asking me what’s next, and I just keep thinking the same thing. The mountains are calling...”

“...and I must go,” he interrupted, finishing John Muir’s famous quote.

A few weeks later, we were all set. With some careful coordination (read: begging everyone we knew to try on our behalf), we managed to secure a night at the chalet, a primitive mountaintop cabin only accessible by foot, and easily our favorite destination. We also managed to get six other nights of lodging in the park to bookend our itinerary. My sister Devorah and her family even jumped in, making it quite miraculous this worked out at all, given reservations for a party of seven are damn near impossible these days. There were four nights at St. Mary Lodge

on the park's east side, followed by the in and out to the chalet, and closing with two nights at Lake McDonald on the other side.

It was going to be amazing. All we needed to do was fly into Glacier Park International Airport in Kalispell, Montana, by tomorrow night.

It was Saturday, and because there is nothing direct from the tri-state area to Kalispell, I had booked a ticket from White Plains, NY, to my childhood home of Minneapolis tonight, and then we were all flying to Glacier Park together tomorrow afternoon. It seemed safe enough, plenty of time. *What could go wrong?*

CHAPTER 3

A SLIGHT DELAY



“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?” The voice over the tiny airport’s PA interrupted my daydream of finding a slice of huckleberry pie before the weekend was out.

“I regret to inform you that today’s flight to Minneapolis has been overbooked and is past the legal weight limit for takeoff. We are looking for 14 passengers to volunteer their seats in exchange for a \$500 voucher on another flight. Unfortunately, we will not be able to board until resolved.”

Fourteen people?! How in the world was this flight so overbooked? I didn't know where to direct my anger, but it landed somewhere between the FAA and Samsonite.

I pulled up the Delta Airlines app to see my options. Tomorrow's flight wasn't until noon, and a voucher wouldn't hurt. This was the one and only flight out of White Plains, so no luck there. They had the same one tomorrow, but it got in too late to make the flight to Montana. I switched to Newark, no more outbound flights to Minneapolis. Then JFK, a few options but all sold out. Holding my breath, I tried the last airport nearby—LaGuardia. There was one flight leaving two and a half hours from now with a single seat open in first class.

Hmm, it's only about an hour to Queens, I thought. I walked up to the podium just as the agent clicked on the intercom again. "Ladies and gentlemen," he called, "the offer is now \$600. We are still looking for 12 more volunteers."

"If you can get me on this first class seat for the 6:05 out of LaGuardia, I'll do it," I said. "But you'll have to shuttle me there and get my bag out of the luggage bay. Is that possible?"

"Thank you, sir, let's try and make that happen for you," he said. Then, looking out at the crowd of other passengers very unwilling to make eye contact, let alone approach, he raised the intercom again. "The offer is now \$700..."

It took another hour for them to convince 13 others, remove our luggage, print the vouchers (which by then had nicely risen to \$1,200), and coordinate my ride across town. My Uber driver pulled up at 4:30 p.m., and I hurriedly jumped in the car.

"Get me to LaGuardia as fast as this Prius can take us!" I yelled. He knew where we were going already, and it wasn't his fault I was cutting it this close, but I needed to release the anxiety pumping through my veins at that very moment.

To calm myself, I pulled out my phone and dialed my wife, Dana. She had kindly (albeit begrudgingly) chosen to stay home

with the girls for the week to make the trip possible, and I hoped a flight voucher would help thank her for it.

“Good news,” I said quickly as she answered. “I have \$1,200 for us to go anywhere you want for our next vacation.”

“That’s great!” she replied enthusiastically. “How? Why?” Then, realizing the hesitancy in my response, she added, “...wait, what’s the bad news?”

“Well, I volunteered my seat for another one out of LGA, but the boarding doors close in 80 minutes and I’m in the backseat of an Uber about an hour from the airport.”

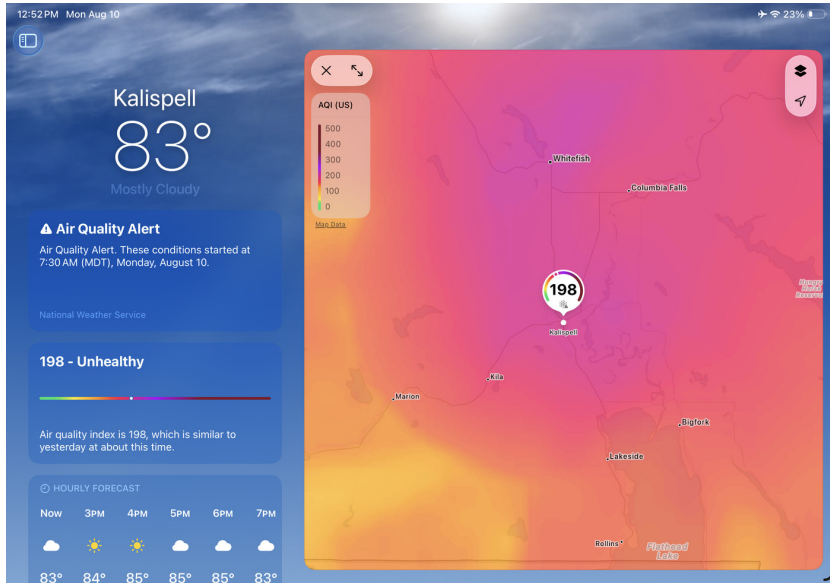
Dana paused before replying again. “Oh no, I’m so sorry. So, what are you going to do if you don’t make it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I will get on that flight to Glacier Park tomorrow if it’s the last thing I do. Nothing is stopping this trip from happening.”

I hung up, and I almost believed it.

CHAPTER 4

A CHANGE OF PLANS



The problem with speaking in extremes is that you're bound to be wrong more often than not. I did get to LaGuardia on time and back home to Minneapolis that night, but we never got on that plane to Montana.

A couple days earlier, wildfires had ripped through the Pacific Northwest and most news outlets had been covering the danger on their broadcasts since. The smoke pushed air quality dangerously low across the West Coast, and it had now moved into the Rocky Mountains. Flights were getting delayed or canceled, and health risk was a real concern for anyone with

asthma or heart conditions. Dad had both, so at breakfast the next morning, we sat and discussed our outlook.

"It says here the air quality index is 243 in Kalispell," Deborah said, showing us her phone's weather app.

"Is that bad?" I asked. I had no idea what a good score was, though the bright purple shade painting the map screen definitely didn't look promising.

"Yes, very bad," she responded. "To put it in perspective, it's 40 here. And anything over 100 is high-risk for people with respiratory issues."

"Yikes, take a look at the pictures from Lake McDonald." Dad had pulled up the national park's official weather service page, which showed live feeds from cameras across the park.

Scrolling through the images taken minutes earlier, my heart sank. Each was worse than the one before. What should have been bright blue skies waking up from the sun's first rays was instead a blur of reddish-gray haze everywhere. Some faintly showed the thin outline of mountains, most sat veiled in smoke.

I looked up and read it on Dad's face before he opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry, kids, I don't think it's a good idea to go," he said. And although he was talking to all of us, he was looking at me, wearing the same devastated look I knew was on my own face.

I wanted to be optimistic, to say something that would push us forward with our perfectly planned itinerary. That trick worked more than once on the AT, seemingly convincing my hiking partners to look on the bright side and trudge on with newfound excitement for hiking in the rain, snow, or dark of night.

But looking at Dad's phone again, I knew it was useless. Even if we went, the week was sure to get worse before it got better and any attempt at hiking would be miserable and dangerous.

"Okay," I agreed with a heavy sigh. "You're right. It's just... it's been ten years since we all hiked in the Rockies together. This sucks." Looking from Dad to Deborah, and then back to Dad, I

said, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you are right, we have to cancel the trip.”

“Actually... maybe not.” A voice called out from behind us. Devorah’s husband, Kevin, walked in with his laptop in hand and a smile on his face as he stared at the screen.

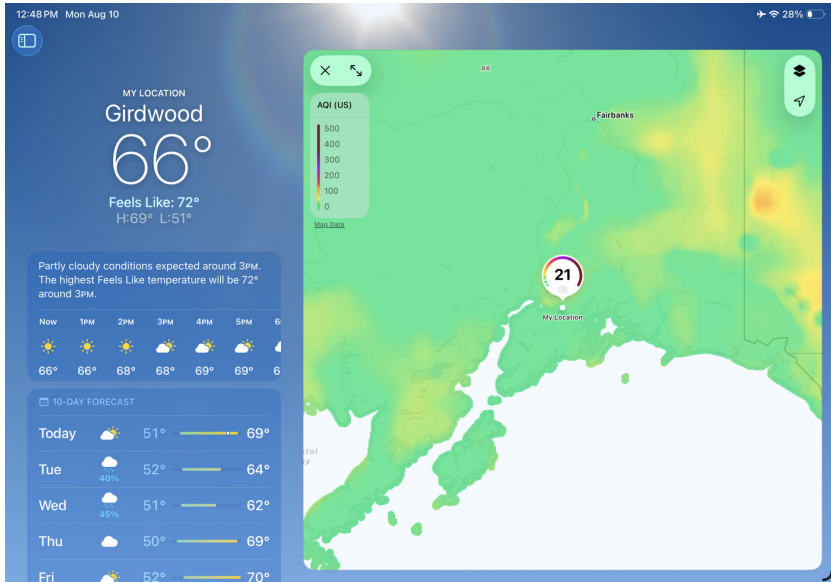
“We’ve already blocked off the week, and the smoke looks bad everywhere from Seattle to St. Louis.”

“Yeah?” I asked, not quite sure what he had in mind. By this time tomorrow, smoke was sure to hit Yosemite, the Tetons, and Rocky Mountain National Park. There wasn’t anywhere left in the country I could think of that would be safe for a week of hiking in the kind of mountains that Dad would enjoy.

“Well...” He lifted his head and shot us all a look. A look we knew meant he had already figured everything out. “Anyone want to go to Alaska?”

CHAPTER 5

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, GO TO ALASKA



“Okay guys, I think we’re all set!” Devorah’s bubbly voice called from the kitchen. Only an hour had passed, and we had all been furiously researching and coordinating details for a last-minute pivot to the exciting idea of Alaska.

“I was able to rebook our flights. We leave for Anchorage at 9 p.m. tonight,” she added. My sister had the uncanny ability to take something logistically difficult and make it sound like a breeze. I’m sure it was preceded by a lengthy chat with Delta customer service, some heavy persuasion to bend the rules, and a

stubborn spirit to find a way. But all we heard was the desired outcome. A plan was in motion. We were set.

“Great!” I added. “And I just got off the phone with Glacier Park reservations. They were able to cancel our stay at St. Mary Lodge, and just rebooked it for next year so I don’t lose the deposit.” It was a brilliant call by the reservations agent, saving me \$500 and securing a return to the national park before we’d even left for Alaska.

“We aren’t going to be so lucky with Granite Park Chalet,” yelled Dad from the bedroom upstairs. Then, as he walked downstairs to us, “they have an iron-clad cancellation policy that we are long past. But it’s okay, they are hurting from this too and I don’t mind the donation, given the circumstances.”

Dad had a soft spot in his heart for the owners of the chalet. It was one of a series of structures built by the Great Northern Railway at the turn of the 20th century, enticing hikers to travel hut-to-hut and feel like they were vacationing in the Swiss Alps. Now, thanks to years of mismanagement, forest fires, and crumbling infrastructure, only two of the original nine remained. A world without those backcountry cabins would change the park forever, so I wasn’t shocked he’d shrug off the money. *You’re a good man, Dad*, I thought.

Within an hour, we also managed to book an Airbnb south of Anchorage, rented a minivan, and drafted a hiking schedule around Chugach National Forest and Kenai Fjords National Park. During my limited time of research, Instagram’s algorithm had already started screaming at me not to miss the latter.

After a quick trip to REI for some warmer-weather gear, just in case, we were dropped off at the airport and ready for anything. Nine hours later, we pulled into a beautifully rustic cabin near Mount Alyeska around 3 a.m. and retreated, exhausted, to our beds.

Sleep came minutes after closing my eyes. *When I wake up*, I thought, *new adventures await*.

CHAPTER 6

THAT'S NOT A GLACIER, THIS IS A GLACIER



For those who have not been, Alaska is a geographic anomaly. With more than 76 million acres tied to national parks or forests, roughly a fifth of the state sits on wilderness-protected lands.

The largest national park in America is Wrangell-St. Elias at 13.2 million acres, but this is also one of the least visited, given how difficult it is to reach. Years ago, I had intended to backpack here, but after learning the trek would require drop by sea-plane and a firearm-wielding guide to aid us... I opted to backpack

Denali National Park instead. I knew what happened to Chris McCandless during *Into The Wild*. No thanks.

And Denali is no cakewalk for hikers either. Even though more than 500,000 people visit each year, fewer than 1% of them will go backcountry. It's definitely not for novice hikers. Which isn't helped by the strict quota reservation system, lack of any groomed trails, and constant wildfire closures that restrict access.

When my buddies and I visited in 2015, it was my first taste of Alaska. It was rugged, raw and unforgettable. And, after scaling a 1,000-foot scree field to get a glimpse of Denali's 20,310-foot summit towering over the landscape... I understood why people found a way to get out there.

So, over the next five days, the seven of us packed in a tight schedule traversing America's last frontier. Our itinerary took us to places each day that could have all been otherworldly destinations. We hiked mountain ridgelines that dwarfed Montana one day, then strolled through rainforests ripe with salmonberries and blueberries in valleys below the next.

To give Dad's feet a rest, we took one day to travel by boat, riding from the small town of Whittier (where, I learned, 90% of inhabitants live in a single apartment building) through Prince William Sound.

As the boat pulled up to the 7-mile stretch of Blackstone Glacier, where it dipped into the water, the captain cut the engines and I heard Dad's voice call out from next to me. "Wouldn't it be neat if we saw the ice break off into the..." And as if waiting for its cue, a shotgun blast bellowed across the sound as a chunk of glacier calved from the base and crashed into the water below.

We all cheered at Dad's perfectly timed comment, and laughed as he told it over and over again to all the other passengers as we continued our sea tour of Alaska's glaciers and waterfalls. And smiles didn't fade for him or any of us later that day, as we sat relaxing in the Alyeska Nordic Spa—a cozy

collection of hot tubs, cold tubs, and various saunas nestled in the woods. The tranquil steam calmed us for hours until the sun finally dipped below the horizon at 9 p.m.

“Oh yeah, I could get used to this,” Dad remarked, laying spread eagle in a warm whirlpool.

And as the week came to a close, we finally made our way down to Kenai Fjords National Park. I didn’t know what to expect, except that those who thought Glacier National Park was special supposedly changed their tune the second they saw it.

It didn’t disappoint. The park is nestled around Harding Icefield, a 700-square-mile expanse feeding nearly 40 glaciers, and providing views that rival anything else in America.

The pinnacle moment came at the end of a 4.5-mile hike up from the base of Exit Glacier, when we stepped over the trail’s final crest. Mountaintops speckled the horizon in every direction, and it felt like we were on top of the world. It took a few minutes to finally realize the sea of white spreading between the peaks was a sheet of ice, and not the bed of clouds I’d first taken it for.

Oh yeah, I thought as I recalled all those earlier Instagram reels. I get it now.

Sitting on the plane, waiting to touch down back in Minneapolis, I couldn’t help but appreciate the majesty of Alaska and all that we got to see. It was a special trip, unique and spontaneous, and full of new stories we’d never forget. I looked over at Dad sitting next to me, fiddling with his earbuds to watch another YouTube video on his phone.

“I know this wasn’t what we expected this week,” I said, disturbing him from the task that should have been less complex than he made it look. “But I’m really glad we didn’t cancel. I’m happy we did this.”

Dad looked up slowly with a sly smile before responding, “No, son, I’m Happy. You’re Sharkbait.”

It may not have been the Appalachian Trail or Glacier National Park, and it wasn't the last backpacking hurrah with Dad I thought it would be, but nothing could change his lighthearted spirit that made his trail name and persona so perfect.

"Ha, you're right, my mistake," I replied, as I started fiddling with my own earbuds. "And next time, the adventures of Sharkbait and Happy will continue."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Neiman, trail name Sharkbait, is a backpacker and outdoor enthusiast who learned of the Appalachian Trail as a young adult. Almost two decades later, he set out to complete a continuous thru-hike from Georgia to Maine, chronicling each day of his five-month journey on a personal WordPress blog and YouTube channel.

His online journal drew a dedicated following of friends, hikers, and strangers, which further inspired a passion for writing, including his travel memoir, *Hello My Name is Sharkbait*. His books bring daily trail adventures to life, both through vivid imagery on the page and inspiration to get outside and walk one's own footpaths.

When not hiking, Michael lives in Ridgefield, Connecticut, with his wife and family. He can be found exploring local trails or introducing others to the magic of the mountains, whether in person or through his writing.

You can follow his latest adventures at HelloNeiman.com, or on most social media as [@HelloNeiman](#).