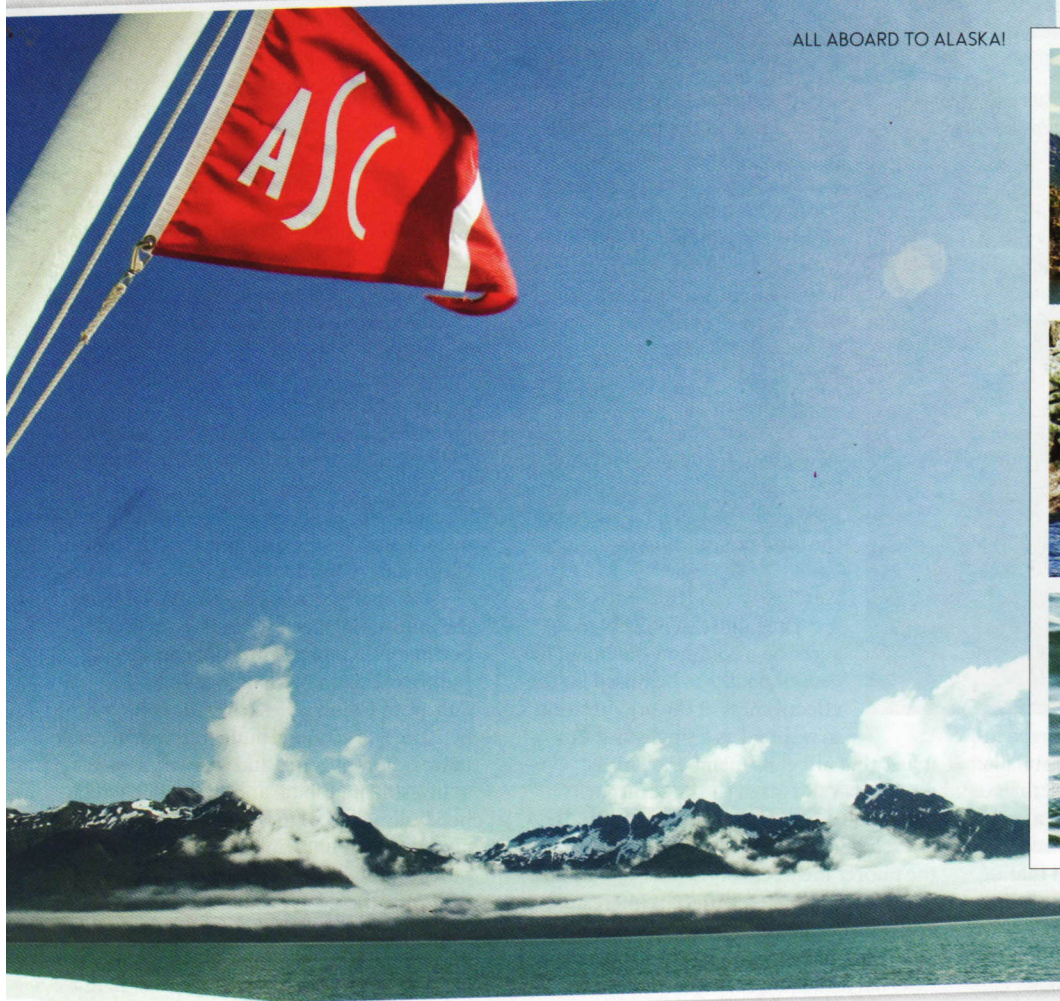
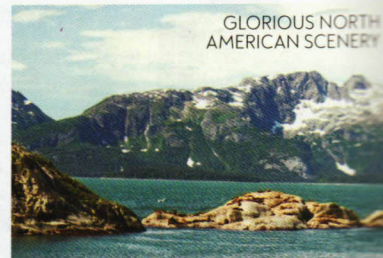


ALL ABOARD TO ALASKA!



GLORIOUS NORTH AMERICAN SCENERY



PENGUINS BASK IN THE ALASKAN SUN



A TUFTED PUFFIN

WHEN THE WORD 'CRUISE' IS MENTIONED, THE FIRST THING THAT USUALLY COMES TO MIND IS A LARGE BOAT CRAMMED WITH A THOUSAND PASSENGERS WHO HARDLY LEAVE THE SHIP AND EAT BUFFET MEALS.

These boats are unable to seek passage into the remote coves only our yachts are able to access.

What I experienced was a truly unique, hands-on cruise exploration in Alaska Inside Passage & Glacier Bay. You could say—the ultimate UN-CRUISE experience. I explored remote places of Alaska with a mere 30 like-minded luxury adventurers.

This was an unmatched, hands-on small boat chartered exploration—Kayaks and whales, paddle boards, mountains, glaciers, hiking, first class service and wine. We ventured into some of nature's most exciting playgrounds and historic ports for exploration,

UNCRUISING IN ALASKA

An Alaskan cruise isn't all about snow, sea, and ice. It is a true scenic adventure, the kind that occurs once in a lifetime adventure

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CECILY MABASA

and eye-to-eye wildlife encounters.

Exploring the Alaskan passages is an unsurmountable experience. It was a free-flowing, adrenaline-filled adventure that left all the passengers wanting for more of the incredible marine wildlife, the majestic panoramic views of the icy mountains, and the exciting activities set for us each day.

DAY ONE: JUNEAU

A limousine was waiting for

us when we arrived in Juneau, the city-borough capital of Alaska. Juneau serves as one of the state's primary ports for cruise ships and yachts. It is an adventurer's destination on its own, with its milieu of activities suited for the active: day cruises via canoes, rafts, yachts and kayaks; guided glacier treks; bear-watching and dog-sledding; and flight-seeing, a variation of sightseeing on a helicopter. From the airport, we transferred to our hospitality room in

Westmark Baranof Hotel, one of Juneau's gem accommodations.

With a few hours to spare, we walked down the main street filled with cruise passengers like us waiting to embark on their respective ships, and had lunch at the uber famous Tracey's King Crab Shack. One simply cannot leave Juneau without getting their hands dirty shelling those foot-long crab legs. Located right by the ship docks, Tracey's serves the freshest Alaskan crabs in the area. On certain days, there are long lines just to grab a quick bite; it's worth the wait though. We finished our meal just before boarding time. Upon boarding Endeavour, our three-deck newly-refurbished yacht-style boat, we were greeted by the crew complete with champagne and smiles. We set sail by early evening, with the sun just about to set, and got ready for a week of scenic channels and secluded wilderness. First thing's first: an emergency evacuation drill.

DAY TWO: GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK & RESERVE

Even before sunrise, the PA system sounded, announcing

sightings of humpback whales that surround the yacht. That woke us up. I grabbed my down jacket and camera, and almost flew to the deck. What a view that was! Humpback whales jumping everywhere that I didn't know where to look first. My jaw literally dropped that morning. Once we all calmed down, we began the day with daily stretching and breathing exercises, led by Noelle, one of the crew. It was a pre-breakfast ritual that we religiously followed each day of the cruise.

For today, we were contained on board, looking out for wild life and icebergs. We picked up National Park Ranger Faye at Bartlett Cove, a hundred miles from our starting point at Juneau. Ranger Faye accompanied us for the two-day stay we had at the Glacier Bay Park, one of America's popular parks. We travelled nearly 60 miles cruising up-bay to the tidewater glaciers of Grand Pacific and Margerie, which frequently calves huge icebergs into the bay. For our entire journey, Ranger Faye explained the park's geology, glaciology, wildlife and history—the Park has deep roots in the culture of Tlingit, Alaska's indigenous people. We passed through the west arm of Glacier Bay and went up-bay to reach the inner coves, sailing through the Icy Straits, a body of water in Alaska which has a rich marine life, as well as an abundance in sea birds and spectacular scenery. There were sea lions, tufted puffins, moose, bald eagles, bears as well as mountain goats.

We arrive at South Marble Island for more wildlife viewing

Scenic islands aren't confined to the tropics



at lunchtime, then off we went to Gloomy Knob, where we spotted a wolf, a black sow and even two bear cubs playing in the water. Next, we sailed through Russel Cut, reaching Margerie Glacier during cocktail hour for a splendid viewing on the deck. What more could you possibly ask for? Wrapped in cashmere blankets, we were served baked scallops and cocktails. Our evening was spent anchored in a hidden cove and doing much-needed exercises on kayaking and safety procedures to prepare ourselves for the coming days.

Wildlife Sightings: Tufted puffins, sea lions, mountain goats, sow bears, humpback whales, sea lions, sea otters, black-legged kittiwakes, marbled murrets, pigeon guillemots, bald eagles, wolves.

DAY THREE: GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK & RESERVE, REID INLET

We enjoyed an exclusive day exploring the glaciers and wildlife of the Park—Glacier Bay seems to be in excellent form when explored in small groups of people. Our first real

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



KAYAKS, WHALES, PADDLE BOARDS, MOUNTAINS, GLACIERS, HIKING, FIRST CLASS SERVICE AND WINE. WE VENTURED INTO SOME OF NATURE'S MOST EXCITING PLAYGROUNDS AND HISTORIC PORTS FOR EXPLORATION, EYE-TO-EYE WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS

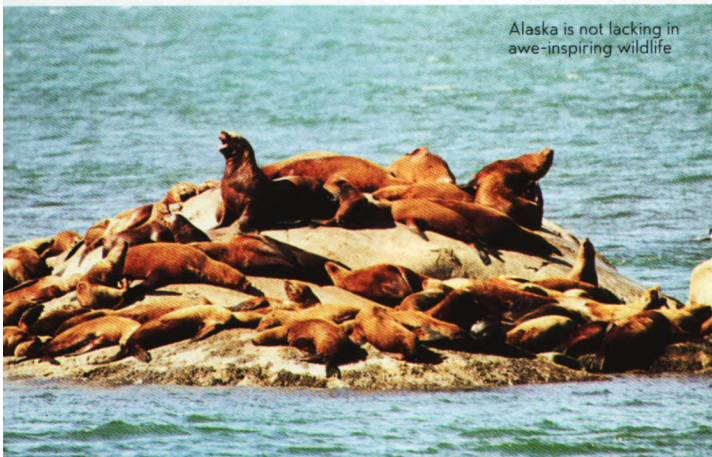
Alaskan adventure! Our yacht went further up, docking at Reid Inlet and spending the entire day exploring the place. Over breakfast, we were asked to

choose from several activities, namely kayaking, walkabouts, hardcore hiking, and a small boat tour. After being cooped up in the yacht for two days just sitting around and stuffing myself with scrumptious cuisine, I needed something challenging like the hardcore hiking.

Our zodiacs landed on a beach and we walked uphill through a trail-less terrain, scrambling on some parts with our hands. I have walked so many trails all over the world—walking off trails was quite a novelty and a true adventure. We explored ice caves, walked on glaciers without crampons that I literally had to slide down on ice. Still high on adrenaline, we decided to also do some kayaking after lunch. We skirted some walls in search of wildlife and even had an impromptu kayak race.

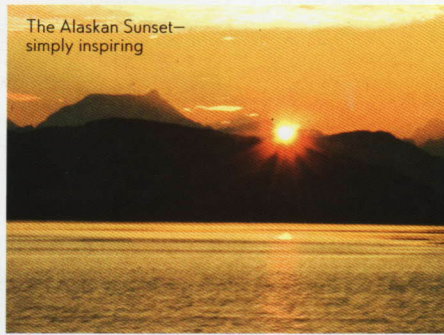
It is quite difficult to find the perfect word to explain the beauty and otherworldly feeling we had while exploring outside the yacht. It is something one has to experience for themselves

Alaska is not lacking in awe-inspiring wildlife





A humpback whale—truly a regal sight



The Alaskan Sunset—simply inspiring



Readying the kayaks for our journey

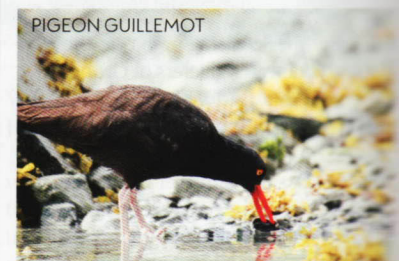
for rough terrains, muddy floors and lots of logs. We almost didn't make it to our hike.

On our way to the starting point, we took a detour at False Bay to watch and feed whales. The ocean was filled with groups of hungry humpbacks, and boy, were they in the mood to perform! There was non-stop breaching and jumping in and out of the water that we couldn't bear to leave.

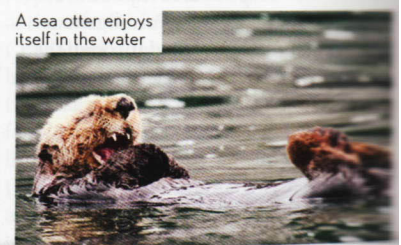
The day got even better at Pavlov Cove where we saw brown



Our cruise ship—better than the loveboat



PIGEON GUILLEMOT



A sea otter enjoys itself in the water

THEY SET OUR COURSE FOR ARGUABLY THE RICHEST WHALE WATERS IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA. WE WERE ON WATCH FOR THE TELLTALE BLOWS OF THE HUMPHACKS

to know the depth of this adventure.

Wildlife Sightings: Bumblebees, black oystercatchers and chicks, pigeon guillemots, pelagic cormorants, western sandpipers, gulls, wolf spiders, pacific blue mussels, barnacles, bald eagles, parasitic jaeger, red-necked phalarope, humpback whales.

DAY FOUR: ICY STRAIT, IDAHO INLET, SHAW ISLANDS, GEORGE ISLANDS

I was told that today was going to be the ultimate day of exploration. It was kind of hard to believe, given the previous day's activities, but it turned out to be such an understatement. I really thought it couldn't get any better after yesterday, and even over breakfast, there was non-stop talk about the great adventure we had. They set our course for arguably the richest whale waters in Southeast Alaska. We were on watch for the

telltale blows of the humpbacks. Our exploration started in the Idaho Inlet, where we had a Muskag experience, a muddy and challenging adventure. A National Graphic professional photographer was part of our troop—what an unexpected treat that was! We were told to stay together as we were entering the bears' playground; there were no bears in sight but they did leave some fresh tracks.

We sailed through the South Indian Pass to George Island as we had breakfast onboard. The afternoon explorations at George Islands were both done on foot and in kayaks. After that, we joined our captain on the bridge. By late afternoon, we dropped the skiffs and kayaks for a closer inspection of the remote coastline, our eyes set on shore for possible bear sightings. We ended our day with a relaxing soak in the upper deck hot tub, taking in the solitude of the wilderness.

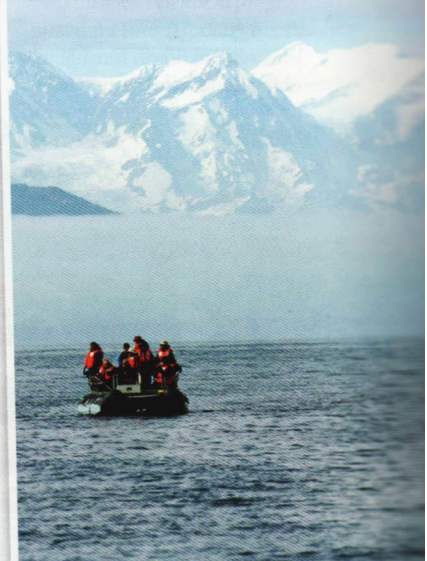
Wildlife Sightings: Arbor

porpoises, humpback whales, sunflower seastar, mottled seastar, western sandpipers, lion's mane jellyfish, moon jellyfish, water jellyfish, shiner perch, bald eagles, sea otter, bear prints, muskeg flowers, breaching humpback whales, sea lions, marbled murrelets, pigeon guillemots, horned puffins, peregrine falcon.

DAY FIVE: FALSE BAY & PAVLOV HARBOR

With no committed agenda, we cruised along Chichagof Island's waterfall coast to marvel at the exquisite views of Alaskan wilderness. Today, Noelle did a yoga walk instead using our mats; right after, we did an intertidal beach exploration at Iyaukeen Cove and on to Gypsum Creek Game Trail Hike

THE MOUNTAINS OF ALASKA



bears swimming and fished for salmon. We came at just the right time – it was salmon migration season – and there were lots of bears coming out of hiding just to catch their favorite food. Three bears were waiting for us by the waterfalls, a few others were a hundred yards away, staking their territory. They were walking up and down the waterfalls, patiently waiting for salmon to pounce on. At one point, a bear was heading directly our way – it was such a scare! That evening, the yacht was tucked away in the magical Red Bluff Bay. It was a good time for skiff operations and kayaking to look for sea otters and bears before calling it a day.

Wildlife Sightings

Humpback whales, bald eagles, glaucous gulls, brown bears, harbor seals, silver coho salmon, belted kingfishers.

DAY SIX: THOMAS BAY IN SCENERY COVE, FREDERICK SOUND, STEPHEN'S PASSAGE

The adventure continues...

We got on kayaks and explored the amazing Scenery Cove. To challenge us, we had the opportunity to try paddle boards for the first time—a



Canoeing through the scenic Alaskan waters

new skill I learned quickly. In the afternoon, we took a power walk to Beird Glacier, spending the day to explore Fredrick Sound and Stephen's Passage, another excellent place to have humpback whale sightings among other marine wildlife. The 45 miles of Fredrick Sound can only be accessible by water or air vessels. There was an abundance of marine animals—herring, zooplankton, a lot of other crustaceans, as well as whales. It is said that majority of the whales that migrate from Hawaii stay along Fredrick Sound for its nutrient rich waters.

It was enough for us that we decided to stay onboard our yacht for the rest of the day. There was lots of things to do inside the Endeavour, which houses a wine bar, a spa and even a small gym with fitness equipments to prep trekkers. The food was also unbelievable; meals are served over different courses, unless we were having barbecues on the deck. The service is excellent and they were so keen on checking up on our personal preferences. There was even a time that I was craving for a good old grilled cheese sandwich for lunch. 15 minutes later, I was munching on one.

Wildlife Sightings Belted kingfishers, bald eagles, harbor seals, sea otter, mew gulls, merganser ducks, western sandpipers.

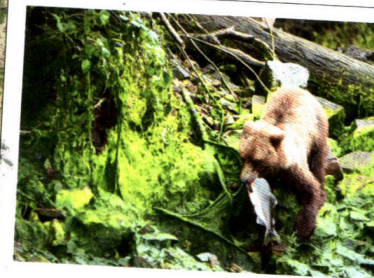
DAY SEVEN: ENDICOTT ARM AT FORD'S TERROR & DAWES GLACIER

On our final day at the

THREE BEARS WERE WAITING FOR US BY THE WATERFALLS, A FEW OTHERS WERE A HUNDRED YARDS AWAY, STAKING THEIR TERRITORY

Endeavour, we sailed through Steven's Passage and Tracy Arm. We got up early in the morning to watch the glaciers. At Endicott Arm, there was a wild feeding area with granite walls. I felt so far away from civilization. There were dramatic fjords and glaciers, which we all gawked at from our kayaks. This place is widely acclaimed as the most beautiful in Alaska.

After that, we went on a small boat tour towards the majestic head of the bay to watch ice dropping. Dawes Glacier has lots of calving ice, making for an awe-inspiring show against snow-capped mountains glowing high overhead. Our cruise ended with a festive farewell dinner before turning in. There was a slideshow of our week-long adventure, like a photojournal, capturing every necessary and essential moment in the Alaskan seas and landscape. The next morning, we headed back to Juneau after breakfast, bringing with us an unparalleled experience with nature.



WILD THINGS
Top to bottom
A brown bear catches dinner; Hiking through the Alaskan terrain; A family of seals bonds in the snow; A leisurely ride through the gentle river



Wildlife Sightings Mink, limpets, blue mussels, sea urchins, sea anemone, sea star, surf scoter, gulls, marbled murrets, harbor porpoise, harbor seals.

WHEN TO GO

Alaska cruise season is limited from May to early September each year.

HOW TO GET THERE

The writer travelled with the luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations (<seatosummitadv.net>, (0917) 868 7971, (02) 815 8233, ces@seatosummitadv.net) on this uncruising adventure. You can fly to Seattle then take direct flight of Alaskan Airline to Juneau. ■



Our luxurious accommodation at sea



Refreshments on deck—no cruise is complete without cocktails