

DESTINATION: PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND

# FROM GLACIERS TO MEADOWS



## TONY FLEMING TAKES US ON A JOURNEY THROUGH PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND, ARGUABLY THE BEST PLACE IN ALASKA TO SEE SPECTACULAR COASTAL SCENERY AND TIDEWATER GLACIERS CALVING INTO THE OCEAN.

**W**e arrive in the relatively sheltered waters of Prince William Sound from Vancouver Island after a journey of 1600 miles, over 26 days. Few cruising boats make it here for, to reach it, any boat too large to be trailered must be placed on a barge or brave a 500 mile transit across the open and often tempestuous waters of the Gulf of Alaska.

The Sound encompasses 7,000 square miles with some 3,000 miles of convoluted shoreline. Within its limits lie the three small towns Cordova, Valdez and Whittier plus two native villages of Tatitlak and Chenega. We call first at the busy

fishing port of Cordova on the edge of the huge Copper River Delta – a 700,000 acre wetland which, between late April and early May, provides a vital stopover for as many as 20 million migrating birds. Its multi-branched waterways are a breeding ground for the famed Copper River salmon. The town is dedicated to commercial fishing but many slips in the boat harbor are vacant as most fishing boats are taking advantage of one of the tightly controlled 'openings'.

Our first guest, Brian Kell from the Fleming dealership in Western Canada, joins us here having flown in from Anchorage. Apart from Captain Chris and myself, we are now five aboard with Brian, Christine and Kaylin who, as deck hand, is gaining sea time and experience in furtherance of her chosen career.



### *In The Wake of Cook*

Moving on from Cordova we explore the eastern side of the Sound calling first at Snug Cove - used by Captain Cook on May 16th, 1778 to careen and repair the Resolution, one of his two ships. According to his log, some of the seams had gaps as wide as 63.5mm which had to be caulked with rope!

Prince William Sound has more than 150 glaciers with more active tidewater glaciers than almost anywhere else in the world. Most are retreating – some at a spectacular rate. The Columbia Glacier has retreated 12 miles between 1980 and 2011, during which time it has also lost 50% of its thickness. It is expected to continue to shrink until it reaches dry land when it will cease to be a tidewater glacier. It was ice from here that, in 1989, forced the Exxon Valdez to divert from the outbound shipping lane leaving Valdez. Along with human error, this ultimately led to her catastrophic grounding with the discharge of eleven million gallons of crude oil into the pristine waters. Bligh Reef, on which she came to grief, was named after Lt William Bligh, later

of Bounty fame, who was with Cook on his visit to the Sound.

We anchor for the night in nearby Heather Bay and, under a chilly rain, launch both tenders and pick our way between floating and grounded chunks of ice. While alongside a floe, a sudden bang – as loud as a signal gun – is followed by its immediate and total disintegration. Large slabs of ice tumble into the water, become submerged and then rebound with water sluicing off them only inches away from the tender. It is a stark lesson to keep our distance from these beautiful but treacherous sculptures.

The following day, we continue up Columbia Bay towards the glacier at its head, we are faced with an apparently solid line of ice but, as we proceed, openings appear between the floes. We cruise among these massive ice castles, which serve as resting spots for seals and otters. The face of the glacier itself remains several miles distant when we reverse course and retrace our steps.

### *Valdez & Glacier Country*

It was the 4th of July when we pass

through Valdez Narrows between Entrance Point and Entrance Island to the town of Valdez. The harbor is crammed with commercial fishing boats. We are requested to hang around in the bay until after the announcement of the next opening when the harbormaster would have a better idea of available berths. Finally he manages to squeeze us in with Venture looking very much like a swan amongst her working cousins.

Valdez had suffered a major disaster during the 1964 earthquake when the dock - and the land on which it stood - collapsed due to liquefaction. Thirty-one people lost their lives and the town was re-established at its present location on higher and more stable ground. Annual snowfall in Valdez is between 762cm and 1270cm with a record 1414cm set in the winter of 1989/90. Brian leaves us here and we are joined by Steve D'Antonio – a well-known technical consultant to the marine industry.

The northwest section of the Sound is an area of multiple glaciers branching off College Fjord - so named by the elaborately equipped 1899 Harriman



expedition who spent several weeks exploring the area. They named each of the many glaciers after Ivy League colleges in the United States. Waterfalls of every size - from silvery streams to thundering cascades - tumble in countless profusion down the steep slopes.

We continue into Harriman Fjord and then to Surprise Inlet to visit Surprise Glacier where numerous otters are hauled out on the many floes. A triple-decked tour boat, out of Whittier, hovers at the foot of another huge multi-stream waterfall sluicing off Cataract Glacier. Here we reach our farthest north at 61 degrees 10.3 minutes.

We nudge our way through fields of floating ice up College Fjord towards Harvard and Yale glaciers until it became abundantly clear that, although we could eventually reach them, progress would be unacceptably slow. Many of the ice floes carry pebbles and even sizeable chunks of rock gouged from bedrock by the action of the glaciers. Steve enthusiastically retrieves samples and spends considerable time kneeling on

the swim step rescuing rocks from a watery grave.

### *Trees & Meadows*

While glaciers and ice are the main draw, most of the Sound is verdant green with trees and apparent meadows. But looks are misleading as we discover when we venture ashore in Hobo Bay to search out the remains of a derelict mine. We find the going extremely hard over soggy muskeg that literally sucks the soles off Steve's boots. Insects are a trial that takes much of the pleasure out of hiking. We come away with increased respect for the hardy explorers and prospectors who bush-wacked their way across this land. In places the earthquake had caused the earth to sink, allowing the sea to encroach upon the land creating ghost forests formed by bleached skeletons of trees killed and preserved by the salt.

Our next destination is Blackstone Glacier at the top of Blackstone Inlet - nicknamed Deathtrap because ice calving from a hanging glacier, concealed above and beyond the vertical cliffs, can descend from

the heavens to deliver a death-dealing blow without warning. This area is exceptionally beautiful with magnificent waterfalls.

A gaggle of kayakers are reduced to the size of insects by the immensity of their surroundings. We move to adjacent Beloit Glacier with another beautiful waterfall and, in peerless weather, hover impatiently for ice to calve from the craggy cliffs of ice. The lack of ice in the water - which allows us to approach the face - is an indication that the glacier is not very active.

### *Crew Change*

It is time for another change of crew - this time at the town of Whittier. Located at the head of Passage Canal, the town originated as a military dock and fuel depot in 1942. The congested harbor is filled mostly with fishing boats much smaller than we had seen in both Cordova and Valdez and there is a continual flow of such craft shuttling in and out of the narrow harbor entrance. There is no space for us at a marina berths so we tie up at a floating breakwater which requires



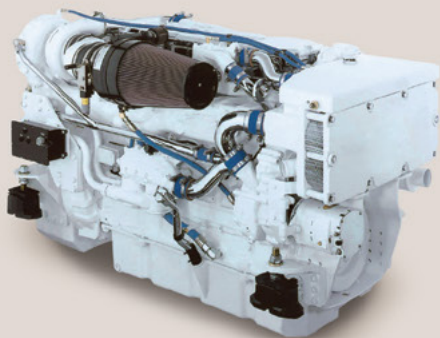
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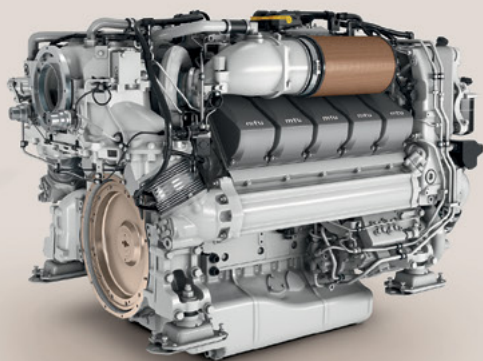
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using the tender to go ashore. There is a fourteen year waiting list for marine berths!

In a major undertaking, a rail spur linking Whittier to Anchorage was built in 1943. This required the construction of two tunnels – one of which was 2.5 miles long under Maynard Mountain. In June 2000 a road was built to share this tunnel with the train and, for the first time, it became possible to drive to Whittier from Anchorage. After some

difficulty, involving advance planning, we are able to rent a car from Avis where the rental office is in the back of a general store. After passing through the blackness of the unlit, rough-hewn tunnel we drive the sixty miles to Anchorage where we drop off Steve and collect Louisa who has flown in from Taiwan.

We refuel in Whittier, taking on 1420 gallons of fuel – our first since leaving Juneau. We continue to move south

and visit Deep Bay and Mink Island before reaching Eshamy Lodge. Duke and Pamela, who run the place, show us around the cabins nestled among the trees. The lodge is accessible by boat or float plane from Whittier and has limited but comfortable accommodations. Duke goes to check his gill nets and returns with a boatload of salmon. He sells most of his catch to a pick up boat waiting in the bay but generously presents us with two fillets.

**ONCE YOU FEEL IT, YOU'LL NEVER BOAT WITHOUT IT.**  
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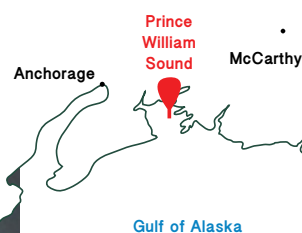


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## ALASKA



### *Jade Green & Beautiful*

We spend the next evening in Barnes Cove in Drier Bay on Knight Island. Overlooked by towering, snow-capped, peaks, this is one of the most beautiful anchorages we have visited in the Sound. We make a couple of expeditions ashore and climb a knoll overlooking the bay. Below us, in beautiful weather, Venture floats like a toy boat on translucent, jade-green, water.

While underway in Knight Island Passage, we overhear a caller on the VHF reporting whales, both orcas and humpbacks, in huge numbers he has not seen for ten years. They are off Point Helen and, by great, good fortune, are already heading that way. Through binoculars, we can see tall fins and blows all across the horizon ahead

of us over a calm and glassy sea. We arrive at the spot within forty minutes and spend the next hour surrounded by these enormous animals apparently unfazed by our presence. We move slowly, sometimes shutting down the engines and switching off the ultrasonic antifouling, taking care not to go too close. It is a magical experience. We continue on to isolated Needle Rock where multitudes of Stellar seal-lions are hauled out and draped over the craggy rocks.

Chenega Glacier is our last tidewater glacier. Huge numbers of Harbor Seals warily watch our progress as we thread our way through multiple floes to within ¼ mile of the glacier face. Brash ice tinkles musically along the hull as we wait anxiously for the glacier to calve. We scan the full width of the heavily fissured face, alert to every crack and

boom from the immense forces locked within this moving river of ice. Minutes pass. Finally, our patience rewarded, we watch in awe as huge slabs break free and slide majestically into the water, leaving Venture rocking gently on the resulting swells.

All too soon our time is up. We exit the Sound, bypassing Flemming Island, and, for the first time in four weeks, feel the surge from the open ocean as we make our way to Seward for a brief stop before heading to Montague Island. From here we make direct passage across the Gulf of Alaska to Cape Spencer - a straight shot of 392 miles lasting 42 hours. We had spent 28 days cruising Prince William Sound but, with a coastline longer than that of Oregon and California combined, we could spend a lifetime exploring this beautiful area. ☼

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