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Kayaking adventures among glaciers – and orca whales

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"They're real mean. Will kill you in a second if they get ahold of you," said my husband as I opened the door of our cabin and stepped out onto the deck.

I could hear the commotion about 50 feet to the left.

A crowd was gushing with deep "Ah's" and "Oh's."

When I got to the front of the boat I could see the orca, also known as the killer whale, arching up and down in the air, his top and fins looking like black velvet and making a sharp contrast to his white underbelly. Not far behind were six others who kept mostly underwater, but put their fins up intermittently as if showing leg at a nightclub.



Sea lions sunbathe on a rocky island at the northern end of Glacier Bay. The area is also home to murrelets, ptarmigan, sea otters, bear, moose, humpbacks and orcas. [Click to view gallery.](#)

"They come up here to feed on herring, krill, salmon, and seabirds," Jeremy, our expedition leader, said over the microphone. "We've even seen them snatch seals and sea lions off icebergs."

We were heading north through the Icy Strait of Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska, the northern end of the 1,000-mile Inner Passage that goes from Vancouver, British Columbia, to the bottom of the state. It's one of the largest marine-mammal protected areas in the world. Our route for the weeklong trip in mid-August on Un-Cruise Adventures' Safari Endeavour was from Juneau and back to Juneau, going past the spectacular glaciers of Margerie, Johns Hopkins, and Grand Pacific, and south into a long fjord, Endicott Arm, to Dawes Glacier.

Alaska had been on my wish list for a long time, though big cruise ships are not my thing. An 84-passenger explorer boat with the sounds of the birds, wind, and water was just the entertainment for me.

I must admit that the unique way the Safari Endeavour has for getting kayakers into the water drew me in at first. On the bottom rear level, there's a platform with wheels, so you are rolled into the bay. To those who have not kayaked: The most difficult part is getting in.

I could not tell anyone the irrational fear I'd had since we booked: that one of these monstrous whales would emerge under my kayak and upend it. Think of the classic picture of the humpback with its fins up in the air. In the photos, they look like they are so close and could reach a small vessel in a

nanosecond. Eeeek! Yet, I was determined to kayak here in the grasslike water of a bay.

"We're required to keep one quarter of a nautical mile from any whales," the captain said in his orientation. "And that includes kayaks, for those of you who are taking trips." That announcement was a bit reassuring. The captain knew how to keep a safe distance from the whales, but would I?

No other guests seemed to voice my concern, so I kept my mouth shut. Besides, it was quickly becoming apparent that this journey was akin to a tremendously fun adult summer camp with leaders to take us on jaunts off the boat. You don't want to expose your fears to others. The more we passed whales at a safe distance, the more at ease I became, but there was still that lingering Moby Dick image.

Passengers ranged in age from 50 to 80, except for grandchildren. Most were seasoned international travelers on a quest for soft adventure. There was no dress code, and we had delicious gourmet food at all meals.

Twice a day, there was a choice of three or four excursions for various ability levels: The easiest were riding metal skiffs to get up close and examine the glaciers; short kayak trips; and island hikes where animals, plants, rocks, and trees are the only residents. For the most-advanced, there was hiking up glaciers and bushwhacking on islands, where to get through, you had to shimmy up cliffs of rock or high piles of slippery logs.

Because there was no internet or phone service, travelers constantly interacted with each other in the commodious lounge with its wide window views, or out on the deck; there was always a view over the side to talk about - a calving glacier, a mountain goat up on a cliff, a bald eagle swooping down for a fish, a bear loping along the shore looking for a salmon to swoop up, or a hike, kayak trip, or skiff exploration to discuss while we were cruising from one day's stop to another.

In the lower part of Glacier Bay, the orcas and humpbacks often put on shows. Wherever we were, murrelets - the official state bird - plus ptarmigan, gulls, and the occasional bald eagles and cormorants performed a concert in the skies. We watched the larger ones closely because they often made quick dives into the water to catch fish.

At one point, we passed rock islands with sea lions and their pups sunning themselves, while black-booted kittiwakes kept their eyes straight ahead to the east as if they were on guard for some sort of invasion. Farther on was another island full of black cormorants waiting for their next predator opportunity.

Soon, the animals would be migrating. The whales were fattening up before making a trek to warmer subtropical waters in Hawaii, Mexico, and Japan to mate and deliver babies, and return here in late spring for another cycle.

"Resident orcas will follow the large salmon out into the Bay of Alaska, while the transient orcas will stay in Glacier Bay to feed on the smaller sea mammals such as harbor porpoises, Dall's porpoises, sea otters, harbor seals, and Steller sea lions," said California marine biology professor Jackie Hedgpeth, who was in residence during the entire trip.

"The most common bird, the Arctic tern, travels 24,000 miles round-trip from its high Arctic breeding ground to their wintering grounds in the Antarctic, while the bald eagles may move south as far as Washington State and then return in late winter, when the fish come back to Glacier Bay."

Time is a conscious thought in this area of the world because the glaciers have been receding since the late 1700s. In fact, when John Muir first came here in 1879, the ice front had retreated almost 50 miles. Glaciers appear as wide piles of dirty snow coming down between mountains until they reach the

water, where the front is a wide stretch of columns - ice so compressed that it is often blue. As the columns break off and fall down, there's a thunderous noise. The process is called calving. Had we come several hundred years ago, we could not have gotten into Glacier Bay: It was frozen over.

Bear and moose orientation - stand still if you see a bear, lest he or she think you are an object he should run after, and quickly get out of the way of a moose - was followed by a hike at Bartlett's Cove, the only developed area within the park, with a visitors' center, park headquarters, a lodge and campground.

Here, on the first day, we learned how a rain forest develops on land after a glacier recedes and leaves sandy, rocky soil. First to come is the dryas plant that spreads like a mat. Then, after a period of 35 years, the bushy mountain alder bushes begin to overtake the dryas. Cottonwood trees - prolific all over Alaska - grow over the alders and cut off the sunlight. Then come the spruce that tower over all, and last the Western hemlock, which doesn't mind the shade and eventually rises higher than all of them.

Later on in the week, a group of us rode in a motorboat to Robert's Island, a home for loons, seabirds, and the occasional bear, and had a lesson on the rocky shore. Our leader Hannah held up sea animals such as urchins, banana slugs, and kelp (known as mermaid's condoms) and then had us bushwhack into the forest. (Yes, Hannah had bear spray attached to her belt, but she said she hadn't used it in her seven years as a leader.)

We gripped tightly onto clumps of grasses as we went from the rocks to swamp. Since there were no established trails, we made our own openings by climbing under overhangs of branches until we reached a sanctuary in the forest, akin to fairy country in children's books. Hemlocks reigned above, green plants and vines grew over the trees - some standing, some fallen - and light bounced through at various angles. Hannah had us stand still in silence for five minutes and listen to the sounds, and I began to see dustlike particles on the shards of light.

At Kelp Bay, I did my dream kayaking in a serene spot. Sea otters played in the water and wrapped themselves in kelp, nibbling on it for highly nutritious meals. Fish swam back and forth under the boat as I paddled along. Except for the birds above, there was only the sound of distant water softly lapping against the rock shore and wisps of wind in the pine trees. It was the last interlude of peace I would find for a long time.

On our way out of Glacier Bay National Park, a school of porpoises hugged each side of the bow like tugboats in a busy city harbor guiding a ship out to foreign lands. In another month, wintry weather would start, and the whole cycle would begin again. The whales and many of the birds, fattened up by the summer's eating, would head south to warmer waters to mate and give birth. Bears and the smaller animals would burrow up in their underground spaces.