

SECTION 4: THE NARROWS AND BEYOND

Wednesday, June 27 & June 28, 2007

Petersburg, AK

Coffman Cove to Petersburg: 59.17 miles

June 27: The alarm went off at 3:30 a.m. Alaska time (4:30 PDT). By 4:45 a.m. we had raised anchor and were leaving Coffman Cove in a light rain but with plenty of daylight.



Today we will transit Wrangell Narrows, aka “Christmas Tree Alley” because it has so many red and green lights on navigational aids marking its many twists and turns. The plan is to get there, crossing Clarence Strait and then taking Stikine Strait between Zarembo and Etolin Islands, in time to ride the flood partway in and then the ebb out the other end. Thus the early hour.

Along the way we dodge several gill nets and can hear radio chatter from other pleasure boats... ”Can you see his float?” and “We took that one to port” or (this from a fisherman) “Calling the sailboat...you are about to run over my net” and the response “Oh, now I see it. Thanks.” Once you find the orange end float and figure out which boat it goes with, you can usually see the line of white floats holding up the net. We have simplified the problem by taking a course more to the center of the channel; gill netters tend to be close to shore.



At the entrance to Wrangell Narrows are more floats, but these are marking crab pots, not nets. We have found the ebb tide....the floats are bent over by the speed of the current rushing in.

We have been here before, in 2004, but remember primitive settlements with small A-frame buildings along the shore. Now we see framed cabins, in the ochre color of new wood. Further along are even more substantial houses, large ones, and a resort with a lodge, guest cabins and a small boat dock. We don't remember seeing any of this before.

At Anchor Point (about halfway through the Narrows) little fishing boats fill the channel...so many that we can't see the navigational aids. Men and boys and I think some women, too, are out there fishing, oblivious to the wakes of power boats racing by,

We entered Wrangell Narrows with two marks with letters indicating place names and then began marks #1 and #2 etc. At Light 50 there is a logging operation with a road to the water, log booms and a small boat dock. Across the channel are very large houses, with electricity. At Scow Bay, just before Petersburg, containers for Alaska Marine Lines are stacked high on each other on land. Looking ahead, a jet plane suddenly appears from behind a mountain. Airport must be nearby, we hope.

Finally, after more than two hours of bends and curves, we arrive at Petersburg. We have a choice of North or South Harbor. South is newer and undoubtedly nicer, but North is right at town. Located next to a very busy cannery and filled with fishing boats, North Harbor is interesting.



We are assigned Slip 63, next to Dorothy H II. We chat with the fisherman and watch as he works. His is a long line boat, with softball-sized weights sitting ready to pull the fishing lines down to a proper depth. More complex, but the same system as our downrigger. We talk about navigation systems – everyone uses GPS, computers and chartplotters these days. I wonder, back in the late 50's when the first satellites were launched, if we really appreciated what an impact satellites would have on such a variety of people and occupations.



June 28: Our fisherman neighbor has been busy cleaning, filleting and salting herring all day, making bait for salmon. He puts the strips of herring into wooden boxes, about 8” x 12” by 4”, then covers them with rock salt, then adds another layer until the box is full. Three boxes of salted herring bait will last through the winter. He can use them sooner, but likes them to be salted at least a week; firms them up so they are easier to put on the hook. He puts on a hook with a lure, then wires the fish onto the hook. Guess the salmon love it!



Bob just came in with a treasure – a Ziploc bag filled with bloody fish heads and bones! We’re hoping Dungeness crabs will find them enticing.

Unlike Ketchikan (with many fishing boats from Washington State), most of the boats here are local. It's an active dock. People are busy, making repairs, preparing to go out, etc. Across the water someone has been hammering on something metal all day. It would be quieter to try South Harbor but we would be further from town and miss learning about fishing—and we wouldn't have those marvelous fish heads in our freezer!

Petersburg is known as “Alaska’s Little Norway.” There is a Sons of Norway Hall and a Norwegian boat replica toward the south of town, but we didn't even get there this time, having been there before. South Harbor would be below that.

We have a sense that Petersburg has grown since we were last here, and grown away from its old main street, leaving it to transient boats and fishermen. Up the ramp from the dock is town. To the left is the cannery and next to it The Trading Union with groceries downstairs and a department store upstairs. Turn right instead and there are two blocks of stores including Hammer & Wikan, a very well-equipped hardware store. (I've been looking for freezer tape for months at home, but found it here.) Town ends about two blocks down, with a hotel, and coffee Hus (two dots over the “u”, probably a Norwegian word).



The post office has moved, and is no longer walking distance. It's now somewhere else, “a taxi ride” away, says the man in the harbor office, who isn't sure if there is a mailbox in town.

Life marches to a different meter. After the negative response to “Is there a mailbox?” I asked, “Is there a place to leave outgoing mail?” The man at the harbor office answered, “Well, I suppose, if it has stamps, you could leave it here, but I can't promise anything. We go to get the mail every 3-4 days.”

Walking back to the boat, two men, one in orange waterproof coveralls, are chatting. I overhead one remark: “California's a strange place.” To each his own. At least we have mailboxes.

(Ultimately, just before leaving Sam and I went to get a newspaper and coffee, next to the little hotel. The lady at the hotel desk understood, and took my postcards.)

Bob treated me to take-out pizza, across the street from the dock, upstairs and over the cold storage company that sells seafood and bait. Papa Bear's Pizza sponsors local high school sports: wrestling, baseball, swimming and diving, etc. Teams compete with Sitka, Ketchikan, Craig, and other southeastern Alaska towns. How do they get to these places, especially in winter? There is much to know about living in Alaska.

From our berth, halfway down the dock, at the shore we can see a three-story green metal building with metal siding. It appears to be a "dorm" or "bunkhouse" for either fish boat helpers or cannery workers. At the end of the day on Thursday men are standing on stairwell balconies or gathered in front. All are male, and appear to be Hispanic (maybe could be Native American)?

10:45 p.m. PDT (9:45 p.m. Alaska Daylight Time): The light is starting to dim. I was going to make some calls, but it is too late, even though the light makes it seem much earlier. The sun has slipped behind a mountain, but it is still light enough to read by it. The information booklet says that Petersburg has 17 hours and 50 minutes of daylight at summer solstice, just a week to so ago. At winter solstice there is just six hours and 46 minutes of daylight.

Friday, June 29, 2007

Petersburg to Thomas Bay, AK

It's 4:30 p.m. PDT (3:30 Alaska time) and we are sitting at anchor in a pristine little inlet watching it rain. The water is absolutely calm, a milky greenish translucent color similar to the glass rocks Wayne gave us. Yesterday was sunny, T-shirt weather in Petersburg. Today it is chilly and overcast. Only a small sailboat joins us in this inlet, behind Ruth Island well inside Thomas Bay, which is just across Frederick Sound from Petersburg.

We are surrounded by lots of polystyrene floats, probably attached to crab traps. One – the red and white one with "Apollo" lettered in Carolyn Lancaster's beautiful calligraphy marks our crab trap. We have great expectations, having baited it with the fish heads scavenged from our dock neighbor at Petersburg and some special smelly stuff irresistible to crabs, or so the salesman at Ketchikan's Tongass Trading Center told us.

We practiced fishing today, for more than an hour. Although we now know how the downrigger works, and the trolling valve on the boat, we don't know what we will have for dinner, since barbecued salmon was on the menu.

Baird Glacier lies at the other end of Thomas Bay. It's receding, and has left behind a mudflat "wall" of granite and other rock. The mudflat is charted but close to it is 89 fathoms of very cold (34.1 degrees) water. As glaciers go, it's not very pretty, just a low white slope retreating back through a mountain canyon.



8:30 p.m. PDT: Three more boats have come in. One, a large powerboat, ignored us and went straight in to the end of the inlet, which shoals but has a shrimp industry (we saw a large barge when we came in but it's out of sight around the corner now). We looked out a few hours later and the powerboat is high aground. Its black hull is completely out of water, sitting on the mud. Very strange. Did they do this deliberately? Incompetently?

At dinner a sailboat with some kind of Union Jack flag came in, and several ports listed on the back, including Hong Kong. They immediately got in a dinghy – two men and a dog – and headed for shore. They came back with wildflowers and (we assume) a happier dog.

Our doggie is happy....she got her dinner “al fresco” in the cockpit and then visited her green mat, with no urging from us. So we believe we have been successful in our potty-training efforts. This was supposed to be the place where we inflated the dinghy, but it was raining when we arrived and we were tired. It has (temporarily) stopped raining, but Sam is done for the night, fast asleep on her cushy egg-crate bed (thanks to Kimani's recommendation) under the table.

We hope the crabs are happily crawling into our trap and feasting on fish heads. Tomorrow we'll see.