

Cruising with Discovery

by Deane Manolis, AP

My daughter's voice over the phone sounded excited—"Dad, I think I've found it. How about cruising Prince William Sound on a 12 passenger cruise ship?" Needless to say, I was dubious, but intrigued.



Cascade Falls on a sunny evening

We started looking for an Alaskan cruise in March 2006, and quickly found we were too late to book a cruise for six people on one of the smaller ships. We were locked into a specific time, as scheduling was difficult for my daughter and her husband, both physicians. We were thinking small, but not quite that small—as the 12 passenger, 65 foot Discovery turned out to be. But what an adventure ensued for the five of us—daughter Amy, son-in-law Rich, Michael (9), Ryan (7), and this old Grandpa! (It was not Grandma's kind of cruise.)

We began our adventure on a Sunday morning in June 2006, taking the Alaska Railroad from Anchorage about 75 miles southeast, to Whittier, AK, on Prince William Sound, at 60° N. latitude. There, we boarded the Discovery for a six-day, five-night cruise, greeted by its enthusi-

astic crew, Capt. Dean Rand, mates Sarah and Samantha, and cook Matt—along with my grandsons' favorite, the ship's Black Lab, Happy. The cruise included stops for daily hikes, kayaking, and fishing, all the while viewing land and sea wildlife of the unspoiled maritime wilderness of Prince William Sound (PWS).

We cruised the western half of PWS in an elongated circle, first south, then a bit east, then far north to the College Fjord area, before dropping back south to Whittier. This part of PWS remains pristine, as the damage from the oil spill of the Exxon Valdez occurred further east. Western PWS is recessed, sheltered from the stormy Gulf of Alaska by a series of islands. We traveled among many mountainous islands with scalloped bays and coves, separated by narrow channels of deep water. Consequently, the water was unusually calm, many times mirror-like. (The eastern sound has more open water, and large passes to the Gulf of Alaska, so often has rough water conditions.) There are innumerable beautiful anchorages, but local knowledge is vital, with tidal ranges of 10-20 feet and vigorous tidal currents. Weather systems moving up the Gulf of Alaska and cooler air coming down across interior Alaska often meet over PWS. The result is frequent rain or fog, and heavy winter snows, especially in western PWS. The subsequent result is the furthest north temperate rain forest in North America (and maybe the world), huge mountain ice fields, and many "tidewater" glaciers that come down to sea level. Virtually all of the land area is part of Chugach National Forest—with beautiful mountain scenery.



The family on a kayak outing

Discovery is a 65 foot modified trawler, built in 1958 at Jacksonville, FL. It has a steel "round bilge" compound hull, displaces 60 tons, and is powered by two Cummins diesel engines, one of which is original. Engines are installed backwards, with twin counter-rotating v-drives. Ed Monk, Sr., a well-known naval architect, designed it. Behind the wheelhouse, there is a roomy salon/dining room and well-equipped kitchen on the main deck. Below, there are 6 double bunk cabins, and two heads—the crew has cabins aft near the engine room, and the Captain sleeps in the wheelhouse/helm area, by preference. There are two generators and an 80,000 BTU oil-fired ship's furnace to keep things cozy. The ship

cannot carry enough fresh water for needs of passengers and crew, so a reverse osmosis desalination filter is able to convert up to 600 gallons of seawater daily. The ship also carries two RIBs for shore excursions and about 10 kayaks on top of the main cabin. The ship was built originally for the Presbyterian Missions of New York City, and provided mail and other services for native villages in southeast and south central Alaska until 1983. The boat was purchased by Dean Rand in 1991, and has been used for summer excursions and winter research assignments since then. Summer cruises run from late May to September, and from 5-10 days' duration.



Boarding the kayaks to explore Barry Glacier

I just recently learned how hull maintenance is done on Discovery and other boats in coastal Alaska. Because of the great tidal range, a “tidal grid” is built with timbers on pilings. A boat is floated onto the grid at high tide; as the tide drops, the boat lists toward the shore side pilings, and the grid supports its hull. The crew must be well organized—to quote Dean Rand: “I get about 4 hours to work at each low tide cycle so I need to be very organized and ready to go with pressure washer, primer paint if there are bare spots (which usually are there because of the ice that we hit by the glaciers) and gallons of copper bottom paint and rollers.”



Chugach meadow

There were only five other passengers on our cruise—two couples and a single woman. We were all very compatible, and all participated in the daily outings. Although the calendar read June, the nature calendar was very early spring, and our hikes included a profusion of wildflowers in boggy ground with some receding snow—rubber boots and rain gear were provided for us. The average day included clouds and mist, occasional light rain, temperature in the high 50s to low 60s, and very calm water.

meals and snacks. Breakfast included such things as smoked salmon and tarragon quiche, and always home-baked muffins, such as cinnamon-cherry. Lunch usually included soup (potato corn chowder with sage) or salad (oriental chicken salad). Cocktails and delectable hors d’oeuvres preceded dinner; sample dinners included Copper River Salmon, Halibut Andaman (light curry sauce over macadamia nut crust), or boneless leg of lamb. Then desserts such as apple cinnamon pie or black bottom cheesecake would conclude our eating day.

As on most cruises, the food was superb. But Discovery’s was different, as our chef worked right in front of us, and catered to every need, including the children’s. Matt was taking a break after owning a restaurant in Seward, AK, and provided us with gourmet

There were many highlights on this trip, which were made even more special because of Discovery’s ability to explore areas inaccessible to large cruise ships. Some of the most memorable:

- Approaching Chenega Glacier, one of the largest tidewater glaciers in PWS, through milky-white glacial ice and water. Huge ice-falls off the glacier face thundered into the water, creating swells that rocked our small ship. Meanwhile, harbor seals rested on ice flows unconcerned, while sea otters approached Discovery, apparently curious about this huge blue and white iceberg in their territory.



Synchronized otters

- Fishing for halibut in the deep channels between islands, and just off amidships, very close to shore, two humpback whales blowing steam repeatedly in the damp air. And then having delectable fresh halibut for dinner, and halibut fish chips for snacks.

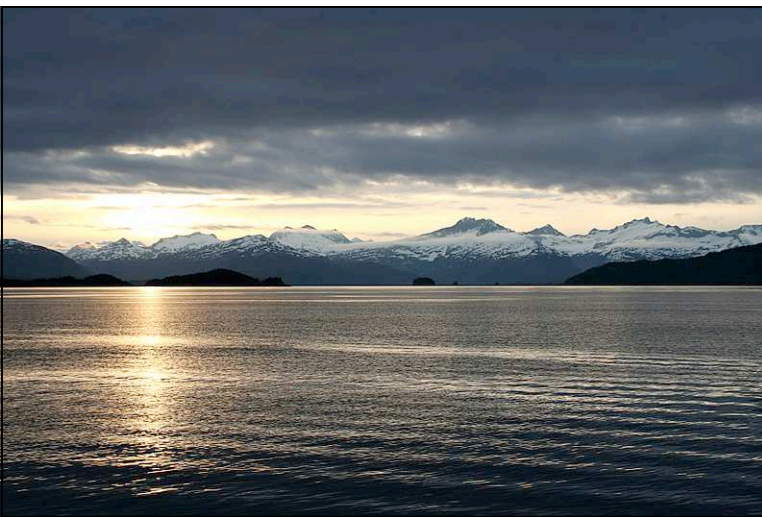
- Cruising to the “Needle”, a seamount with an acre of rocks above water, covered with bellowing sea lions. And along the way, an escort of speedy Dall porpoises, diving and criss-cross weaving at Discovery’s bow.

- Visiting an oyster farm in beautiful Eaglek Bay of PWS. Oyster farming is sanctioned in Alaska, because oysters grow well, but cannot reproduce in the cold water; thus there is no fear of a new species invading the environment. This operation, one of about 50 such enterprises--and the furthest north--in Alaska, is run by a fascinating couple, Suzie and Dave Sczewynski.



Discovery in Colross Passage

They live in the middle of nowhere—making it to “town” (Whittier or Anchorage) an average of 3-4 times a year. Dave’s record is over 400 days of not leaving their home, which is an old barge that rises and falls with the 18-20 ft. tides. They have thousands of trays floating under buoys, containing many thousands of oysters that require six years to mature. Suzie gave us a boat side lecture and demonstration of oyster “mariculture”. A smiley, enthusiastic woman, she seemed to revel in her role as teacher—and also obviously enjoyed being able to meet and converse with people. We also met Dave, a classic rugged individualist, and good friend of Dean Rand. The couple work constantly summer and winter, as the oysters need to be sorted and placed in new trays several times as they grow. Besides oysters, they do subsistence hunting and fishing, stock up on staples on their few visits to “civilization”, and barter trade for oysters with visitors like Discovery.



Prince William Sound -- 10 pm June sunset

- Finally, kayaking on the calm waters of PWS. On a morning outing, we saw many colorful tidal creatures near shore. Then paddling along a deep-water inlet, we were followed by a seal and sea lion, and saw numerous whales spouting in the distance. On a third kayak trip, we paddled through thick glacial ice (hard work!) to the faces of Barry and Coxe glaciers in Barry Arm of College Fjord. It was a bit disconcerting when icefalls off the glaciers caused rolling undulations under our kayaks. Close by, six mountain goats worked their way down to tidewater, where they use rocks as salt-licks.

Throughout this whole cruise, Discovery’s resourceful, enthusiastic and knowledgeable crew

impressed us greatly. Our off-ship activities were accomplished in a safe and professional manner, always accompanied by crew. My grandsons hit it off famously with the two young women mates—who were great teachers. When we returned to Whittier, we still had more Alaska to see, but cruising with Discovery was truly the highlight of our Alaskan trip.

More information on Discovery cruises can be found at their website www.discoveryvoyages.com/. Also, more of my pictures are in their newsletter at www.discoveryvoyages.com/newsletter.shtml, with a link to “Guest Photo Gallery”.

Quiz Answers: 1. T 2. F-a bight 3. T-because it floats 4. T 5. F-0001 6. T 7. F-compass north