

## GOING PLACES #1

JACQUELINE UNSWORTH



# THE ICY INSIDE PASSAGE



I'm floating in a sea of freezing turquoise water. Giant icebergs drift slowly past, some so close I feel I could touch them. A sunbathing otter does backstroke for my camera, flapping its tiny paws. A bald eagle stares at me from its perch on a chunk of melting ice. And all around, in every direction, the sheer basalt cliffs and snow-topped mountains keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger ...

I'm doing an Alaskan cruise, standing on the sun-baked deck in my shorts and t-shirt. And I've never in my life felt so utterly, totally overwhelmed. Our ship, which looked huge when we first walked up the gangplank, is now completely dwarfed by its surroundings. And I can't help thinking, "Oh my gosh!"

Our adventure started three days ago on the waterfront in Vancouver, as we watched float-planes take off and land and cruise ships come and go. I've always been a nature girl, and Alaska's always been my dream. As our ship tied up at the terminal, we were itching to get on board.

We unpacked in our cabin, did some exploring, then went out on deck for the sail-away party. With a sharp blast on its horn, the ship started moving.



Our destination was the famous Inside Passage – 1000 miles of waterway that winds northward up the Alaskan coast between 3000 islands. Curiously, the further north we went the lighter it got – and at 10 o'clock that night we could still see. The channel was calm, protected I guess by the islands that were everywhere, and it felt like we were sailing through big lakes.



We were up on deck at first light the next day, and I remember feeling totally insignificant. Huge cliffs and towering peaks surrounded us, and I felt like a speck in the universe.

We saw float planes, ferries, other cruise ships and the occasional fishing village: little weatherboard houses clinging to the shore ... mostly men and fishing boats, it seemed (didn't spot many women).

At one stage, cruising through the narrowest point of the Inside Passage, the ship slowed right down, and it seemed like we could just about reach out either side and touch the rocks! Then more open expanses, more narrow passages, more cliffs and forests and mountains.

And each day it got better because each day it got bigger.

I spent a lot of time leaning on the deck-rail looking for wildlife. It was part of my big dream – what I'd come to Alaska to see. Especially bears and whales. But I wasn't having much luck.

We saw plenty of bald eagles (some-



PHOTO: S. RIPPEL (GREYSTONE.COM)

where en route we sailed close to a huge breeding ground). And plenty of wild goats, scrambling over the rugged terrain. But no bears or whales. These wild creatures won't always show up for tourists ...

Nestled at the heart of the Inside Passage is Juneau – Alaska's capital and the southeast's largest city (population 27,000). It's great for shopping if you're looking for furs, or tribal artefacts made in Tlingit or Eskimo homes. But you don't really go to Alaska for the shopping – you go to experience something bigger than yourself.

This entire coastline shuts down over winter. Supply ships continue to do the rounds, but no cruise ships – the weather gets too wild and the waterways ice-up. And, anyway, it stays dark this far north for three or four months each year.

We took a ride in an old float-plane, out over the Mendenhall Glacier (a giant jewel of shimmering blue ice that dominates the landscape north of town) into a vast wilderness. Through mountains, trees and fog we flew before dropping down and landing

on a slow-moving river. Our plane's floats got stuck on a sandbank, but no problem: the locals paddled out in canoes and ferried us ashore to the famous Taku Lodge.

They told us the Lodge's history: how it was inherited by the nurse who'd cared for the original owners – and how she went on to provide the inspiration for Alaska's Iditarod dogsled race, driving her dog-team all the way to Fairbanks, across desolate tundra, frozen rivers and dense forests.

Then they put on a big salmon-bake for us – cooked over an open barbecue. And I have never tasted anything so delicious.

This was Real Alaska, in the middle of absolutely nowhere. And when they showed us some big claw-marks scratched deep into the walls of the lodge, I thought "*Let's go find us a bear!*" But we'd run out of time ...

**C**ruising further north, we went ashore in Skagway – a gorgeous old mining town born during the Klondike goldrush. In 1897 the town's population mushroomed overnight to 20,000 with more than 80 saloons – and

became known by the Mounties as “the roughest place on earth.” These days you can walk around it in five minutes, check out its colourful false-front buildings, take a ride on the antique Yukon Route narrow-gauge railway, and even pan for gold.

Further north again, we left the Inside Passage and sailed into open sea, floating ice – and glaciers.

Of all the attractions Alaska offers, glaciers probably top the list. After all, there are some 100,000 of these frozen rivers, many of them flowing into the sea. And watching giant chunks of ice drop off the ends is a highlight on every cruise. It’s



called ‘calving’: the ice tears away from the glacier with a thunderous crack ... it hits the sea, shooting water high into the air and creating a mini-tsunami (which you can feel on the ship if you’re close



enough) ... then, the chunk of glacier that made the big splash disappears below the surface, only to pop back up a few moments later ...

*... and an iceberg is born!*

Despite all the ice, it was hot the day we were there. And I was on deck with my hat, sunglasses and sunscreen as our ship moved very slowly and very safely, navigating through the bigger chunks and getting right up close to the famous Hubbard Glacier.

That night, in one of the lounges, I was busy complaining “I’ve come all this way and I still haven’t seen a bear or a whale!” – when, through the window, I saw a movement in the water, and this whale came up and flapped its tail at me! True!

He did it a couple more times, and then went.

That was it! But that was enough! And I was a happy traveller ...

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