

Dear Friends,

In 1992 I stopped in Anchorage Airport on my way to Russia. Although this counted as Alaska, and got me one county (they call them *boroughs* there), it wasn't much of a visit. I have long both wanted to go back (to see the place) and needed to go back (to fill in the counties). Alaska has only 19 boroughs, but it is a difficult state for county-collectors because there are no roads connecting most of them, and travel has to be by a combination of road, rail, sea and air links made delicate by less-than-daily schedules in some places. But *The Call of the Wild*, don't you know? Finally I did plan a trip to cover almost half the boroughs, and on August 3rd flew on Alaska Airlines from San Francisco via Seattle to Ketchikan.

The flight north was the first of many vividly scenic flights on this trip – flat green islands, and distant mountains with snow powdered on summits and ridgelines, streaking white down slopes and chasms. Huge cold-looking waterfalls – also glaciers, I now realize – and clouds resting on mountain peaks. Blinding displays of snow on gray-green slopes threaded through with turquoise fjords, black lakes and brown rivers. I saw a fjord in my future.

I landed at Ketchikan Airport without yet really being in Ketchikan but on neighboring Gravina Island, separated from Ketchikan (on Revillagigedo Island) by the Tongass Channel, gateway to the famous Inside Passage. My hotel ordered a Sourdough (!) taxi for me, but to get to it I had to cross the strait between the islands on the ferry *Ken Eichner 2*. The bridge that should have connected the airport to the town was never built – it was the famous “Bridge to Nowhere” that became a big issue in the 2008 presidential campaign.¹ A bridge to an island with only 50 people on it – what a scandal! Somehow no one mentioned then that the bridge didn't go nowhere when you crossed it *the other way*, into Ketchikan. But I always like a ferry ride, and this was the first of my eight new Alaska boroughs:



KETCHIKAN GATEWAY.



The town was peeling and ramshackle, with lots of rust and metal siding. It was narrow, lying between the mountains and the water – a bit like a West Virginia coal town but more frontiersy. I soon found all the major towns in the Alaska panhandle felt and looked like this, but with a much more upbeat feeling than those coal towns have. Here the license plates say *The Last Frontier*, and it really feels that way – jaunty and can-do, with a slightly boastful air. Seaplanes took off from the water – they are called *float planes* in Alaska. I saw a bumper sticker that read

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravina_Island_Bridge.

I ♣ SEALS. My hotel was very run down, but it was only for one night – *can do*, right? Above: a bear from a Ketchikan totem pole.

The town was packed with enormous cruise ships – just how enormous it is hard to realize even when you’re right there. They looked like huge residential complexes, or office buildings lying on their sides. Here’s a picture of half of one – the little blue and white Duckmobile in the right foreground is about the size of a school bus.



Most of the visitors to southeast Alaska come on cruise ships. Others are en route to packaged wilderness adventures; independents like me are relatively rare. Almost all the stores in Ketchikan were selling souvenirs, jewelry and salmon (sent anywhere!), and they all shut down when the last cruise ship leaves in September. There were so many bars and liquor stores, though, that I felt like I had just rolled or rollicked ashore from a fishing boat, looking for a drink.

Light rain, gray mist. I had gone from cool wet fog in San Francisco to what seemed almost the same in Ketchikan – it felt like San Francisco summer weather with a caffeinated bounce, plus some drizzle, and was never really uncomfortable. An unlined raincoat and some layers and a folded-up umbrella in my coat pocket were all I needed. When I spoke to people Down South (as they call it here, not the Lower 48) everyone thought I would be chilled to the bone and need furs and long underwear. But the *average* high temperature in Ketchikan in August is 64°, the average low is 54° – even in January the average low is only 28°. The Frozen North this was not.

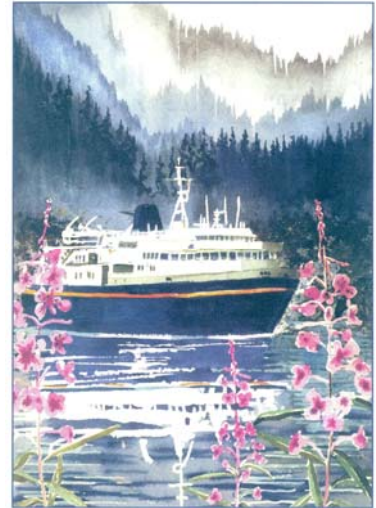


I explored the town some on foot. I found a store that specialized in the fascinating Tlingit art (above left) I later saw all over Juneau, and walked around on Creek Street, the former prostitutes’ quarter (above right). The next morning I took an excursion on the very Duckmobile shown in the cruise ship picture, called the *Kody J.*, which after hitting the high spots on land (not that many) splashed amiably into the Tongass Narrows. Waterside Ketchikan is built on pilings, and beyond the piers there are countless small

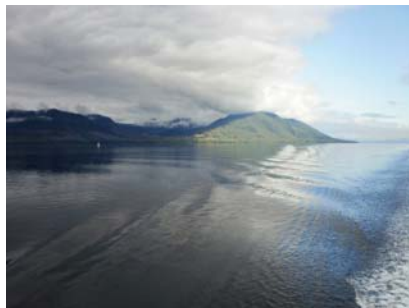
fishing boats – trawlers like the *Marshal Tito* (below left), and seiners and line vessels, each with a different kind of rig. On the way back you could see that the town is just a few blocks deep at the base of a steep piney hillside, the summit covered in fog, a typical southeast Alaska environment.



That afternoon I went out to the dock in another Sourdough cab to board my ship, M/V *Matanuska* (right), for the trip up the Inside Passage to Juneau.²



Matanuska, one of the ships of the Alaska Marine Highway System, is a roomy, comfortable vessel, with agreeable lounges, plenty of deck access, a cafeteria and even an elevator.³ There was a stunning display through the wrap-around windows in the front lounge. Blue water in 100 shades, glinting white in sunlight; green mountainous islands with an occasional wooden building (very rare). Clouds in every shape, and gray, white, gray-white, and pale blue sky. Looking through my pictures from this voyage (indeed from all of SE Alaska) I am struck by how dominant are gray, white and pale blue.



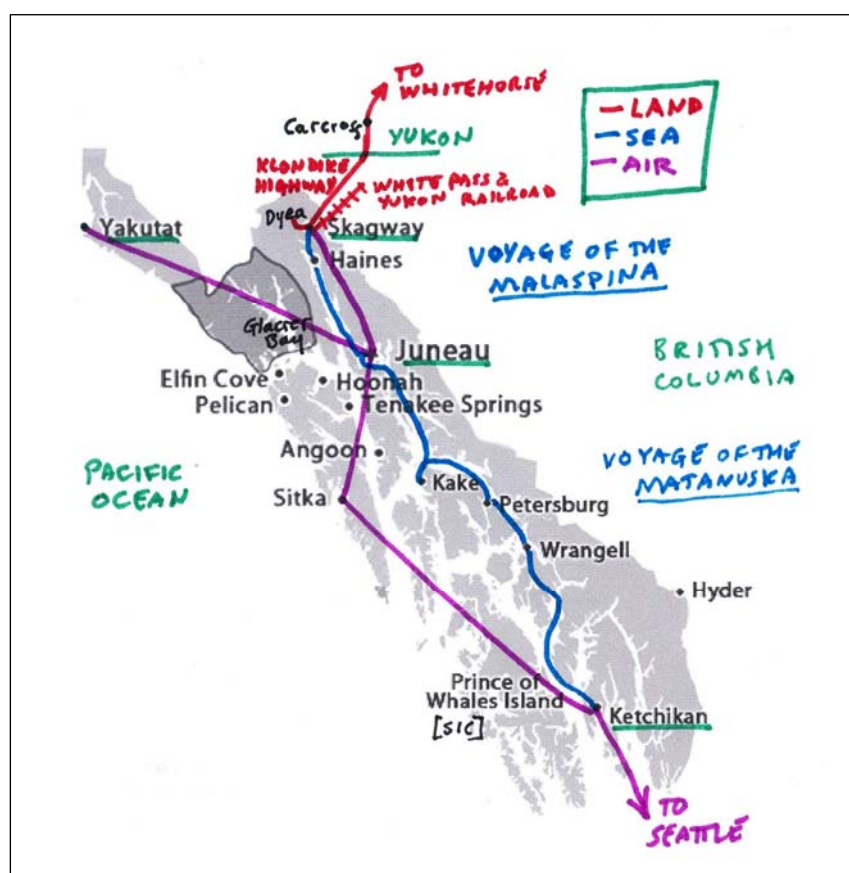
Sometimes it was good to go outside and feel my surroundings more immediately. But often it was too wet and too windy in front. In back, sheltered from the wind by the superstructure of the ship, it was very mild, but somehow looking back is not nearly as satisfying as looking forward. Why not? It's pretty much the same view. I suspect

² M/V means Motor Vessel, contrasted with S.S. (Steamship). *Matanuska* is the name of an Alaskan glacier (also a river and a valley). The two vessels look the same size in these pictures, but *Matanuska* at 408 feet and 3029 tons is much, *much* bigger.

³ The Alaska Marine Highway System is a very ambitious, very successful ferry system run by the state Department of Transportation, providing access to the coastal communities of southern Alaska from Ketchikan all the way to Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians, and indeed down to Seattle. For more on AMHS see <http://www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/>.

something buried deep in our primate brains, a need to look ahead as we swing through the trees.

Wide waters narrowed to straits. A gap between hilly islands suddenly revealed high snowy mountains. Fog and mist closed in; low light of late northern evening. We docked at WRANGELL, a lonesome strip of lights in lowering dusk but another borough checked off (see the map below). I had treated myself to a cabin, spare but snug, and when night finally fell I went below to sleep. Much clanking and shuddering and vibrating, which San Franciscans have learned to read as earthquakes. Not earthquakes here, though. While I was asleep we docked at Petersburg in THE UNORGANIZED BOROUGH, which includes all of Alaska not in any of the other boroughs (more than half the state by area).⁴



I awoke at what the Navy calls O-dark-hundred, as we were landing at Kake (pronounced *cake*) on Kupreanof Island in the Alexander Archipelago. I stayed up for most of the rest of the trip, although I did doze some in the forward viewing lounge. The mountains grew taller and snowier; the exchanges among sea and fog and sky grew more complex.

We landed in JUNEAU after about 24 hours afloat, and I went to my hotel in a shuttle van. Although it is the state capital, Juneau is very small by urban

standards, with a population slightly smaller than Poughkeepsie NY or East Palo Alto CA.⁵ As in Ketchikan, the downtown is mostly tawdry tourist shops geared to the cruise ship trade; what's left, for the locals, is functional and unlovely. But the setting is dramatic – in most places the city ends after a block or two, and steep wooded mountains, snow-topped even in August, rise abruptly. Waterfalls and avalanche routes run down

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unorganized_borough, and the map on page 10 below.

⁵ Juneau 32,164, Poughkeepsie 32,736, East Palo Alto 33,899.

the slopes. On a few blocks high up near the Capitol (a brick office building with a few pillars in front) stand frame houses of modest charm; otherwise Juneau is mostly aluminum siding. It delighted me that I was able to get up to this level by cutting across a parking lot near my motel, taking the elevator in the State Office Building up to the eighth floor, cutting through an adjoining building and emerging next door to the Capitol without having to climb the hill.



I did a little tourism in Juneau. The main sight is the Mendenhall Glacier (above left), which runs almost up to the shore a few miles from town (years ago it emptied right into the sea). At the end it calves off hunks of ice which float in the lake at the glacier's mouth. The State Capitol, State Museum and City Museum are rather dreary, but crossing the strait to Douglas Island on a tour bus I did see some bald eagles perched on pilings, waiting for fish. There was a lot of Tlingit art, not only for sale but built into street and building decorations, and more totem poles. Two pushcarts offered delicious Filipino barbeque on a stick – I had some for lunch every day, and in the evenings made do with a ready-made sandwich from the local convenience store rather than bother with a restaurant (there was only one restaurant within walking distance of the Driftwood Lodge anyway).

After Juneau the next step was to board *Matunuska's* nearly identical sister ship M/V *Malaspina* (also named for an Alaskan glacier) and head north. This trip was much shorter, and the scenery even more dramatic, than the earlier one – an overwhelming display of green mountains with fog and waterfalls, mountains white with snow, and green water all around. But it was hard to see in the viewing lounge with water on the windows, and harder outside in the wind and rain (above right). They call rain *liquid sunshine* in Alaska. And it was *cold*, even though of course nothing compared to *real* Alaska cold. All shades of white with white-gray cloud cover; overhead light so

brilliantly reflective it hurt my eyes. Dolphins played in our bow wake; a diving whale showed me his tail as we glided up the Lynn Canal to HAINES and SKAGWAY.⁶

Skagway was the only place I rented a car. You don't really need a car in Ketchikan or Juneau. But my hotel in Skagway was not downtown, and one of the two sites that make up the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park was several miles out of town.⁷ Also, unlike the other towns on my trip, Skagway had roads that actually went somewhere else, through countryside I wanted to see. So I reserved a car, and later realized, looking at a map in the *Matanuska* lounge, that Skagway was only 65 miles from the Yukon Territory. So I decided that when I got there I would take my car and make a dash for it, up the Klondike Highway.



The Klondike Highway is the modern incarnation of the old Chilkoot Trail that the prospectors of 1898 took to get to the gold fields of the Yukon. Climbing it was a miserable ordeal, over high mountains in freezing weather on a dirt track two feet wide (left). It was made insanely worse by the insistence of the Canadian police that prospectors bring a year's worth of food and

supplies with them, forcing many to make the trip up the trail seven or eight times, fully loaded. Here's a picture – it is echoed on the rim of the Skagway borough seal.⁸ I could see the old narrow trail from the modern highway.



⁶ The Lynn Canal is a natural inlet, not a man-made canal; it is the deepest, longest fjord in North America.

⁷ The hotel was called At the White House. They tell the story that in 1956 a Republican campaign worker knocked at the hotel door and asked "Would you like to keep Eisenhower in the White House?", to which the owner supposedly replied "No! Let him stay downtown!"

⁸ For a flavor of the prospectors' ordeal, here are a few lines from "The Law of the Yukon," by Robert W. Service.

Staggering blind through the storm-whirl, stumbling mad through the snow,
Frozen stiff in the ice pack, brittle and bent like a bow,
Featureless, formless, forsaken, scented by wolves in their flight,
Left for the wind to make music through ribs that are glittering white.

From *Songs of a Sourdough* (1907). You can read the whole terrifying poem here: http://openlibrary.org/works/OL3001587W/Songs_of_a_sourdough. For novelistic treatment of the Chilkoot Trail and the Klondike Gold Rush, see Service's *The Trail of '98* (1908), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22063/22063-h/22063-h.htm> or Jack London's *Smoke Bellew* (1912), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1596/pg1596.html>.



On the Alaska side of the border the road is in the Tongass Temperate Rain Forest, with the accent on *rain*. It is so foggy you can scarcely see anything as the ocean air hits the



mountains (left). Then in 13 miles, at the border, the rain forest changes to a barren treeless High Alpine Zone of glacial moraines, mossy rocks and green lakes (right), very Arctic looking, like what you fly over coming back to California from Europe. Soon after that it becomes a High Boreal Zone – stunted trees, distant fog-shrouded mountains and icy runnels.

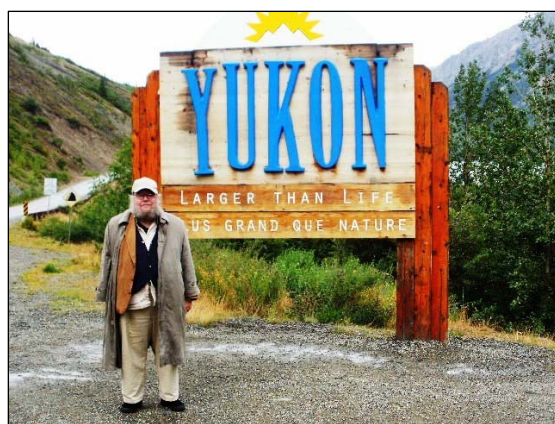


Big bald elephant humps – one Gibraltar after another – are these glacial too? The landscape has an interior rather than coastal look at this point, not like the previous two zones at all. Very dramatic and eye-poppingly beautiful with the mountains and the gorge and gray-green Lake Tushti below. Terrific, but more like Montana than Alaska. I saw an eagle cruising *below* me, patrolling the lake for fish.⁹ And then, about 50 more miles into Canada, welcome to the



Yukon! (Arms at left – note the sled dog.)¹⁰

I was aiming for Carcross, the first hamlet on the Yukon side of the line. When I got there no one was around but a lonesome policeman. I asked him where I could find lunch. My choices turned out to be 65 miles back in Skagway or 35 miles onward to Whitehorse, but then I would have to drive 100 miles back. Or, I thought, I could



⁹ A proper working bald eagle, *Aquila macho*, not one of your lowlife eagles, *Aquila schnorrer*, that hang around the salmon-packing plant waiting for offal. (Just a little joke – actually both eagles are *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*.) The young woman who took my picture at the Yukon sign said I just missed seeing a bear.

¹⁰ Also, while we're at it, note in the top portion of the shield a roundel of vair (a heraldic fur) over the red cross on white of England; below, a sinuous silvery river passes between two snow-clad mountain peaks concealing gold in their rocky hearts.

freeze to death slowly like the fellow did in Jack London's "To Build a Fire." But as it was a bright sunny day and about 65 degrees out, with no snow closer than a distant mountaintop, that didn't seem practical either. So after moseying around deserted Carcross for a while, and taking in the lakeside view from a sturdy wooden deck, I turned around and drove back to Skagway, over the ridge and then WHAM back into the fog and rain (right). Tush-Tush-Tushti, goodbye! I drove 130 miles just so I could cross into the Yukon Territory. Was it worth it? Absolutely!¹¹



I set the next day aside for Skagway tourism. The downtown still has a lot of original buildings (left), now preserved as part of the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. Captain John took me around the

harbor on *Susanna*, one of the few wood-fired steamboats left in American waters (right). Then, since I had a car, I drove out to Dyea (pronounced Dyee), which was the original harbor, settlement and trailhead before the Chilkoot Trail edged it out (longer, but easier). There is nothing left there now but an archaeological site, but the road passes through a lovely country of wooded hills with snow in patches, lush tidal meadows of waving ryegrass, clear cold quick-running



streams, low-lying estuaries with grassy sloughs and brown sandbars, and cloudy faraway peaks. Spruce and pine and mountain hemlock, white yarrow and bright pink fireweed (left, and in the *Matanuska* picture on page 3), yellow arnica and wild blue geraniums everywhere.¹² I met a strapping young red-bearded botanist who told me he had seen salmon in the streams. The salmon were running while I was in Alaska, but I know two for sure that didn't run fast enough.

¹¹ Canada has 10 provinces, of which I have been to only six, and three territories of which before this trip I had not been to any. No one would stamp my passport in either direction.

¹² Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) stops bleeding – just chew some up and glop it on. It is named for Achilles, whom the centaur Chiron taught to carry it with him as a field remedy.

On my last day in Skagway I went back along the Chilkoot Trail into Canada, but this time on a steam train of the White Pass and Yukon Route railway. Chugging along the mountainside, right up against the biomass on the forest side of the gorge, was a very different experience from driving the Klondike Highway. High mountains, avalanche paths and deep chasms lined the valley side; going over trestles felt like flying.¹³ The Trail of '98 was much more clearly visible from the train – amazingly narrow, a single slip sure death. Vast plumes of black oily steam poured from the engine – even though it was mostly water, that couldn't be great for the old carbon footprint. The next day I went back to Juneau on a small Wings of Alaska single propeller plane, flying low over the peaks and glaciers (above right).



My last adventure in Alaska was to fly to YAKUTAT, the northernmost borough of the Alaska panhandle. It is right up where the panhandle joins the main expanse of Alaska, and is one of the most remote and isolated places I've ever been. A thrilling flight over snowfields and glaciers helped me understand a lot about how they form and move. Sometimes I could even make out the glaciers' characteristic ripples and blue tint through deep snow. I had the foresight to call ahead for a taxi, so Virginia the cab driver met me in Yakutat's only cab and drove me around.

There was not that much to see in Yakutat, which apart from the jagged white mountains in the distance looked a lot like northern Wisconsin and even, in places, like the more sparsely populated parts of Cape Cod. We went to the empty beach, and down to where fishermen lived in temporary structures and eagles roosted on posts. Deep mossy woods;

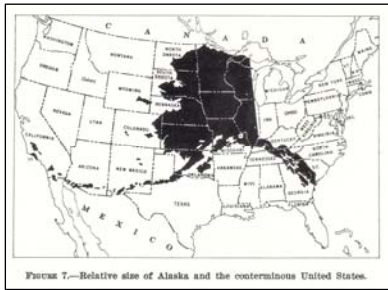


meadows and water lilies; an abandoned coast artillery battery; a sweet little boat harbor.¹⁴ A few hours down time at Fat Grandma's, where her hot and sour soup was the only lunch in town, and then back to the airport in Virginia's taxi for the return flight (over Glacier Bay) to Juneau. Yakutat and Bakutat on the same day! At the airport they stamped my boarding pass with a moose (left). The next morning, August 15, I flew from Juneau via SITKA (my last borough), Ketchikan and Seattle to San Francisco.¹⁵

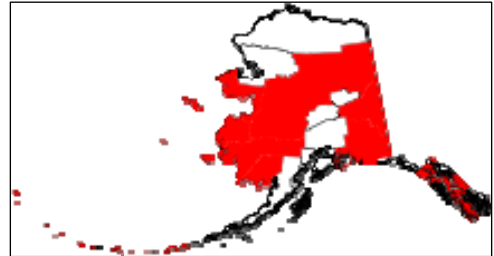
¹³ The railway over White Pass is an official International Historic Civil Engineering Landmark. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Pass_and_Yukon_Route; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Historic_Civil_Engineering_Landmarks.

¹⁴ There was a reason for the artillery – in World War II the Japanese actually did occupy some Alaskan islands. They were way at the other end of Alaska, but still.

¹⁵ And boy, were my arms tired.



Alaska looked and felt like nowhere else I've ever been. The misty mountains and dazzling scenery were part of it; the rough and ready frontier feeling was part of it too, and part was the huge expanse. I never got beyond the southeast panhandle on this trip, and still it was as far as from Cape Girardeau MO to Savannah GA.



It was empty – not as empty as in the Arctic parts, but empty enough – just a few settlements laid between the mountains and the sea, mostly without roads.¹⁶ And while the climate went from only chilly to near-balmy in August, you could see awareness of winter in people's eyes.

In the map at right, the red area is the Unorganized Borough. Leaving aside the panhandle, which I have now covered, what is shown in *white* are the ten boroughs I still have left to do. I can hardly wait to go back and get started.

David
September 2012



JUNEAU

¹⁶ San Francisco (pop. 812,826) has 12% more people than the whole state of Alaska (pop. 722,718), but 13,634 times its population density. Even Cape Cod (pop. 215,769) has 442 times Alaska's population density.