

## Safari Explorer-Yacht Makes Exploring a Personal Experience

by Betsa Marsh, Travel Arts Syndicate

Originally published August 28, 2009 in the Miami Herald

ENDICOTT ARM, Alaska -- Paddling a kayak, canary bright against dusky, glacial waters, I'm threading among iceberg bits that snap and pop like a Slurpie possessed.

As instructed, I'm giving the harbor seals of Alaska's Endicott Arm plenty of space, admiring them as they lounge on their ice floes and loop through the water. But secretly I'm hoping they'll come visit me.

Suddenly, a little guy pops up 1 ½ feet off my bow, scaring us both so badly that I shriek and he lunges back underwater.

It's nearly enough to make me spill my hot chocolate.

Yes, it might be freezing at the face of Dawes Glacier, with chapping air and frigid waves, but the crew of the Safari Explorer wants me to have my creature comforts. Expedition leader Beth Pike offers hot chocolate from her skiff.

Within minutes, the glacier calves with that trademark cannon boom -- what the local Tlingit Indians call "white thunder" -- and crags of blue, white and gray ice shatter into the bay. Four or five explosions seem perfectly adequate, until a sonic boom fills the fjord and Dawes' entire snout collapses, firing a hidden, underwater "shooter" berg the size of an ocean liner hundreds of feet into the air. Kayakers near the face ride out the tsunami, then paddle like mad back to the *Safari Explorer*.

For a week, the 36-passenger yacht of American Safari Cruises becomes our Mother Ship, a safe place for watching orcas play a lethal cat-and-mouse game with a Steller sea lion, a dry place to climb back onto after a drenching forest hike.

On the Explorer, the bridge, bar and hot tub are always open.

This 300-mile voyage, round-trip from Juneau, is a curious kind of luxury, focused entirely on the wildlife and wild landscapes of Alaska. Expedition leaders encourage everyone to hike, kayak or hop on board the skiff to get as close to possible to this monumental slice of southeast Alaska.

So the week is rain pants and hiking boots, sweatshirts and parkas, without a formal night in sight. Looking for casino action? Try a killer game of Uno in the wine library. Need a dinner show? Head outside to watch humpbacks fluke and porpoises race in the bow wake.

"The luxury is in the experience, in the wildlife," says Dan Blanchard, president/CEO of American Safari Cruises. "I want this to feel like you're coming onto my yacht. That's why we don't sail at night, but find some place quiet and drop anchor."

Although his yachts sail in Hawaii, Mexico and the Pacific Northwest, the Washingtonian has adopted Alaska as his home. Blanchard has seen tourism surge since he went north in the 1970s.

"When I first came here, I found places like Skagway and Haines true Alaska, but now there are five cruise ships in the harbor and people are walking in the streets, literally, because there's no place on the sidewalk with 7,000 or 8,000 people in town. Port stops mean nothing to us -- we stop because we need to replenish the boat. We try to make them interesting, like Petersburg."

The little town of 3,600 on Mitkof Island is a cute diversion during the week, with the world's largest salmon proudly spotlighted in its Clausen Memorial Museum and its Norwegian pedigree still proclaimed at the Sons of Norway Hall and Fisherman's Memorial.

The wall of bronze plaques honoring men and women lost at sea shows that this continues to be "the town that fish built" since its founding in 1898. Some \$60 million worth of seafood is brought in here each year. You may smell Petersburg before you see it, but the locals would tell you that's money on the air.

Diners on the Explorer, too, benefit from the bounty.

"I buy fruits and vegetables from Seattle," says Chef Phil Bunker, "but there's something we do better than anyone in the Lower 48: Alaska seafood."

He proves it night after night, steaming crab legs as long as windshield wipers; glazing rare, white King salmon with honey and soy; treating halibut to a pecan crust and blueberry beurre blanc sauce. While seating and service are casual, the food arriving from the tiny galley is refined.

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And, occasionally, reheated. Captain Tim Voss will slow the growling engines for any amazing wildlife he spots. His baritone PA announcement will send passengers flying from their cabins, binoculars and cameras flapping around their necks.

Over porridge and scrambled eggs, Voss announces humpbacks off the bow. Within a few moments, it's clear we've stumbled upon 11 adults and a calf bubble netting and lunge feeding, gulping in tons of sea creatures and water with each swallow.

Releasing air from their blowholes, humpbacks create a curtain of bubbles to visually and sonically confuse schools of fish. We watch these leviathans, frothing with bubbles, lunge again and again, first from the ship then from the skiffs. Our breakfast is a cooling memory.

The bubble netting grows even more suspenseful when Pike puts a hydrophone in the water. One whale starts the keening, then the rest join in with bear growls and lion roars until they crescendo to the top, maws agape.

We watch for nearly four hours, until lunch time. Sure enough, the Thai chicken wraps have to wait once the bridge spots orcas bullying a group of Steller sea lions off Iyokene. They separate two from the group, battering and tossing them as the orcas make guttural tiger growls. Ultimately, they swim away without eating them, leaving the traumatized pack to support the victims as best they can.

For our dinner show, the humpbacks return during our red King salmon and crimini mushroom polenta.

With wild creatures, of course, each day is different. One moment we slow to watch a bear sow and her two cubs, about 18 months old, ambling along the shore. One little guy stays close to mama, the other lags behind, sniffing rocks, wandering down to the water, roly-polying off a driftwood tree trunk. When he realizes how far behind he's fallen, he galumphs to catch up, his toffee fur rippling like waves.

During a rare two-day stay in Glacier Bay National Park, permissible because of the ship's small size, we bird watch at South Marble Island. Glacous-winged gulls, cormorants and tufted puffins winging overhead all seem to be crying at once, joined by the grunts and growls of Steller sea lions hauled up on the rock. The entire island sounds like a car alarm and smells like a fish cannery.

Fast forward to the stillness of air and water as we kayak up to Lamplugh Glacier. The silence makes the calving cracks even more jarring.

Once a true tidewater glacier at the water line, Lamplugh has receded to a beach glacier. All of Glacier Bay is receding at the fastest rate in recorded history. Over centuries, ice has filled up Glacier Bay and retreated at least four times.

"It's like having a window into the Ice Age," says National Park Service Ranger Richard Becker on the deck of the Explorer.

The Tlingits tell the tale most poignantly because the encroaching ice once entombed Se Shuyee, their sacred homeland. The Tlingits were sitting in their canoes, the tale goes, and watching ice fill their lodge house. It was, the elders said, as if the valley of grass was turning into a river of ice.

Now, the ice is flowing backward and the earth is greening once again.

American Safari Cruises, based in Seattle, offers all-inclusive cruises to Alaska, Mexico's Sea of Cortes, the Hawaiian Islands, the Columbia and Snake Rivers, and the Pacific Northwest. The 36-passenger Safari Explorer sailed into Alaskan waters for the first time in 2008. In 2010, the eight-day, seven-night Juneau round-trip cruises will resume May 14; starting rate is \$4,895 per person, double occupancy. The Safari Quest and Safari Spirit also sail in Alaska for the summer season. 888-862-8881 [WWW.AMERICANSAFARICRUISES.COM](http://WWW.AMERICANSAFARICRUISES.COM).