

GOING PLACES

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ALASKA'S FROZEN JURASSIC PARK



Staggering! There's no other word for it. And silent! Utterly, awesomely silent. A shh-don't-talk, other-worldly kind of silence that's broken only by an occasional sound the Tlingit Indians call "white thunder". A massive rolling, rumbling sound. Followed by a gunshot-like crack that tells you a glacier is calving ...

We're in Alaska, North America's Final Frontier, famous for whales and wildlife, teetering peaks and crunching ice. And there's no point exaggerating because everything we've seen so far on this rugged, rocky coast is pinch-me-please stunning!

Take Monday morning. While people at home were eating breakfast, we were out on deck whale-watching. It was a chilly, sea-misty day, with low cloud cloaking the forested shoreline and almost-but-not-quite hiding the mountain peaks. And we reached the town of Juneau without having spotted a single flapping whale.

But that was about to change ...

Juneau (Alaska's charming capital) is home to indigenous Indians with colourful totem-poles. And visitors come here from all over to kayak, dog-sled, raft, sightsee, fish, and explore the lush Tongass National Park. We wandered the town and poked around some end-of-season sales, then climbed aboard a jet-powered catamaran.

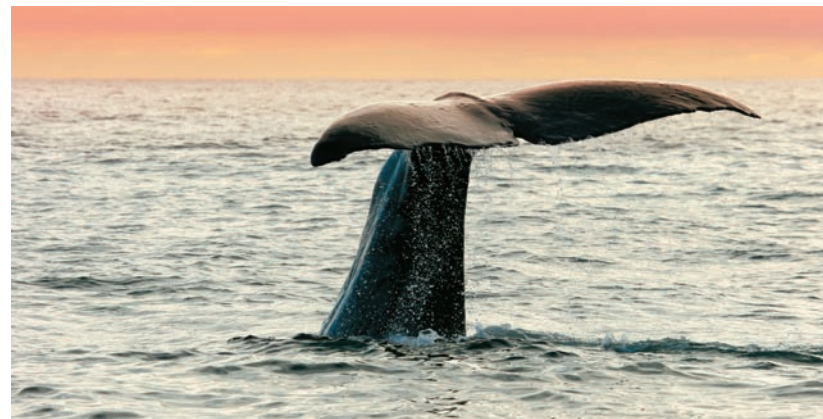
These inky-black island-studded waters are home to seals, sea-lions, bald eagles,



blacktail deer – and the feeding grounds of humpback whales. And we wasted no time spotting their telltale spouting. Before you knew it, we were right amongst these giants of the deep – mothers, mainly, and their young calves, lolling on the surface (their signature humps showing proudly) ... then diving lazily for food, their huge tail-flukes waving in the air.

I don't know what those majestic mammals thought of us humans, rushing eagerly from one side of the boat to the other, searching, shouting, pointing, and aiming our cameras in all directions at once, but we were utterly captivated by them.

And a close-up look at a beachful of





White Pass & Yukon narrow-gauge railway and clattered off between silvery-purple mountains, across rickety bridges and through once-popular spots like Deadhorse Gulch.

We even tried our hand at gold-panning – and came away with a few shiny, lucky specks in tiny plastic bags!

But Tuesday wasn't finished with us yet. We also got to ride a helicopter (in convoy with other helicopters) up-up-up into Alaska's spectacular mountains – where we eyeballed jagged peaks, tortured



yawning, roaring, rioting sea-lions simply added to the magic on our way home!

Tuesday found us up the end of another beautiful fjord – in Skagway, one-time kick-off point for the hectic Klondike Gold Rush. It was late 1800s, and Skagway (cramped with shops, banks, hotels, dance halls and saloons) was overflowing with gold-panners, storming up every valley and sloshing through every creek in search of the promised yellow ore that lay waiting to be plucked.

A strong, biting cold wind got us throwing on coats and scarves, and it wasn't hard to imagine the frightful conditions way back then. We'd chosen end-of-summer – but those hopeful prospectors had to endure freeze-your-butt-off winters.

We grabbed a ride on the antique

valleys, cascading waterfalls and massive glaciers, before landing on one of them, the mighty Meade Glacier, for a guided walking tour.

You couldn't help feeling a certain reverence as you stepped out onto the ice ... knowing that this surreal landscape had taken thousands of years to form. We clomped around in oversized glacier-boots, gazed into the distance, tasted pure meltwater, tried not to fall down spooky-blue crevasses, and kept muttering: "This is fantastic – absolutely FANTASTIC!"

Today, Wednesday, we donned long undies, warm layers and woolly hats as we cruised slowly into the World Heritage Park known famously as Glacier Bay. Only 200 years ago, these shorelines were themselves buried under an impossibly-thick icy slab. And, today, more glaciers

meet their end in these chilly waters than anyplace else in the world.

Alaska's 'rivers-of-ice' (like the one we walked on yesterday) began life some 4000 years ago, as frozen snow – 10 times denser than the iceblocks in your fridge. When their packed-down weight got too much they began inching downhill, reshaping the landscape and gathering rubble on the way. And when their front-ends (often kilometres wide) finally reached the sea, they began breaking up ...

It's called 'calving'. It happens with a thunderous roar, when a huge chunk of glacier splits off and crashes into the Bay – shooting torrents of water high in the air, and rocking your boat if you're close!

And when that submerged chunk of glacier pops back up to the surface – behold, an iceberg is born!

It happens every gob-stopping, eye-popping day in Alaska ...




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GENERALLY, HELPFUL HINTS AREN'T.