

CHASING GLACIERS ~ A cruise through British Columbia and South East Alaska Angela Lilienthal and Clive Woodman

(Clive and Angela have owned Cosmic Dancer V, a 1988-built Sweden 38, since 2006, have sailed her more than 40,000 miles and visited 29 different countries. In 2011 they crossed the Atlantic (winning the ARC two-handed division), and after five seasons on the eastern seaboard of the US and Canada, plus Greenland, in 2016 trucked her across the continent to Seattle to explore the northern Pacific.

Follow their travels at <http://www.cosmic-dancer.com> – an outstanding website, as might be expected from the man whose company built our own new site two years ago.

This article first appeared in Roving Commissions, the Journal of the Royal Cruising Club.)

Any worthwhile expedition can be planned on the back
of an envelope. Bill Tilman

Our plan for the 2018 cruising season was completely *d'accord* with Tilman's philosophy. It went no further than saying we would set off as early in the season as possible, sail as far north into Alaska as the short summer season would allow, and then return to over-winter in Sidney, British Columbia.

The first part went to plan. *Cosmic Dancer* was lifted back into the water in Sidney on 26th April and in a consistently fine spell of late spring weather fitting out began in earnest. Michael and Anne Hartshorn, OCC, on *Nimue* were in the yard next to us and we shared many a social occasion once work was done for the day. It wasn't long, however, before the oft-quoted saying, 'No plan survives contact with the enemy', kicked in. The enemy in this case proved to be our yacht insurance company who, with just two weeks to run on our existing policy, dropped the bombshell that

Cosmic Dancer in Tarr Inlet, Glacier Bay







Clive and Angela

their underwriters would no longer provide cover for North America and Canada and hence they would not renew our policy, thus triggering a last-minute search for alternative arrangements.

It quickly became apparent that we wouldn't get a new insurer without a full out-of-water survey and full replacement of our standing rigging, which was a few months older than the 10 year limit imposed by many insurers. The first of these requirements would merely have been expensive, but the latter was impossible to achieve at such short notice and would have involved delaying our departure by a season. After almost two weeks of fruitless searching for alternatives, we finally managed to pressurise our existing insurer to renew, on the grounds that they had insured us to get to this particular part of the world and therefore had a moral obligation to insure us to get away from it! It was not an easy-won victory, however, and came at a price – an almost doubling of our annual premium.

It was 22nd May before we could throw off our lines and start the journey north. Within a week we had rounded Cape Caution at the northern end of Vancouver Island, only to discover that summer had not yet got this far north. Two days were spent sitting out a 45 knot gale in Bella Bella before continuing north into the Great Bear Rainforest, which lived up to at least the second part of its name. For eight days the relentless sound of rain beating on the cabin roof and against the backs of our foulweather jacket hoods was our constant companion, whilst our Webasto cabin heater became our best friend. Meanwhile the only bears in sight were the ones to be found on a wall mural in Prince Rupert when we arrived there two weeks after setting out, thanks to some very favourable southerly winds which had accompanied the rain.

Street art in Prince Rupert

One of the highlights of this otherwise damp leg was that the many waterfalls lining the Inside Passage were in full spate, forming brilliant white slashes down the otherwise endless carpet of green forest that is the northern BC coast. At the foot of one such waterfall we watched a pair of humpback whales diving. Their spume was almost indistinguishable from the spray rising from the torrent, but their distinctive diving tail flukes were vividly highlighted against the white backdrop of the falls.



Crossing the border from Prince Rupert, Canada to Ketchikan, Alaska brought mixed fortunes. On the negative side we were told that it would not be possible to get an extension for our US cruising permit obtained the previous season, and that we would need to be clear of Alaska no later than 8th August. Whilst this was a setback, it still gave us a full two months so was not a disaster. On the plus side it heralded the arrival

of summer, which – although we did not know it at the time – would turn out to be one of the driest, sunniest and warmest in South East Alaska's history. We went on to enjoy eight weeks of almost unbroken sunshine and no rain, a true rarity in a region which normally experiences up to 280 inches per year.

Our first week in Alaska was spent enjoying the stunning mountain scenery of Misty Fjords National Park, a vast wilderness area only accessible by boat or seaplane. It was here that we were to discover that blue skies and bright sunshine don't necessarily make for settled sailing conditions in Alaska. On misty, overcast days in the Inside Passage, unless a front is passing through it is quite normal to experience mirror calm

Sea lions





South Wrangell Narrows

conditions all day long. On bright sunny days, however, by late morning thermally-generated inflow winds often start funnelling up the fjords. These arrive without warning, and in the space of a few minutes it can go from mirror calm to 30+ knots. After getting caught out the first couple of times, we soon learnt that on a sunny day it didn't pay to sail without the staysail bent on and ready to hoist at a moment's notice, no matter how benign the conditions might appear at the start of the day.



*A fishing boat en route
to Petersburg*



Poppies in Petersburg

From Misty Fjords we continued northwards up the Inside Passage, passing through Wrangell and Petersburg to reach Tracy Arm. Deemed by some to be even more spectacular than Glacier Bay, we were not disappointed, although we left with the distinct feeling that visitors in the relatively near future may not be able to say

the same thing. The pilot talks about spectacular hanging glaciers on both sides of the Arm as you work your way inland to the Sawyer Glacier. The hanging glaciers have now largely melted, leaving behind glistening cirques of bare polished rock. In this part of the world it isn't long before bare rock succumbs to the relentless tide of advancing rainforest, which steadily envelops anything which is not permanently covered in ice.



Sawyer Glacier, Tracy Arm



Harvesting ice for the evening cocktail

Already many of the Tracy Arm cirques are partially covered with new growth dwarf birch, and it won't be too long before they are completely cloaked by rain forest rendering Tracy Arm indistinguishable from so many other steep-sided fjords in South East Alaska and British Columbia.

It's not only the hanging glaciers which are under pressure. As we worked our way up the Arm we were intrigued to see an AIS contact on our plotter which was apparently a mile or so inland from the head of the fjord. We put it down to interference to the signal caused by the slab-sided rock faces which surrounded us, but when we reached the head of the Arm all was revealed – the snout of the Sawyer Glacier is now almost

two miles further inland than its charted position. As we approached for the obligatory photo shoot we had the rather unnerving experience of navigating over what our plotter assured us was dry land, but which our eyes said was definitely water, and water so deep that our echo-sounder couldn't pick up the bottom! For now, however, there was still enough floating ice for us to harvest some to put in our evening cocktails, but there was a strangely subdued feeling that evening as we sat down to enjoy our

South Sawyer Glacier



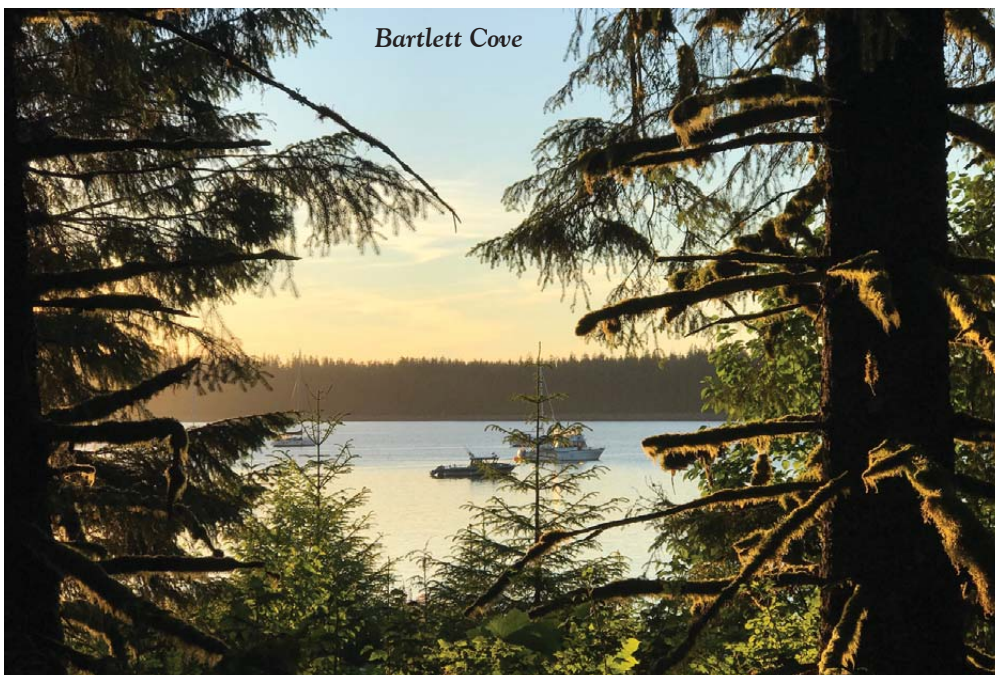


T'lingit totem and art in Bartlett Cove



glacially-chilled G&Ts. Part of it was being overawed by the sheer splendour of what we had seen earlier in the day, but tempered by the nagging feeling that the normal cycle of advancing and retreating tidewater glaciers was drastically speeding up and going in one direction only.

From Tracy Arm we headed to Auke Bay to reprovision and consider our next steps. Our original plan had been to spend a couple of days in Glacier Bay before crossing the Gulf of Alaska to Prince William Sound and Kodiak. Despite our later than intended departure, and the failure to get an extension to our cruising permit, this was still just



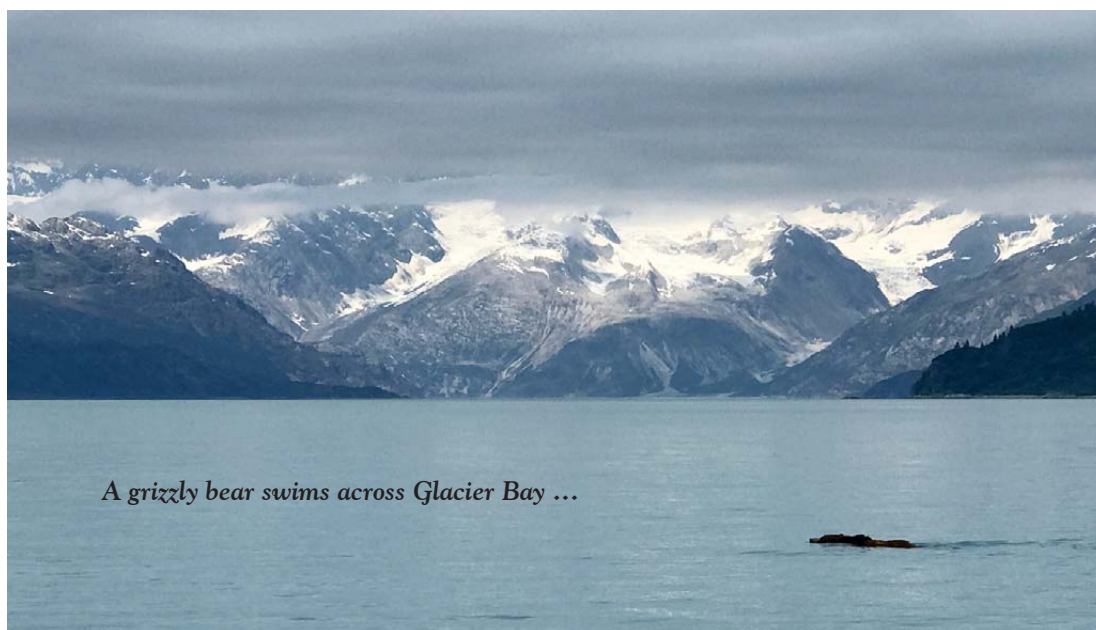
Bartlett Cove

about achievable, so we pressed on to Hoonah to wait for a permit to enter Glacier Bay and a suitable weather window for the Gulf crossing. Although half the daily quota of permits to visit Glacier Bay National Park are reserved for those like us who cannot predict their arrival date with enough certainty to apply two months in advance, we still had to wait almost a week before being allocated a short-notice permit.

Although there was no 'enemy' this time to force a change of plan, while waiting for the permit we came to the conclusion that it would be a crime to rush through so many wonderful cruising areas so quickly, doing justice to none of them. So the decision was made not to cross the Gulf, and instead to spend our remaining cruising permit time in South East Alaska, returning the following season to explore Prince William Sound and Kodiak. With this decision made, we went on to enjoy the wonders of Glacier Bay in perfect weather. The glaciers are as spectacular as those in Tracy Arm, although the distances involved in getting to see them are greater, but for us the real highlight of Glacier Bay was the wildlife.

One night was spent at anchor in a small bay on the west side of Russell Island where we were surrounded by humpback whales swimming within feet of the boat as they fed close to the shore. Sea otters were to be found everywhere, lying on their backs with head and tail flippers out of the water like Dead Sea bather, often with a salmon clasped between their forefeet which they gnawed away at like a giant ice cream cone. The only thing to elude us was a grizzly bear. We anchored in all the places where we had been told it was impossible not to see bears feeding on the shore at night – and achieved the impossible! We had given up all hope of seeing a bear and were on our way out of the park, when we spotted what we thought was a semi-submerged log in front of us. Leaping to the helm to take it out of autopilot mode and start avoiding action, we suddenly realised that the log was moving and that it had a large, black, glistening nose.

A grizzly bear swimming is not a thing of grace or beauty. Exercising a very inelegant form of doggy paddle, and only just keeping its nose above water, it resembles a young child taking its first faltering strokes without a flotation aid in a municipal swimming



A grizzly bear swims across Glacier Bay ...



... and finally plods ashore

pool. When we first spotted the bear it was no more than a few hundred yards from the shore, heading out to cross a four mile wide fjord. It was moving so slowly, and apparently struggling so hard to keep afloat, that we were convinced it would never survive the crossing – we were sure it was only attempting it because it had been on the losing side of a territorial spat with another bear. Out of sheer curiosity we followed at a respectful distance behind with the engine idling.

Whatever the bear lacked in elegance, it more than made up for in dogged perseverance. Three hours later it had reached the other side, but eschewed the chance of an easy landing on a gentle sandy beach, instead heading a further half mile towards what looked like a very inhospitable rocky shore, which at low tide had a near-vertical

20ft drop to the water. We were then mesmerised by the sight of this huge, waterlogged bear pulling itself up out of the water and up the 20ft cliff using just its forefeet. With nothing more than a quick, nonchalant shake to get the worst of the water off, it then went on to demonstrate why it had just swum four miles. With one effortless swipe of a leg it brushed aside a boulder the size of a small saloon car to get at the black mussels nestling underneath,



*Pelican Cove,
Chichagof Island*

and started feeding on them. If we ever had any illusions that a bear would be unable to climb out of the water onto our boat whilst at anchor they were immediately dashed ... and having seen how nonchalantly the boulder was moved we didn't have any faith in our washboards preventing a bear from getting below. A mental note was made never to keep any mussels on board whilst cruising Alaska!

From Glacier Bay we headed to Elfin Cove, a small and magical boardwalk fishing settlement which never fails to charm all who stop there. Knowing that some harbour masters in Alaska can get a little grumpy if you try to come alongside without first calling them, during our approach we put out a call on Channel 16 to 'Elfin Cove Harbourmaster'. Following our second call there came a gruff, anonymous response over the air, "There is no f***ing harbourmaster in Elfin Cove". Suitably chastened, we quietly tied up alongside a fishing boat and adjourned to the quirky local pub where we soon became embroiled in a fascinating variety of interesting and extremely enlightening conversations with the local fishermen.

This continued into the early hours of the morning, when we found ourselves partying on the deck of one of the local fishing boats, drinking copious quantities of vodka chilled with ice straight from their fish holds. It was then that our host admitted it had been he who had 'enlightened' us over the radio about the lack of a harbour master ... but there were no hard feelings and several more vodkas were drunk before people finally retired to their bunks, nursing not bruised feelings but very sore heads the following day!



Sitka Harbour at dusk

From Elfin Cove we took the outside route down the west side of Chichagof Island to Sitka. It is a fascinating stretch of coast, full of wonderful, wild anchorages but seldom cruised by visiting yachts. Those that do often emerge with a tale to tell of hitting a rock en route, largely because the area is so poorly surveyed and marked. We were to be no exception. We were just a few miles from Sitka, and silently congratulating ourselves on having avoided a similar fate, when we heard that horrible grinding sound of lead brushing against a rock that the chart said wasn't there. Fortunately it was only a glancing blow and the only damage done was to our egos, but we realised we had become complacent. After two seasons and 5000 miles of cruising through the glacially-formed fjords of the Inside Passage, where for the most part you can get within feet of the shore before your echo-sounder registers anything, we had subconsciously fallen into the mindset of 'if you can't see it, there's nothing there'.

The west coasts of Chichagof and Baranof are geologically very different from the Inside Passage, requiring a 'step up in gear' when it comes to navigational vigilance, and we had failed to change gear. Our only consolation came from subsequent talk with a local fisherman in Sitka who said, "Don't get too cut up about it ... there isn't a professional fisherman in Alaska that it hasn't happened to at least several times. Here we just call them 'self-charted' rocks!". We took the view that 'after a fall you need to get back into the saddle straight away', so rather than taking the more commonly-travelled inside route from Sitka down the east coast of Baranof Island, we continued down around the equally wild and unsurveyed west coast of Baranof, completing a circumnavigation of the island before returning to Sitka.

By now we were running out of days on our cruising permit and Angela had to return to Germany for an unavoidable work commitment. Howard Bell, a fellow Sweden 38 sailor, kindly agreed to join us for the passage back to Port Hardy, which passed with no drama more serious than a fuel blockage, although it proved annoyingly difficult to locate and clear. We were extremely grateful to Gerd and Melissa Marggraff, OCC, aboard *Thor* for their help in getting the problem sorted and for some wonderfully sociable evenings



*An old fishing
vessel in Sitka*



Purple Gins with Jane and Steven

together. We finally made it back into Canada with just 12 hours remaining on our US cruising permit – a close call, but no one could accuse us of wasting an opportunity!

Angela rejoined in Port Hardy, together with Steven and Jane Anderson, OCC, for the penultimate leg to Vancouver. It was an unusual experience for us to have four people aboard *Cosmic Dancer*, and a real joy to sail with racing people who never missed an opportunity to get the ‘coloured’ sails up, whilst sharing our love of the evening ritual of G&Ts on deck! We blew the cobwebs off both spinnaker and cruising chute – which had lain sadly neglected in the forepeak for the past few years as they are a bit too much of a handful when sailing two-handed – and enjoyed some wonderful downwind sailing through the Broughton Islands, Desolation Sound and the Straits of Georgia.

The finale of our 2018 season was joining the OCC’s British Columbia Rally, an extremely sociable and party-filled twelve-day cruise through the Gulf Islands. For this we were joined by OCC stalwarts Doug and Dale Bruce, who as authors of the *Newfoundland Cruising Guide* had been hugely inspirational in much of the cruising we did whilst on the eastern seaboard of the Americas.

The Rally was a fitting end to a wonderful season during which we had been on board for 150 days, sailed more than 3100 miles, visited some fantastic places, met many wonderful people and even done a little bit of Alaskan ‘self-charting’. Very little of this had been in the initial plan and we hadn’t always stuck to what little plan there was ... but when it comes to sailing we are inclined to a philosophy once espoused by a hugely eminent American General:

I have always found that plans are useless, but planning
is indispensable. Dwight D Eisenhower