



Photo: Don Mankin

A (Very) Small Boat Cruise in SE Alaska

The Inside Passage in SE Alaska is the kind of place that inspires multiple visits. My trip this past summer, my third, was far and away the best.

The first two trips were on the Alaska Marine Ferry; the most recent was on the 85 foot long MV Windward, built in 1924 and the first charter yacht in Alaska. The yacht is an intrinsic part of the experience – cozy (only 4 cabins), lots of wood and classic design. Much more intimate than the ferry or the giant cruise ships that sail up and down the Inside Passage all summer. On this 7-day trip, I got to know everyone, including the 3-person crew.

We were also able to get into coves and bays and through channels that larger boats cannot. And the itinerary was flexible, enabling us to change course to see whales, take advantage of weather to kayak in protected waters or dodge icebergs as we cruised down narrow fjords.

On cloudy days we chugged through a silver world, passing islands covered in tall evergreens. Tufts of clouds and fingers of mist hung in the air between the hills and islands, wrapping the rolling contours of green in wispy cotton. On sunny days, we sat in shirt-sleeves on the deck soaking up the warm rays.

I got up early every morning to stand on the deck and watch eagles swoop, salmon leap, sea lions play and the sky turn colors in the emerging dawn. There was plenty of time to read, nap, contemplate, or sit on the deck at the front of the boat looking for whales spouting in the distance.

Despite the relaxed pace, there was plenty of activity. We kayaked for an hour or so most days, usually an easy paddle in a protected cove, along a beach or around an island.

We also hiked — the longest, three miles round trip, took us through an old growth rainforest to a lake.

The rough trail and the fresh bear scat made it seem even longer. The soft green forest muted the sounds we made to scare off the bears or at least not catch them by surprise. Our noisy efforts must have worked since we didn't run into any. I was both disappointed and relieved.

Another day we hiked up a hill alongside a roaring river to a natural hot spring. The trail was mostly board-walk but with enough rocks, mud and roots to make me feel as if I had earned the soak once we got there.

We saw tons of wildlife, pun intended. We spent almost two full days looking at whales, mostly humpbacks plus a few orcas. Some were in the distance but many swam alongside the boat, flipping their tails as if waving goodbye before diving deep in the water. One swam so close I got a photo of his nostril-like blowholes; another breached just a few feet off our bow, spraying me with an impressive splash as he flopped back into the water.

We also spent an afternoon at a fish hatchery watching bears scrounge for salmon in the river just 20-30 yards away. There were at least a dozen, including a big mama with four cubs and two young bears hanging out like brothers, which they apparently were. We had enough time to note personalities, relationships and even a dramatic teeth-baring exchange of snarls and growls between two bears challenging each other over a choice fishing spot in the river.

It's hard to top whales and bears but the last two days of the trip came close, cruising down Endicott Arm, a long fjord carved deep into the snow-capped mountains of the Coast Range. Our first stop was Fords Terror, a steep and narrow fjord branching off from Endicott Arm named after a naval crewman who rowed through the narrows in 1899 at high tide only to spend several scary hours trapped by the turbulent, twisting currents when the tide surged out.



Author Don Mankin (l) soaking up the good life. Photo: Don Mankin

We waited for high tide before entering the narrows. It's a breath-taking ride between sheer granite walls 2000' high with streams cascading through the seams in the rock. John Muir described this place as Yosemite with water. That only begins to describe the dramatic beauty of this place, one of the most spectacular places I have ever visited. We stopped at the end of the fjord for the night. It felt like the end of the world.

It was worth getting up early to watch the sun touch the snow-capped peaks behind the walls of rock, then creep down the sheer walls to the water. Mist hung over the stunning reflections of the walls in the water and the fragrance of evergreens filled the air. The only sound was the soft rustle of distant waterfalls.

On the way out of the fjord at high tide, we got in the kayaks to observe the waterfalls up close and paddle the last couple of miles back through the now placid narrows to our boat waiting for us on the other side.

Once aboard, we headed to Dawes Glacier, a massive tidal glacier — about 200' high and a half mile across — that carved out the fjord millions of years ago. Our captain carefully threaded his way through the many icebergs and bergy bits floating by along the way.

We sat and looked at the glacier for hours, bundled up against the cold wind, listening for the cracks of thunder that signaled the calving of chunks of ancient, deep blue ice, some as big as houses crashing into the water. That was essentially the last day of the trip. I probably won't come back this way again. It would be hard to match this trip and impossible to beat.

(Don was hosted on this trip by Wilderness Travel, www.wildernesstravel.com. For more information and photos, see his blog on his website, www.adventuretransformations.com)

Journey to
EXOTIC SOUTHEAST ASIA
with Adventure Geezer
Don Mankin

October 20 – November 1, 2019
www.Explorer-X.com/SE-Asia-2019

EXPLORER
EST. 2017 • SEATTLE, WASHINGTON