

Sides take centre stage Food: 7

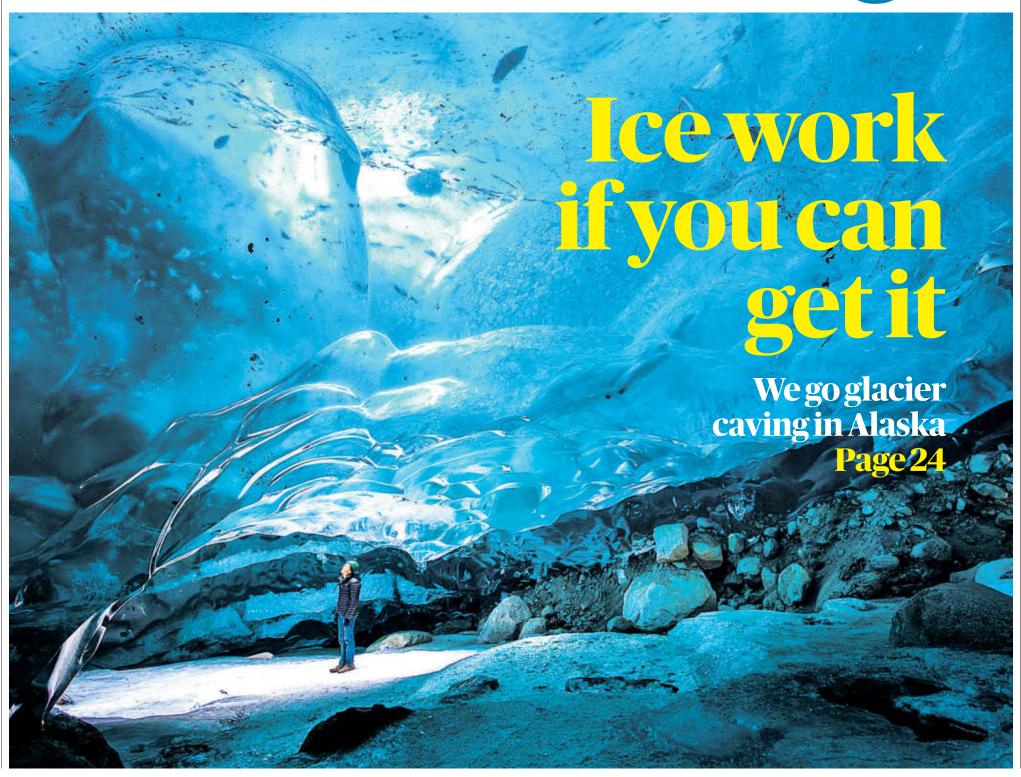


Eat, shop and party in Rome Travel: 15



SUV or shed on wheels? InGear: 28

Sunday



Sunday Travel

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

alking to the edge of the glacier, I 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. 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"



rom 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 enerated 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

A WHOLE BLUE

To reach the ice

EXPERIENCE

caves, right,

Glacier, above

riaht: the Tracv

Juneau is ideal fo

Arm Fiord near

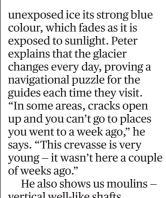
at any time – and although the guides regularly inspect the ice and refuse to run trips if they think it is particularly dangerous, there is still a risk. If anyone is having second thoughts, there is an option to wait here. The voice inside my head that recalls my previous night's reading tries to convince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

melting, so a cave can collapse

ome using poles for balance. The ice is crunchy in parts, slippy 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





vertical well-like shafts urrowing 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 ones, 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

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 o sapphire spheres. As we go in the cave gets narrower, and the ceiling lower, until it ends at a back wall with a small

It is an exhilarating Although the cave network experience and a memorable is underneath a huge glacier, day, but having an adventure comprising thousands of on a glacier is not something vears-worth of ice. I am struck unusual in Alaska: the state by how bright this cave is and has an estimated 100,000 how the roof is filled with glaciers covering more than clean, clear ice of every shade 75,000 sq km. Even in this area of blue rather than the murky of Juneau in southeast Alaska, opaqueness of the glacier's which is along the Inside surface. It is also unexpectedly Passage – the shipping route noisy: there is a waterfall of that weaves through the islands on the Pacific coast of melting ice at one end, and a

across the stones on the floor a reminder of the ice's rapid

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 vear or two, this cave might be gone completely.

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

3,900 sq km and offers many

"flightseeing" over the icefield

even take longer glacier tours

Instead of paddling to a glacie

by canoe or kayak as we did,

sailboat, choosing any length

you or go by motorboat or

or level of adventure.

by plane or helicopter, and

with overnight camping.

different glacier-related

experiences: you can go

trekking, ice climbing,

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

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

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

Tracy Arm has two glaciers

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, ou get an unobstructed view Every day we have a good

day. Every day." After just a couple of days of exploring glaciers, I know

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.

