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Forget fear: go with the floe

The promise of an aqua-coloured underworld beneath an Alaskan glacier led *Yvonne Gordon* on a thrilling, iceberg-dodging journey

Walking to the edge of the glacier, I look down on a sheer drop of grey and white silt and ice. Beneath me is an ice cave; to get there means a short descent. I look over my shoulder and put my left foot behind me, edging it down slowly. I dislodge a rock and watch as it goes crashing down into the gap. Suddenly, my whole body is shaking with adrenalin.

Usually, holiday experiences induce excitement, not fear, but this one has sparked both.

When I had first seen photos of the caves inside Mendenhall Glacier in Alaska a few months previously, the vision of light shining through the ice to create myriad shades of blue left me mesmerised. So when I arrived in Juneau, the state's capital city, I excitedly signed up for a guided tour with a company that leads canoe trips across Mendenhall Lake – the waterway formed by run-off from the glacier – followed by a trek across the glacier itself into its partially hollow centre.

The terror began when I stayed up late the night before

I was due to take the paddle and three-hour hike leading to the caves and read about the dangers of being crushed by avalanches or snowmelt.

It is a cloudy morning when I meet my tour group – there are 10 of us, plus two guides – and we drive to our base to be equipped with boots, crampons – angled spikes that strap to footwear to provide traction for walking on the ice – climbing harnesses, helmets, and waterproof trousers and jackets. We drive to the lake, carrying two canoes to the shore, and divide into two groups: six to a canoe, and two to a bench with one wooden paddle each.

As we set out onto the lake, I can see Mendenhall Glacier carving down the mountain valley in the distance, a huge mass of blue-white ice. I have seen plenty of glaciers but have never walked on one and am unsure what to expect: will it be an easy walk or tough hike? Will I be able to keep my footing? Will there be lots of cracks in the ice?

On the lake, we pass a floating piece of ice the size of a bus, which had “calved”



from the glacier four days before. We paddle past Nugget Creek Falls, a waterfall that empties into the lake. After an hour or so of paddling, we arrive at the side of the glacier, and dock at a grey beach made of “glacial flour”: fine-grained, silt-sized particles of rock generated by by glacial erosion. We pull the canoes onto the shore before donning our crampons.

Before we set off, our guide Peter gives us a safety briefing and asks if we are all sure that we want to continue. Ice caves can be dangerous and unstable – glacial ice is constantly moving and

melting, so a cave can collapse at any time – and although the guides regularly inspect the ice and refuse to run trips if they think it is particularly dangerous, there is still a risk. If anyone is having second thoughts, there is an option to wait here. The voice inside my head that recalls my previous night's reading tries to convince me that might be a good idea, but I reason that I haven't come all the way to Alaska to chicken out.

We set off across the ice, some using poles for balance. The ice is crunchy in parts, slippery in others, as we weave our way around the glacier's peaks and troughs; a raging sea of icy waves frozen in time. At one point where we have to climb over a small ridge, Peter chips away to make three steps in the ice with an ice axe.

We stop to look at crevasses: huge, deep fractures in the ice formed as a result of the glacier's movement, creating vivid blue seams. Although it looks like a solid mass, the ice is shifting constantly as the glacier inches forward, like a slow river, creating the splits. The compression inside gives



unexposed ice its strong blue colour, which fades as it is exposed to sunlight. Peter explains that the glacier changes every day, proving a navigational puzzle for the guides each time they visit. “In some areas, cracks open up and you can't go to places you went to a week ago,” he says. “This crevasse is very young – it wasn't here a couple of weeks ago.”

He also shows us moulins – vertical well-like shafts burrowing down into the ice. We inch forward to gaze into the azure abyss, but not far enough to fall in.

We continue along the ice and eventually, after a short uphill scramble on rock and stones, come to the last slope at the glacier's edge before the climb down into the ice cave. As we reach the bottom of the slope, one by one, we duck inside, keeping our heads low

and avoiding any areas where Peter believes the ice is more unstable.

Being in the cave is more incredible that I could have imagined: I am surrounded by illuminated walls of cerulean and turquoise. The ice has formed huge clear bubbles, creating a surreal enclosure of sapphire spheres. As we go in, the cave gets narrower, and the ceiling lower, until it ends at a back wall with a small opening.

Although the cave network is underneath a huge glacier, comprising thousands of years-worth of ice, I am struck by how bright this cave is and how the roof is filled with clean, clear ice of every shade of blue rather than the murky opaqueness of the glacier's surface. It is also unexpectedly noisy: there is a waterfall of melting ice at one end, and a stream of meltwater rushing

across the stones on the floor – a reminder of the ice's rapid melt rate.

Peter shows us where a large piece of ice collapsed the week before, hence his warning to keep to one side. He tells us that at the rear of the cave, so much ice has fallen that it will probably open up within weeks. The ice changes so much that, within a year or two, this cave might be gone completely.

It is an exhilarating experience and a memorable day, but having an adventure on a glacier is not something unusual in Alaska: the state has an estimated 100,000 glaciers covering more than 75,000 sq km. Even in this area of Juneau in southeast Alaska, which is along the Inside Passage – the shipping route that weaves through the islands on the Pacific coast of North America – the vast

Juneau icefield covers almost 3,900 sq km and offers many different glacier-related experiences: you can go trekking, ice climbing, “flightseeing” over the icefield by plane or helicopter, and even take longer glacier tours with overnight camping. Instead of paddling to a glacier by canoe or kayak as we did, you or go by motorboat or sailboat, choosing any length or level of adventure.

The Inside Passage region, which in addition to glaciers features temperate rainforests, inlets, and coastal mountains, is also known for its wildlife. I elect to take a day trip along the 48km-long Tracy Arm Fjord near Juneau within the Tongass National Forest, home to harbour seals, sea lions, humpback whales, porpoises, mountain goats, black and brown bears, bald eagles and arctic terns.

“We stop to look at the crevasses and shafts, inching forward to gaze into the abyss, but not far enough to fall in

As our skipper, Steve, motors us through Stephens Passage, which leads into the fjord, we see a spout of vapour coming from the water. We race towards it in time to see a humpback whale curl over into a dive, its fluked tail rising slowly from the water and then sinking down in one slow movement. As the day progresses, we see several sprays of vapour in a row: two or three humpbacks diving together.

As we turn into the fjord, we spot a floating iceberg with a bald eagle sitting on top, as if navigating. As we pass, a seal arrives and circles the base of the ice, looking for a place to come ashore. The further we venture into the fjord, the more icebergs we dodge. On the shore we see a black bear feeding.

Tracy Arm has two glaciers – North Sawyer and South

Sawyer – and our boat crunches through the ice to approach each one. As we watch the wall of ice, a huge piece breaks off, followed by what sounds like a rumble of thunder seconds later. It is a thrilling event to witness.

Steve tells me that he has been doing this tour every day for 23 years and still loves it. He adores seeing the whales, but approaching the twin glaciers remains his favourite part of the day.

“People are thrilled because they've never seen anything like it before,” he says. “We've just seen a very large piece of ice calve off and people were all excited about it.”

“There isn't much traffic, you get an unobstructed view. Every day we have a good day. Every day.”

After just a couple of days of exploring glaciers, I know exactly what he means.

THE BRIEF

Above & Beyond Alaska (beyondak.com) runs similar glacier treks from May 1 to September 30. For day trips to Tracy Arm Fjord (also available from May 1 to September 30), see adventureboundalaska.com. For further details about the Juneau region, visit traveljuneau.com. Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) flies to Juneau from Anchorage and Seattle, or you can get there by ferry on the Alaska Marine Highway System (dot.state.ak.us/amhs). Fly from Dublin to Seattle, via Heathrow, with Aer Lingus, BA and American Airlines, or fly to Anchorage with Lufthansa via Frankfurt.



A WHOLE BLUE EXPERIENCE To reach the ice caves, right, requires a hike across Mendenhall Glacier, above right; the Tracy Arm Fjord near Juneau is ideal for spotting wildlife, including seals, above, and humpback whales, left



YVONNE GORDON; NIELISA FARELOW; ALAMY