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 MCKEFL, 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 Lackman (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.

**POINTEBAKED, ALASKA (56°21’N, 133°27’W):** 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 dated 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-
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, 133°17’ 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 southeast Alaska, with a population of about 900.

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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 some younger enthusiasts on a cruise ship very much enjoyed it, none of us had the courage to try the line in the midst of a fog bank. It’s a thrilling experience, and it goes as close to being the end of the world and can report it was well worth the trip.

Ford’s Terror, Alaska (57°37’ N, 133°22’ 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 on 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 on a cruise of southeast Alaska.

We had read in our cruising guide (Explorer Southeast Alaska, by Don and Réanne Douglass) that the folks who run a fishing lodge in the bay wouldn’t mind if we used their Wi-Fi, 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 SEV. 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.

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 (Explorer Southeast Alaska, by Don and Réanne Douglass) that the folks who run a fishing lodge in the bay wouldn’t mind if we used their Wi-Fi, 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 SEV. 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 Garych, 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
An Ideal Yacht for the Inside Passage

First of all, my Marlow Explorer 63E 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’s poury, 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 trawlers cruise 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 abait the pilothouse, makes for a very practical, convivial situation. Even the cook can keep an eye out for logs. Of course, when the sunlight shines, which actually happens fairly often, you can also use the flybridge for navigation, an option for which Marloes are ideally suited, thanks to a bridge-access stairway that bottoms out alongside the galy, thereby limiting the number of stairs needed on board.

Another advantage of my Marlow is that she has a semi-displacement hull. Thus you can cruise in full displacement mode at 50 knots, say, while enjoying the landscape and relaxing at the wheel. But when cruising near 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 debris 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 63E (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.

We’re not smokers, so we didn’t have tobacco, but we did have silver from those who passed his grave. The tribe buried him at the other end of the narrows, so that the whales would continue to come. The shaman appreciates an offering of either tobacco or silver from those who pass his grave. He apparently understood, as demonstrated by what followed.

Elizabeth was a shaman in her own country and therefore a peer. The shaman as I was throwing the quarter into the sea that Queen Elizabeth I was surprised, 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 bear!

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 second-locale 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.

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