



Capital Adventure

Exploring Juneau and the Tongass National Forest

By Rob Dunton

As I push off the shoreline, the sound of fiberglass on sand gives way to silence as my kayak glides onto the surface of Mendenhall Lake. This body of water did not exist 80 years ago; the lakebed has been exposed and filled as Mendenhall Glacier has receded northward, nearly two miles since 1910. In this small part of southeastern Alaska's Tongass National Forest—the nation's largest at 16.8 million acres—every direction offers a view of water, lush evergreens and soaring mountains. To my left and right paddle my lifelong friends Scott and Mark, who have joined me to explore Alaska's capital, Juneau, and the forest that surrounds it.

Juneau is a waterfront town nestled in Alaska's Inside Passage, where fjords, glaciers and mountains meet the sea. Though larger than Delaware or

Above: A kayaker paddles past Mendenhall Glacier, about 12 miles from downtown Juneau.

Rhode Island, greater Juneau has just 31,000 residents. It is the only state capital with no direct road access—everyone arrives by air or sea. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 1800s, native tribes, including the Tlingit Indians, lived in the area and fished its rich waters. Today, the town looks like a postage stamp in a sea of green. Visitors come to ski at Eaglecrest Ski Area in the winter, fish for salmon and halibut in the summer, and, in every season, experience breathtaking wilderness at every turn.

Scott, Mark and I paddle our kayaks along the shore, past a beaver's lair. As we round a small peninsula, we see the face of Mendenhall Glacier and its floating icebergs. We put power into each stroke, and in 15 minutes we are circling a pair of icebergs, each as long as a city block and as tall as a five-story building. One has a long cantilevered arch protruding from its side, as though an arcing tidal wave has frozen in place. I imagine how much ice must exist below the surface to counterbalance such a protrusion. At first, we keep our distance, worried that these imposing structures will roll or collapse. Before long, though, curiosity gets the best of us, and we decide to paddle between the pair for a more intimate look.

After circling the icebergs, we head toward the glacial wall that rises more than 100 feet above the waterline. We stay alert, knowing that calving—the breaking away of part of the ice from its mass—can occur at any time. Dodging collapsing mountains of ice or rogue waves in a kayak is not a game I want to play.

An hour of spellbinding exploration later, we return to shore to meet Corey Denton, an ice-climbing guide from Above & Beyond Alaska, the local outfitter we rented our kayaks from, which also leads excursions into the Tongass wilderness. Corey's red beard and rosy cheeks give his face a look of alpenglow, and his calm demeanor reflects a lifetime of being outdoors. He spends part of every summer

in a house located three-quarters of a mile from the trailhead that leads to the glacier. With Corey is an unexpected guest, nature photographer Kent Mearig, Corey's pal since the sixth grade, who has just come off the ice after a morning of shooting photographs. It's clear that he's eager to return.

Mark, Scott and I follow Corey and Kent's lead into a shaded forest that skirts the glacier. We walk for nearly an hour, passing rocks painted with the year in which the fringe of the glacier extended to each spot. The pace of the glacier's retreat is staggering.

"One really cool thing about glaciers flowing out of the Juneau Icefield is that they move relatively fast," explains Corey. "The Mendenhall can flow up to three feet per day in the summer, and as a result, it changes dramatically. Crevasses open and close from year to year. New streams and moulins form; arches and tunnels appear randomly; and features change as the wind and sun melt the ice."

The young forest fades as we approach the glacier: Alder and willow give way to moss and lichen, and eventually to polished

Above: The Mount Roberts Tramway ascends about 1,800 feet above Juneau.



granite, exposed so recently there hasn't been time for life to take root. We strap on helmets and crampons, and are instructed how to use an ice ax, then we step onto the glacier. The terrain is undulating and wrinkled, yet open and ethereal. We spend an hour hiking through twisted gullies and serpentine tunnels, past sapphire streams and glacial ponds framed by the varied white surface, always on the lookout for fragile pockets or fissures that could give way underfoot.

Corey and Kent take us to a stunning moulin, a deep crevasse in the ice carved by surface water. On the edge of the gully, Corey drills in two long ice screws and secures a top rope to them. With Kent holding a safety line, Corey uses his ice axes to lower himself into the gorge with a waterfall rushing behind him. Three-quarters of the way to the bottom, the coarse ice wall turns glassy, a seemingly bulletproof surface that spiked crampons and ice axes can't penetrate. End of the line.

When Corey returns to the surface, Mark, Scott and I take turns mimicking his descent. What looked effortless for Corey is a sweat-inducing, adrenaline-pumping workout for us. Then we spend another hour winding our way off the ice.

Back on granite, we walk along the edge of the glacier to the broad mouth of an ice cave. We follow Corey and Kent inside, down a steep slope of granite, until we reach a river running deep within the ice. Kent hands me his tripod to use with my camera, knowing what awaits us, then motions us into the shallow stream. We scramble over river stones, following the stream deeper into the expanding cave. Every surface is intricately carved, polished and cerulean—nature's own Sistine Chapel.

"This place is constantly changing," calls out Kent over the reverberating sound of water flowing inside the ice. "New waterfalls appear on the surface, then disappear below the ice, and the changing light alters everything."

We duck through a narrow opening and find ourselves on the edge of a lake deep inside the glacier: It's an extension of Mendenhall Lake. Overhead, the ceiling is an intricate pattern of carved ice in a thousand variations of blue, from translucent turquoise to deep slate. In all my travels and life experiences, I have never seen anything crafted by

DETAILS

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man or nature that compares to this miraculous creation. The knowledge that, in the following weeks and months, the magical space will melt or calve away makes our visit all the more dreamlike.

Weary after our journey, Scott, Mark and I relish the hot tub that awaits us at Pearson's Pond Luxury Inn and Adventure Spa, our forested accommodations just a few minutes' drive from the glacier. When we arrive, proprietors Diane and Steve Pearson are waiting with wine, fruit and freshly baked cookies. Soon we are soaking our tired bodies beneath the evergreens.

The three of us awake, refreshed, to the scent of Sitka spruce and Western hemlock. Steve offers us a choice of two breakfast dishes: fresh blueberry pancakes or eggs Florentine made with gourmet cheeses.

Above: Alaska Zipline Adventures guide Ben Mallott enjoys a ride on the forested course.

I take a half-order of each. The meal is a perfect way to fuel up for the day's excursion—ziplining through old-growth forest.

Rachel and Matt DeSpain, owners of Alaska Zipline Adventures, designed their course among the canopies to have minimal impact on the old-growth forest it showcases. While the two were planning their business, they lived outdoors—attending town meetings while wearing dress clothes by day, and then retiring to their campsite in the evening to eat salmon they'd caught. Once permits for the course were approved, the DeSpains waited until winter to start construction, so that all of the building materials would be transported over snowpack to protect the fragile wetlands on the forest floor. Rachel and Matt's commitment to the environment earned Alaska Zipline Adventures certification by the nonprofit Sustainable Tourism Eco-Certification Program.

After a requisite safety talk, two practice runs and a thrilling zip with great views of the surrounding mountains, Scott, Mark and I find ourselves huddled with our nine fellow zipliners on a platform in the upper reaches of a towering Sitka spruce.

"Welcome to Jump!" exclaims Brittany "Gonzo" Gonzales, our cheerful guide. "The reason we call this tree 'Jump' is because this run is the closest thing to jumping out of a tree we do. We are 90 feet up, and we will zip 350 feet across to Noah's Arch, near ground level. Who's ready?"

I step forward. A guide secures my harness to the cable, and on the count of three, I leap. The cable above me seems to fly by, and the wind whistles through my helmet. At the end of the line, another guide helps me land safely on the platform. With a "yip!" and a "yahoo!" Mark and Scott follow. One by one, each member of our group makes the thrilling ride with glee.

Soon, all 12 of us are huddled on another platform, ready for the longest zipline of the day: the 700-foot run to Brother Tree. Below us winds Fish Creek, churning with spawning salmon. I clip in, leap off the platform and soar through the forest over the stream, which sparkles in

the midafternoon sun.

When I land on the next platform, hot spruce-tip tea awaits, along with crackers and smoked-salmon cream cheese. Posted on the railing are inspirational quotes, such as: "'Life is a daring adventure or nothing.' —Helen Keller." Perfect.

Back on terra firma, Scott, Mark and I head into the heart of Juneau's historic downtown to check in to our next accommodations: a meticulously restored 1906 bed-and-breakfast called Alaska's Capital Inn. We are greeted like family by innkeepers Linda Wendeborn and Mark Thorson, who show us around the colorful, well-tended gardens, and cozy living and dining rooms, and to an immaculate guest room with lovely antiques. We wash up and head out to explore town.

A block away is the impressive state capitol, a few blocks above the city's historic district. Queen Anne- and Victorian-style buildings from the gold-rush era line the streets, many of which are home to coffeehouses, restaurants, galleries and shops.

We explore handsome Franklin Street, set at the base of imposing Mount Roberts, and admire the period architecture. Then we check out the cruise ships moored along the waterfront. Floatplanes taxi up to wide wooden docks, dispatch passengers and take off again across the Gastineau Channel.

We make our way to the Twisted Fish Company, a waterfront restaurant known for its seafood, where we feast on wild salmon baked on a cedar plank, a mountain of Alaskan king crab legs, and seafood and cream cheese baked in puff pastry. Scott and Mark rehydrate with Alaskan Brewing Company's Summer Ale as we enjoy the twilight of sunset at 9:45 P.M.

After a good night's sleep, we head downstairs to find warm rhubarb muffins and granola set out on a long oak table. Mark Thorson offers us an upgrade—Alaska sourdough pancakes and thick-cut smoked bacon. We heartily accept.

For our last day, our trusty trio splits up. Scott and Mark, both avid fishermen, can't imagine going home without freshly

caught salmon, so they head off for a day of fishing. I join up with local outfitter Alaska Discovery for a trip down the Inside Passage via floatplane to Admiralty Island, to visit Pack Creek Wildlife Sanctuary, which boasts the highest concentration of brown bears in the world.

At the 60,800-acre sanctuary, our group of eight enters a temperate primal rain forest and hikes for a half-mile on a trail of peat moss. Our guide points out thimbleberry, salmonberry and thorny, low-lying devil's club. As we near the park's observation tower, we go silent so as not to scare away the animals we've come to see. The tower is perched on the edge of the sanctuary's namesake Pack Creek, named after Arthur Pack, a conservationist who lobbied for bear-protection measures enacted in 1934.

We ascend the ladder and enter the tower. From our roost, we can see pink salmon swimming in the creek below and bald eagles perched nearby. With a collection of binoculars and telephoto lenses, we spend about an hour scouring the surrounding brush for bears.

Next, we hike to an estuary named after Stan Price, who lived with his wife in the area that is now the sanctuary and habituated this colony of bears to humans in the 1950s. For the next two hours, one bear after another enters the clearing for a salmon dinner, then disappears back into the forest. Between bear visits, I soak up the quiet majesty around me, astounded that Juneau is only about 30 miles away. It is hard to believe that so much wilderness, with so few people, is so accessible. It's an idyllic combination I plan to take advantage of as often as possible. ▲

Rob Dunton is a freelance writer and photographer living in Santa Barbara.

GETTING THERE



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