

CRUISING ON HEMINGWAY'S *PILAR*

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Ice Water Mansions



A large cruise ship is seen from the side, navigating through a narrow fjord. The walls of the fjord are composed of towering, jagged ice formations in various shades of blue and white. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is not visible. The ship is positioned in the lower left corner of the frame, moving towards the right.

ALASKA VOYAGE PROVES TO BE A FEAST FOR THE EYES

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY TONY FLEMING

The ice stretched across the fjord ahead of *Venture* in a seemingly unbroken barrier, effectively barring any further progress toward the face of the Sawyer Glacier. Being a responsible captain, Chris Conklin expressed his doubts about continuing. "Let's keep going," I responded. "After coming so far we don't want to give up until we absolutely must."

We had originally planned to wait until tomorrow before navigating the full length of Alaska's Tracy Arm but we decided to take advantage of this rare day of fine weather to change our plans and keep going. The fjord is 24 miles long with scenery so spectacular it was hard to know where to turn one's eyes. Countless waterfalls, fed by the melting snow, cascaded down the face of soaring cliffs with trees growing out of all but the steepest of them.

Increasing amounts of ice obstructed our path, including brash, which thumped the underside of the hull and was hard to see. Some pieces were sculpted into marvelous shapes resembling fish, pelicans, or swans. We passed a gaggle of kayakers in multi-coloured kayaks so far off that they were almost invisible except



Top: Cpts. Chris and Christine keep a sharp lookout for ice-floes in Endicott Arm. Above: Louisa is well muffled in the tender, with Dawes Glacier in the background.



breaking around 3 a.m.

It was raining when we awoke the following morning, which made us thankful that we had decided to penetrate Tracy Arm the previous day. Overnight, a small iceberg had become stranded on the rocks at the entrance to the cove and, when we re-crossed Tracy Arm Bar, the red, port-hand marker, which the previous day had been missing in the strong tide, had reappeared—although its survival was now being threatened by a beautiful but menacing blue iceberg.

On our way up Endicott Arm we paused to reconnoiter the approaches to Ford's Terror, which we planned to enter on the return journey. This spot earned its sinister name from a navy crewman who, in 1899, rowed into the fjord at slack water to do some duck hunting. With the turn of the tide, the calm water at the entrance became extremely turbulent with rapids, rooster tails, and whirlpools. According to the account, Ford found himself trapped in the maelstrom for six hours dodging chunks of ice. The dogleg entrance was hard to identify at low tide but enabled us to get the lay of the land and identify the hazards.

DAWES GLACIER

As we penetrated deeper up the 40-mile length of Endicott Arm, the sides of the fjord grew ever steeper until they became sheer rock walls bearing the scars of the glacier that had ground its way past them not so long ago. We encountered increasingly large quantities of ice calved from the Dawes Glacier. We kept going despite ominous thumps and bangs as the hull came into contact with the floes. Our perseverance was rewarded when the ice unexpectedly opened up and we reached open water.

The glacier face now appeared to be only a few hundred yards away but the

through binoculars.

The ice became increasingly more densely packed as we progressed through the twists and turns of the fjord, and we wondered how far we would be able to go before it blocked our progress entirely. We passed harbor seals resting on the ice floes. Some were timid and slid off into the sea early, while others just watched us warily as we approached. Bloodstains on some of the floes were evidence of a recent birth and brought home to us the responsibility of keeping clear of floes with evidence of seal activity. We reached the point where the fjord divided into separate channels leading to the north and south faces of the Sawyer Glacier.

CRUNCH TIME

These are tidewater glaciers, meaning that they extend into the sea. The ebb and flow of the water undermines the underside of the ice and huge chunks break off into the water and float away. The face of the glacier at the water's

edge was a deep blue. We launched the tender, and Louisa and I climbed aboard while Chris cautiously nudged *Venture* through the floes toward the face of the glacier until she was brought to a standstill by a floating wall of blue ice.

Using my knees to hold the wheel steady, I drove the tender while shooting video and stills. I have found this works better than trying to relay instructions to the driver. It was Louisa's job to tell me when we were about to run into something as we proceeded at slow speed through the ice, some of which was colorless and as clear as crystal. Whenever the inflatable came into contact with the floes, it squeaked like a thumb slipping over the surface of a party balloon.

After about an hour we reluctantly headed down the channel but it was hard to stop taking photos during the return journey. By the time we anchored in Tracy Arm Cove it was almost 8 p.m. but, this far north, darkness did not descend until almost 11 p.m. with dawn



radar showed it still to be 3 miles distant. Nothing remained in the way of our reaching the towering wall of ice, but discretion made us call a halt while we were still several hundred yards away. It was as well we did because large slabs of ice were calving from its blue, deeply fissured face.

Under improving weather we launched the tender, and my friend Louisa Chen and I climbed aboard, armed with cameras. Conklin ran *Venture* back and forth across the face of the glacier while I took photos and video. On one occasion, I heard a sharp boom coming from one end of the glacier and I held a video camera on that area. Increasingly, large chunks of ice started to break free followed by a large slab, which slid into the sea with a tremendous splash just as *Venture* entered the frame. Large swells resulted from this collapse but they were smooth and rounded and did not create a hazard.

It was hard to tear ourselves away from this amazing spectacle, but after an hour or so, we reluctantly turned our bows and threaded our way back out through the pack. We stopped to collect some crystal clear ice to cool our drinks.

Our reluctance to leave the glacier had put us behind schedule and it was one hour past high water slack when we reached the entrance to Ford's Terror. The out-going tide was beginning to

gather speed, but with the powerful engines we had at our disposal, we had no problem negotiating the narrow entrance. The guidebooks tend to dwell on the alarmist name and the perils of the entrance rather than what lies in store once past the narrows, so the stunning beauty of the wonderland within came as a revelation. We had

not appreciated, from reading the cruising guides, the outstanding nature of this magical place which was akin to cruising through Yosemite Valley.

To our surprise we found *Penguin*, a Nordhavn 46, whose crew we had met and come to know much earlier in the trip, already anchored at the head of the northern arm of the fjord together



Go along on
Tony's wild
dinghy ride.
Scan this QR
code, to watch
the video.



Top Left: A pair of bald eagles overlook
Aurora Harbor in Juneau.
Top Right: Harlequin Ducks take flight
one morning in Ford's Terror.
Center: *Venture* passing one of the
many waterfalls in Ford's Terror.



with their friend in a Nordic Tug. Care needs to be taken when anchoring here as depths drop off rapidly and you could find yourself aground at low tide if you have not watched the depth sounder and paid attention to the tide tables. The only sounds in this exquisitely beautiful spot were those of the nearby waterfall.

COLOR AND TEXTURE

The following morning dawned absolutely calm with filaments of cloud lingering in the still air part way up the peaks. A flock of colorful Harlequin Ducks scavenged in the outfall from the waterfall. We launched the tender and explored the fjord. We passed through rapids guarding the eastern arm of



Ford's Terror and then down to the main entrance to the fjord, which we sped through without any problem at low water slack. On the return journey, we poked our bows into a narrow cleft in the cliffs, through which cascading waterfalls tumbled over moss-clad rocks into water the color of jade. That evening we enjoyed a delightful evening aboard *Penguin* sharing drinks, conversation and tasty hors d'oeuvres.

In a boat the size of *Venture*, it is safer and more sensible to enter and leave Ford's Terror at high water slack, which occurs just twice in every 24 hours. This meant being underway at 5:30 the following morning. It was another opportunity too good to miss and I decided to go in the tender to take video and photos of *Venture* underway and passing through narrows.

I had a great run all the way down through the spectacular fjord and sped out through the narrows ahead of *Venture*, so that I could film her passing through. A beautiful chunk of floating ice added drama to the scene. Although the sky was overcast, there was no rain, which would have made photography very difficult. Just beyond the entrance, *Venture* resembled a toy against the background of a spectacular, multi-branched waterfall.

Penguin left at the same time and we both headed for Taku Harbour where there was a single sailboat tied up at the government dock when we arrived just before noon. When we left the following morning, a pair of humpback whales were bubble-feeding just outside the bay—rising up and bursting through the surface of the sea with their huge mouths agape. Unfortunately, they were too far away for decent pictures, but it was a memorable sight.

AMONG BEHEMOTHS

Just north of here we came across many sea lions lounging on the rocks in Slocum Bay before heading up Gastineau Channel leading to Juneau. We arrived at the Intermediate Dock at noon and tied up between two large cruise ships. After several days of being completely out of touch, it was a relief to be able to connect to email and the Internet. Communications all along this

Top Left: Seals haul out on ice floes in Tracy Arm to rest and calve.



Large cruise ships tower over Venture in downtown Juneau.

coast were very sparse and unreliable.

Juneau is the capital of Alaska and, like Ketchikan, the downtown area is dominated by huge cruise ships, which come and go every day. After a couple of nights moored among the behemoths, we relocated to cheaper Aurora Harbor further away from the center of town and used the savings to rent a car, which is strongly recommended if you plan to spend any time in the capital of Alaska. We took a ride up the Mount Roberts aerial tramway but the low-clinging clouds obscured the view. The last time we came here in August of 2006, it rained every day for three weeks. We were told at that time that we needed to visit Juneau before July. This time we are here in June and it is still raining!

We had a change of crew in Juneau. Christine left us and we were joined by Australians Peter and Bernie McMorrow, who had recently driven their Fleming 55 from Sydney to Perth—a journey of at least 6,000 miles across the top of Australia. Before departing Juneau we visited the Mendenhall Glacier, which,



ADVICE TO THOSE WHO FOLLOW

We started out from Vancouver Island in mid-May, which was fine. I don't think you would want to set out much before the beginning of May. We arrived in Juneau on June 10. On a previous trip we had been told by the harbormaster in Juneau that by July the summer was over—meaning tons of rain thereafter. But we had plenty of rain in June, so I don't know that it makes much difference. (The locals were all complaining, so maybe this was an atypical year).

At the other end of the season, I think you want to be under way going south by the end of September. It is more than 1,000 miles from Juneau down to Vancouver Island. September is a good month to cruise the Desolation Sound area as the summer crowds have departed, the weather is generally nice, and there are blackberries to pick!

As far as resources beyond U.S. and Canadian charts, there is a wonderful fold-out map, which covers the whole length of the Inside Passage and loaded with interesting facts and information. It's called *Alaska & Canada's Inside Passage (Cruise Tour Guide)*, available on Amazon.com.

A wonderful pair of atlases provide the origins of place names and describe historical events along the route in amazing detail. Unfortunately, it seems this publication is out of print but you can still read about it on Amazon. Type in "Evergreen Pacific: Exploring Alaska and British Columbia," which covers Skagway to Barkley Sound. A companion atlas is called *Puget Sound and British Columbia*. Stephen E. Hilson is the author of both.

Another useful book is *Inside Passage Activity Guide* by Nancy Thalia Reynolds, which is also available on Amazon. Exploring Alaska and British Columbia by Stephen E. Hilson has 3,000 indexed locations, many of which are illustrated by aerial photos. The book is available from Fine Edge Nautical Publishing (www.fineedge.com).

I can think of no piece of equipment that is specifically essential to our Alaska cruise. Having said that, you must be prepared to anchor in deep water. Therefore, you need a good anchor, plenty of chain, and a good windlass to pull it all up. I don't believe it is essential to have a watermaker but it is convenient. You will certainly get better-tasting water.

Keep in mind that once you're away from towns provisioning becomes a bit more challenging. Even in the populated areas supermarkets may only receive new stock about once per week, when the supply barge arrives. Most of the small, mom-and-pop, seasonal marinas have their own small stores stocked with the basics.—Tony Fleming

despite being a major tourist attraction, retained its grandeur and ability to impress. Arctic Terns, nesting in the area, flitted about our heads. These birds migrate every year from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back—a round trip of about 44,300 miles!

From Juneau we continued on to Glacier Bay, for which you need a permit before entering the park. You cannot reserve your spot more than six weeks ahead of the intended date of your visit but, to ensure your preferred dates, it is best to make your reservation as soon as possible after that. En route we stopped at Gustavus from where we took a breathtaking charter flight over Glacier Bay before piloting *Venture* into its icy waters.

We spent three days cruising within the bay itself—reaching our maximum northing just shy of 60 degrees in the waters off Margerie Glacier. We were favored with wonderful weather. From here we turned our bows south and made our way back to Vancouver by way of Sitka and the "outside" Inside Passage. But that is another story! 

