SECTION 13: BEHM CANAL

Wednesday, August 1, 2007
Meyers Chuck to Yes Bay, on the Behm Canal
50.39 miles

“We’ll send a skiff at 5:30. Will that be OK?” With that transmission, we completed dinner reservations for tonight. Sounds fancy…. We will see.

Every other week we have big (spring) tides followed by neap tides, where the different between high and low is not so great. We’re at the spring tide cycle, with more than a twenty-foot differential between high and low! At 2:58 a.m. Alaska Daylight Time there was a high of 17.88 feet; this morning at 9:17 ADT a minus tide of nearly three feet (-2.72) was predicted.

Meyers Chuck is a cute little cove with a narrow entrance bounded by shoals and rocks. Leaving at the peak of such a large minus tide sounded risky, so we were up and off the dock at 6:35 a.m. – the second boat to leave. Low at the time was three feet and dropping. The shallowest water we passed through was about 21 feet, so another six feet down would have been OK but adventurous.
Since today is the first, it’s a Rabbit day. To assure our good luck we covered all bases. Before leaving Sam and I went ashore to mail a Rabbit Rabbit Rabbit message, posting it in the U.S. Mailbox standing on the path at the end of the ramp, next to the telephone booth with a birds nest in it and the community bulletin board warning of bears and announcing volleyball at the old schoolhouse (now a private residence) every Saturday at 2 o’clock. Mail goes out each Tuesday at 10 a.m.

![Mailbox and telephone booth]

If today is any indication, August will be a good month. It is sunny today, with blue sky and flat water – just like we envisioned cruising in Alaska would be! Cell phone service came back once we got out on Clarence Strait so we called Mom with a Rabbit message. As we rounded Caamano Point we were even able to pick up email for a short time.

Behm Canal borders Revillagigedo Island on three sides; the city of Ketchikan covers its south end. Misty Fiords National Monument extends along the east side of the island and the Canal. Most of this area is wilderness, with many deep inlets and steep-sided fiords.

Behm Canal is about 100 miles long from entrance to entrance. We see very few other boats as we make our way to Yes Bay, home of a fishing resort which is our dinner destination. Yes Bay is only about a quarter of the way around the Behm Canal, on its western side, but it takes us nearly four hours from Clarence Strait to get there.

Yes Bay is a long, narrow inlet that runs northwest off of the Behm Canal. About 2.6 miles in it narrows even more, to about 75 yards. The resort is at this point, with a small dock. When you pass by the rocks blocking this channel, it opens up again. A U-turn around a small peninsula takes you to an anchorage called “first basin.” We are directly across from the lodge, but completely hidden by a thick stand of trees, some with moss hanging from lower branches. We are the only boat here, except for a small barge where the lodge stores fuel and other supplies. There is another anchorage, called “second basin” at the end of Yes Bay inlet, another two or three miles up.
At 5:30 p.m. the skiff comes around the corner, as promised. It is an old aluminum one that our driver found on the beach and has restored, old but very clean. We leave Sam in charge of Apollo and speed around the corner to the lodge where we are greeted by the owner. Yes Bay Lodge can handle up to 24 guests and this season has between nine and eleven guides working. Not sure what the cost is, but it’s a place I’d not mind coming to for a few days.

A covered veranda looks out east onto the steep-sided passage to the Behm Canal. Aluminum day fishing boats crowd the small dock. The lodge is simple, not pretentious, but subtly very well organized. A table of hors d’oeuvres waits in the bar: cheese cubes, brie, smoked salmon, deviled eggs. Half a dozen men are chatting. We take our drinks out to the veranda and join a couple from Las Vegas. This is the third time they’ve come here; fishing is good, with a guide for every two people. This morning, from her bathroom window, she watched a young bear by the stream.

The chef comes out to greet us. He used to run the kitchen at Bellagio in Las Vegas but loves this lifestyle and prides himself in using local produce. This morning he caught the halibut for tonight’s meal and later hand-picked wild mushrooms and cherries. He works the season here, then will go to Tahiti for a while and then work a little at a ski resort, then back here.
Dinner will be delayed slightly to await the arrival of some guests. Soon we hear the sound of an airplane, and the lodge’s plane, a recently rebuilt DeHavilland Beaver, flies down the channel and stops at the dock.

This prompts a discussion about the recent tragic crash not far from here of a sightseeing plane. The pilot and four people from a Princess cruise ship were killed. Many here are pilots, and the consensus seems to be that the pilot, although fully qualified to fly, did not have a lot of Alaska air time. Alaska’s changeable weather and steep mountains present special challenges. When in trouble, stay over the water, was the comment. Apparently he tried to pull up over the mountain and the plane stalled.

Soon our chef announces “Dinner is served.”

When you enter the lodge there is a large common area with a fireplace and two ping pong tables. Behind it in a large alcove rows of wooden pegs hold rain gear and the ubiquitous brown rubber boots – enough for any guest of any size. To the right is the bar with windows on two sides and lots of comfortable chairs. To the left is the dining room, with large, polished-wood tables. A hand-lettered sign saying “Apollo Party” indicates our table. The group of men sit at a larger one. Our Las Vegas couple have a small table by the window and the new arrivals are near the corner windows. In all, there are 13 people.

A tangerine and walnut salad awaits us. When we are ready, out comes a large serving of almond-encrusted halibut surrounded by asparagus, carrots and wild mushrooms with rice. The food is excellent and a good value; not inexpensive, but a good value. A dessert of cherries and blueberries with a creamy sauce over ice cream and sponge cake finishes the meal. We learn that staff gets the same menu (though perhaps not the dessert).

After visiting a bit and settling our bill, it’s time to go back to Apollo. We meant to sign the chef’s guest log, but forgot.

The cove we are in opens to the west, and we are treated to a magnificent sunset – the first sunset we have seen in Alaska (in June the days were too long, in July the skies too overcast). Layers of yellow, orange and gray fill the sky at 9 o’clock. Days are getting shorter; it’s about time to head south.
Thursday, August 2
Yes Bay to Fitzgibbon Cove on the Behm Canal
24.25 miles (Route 99)

Tides August 2: High 16.39 feet at 3.56 a.m.
                Low:  0.39 at 10:02

We are sitting quietly at anchor in FitzGibbon Cove on the Behm Canal, the only boat here. Out one window we see a lot (it’s high tide) of flat green water and a grassy meadow. Out the other side a high snow-covered mountain basks under white clouds and a blue sky. Weather feels humid and is warm enough for just a t-shirt, no jacket needed. It’s the perfect place to relax and catch up on my missives while Bob naps. Sam is in the cockpit, busily catching flies.

We left Yes Bay about 10 o’clock to travel around the top of the Behm Canal to Fitzgibbon Cove on the east side. “Canal” is a misnomer; when I hear the word canal I think of a narrow, man-made even-sided passageway. The Behm Canal is a natural strait, quite wide in places, that flows around three sides of Revillagigedo Island, forming an upside-down “U.”

The narrowest part of the Canal is at the top area, Behm Narrows. Our notes promise good salmon fishing. The fish finder marked some fish, so I got to work. The salmon
season is very slow this year and our inexperience doesn’t help. To use the downrigger one must let the line on the fishing pole out at the same time letting the weight on the downrigger out. But first you have to get the pole ready, attaching a shiny flasher to the line and then a herring (from the freezer) to the rotary salmon-killer that has a hook (barbed hooks are allowed here, not in California), all the while keeping the bait away from Sam. You’re supposed to put the bait set-up in the water and then attach it to the downrigger but I didn’t know that until today. So the first time I messed up and forgot to put my thumb on the reel when I let the line out, and got a small (thankfully) rats nest of line, which I fixed. Second time was better, but I felt a nibble and didn’t check the line. When I finally did, I had a small shark on it, so a lot of trolling time was wasted. Liberated him, watched him swim away and tried again. At least now we can say we have caught a fish!

It was very serene, out in the cockpit slowly trolling. Very quiet, very peaceful, very scenic – just no fish. Another boat tried for a while and left. After two hours, we gave it up as well. Turns out that part of the Behm Canal is closed to all salmon fishing until August 15, so I guess fishing season is done for us.

Underway, we saw a foam cup in the water. We both noticed it – the first piece of trash we have seen in the water here!
We made our way to Fitzgibbon Cove, easily spotting the “small white cliff” noted on the chart. You can’t see the entrance to FitzGibbon from the west until you pass it, find the cliffs, then turn north into the cove. The effort is worth it. It’s very scenic, with several forested islets and white or tan rock cliffs instead of usual black rock. This is an open bay, with lower mountains, sunshine and a bright sky – opposite of the “gloom and doom” feeling of Ford’s Terror.

We set the crab trap, using the other half of the small halibut caught earlier in the trap and three tired former bait herrings, then defrosted a steak to barbecue.

How do you exercise an active dog on board? The floor of our main salon, where Sam is allowed to be, is about 8 feet by 7 feet. We throw tennis balls, give her a cube to nose around – and watch out for balls carefully placed on the steps to the wheelhouse, an invitation, accompanied by pleading eyes or an intense stare, to play ball.

At 6 p.m. we are still reveling in the sunshine and warmth. Such a treat! It’s as if Alaska is saying, “Wait, I didn’t mean it about the rain. Look! I can be spectacular!” But we do need to leave soon…
Friday, August 3, 2007
Fitzgibbon Cove to Rudyerd Bay via Walker Cove
63.13 sightseeing miles (Route 101)

We are having another delightful, sunny day. That’s three in a row and we hardly know what to do!

Today will be a long day of sightseeing, so we pull up the anchor at 7:15 a.m. and retrieve the crab pots. Thirteen crabs, all male; we keep the 5 largest.

Two hours along this beautiful, wide canal and we haven’t seen another boat – in fact, not since about noon yesterday. The VHF is silent; no weather broadcasts that we can hear. We are surrounded by silence, sunshine, snowy mountain tops, and flat green water.

Walker Cove is supposed to have a 5-fathom bar across its entrance. Approaching about 9:30 a.m. near low tide it looks like all ledge, but we find a place to cross. In less than a minute we go from 144 feet deep to 38 feet, then climb back 50, 60 feet, 100 feet, 200 feet, then 344 and flashing (too deep to read). At least we could see every charted rock!

More than a little inlet, Walker Cove is a fjord bordered by mile-high, almost perpendicular mountains and waterfalls, and ending with a glacier-carved valley. It is too deep to anchor, but the park service has installed a mooring float near --very near -- shore. Fran and Dick on Raven had mentioned that the float seemed very close to the beach -- and bears. We agree, and do not feel comfortable spending the night so near ursine neighbors. Instead, we enjoy watching brown bears and cubs on the low tide beach, then move on. Going out the entrance, about 11 a.m., the tide is higher and less shoal exposed.

Scenic Rudyerd Bay lies about 9.5 miles south. This entire area is called Misty Fiords National Monument Wilderness. Our Alaskan fisherman, Spike, spoke disdainfully: “They took a bunch of inlets like all the others in Alaska and gave them a fancy name.” Perhaps true, but they are spectacular.
We saw one boat going to Walker Cove as we exited – and that’s it until, approaching Rudyerd, we waved at a Nordic Tug 42 coming towards us – Chrisara of NT Charters, Juneau. We’ve seen the boat before.

We look up as we enter Rudyerd, at a mountain about 3,000 feet high. It’s impressive but Ford’s Terror was even taller. The mountain is sheer granite, flat vertically as if sliced off. There are no trees on its sheer side until lower down, and just a few at very top. The mountains look like layers turned 90 degrees, like a loaf of sliced dark bread.

As we made our way up the inlet, past waterfalls, trees, cliffs, I sat on the bow deck and just watched and listened – and thought about all we have seen. Two sightseeing planes came over, silhouetted against the blue sky and white clouds. It was very peaceful to listen to the water and reflect, a nice way to begin to say farewell to Alaska.

We reached the end, about 100 feet wide (but 207 feet deep), opening onto a few small meadows and stream outlets. On the way back we passed a few kayaks, and some tour boats. Rudyerd Bay was becoming a busy place.

Punchbowl Cove, near the entrance to Rudyerd Bay, has been described as “quintessential Misty Fiords.” Named for its precipitous sides and dramatic high sheer wall, it’s a popular stopping place. We powered towards the head; the mooring buoy was already taken, and two boats anchored. On shore we saw a tent, five kayaks, people on shore and a sign: A diamond shape with horizontal red and white stripes. Not sure what it means.
By 3:30 we were anchored and preparing to enjoy our last evening at Misty Fiords. We cooked our Dungeness crabs and marveled at these wonderful – and sunny -- last few days – our “dessert” served by Alaska to assure a return trip. At 9 o’clock the sun was setting; by 9:45 we enjoyed the sunset, the darkness and the quiet.

Saturday, August 4, 2008
Punchbowl Cove, Rudyerd Bay to Ketchikan
49.20 miles

It would be logical to leave here and just head south, stopping at Foggy Bay before crossing Dixon Entrance into Canada. But we need fuel, and so we will instead detour and go to Ketchikan, where we first cleared customs into the U.S. from Canada on the way up. We will have circumnavigated Revillagigedo Island.

We raise anchor at 6:50 a.m. At 7:45 we pass New Eddystone Rock, named by Captain George Vancouver in 1793 because of its resemblance to the lighthouse on Eddystone Rock in the English Channel off of Plymouth. Standing 230 feet high, it is a distinctive rock rising from a sand shoal.

By 10 a.m. we reach Point Alava and, still enjoying blue skies, turn west towards Ketchikan. Lots of boats are coming our way as we get closer. We pass Angle Point about noon, then reach the fuel dock. Ketchikan is very busy, the water choppy from boat wakes. We are not used to this!
We will stay at Ketchikan Yacht Club in Thomas Basin, near downtown, this time, instead of going past town to the larger Bar Harbor. It’s a small, crowded basin, but we find a berth. KYC is a homey sort of place. The small floating building offers a sofa, plastic chairs, a long table and a bookcase with lots of books and a few ship models. A Sequoia Yacht Club (Redwood City, California) burgee hangs near the dock and a Coyote Point YC one near the door. A printer is available; it’s all yours to use. The people are friendly to visitors, and very trusting, as is everyone we have met in Alaska.
Towards the end of the day, I take a walk. The Blueberry Arts & Food Festival is just closing. The only cruise ship to come today (usually four visit each day) left several hours ago. It’s nearly dusk and lots of people are out, enjoying summer. We are near the “historic” section of Ketchikan. Faux shops line a faux boardwalk along the creek. People are fishing from the road bridge spanning the creek. It’s cute, but I can’t help comparing this to Elfin Cove. The buildings here have too much paint and are too well-kept to be authentic. And the ever-present “duty free shop” signs don’t help.

At 8:30 p.m. the sun is setting behind a mountain. Morning light still comes early, but days are getting shorter quickly, very different from a month ago. It looks like our delectable Alaskan weather is changing as well. The weather report suggests a front is coming in, so we decide to scoot while the going is good and make the trip to Prince Rupert in one long day, by-passing Foggy Bay.