



HUMBLED BY THE POWER
AND SCALE OF
wild Alaska

*Exploring a mesmerizing icy world in southeast Alaska is an
adventure of a lifetime. By Yvonne Gordon*



Humpback whale, Inside Passage; Sawyer Glacier

A black shape glides through the water near us and suddenly there's a *pfwoossh*. It's a large whale expelling air through its blowhole, which forms a large cloud of vapor. The whale disappears underwater but seconds later, its magnificent tail rises out of the water and high in the air. Then it disappears, plunging down into the depths and leaving just a few ripples on the surface.

"The tail is called a fluke, and on the underside, the markings are unique," says Luke, our guide.

We're in a boat in Alaska's Inside Passage, off the coast of the Alaskan capital, Juneau, and Luke Forrester, our guide and a naturalist, is telling us about whales. Humpback whales come here to feed on herring — feeding for up to 21 hours a day — and stay underwater for about 15 minutes at a time.

As soon as one dives, the race is on to spot the next and reach it before it disappears. The noise of the big puffs and the clouds of vapor in the air signal where the whales are.

We leave Juneau and motor out through Auke Bay and find ourselves suddenly surrounded by mountains. On one side are

the silvery patches of the Herbert Glacier Eagle Glaciers, part of the 1,500sq-mile Juneau Icefield.

Back on shore, after a thrilling trip, curiosity about the glaciers leads me to book another day trip, an early-morning departure bound for Tracy Arm Fjord. As we leave the dock, the water is calm and a big bank of low clouds stretches across the hills, appearing black in the morning light.

As we pass Admiralty Island, our guide tells us about the wildlife regularly seen here — in the water, there are harbor seals, porpoises, humpback whales and sea lions, and on land, mountain goats and bears, plus bald eagles and sea birds such as gulls, Arctic terns and guillemots. We pass more humpback whales — pods of up to eight.

We come to Tracy Arm Fjord, and see our first iceberg, a sea eagle perched on top as if guiding the way. The sides of the fjord are lined with forests, and we marvel at hanging glaciers and waterfalls, even spotting a black bear on the shore.

The forest turns to rock face the further along the fjord we go and icebergs become more frequent until we're crunching through

the ice. We soon come face to face with a huge bright white-and-blue wall — the south Sawyer Glacier.

Suddenly, a piece of ice crashes to the water below with a large splash, and there's a thundering rumble. Glaciers are constantly moving, regularly calving icebergs that float down the fjord. This explains where all the icebergs we saw from the boat have come from.

As we return to land along the Stephens Passage, we spot more whales and motor towards them for a closer look. "We like seeing them. It's a nice part of the day, a nice little detail," says our captain, Steve.

One of the most popular glaciers in Juneau is Mendenhall; I set off on a guided hike along the West Glacier Trail, starting down at Mendenhall Lake and heading up through the Tongass National Forest. One of our guides, Eric, explains how the forest is just 125 years old, having sprouted as the glacier receded. The first trees to grow were sitka alder, then spruce. We walk along a narrow trail through the forest and over bridges with rushing, noisy streams below. ►

The ground is soft and the light is subdued, shaded by the trees. Some rocks are covered with green moss. At times, the trail heads up steep hills, with handrails for support. The guides take many photos, freeing us from the distraction of documenting the whole thing.

Eric explains all about the forest, the different phases of growth, and how the land here is rising up between a quarter and a half of an inch a year, without the immense weight of a glacier bearing down on it. As the glacier recedes, more vegetation grows and this brings more animals. We meet a deer on the trail, and I notice Eric is carrying a large can of bear spray — just in case.

After three hours of mostly uphill walking, our hard work is rewarded. The views over the expanse of ice are incredible, taking in the mountains and Mendenhall Lake. From our perch, around 700ft up, we can see a group of people walking on the glacier; they look like tiny dots.

After seeing glaciers from a boat, and then from above on a hike, my final adventure in southeast Alaska turns out to be the most fascinating encounter of all — a trip by canoe to walk on Mendenhall Glacier.

We're kitted out at the tour company's base before driving to Mendenhall Lake, where our dozen-strong group is put into

two large canoes. With each of us armed with a large wooden paddle, we canoe across the lake, passing Nugget Falls and a monstrous iceberg along the way. After an hour of paddling, we pull up at a small silty beach next to the glacier.

We put on our crampons and set off across the ice; the guides pointing out crevasses and patches of blue, caused by compressed snow within the glacial ice. We also see vertical shafts, called *moulines*.

The highlight of the day comes as we reach the ice cave under the glacier. Inside, the walls are smooth and glossy, with bubbles of blue and white ice. The sound of rushing water outside reminds us how fast the glacier is melting and how dangerous it is to be here — glaciers are constantly on the move and ice caves can collapse at any time, a danger our guides have made us aware of before setting out, adding to the adrenaline rush.

As we walk back to the canoe, I look up to the mountain I hiked the day before and realize that after seeing a glacier far off in the distance, seeing one from a boat, and hiking up the side of one, I've finally, become one of those tiny dots on a glacier — reduced to a mere speck by the power and scale of wild Alaska. ■

Sample

Viking Travel has five nights in Juneau, including airport or port transfers, four nights' hotel accommodation in downtown Juneau, a full-day Tracy Arm boat trip, guided Mendenhall Glacier hike and half-day whale-watching cruise, from \$1,200 per person, based on two sharing. Viking Travel also specializes in ferry trips on the Alaska Marine Highway. alaskaferry.com

Selling tips

Talk up the range of adventures:

There's something for all levels and tastes, whether clients want to take a leisurely boat trip on the Inside Passage, or get out into a kayak or onto a hiking trail or glacier. Other adventures include flightseeing tours, helicopter tours with glacier landings, glacier dog-sled rides and gold-panning.

Sell the wildlife: There are opportunities to view everything from deer and bears to sea lions, porpoises and whales, all in their natural habitats.

Sell the wilderness: Although Juneau is the state capital, it's a small city, set between Mount Juneau, Mount Roberts and the Gastineau Channel, so there are lots of opportunities to get away from the city be in unspoiled nature and remote settings, even if it's just for a few hours.

Promote the adventure involved in getting there: You can't reach Juneau by road, so people can travel there by airplane, floatplane, by ship, or by ferry along the Alaska Marine Highway.



From top: Coast Mountains reflected in a pond, Tongass National Forest; meltwater, Mendenhall Glacier