

GET DIRTY PLAY OUTSIDE

EXPLORING THE UNTAMED
WILDERNESS OF SOUTHEAST ALASKA:
A HIGH-ENERGY INNERSEA DISCOVERIES
CRUISE TAKES YOU WHERE FEW HAVE
EVER BEEN BUT YOU WILL HAVE TO DO
SOME OF THE “DISCOVERING” YOURSELF.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV





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E'RE ON A MISSION. Zooming off from our adventure ship by Zodiac earlier this morning (at the bright and cheerful time of 7:00 am), our small hardy group is now tromping on an 11-mile hike through an eerie moss forest. Gnarly roots threaten to trip us if our eyes wander up to take in the beauty of branches dripping with delicate lichen. We're hunting for several kayaks that were dropped by helicopter the previous summer. Once we find them, we'll tack on a hard, five-mile paddle to Patterson Glacier – where we may be the first people ever to beach at the foot of this enormous, wild, windswept slab of ice and snow in southeast Alaska.

Our fearless leader, Dan Blanchard, is excited. The CEO of InnerSea Discoveries, which offers these “un-cruises,” he loves to escape his Seattle desk whenever he can to join a voyage. Despite trying, he's never reached Patterson Glacier in the 25 years that he's personally explored this region. Today, he's determined we'll make it.

And we do! But not before fording knee-deep streams (our guide Randall graciously carries the ladies across on his back, but the guys have to be manly and put up with soggy feet). And battling strong river currents, which almost force two of us (guess who?) to drop our paddles in

defeat and be swept backwards. And hoping the gangly moose calf, which scrambles up a slippery rock face, reconnects with her mother swimming in the river in front of our kayaks.

But by dinner time that evening – as all 76 guests on our little *Wilderness Discoverer* ship help themselves to steaming chicken Marbella with apricots, couscous and spinach-and-hazelnut salad – it is only exhilaration and a sense of awe we feel (okay, a few sore muscles too). For we are fortunate enough to experience all sorts of amazing adventures here in this vast, incredibly wondrous, wild place, where waterfalls gush and monstrous mountains rise steeply through the mists and there's no sign of human presence anywhere (except ours).

InnerSea Discoveries is unlike any other Alaska cruise. In fact, it's not really a cruise in the usual way you think of a cruise. We wear jeans for dinner and there's nary a shop on the whole voyage. InnerSea is the “high-energy, get dirty, play outside (rain or shine)” arm of the same company that operates the more deluxe American Safari Cruises. Aided by a young expedition team of keen and friendly American staff, InnerSea is more about helping you discover Alaska's “untamed wild and woolly wilderness.”

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This page:
The cosy 76-guest Wilderness Discoverer was designed for slipping into secluded areas rarely visited by other ships. At right, the dining room (top) and guest lounge.

Facing page:
InnerSea is about discovering Alaska's untamed wild and woolly wilderness—from close encounters with wildlife and wilderness hiking to stand-up paddle-boarding (that's our author Janice staying dry and making it look easy)

And, boy, do they do that well. In our first 24 hours onboard, we listen to the snap, crackle and pop (or "berg seltzer") of melting bits of icebergs while on a Zodiac ride to Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm, pick up three forest rangers for an impromptu ship's lecture on their work (they counted 780 seals the day before on the glacier), see a fat black bear ambling onshore, spy humpback whales in Frederick Sound, veer off course to invite a whale researcher and his four assistants aboard for dinner (they've run out of veggies and beer on the miniature island where they're living for the summer), and ogle big blue icebergs the size of trucks, with bald eagles perched on top.

The innovative cruise line launched its first two ships last summer for seven-night cruises between Juneau and Ketchikan. They quickly sold out their inaugural season. For 2012, they've added a third ship to sail between Juneau and Sitka, with three days exploring Glacier Bay National Park.

Made for slipping into secluded areas rarely visited by other people, these ships are cosy. They're so intimate that there are no room keys and guests often leave doors open when relaxing in their cabins.

There are cabins of various sizes on the ship, but ours is one of the smaller ones, in fact, we've been spoiled in the past and this is the teeniest we've ever slept in. But there's room for two single beds, or they can be pushed against the wall to make a double, plus a small side-table. Because InnerSea is committed to eco-cruising (and uses green cleaning supplies), bed sheets aren't changed during



the week. There's not a lot of closet space but guests are welcome to hang their jackets and sweaters on hooks in the hallways and stow their rubber boots, given out for the week, in lockers on deck. The private wet bathroom has a handheld shower and resembles a sailboat "head", but it all works just fine, given the adventure focus.

Guests are a mixed lot, who come from as far away as Australia and New Zealand. Most are active types in their 50s and 60s. On our cruise, there's Jim in his 70s, who hikes in shorts (brrr!) and is so buff he could put any young weightlifting jock to shame. And Toni from Minneapolis, who's here for the "critters and birds" ("If I want to gamble or see shows, I'll go to Vegas"). And a multi-generational family of ten celebrating the grandparents' 60th wedding anniversary – grandma and granddad read wildlife books onboard while the 20-something grandkids enjoy stand-up paddle boarding.

Stand-up paddle boarding? Yep. Along with kayaking, hiking and Zodiac forays – led by expert naturalist guides and included in the cruise price – there's SUP, the fastest-growing water sport in the world. You stand up on a board shaped like a large surfboard and paddle with a long oar. And here, you don't wear a wetsuit, just regular clothes and a light jacket.



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Closeup view of humpback whales.

Hmmm, won't you freeze to death if you fall in the water in Alaska? Actually, no. We don't paddle in Alaska's icy, glacier-fed waters, but in smooth-as-glass Pacific inlets. We both learn how to SUP, and then go off on our own, loving the quiet stillness and the core exercise as we glide by low-hanging cedars and shoreline rocks, covered with barnacles and black mussels.

Another favorite outing is the guided trek to Baird Glacier in Thomas Bay. After passing playful seals, we jump from our Zodiac into a field of violet lupins and pink River Beauty flowers. The beginning stretch passes through rocky fields, where the wind blows cold and white Arctic terns cry mournfully as they circle overhead. Upon reaching the push moraine (pile of rocks pushed by the glacier), we sink into deep boot-sucking mud, and then haul ourselves out with the help of hiking poles handed out for each hike. But it's the glacier itself that is fascinating to walk across. It's like a marvellous modern painting with jagged black, chocolate and white striations. We peer down into blue holes of icy water and leap across crevasses.

This is true wilderness, and InnerSea guests are the only Alaska visitors with permission to explore Baird Glacier. There are no marked trails. At the crack of dawn, the expedition team had earlier staked out a general route with red flags, but no one knows how best to navigate the glacier until we get there. Indeed, throughout the week, bush-whacking and trail blazing are par for the course.

Enrichment lectures add to the authentic experience. In Wrangell, a young Tlingit woman, wearing a traditional raven-embroidered cloak, comes aboard to share the history of her tribal people. Optional activities can be had too. For a small extra charge, you can sign up for snorkeling (with wetsuits), flightseeing, fishing, jet boat tours and overnight wilderness camping.

You'd think with all the physical activity, we'd lose a couple of pounds but unfortunately no. The food is just too good, with that home-made taste you get when cooking fresh for a small group. Breakfast might be hot seed oatmeal or cranberry scones with whipped Greek yogurt, followed by scrambled eggs and sausages. Lunch? Perhaps a seafood chowder and salad with cheesy cornbread, and baked raspberry bars for dessert. All meals are buffet (except for the king crab feast the last night), eaten family-style at tables of four and six.

By the end of the cruise, we feel like old friends with many of the guests. Someone organizes an email exchange list. A few lucky people stay on for the reverse itinerary, which explores different uninhabited coves and inlets. And one couple books a Hawaii trip on InnerSea's sister line, American Safari Cruises – a clean vote in favor of adventure cruising like this. 🐳

To learn more about InnerSea Discoveries, visit www.cruiseandtravellifestyles.com