

## SECTION 12: WRANGELL

**Sunday, July 29, 2007**

**Petersburg and Wrangell Narrows to Wrangell**

**38.31 miles**

Without going to sea and facing exposure to the Gulf of Alaska and its weather, there is really only one way to get from Juneau and the northern end of the Inside Passage to Ketchikan on the southern end. That's Wrangell Narrows. Scanning a map, it seems like there are other passages, but their names betray them; Frederick Sound, running between Mitkof Island and La Conte Glacier, ends at "Dry Strait." To the west, on the other side of Kupreanof Island, is "Rocky Pass." Neither is recommended for navigation.

Instead, everyone goes up and down Wrangell Narrows, a twisting and often shallow 21-mile passageway nicknamed "Christmas Tree Lane" for its more than 70 colored navigational aids and lighted buoys. Red lights mark the port, or left side, and green the right. Petersburg sits at the top of this "lane." Wrangell is about 20 nautical miles southeast of its southern end, at the tip of Wrangell Island and directly south of Dry Strait.

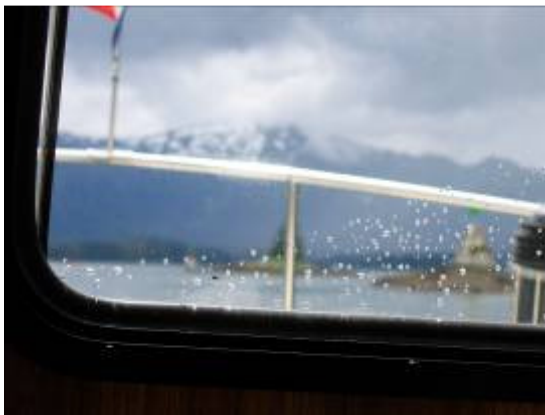
Because so much water flows through this narrow passage, currents are strong. Water flows in and out from both ends, so midway through the Narrows, the currents change, ebb becoming flood and flood an ebb, The trick is in the timing. Done right, one could ride the flood down from Petersburg, then at the half way point catch the ebbing tide to the end. Easier said than done, however.

We're off the dock at 10:35 a.m., just in time to give ourselves a little excitement. The current is flying by – a four-knot flood makes our boat speed 12 knots! The cell phone rings; it is Tracy calling. I am a little distracted since Pacific Titan, a tug hauling a huge barge, is coming up fast and we are about to pass them at the narrowest part of the channel. Bob is cool. He takes us way to the starboard side of the channel and slows down to let it pass. Still, that barge was close enough to completely fill the viewfinder of the camera.



We continue down Wrangell Narrows. It is raining heavily yet the sky to port is bright. This seems like a different kind of rain, a wetter one, like the “pineapple express” rains we get during El Ninos in California. A few minutes later it is sunny and bright.

The 406-foot Alaska State Ferry Matanuska is coming our way. We pass 321 yards apart between Mountain Point and Green Point. At Green Point (Mark #49) we see some houses to port (the Petersburg side) but just trees to starboard. At mark #37 it looks like a lodge, or resort with lots of buildings and little cabins being built.



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We are following another pleasure boat, “Patience” from Friday Harbor. It looks like a fishing boat and has a downrigger, but it is a Selene.

A little skiff comes towards us, going very fast and with a dog standing up in the bow!

Toward Spruce Point (Mark #18) the water is more open. Several houses are well-spaced in the trees, not like the dense clusters of houses we saw earlier on.

Now we've reached Mark 17, and we have a big adverse current. We didn't time it right. Our SOG (Speed Over Ground, measured by the GPS) shows that we have slowed to just 4.9 knots.

Opposite #14 is another cluster of houses on Keene Channel. We are away from glaciers now and the water is green, not the milky aqua of glacial water. The last glacier was LeConte, which sort of separates Petersburg from Wrangell and makes Wrangell Narrows the necessary transit route.

At 12:47 p.m. we pass Mark #1. We exit Wrangell Narrows, but still have a ways to go. The ferry Taku is overtaking. We already passed Patience; how small she looks with the ferry looming up behind. They exchange radio discussions about passing. (Taku, 352 feet long, can carry 69 vehicles and 370 passengers. It has 9 four-berth and 33 two-berth cabins and along with its four sister-ship ferries is the lifeblood of Southeast Alaska, connecting people and communities.)



Taku passes us at about 1:15 p.m., as we round Pt. Alexander and turn down Sumner Strait towards Wrangell. We continue for two and a half hours, motoring between Zarembo and Mitkof Islands, then passing Mud Bay on Vank Island and several smaller islands, the rain alternating with patches of blue sky, seas fairly flat. Just one month ago, on June 27, we were here, passing Vank Island on the way to Petersburg. We've seen and done a lot since then.

Just before 4 o'clock we sight the blue mural that welcomes visitors to Wrangell, "the friendliest little town in Southeast Alaska." Wrangell, our Alaskan fisherman, Spike, said, "is more like the old Alaska." It's small, with a population of 1,900 people, and sits in the middle of the Tongass National Forest, near the delta of the Stikine River. Wrangell Island, 30-miles long, has a mild (but wet) climate, a jet airport with daily flights on Alaska Airlines, a state ferry terminal -- and Muskeg Meadows, the only USGA-rated golf course in Southeast Alaska.



We were here once before, briefly, when we stopped to wait for slack water during our 2004 charter trip. Now as we approach, it looks a lot bigger than we remember, with lots of buildings strung out along its south shore.

A man on a fish-buying boat calls over the radio: "Anyone who needs anything..." Fishing for gill netters opened today at noon, and lasts until Tuesday. He's hoping they'll pick him to buy their catch.

At Wrangell the smiling harbormaster is the friendliest we've seen. We side tie to the public dock in front of another Nordic Tug 32. At first we thought it was Makai, and our friend Drue, but turns out it is Raven, from Anacortes. Dick and Fran invite us over; their boat is immaculate with "a place for everything and everything in its place." (We are still trying to deal with clutter and where things best fit.) Dick is a wood worker and it shows. But Bob is most impressed by his dinghy system. a hard-bottom inflatable boat with 15-horsepower engine, all on a lift-up system that carries it on the transom without taking the outboard off the dinghy.



We enjoy chatting about places we've been and new places to see, and find we have a lot in common. A 5<sup>th</sup> generation Californian, Dick has worked at Lockheed, taught about simulators, worked in San Jose, and in Binghamton, New York – all similar to what Bob has done. So there is lots to talk about.

We also learn how his watermaker works (and when it doesn't work). The milky water we see, Dick explains, is filled with glacial dust. Glaciers move slowly. We don't see it, but they are constantly grinding down rock as they inch forward. That fine grit is what makes the water opaque – and clogs filters. They don't even try to use the watermaker in glacier areas -- too much glacial silt.

Everything closes on Sundays in Wrangell so we are unable to get fuel or groceries. We decide to stay an extra day and catch up on errands and, we hope, email. Our Verizon broadband sort of works, but there is a sign on the dock advertising a signal --\$6.00 for 24 hours. Seems reasonable, if we can figure out how to sign up.

### **Monday, July 30, 2007**

We woke up to a nice day. Sam and I went ashore to adjacent Shakes Island, named after a Tlingit (pronounced "Clink-it") chief. It's sort of a park, grassy with a small long house and lots of totem poles, each telling a story. *Bear Up the Mountain* totem, for example, commemorates a legendary flood; two grizzly bears helped the fleeing Shakes tribe find refuge from the rising waters. Sam had a good workout and then we explored town a bit, finding the coffee shack. Raven decided to head out but not go as far as Meyers Chuck, our next destination. We may run into them again.



By late morning it had started to rain....and rain...and rain. Heavily. All day. Bob took a taxi to do some errands. I worked on my missives, then decided to check out town and mail some letters.

The Post Office (which also serves as the Customs Building) is impressive, a big, imposing white building on a hill a block from shops and surrounded by bright green mowed grass. (We've rarely seen mowed grass in Alaska...lots of uneven grasses, wild flowers, gravel, etc., but not formal lawns.) There is no home delivery nor drop boxes in Wrangell, so everyone must come in to pick up mail and packages. It is Monday at noon. Lots of people are here in line, chatting with each other about other people, plans and books and picking up packages, many from Amazon.com. Shiny, polished brass P.O.

Boxes cover one large wall. A shipping container sits backed up behind the post office; mail comes in via containers on barges



Apparently cruise ships no longer come to Wrangell, although smaller ones might, and it is a ferry stop. It's close to the Anan Wildlife/Bear Observatory, Stikine River and LeConte Glacier. Several small tour boats from Wilderness Adventure Tours, aluminum ones with big outboard engines, are tied on the other side of the dock. So tourism is an industry.

It would be fun to come back, by plane or ferry, stay at one of the many Bed and Breakfasts, and take one of those tour boats, or perhaps take a cab to venture out. We suspect there is more to Wrangell than meets the eye.

Wrangell also has a cannery or two. We are now used to seeing small groups of Eastern European young men walking around speaking Russian or a similar language and know that "foreign exchange student" is an euphemism for cannery worker.

Internet continues to be a frustration. I stopped in at the small ACS office, which had advertised an internet connection; the one person there was just a receptionist and didn't know much about the service. She said she'd have someone check the signal, but if anything, it got worse.

Maybe the lack of internet connections leads to more people communication. At the small grocery store, I met a friendly lady while checking out the limited produce. "We meet again!" she smiled, as we converged near the paper goods aisle, seemingly old friends by now. Bob had taken a taxi from the boat; we saw the driver getting a donut inside the store. "Take your time," he smiled. He'll wait for us. We took the groceries and went back to the boat for more computer work.

## UNDER FOUR FLAGS

At the end of the day, I decided to check out the local museum—a big, new building that opened just after we were here in 2004. It seems sort of out of character with the rest of the town, which appears to be a little poorer than we remember it.

Wrangell has been governed by four entities: Tlingit, Russia, Great Britain and the U.S. It was a Tlingit trading area that in 1834 became a Russian fort, Redoubt St. Dionysius, then in 1840 Fort Stikine of the Hudson's Bay Company. Gold was discovered in this area in the 1860's, much earlier than the discovery of gold in what is now Juneau in 1880 and the more famous Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-98. The area was renamed Fort Wrangell after American occupation in 1867. Apparently it was quite a frontier town, rough and bawdy, until the boom times settled down.

The town, the island it sits on and Wrangell Narrows were all named for a Russian admiral, Baron Ferdinand Petrovich von Wrangell, the sixth Chief Manager of the Russian American Company and a notable naval officer, explorer and writer.

The museum displays were quite good. A movie included a section on life today. Fish and shellfish are important sources of income. Instead of auto shop, the local high school teaches how to make aluminum boats. Sports teams compete, but they travel by ferry or charter boat instead of buses.

#### “NORTHERN EXPOSURE” REVISITED

Wrangell has a local radio station, Stikine Radio KSTK-FM. Listening brought up memories of television's "Northern Exposure" -- without the moose. Stikine Radio's DJ, a woman, was entertaining her in-laws from Tennessee and talked about picking special songs for her mother-in-law, who apparently was in the studio with her.

We learned that no babies are delivered in Wrangell – doctors won't do it. Pregnant women have to go to Ketchikan, with better facilities. I guess they go early and stay there a while.

The DJ broadcast the weather report: Mostly cloudy with a chance of rain. It's 9 o'clock and the temperature is 56 degrees. Another weather report: Mostly cloudy with a chance of rain. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Sitting inside our cozy boat, hearing raindrops come and go, the folksiness of the radio station was just the right touch.

Wrangell has no AM radio stations to listen to, and no news station. As in frontier days, news is rare, old and usually second-hand – but often interesting.

Stikine Radio aired several segments on the inter-island ferry system, interviewing passengers about their destinations and lifestyles. They did one segment on Tenakee Springs, which we had visited.

Barges come twice a week from Seattle and apparently visit each Southeast Alaska town, bringing groceries and other supplies (but not fuel). The biggest project was a huge crane. They had to build a pad on top of containers to hold it. Containers are usually stacked five-high on the barges. People sometimes try to sneak drugs on, so the DEA often runs drug-sniffing dogs around them. The barges bring in about 450-700 containers a week, and about 30,000 containers a year.

We also learned that Coffman Cove, which we visited on the way up, is to get new school, at a cost of \$7 million for about 79 students. It's on Prince of Wales Island, the largest island in Southeastern Alaska. There are road construction jobs, but people won't move there now because there is no school. They are finishing a road to connect parts of the island and perhaps encourage more growth.

All this courtesy Stikine Radio. At 9:30 p.m. it is very light but dimming. Signing off now...

**Tuesday, July 31**  
**Wrangell to Meyers Chuck**  
**Route 32      50.7 miles**

Wrangell Island is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest island in the Alaskan Panhandle, with 220 square miles, 140,612 acres and 88.5 shoreline miles. Zimovia Strait, a waterway some 30 miles long connecting Sumner Strait and Ernest Sound, runs along the western side of the island, separating Wrangell Island from Etolin and Woronkofski Islands. Named by the Russians, Zimovia translates as "winter."

There are other ways to head south, but this is advertised as quite scenic and sheltered. Part way down is Zimovia Narrows, with a channel described as "tortuous, but marked by buoys, daybeacons and lights." The Narrows pass through what was once a flourishing Indian village.

We are off the fuel dock at 10:30 Alaska time and half an hour later pass Shoemaker Bay Boat Harbor, a favorite of sports fishing boats. It looks more "yachty" and less workboat-focused than the Wrangell Harbor we've just left. South of it we see big piles of orangish stuff like you see in British Columbia. We think it is a wood chip operation, with evidence of logging rarely seen in Alaska.



We also see what looks like a nice road, as far as it goes. We've been told that the last house is 13 miles down the road from Wrangell, and think the road ends there. (There are a couple of cabins at the south end of the island, at Thom's Place.)

Heading down Zimovia Strait with smooth seas, we see lots of fishing boats and watch one pull in a very long net. This week's season ends at noon today – in half an hour. A few houses dot the shore, but are becoming much less frequent.

As we approach Zimovia Narrows we can look ahead and see lots of marks. But this is not a straight-line course. We need to wander around and through the various shoals and rocks, guided by navigational aids. It really helped to have a paper chart to give the overall concept and electronic chart at 75% to show the location of the boat and shoals in great detail.

There is no other boat here, just lots of little inlets, mostly shallow, and tiny bays and small islands. This once was an Indian Village. It would be a good site, with defensible access and lots of grassy but clear sloping shorelines. Near Trap Rock we saw a floating cabin with a dock and an abandoned house, and ahead some blue sky.

We pass Thom's Place, where a few people live, at about 1:40 p.m.. It's very scenic, with an irregular shoreline, inlets and cove. Now we've reached the end of Wrangell Island, and enjoy a long, boring (thankfully) ride down Ernest Sound. Seas are basically flat, the sun out and sky blue. A pleasant change.

I spend the time cleaning up while Sam noses her food cube all over main salon. Once in a while a piece of dry dog food kibble comes out. Great exercise.

At 1637 hours we reach the now-familiar entrance to Meyers Chuck, just a few hours west of Ketchikan. The cell phone comes to life with four bars!

