



## Going with the Floe

### Kayaking Alaska's Icy Strait and Glacier Bay

By Rob Dunton

**F**ar in the distance, a blast of water spews into the temperate July air off Point Adolphus, on the northern tip of Chichagof Island, in Alaska's Icy Strait. Against a dark backdrop of evergreens, the white puff morphs into a columnar-shaped cloud and slowly evaporates. Seconds later, another geyser erupts, followed by another, then another.

"It's another pod of humpbacks—from the look of it, half a dozen," explains Brian McGorry, our lean, bearded and preternaturally calm kayaking guide. Tight pods of six to 10 humpbacks

are rare: Whales do travel in groups, but usually in pairs or threes, not in feeding carnivals such as this.

A 29-year-old with dual degrees in outdoor education and eco-tourism, Brian has spent six years paddling Alaska's southeastern panhandle and knows well the shores around Chichagof Island, nearby Gustavus—40 miles across the strait and 60 miles west of Juneau—and the Tongass National Forest.

The Tlingit Indians were the original inhabitants of this area, pushed southward as glaciers expanded during the Little Ice Age. Ice from the 4,000-year-old Little Ice Age reached its maximum southern extension around 1750, then began to retreat. Though we've seen no trace of ice, Captain George Vancouver found the channel filled with it in 1794, and gave the waterway its name: Icy Strait. Now the area off Point Adolphus is ideal for watching humpbacks.

"According to researchers," Brian says, leading our group toward the pod, "Point Adolphus is the only place in the world where humpback whales congregate and 'group up' in such numbers and in such a small area." This is precisely why I've come.

Tucked in front of me in this tandem kayak is my buddy Scott Vickery. Another friend, Mark Rauch, paddles nearby. Together we form a trio of lifelong friends who have been pushing the water-adventure envelope—kayaking, scuba diving, rafting and waterskiing—for more than 20 years. For this adventure we have signed on with Alaska Discovery for two back-to-back kayaking expeditions to explore Southeast Alaska's panhandle: three days of communing with humpback whales off Point Adolphus, followed by four days immersed in the natural

wonders of Glacier Bay. We are nearing the end of our second day, quietly viewing one pod of humpback whales after another.

In sync after our first day of paddling, Scott and I put our shoulders into each stroke and race toward the action, but Brian calls us back. Whales are big, currents are strong, and the water is cold. Stay close.

A subtle splash emanates as each blade enters and exits the water. A few drops fall, and a soft breeze passes our ears as we cut through the water. Otherwise our fiberglass kayak is silent. This quiet interaction with nature is one of the draws of this form of transport: no rush, car engines, megaphones or crowds—just slow, silent paddlers and more whales than I have ever seen.

We cover the half-mile in about 15 minutes, and are now close enough that we heed the Marine Mammals Protection Act—whales are federally protected, and no

Above: Steller sea lions sun themselves on rocky islands in Glacier Bay National Park.

Left: Kayakers navigate ice floes in Glacier Bay.

A kayaker watches a pod of whales off Point Adolphus.



ROB DUNTON

one is allowed to approach within 100 yards of them. Even from this distance, we hear the distinct “puff” of each whale’s exhale as it sends a plume of atomized water 15 feet into the air. Suddenly a deep trumpeting sound erupts from the pod, then another. My pulse quickens. We have never heard whales do this before, and the excitement in our group grows. Some would love to move closer, others farther back. I’m not sure whether to pull out my camera or be vigilant in my paddling. Scott offers to maneuver us solo, so my camera begins to click.

The whales twist and weave fluidly as they hunt for krill, shrimp and small fish. Watching humpbacks intertwine like a bucket of bus-size snakes is a surprise—and apparently a rare sight. As each 40- to 50-foot whale dives below the surface, its namesake hump—akin to a worn, rounded dorsal fin—arches past, followed by the flukes of a wide tail. Blowholes open and close with each breath. The feeding pod moves toward us, and we back-paddle to maintain a safe distance.

As the tide turns, we need to head back to our campsite, a collection of roomy tents set in a lush temperate rain forest a mile to the east. We paddle along the verdant coast, followed by a handful of curious sea lions. Bald eagles perch regally on shoreline boulders and in treetops. We scan the beaches for roaming bear, deer or moose, but see none.

On our return, our guides craft a dinner on the beach—baked wild salmon, fresh fruit and homemade brownies. Rainwater, potable here, has been channeled from our dining tarps into jugs, and we drink from the sky. We hear stories of recent sightings from our guides: a collection of humpbacks that, working together, blew a “bubble net” around a school of migrating herring, then surged from the depths, mouths agape, to ingest them; or a group of killer whales who batted a sea lion around like a ball above the surface before consuming it.

Our routine in the wild has been refreshingly simple: Kayak with sea mammals, explore the temperate rain forest, dine on sensational camp food, relax with our congenial group and sleep. Our sightings have become so frequent and spectacular that when Brian surveys our group about a last paddle at dawn before returning to Gustavus, only two of us express any interest.

Since I’m getting up early, Scott and I head to our tent to retire in

the hours-long twilight. As we enter the dense canopy of hemlock and spruce, the vegetation is so prolific, I feel like a wall of freshly minted oxygen is enveloping me. As Scott and I tuck ourselves into our respective sleeping bags, we hear puffs offshore as more whales cruise past.

“Ever wonder if whales dream?” I ask Scott. His snore is his only response.

In the morning, we load up and head for Gustavus, where we spend the day sorting gear, riding bikes in town, buying salmon to ship home and, in general, relaxing.

After a rejuvenating night of table service at Annie Mae Lodge, warm showers and comfortable beds, Scott, Mark and I join a new Alaska Discovery group and head down the road to the dock at Bartlett Cove, headquarters for Glacier Bay National Park. Here we meet two transport boats loaded with kayaks and gear. Our second expedition, to Glacier Bay, begins as our Point Adolphus trip did: with a stunning boat excursion.

The 60-mile ride north up Glacier Bay is as fascinating as it is beautiful. Pristine mountains, forests and inlets surround us. To the west looms the dramatic Fair-weather Range, source of ice to the glaciers on the peninsula. During the two-hour ride, we witness what nature has accomplished over the past 250 years. From a lifeless slab of granite scraped clean by thousands of years of ice, a vibrant forest ecosystem has emerged.

When the Declaration of Independence was being signed, Glacier Bay was little more than an inlet, and Bartlett Cove was buried under a glacier 20 miles wide and 100 miles long. By the time John Muir arrived in 1879, the glacier had retreated enough to leave 40 miles of freshly carved bay. Today, visitors must motor more than 60 miles from the densely reforested Bartlett Cove to reach the barren face of Johns Hopkins Glacier (named, in 1893, by H.F. Reid, an alumnus of the university).

Twenty miles into our journey, we pass Francis and Drake islands, both of which would have been under glaciers in 1857. We slow as we come to a large colony of Steller sea lions sunning themselves beneath the brilliant summer sky. We pass flocks of



horned puffins and pelagic cormorants, then stop at the base of a granite wall to watch a mountain goat enjoying a meal of grass on a sheer ledge with no visible access.

Finally the boats slide their reinforced hulls onto a wide cobblestone beach a mile and a half across the sound from Lamplugh Glacier, at the mouth of Johns Hopkins Inlet. This will be our campsite for the night. As recently as 1907, this beach was beneath a massive ice floe, but the glacier has since retreated 13 miles north.

Shelli Ogilvy, our guide, was born and raised in Gustavus. A buff, outdoorsy artist with degrees in marine ecology and outdoor recreation leadership, she has been guiding for 11 years.

With our tents firmly anchored in the cobblestones and our provisions stowed in a row of bear-proof containers, our group—with members who hail from as far away as Estonia and Australia—partners up and slips into kayaks, then heads toward Lamplugh Glacier. The glacier is named after English geologist George W. Lamplugh, who visited Glacier Bay in 1884.

We paddle past ice cubes and icebergs, through milky, jade-green water. Considering the abundance of ice in the water, the midday air is surprisingly comfortable—high 50s to mid-60s.

We park our kayaks on a rocky beach north of the tidewater glacier,

next to a glacier-fed stream. Shelli unfurls a checkerboard tablecloth and lays out a hearty lunch with pita bread and hummus, smoked salmon, and fresh fruit. Replenished, we hike to the base of the glacier where a shallow cave has been carved by a river of melted ice. Then we paddle within 100 yards of the glacier's face, examining a surface strewn with rocks and boulders gathered from moraines along the way, and colored in an array of whites and blues depending on the density of the ice. The more compacted the snow—which becomes glacial ice—the more the red (long wavelengths) part of white light is absorbed by ice and the blue (short wavelengths) is transmitted and scattered.

We keep our distance, keenly aware that city-block-size slabs of ice could calve at any time, creating glacial waves. Near the mouth of the inlet we see a cruise ship idle in, circle to take in the view, then leave. Except for this, we have not seen another boat or kayak in hours. The inlet is ours.

Pigeon guillemots, bald eagles and



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**Glacier Bay Lodge** is home to the National Park's offices. The waterfront lodge offers day tours up Glacier Bay. 888-BAY-TOUR; [www.visitglacierbay.com](http://www.visitglacierbay.com).

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Kittlitz's murrelets fly past, and we spot a few harbor seals with lightened fur that blends in with the iceberg.

We paddle lazily back to camp. Glaciers abound to our left and right on the water's edge and on mountainsides. Kim Heacox writes in his book *Alaska's Inside Passage*, "Alaska boasts more than one-hundred-thousand glaciers, most of them small and unnamed, but two ... are roughly the size of Rhode Island." When I read this, I couldn't grasp nature on such a vast scale. Now, as we leave the Lamplugh Glacier—at eight miles more than half as long as Manhattan—I'm paddling through it.

Back at camp we relax and take in the scenery as Shelli and her assistant, Sam, put together a Mexican feast of fresh fajitas and warm tortillas, then pour margaritas over glacier ice. The ever-present smoked salmon is a worthy appetizer accompanied by dried fruits and nuts. As the sky slowly dims, we circle up on the beach. Stories and laughter echo off the hills.

We wake late, load our kayaks, and move our camp six miles up the inlet, closer to Johns Hopkins Glacier. Here, ice litters the water; icebergs become common; and we see more harbor seals and pups reclining on the floes.

Once our new campsite is set, we paddle just more than five miles up the inlet until the frozen debris becomes too dense. Scott and I make an attempt to push another 50 feet into the inlet, only to have the route we forged close up behind us, ice surrounding us like antibodies attacking a

germ. As we bump and prod our way out, panic sets in: What if one of these car-size chunks flips, taking us with it? We finally exit the morphing minefield, and receive a well-deserved glare from Shelli. Apparently everyone else had heard her say, "Don't paddle into the ice." *Dumb move.*


We pull our boats onto a broad beach in full view of the massive glacier that ends here, 12 miles from its source at the eastern slopes of Lituya Mountain and Mount Salisbury. Only weeks earlier the area was deep under winter's lingering snow.

We hear a deep rumble and turn our heads to the glacier's face. Sound travels too slowly; the mass of calving ice is already in the drink. Our eyes glued to the fractured wall of moraine-stained ice, we wait to witness the next fall. Like a building imploding, a new section of ice gives way and falls with an explosive splash. Two seconds later, the related thunder arrives, and four minutes after that, the water along the shore surges and short waves hit the beach. We spend the afternoon picnicking, watching time melt into the tidewater.

Later, as we relax over our last dinner at camp, the waterline suddenly pulls back, then surges nearly 15 feet up the shore, with a crash. A massive calving must have occurred miles up the bay. For us, simple things such as hot food, the rustle of a stream and skipping rocks at a passing iceberg have become the important things. We've fallen into nature's rhythm, and just being here will do as much for our souls as the memory of a glacier calving or a breaching whale. We're reborn and refreshed, like the ice-shaped landscape around us. ▲

Rob Dunton writes about adventure and travel from Santa Barbara, California.

### GETTING THERE

 Alaska Airlines offers daily flights to Juneau, with seasonal connecting flights to Gustavus/Glacier Bay. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Alaska, visit the Web at [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 866-500-5511.

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