

Howdy, howdy, howdy, all!

August/September 2015

After having missed a season of summer travel in 2014, we climbed back into the proverbial saddle this summer by taking a trip to Alaska -- according to Wikipedia the 49th state to be admitted to the Union (back in 1959), ranked #1 in area and #48 in population (770,000). It is a remote, very lightly populated, and wildly beautiful place where we have actually spent a good bit of time over the years in work-related capacities (installing and maintaining equipment for high-latitude ionospheric research for Stanford Research Institute from 1968-98) in the areas around Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Homer (on the Kenai Peninsula). We had, however, never set foot on the little finger of very scenic land running down the Canadian coast from the 1896-99 gold-rush-era town of Skagway and decided to correct that oversight this year by navigating the so-called "inside passage" as the area is known. Because of the spectacular scenery along the coast (including Glacier Bay, where one can observe bird-life, bears, whales, and mountain goats, along with the last of the glaciers in that region in the process of "calving"), the area is extensively visited by cruise ships, a form of transportation which, because of the thousands of people involved, we opted to avoid. Instead, we chose to drive from San Francisco to Bellingham (just south of Vancouver, BC), park our car for a week, and hop on the AMHS (Alaska Marine Highway System) ferry service offered by the state of Alaska, which (in a very popular form) offers a regular 3-day-long ride from Bellingham up to Skagway (and far beyond in various forms used mainly by native Alaskans). Towns we passed included Prince Rupert, Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Juneau, Haines, and Skagway, of which we actually stopped in Ketchikan, Wrangell, Juneau, and Skagway. From Skagway we hopped by train, small plane, and local ferries to White Pass, Gustavus, Glacier Bay, and back to Juneau before getting on a commercial flight for the return to Seattle -- a total of about 7 days actually in Alaska and a trip we would highly recommend (see <http://www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/> and <http://www.alaskaferry.com/>). Our daughter Julie (who lives in Santa Fe) flew into Seattle to join us for the trip north and provided a very professional level of camera work using her newly acquired Nikon camera with giant lens, although since she did all the picture-taking we realized too late that we have no pics of her to show!



Inside passage area from Seattle north to Skagway showing Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS)

The Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) consists of two parts -- the "mainline" system and the "dayboat" system.



Malaspina



Columbia

The AMHS mainline system (overnight, long-haul) uses 6 car/passenger vessels -- the Columbia, Kennicott, Malaspina, Matanuska, Taku, and Tustumena of which we traveled on two -- the Malaspina (left) and the Columbia (right) above, the Columbia being a much larger ship. The ships are spacious and comfortable (they can carry several hundred passengers) with decks, staterooms, lounges, and dining facilities, yet are microscopic compared to the large cruise liners with their thousands of passengers. (The last 3 pictures shown here were extracted from the Internet, since they were views we could not get!)



LeConte



Skagway (with 4 cruise ships docked)

The alternate AMHS dayboat system (single-day) routes use 2 car/passenger vessels -- the Aurora and the LeConte, of which we traveled on the LeConte, shown above left. (A further sub-class of the dayboat system are the shuttle ferries, which provide round-trip service in a single day utilizing 3 vessels -- the Chenega, the Fairweather and the Lituya). The shot on the right is of a completely different mode of travel -- four 3000-passenger (or more!) cruise ships simultaneously docked and disgorging masses of tourists into the little town of Skagway (with its tiny airport, from where we flew out, shown on the left). While in Juneau, we saw 3 more cruise ships and another handful floating around in Glacier Bay. During the summer their presence tends to dominate and define the small towns along the coast, of which Skagway, Ketchikan, and Juneau particularly cater to cruise-ship passengers (to their considerable detriment!). Many young workers from the States come to the "inside passage" area on a seasonal basis from Memorial Day to Labor Day to provide maintenance and service support during the short tourist season.



Sleeping arrangements on Malaspina for budget travelers! Remote town of Wrangell from boat at night

After a very pleasant 3-day cruise up the inside passage (with the 3 of us lodged comfortably in a 4-person stateroom with bathroom and shower, an unusual luxury for us!), we arrived at Skagway, the northernmost point of our trip. Skagway was a jumping-off point for the gold fields during the Gold Rush of 1896-99, and around 1898 some enterprising gentlemen built a narrow-gauge railway through an area called White Pass to get the miners across the coastal mountains. Remnants of the old town of Skagway remain today, upgraded to “modern tourist standards” and featuring a pleasant round-trip morning excursion on the refurbished train.



Skagway sans cruise ship folk! Elegant Skagway White House B&B where we stayed (both shots taken about 9 pm at night)



Abandoned trestle for White Pass train to gold fields Glacier Bay seen from flight from Skagway to Gustavus

We left Skagway on a small 7-passenger plane for the town of Gustavus in Glacier Bay, which is a must-see for the area and features a number of glaciers which are "calving" into the Bay. Most of the glaciers have greatly receded, but the trip is still an exciting one featuring fish, whales, birds, mountain goats, and (so we are told!) bear.



Setting out for bird/whale/goat/glacier watching Glacier calving off John Hopkins (inaccessible to most cruise ships)
(Guide's videos at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe8nmrdP5UQ>)



Mountain goats in Glacier Bay



An unexpected bit of excitement just north of Juneau -- an overturned boat with 6 fishermen aboard (sort of!) and waving for help to the crew of the LeConte (Glacier Bay to Juneau ferry) -- a potentially disastrous scenario in those lightly frequented waters. They had been in the process of pulling their anchor aboard using an electric winch when the anchor stuck on the bottom, pulling the bow down at the same time that a passing wave hit the bow, tipping the 22-foot(!) welded-aluminum boat over and dumping them into the 50-degree water (none of them had unfortunately taken the trouble to put on their life jackets!). http://juneauempire.com/local/2015-09-06/crew-ferry-leconte-saves-six-after-boat-flips?utm_source=Recommendation_Widget&utm_medium=desktop&utm_campaign=qrec&utm_content=image

We eventually left Gustavus near Glacier Bay on the LeConte (one of the short-haul dayboats) to return to Juneau for an overnight stay and a next-day commercial flight on Alaska Airways back to Seattle. (One significant inconvenience is the necessity of taking a several-hour-long shuttle from SeaTac back to Bellingham on Interstate I-5 to retrieve our car, a route which competes for congestion with those of any other US city we have visited!)

And, of course, passing through Oregon gave us the chance to stop in the Eugene/Springfield area, where Bruce's sister Kim lives with her husband Fritz on a 5-acre farm in the small community of Pleasant Hill. As many of you from our Atlanta days may remember, Kim is very much into animals, and five acres gives her plenty of chance to exercise that skill ...



Kim + chickens + dog



Kathy + some of Kim's ducks



Kim + horses



Kim + pigs



Kim's hand + dogs + cat



and finally, Kim and Fritz + well-equipped workshop

At other times there have been sheep, goats, and a cow or two, but for now the animal population in Pleasant Hill seems to be somewhat restrained (Kim's main field is lying fallow while undergoing treatment for a foxglove infestation!).

Hey, Enough for now, and Cheers to all,

Bruce and Kathy (and Julie!)