



Mention cruising in Alaska and superlatives flow: unparalleled scenery of high, snow-capped mountains, massive glaciers, wide vistas, extensive spruce and hemlock forests. Waters where whales, dolphins, sea otters and bird life abound; where black bear and the world's great brown bear (grizzly) comb the shores and rivers; where numerous towns, small settlements and Native communities, all tied to the sea, offer their own divergent cultures.

Or, on the other hand, mention Alaska to some boaters and anxiety and fears well up. Remote wilderness waters with strong currents and high tides, changeable weather patterns and a rugged coast with more than 1,000 islands and countless islets, rocks and reefs, many of which are poorly charted.

Each summer season, Southeast Alaska (known locally as Southeast) sees increasing numbers of cruising vessels, from trawlers and sailboats of all sizes to mega-yachts. Some small-boat owners trailer their boat on the B.C. or Alaska ferries, putting in at Prince Rupert or Ketchikan. Others under-

take a round trip of the Inside Passage's 1,000-mile length—a trip that requires good preparation, self-reliance and, above all, vigilance at the helm.

Still others who lack the time but have the means can load their boat on Dockwise in Vancouver and have it delivered to Ketchikan. (Dockwise launched this new service to Ketchikan in May 2005. For information see www.yacht-transport.com or phone 604-924-1830).

FACING THE FEAR What is it that draws more and more boaters northward, yet discourages others? Certainly the

advances in navigational electronics and safety gear have increased the ability to venture farther and farther from “civilization” and, as urban life expands, the need to “escape” envelops a lot of us. But what in particular inspires some boaters to cross that “fearful” Dixon Entrance when British Columbia has so many miles of magnificent cruising grounds? Are Americans more adventurous and inclined to like anchoring out, compared to Canadians who—as one Vancouver boater ventured—“like their marinas”? Or is it fear of the unknowns that lie beyond Prince Rupert?



Mendenhall Glacier is one of Juneau's main attractions.

I suggest that it's not so much the unknowns of the northern frontier beyond Prince Rupert or a lack of creature comforts that holds back many boaters, but a lack of confidence that can be easily overcome by a healthy dose of preparation, gleaned tips from seasoned cruising friends, attending Inside Passage seminars and studying the most credible guidebooks. And by advancing one season at a time, cruising perhaps from the Gulf Islands to Desolation Sound, then north to the Broughtons, and finally making that leap across Queen Charlotte Sound and northward through B.C.'s north coast, the Grenville Channel "pipeline" and across Dixon Entrance. In this manner, adventure replaces fear and confidence takes hold.

CROSSING THE BORDER Looking back on my own experience, the first time my husband Don coaxed me to Alaska I remember feeling intimidated. "Take me back to B.C.!" I wanted to shout. "Alaska's too wide, too big. It's not intimate like B.C." That was about two decades ago, and despite the fact that my love

for the north coast never diminishes, my desire to return annually to Alaska remains. I like the open spaces, the dramatic scenery of glacier-cut peaks, the cooler summer temperatures, the camaraderie of other boaters who like to explore wilderness areas, the lack of traffic and VHF chatter, yet the ability to visit a town when I want to.

In an effort to understand what draws others, I interviewed individuals and couples who made the voyage up the Inside Passage to Alaska in the summer of 2005—Canadians, some of whom were undertaking their first trip and others who've cruised Alaskan waters for years, as well as boaters from the U.K., Sweden, Australia, South Africa and the far corners of the U.S.—combining their comments and feelings with my years of exploring both B.C. and Alaskan waters with Don.

What do these boaters like most about Alaska? What differences do they find after crossing the border? What fears or anxieties have they overcome in "crossing the border?" What, in their opinion, discourages others from leaving the land of docks and marinas? I found that we all share similar interests and feelings, the

love of spectacular scenery and remote wilderness cruising, and an appreciation for Southeast's towns and villages.

"Where else can you anchor in view of glacier-covered peaks with no other boats around?" exclaimed Maple Bay residents Dave and Evie Frisby of *MV Ene-tai*. "There's no other place like Alaska!" (The Frisbys were frequent companion boaters when Don and I explored the Gulf of Alaska's Prince William Sound and Kenai Peninsula.)

Retired commercial pilot Bob Mutter, who's been cruising B.C. waters for more than 20 years, has single-handed his sailboat *Callisto* to Alaska for the past five years, and in 2004 he went all the way to the Gulf of Alaska. As a Canadian, what inspires him to come to Alaska?

"There's more of everything—more glaciers, more wilderness, more wildlife, more whales and porpoises, and outstanding fishing. Things we used to have in B.C. Besides, I like the remoteness of these waters and having to be self-reliant."

North Coast scenery—such as that in Roscoe Inlet, Cousins Inlet, Dean Channel and Gardner Canal—decidedly rivals some areas in Southeast, but you won't

see tidewater glaciers spilling into the saltwater. You may be able to take a dip in some North Coast waters, but cross the border and you have to be a polar swimmer or scout out some of Southeast's warm springs.

Highest on the list for a cruise to Southeast Alaska is undoubtedly world-renowned Glacier Bay National Park, where even a 10-day permit doesn't allow enough time to explore every bay and inlet. Other choices include Anan Creek Wildlife Observatory, south of Wrangell; Misty Fiords National Wilderness in Behm Canal; Tracy Arm, south of Juneau; Lynn Canal, the longest fiord in

White Sulphur Springs on Chichagof's west coast is one of four popular hot springs along the outer route of the Inside Passage.



A typical scene in small Alaskan villages.



Southeast; and Sitka. Boaters who return again and again usually set a route to lesser-known places, and many become inveterate explorers on their own. In 2004 and 2005, Don and I were delighted to see more pleasure craft exploring the outer coasts of Yakobi, Chichagof and Baranof islands. Among the flags represented were those of Germany, France, Canada, Britain and the U.S. Clearly this indicates confidence and a wish to explore!

"First timer" Kathy Wilson lives on Oregon's dry eastern slope. When she and her husband Bill visited Glacier Bay on their vessel *Seagar*, they anchored off the snout of Reid Glacier, one of the more accessible glaciers in the park. Her eyes lit up as she described their experience "sleeping with a glacier."

For some pleasure boaters, the scenery and intimacy of Tracy Arm, south of Juneau, surpasses that of Glacier Bay. Flanked by 5,000-foot glacier-polished peaks whose bowls and U-shaped valleys hold snowfields and glaciers that generate magnificent waterfalls, the 25-mile long fiord terminates at North and South Sawyer glaciers. Its deep, turquoise waters sustain a population of harbour seals that pup on the bergs off the glaciers' snouts. Unfortunately, cruise ships are now entering the fiord, and a permit system is sure to be imposed in the near future.

For some pleasure craft, Southeast's

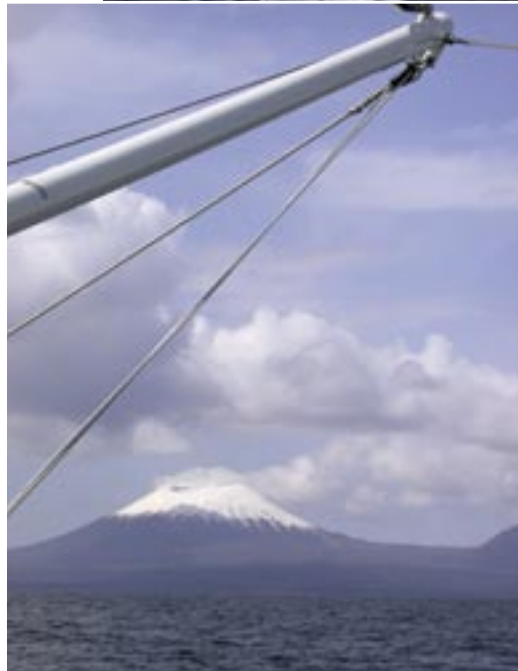
towns rank high, too. Englishman Dick Drinkrow of the sailboat *Tairua* loves the “tremendous mixture of touches of civilization and vast stretches of wilderness” that he finds along the Inside Passage. (Dick has moored his vessel in Point Roberts for the past three years so that he and his wife can spend their summers exploring the Inside Passage.) From south to north and west, the major supply centres of Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Juneau, Haines, Skagway and Sitka provide these touches.

KETCHIKAN (population 18,000), which as the Customs clearance port calls itself Southeast’s “First City,” once supported a thriving lumber industry. With the closure of the mills, the city turned to tourism and now plays host to innumerable cruise ships, which has greatly changed its frontier character. The boardwalk shops along Creek Street, which housed one of the biggest red-light districts west of the Mississippi when Don lived there as a teenager, is now filled with boutiques. The Interpretive Center close to Creek Street, the Totem Heritage Center and Saxman Park at the south end of the city are all busy tourist attractions. However, crowds that alight from cruise ships, the traffic of tenders, and the noise of hourly floatplanes in Tongass Narrows have begun to encourage pleasure craft to continue northward after they’ve cleared Customs.

MISTY FJORDS National Wilderness Area, within easy reach, gives even seasoned Alaskans a complete contrast to the stress of a Ketchikan summer. The first time Don and I visited Misty Fjords years ago we had the area entirely to ourselves, and it hasn’t changed much. Friends from Ketchikan spent a three-day weekend in the area’s spectacular Rudyard Bay in July and were able to anchor alone every night. The polished granite domes and waterfalls that plunge from perpendicular walls were theirs to view without another vessel. “We’ve visited Misty Fjords many times,” they told us, “but we never tire of taking our boat there.”



Ketchikan, the Southeast’s “first” city, plays host to numerous cruise ships that shadow the downtown floats.



Mt. Edgecumbe, northwest of Sitka, is one of Southeast Alaska’s icons.

WRANGELL (pop. about 2,000), just south of the mighty Stikine River that takes its source in B.C.’s Rockies 400 miles to the northeast, has, to date, rejected the large cruise ships, retaining its “old Alaska” character and welcoming attitude toward visitors. A new harbour has recently been completed, making it easier to find moorage without having to raft to other vessels (as in the past). The new Nolan Museum and Visitor Center, Chief Shakes House, Petroglyph Beach, picnicking and hiking areas, as well as its proximity to Anan Creek Wildlife Observatory are the lure here. Golfers needing

a “fix” can find nine holes at the beautiful new Muskeg Meadows Golf Course. All boaters queried rated Wrangell as a favourite stop, especially for its Fourth of July celebration.

PETERSBURG (pop. 3,000), which looks out on Frederick Sound and across to Le Conte Glacier, traces its heritage to Norwegian fishermen, and its annual Little Norway Festival, held in May, draws many pleasure craft. Renowned for its shrimp and halibut, the town has the busiest fishing fleet in Southeast. Although harbour authorities do a masterful job of “hot berthing” pleasure craft, the docks are essentially geared for fishing vessels, causing one boater to comment, “It’s hard to find a clean head in Alaska!” The town’s streets and houses, however, are clean, neat and brightly painted, many with Scandinavian designs.

JUNEAU (pop. 30,000), Alaska’s capital, is the most urbanized of Southeast’s towns. If it weren’t for the snow-capped mountains that border each side of Gastineau Channel and Mendenhall Glacier on the north side of the city, when you’re inside Costco with its acres of shopping, you could imagine yourself in any North American city. Although cruise ships fill the city docks to overflowing, pleasure craft can usually find space in the newly



Auke Bay Harbor, on Juneau's north side, is the most popular harbour for transients.

appointed Harris Basin, Aurora Harbor or, for more quiet moorage, across the bridge in Douglas—a bus or taxi ride to the city centre. Auke Bay, north of the city, is the favoured transient facility. It, too, requires bus, taxi or rental car.

Mendenhall Glacier is Juneau's main attraction. The Visitors' Center across from the calving glacier gives information about its history and its now-retreating snout, as well as details about the shallow and rebounding Gastineau Channel, which separates Juneau and Douglas Island. Aside from the usual boutiques, souvenir shops and jewellery stores, Juneau is attuned to the outdoors, and there are numerous hiking and biking trails in the area.

SKAGWAY North of Auke Bay, Lynn Canal—one of the deepest fiords in continental North America—stretches some 66 miles to Skagway. Some boaters prefer to take the fast ferry to Skagway or Haines, avoiding a long slog where there are few good anchor sites and the wind



Sitka's New Thomsen Harbor provides the only moorage for transient vessels.

is often on the nose. The two towns are the only Southeast Alaska communities serviced by road to the North American continent.

Skagway's attraction, of course, is its historical Chilkoot Trail that led to the Canadian Klondike gold fields. The town's 800-resident population swells considerably in summer as cruise ships disgorge nearly a

half-million passengers.

You don't come to Southeast for its cuisine. Only a handful (if that!) of the region's restaurants can be considered gourmet. Kathy Wilson, however, found the Stow-Away Café in Skagway "the best of the entire Inside Passage." She also discovered that by walking just a few blocks north of the town's centre—preserved as the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park—she could leave



Orthodox church spires are a symbol of Sitka's Russian heritage.

the crowds behind and gain a sense of the "real" Skagway.

HAINES (southwest of Skagway), with a slightly larger year-round population than Skagway, is billed as the bald eagle capital of Alaska. From October to February, more than 3,000 bald eagles make their home in the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, 20 miles east of Haines. The community has also become one of Southeast's leading artist communities.

SITKA, on Baranof Island's west coast, is considered by many to be the "jewel" of Southeast Alaska. The small city (pop. 9,000) is tucked along a curving strip of land at the foot of mountains whose 4,000-foot peaks hold snowfields that gleam throughout the year. Across from the city on Kruzof Island is one of Southeast Alas-



In Craig Harbor, be prepared to share moorage when the seiners are in.

ka's trademarks—snow-covered Mt. Edgecumbe (3,201 feet), a dormant volcano.

Small islands and islets protect Sitka Sound from the full force of the Pacific, giving the city a gentler aspect than its

Inside Passage cousins. Sitka's Tlingit background and history as Alaska's Russian capital are an integral part of its culture. For visitors, among just a few attractions are the Sheldon Jackson Museum that houses exquisite Tlingit, Aleut and Eskimo artifacts, as well as the Raptor Center, Totem Park and, offshore, the St. Lazaria Islands Bird Reserve.

PELICAN In recent years, small out-of-the-way communities have drawn more cruising boats. Facilities vary from good to rough, depending on the community's economy, but even the smallest have jumped on the tourism bandwagon and are doing their best to clean up for visitors. What they offer is a nice contrast to the cities—remoteness, friendliness, beauty and quiet. Gone are the communities of pot-smoking, drug-ridden docks of the '70s where "outsiders" were unwelcome.

Take, for example, the small boardwalk community of Pelican on Chichagof Island's Lisianski Inlet. Once a thriving fishing community, Pelican has become almost a "destination" for cruising boats. In 2004, the harbour had to turn away boats during its Fourth of

July celebration. But in the summer of 2005, the old docks and electrical outlets were upgraded and additional new docks set in place, allowing room for both pleasure and fishing vessels. Bob Mutter, himself a yearly visitor to Pelican, said, "Tell readers they won't



The boardwalk community in Pelican, Chichagof Island.

like it up here, except when they find out they can get lattes in Pelican.”

LITTLE ELFIN COVE, on the south side of Cross Sound, Hoonah across from Glacier Bay, Tenakee Springs and Baranof’s Warm Springs Bay are also popular. And more pleasure craft are going beyond the most travelled routes. Both the west and east coasts of Prince of Wales Island are receiving more pleasure craft, and even The Gallery in the boardwalk village of Meyers Chuck, on the mainland across from

Thorne Bay (see sidebar), has developed quite a reputation for its regional handcrafts and basketry.

THE NORTH COAST, where settlements are less populated than those in Southeast, offers fewer possibilities for extensive provisioning, fuelling and repairs (other than Shearwater) until Prince Rupert. Perhaps boaters are discouraged from crossing Dixon Entrance because of fear of natural forces. Tides that increase with higher latitudes—spring tides of up to 17 feet, with tidal current velocity of four to six knots, for example—are not uncommon. There’s also the less pre-

dictable weather and the challenge of anchoring in greater depths in many coves and bottoms covered with silt and rock near glaciers.

Some of the man-made differences are simply annoying. Fewer nav-aids and lighthouses (none are staffed in Alaska), NOAA charts that don’t quite match the quality of Canadian charts (the latter tend to be more up-to-date), less accurate weather reporting (just two data buoys in Southeast), spotty VHF coverage in certain areas and, according to many boaters, a U.S. Coast Guard more concerned with Homeland Security than with small craft.

“Forget fast help in Alaska!” exclaimed one U.S. boater. And Don and I have always said that if our boat *Baidarka* ever has a major problem, we hope we’re in B.C., not Alaska. The Canadian Coast Guard, staffed by career professionals whose voices we recognize year after year, are, in our opinion, the finest anywhere we have found in 160,000 miles of cruising, and everyone I interviewed made similar comments.

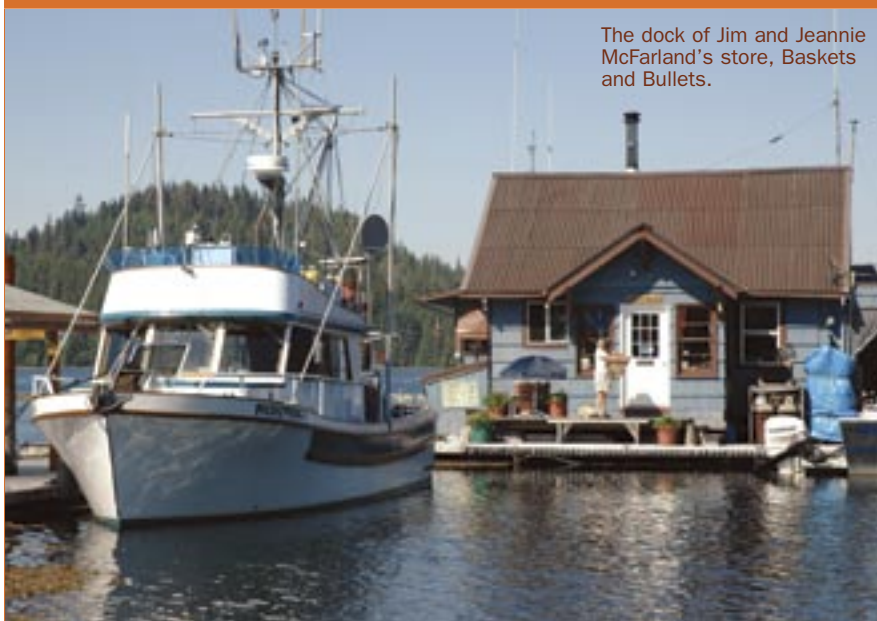
Coast Guard Juneau may have other things on its mind than pleasure craft, but the tight-knit communities of fishermen, residents of boardwalk settlements and other boaters are unusually responsive to the problems of small craft, meaning help is never too far away via the local Channel 16.

So what is it that prevents boaters who sigh and say they’d love to go to Alaska but would never have the nerve to cross Queen Charlotte Sound, much less Dixon Entrance? Muttter offers a reason: “There’s an invisible line just north of Campbell River and Seymour Narrows, where stories persist of the dangers, and the fear that, beyond Port McNeill, there’s nothing.”

I asked Carole Cederberg if she was anxious the first time she crossed Queen Charlotte Sound. “Anxious? No. It didn’t bother me. The roughest water we’ve encountered has been from Victoria to Blaine.”

Carl and Carole logged over 3,000 miles to Alaska in both 2004 and 2005. Although they dock half of the time, they prefer anchoring and often travel with their Vancouver friends Jack and Roberta Carthy on *Five Cs II*.

ALASKA'S BASKETS AND BULLETS



The dock of Jim and Jeannie McFarland's store, Baskets and Bullets.

In the south arm off Thorne Bay, Alaska, boaters will find a floating sporting goods store called Baskets and Bullets at McFarland's Floatel. Here you can purchase fishing and hunting licences, and you'll find bullets, fishing gear, and prawn and crab traps interspersed with basketry supplies and beautifully crafted local baskets.

Jim and Jeannie McFarland own the establishment and have five fully equipped log cabins and a conference centre on shore. The well-kept cabins, served by the "Red Crew" (the staff all wear red T-shirts), are connected to the floatel by boardwalks and floats. Guests use the cabins as a base for fishing, hunting, conferences or, in our case, a basketry course taught by Jeannie along with well-known Haida weaver Dolores Churchill.

My wife Noreen and I took the basketry course in June 2004. Included in the 10-day course was a section on pine needle basketry, followed by collecting expeditions for spruce roots and cedar bark, guidance on preparation of materials, and weaving techniques. The timing of the basketry course is set around June, to coincide with the optimal harvest of spruce root and cedar bark, before the sap starts flowing. For this reason, future courses are likely to be held at about the same time.

This year's course participants ranged from novices to professional basket makers and basketry teachers from as far afield as Nantucket, Rhode Island. It was a special opportunity to learn the traditional ways of harvesting, preparing and weaving cedar bark and spruce roots from experienced native artisans. If you're looking for simple handicrafts that can be done on board and that will suit the local coastal environment, consider making Baskets and Bullets a destination.

Thorne Bay is about 36 miles northwest of Ketchikan, on the east side of Prince of Wales Island. The community is serviced by floatplane from Ketchikan or it can be reached by road from Hollis, where the ferry from Ketchikan connects to Prince of Wales Island. For more info, phone 1-888-828-3335 or visit www.mcfarlandsfloatel.com.

—David Hoar

The store carries hand-woven baskets created by Jeannie and well-known Haida weaver Dolores Churchill, both of whom also teach basket-making courses.



"There are miles and miles when we don't see another boat, so it's nice to travel with a companion boat," Carl says. But afraid, no. "There's no reason," Carole said. "If you pay attention, study your charts, know the tides and currents, and wait for the proper weather, there's nothing to be afraid of."

Small-boat owners Jacques Gagnon and Nicole Larochelle of Québec are a good example of boaters who came well prepared to Alaska. They trailered their 25-foot outboard sailboat *Puce* cross-country, put in at Boundary Bay and motor-sailed all the way north to Juneau and back to Prince Rupert in just seven weeks. As freshwater sailors, this was a new adventure for them—one that didn't worry them in the least. And the highlights of their trip? "The fishing towns Petersburg and Sitka, the scenery in Lynn Canal, the glaciers in Tracy Arm and, down south, the Broughtons."

Bear in mind you won't find pleasure-craft marinas in Alaska (Prince Rupert YC is the only marina north of Shearwater). There won't be any harbour personnel to help you dock or grab your lines and you'll share your moorage with commercial fishing boats as well as megayachts that may have to run their gensets 24 hours a day. But the myriad advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

So is Alaska for you? Do you like wilderness waters where you can anchor without having to worry about other boats, where you have a view of magnificent snow-capped mountains and glaciers, where you can get your fix of "civilization" when you need it? You just might surprise yourself and, like the boaters who've been there, catch the fever. As they said, "It's like nowhere else in the world."

Réanne Hemingway-Douglass and her husband Don Douglass have authored six nautical guidebooks in the Exploring series that cover the areas from San Diego to Glacier Bay, including *Exploring Southeast Alaska: Dixon Entrance to Skagway*, published by FineEdge.com. The Douglasses also host an *Inside Passage* seminar every March. For information, check their website www.OutsidePassageNews.com. ●