

North to Alaska! July 2010

Prologue

We are a widely-travelled couple with three teenagers, and this was our first chance in many years to have a trip just to ourselves, as a 20th anniversary treat. So we packed two of the kids away to summer camp, sent the other to stay with a friend's family while he did his summer job, flew from Toronto to Seattle, and headed north.

Monday, July 5, 2010

Radisson Airport Hotel, Seattle, WA....No big rush to do anything today, after a long comfortable sleep-in. A buffet breakfast downstairs was all we needed to accomplish before walking our bags across the street to the airport terminal (the choice of hotel was premised on it being the only place within walking distance of the airport). It took an hour or so to get through various lineups, and we caught our Alaska Airlines 737-400 on time at 12:30. With grey skies, we didn't expect much in the way of scenery, but the clouds opened up from the north shore of the Olympic peninsula to about two-thirds of the way up Vancouver Island, so Susan and I (both with window seats on the left side of the plane) had fine views of the snowy spine, carved-up forests, protected valleys, and settlements of the Island as we drifted overhead at a height of 10 km.

The flight north was 2 hours and 20 minutes long, so when it was time we dropped down through the cloud layer and into the misty rainy land of forests, mountains, and oceans. With a startling glimpse of the Mendenhall Glacier's fat tongue, we were welcomed to Juneau, Alaska (or at least its airport). We hung out in the crowded basic waiting area for 45 minutes, then boarded the southbound 737-400 Combi, making its milk run through several island centres and eventually to Seattle. The flight to Petersburg was a straightforward half-hour up-and-down run, filled with a mix of locals and tourists, mainly fishermen.

While waiting for a lift into town, sheltered from the light rain, we met a couple (later, as we were to discover, actually a father and daughter) from Texas who were destined to both our hotel and the Sikumi. So we made our introductions to Harry and Emily and chatted a bit. The Scandia Hotel van brought us to our "downtown" hotel in a few minutes, so we dumped our bags, put on our rain jackets, and anxiously set out to stretch our legs and explore the little fishing settlement. There was a main street about half a kilometre long, just inland from the calm waters of the Wrangell Narrows. It featured all the necessary stores, a municipal building, and at the north end a big fish plant across the road from a tidy set of bunkhouse buildings for the staff. Memories of my company mining town upbringing came flooding back!



"downtown" Petersburg...

There were dozens, if not hundreds, of fishing and leisure boats tied up among the complex of docks, all set up for what appeared to be a very high tidal range. We quickly spotted the tidy blue-and-white Sikumi, sitting amongst the fishing boats to await our arrival. A couple of other canneries stood on waterfront stilts, some funky century-old wooden structures lined a remnant harbour front laneway, the brightly-painted Sons of Norway hall stood proudly to mark the town's Scandinavian heritage,



A classic situation in the slough, Petersburg

and some really evocative homes and workshops juttred out over a murky slough nearby. A grid of streets spread a few blocks back and up the hill behind the town centre, but that was pretty much all there was to Petersburg, Alaska.

Our tour completed, we dropped in to the local Mexican restaurant, which occupied part of a big bar, complete with pool tables, wood panelling, and velvet Elvis paintings. The food (on paper plates) was fine and we shot a game of pool to amuse ourselves before retreating to the Scandia to watch TV for the evening. A series of Mad Men episodes took care of that, as the grey skies lingered until darkness after 10 PM.

Tuesday, July 6, 2010

Unlike most of our trips, we were taking our time getting underway. Nevertheless, this was the big day - all aboard!

Cloudy skies but thankfully no rain. Things are looking up! The non-bustling street(s) of Petersburg at least offered us a coffee shop and an opportunity to stroll around. A stop at the tourist info shop and bookstore, a look at the school and community swimming pool, and breakfast al fresco at Tina's Place was about all there was on offer.

As we waited to take our bags from the hotel, we watched about half the Netherlands - Uruguay World Cup semi-final; we had to leave while it was 1-1, and it may be a week and a half before we find out the result! Hup Holland! Watching the game, we were introduced to David and Cathy, winery owners from California's Napa Valley and one of the remaining couples on the Sikumi. They were a bit older than us (60ish?) and very personable.

The hotel van took our bags (and us) the half mile to the wharf, where the Sikumi sat proudly among all the working fishing boats. A few of the surprisingly young staff greeted us and took our bags on board, so we were underway shortly after noon. We met the fourth and final couple on the trip, a pair of biochemical engineers in their fifties (Don and Cindy) from Baton Rouge, Louisiana; they had a sugar plantation.

We also met the Sikumi's crew. Captain Kurt, in his fourth year of running the Sikumi, was only in his twenties but was very experienced, having grown up near Sitka as the son of a commercial fisherman and been on board fishing boats since thirteen. He captains a fishing boat in the Aleutian Islands in the off season. Deckhand Mike was a young jack-of-all-trades from Milwaukee, Wisconsin who was nevertheless an experienced seafarer as well. Bri was the guide / naturalist, who had a vast background in kayaking and training and who was working as an arborist while angling to get her own kayak shop in Seattle eventually. Gabriel, the chef, was a trained biochemist (another one) who had had enough after seven years of corporate work with Dow and now mixed summers on the Sikumi with winters pursuing a psychology doctorate and volunteer work in Seattle. Katie, the final crew member, was the daughter of one of the ship's owners (there were three investors) who was on board for several weeks after her college courses wrapped up; this was her last week this season as she was headed back to Seattle to enjoy the rest of her summer down south. She helped in the galley, serving, and making up the rooms.

So here we were, 13 happy souls, about to putter around the bays and shores of Frederick Sound for a week, so see what we could find and spend the times in between relaxing and enjoying the break from our regular "real life" routines.

The Sikumi ("Among the Ice") was built in 1987 and worked as a fishing trawler before being sold and converted to a cruise boat. It is 67 feet long and has everything we need. There are four cozy guest bedrooms (each with a bathroom / shower) up front, while the rear half of the main deck is a big open kitchen / dining / bar / lounge area with big windows offering panoramic views. Below is the crew's quarters (two tiny bunkbed rooms and a shared bathroom), storage, and the engines. The upper deck is open at the rear, where a small motorboat is stored. The bow is also open, and the enclosed bridge is spacious



Kurt and Mike on the bridge



Gabe and Katie in the kitchen

and welcoming at all times. The captain's quarters are behind the bridge, which features radar, sonar, and GPS to allow tracking in three dimensions at all times. The sonar is interesting, as it generates an accurate profile of the bottom (depth in fathoms) as we move along; it is used to pick the exact places for dropping shrimp and crab pots. All the kayaks are stored on the canopy above, and lifted down by the hydraulic crane on the rear deck. Everything is very comfortable and has a "make yourself at home" attitude - there are binoculars around whenever you want to grab a pair, Gabe will cook up something whenever you want, the bar is open, you can have a shower whenever, etc. There is a bookshelf and several games for amusement as well.

Pulling out of Petersburg and past the wharves and fish plants, we passed by the "nice part of town" - a string of lovely new homes strung along the waterfront - and soon encountered our first Alaskan wildlife. A mass of Sea Lions congregated atop a big red channel marker, playing a maritime version of "king of the castle". A white-capped Bald Eagle watched the proceedings from atop the tallest tree on the nearby shore.

As we moved out into Frederick Sound, the channel opened up and we could begin to sense the scale of things. Low cloud still shrouded the hilltops, leaving the skyline to our (active) imaginations, so we focused at sea level. Soon enough, a spout up ahead marked our first humpback whale sighting. Everyone was so excited! We diverted and followed around the poor behemoth mid-strait for some time, filling digital camera cards with instant memories. Of course, one humpback pretty much looks and behaves like the next, but we were all looking for a breach or a tail slap to distinguish this one.



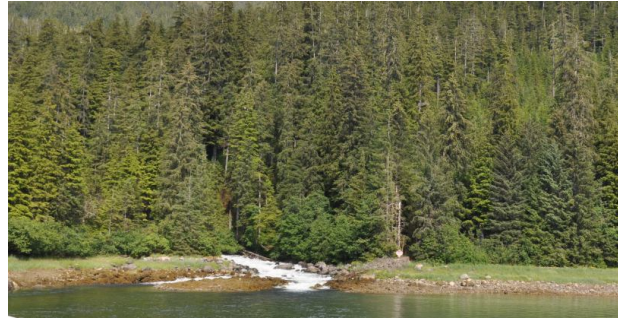
The welcoming crew at Petersburg harbour

Moving on, we rounded Wood Point into the broad reach of Bahomas Bay; further in there was a glimpse of the broad tongue of the Baird Glacier, coming down from under the clouds at the head of the bay. We turned away, however, and headed to an anchorage a hundred metres off a beach in front of a heavily wooded shore, marked by a whitewater stream rushing its way to salty oblivion. A few hundred metres away there was a cabin tucked in the woods; it was one of many you could reserve in the Tongass National Forest. This was one of the countless cabins and trails scattered over southeast Alaska. The protection of such a vast area of land from logging and mining was a remarkable feat, and contributed greatly to the purity of the scenery we would encounter.



the toe of the Baird Glacier and the results of its work

Mike lowered the skiff and ran us over to the shore in groups of four, then we set off on a steep but well-put-together trail alongside the stream. The temperate rain forest, the rushing stream, the towering hemlock and spruce trees, and the steep hillsides combined to make a wonderful hiking environment. We went in about a kilometre and a half, turning back where the wood-planked trail shifted into a steeper and muddier track. I would have enjoyed going on but I got the sense that Bri was taking a cautious approach to start with our new group, assessing our abilities and interests and not wanting to push us too hard.

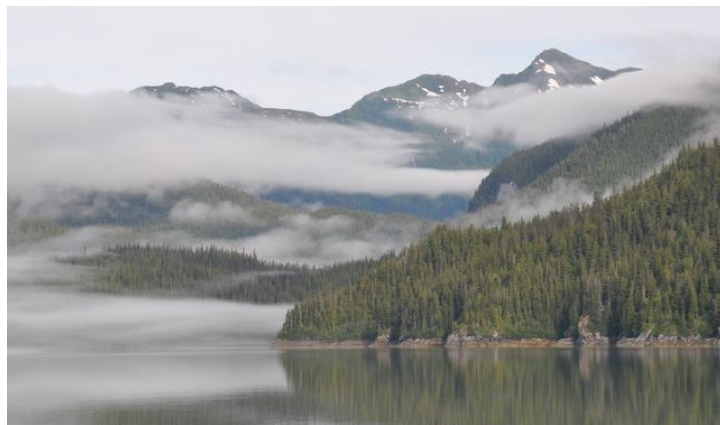


Venture into the Alaskan forest and you may never be seen again

Back on the Sikumi, we moved further into the bay, dropping several shrimp pots and taking a closer look at the glacier before tucking ourselves into the appropriately-named Scenery Cove, a lovely protected and quiet inlet hidden among the forested slopes near the head of the larger inlet. Dropping anchor and shutting off the diesel engines for the night, we feasted on halibut and got to know each other as the skies dimmed only slowly at this northern latitude of 57 degrees.

Wednesday, July 7, 2010

We awoke to a misty flatwater scene that evoked a spooky movie. The sensational visual effect had to battle with the eruption of noise from first the diesel generator, then the boat motors, then the winding up of 120 feet of anchor line! It was 6:30 AM.



Good morning, Alaska!

We pulled out of Scenery Cove, saluted at the entrance by a Bald Eagle perched at the very top of a spruce tree, the topmost branch bending under its weight. As the view in the main channel opened up, the grey stubbed toe of the Baird glacier was clearly visible to the east, as were bits of the snow fields higher up that kept it fed. Swirls of mist hung at low levels but the main cloud elevation had risen to the point where most of the skyline to the north was visible, with 3,000' - 4,000' forested peaks rising steeply from the 10' high tidal band that marks the shoreline. Things clouded up for a bit but by midday the skies were pretty much clear and the conditions were such that the Captain declared today the best weather of the season so far!

The first order of business was to haul up the shrimp pots. It was fascinating to see that a few of the traps had attracted a dozen or more jumbo shrimp, while others had a lonely single error-prone crustacean. Altogether, the nine pots yielded just over four pounds of shrimp, so that took care of supper for all of us!

Moving along to the northwest, we got into the open waters of Frederick Sound - remarkably vast and empty, it seemed like we had the whole Sound to ourselves. Occasionally a fishing boat could be seen in



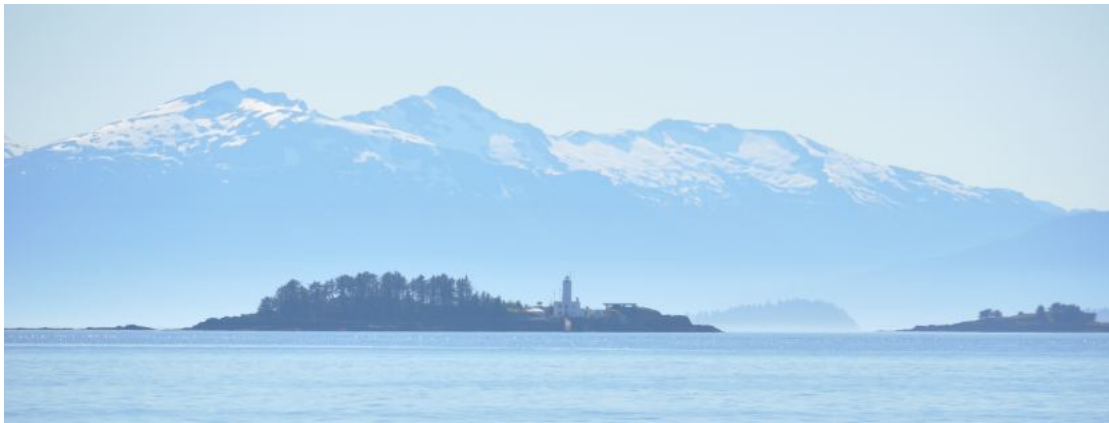
fat juicy shrimp...caught!

the distance, but there was no interruption to the natural coastline and we were undisturbed in our progress. Undisturbed, but easily diverted by the spout of a humpback whale! We stopped and observed a solitary whale for a while opposite Farragut Bay, then moved on to round forested Cape Fanshaw to anchor off the south tip of a little island (Whitney Island) that sat a few hundred metres off the mainland. This sheltered area was perfect to introduce everyone to sea kayaking, so we launched the fleet from a floating inflatable dock. There were two doubles and a bunch of singles. It was a delight to get out on the water in such a gorgeous environment.

We paddled over to a broad beach on the mainland and got out to explore the remains of a fox farm of decades ago. A small shack, slowly rotting into the woods, a few sets of piles to mark an old dock, some rusted boiler and stove parts, and a field of non-native flowers and plants were all the evidence remaining of somebody's hard work of years past.

Paddling back to the island shoreline, we poked among the rocks atop crystal-clear water to peer down to the sunlit kelp, mussels, starfish, crabs, little fish, and vegetation of the tidal zone. The most impressive (and creepy) sight was the 20-armed Sunrise Star. It makes you wonder about diving, so I asked Curt. He said there was some dry-suit diving in Alaska but primarily on the outer shoreline rather than in the Inner Passage.

Moving on, we cruised up, directly north now, into Stephens Passage (!).which would ultimately lead to Juneau. Immediately to the west, the low wooded islets of the Five Fingers sat mid-channel, but the remarkable skyline far to the southwest was what drew my attention - the whole of Baranof Island seemed to be a icy glacier-clad mountain range that walled us off from the open Pacific. Even though the peaks aren't high in absolute terms (only about 4,000 feet), they present themselves in their ice-covered glory as near-Himalayan in scale.



The Five Fingers lighthouse with Baranof Island in the background.

With several whales spouting near the Five Fingers, we diverted west to see what was going on. It was a bit of a show compared to the single whales we had seen to date. You could never tell where one would emerge, and there were some pairs cavorting together which was fun to see. Then we picked up a particularly active humpback off to the northeast, slapping his tail and standing on his head so we chased after him for a while.

Only about twenty minutes after we left the whales behind we got the call - dolphins at the bow! Actually it was a group of about a dozen Dall's Porpoises, who delighted in riding our bow wave and leaping out of the water as if daring us to catch them. What a remarkable spectacle, seeing the sleek black-and-white animals, about six to eight feet long, swoop apparently effortlessly across our path. We could even watch them rocket forward under the clear surface, then burst up in a splash. Our nine and a half knots was nothing to the porpoises; after ten or fifteen minutes they had had enough fun and accelerated out of our sight.



We watch whales while ferry passengers motor on, oblivious...



Porpoises cavorting off the bow

After 7, we pulled into forested Windham Bay for the night, dropping a few crab pots and pulling into a sheltered cove (disappointingly, occupied already by a small boat - as if there weren't enough coastline for everyone...). A fine supper of seasoned shrimp and risotto was followed by chatting, reading, sipping wine (did I mention the ship has an open bar?) and relaxation. Despite the clear skies, it never really gets dark enough to watch the stars at this time of year.

Thursday, July 8, 2010

The diesel motors chugged to life at 6:30, so, consequently, did we. An anxious glance out the window confirmed that the good weather was holding for us. Today's plan was to do a long straight run up Stephens Passage, so off we went, flanked to the east by a continuous array of peaks, interspersed with green valleys and a few bays, capped by snowy patches and even high ice sheets and the occasional tongue of glacier drooping down towards the dark deep water. After a filling breakfast we stopped briefly to dump some shrimp pots, then moved into the mouth of Tracy Arm. Even at this point there were a few floating chunks of ice (it would be a stretch to call them bergs) to hint at what awaited 27 miles ahead.

The wooded slopes are gentle enough and the channel is a couple of kilometres wide for the northward reach, but we head for a great battered granite face. Upside-down vees of steep spruce forest a thousand metres tall are wedged between great scraped-bare funnels of smooth rock and patches of ice, each contributing an array of white streaks angling down to a single waterfall-laced stream that typically bursts wildly right into the glacial-powdered blue-green fjord.

We make a sweeping right turn and see the channel get narrower, the walls get steeper, the peaks and snowfields become more prominent, and feel our anticipation level rise. The fjord extends easterly for 15 more miles, gently twisting and finding its way to within a few kilometres of the Canadian border. It is a geologic classroom - Glaciers 101 - with all the classic features of a glacier-carved landscape. Some great hanging valleys, and the views up some deep clefts to snow-capped peaks is almost irresistibly tempting. It is heartbreaking to sense that I'll never have the opportunity to hike and camp within this gigantic landscape, but at least I can soak it all in with all my senses today.



Fjord walls dwarf human visitors



Classic glacier-carved hanging valleys

The fjord gradually became too ice-choked to get closer than two kilometres to the face of South Seymour Glacier. There were several other boats in sight, either private cruisers or day-trip boats out of Juneau. Everyone was picking their way through the mix of floating mini-bergs and slushy bits. The glacier face was a ragged pile of white-blue ice a couple of hundred metres high, fed by a big ice field high in the back of the grey peaks to the rear. Having determined that we'd have better luck with the main branch of the Seymour Glacier, we turned around and wound our way back a couple of kilometres to a roughly-scraped fjord branching off to the north. It was a few km long, and after a couple of turns we could see a second glacier face. Strikingly, the side fjord was almost ice-free, due to the flow of water that bubbled up from under the ice dam at the head of the fjord and created an outbound water movement. After a pleasant lunch on deck, we hung out a half kilometre off the ice face, watching for crumbling ice, chunks bounding down to drop into the sea, a dozen bobbing seals, massive slabs of dark blue ice welling up from below the surface (shooters) to erupt with a splash, the constant welling of fresh water from the glacier's under-ice river, and the dramatic forms and shades of ice, from dirty grey to pure white to deep transparent blue. Despite the lack of floating ice, we hung around for a couple of hours and saw numerous spills and splashes, from insignificant to major slabs collapsing into the fjord. The raw power, the unpredictability, and the delayed sounds of nature at its most basic were enthralling.



Seymour Glacier south arm – as close as we got



We weren't the only ones watching the ice show.



A rock-hard dark blue crystalline shooter arises from the depths



...while an ice "bomb" drops off the glacier face

Later in the afternoon we pulled out into the main fjord and loaded into the kayaks for a little saltwater paddle in the warm sunshine. It was so enjoyable to putter along for an hour and a half amid the floating ice bits and wonderful scenery. We moved along the sheer cliffs of the north shore for a while, dipping in and out of various waterfalls - just like kayaking the Credit River, but not! The Sikumi moved ahead out of sight and let the kayakers have the fjord to themselves (although there was a larger ship across the channel). All too soon, it was time to load up; the boat returned, the gear was hoisted on board, and, wine glasses in hand, we retraced our path to the mouth of the fjord as the valleys and ridges closed in on themselves and left our sight.

With our preferred anchorage already occupied by smaller craft, Kurt set the Sikumi's anchor down in an open spot in large Holkham Bay, sheltered by Harbor Island and just near the gravel bar at the foot of Endicott Arm (Tracy Arm's twin fjord that extended southeast from the bay) that marked its long-ago the terminal moraine. The glaciers that ground out the inlet lay hidden around corners some 25 miles upstream. We lay near Sumdum Glacier, tumbling down a valley to the east of us. Waters were calm and Gabe whipped up another great meal, this time putting yesterday's fresh halibut catch to good use. Everyone chatted easily after dinner, and I eked out a victory over David and Cathy in a Scrabble game.



Massive Sumdum Glacier overlooked our anchorage

Friday, July 9, 2010

Grey skies and calm waters greeted us in the morning. We pulled anchor and set off to retrace our steps, aiming to recover our shrimp and crab pots from a day ago. At the first stop we pulled up another 3 1/2 pounds of shrimp from our eight pots (Curt is upset that the ninth one was lost to the depths, thinking that Mike hadn't tied it onto the line properly), then back to Windham Bay to reel up the crab pots. There were 21 male crabs of the correct size (at least 6 1/2 inches across the shell), one female (released), and one or two immense slimy twenty-legged sea stars in each crab pot. At least those go back to the sea floor!

We then set a southwesterly course across Stephens Passage to The Brothers Islands, a pair of relatively low-lying larger islands that we reached around noon. It was good that we had snapped our photos of the icy spine of Baranof Island a couple of days ago; there was no indication today of the spectacular skyline that lay hidden behind the cloud bank.

We found a favourite anchorage spot in a sheltered bay on the southwesterly tip of the islands and set the boats out while lunch was served. Gabe continues to excel in the galley. One group (including Susan and I) hopped in the skiff and headed half a mile over to a rocky islet that had attracted a sea lion rookery. On our approach we found ourselves in the midst of forty or fifty frolicsome and inquisitive young sea lions - it was great fun to watch them flip around so closely and in their own watery habitat. The rookery was in two parts - one for the rejected males and the other for the massive dominant males, females, and pups. The larger dominant males ran to 2,500 pounds and the group was a constant source of roaring, barking, belching, and other raw noises. What a great experience! It was dampened somewhat when, on the return trip, we came across a starving male sitting silently alone on a rocky beach with a big salmon spinner sticking out of his mouth; he had been chasing a salmon and swallowed the hook; unable to feed, he was now slowly dying, although perhaps the spinner might rust out in time for him to revive. It was interesting how he had been rejected by the rest of the sea lions.



The welcoming committee



Guillemots were constant companions



The most comfortable coastal rock in all of Alaska?



Unable to eat and starving to death on the beach

Returning to the boat, we switched into kayak gear (while the others took to the skiff) for a leisurely paddle along the shore of a small rocky island, with plenty of sea stars, birds (guillemots, oyster catchers) and shallows to explore. From there, it was another couple of hours westerly to the mouth of Eliza Harbour, where we dropped anchor for the evening just inside the sheltered mouth of the bay.

After another fine meal, the evening scrabble match attracted four teams and kept us entertained until bedtime at 11. Despite an atrocious run of low-scoring vowels Cathy and I managed to hold on to second place.

Saturday, July 10, 2010

The morning saw us cruising along the forested southern slopes of Admiralty Island, home to one of the world's greatest concentrations of brown bears. A patient exploration of Murder Cove at the southern tip of the island revealed several small deer munching grasses on the foreshore, a large unfinished fishing lodge complex, and none of the sought-after bear sightings. This was, I suppose, a relief to the deer and fish.

Pulling out of the Cove, we headed west across the three-mile-wide Chatham Strait, with a bit of a swell due to it being open to the Pacific several miles to the south. The snowy alpine zone of Baranof Island revealed itself to us only intermittently as we cruised north along its eastern shore. It was about 12 miles as the crow flies due west across Baranof to Sitka on the Pacific coast, but closer to 60 treacherous miles around Baranof Island by boat. Deep valleys and whitewater falls interrupted the coastline, and soon enough we turned into a broad calm bay with a little settlement at its head, right beside an extraordinary gushing 50 m high

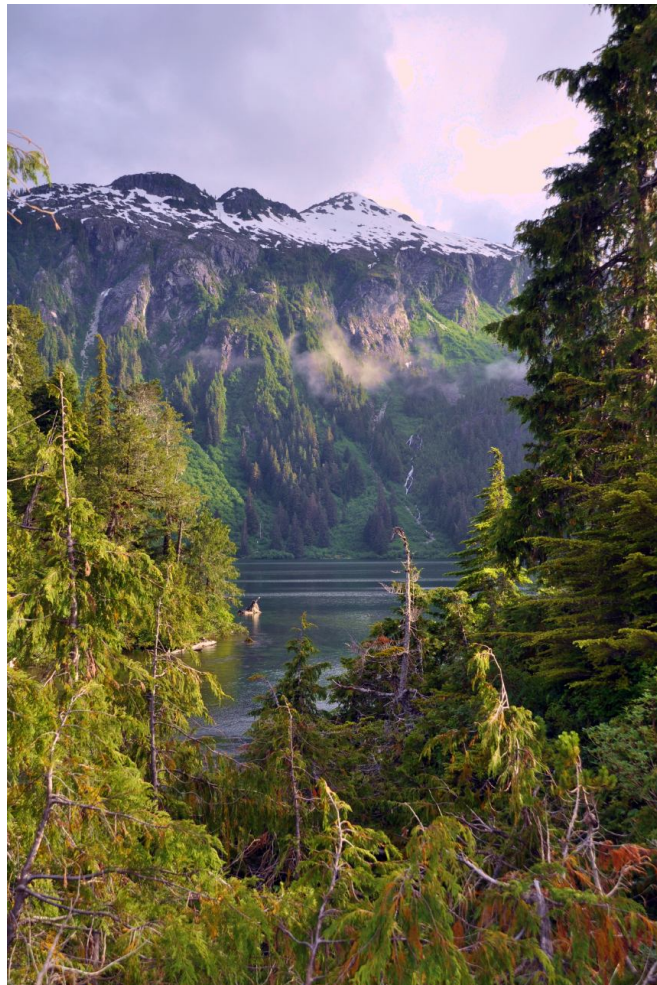


Docked at Warm Springs Bay

waterfall. This was Warm Springs Bay, and after dropping our shrimp pots near the entrance we cruised in to the government dock and tied up (after juggling some smaller boats around to make room for us). The setting was extraordinary - the beautiful untouched forests reaching steeply up to the cloud line, the deep dark waters of the bay, a raised wooded walkway for a few hundred metres linking the pier with the waterfall and serving eight or ten steep-roofed wooden homes / fishing camps, an equivalent number of boats tied up at the pier, and a path up into the dark forest leading to the Baranof hot Springs and Baranof Lake. Several of the boats were gorgeous - the trim wood National Forest Service one had been built in the 1920s and was a designated National Historic Place, a couple of fishing boats with nets piled high, a beautiful smaller wooden sailboat, a larger wooden live-aboard tied up for the season, a crisp modern motor cruiser we had seen over in Tracy Arm a couple of days ago, and our big blue steel-hulled vessel.

After lunch we launched the kayaks and spent an hour and a half exploring the bay. We focused on a large circular lagoon first, entering via a narrow channel through which the lagoon nearly emptied at low tide. It was a completely different quiet place in there. Re-emerging to the bay, we sensed the strong current from the gushing waterfall, then moved along the south shore to a long deep bay, paddling in dark calm water under the watchful eyes of a perched eagle, its screeches echoing from the hillsides. The weather had started to clear up, with bits of blue sky and broken clouds, so that was exciting.

After a brief rest back on the Sikumi, most of the group set out at quarter to four for a bit of a hike. It was a ten minute walk along a well-maintained trail up to Baranof Lake, which stretched a couple of miles back into the island. It was the source of the waterfall - it was extraordinary that there was enough meltwater in the surrounding ice-clad mountains to feed a constant flow to such a gushing torrent. It was also fascinating to see the whole range of physiographic zones despite the mountains rising only 3,000 feet from the sea - from frozen white peaks to the alpine zone, down to the spruce and cedar forest to the water's edge, and on down further hundreds of feet into the darkest depths of ice-cold fjord water. Susan and some others returned to the nearby hot springs, while Don, Cindy, Cathy, Bri and myself headed uphill towards Sadie Lake. The trail was often steep and extraordinarily mucky as it picked its way through muskeg, around rocks, and over roots. It was slow going and it took us about an hour and twenty minutes to cover the two miles to the lake. The payoff was a very pleasant



Baranof Lake in the evening light

mountain lake scene, but its enjoyment was hampered by the swarms of flies and mosquitos. Even greater was the payoff an hour later as we stripped down to swimsuits and slid into the water of the hot springs, in a rocky pool set



Raging ice-cold waterfall or calm hot springs...the decision was easy for the Babes of Baranof (bare enough?) Island

right beside the roaring whitewater of the Baranof falls.

It was interesting, as always, to come to that point in the trip when you've gone as far as you are going to get, and you turn your feet around and start heading for home. It had taken three flights, five days on a boat, and a long hike to get to the shores of Sadie Lake. I won't say it was deep in the Alaskan wilderness, but it sure wasn't downtown Toronto! I always find a certain poignancy about leaving a place when, while it will remain accessible if I really needed, there were pretty long odds that I would ever dip my toes in Sadie Lake again. Ah well, there are plenty of other fantastic places in the world that I haven't even seen yet, so onwards! We are heading back to Toronto but that's just a jumping off point for whatever new adventure we come up with.

Vic, a folksinging woodcarving fisherman from another boat tied up at the dock (for the whole summer) joined us in the evening and literally sang for his supper. He did a half dozen songs at the dinner table and informed us about the carving cultures of the area, while the rest of us tucked into extraordinary beef loin and creme brulée. See what I mean about not being too embedded in the Alaskan wilderness?

Sunday, July 11, 2010

We untied and pulled out at the leisurely hour of 7:30 this morning into the calm bay. The shrimp pots at the mouth yielded a paltry half-dozen shrimp, a couple of slimy sea stars, and an extraordinarily ugly little fish. The waters out in Chatham Strait weren't too bad, with only a small swell to deal with. Skies were mostly cloudy, with patches of blue sky about and the inaccessible peaks of Baranof Island visible in a wet misty atmosphere. It would certainly be cold and miserable up there.

Our movement was southward along Baranof's forested and rugged eastern flank. After a couple of hours we came upon a massive red bluff (check it out on Google Earth – it really is red!) which sheltered a comfortable narrow bay several miles long (Red Bluff Bay, natch). We motored in and anchored half a mile from the head of the bay near a couple of other smaller boats. Out came the kayaks for a lengthy paddle about the calm waters. For the first time it rained on us while we were out on the kayaks but with the rain gear and the skirts, it had no effect on our mobility or our ability to enjoy the adventure. Once again Alaska put on a land/sea/air wildlife show for us – a brown bear ambling along the grassy foreshore at the head of the bay, seals popping their heads up and keeping an eye on us, bald eagles swooping down from their treetop perches, and everything else trying to stay out of their respective mouths. We paddled all the way down a side fjord to see a waterfall, and enjoyed the ambience of the whole situation immensely.



leaving Red Bluff Bay

Lunch was great as usual, then we hoisted anchor and returned to the Strait. This time it was straight (strait?) across the grey water; fortunately the swells were manageable on this, the most exposed passage of the trip. Kuiu Island eventually filled our eastern horizon with a low, undistinguished profile and many rocks and bays. We stopped for a period off its northern tip for a bit of Sea Bass fishing. Despite my generally inept background in fishing, I managed to haul in a couple of bass, a rock fish or two, and, after a mighty struggle, an intricate and fascinating ten-pound piece of coral. Susan, meanwhile, managed the unlikely trick of dropping a hook right on top of a huge slimy Sea Star and pulled it off its rock and on to the deck. I guess edible things are safe from the Schijns fishing rods.

We continued northeast across the broad mouth of the Keiku Strait, with the native settlement of Kake visible in the distance. Given that it was the only settlement we saw on the whole trip it might have been interesting to see, but no-one ever seemed to have much good to say about Kake so I guess we didn't miss much. Curt was keeping an eye out for bears or other critters along the northern shore of Kupreanof Island, and soon enough the alarm was called – a couple of black bears on the pebble-and-grass foreshore! We pulled in quite close and settled in to watch the interaction between what eventually became a seven-bear gathering. They were digging stuff up from the ground, breaking shells open for food, and ambling about. We ended up simply staying put for the evening, and after supper I retreated to the rear deck to read a bit more and take in the wonderful big-sky sunset.



A couple of the bears on the beach



Goodnight whales. Goodnight fish. Goodnight seals. Goodnight moon.

My reading list on this trip was a short one, consisting of a non-fiction ride with John Wesley Powell's first descent of the Grand Canyon, and Ken Follett's massive historical fiction piece, *The Pillars of Heaven*.

One final scrabble triumph, and we were ready to turn in for one last floating sleep.

Monday, July 12, 2010

The boat motors fired up at an unconscionably early hour of 4:00, but that's what it took to get the Sikumi underway and back to dock at Petersburg by 9:30, so that folks could catch their morning flights back to reality. We drifted back to sleep and crawled out of bed at 7 to enjoy one last stretch of calm water, as the boat proceeded comfortably down the wooded shores of Kupreanof Island. It was another cloudy morning but with the promise of some of the cover breaking up. The Wrangell Narrows came into view before 9 and we cruised past the shoreline houses and sea lion-bedecked channel markers at extremely low tide, winding up right back where we started a week ago at Petersburg's south pier.

After our goodbyes to our new group of friends, we checked walked over to the Scandia and checked in. We set out on a walk to “see the town” via a long loop along the shoreline to Sandy Cove and back to downtown via the airport, taking almost a couple of hours. We came across a deer along the road – not quite as exotic as seeing one on the shore of some wild island! Fish & chips for lunch was followed by an hour and a half nap to compensate for the early rise.

In midafternoon we laced up the boots again for a big hike to the top of Raven's Roost, a forested hill to the east of town. We had to stroll the half hour back past the airport to the trail head, and from there it was two hours of uphill – first on a nice boardwalk across wet open lands, then it got steep. The trail was pretty chewed up but fairly well maintained and easy to follow, over logs and rocks, wet spots and some mud. After an hour and a half of this, we didn't seem to be making much headway. Just when we were deep in the forest and debating the merits of going any further, two local youth met us on their way down and advised us that it was 20 - 30 minutes to the top. It was extraordinary timing - from the log book at the trailhead, they were the only other people who had used the trail in the past five days! The news gave Susan renewed purpose and she tore off up the roots, rocks, and planks; sure enough, there we were half an hour later, sitting in an open meadow munching on chocolate bars and enjoying a tremendous view from northwest to east, covering Petersburg Mountain, the narrows, part of the town and airport, and across Frederick Sound to the hills and icefields that led to the Canadian border. We could see almost the entire itinerary of our first day on the boat - the bay, our hiking spot, our first (successful) shrimp pots, and up towards Baird Glacier.

One thing that surprised me about Petersburg was how the place shut down at 9 PM. I would have thought that, in the long summer evening hours of sunlight everyone would be out on their decks, strolling and socializing and enjoying the weather, knowing that there



Susan surveying Frederick Sound from high above Petersburg

would be long months ahead of darkness and cold. But no, the pizza place and cafe were closed, Tina's was cleaning up, and even the Mexican spot was pretty much winding down by 9:30. I guess the town is too small to even support that level of activity. We were only saved from having to have a bowl of chili at the grocery store by grabbing the last two burritos in town from La Fonda. Washed down with a beer, they were a tasty reward for the rigours of the day.

Our feet resisting any further activity and Petersburg being incapable of supplying any nightlife, the day wound down with a couple of episodes of Mad Men on the TV.

Tuesday, July 13, 2010

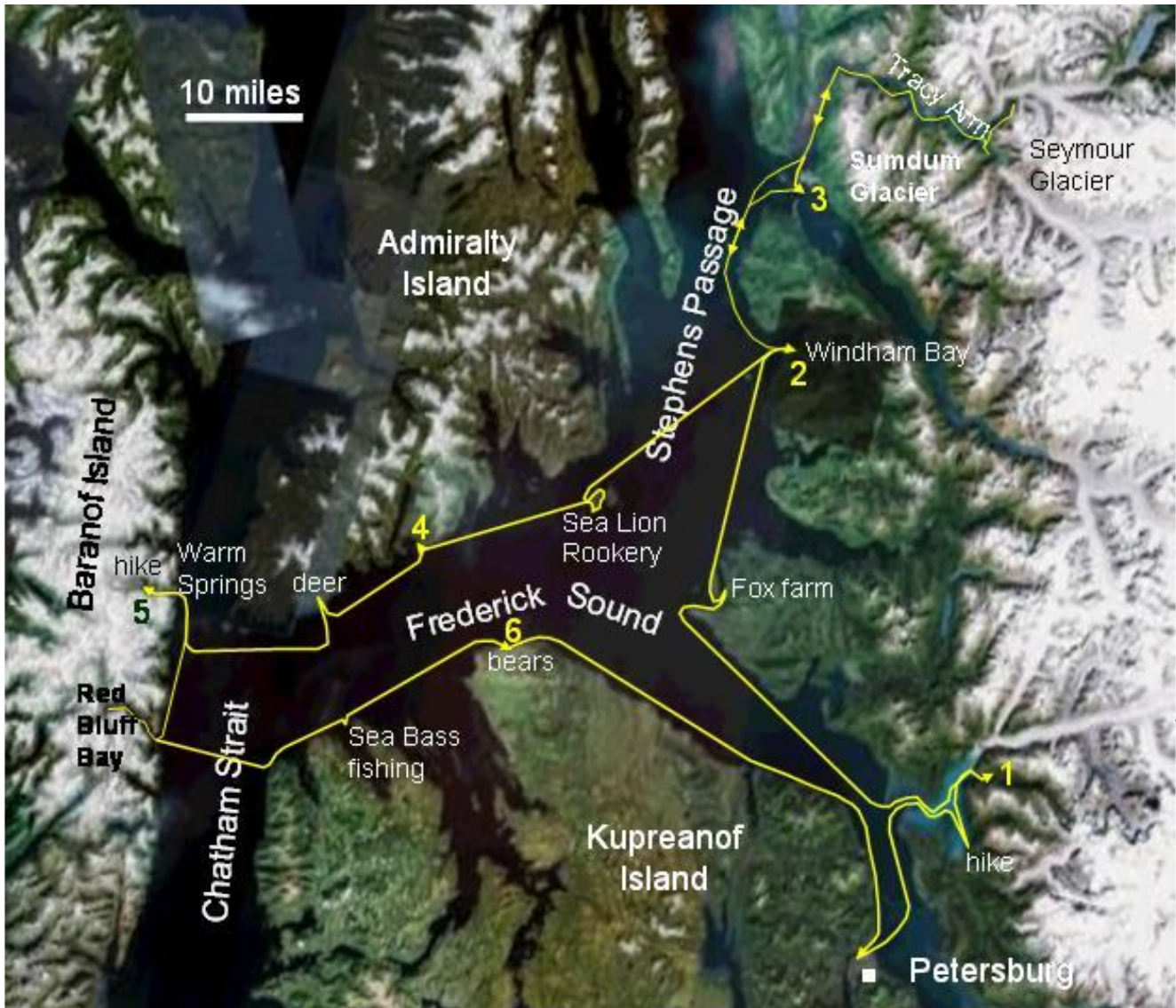
A leisurely start to a travel day, with a sleep in and breakfast al fresco at Tina's, watching the pickup trucks come and go on the main street. I suspect Petersburg has one of the greatest ratios of pickup trucks per capita of any North American settlement.

Our hotel room overlooked main street, so we were amused later on in the morning to see Mike, Katie, and (presumably) Katie's friend and replacement come strolling up from the boat, leading three giant rolling bins of laundry towards the laundromat...their work never stops!

The flight out of Petersburg was straightforward, rising quickly above the clouds. I was on the left and saw little of the earth until we dropped down into Juneau, while Susan had a right (east) side window and caught a great view of snow-capped peaks soaring above the low-level clouds. We got to see a lot more of Juneau airport than we planned, as someone on the incoming flight had let the tap in the bathroom overflow and pour water down below the passenger deck; this took a couple of hours to dry off and check out. Fortunately the views on the southward flight to Seattle were tremendous, as we sat on the left side (albeit above the wing - don't get row 16 again). I love seeing the mountains and valleys of coastal BC, where there is so little apparent human intervention other than a bit of logging. No matter what we do in the valleys, the peaks will always be the same. There is so much landscape there to tempt the hiker and mountain climber - if we retire to BC some day it is sure to be an active retirement!

We dropped in to Seattle - Tacoma Airport late, after 6:30, under the mighty snow cone of Mount Rainier reaching up into welcomingly blue skies. We based ourselves in Bremerton and did a spectacular day tour of the Olympic peninsula before taking the ferry back to Seattle and heading back home.

So there you go. Until next time....



**The Voyage of M/V Sikumi
July 6 – 12, 2010**