

SECTION 11: BACK TO THE NARROWS

Thursday, July 26, 2007

Ford's Terror to Hobart Bay, Alaska

Route 29: 45.10 miles.

Entrance Island protects Hobart Bay, 14 miles north of Cape Fanshaw, and in it is a tiny little sheltered bay. We arrived at Hobart Bay just before 6 o'clock boat time, having successfully escaped from Ford's Terror and Endicott Arm. One boat was at the little free dock (that does not connect to land). They helped us tie up and we chatted, noting that they were wearing Amazon.com jackets; Robb Keystone and his crew, Brian, on Sea Spirit, both knew (or knew of) Nicole when all worked at Amazon.com. They are on their way north. We became the advisors, suggesting places to stop or not stop.

The free dock here is only 100 feet long. There is no access to land, just a floating dock. At our end it has a bunch of stuff: Things covered by a blue tarp, a gray plastic bin two feet by three, a couple of 30- or 40-gallon trashcans with holes in the lids, a lot of plastic buckets, an ice chest. On one of the very tall pilings holding the dock is a sign (hung upside down): "Storage of crab pots, nets, barrels or skiffs on dock is prohibited. State of Alaska."



We can see a two-story house ashore. Soon after we arrived, a crab-fishing boat came in and tied to the end. Two men emerged, and began siphoning fuel from the plastic barrels on the dock. Gas fumes drifted into our aft area for a while. Then one man went ashore, using a paddleboat-like skiff to travel the 20 feet from the dock to shore. Turns out he has a 100-year lease on the land and lives there with his two pug dogs. This used to be a post office, which is why the government put in the dock and ramp to shore, but the post office stopped a long time ago (1930's I think). The current tenant/crab fisherman came here in the 90's and "got tired of people coming in my yard." So he took down the ramp (and shore access) and burned it (over a ten-year period). He's probably the one who hung the sign about storage upside down as well. The cables that held the ramp remain somewhere underwater so mooring to the inside isn't recommended for larger boats.

Soon the dock is full. We are on the outside with a sailboat from Juneau in front. An Alaskan sports fishing boat and our little Seattle boat are on the inside. The dock is comfortable, though, and a good place to stop during a long passage.



The sailboat, for example, came from Juneau and is heading for Wrangell tomorrow. We are nearly two knots per hour faster and have taken two or three days to cover the same distance. Apparently they are heading to Seattle for prostate cancer radiation treatment and will live on the boat. If all goes well, they will take it to San Diego next spring. We wish them well.

Friday, July 27, 2007

Hobart Bay to Ruth Island, Thomas Bay

49.58 miles

Friday morning at Hobart Bay:

The tide is quite low, exposing a lot of shoal near shore. Our sports fisherman boat had to walk his boat around the end of the dock (clambering over and around all the junk on the dock) but didn't seem to have any problem with the mystery cables. We have nine feet of water under us and can see shells on the bottom. The sailboat left at first light, as promised.

Friday afternoon at Thomas Bay:

Thomas Bay is just 12 miles north of Petersburg Harbor, on the east side of Frederick Sound. We could have gone on to Petersburg, but five hours was a long enough trip for one day -- and this will be our last chance to set the crab trap for a while. Our favorite anchorage, behind Ruth Island, is another five miles in. An eagle or two usually sits in the island's trees.



Quite a lot of rain came though last night, but today is clear with smooth water and a light sky ahead. We are sorry to be leaving Alaska but are eager to head south. It just feels like time to start down, although slowly.

Being safely in we can now comment on the difference between the two segments of our trip down Stephens Passage. On today's trip we had sunshine between light clouds and patches of blue sky, a pleasant journey. The trip from Taku to Tracy Arm featured choppy seas and wind waves, an uncomfortable trip.

Earlier today, we officially completed our circumnavigation of Admiralty Island as we rounded Cape Fanshaw and entered Frederick Sound. There were some wind waves on Frederick Sound. To port it was sunny with blue sky and to starboard were dark gray clouds...So we headed more to portside, close to shore, to look (unsuccessfully) for bears.

This is the third time we have been to Thomas Bay, once in 2004 and now for the second time this trip. It feels like the beginning of a long good-bye. From here we will go to Petersburg, then down the Wrangell Narrows and to Wrangell, then to Meyers Chuck. All this is essentially a repeat of our 2004 trip and this year's voyage up. We'll vary the good-bye with a trip up the Behm Canal to add new adventures, then head south via Ketchikan (for fuel), and Foggy Bay, then enter Canada at Prince Rupert. This exit segment will probably take a week.

We have never entered the Ruth Island anchorage at high tide; it looks completely different. We see a small (maybe ten by four feet) unfamiliar exposed rock. Coming closer, we see that the "rocks" on it are harbor seals, not active, not barking and in fact absolutely silent. We think they might be pups but don't know. Some are completely out of the water, bodies oddly arched so that we wonder if they are OK.

Behind them we can see a snowfield. We don't remember that, either. The view from high tide is definitely different.

We bait and set the crab trap, then anchor. Sam and I row ashore with disappointing results. High tide has covered a lot of landing spots. We row around, and row some more for about half an hour, so close to shore yet so far. An oar dipped in the water near grassy areas indicates about two feet of depth; doable, but sounds chilly. Other areas are rocky; we have a soft-bottom dinghy and I did not want to beach it on a rock on an ebbing tide. Finally we compromise on a grassy spot. No rock or tree limb to tie the dinghy to, but a flat rock and a bit of algae to step on when landing. The grass on shore is strewn with large rocks/small boulders (about one to two feet in diameter); the grass itself is about a foot or so high. So poor Sam, who desperately wants to play Frisbee, can't see the Frisbee once thrown – and I almost can't see her in the grass. It is not the best play time we have had.



Hopefully the crabs are having more fun playing with the halibut we gave them. It came up with the crabs in our trap at Taku Harbor, was too small to eat and so far is the only fish we have caught.

8:30 p.m. – The harbor seals have left; the rock is bare, although much larger since it is low tide. We don't understand where they came from or where they went. Perhaps we can ask in Petersburg tomorrow, at the small marine mammal research center there.

Saturday, July 28
Thomas Bay to Petersburg, Alaska
20.07 miles

We pulled up the crab trap about 8 a.m. as we left Ruth Island and were greeted by four crabs – all keepers! By 9 o'clock we were out of Thomas Bay and heading south in the rain across Frederick Sound towards Petersburg, by now a familiar town. By 10:15 we were docked, again at North Harbor and this time very near the cannery.

Sam and I went to play Frisbee and then I wandered around alone sightseeing while Bob looked for a marine store. I've been looking for something -- an Alaskan craft – as a memento for the boat, so checked out the local museum. The shop had nice wooden bowls, locally crafted (actually, in Wrangell, but that's fairly local). A nice man insisted on giving me a tour of the museum; it's small but has some interesting maritime artifacts. Glass floats, for example, that held nets up. Didn't they break? Yes, they often did, so most of the larger boats had a glass blower on board to make new ones. There were photos of fish traps, now outlawed, which as late as 1959 were used to catch salmon by just blocking the entire river. And, of course, all the links between San Francisco and Alaska Packers.

Petersburg has been a fishing “town” for nearly 2,000 years. The first cannery was built in 1897 by a Norwegian who saw nearby LeConte Glacier as a handy source of ice. It is one of the top ranked ports in the U.S, for the value and quality of fish landed and is home to 3,100 permanent residents and 370 fishermen holding harvesting rights with a combined market value exceeding \$100 million.

Petersburg has a wonderful bookstore that fills an old house. I stopped by and asked about the lady I met at the Laundromat in Auke Bay (Juneau) who said her great-grandparents lived in this house. The clerk, who is the owner, knew exactly who I was talking about. She said this is one of few original (1920's) houses left and they had to replace the foundation. Apparently people used beach sand to mix cement and the salt has caused foundations to crumble. The bookstore must be a cozy place in winter, with nooks and window seats, a children's area with toys on the floor.... and lots of books. I bought a book of watercolors by famed Alaskan artist Rie Muñoz, *Alaska Through the Eyes of an Artist*.

We've had very little news this summer, so I looked for a newspaper. The best you can do is yesterday's newspaper today, and they sell out fast. The tour plane crash near Ketchikan is big news, as is the slow fishing season this year.

The local paper discussed cannery issues. “Foreign exchange students” brought in as cheap labor are complaining because there is not enough work. Turns out the canneries employ seasonal workers from places such as Turkey, Russia, Albania, Poland and Kazakhstan and call them “exchange students.” They get J-1 Exchange Visitor visas but pay an agency about \$3,000 per person to find them a job and for their tickets. Because

of the slow fishing season, the workers are worried that they won't have much money left after they repay the agency. Canneries also hire local high school and college students and "Hispanic workers from California" the article said.



Petersburg is hosting a Little League tournament so welcome signs are up in store windows, as are posters for a "Quilting in Rain Country" workshop. I took my computer to the public library to get internet access and the friendly woman at the desk opened up a conference room so I could have power. (Electricity was great; can't say as much for the quality of the internet signal.) The copy shop where I got great internet access last time is not open on weekends.

Back at the boat, Bob cooked and cleaned our Thomas Bay crabs, and replaced the fishing line I had tangled up.

North Harbor is a busy place, with lots of people coming and going, just visiting on a summer Saturday. Almost all the boats here are fish boats. (There is a newer South Harbor for pleasure boats, but we like North for its local color and proximity to town; "Main Street" aka Nordic Road is at the head of the ramp.) Five big refrigerated containers (the kind that go on trains and ships) stand at the top of the ramp next to the cannery. It is a busy place, with boats coming in and unloading.



Our berth could hold two boats, but the space is open. Beyond us, “Tionesta” is checking his reel. Most boats in the harbor now are gill netters. Seiners are gone – we saw a lot going out as we came in. Unlike gill netters, who use drift nets and often fish alone or with just one crew member, seiners work in crews of five or six to set a net and then close it up to trap the fish. They usually catch “humpies” – pink salmon that is usually canned.



Today we had a fair amount of rain and lots of sunshine. No contradiction – this is Alaska! Sometimes we needed to wear a warm Polartec jacket and other times we needed to peel down to just a T-shirt.

About 9 o'clock I decided to walk down to the South Harbor, to see the Sons of Norway Hall and the Nordic ship replica on display in front. South Harbor is quiet, not busy as ours is. A few young men are playing soccer in the street near the dorm – foreign cannery workers no doubt. I get back just before it starts to rain; it's pouring now. Thankfully we have shore power here and can run the space heater! Welcome to July in Alaska!



Apollo's Cruise to Alaska – 2007
Section 11: Back to the Narrows