

Chasing Glaciers

A Cruise through British Columbia & SE Alaska

Angela Lilienthal and Clive Woodman

Awarded the Cruising Club Bowl

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

Bill Tilman

Our plan for the 2018 cruising season was completely in 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 on Vancouver Island.

The first part went to plan. *Cosmic Dancer* was lifted back into the water in Sidney BC on 26 April and, in a consistently fine spell of late spring weather, fitting out began in earnest. However, it wasn't long 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 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 commissioning both a full out of water survey, and a 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 have been merely expensive to fulfil, but the latter was impossible to achieve at such short notice and would have involved delaying our departure by a season.

Cosmic Dancer in Tarr Inlet, Glacier Bay



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Cosmic Dancer's track is so complex that readers who wish for detail should go to zoomable versions of these tracks: available online at <http://cosmic-dancer.com/BCMap2018.aspx>

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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. However, it was not an easily won victory and it came at a price, almost doubling our annual premium.

It was 22 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 45kt gale in Bella Bella before continuing north into the Great Bear Rain Forest, 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 back of our foul-weather-jacket hoods was our constant companion, whilst our Webasto cabin heater became our best friend. We arrived in Prince Rupert just two weeks after setting out, thanks to some very favourable southerly winds which had accompanied the rain.

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 fins 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 8 August. Whilst this was a setback, it was not a disaster since it still gave us a full two months of cruising in Alaska.

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 summers in SE Alaska's history. We went on to enjoy eight weeks of almost unbroken sunshine with no rain, a true rarity in a region which normally experiences up to 280 inches of rain 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 it is quite normal to experience mirror calm conditions all day long unless a front is passing through. However, on bright sunny days by late morning thermally generated inflow winds often start funnelling up the fjords. These arrive without warning and in the space of minutes it can go from mirror calm to 30+ kts of wind.



Misty Fjords National Park

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.

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 not too far distant 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 doesn't take long before bare rock succumbs to the relentless tide of advancing rainforest which steadily envelops anything which is not permanently covered in ice.

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 covered in rain forest, rendering Tracy Arm indistinguishable from so many other steep-sided fjords in SE Alaska and British Columbia.

It was 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 full mile or so inland from the head of the



Sea lions

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fjord. At the time we put it down to interference to the signal caused by the slab-sided rock faces all around us. However, when we reached the head of the arm all was revealed.



The snout of the Sawyer Glacier is now almost 2nm further inland than its charted position. As we approached the glacier for the unmissable 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.

However, for now there was still enough floating ice around that we were able to harvest some large chunks of it to put in our evening cocktail, but there was a strangely subdued feeling on board that evening as we sat down to enjoy our glacially chilled G&T. Part of it was being overawed by the sheer splendour of what we had seen earlier in the day, but tempered by a nagging feeling that the normal cycle of advancing and retreating tidewater glaciers was somehow drastically speeding up and going in one direction only.

From Tracy Arm we headed to Auke Bay to re-provision 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

Sawyer Glacier Tracy Arm





Sunset at Fury Cove, Alaska

to our cruising permit, this was still just about achievable. 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 for almost a week to be allocated a short notice permit.

Whilst there was no ‘enemy’ this time to force a change of plan, nonetheless over the course of several days 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. The decision was made not to cross the Gulf and instead spend the rest of our remaining cruising permit time in SE 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



Bartlett Cove, 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. However, 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 a Dead Sea bather, often clasping between their

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forefeet, a salmon which they slowly gnawed 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, yet we 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 take 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 their first faltering strokes without a flotation aid in a swimming 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



A very determined bear 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 drop of 20 foot to the water. We were then mesmerised by the sight of this huge waterlogged bear pull itself up out of the water and up the 20 ft cliff with just his two fore feet. With nothing more than a quick nonchalant shake to get the worst of the water off, he then went on to demonstrate why he had just swum four miles. With one effortless swipe of a leg he brushed aside a boulder the size of a small saloon car to get at the black mussels nestling

underneath it and started feeding on them.

If we ever had any illusions that a bear could never climb out of the water onto our boat whilst at anchor, then they were instantly dashed that moment, and having seen how nonchalantly the boulder was moved we didn't have any



Fishing boat en route to Petersburg

faith in our wash boards preventing a bear from getting below. A mental note was made to never keep any mussels on board whilst cruising in Alaska!

From Glacier Bay we headed to Elfin Cove, a magical, small, boardwalk fishing settlement, that, from the accounts of

everyone who has cruised through this area, never fails to charm anyone who stops there.

Knowing that some harbour-masters in Alaska can get a little grumpy if you try to come alongside without first calling them, on our approach we put out a Ch16 call to 'Elfin Cove Harbour-master'. After the second call there was a gruff, anonymous response over the air, 'There is no f***ing harbour-master 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.

It continued to 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 at that point our host admitted that it was he who had 'enlightened' us over the radio as to the lack of



Sitka Harbour at dusk

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.

From Elfin Cove we took the outside route down the west side of Chichagof Island to Sitka. It is a fascinating stretch of coast to sail along, full of wonderful wild anchorages, but seldom cruised by visiting yachts, and those that do

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often emerge with a tale to tell of a rock hit on route, largely because the area is so poorly surveyed and unmarked. We were to be no exception. Having recently re-read a selection of *Roving Commissions* articles on cruises to the area it appeared that RCC members are not immune from hitting rocks in these parts. We were silently congratulating ourselves on having avoided a similar fate, when just a few miles out from Sitka we heard that horrible grinding sound of lead brushing against a rock the chart said wasn't there.

Fortunately, it was only a glancing blow, and the only damage done was to our egos. However, we had become complacent. After two seasons and 5,000 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.

The only consolation we could take from the incident came from



Misty morning in the Broughtons

subsequently talking with a local fisherman in Sitka who said, 'Don't get too cut up about it. There isn't a professional fisherman in Alaska to whom that hasn't happened at least several times. Here we just call them "self-charted" rocks.'

We also took the view that 'after a fall you need to get back into 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 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, son of Bob Bell (RCC), 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 made it back into Canada with just 12 hours remaining on our US cruising permit, a close call, but then no one could accuse us of wasting an opportunity.



Purple Gins with Jane and Steven

Angela re-joined in Port Hardy, together with Steven and Jane Anderson (RCC), 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 people who never like to miss 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 our 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 Ocean Cruising Club's (OCC) British Columbia Rally, in an extremely social and party-filled 12-day cruise through the Gulf Islands. It was a particular pleasure to meet Tom and Vicky Jackson (RCC) during the rally, since it was their accounts of cruising in Alaska and British Columbia which had played a huge part in inspiring us to cruise the area.

It was even rumoured that the two participating yachts with RCC members aboard were to be found racing against one another on the rally leg from Sidney to Victoria, a completely scurrilous and unfounded rumour, even if subsequent examination of their GPS tracks did reveal that there was a suspicious amount of tacking on even the smallest of wind shifts, together with something that looked awfully like covering.

The Rally was a fitting end to a wonderful season. We had been on board for 150 days, sailed over 3,100 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:

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

Dwight D Eisenhower