

Go wild: Tracy Arm fjord near Juneau; Juneau, the state capital (right)



the glacier. Steve has allowed us on one side of the bow, and we watch nervously over the side, as each iceberg passes, wondering if one will puncture our hull.

The front of the South Sawyer Glacier is a wall of ice, some deep blue, some white, or grey towards the sides. We see a chunk of ice calving off the glacier. As it falls into the water, the noise reaches us, a loud thundery rumble.

Steve, who has been skipping this trip for 23 years, says the glacier is his favourite part of the day.

"You don't know what it's going to do each day," he says. "People are thrilled because they've never seen anything like it before."

By the end of the week, I've had every type of glacier adventure. I hike up the mountain behind Mendenhall Glacier to see it from above — and the people walking on it appear as tiny dots. Another day, I am a dot as I take an adventure trip where we paddle to the

glacier to climb on it. Another time, we go by helicopter and land on a glacier. On many day trips, I meet cruise ship passengers and their eyes always go wide with envy when they learn I am here for a few days. A short ferry trip brings us to Haines, where there's rafting and bears to be watched — and we see the same scenery that the cruises do.

Sometimes, this wild space seems like another planet. But then, I spot something familiar on a tour of the Alaskan Brewing Company — some boxes of Irish carrageen moss seaweed. I ask the guide, who says it clarifies the beer, adding, "sure our brewer is Irish". The brewer turns out to be a Brian Murphy from Enniskillen.

His wife is from Juneau and he's been here three years. All this on his doorstep and his day job is to make beer. Now it's my turn to have eyes wide with envy...

WHAT TO PACK

Rain gear — it's a rainforest area — and proper hiking boots. Wear layers and warm clothes, especially at glaciers — a proper waterproof shell and down inner layer are handy depending on temperatures. High season is May to September; April/May are the driest months.



GETTING THERE

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) flies from Anchorage and Seattle to Juneau. Or take a state ferry north or south along the Alaskan Marine Highway, running 3,500 miles north from Bellingham, Washington and stopping at Juneau and Haines (see dot.state.ak.us/amhs). For more, see traveljuneau.com & travelalaska.com



WHERE TO STAY

The Silverbow Inn (silverbowinn.com; doubles from \$109/€102) is a cosy boutique hotel with a B&B-feel in the downtown Juneau area. The Jorgensen House (jorgensenhouse.com; doubles from \$250/€235) is a family-run luxury B&B with beautiful reception rooms. The house can also be rented (it sleeps eight).

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Into the wild ALASKA

You don't have to take an expensive cruise to see America's greatest wilderness, says **YVONNE GORDON**. And it is wild...



Pwooffsh". There's a loud whoosh, followed by a spout of vapour shooting high into the air. Something black and glistening carves through the water, and up comes a huge tail, rising high above the surface. Then it disappears, leaving just a few ripples on the surface.

This is a humpback whale expelling air from its blowhole before diving for food. It will stay underwater for about 10 minutes, then repeat the process, with another flash of its huge fluked tail for us delighted onlookers, who are on an afternoon's whale-watching trip.

I've been in Alaska just 24 hours and up to now, I had never seen a whale before. Now I'm in a boat in Auke Bay watching humpbacks. Each time we see a 'blow', we race over to watch the dive and tail flash as the whale plunges down for a feed of herring. Then we excitedly scan the horizon for the next one.

"Their main behaviour is feeding; they do it for 21 hours a day," says our guide Luke, adding that whales can take in

15,000 gallons of water with each gulp. As we wait between sightings, I notice that two of the blue-black mountains surrounding the bay are topped with silver patches of ice — the Herbert and Eagle Glaciers, part of the huge Juneau icefield that covers so much of the area.

My first understanding of the vastness of Alaska came while flying to Juneau, the state capital, from Anchorage. We flew over miles of snow and mountains, without seeing a single house, town or road. Juneau can only be reached by air or sea as the terrain is too rugged for roads. It's on the Inside Passage, a Pacific coast marine corridor popular for cruises. Cruise ships only visit Juneau for a day though, so passengers miss out on its adventures.

The following morning, Juneau's waterfront is buzzing with groups meeting for whale watches, helicopter tours, hikes and glacier trips. A row of booths sells more day trips — flightseeing, float planes, fishing, dog sledding, kayaking and even gold panning. I'm taking a boat trip to Tracy Arm fjord, however, which leads to the two Sawyer Glaciers.

A bank of clouds hides the mountains as we leave the boat dock. Steve, the skipper, tells us where on the deck we're allowed go. "I'll open up the bow when we see something like an iceberg or a waterfall," he says. There isn't one building along the miles of coastline, it is true wilderness.

As we turn into the fjord, we see our first iceberg, a mass of bright bluey-whiteness, and learn the names. 'Bergy bits' are small pieces of ice; 'growlers' are up to three metres and icebergs are over three metres. As we pass the huge floating block, I see an eagle sitting on top and a seal trying to climb onto the ice.

A book on board our boat lists the wildlife in Tracy Arm — seals, sea lions, whales, porpoises, mountain goats, bears, bald eagles, arctic terns. A couple of hours later, we've seen them all, in the wild; pods of whales, white goats on a hill and even a black bear on the shore. We pass plenty of sea birds, porpoises and sea lions.

The further into the fjord we go, the more frequent the icebergs become and soon we are crunching our way slowly through them, making our way towards

3 must-dos...



TRACY ARM FJORD

On a full day's trip to Tracy Arm fjord and the Sawyer Glaciers, you'll see glaciers, icebergs and lots of wildlife including sea lions, eagles, whales and maybe even goats, bears and seals. There's a full outside deck and refreshments available on board. \$152/€143; adventureboundalaska.com.



WHALE WATCH

A three-hour trip to Auke Bay with Juneau Tours costs \$110/€103pp. Whales are guaranteed (or you get a refund), and passengers can view from outside decks when a whale is sighted. Sea lions and eagles are regularly spotted too, and sometimes orcas and porpoises. See juneautours.net



WEST GLACIER HIKE

This gives a bird's-eye view of the Mendenhall glacier, and is also a hike through new forest that has grown where the ice has retreated. You don't have to worry about taking photos either — the guide takes photos and video throughout the hike, for you to keep. \$94/€88pp; adventureflow.us