

## Small ship a must for glacier gazing on Alaska's Prince William Sound

Spud Hilton, Chronicle Staff Writer, Sunday, February 3, 2008

04:00 PST Prince William Sound, Alaska -- The first five objects to strike the hull were, in order, a case of beer, a row boat, a TV set, a refrigerator and a 1957 Chevy (cherry red with whitewalls).

Then a condo duplex.

At least that's how it sounded inside my cabin on the Bargain Basement Deck of the Spirit of Columbia, where at 6:30 a.m. my head lay inches from a steel hull being battered mercilessly by prehistoric blue ice.

Did this captain even see "Titanic"?

Each crunching thud rang the cabin like an oversized gong. The mallets in this case, however, were pieces of what I had come to Alaska's Prince William Sound to find - the massive mountain-leveling glaciers, crenelated rivers of frozen snow that sculpted almost everything in the state. Although judging from the increasing attention to rising global temperatures - and from what was ramming my cabin wall - I hoped there was still some left standing.

The goal: Experience Alaska and its jewel-like glaciers up close (although in hindsight, maybe not this close), instead of just viewing them through binoculars. I booked a four-night voyage on Cruise West's 79-passenger Spirit of Columbia because, it turns out, a small ship isn't just the most reliable way to get close to the ice and the wildlife - it's just about the only way. Faced with a chance to see a dozen or so of Alaska's celebrated icons, and taking advantage of rare single-passenger rates, I set out to experience them - before they disappear like party ice in a picnic cooler.

Glaciers are like the world's slowest lemming stampede: All the pressure is from behind, and by the time the guys in front figure out where everyone is going, they're over the edge.

The result - instead of a lot of rodent squeals - is a thunderous cataclysm, starting with distant crackling and bone-jarring snaps, and ending with the kind of sub-atomic detonation you'd expect when a slab the size of a Hilton Garden Inn hits the peaceful fjord.

Alaska's best-known tidewater glaciers (the ones that shed icebergs in a process known as calving) are in Glacier Bay, the convenient (and busy) 7-Eleven of glacial dexterity and requisite big-ship cruise stop on the state's droopy southeastern tail. The mother lode, however, is around Prince William Sound, a wonderland of jagged peaks and snaking flows of super-compressed snow, many of which terminate violently into a sheltered, Medusa-like sea three times the size of San Francisco Bay.

The surrounding Chugash Mountains had been part of a plateau 20 million years ago, until pushing from underneath - and glacial carving from above - left a highly sculpted landscape of misty coves, steep-walled fjords and hedgehog-like isles with forest that seems to sprout directly from the sea.

Just so we're clear: For whatever reason - internal-combustion engines, Mother Nature's bio-rhythms or (my favorite) cattle flatulence - the majority of Alaska's tidewater glaciers are retreating. They are melting, evaporating and calving faster than they accumulate new snow, which makes them appear to lose ground, some at a pace so fast that there aren't sailing charts yet of newly vacated fjords. Columbia Glacier alone has dropped back almost 10 miles since 1980, and has, at times, calved off 2 cubic miles of frozen chunks a year into the Sound, enough to cover all of San Francisco in a layer of cocktail ice 215 feet deep.

All of which is why I came to be at College Fjord in South Central Alaska, standing on the observation deck with my 78 fellow passengers, waiting for the Harvard Glacier to lose another lemming.

Capt. Laura Tritch (informally, Capt. Laura) edged the ship through the debris left by past calving, keeping us within a few city blocks of the 250-foot cliff that filled 1 1/2 miles of our horizon. But not too close: Beyond the obvious dangers of falling icebergs and subsequent monster waves, there are the little-discussed underwater calvings, when pieces break off the submerged face and pop up from underneath like a Champagne cork.

Harvard Glacier sits at the end of College Fjord, a 22-mile-long finger whose steep banks are a Swiss cheese of glaciers with Ivy League names - Vassar, Yale, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, Dartmouth - all doled out by the Harriman Alaska Expedition in 1899. (Legend has it that expedition members took great pleasure in excluding Princeton.)

With four days of spotting glaciers - Blackstone, Chenega, Beloit, Sheridan and a resume full of college names - there was the potential for falling-ice overload, to become numb, not just in the winter-like weather, but to the glaciers themselves. Like Europe's cathedrals or India's temples, however, each was striking or heart-wrenchingly beautiful for different reasons: a particular blue hue, improbable overhangs, perplexing striations from rock that was turned to talc by time and a painfully slow tide.

We continued to hover near Harvard's face and I tried to gauge the crowd's interest based on shutter clicks per minute from the armory of digital cameras: general scenery (five clicks); each other (11 clicks); harbor seals eyeing us from their icy rafts (26 clicks); the crash of the glacier calving (4,876 clicks). I considered for a moment that this is one of the few places (outside Las Vegas) where it's socially acceptable to celebrate the collapse of historic structures, all older than any Mayan ruins. It seemed a little like cheering for the toppling of Stonehenge.

As if on cue, a piece bigger than the ship toppled from the right side, seemingly in slow motion, prompting a collective gasp, 4,876 shutter clicks and a warning from Capt. Laura to hold on or, I assumed, some of us might do a little calving of our own.

While much of the scenery appears prehistoric, Prince William Sound is, by comparison, a wild rave party of change, geologically, ecologically and geographically. Not only are the glaciers running for higher ground, some of the ground has run for higher ground.

The Good Friday earthquake of 1964, centered near College Fjord and calculated as 9.2 on the Richter Scale (the strongest ever in North America), lifted portions of Prince William Sound as much as 36 feet, and dropped others as much as 8 feet. The subsequent tsunami wiped out the town of Valdez and Cordova's waterfront.

Sadly, what made Prince William Sound a household name wasn't Mother Nature's wrath, but seafaring incompetence and a tragically inept reaction time. When the oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in 1989, the ship bled 10.9 million gallons of Alaskan crude into the pristine fishing grounds and wildlife habitats of the sound and beyond. Response to the emergency had to be measured in days instead of hours.

I had been eager (and a little anxious) to see what had healed in the 18 years since - and what hadn't.

Having crossed the sound during the night, we spent the day "gunkholing" (a crew term for "let's see what's around the next corner"), weaving through the twisty maze of inlets and passages of Knight, Bainbridge and Evans islands. Making the most of a flexible schedule, Capt. Laura steered us into a remote cove to watch six black bears lazily gorging on salmon, tried to keep pace with a pod of maniacal Dall's porpoises, and spent an hour playing Marco Polo with a humpback whale. Almost everything around us had been part of the Exxon Valdez spill zone.

Megan, the ship's Exploration Leader (also, apparently, the cruise director, narrator and staff photographer) gave an evening lecture on the 1989 tragedy, covering the details but steering clear of conclusions. I couldn't help but wonder how you understand a loss that you can't see. The visible oil slick was gone, but chemicals remain in the soil of hundreds of islands. Fish and water mammals are there, but millions didn't survive and entire species may never return to these waters.

During a trip already rife with interwoven topics, a passing comment in Megan's lecture caught my attention. The reason the Exxon Valdez crew shifted out of its assigned shipping channel? To avoid icebergs that, it turns out, broke off of the Columbia Glacier.

Maybe it's the close quarters and absence of a casino - or the zillions of trees and lumbering bears - but our cruise didn't seem so much a luxury vacation as a summer camp.

The passengers on our voyage - a relatively diverse band of mostly 40-and-up-somethings, all seeking some cocktail of scenery, wildlife, education and relaxation - were friendly and proved hearty enough to brave steady Alaskan rains to catch a glimpse of sea otters, waterfalls, harbor seals and bald eagle chicks.

I half expected the words "global warming" to be the 800-pound gorilla on deck, but they were spoken infrequently and without rancor. These people didn't seem to be looking to debate (red state, blue state, greenhouse) so much as witness intensely moving natural wonders before they disappear - whatever the reason.

The summer camp vibe was fostered in part by a captain who was as personable and relaxed as big-ship captains typically are stodgy and removed from passengers beyond posing for photos. Capt. Laura passed out cookies during one evening's lecture, gave highly entertaining bridge tours (not easy to do when the bridge is the size of large office cubicle), and hung around with a small group of us late one night as we watched a bear cub taking a swim - during which we discussed the aromas of tequila.

The exception to the summer camp vibe: A chef and kitchen staff, including a full-time baker, who might well merit a Michelin star or two on land. Serious foodies at my table one night confirmed that it wasn't summer camp cuisine.

The only stop on an otherwise perpetually mobile itinerary was at the tiny fishing village of Cordova, one of only three towns on Prince William Sound (along with Valdez and Whittier). Inaccessible by large cruise ship and with no connecting roads, Cordova remains a rustic working community that quietly endures the meager tourism from the infrequent ferries and the occasional small cruise ship such as ours.

Shops are more likely to stock peanut butter and toilet paper than the ulus (knives), sweatshirts and "I (heart) Alaska" snow globes that fill shelves in Juneau and Skagway; and an "authentic" experience is easy to find because every restaurant is "where the locals eat." In less than an hour, I found the best breakfast in town, the best beer, the date of the annual Cordova Fungus Festival and California Dreamin', a closet-sized business behind the supermarket that may be the only honor-system tanning booth in the state.

Seeking a vessel that would further close the gap between me and the pristine Alaskan coastline, I signed up to paddle up Orca Inlet with a small group from the boat. I shared the two-person sea kayak with Joan, a fellow passenger whose husband had opted instead for fly fishing, but who seemed to share my goal of finding untouched Alaska.

After a few moments of synching our paddle technique (or in my case, the lack of it), we breezed along a shore that, once we left Cordova and the defunct fisheries behind, looked as pristine and unexplored as anything Capt. George Vancouver encountered while searching for the Northern Passage. At times, we would pull ahead or drop behind the pack of six other kayaks, mostly to filter out the collective splash of paddles and to, on cue, stop paddling and glide in total silence. It was during those dead-stick moments that I began to hear Alaska - dozens of burbling waterfalls

(some visible, some cloaked in a dense wall of spruce, alder and western hemlock), as well as birdsong, light breezes and the "splash-plunk" of pink salmon breaching 2 to 3 feet in the air (our guides attributed the bizarre gymnastics to fish being "really happy").

In this place, I could relate.

Three miles up the inlet, we spotted a bald eagle 20 feet up a spruce and glided toward it, lifting our paddles in time to see it take off on a course directly overhead. The clearly audible "whoomph, whoomph" of its massive wings, like the sound of a helicopter played at one-tenth the speed, stunned us both. And for a moment, I swore that I felt its breeze.

I tried to imagine this experience from a larger ship, but knew deep down that the eagle would have been long gone, driven off by cheesy steel-drum music and announcements for 2-for-1 bingo in the Spinnaker Lounge.

About 6 miles up the inlet, we beached the kayaks on a sliver of gravel - the only spot possible on this craggy coast - dug out the salmon-based snacks and hiked a short distance to a postcard-worthy waterfall that, anywhere else, would require parking lots for the buses loaded with tourists. But at that moment it was just our little group and the crash of icy runoff flowing over a sheer rock cliff.

We wandered back to the beach through forest so thick it had a whole other kind of forest growing in its shadow. I fell behind and, while climbing over moss-cushioned logs, almost walked through droppings from an animal I assumed was much larger than any of my trip mates - which shifted my thoughts from peaceful waterfalls to the likelihood of being swatted, gored or generally gnawed on and becoming another layer of the mossy forest floor.

I considered that it's possible to be too close to Alaska, and I hustled to catch up.

Most bodies of water age in geologic time, with birthdays that have a lot of zeros, but our ship was bobbing in a bay that could be measured in presidential elections. When Reagan was sworn in our position in Columbia Bay was under 1,000 feet of ice. By the time Clinton took office, 7 miles of the glacier was gone. Glaciologists call it "catastrophic retreat."

Even the spot where the glacier loomed even a few years ago now is a barrier island of calved icebergs stuck on a moraine shelf, the tortured ruins of a once-mighty ice castle. If a glacier is a living thing, these were the bleached bones of parts Columbia left behind as it fled into seclusion.

We couldn't get to (or even see) the glacier itself - that's reserved for adventurous kayakers now - but the field of immobile icebergs was a welcome substitute, if only because we were able to get close.

Capt. Laura eased the ship to the edge of the moraine and touched the nose to one of the stranded bergs. I inhaled the smell of ice and felt the cold radiating off its eerie, milky blue skin.

Passengers and crew on the Spirit of Columbia stood in silence for a moment or two, then started taking photos, at first of the field of upended blocks and pyramids, then of each other, posing with the ice that had taken on a bizarre kind of celebrity status.

After most of the light leached out of the pearly gray sky, we turned away from the glacier we could not reach and sailed out a bay that had not existed, but that was thick with reminders, ice chunks the size of TVs and refrigerators and cars.

Making a not-so-catastrophic retreat to my water-level cabin, I decided that if I couldn't see the glacier, at least I could hear it.

For now, anyway.