

North to Alaska June 2007

This one started like many of our trips do- with something in the mail. It was on a very small ship that cruised the Inside Passage of Alaska. However, after some discussion, KL and I decided the ship was really too small for comfort.

However, the very next day I got an e-mail offering 50% off on the Regent Mariner, a 700 passenger, all suites, all balcony ship. I called KL about it, and she of course said yes! I then put in a call to our travel agent and told him we were also past passengers on the cruise line and asked him to see what he could do for us.

I got a call back from the travel agent that not only were we booked, but as past passengers, we got upgraded from Category H to E, and there is a \$1000 difference in price. I went to the ship's website, and printed out all the shore excursions. The next time KL and I got together, we discussed which ones we were interested in-some were very expensive. KL found a sea kayaking excursion for me and she will be going to a place that helps bald eagles. A friend of mine at work mentioned something about zip lines, and we found one offered at Ketchikan. It was called a canopy adventure and it sounds fantastic. I have seen programs of them down in Cost Rica, so this will be an experience for both of us. Zip lines are cables strung up in the trees and you sit in a sling and go tearing down them from one platform to another.

I went on line and booked the excursions and got a confirmation from the cruise line by e-mail. We have to wait until 30 days prior to sailing to book the alternative restaurants. A funny thing happened with the on-line restaurant bookings. I went to the site and it said all the reservations were taken, but I went back to the site on a whim, and was able to make our reservations.

Our documents arrived at the house, and we looked through them to make sure everything was OK, which it was. Our travel agent also sent us nice passport covers, and KL started laughing. I asked her what was so funny, and she said, "A year ago I did not even have a passport, and now I have to choose between 2 covers for mine".

AIRPORT

Because of the fact we had an early flight out and a late flight returning, we opted to use a car service instead of the airport shuttle. We also booked a hotel down close to Los Angeles International to avoid any traffic problems in the morning.

When we went in to register, we were told we were upgraded to a suite with a spa!

KL said, "I did not bring a suit"
and I said, "well neither did I". To prove my balance in nature theory, we got a spa suite but the spa was inoperative

Well, we made the best of it, though, there was no water in the spa, so we threw in a couple of pillows, and opened the wine we had brought.

We sat in the spa and watched TV for a while, then called for a 6AM wakeup (ugh) I broke out the manual for my camera and found the button for the self timer and set the camera up on the bar to take the picture. I have a mini folding tripod and it worked very nicely.



We got our wakeup the next morning, and I went down to the breakfast room and brought KL back some coffee to get her heart started. The hotel had a nice little continental breakfast room and we packed a little to take to the airport with us. We were flying Air Canada, and from my past experience, I knew they gave you nothing.

The flight was uneventful, and after a long wait for our luggage, we were met by the ship's representative and taken to meet our bus. The rep told us it would be about 10 minutes, but came back 15 minutes later and told us it would be 10 minutes for the bus to arrive. I said, "That was what you said 15 minutes ago".

We were taken to the Pan Pacific Hotel next to the cruise terminal, and escorted to a hospitality suite. They had tea, coffee and cookies, but that was not going to do it for us. We had about 3 hours to kill, and I noticed that 2 blocks away was an area called Gastown, sort of like the Gaslight district in San Diego.

We were given a map and found a brewpub that had great pizza and beer (of course). We then did a little bit of shopping and saw a very unusual clock that was powered by steam. Instead of chiming, it had whistles to whistle the Big Ben chimes.

We wandered back to the hotel, picked up the luggage we left behind, and headed to the ship. The walk was quite long, but the check in was very short. We were given our cruise cards, and were escorted to our suite. I waited for KL to enter first to get her reaction. Our first cruise was on the Paul Gauguin, and the suite was about 200 square feet. This suite was 300 square feet, PLUS had a veranda! It really knocked her socks off. There was a bucket with champagne waiting for us, plus a stocked refrigerator.

We went up on deck for the sail away festivities, and passed under the Lion's Gate bridge, which connected downtown Vancouver with its North shore.



The next day was a sea day, so we slept in to make up for the lack of sleep the night before. Since we had the veranda, we called room service and had our breakfast out on the veranda. The weather was absolutely fantastic. We wandered around the ship to see where everything was, and then had lunch on the pool deck outside.



We passed an interesting light house, and an hour or so later I saw the pilot boat coming alongside. KL had never seen a pilot transfer so I told her how it worked. The pilot boat pulls along side our ship and matches the speed of the ship. Our ship then puts down a ladder, and the pilot goes down the ladder and jumps onto the pilot boat. The pilot boat then pulls away and goes back to its port.

Since it was a sea day, we decided to take what we called and “old people’s nap” before dinner. Unfortunately we woke up 15 minutes before our reservation time. I called the restaurant and they said they will hold the reservation for 15 minutes only.

Well, KL must have been a magician, because she was completely ready in 15 minutes, and looked stunning. Dinner was very enjoyable, and we went back to our suite to relax before the show started.

KETCHIKAN

Our first port was Ketchikan, and KL opened the drapes to brilliant sunshine and a street that looked like it was from a movie set! There were all these false front buildings lining the street opposite the pier.



Our shore excursion here was called a Canopy Adventure. It involved flight over 8 zip lines and 3 aerial bridges. The flight started with a short 175 foot training run and progressed to the longest which was 850 feet (3 football fields). We started 135 feet above the forest floor, and ended up at a viewing tower 55 feet above the ground. I have to hand it to KL, she is afraid of heights, but did a fantastic job on the zip lines.



After we finished the course, we were taken to the lodge to remove our safety equipment and harnesses and we were all given custom cast Alaska Canopy Adventures medal with a red ribbon.



Aerial bridge



We survived!!!!

TRACY ARM FJORD

The next day we boarded a smaller ship called the Glacier Explorer to visit North and South Sawyer Glacier. We cruised beneath 4000 foot cliffs, and saw all manner of icebergs and waterfalls. The pictures speak for themselves.



While on the boat, we had an interesting experience. KL wears a flying dolphin pendant that belonged to her late husband, and for the anniversary of our first meeting, I gave her the matching earrings. Both the pendant and the earrings were made by a Santa Barbara sculptor and artist named Bud Bottoms.

A lady came up to her and commented on the earrings and said she had the matching pendant! It turns out she was also from Southern California and had attended a fundraiser and both Bud Bottoms and his son Joseph were there! We motored up to the face of the South Sawyer Glacier, and could see a dark stripe on the right hand side. This is called a moraine, and it happens when the glacier had to go around rocks and grinds some of the rock off.



On the way out of Tracy Arm, I got pictures of a mother and baby seal, and a bald eagle perched on an ice floe.



JUNEAU

The boat brought us into Juneau where we boarded our ship and ordered lunch from room service. It was really great having the veranda, and we ate lunch there looking over downtown Juneau. After lunch we made our obligatory stop at the Red Dog Saloon, a well known tourist stopping point.



We wandered the downtown area for a while, stopping in all the shops to see what was offered that did not come from China, but was native. I bought a beautiful soapstone carving of an Eskimo hunter in his kayak. In our travels , we passed an area that used to be the red light district and I pointed out a house called Dolly's that is a museum. KL said, "Ok Steve, I will give you some money".

That night we decided to dine en suite, and started off with shrimp cocktail and matzo ball soup. KL had never had it, so I took a picture of her eating her first matzo ball so I could send it to my mother.



SKAGWAY

Our next port was Skagway, at the northern end of the Inside Passage. In 1898 there was a gold rush in the Klondike, and this was the only way to get there without going overland through Canada. There were 2 passes the people had to climb; a shorter steep one or a longer one with a gentler slope. The problem was the Mounties would not let anyone pass that did not have a ton of supplies, so the people had to have pack horses. Many horses died along the trail, and there is a place called Dead Horse Gulch because of all the horses that died there.

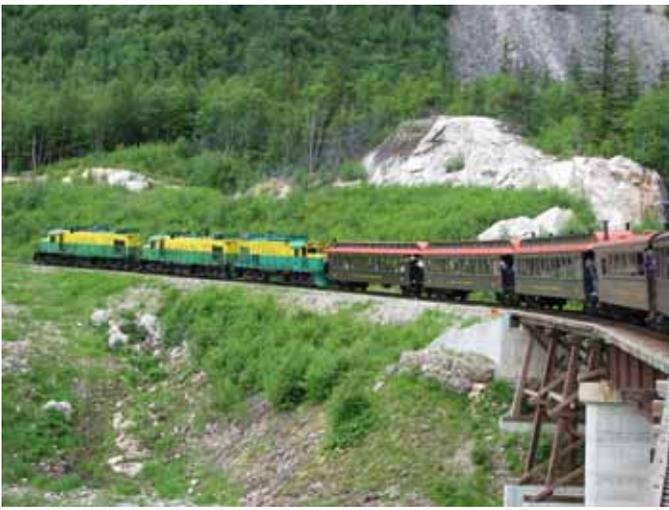
The tracks for the White Pass and Yukon Railroad came all the way out on the dock, so it was just a matter of getting off the ship and finding the coach that had our ships' name on it.



We were pulled by 3 locomotives because we had so many cars. A Carnival ship with 2100 passengers had docked behind us, and they had to add a bunch of cars to accommodate them.

There was also the Pacific Princess in port, with 700 passengers, the same capacity as our ship. If you do the math, the 3 ships hold 3500 passengers, PLUS the crews! The town of Skagway has a permanent population of about 800, so you can see what happens when the ships come in.

The WP & R was built in 1898 to accommodate the Gold Rushers, and is an International Historic Civil Engineering Landmark. It is a narrow gauge line and climbs almost 3,000 feet in just 20 miles. It features steep grades of 3.9% (3.9 feet elevation for every 100 feet of track) and turns as sharp as 16 degrees. I will again let the pictures speak for themselves.



There was a steep climbing turn, and we could see a train on the other side of the gorge making its way up



We had sort of an embarrassing moment in the tunnel above. It was a long dark tunnel, and I reached over to KL and kissed her. Well apparently we both had our eyes closed, because all of a sudden we ran out of tunnel! There were snickers all around us and the lady ahead of us hit her husband and said, "See, we could have done that too"



The cantilever bridge is no longer used, but it was the highest one in the world at one time. The sign commemorating the Trail of '98 shows just how steep and rugged the trail was to the pass. When we got to the top of the pass, there were the US and Canadian flags and a boundary obelisk marking the border. To get us down, the locomotives went past us on a passing track and coupled to the back (now front) of the train. The seats in the coaches were designed to be flipped over so we were all facing the direction of travel.



The railroad also offered the same trip pulled by a steam engine, but it was much more expensive. Since I just rode 8 steam trains in Wales, I did not think we needed that experience. I was told by one of the crew that the steam engine would pass us while we waited, so I was out on the open platform when it came by.



SITKA

In Sitka we went different ways, as KL found a sea kayaking excursion for me. She is interested in bald eagles and a visit to a raptor center plus some Russian dancers were also featured on her tour. The first place she visited was the raptor center, where there was a bald eagle on display with its trainer.



The next stop was a live performance of the New Archangel dancers. They wear authentic costumes from Ukraine, Moldavia, Georgia, and Russia.



The final stop was at the Sitka National Historical Park, which was lined with totem poles.



While KL was on her excursion, I went Sea kayaking. I was taken to a site to put on our rain gear (not needed) and life jackets (needed) and we were taken out to a floating house where we changed to lighter life jackets and were paired up in 2 person kayaks. I got a young lady from Uruguay who worked the Reception Desk on the ship. I asked her if she had ever been in a kayak, but it turned out later she and some friends built a raft so she knew how to paddle.

We paddled down to the end of the inlet, looking for bears, but had no luck seeing any. We did see some bald eagles, including one with a large chunk of moss in its claws, probably to fix up its nest.



As we left Sitka, we saw some beautiful homes on all the little islands in the bay. One requirement of all school children is that they learn how to swim at an early age because of the boats they may have to take to get to school.



HUBBARD GLACIER

The Hubbard Glacier was a real disappointment, as for some reason we did not go all the way to the face of the glacier. On the ship's PA system, there was narration by representatives of 2 local tribes, and they were kind enough to let me take a picture of them in their ceremonial costumes.



After leaving the glacier, we had a spectacular lunch on the pool deck. There was grilled lobster tail, bratwurst, and my favorite, a pile of New Zealand mussels. Following that, there was a demonstration of ice carving



While we getting ready for dinner, much to my dismay, I could not find my camera! Needless to say, I was extremely upset about it. KL, however, being the voice of reason, said, "You can replace the camera, and we still have our memories". I went down to the reception desk, and asked if anyone turned in a camera. The lady opened the drawer and took out a Kodak disposable camera, and I told her that was not it. We went back to our suite to try and figure out where I might have left it, and in retracing our steps, figured out that I must have left it on the pool deck when we moved from the lunch table to the lounges.

Nothing more could be done, so went down to the dining room deck. I stopped at the reception desk to give my name and address to the lady there in case the camera turned up. It turned out this young lady was the one I had shared the kayak with the previous day.

I told her of my problem, and she opened the same drawer the other lady did and took out that same little camera. However, this time she also lifted out a jacket under the little camera, and miracle of miracles, there was my camera! The lesson learned was to put my name and address on the camera, which it has now.

That made dinner a whole lot more enjoyable, and as it was our final night on board, they had some really good entrees. We both opted for the Beef Wellington, which a filet roast wrapped in puff pastry and served with a wonderful sauce!



ALAKAN WILDERNESS PRESERVE

The next day we left the ship (sob), and headed to Anchorage. The scenery on the road from Seward to Anchorage was breathtaking-snow capped mountains reflected in still lakes, and wildflowers blooming all over.

About half way there, we stopped at a preserve that had some of the animals we did not get a chance to see in our travels. The other reason we stopped was the trucks with the luggage were behind us and we had to let them get to the airport first.

We spent about a half hour or so there and then headed to the airport in Anchorage.



Brown Bear



Caribou



Musk Ox



Elk

GETTING HOME

Well, getting home was an adventure too. We had a flight from Anchorage to Seattle, then to Los Angeles. We had about a 50 minute connection, but the Anchorage plane was 40 minute late, so it made it tight on the other end. We told the flight attendant and before the plane landed she told us our plane was going to be at C14 (the last gate on one terminal), and our connecting flight was at D5!

Just before the plane landed, she made an announcement requesting everyone stay in their seats so we could get off first. It took forever to get the Jetway rolled up, and I check the board and it was apparent they had delayed the departure of our flight. We were not going to run to make it, because that made no sense, so I shanghaied a lady driving one of those electric carts and we made it!

We got to Los Angeles and I immediately went to the baggage service counter. The person there said we could not submit a claim until all the bags from the flight were off the plane. I told him we barely made it, and the bags certainly could not have. So after about 45 minutes (it is now 12:15AM) I went back and they told me the bags would be on the first flight in the morning. I gave them my office address because nobody would be home to accept the bags at my house.

We filed the claim and headed to the San Fernando Valley. By this time it had been 14 hours since we ate, so I told our driver to pull into a Del Taco, and I placed our order. We pulled up to the drive up window, and I had the back window rolled down, and I handed the man the money- I got a strange look, but we got our food.

Well, the next day I went into work, and had a retirement party for my boss to go to that night. By the time I left work my bags had not been delivered, and I wondered what happened. I got home about 9PM and called KL, to see if she

got hers. She told me they showed up with all 4 of our bags! She told the delivery person, "I just travel with him-I do not live with him" and that 2 of them were supposed to be delivered to my office before 5 PM that day.

I got on the phone with the people at Alaska Airlines and told them what had happened. They were apologetic and said the bags would be delivered the next day to my office. I told them I wanted them between 8AM and noon that day.

I got into work the next morning, and there were my bags in the lobby! Fortunately we have a night shift and the delivery person had stopped by the office at 9:30 PM the previous night and the night shift supervisor got them for me!

Well, all's well that ends well, and we are home for 2 weeks when we take a local trip to see the Pageant of the Masters at Laguna Beach.

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