

A Boater's Guide to the Last Frontier

FOR GENUINELY CONNECTING WITH PLACES, PEOPLE, AND LEGENDS, THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A MOTORYACHT TOUR OF THE FABULOUSLY FAR-OUT INSIDE PASSAGE TO ALASKA.
STORY AND PHOTOS BY CAPT. MARC ONETTO

Upon and around the cold, inky, fir-fringed waters of this far-flung wilderness, they say time does not exist. Or if it does, it hardly matters.

From May 17 until the end of July 2014, we cruised the Inside Passage from Seattle to Glacier Bay, Alaska, and back: Ted Burns captaining *San Wan*, an Ocean Alexander Mark I, and myself and a host of friends on my Marlow Explorer 61E *Lapérouse*. Ted and I had planned the trip for several years, and prior to our departure we made sure that our yachts were absolutely ready to go.

Here is a short list of preparations that we'd recommend for anyone planning a similar cruise. First, create a complete float plan with ready routes for every stage of the journey, and alternate anchorages in case of bad weather. Second, have a good diesel heating system on board, along with a watermaker that produces 40 gallons per hour or more. Third, reserve some spots in marinas in prime stop-over locations, such as Port McNeill and Prince Rupert in British Columbia; and Ketchikan, Sitka, and Juneau in southeastern Alaska. And fourth, plan ahead for crew changes—spending several weeks with the same friends can be taxing. Many convenient locations offer direct flights to and from Seattle or Vancouver. In our case, I set up nine crew changes over the 10 weeks of the cruise.

Rather than give you a logbook-type account of our travels, I'd like to share the best places, people, and legends that we encountered along the way.

BEST PLACES

PORT MCNEILL, BRITISH COLUMBIA (50°36' N, 127°06' W): This is a wonderful locale to relax before beginning the most remote part of the cruise through the southern portion of the venue. Jessica and Steve Jackman (and their friendly old Labrador), who own and run the North Island Marina here, will welcome you to a spotless operation. If you're lucky, you can even tie up in a slip where you can refuel without having to visit the fuel dock. We also found that North Island has the least expensive and cleanest fuel available north of Seymour Narrows. And if you want to do a crew change here, Kenmore Air flies directly in from Seattle. There are all sorts of shops within walking distance: a supermarket, liquor store, sporting goods and fishing stores, and even an excellent sushi restaurant (Harbour Sushi) with guaranteed fresh seafood direct from Queen Charlotte Sound.

CULPEPPER LAGOON, BRITISH COLUMBIA (52°44' N, 127°57' W): This is a spectacular fjord and a must-see when cruising the Inside Passage, although it requires a small detour through Kynoch Inlet. One-thousand-foot cliffs tower above the lagoon, and several waterfalls splash into it. We anchored in 89 feet of water, just west of the entrance. Our explorations via dinghy were fabulous. A combination of calm waters, green forest, and snowcapped mountains provided a panorama that's now the wallpaper on my PC desktop.

POINT BAKER, ALASKA (56°21' N, 133°27' N): This is a typical small Alaskan fishing village (with just 14 permanent residents) that's home to the last floating saloon in Alaska—the Liar's Club Lounge (closed when we visited, but slated to reopen)—as well as the least-populated and easiest-to-remember ZIP code in the U.S. (99927, or 3 times 9 equals 27), and a postmaster with one of the few hereditary positions in the country (she took over from her mother a few years ago).

The postal-service-contracted floatplane delivers mail twice a week, and there's a great get-together when the plane lands, with everyone collecting their letters and packages. Perhaps due to my as-



The Marlow Explorer 61 E Lapérouse nods peacefully at anchor in Kynoch Inlet. Grizzly bears roam at the end of the far-flung lagoon.

sociation with Amazon [Onetto was senior vice president of world-wide operations until his retirement], I think online service is a god-send for a remote community such as Point Baker, because it allows people to get supplies without having to fly to Ketchikan.

There's a wonderful Alaska state float in the center of the village where you can dock, once you've been escorted into harbor by a family of resident sea otters. The locals seem particularly happy to see visitors in early June, after they've spent an entire winter with only 13 other people to talk to.

HOONAH, ALASKA (58°07' N, 135°27' W): Hoonah (which means "Village by the Cliff" in the native language) is the largest Tlingit village in southeast Alaska, with a population of about 900. The Tlingits are a proud people who have lived in the Icy Strait/Glacier Bay area since prehistoric times. The village is clean and well run by the Hoonah Indian Association, and most welcoming to boaters. The marina is large and well protected, and is a perfect stopover point when cruising to or out of Glacier Bay, the northernmost spot we reached during our trip. The old fish cannery, which ceased operations in the 1950s, has been converted into a visitor center and tourism destination for cruise-ship passengers. We biked the two miles to the cannery using Cannery Road, a beautiful ride along Port Frederick Bay. The museum at the cannery gives a great overview of southeastern Alaska's history, fishing industry, people, and animals. The former Hoonah Air Force Station is now the starting point of a zip line—one of the longest in the world—which ends at the cannery site. While none of us had the courage to try the line in the midst of a fog bank, some younger enthusiasts off a cruise ship very much enjoyed it.

FORD'S TERROR, ALASKA (57°37' N, 133°10' W): This is the ultimate navigation thrill during a cruise of southeast Alaska. Ford's Terror shows up on the chart as a large, unsurveyed inlet on the north side of Endicott Arm. It was named in 1899 after a crewmember off a navy



ship who paddled in and got trapped for six terrible hours by the ripping tidal surge. The rapids can flow so fast that people actually surf them. Since it's a challenging entrance, is very remote, and has no VHF reception, few boats visit. The narrows should only be negotiated at high-water slack. Determining this is not easy, as it varies between Juneau high tide and 45 minutes after. Both going in and out, we approached at Juneau high tide, checked the rapids with our binoculars first, and only proceeded when the flow had stopped. But what a reward! We anchored in the west arm of the inner fjord, in 60 feet of water, near a beautiful waterfall. We then kayaked, fished, crabbed, and spent two memorable days. I think I have now been to the end of the world and can report it was well worth the trip.

BEST PEOPLE

RAFAEL RAMIREZ RUIZ (RAFFI), A MEXICAN-ALASKAN FISHING GUIDE AND ENTREPRENEUR IN CRAIG, ALASKA: We reserved a day of fishing with a guide by going to www.fishcraigalaska.com. The owner of the small outfit that responded is a wonderful young man named Raffi Ruiz. He was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, but has lived most of his life in Alaska. He's superbly competent and took us to a great spot for king salmon, near Sumez Island (55°18' N, 133°24' W). At one point he told us to fish at a depth of 50 feet, and we immediately caught three big ones. His story epitomizes the entrepreneurial spirit that still exists on the "Last Frontier." Originally Raffi worked for a fishing lodge, but a customer was so happy with him that he helped the young man buy a boat and open a guiding company. Raffi now owns four boats and employs 15 people. Moreover, he has the equipment to flash freeze and package fish for his customers.

KELLY, THE LADY OF SARKAR COVE, ALASKA: After an exciting day of cruising, we anchored for the night in Sarkar Cove (55°58' N, 133°15' W). We had read in our cruising guide (*Exploring Southeast Alaska*, by Don and Réanne Douglass) that the folks who ran a fishing lodge in the bay wouldn't mind if we used their Wi-Fi. Deprived of e-mail for four days, I couldn't resist. I tried to raise the lodge on the VHF, but had no luck. However, a lady responded nevertheless, introducing herself as Kelly—she never mentioned her last name and, more's the pity, we forgot to ask. She had a house on the bay, invited us to visit, and said she'd take us to the lodge. We motored to her dock with our tenders, had a drink with her at the lodge, and used the Wi-Fi. After a while, we asked about visiting Sarkar Lake, which appeared on our charts just above the bay. Kelly advised against walking, on account of bears, but offered us her SUV. Up we went to spend a beautiful hour exploring the lakeshore and observing eagles feeding on thousands of small, just-hatched salmon. Let me tell you, hospitality's alive and well in southeast Alaska.

SHERRY MILLS, THE TLINGIT PRINCESS OF HOONAH, ALASKA: As I've already indicated, Hoonah has the best marina in Icy Strait. But what makes the marina so special is the reception you get from Sherry (or *Gagech*, in her native language) Mills, the Hoonah harbormaster. I had reserved space months in advance, but called her a few hours before arriving just to confirm. She made sure we got a great slip with power and water—the transient dock lacks power. I'd like to believe that Sherry is a princess among the Tlingits, because she's so knowledgeable about their culture and history. Besides speaking of



Clockwise from top: the U. S. Postal Service float plane arrives at Point Baker. Kelly, the lady of Sarkar Cove (holding the bottle of wine) with the crew and friends. The fine fruit of a fishing trip near Sumez Island. (Ruiz is second from the left, the author is on the far right.)

An Ideal Yacht for the Inside Passage

First of all, my Marlow Explorer 61E is colloquially known as a "trawler," a style of yacht which perfectly fits the landscape, the climate, and the other working or pleasure boats you'll encounter while traveling the Inside Passage. A covered cockpit and side decks are really nice for protecting the crew from rain during docking maneuvers. You can even dine outside in the cockpit when it pours, which happens once in a while in Alaska. A fast, planing hull, designed for Florida fishing or sunbathing, is really not suited for Pacific Northwest cruising, in my opinion.

Unlike many full-displacement trawlers on the market, which have a separate pilothouse to facilitate night-time cruising, the Marlow has a more open interior, which is good. Few, if any, Inside Passage cruisers travel at night, because there are logs in the water, and days in the summer last for up to 21 hours. So having an open plan, with the galley just abaft the pilothouse, makes for a very practical, convivial situation. Even the cook can keep an eye out for logs.

Of course, when the sun shines, which actually happens fairly often, you can also use the flying bridge for navigation, an option for which Marlows are ideally suited, thanks to a bridge-access stairway that bottoms out alongside the galley, thereby limiting the number of steps needed to serve lunch topside.

Another advantage of my Marlow is that she has a semi-displacement hull. Thus you can cruise in full displacement mode at 10 knots, say, while enjoying the landscape and relaxing at the wheel. But when crossing a stretch of big water that's open to the ocean, like the passages we made at Cape Caution and Dixon Entrance, you can throttle up to 14 knots, a speed that also comes in handy on an 85-mile jaunt like the one between Prince Rupert and Ketchikan.

While many other trawlers offer this dual-speed feature, Marlow Explorers have an additional advantage: an exclusive hull design with two large, strut-type keels ahead of the props and rudders, an excellent feature where floating detritus threatens. Even if they're paying constant attention, most cruisers traveling the Inside Passage have already hit, or will one day hit, a log. It's always good to know that if this happens, a boat has additional protection that may help avoid major damage.

And finally, I think my Marlow Explorer 61E (with an LOA of 65 feet) is the ideal vessel for cruising the Inside Passage for one additional reason: Many marinas along the way have a docking size limit of just 65 feet.

her town with tremendous pride, she recommended two splendid local eateries: Chipper Fish, which specializes in fish and chips, and Mary's Restaurant, with a first-rate Chinese menu. After we visited Glacier Bay for a bit, the weather turned nasty and we returned to Hoonah to ride it out. Sherry put us back in our original slip, which was the most protected spot available. We then spent a blustery afternoon at Mary's, watching the U.S. play to a draw with Portugal in the soccer World Cup. The experience was complemented by a brand new, large-screen HDTV, a rarity in southeast Alaska, because receiving an HD signal requires a super-large satellite antenna.

BEST LEGENDS

THE SHAMAN AND THE DEVIL FISH: As we left Craig and headed north, we had to transit Tonawek Narrows (55°45' N, 133°20' W). Earlier, our fishing guide, Raffi, had told us about the shaman who's buried there. In the old days, a tribe of Haidas had lived at the narrows, and their main source of food was whale. The tribe's shaman was so well connected with the spirit world that he could call for a whale whenever food ran low. But while shamans are wise and live long, they're not immortal, so one day the shaman died. The tribe buried him at the narrows, so that the whales would continue to come.

Raffi had told us something else, too: The shaman appreciates an offering of either tobacco or silver from those who pass his grave.



We're not smokers, so we didn't have tobacco, but we did have silver in the form of Canadian quarters, stamped with a representation of another great shaman, Queen Elizabeth. I made sure to tell the shaman as I was throwing the quarter into the sea that Queen Elizabeth was a shaman in her own country and therefore a peer. He apparently understood, as demonstrated by what followed.

That very evening, we decided to anchor in Devil Fish Bay (56°05' N, 133°22' W), the Loch Ness of the Pacific Northwest. A legend says that a giant devil fish there once rose out of the water and washed away a whole Tlingit village. Even more worrisome were reports that back in the '70s, a team of researchers from the University of Alaska was so overcome by feelings of oppression, depression, and alarm while camping at Devil Fish that the group ultimately fled. So of course we were a bit concerned as we dropped anchor.

But eventually, as feelings of oppression, depression, and alarm

After working her way safely through an inlet fraught with surfable rapids, Lapérouse rests peacefully upon the waters of Ford's Terror.

failed to materialize, we took our tenders to explore, and soon encountered a middle-aged fellow in hunting gear, operating a small skiff. This was surprising, because there were no human settlements within 25 miles. We talked for a while, and he said he was hunting bear—with a bow and arrow as his only weapon, which was pretty surprising, too. A bow and arrow! For bears!

We asked him about crabbing or shrimping. He said the otters were back, and had eaten all the crabs, but he recommended a place just outside of the bay, marked with a sounding of 45 fathoms on our chart (56°05' N, 133°18' W), as the ideal place for shrimp.

On the way back to the boat to grab our shrimp pot, I realized that the person we had just met might well have been the reincarnation of the shaman. Who else would go bow-hunting for bears in such a lonely, potentially haunted place? So, despite a warm meal

waiting for us on board, and a major rain shower, we retrieved the shrimp pot, jumped back into our tenders, and placed the pot exactly where the shaman had recommended.

After a late, but excellent, dinner, featuring the king salmon we had fished in Craig, and a good night's sleep, we returned for our shrimp pot the next morning. And to our delight, it was full of spotted shrimp (*Pandalus platyceros*) which, mysteriously, we tallied at exactly 100, a number holy to the Haida, a tribe famous for large canoes configured for exactly 100 rowers.

All of this, of course, was very convincing: Apparently, the shaman had been honored by our offering, had protected us from the Devil Fish, had brought wonderfully large prawns (if not a whale) to feed us, and would look after us for the remainder of what you might call, "the cruise of a lifetime." □