

Northern Sun Summer Chills —

Alaska

text & photos *Valerie Chew*

Snow-capped mountains (top) A Glacier landscape (inset)

I was wondering why the clouds looked so strange from the plane on our way to Anchorage; it was only after a while that I realized that the 'clouds' were not clouds at all! They were pointy snow-capped mountains. It was such a beautiful sight; and for us strangers to the polar caps it seemed that Christmas came early this year. As we passed the icing-topped mountains, gazed upon the sea and the land, rows of coniferous trees parted to make way for our landing, and the plane settled nicely between them. One thing that struck me right from the beginning was the glorious scenery, and I was looking forward to the many surprises Alaska had in store for us.

The moment we stepped foot outside the airport, we were caught unawares by the warmth of the place. Considering how we were surrounded by snow-capped mountains, Alaska felt strangely warm. A local explained that the month of June was late spring or early summer, so although snow still covers the mountain tops, the areas below were starting to green. According to her, the mountains just greened up about a week ago, so we were lucky we came in good weather.

So where were the Eskimos, them folks riding in sledges, wrapped in polar fur-skins and eating raw seal meat? That my friends, is a myopic view on what this wonderland is all about. In reality Alaska is a pretty modern city and rarely can such indigenous natives be found, but only in the interior of the landmass of higher up North. Based on geography and language, there are eleven indigenous cultures among Alaskan natives. These include the Athabascan, Alutic and Eyak among others; and only a few would identify themselves as Eskimos and each subgroup have their own unique and distinct culture.

We took a coach from Anchorage to Whittier. Along the way, I noticed planes landing on water. They were hydroplanes or seaplanes: aircrafts designed to take off and land at sea. We passed Lake Hood Seaplane Base, the busiest seaplane port in the world. After that, we entered Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel, the longest tunnel in the United States. It was extremely dark and narrow; taking six-and-a-half minutes to get through. At the end of the tunnel, Sapphire Princess, our cruise ship, awaited us at the city of Whittier. Able to hold up to 2670 passengers, it is akin to a hotel on water. The cruise begins at Whittier, travels to College Fjord, then Glacier Bay. It later makes three ports of call:

Sapphire Princess-Gem of the Sea

Land of the midnight sun

READY PASSPORT GO!

Skagway, Juneau and Ketchikan. Then finally, we will alight at Vancouver. The tagline of the company reads, 'Princess Cruises: escape completely'. We did not sense the truism of this statement until the ship set sail.

Entering a world so different from our usual green and warm climate was really a form of escapism; even our mobile phones had no signal, cutting us off from the rest of the world. There were no worries as my whole family was together on this trip. The moment we entered the ship, warm smiles guided us from the entrance, all the way to our stateroom, or cabin. We also had an informative stateroom steward assigned to us, who took care of our every need. We stayed on Caribe or Level 10. I cannot begin to describe the view from our room. It was so amazing. If we kept really quiet and listened very carefully, we could actually hear the mountains sing. The distant music coming from the rushing falls of melted snow resonating with solemn energy as they create new brilliant snow-scapes. It was good thinking on Dad's part that we managed to enjoy such a luxurious view of the scenery. He insisted on having only rooms fitted with balconies. Dad happily proclaimed, 'I have brought the mountains to your bedroom'. Indeed, how sweet it is to wake up every morning to mountains and unobstructed skies.

A moving piece of art framed by window panes, ever-changing, as the ship trudged forward, at times I would glaze awestruck: watching the mountains dance- the sinewy rise and fall of their arched backs; hearing the waters sing- the rush and ebb of chilly waters as they struck the sides of our ship; and tasting the air so sweet-fresh alpine and marine notes lingered. Sometimes I think we are so caught up in our mundane world that we fail to appreciate the beauty of nature. To feel the cold breeze brush against my skin and to the warmth of my cup of tea, infusing my insides, I was contented. In Alaska, the sun seemed to be shining forever. It was the first time I experienced a midnight-sun. The sun sets at about one a.m., and rises before four a.m., leaving little time for darkness. To experience the notion of timelessness is an intriguing feeling that is priceless.

We entered Glacier Bay on the third day of our cruise. As its name suggested, glaciers in a brilliant shade of turquoise flourished in this area which contains the highest concentration of tidewater glaciers. Glaciers are formed by the compression of snow crystals. The crystalline structure of glacial ice allows for the absorption of all colors of the spectrum except blue which travels on a shorter wavelength. Thus, when light strikes the glacial ice, the observer sees blue. As we admired the tranquility that the glaciers bring, thunderous bouts of falling ice disrupted the peace. Similar to avalanching, calving is the phenomenon that occurs when salt water melts

An awesome Reflections

READY PASSPORT GO!

the glacier's snout and huge pieces of ice crack off the face. The Margerie, Grand Pacific and John Hopkins Glaciers are so 'active' that from a distance, we could see icebergs being born.

Same place, different view. I was surprised to see lush greenery when I woke up the day we reached Skagway. Mountains covered with fresh green plants took the place of snow-capped mountains I saw just a day before at the exact spot where I looked out my balcony. Yet another surprise came in the guise of a knock on my stateroom door. Balloons hovered above me when I opened the door, only to be enveloped in the arms of my parents presenting me with hugs and kisses, along with a birthday card. My siblings and grandmother arrived later, singing a birthday tune and then placed a lovely whale's tail necklace on my neck. I was elated.

This was also a day that we first set foot on land after the many days at sea. It was nice to hear the rustling of leaves and be among flowers that smiled at us. The air was crisp and we toured the small town with the sun on our backs. At dinner, I was presented again with another surprise: my mum ordered a beautiful vase of assorted flowers which the crew brought together with a cake as they sang me a birthday song. This really was a memorable birthday, the best I have had so far, mostly because I felt so happy and loved.

We arrived at Juneau, the third largest city in Alaska; Anchorage being the largest. There we arranged for a special tour to go whale-watching. We were very excited as these are wild whales, which can be seen only if we were lucky. Traveling by coach, we stopped-over at Mendenhall Glacier. When we were there, a piece of glacier drifted to the shore, and I was able to feel and taste the glacier. It had a jigsaw-like structure and felt and tasted just like a huge chunk of ice. Later, we boarded the catamaran, Saint Nicholas, anticipating a thrilling chase of wildlife. Once at sea, we were enthralled by the beautiful scenery and the many wild animals that greeted us. Seals, Steller sea lions, Bald eagles, Blue herons and Black bears were among the many we saw. We also spotted playful porpoises, which are similar to dolphins, swimming alongside us. The most relishable of which is no doubt the whales. The Killer whale or Orca differs from the Humpback in that the former shows its fin when diving; while the latter, its tail. A family of three Orcas gave us a wonderful performance. The element of surprise makes viewing even more exciting. A Humpback snuck up on us while we were watching another flipping its tail. We could literally feel the boat tilt as people ran from one side to another, just to take a better look at the whales. The 'blow' of the Humpback: a cloud of condensed water vapor, acts a prelude to their flashy tails. It was a magnificent Nature show and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Food, when shared among people you love, always tastes the best. On this trip, our taste buds were spoilt for choice. Anytime dining was available throughout the cruise. Informal dining came in the form of twenty-four-hour buffets, pizzeria, burger and hot dog grill, late-night bistro and more. Formal dinners were held at the Pacific Moon nightly. The menus differed each night, but dishes like the popular prawn cocktail was an evergreen on the menu. The Alaskan king crabs were fantastic - taken freshly steamed to retain its natural

Rainbow-the sign of the covenant



Irresistible treats from Alaska



Paws as sweet as honey



Lobster at Pacific Moon

juiciness, a hint of lemon and melted butter added a lovely touch to this excellent dish. The succulent lobsters were served with asparagus and flavoured rice; escargots with garlic and butter, grilled rabbit meat, and assorted caviar also topped my list of favorites. The desserts were outrageous and my personal indulgence was the Chocolate Pudding: crispy chocolate cake that was velvety soft on the inside, treacherously doused with a generous pour of hot melted chocolate. Even the humble freshly baked chocolate chip cookies were objects of our delight for they were just too delicious.

Our final stop was Ketchikan, the wettest city in North America. True to its title, it rained incessantly when we were there. As such, we only spent a few hours roaming the town. Ketchikan is also known as Alaska's 'First City' because it is the first place travellers discovered when traveling north. That night, we caught a musical, 'Undercover', amusingly delightful; our senses were treated to a colourful and spectacular ensemble. My favorite part of the show was when they acted out the board game Cluedo; it was ingenious and hilarious.

Alaska is a jewel of a place, a treasure on earth so beautiful that only few can imagine. It is not simply the sight of the beauty that stands before us, but more of the sense of euphoria we get when we are immersed in such works of art, molded miraculously and majestically by the forces of nature. Before the trip, we did not know such a beautiful place on earth existed, but now we do. On the last day on board Sapphire Princess, there was a friendly visit and a beacon-call from nature in the form of a magical display of the rainbow. The colors were so intense and its magnitude so overwhelming that we were totally captivated. Hence marking the end of our trip -The rainbow- A sign that reminded us of the good times we had and a promise of good times yet to come. [D](#)