

A group of approximately ten sea otters are swimming in the water. They are scattered across the middle ground, with some looking towards the camera. The water is a calm, greyish-blue color with small ripples. The otters have dark brown fur with lighter patches on their chests and faces.

# *Southeast Alaska*

*Liquid sunshine and More*

*Alistair Montgomery*

It was early evening in late May in 1963. I stood as usual at the bus stop on Cathedral Street in Glasgow outside the “Tech”, otherwise the University of Strathclyde, waiting for the green double-decker SMT bus to take me home. Looking down the road didn’t bring it any sooner, but I looked anyway, particularly on this day when the slow, grey drizzle was running down my neck. Here it came at last. I squelched aboard and found a seat inside with the other pale-faced passengers staring out the window at the rain. “Terrible weather” the bus conductor said as I struggled for my fare. And it had been, for six straight weeks. That was the year I decided to leave Scotland. The next year I went to Africa, Peru the year after that and Colorado, where the sun shines 325 days a year, after that. I’ve lived there ever since.

My memory was jogged back to that day in May when the pale faces filed onto the aircraft at the Ketchikan stop from Seattle for the short flight to Sitka. And shortly after, here I was, over 50 years later, floating on an inflatable skiff in the Pacific Ocean in Southeast Alaska with nine other brave souls, the slow drizzle supplemented by passing squalls dripping down my neck, this time at an expense many times greater than bus fare. The difference is that here in Alaska they call the rain liquid sunshine: it’s not a term that would catch on in Scotland.

Except for widespread population centers like the capital, Juneau, Alaska truly is the last American frontier and has retained that characteristic to this day. It's a way of life that requires adsorption to be appreciated. The sheer massiveness and emptiness of the Inside Passage can be best explored by small ships carrying less than 100 passengers that can probe the fjords and coves with spontaneous detours (sometimes emptying the dining room during meals) to experience the perpetual wildness and sea life of this land. So, my wife and I signed up, packed our rain gear and "wellies" in our duffel bags on a sunny Colorado day in late August and set off for Sitka and the wilds of Southeast Alaska.

To experience Alaska there is no place better to start than Sitka on Baranof Island.



Sitka was the center of Russian occupation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century driven by the trade in otter pelts. The transfer of the Alaska territory from Russia to the United

States of America took place there on October 18, 1879. There's a totem pole on the site to commemorate the occasion. The city is small with a permanent population of around 9,000. It was the capital once, but now it's small-town



Alaska where one can experience the isolation (the only way in or out is by 'plane or boat); the Tlingit native and Russian-American history; the late summer salmon runs in the Indian River in the National Historic Park; and above all, what it might be like to live

there. There's a good presentation on Totem Poles by Ranger Anne Lankenau here: <https://youtu.be/hHmdDzMc fA>

Our ship, the UnCruise Safari Endeavour, weighed anchor at Sitka on the evening of August 26 and headed north into the placid waters of the Inside Passage where we would spend the next six days.

The ship moved mostly at night, anchoring at the next days destination. Our cabin was on the upper deck. All the cabins on this deck, port and starboard, opened onto a narrow walkway with a taffrail topped by a varnished teak handrail. I stepped out of the cabin the next morning to low cloud, mist and a light drizzle. The ship was moored among small, heavily wooded islands. Nothing moved, not even a seagull. Except for the shipboard background hum, it was totally silent creating a feeling of vast emptiness.



Throughout the voyage, the weather in fact defined the scene. At times the islands were capped with thin clouds over a glassy sea, as one might imagine the

silent waters of Avalon. Ironically, the mood vanished when the sun came out, which it did from time to time.

Daily routine on the ship involved early morning yoga exercise on the covered poop deck for those so inclined followed by life jacket donning for the groups signed up for kayaking, skiff trips, beach walking or bushwhacking through the dense rainforest. The next day's menu and activities were planned after dinner each evening. On that first day we saw our first sea life; a "raft" of otters floating off the port bow that dove when we came too close. But the most awesome experience came the next afternoon with the display of Humpback Whales bubble netting. Several whales cooperate by surrounding a school of fish. The whales all



dive at once and at depth release a stream of air from their blow holes that trap the fish in a bubble fence. They surface through the school with open mouths

capturing the fish and straining the seawater through the baleen. It's an incredible sight complemented by flocks of seagulls that seem to come from

nowhere to feed on the surviving fish in the middle of the ring. It's the intensity of the hunt, the mix of jostling whales and frantic seagulls that makes the image memorable.



On the night of the third day into the cruise the ship entered Glacier Bay. We had taken aboard National Park Ranger Rebekah Wierda who gave a presentation on the history of the park glaciers. When we awoke the next morning, the ship was surrounded by floating ice. We had arrived at the Margerie Glacier at the end of Taft Inlet at the northern extremity of the Park. Before us was a wall of fractured ice, according to statistics about 2 miles long and 350 ft thick, with 100 ft under water. Quite a change from 1794 when Captain George Vancouver was stopped

by an ice wall filling the entire channel in his search for the Northwest Passage.

Since then, the glacier has retreated some 65 miles to its current location.



The Safari Endeavor could stay in Glacier Bay for only 24 hours. On our return trip we entered the Johns Hopkins Inlet open only to small vessels to protect the calving of the sealions and seals from June to August (the leviathan cruisers must wait until September). The Johns Hopkins Glacier I thought was even more impressive by its steepness and curved path to the sea. But what impressed me most of all was the overwhelming massiveness and power of Nature in this special place.



The theme of the cruise was photography. It was led by Jaymi Heimbuch, a



professional photographer from Oregon, who gave excellent shipboard presentations on composition and editing and individual tips on board and on

onshore excursions. On one such trip, we experienced and photographed in the rain forest, the Uncruise guide calling out periodically to warn the brown bears of our presence. The rain forest is dripping. covered in moss and thick vegetation with no trails. Abundant berries supply splashes of color at this time of the year.

When photographing with a macro lens I used a stacking technique to get

complete focus throughout the depth

of the plant, carefully including the

leaves where the shape helps

Identification. Macro lenses have a

very thin depth of field that requires

manual focusing on different parts of

the subject and stacking and blending



the images in Photoshop, Lightroom or other software. The technique really requires a tripod, but can be done hand-held if you have a steady hand and there is no wind moving the subject

## Tips on Photographing Southeast Alaska

Personally, I found scenic photography under cloudy conditions in Southeast to be challenging. but rewarding by the mood created by the perpetual mist. The light is very flat under these conditions and the photos look black and white. These are not typical automatic point-and-shoot conditions. In fact, I took many of the pictures in the accompanying Photo Gallery on manual exposure with a reading from a featureless grey sky plus 1 1/3 stops, adding fine tuning exposure compensation adjustments where needed. This approach avoids under-exposure caused by the enshrouding white mist. Many digital compact cameras have these controls.

The key adjustments under these conditions are aperture, shutter speed and ISO. The best aperture selection is 2 to 3 stops closed from the widest lens aperture. For an f4 lens that would be f8 to f11. Probably the most important setting is shutter speed which should not be less than 1/500<sup>th</sup> of a second or faster. The

aperture and shutter speed settings will determine the ISO speed setting needed for the prevailing light conditions. And it might be high, ISO 1600 or more. Digital compact cameras typically produce more grain in the image at speeds above ISO 800. But in the end, the image is better than one that is out of focus because of a low shutter speed. These guidelines are a good starting point, but ultimately, the best combination of aperture, speed and ISO depends on the subject and can best be determined by practice. Before the trip if possible.

## What to Expect If You Go

If you are a birder that prizes daily species counts you are likely to be disappointed. The principal species we saw were Glaucous-winged Gulls, and Bald Eagles spotted as distant white golf-ball pinpoints in the trees.

Getting a decent shot from a moving skiff is difficult. One of the guides, Christian,



was exceptional at bird and whale spotting and pointed out falcons, Long-billed Murrelet, Loons and more.

We saw the greatest variety of

seabirds (cormorant, guillemot, a few distant puffins and, of course, gulls) when passing South Marble Island that has some cliff habitat and is not totally covered by dense forest. Otherwise, birds were pretty scarce.

Unfortunately, we had to leave the ship at Haines to fly my wife, Barbara, to the Urgent Care Clinic in Juneau. She had developed acute bronchitis and an ear infection early in the trip that required prescription antibiotics for treatment. The Chief Mate doubling as the Emergency Medical Technician could not diagnose or treat the condition. Haines is another of the isolated towns in Alaska with a resident population of around 1,700. It is best known for the swarms of Bald Eagle that arrive at the Chilkat River for the salmon runs in early November.

All in all, it was a memorable trip. Would I go back? Perhaps, but this time better prepared. If I do, I want to return to the magic of the silence and the Arthurian mist and the sea life that is so special in this place.

But I could do without the rain.