

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

Story and photos by Randy Scott

Whale watching, crab catching and iceberg climbing are all part of the adventures that await during a boat trip to Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park.

The crew aboard the 37-foot Nordic Tug keeps a sharp eye as the boat carefully slips through the darkness into Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve seeking anchorage. Fog begins to form, and visibility is quickly going from bad to worse. Jim Clemmons, operations manager for Nordic Tug Charters and designated captain for this trip, switches on the boat's powerful spotlight. Looking skyward through the beam of light, one of the visiting crewmen on the boat's foredeck gleefully announces: "It's snowing!"

Of course, it comes as no surprise to Clemmons, who spends six months a year in Alaska, with the other six spent in Oklahoma on his working ranch. "*It's late September. You're in Alaska. Snow falls this time of year. Dub.*" If those *are* his thoughts, they go unspoken. Clemmons is too gracious for such sarcasm. But for Sean, a 13-year-old boy raised in Southern California where snowfall is about as rare as an iceberg in the Los Angeles Harbor, the white flakes are a big deal. It adds to the adventure. And this is, after all, one mother of an adventure.

Snow, however, is accompanied by cold. And on the water, cold feels exponentially harsh. So after a few minutes, Sean's father tells him, "I'm going in. You comin'?" while nodding toward the cabin.

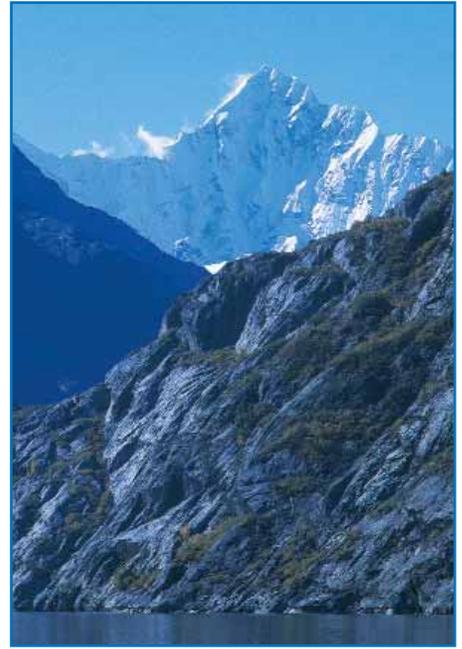
"Not yet," says Sean with a boyish grin, obviously enthralled by the moment.

"OK. Just be careful, and watch your footing," comes the obligatory fatherly advice.





ARCTIC SPLENDOR Icebergs calving off Margerie Glacier is a common occurrence (above); some of the magnificent mountain scenery in Alaska (above right); Nordic Tugs' *Vitus* traverses the icy waters (bottom right).



Before long, the sweeping motion of the spotlight illuminates the ghostly outline of a sailboat, its anchor light dimly visible atop the mast. Clemmons adjusts the steering wheel to give it a wider berth. Shortly thereafter, he checks his chartplotter and radar to determine how far from shore he is, and then he devotes his attention to the depth sounder. "This is it," he soon says to no one in particular. He shifts the engine into neutral, raises the collar on his jacket and exits the warmth of the pilothouse to drop anchor.

Although they're only about 50 miles northwest of their starting point in Juneau, it's taken most of the day to get here. The fast-paced city life that was everyone's norm 24 hours ago came to a screeching halt a few hours earlier when the Nordic Tug approached the entrance to 5,100-square-mile Glacier Bay on an outgoing tide. The water flowed so fast that the boat quite literally barely made headway at a mere 1/2-knot. It was after watching the same green buoy inch by for 45 minutes that the poker cards finally came out.

Besides Clemmons, Sean and his father, the party consists of Sean's older brother

Ryan, his Uncle Gary and a friend of the family named Joe — definitely a guy trip. Most of the group is hoping to spend some time fishing en route to Glacier Bay because few places on earth offer better results for the angler than the rich waters of Alaska. The photojournalist father, however, has been listening to marine weather reports over the VHF radio and insists they push on. A fair-weather window is forecasted to open up for a short time between storms, and he wants it to coincide with their time spent in Glacier Bay, so he can take sunlit photos of some of the park's 16 tidewater glaciers.

Sure enough, the next day offers the most sunshine they'll see in a week. At Clemmons' suggestion, they head for Margerie Glacier, which lies at the park's northwest extremity some 65 miles from the park entrance. Margerie has a flow rate of about 8 feet a day, meaning pieces of the glacier calve or break off fairly regularly.

As Clemmons cautiously pulls the Nordic Tug as close to the glacier as safety will allow, everyone stares in awe. Basalt-like columns of towering bluish-white ice, mixed with black dirt scoured

from the earth in its centuries of sloth-like movement down the mountain, rise out of the water approximately 250 feet. Clemmons turns the boat's engine off, and the crew immediately finds the sound of silence eerily mesmerizing. Then the glacier groans. It's an ominous sound that holds the crew spellbound. A loud pop, followed by a deep resonating creak that echoes across the bay, precedes the collapse of a section of the glacier's face. The massive chunk of ice falls into the water with a thunderous splash that sends a large wave into the bay. Margerie has calved another iceberg.

Clemmons goes topside to launch the dinghy via the boat's davit for closer inspection of some of the icebergs. It turns out to be a *very close* inspection —



event a rescue has to be mounted in quick order. Fortunately, everyone stays dry, and a rescue party isn't necessary. Gary, on the other hand, has climbed to the upper deck where he stares meditatively at the glacial expanse and the towering snowcapped mountains beyond, soaking up as much of the experience as he can. Alaska is good for the soul.

The adventurers finally agree it's time to depart Margerie, which is a bitter-sweet sensation: New and

exciting adventures lay ahead for the crew, but Margerie has captured their hearts, and they realize that they may never see it again. "No matter how many times I see this country, it never ceases to amaze me," says Clemmons. "The creation up here is truly beautiful." On their way back, Clemmons makes radio contact with Joergen Schade, owner of Nordic Tug Charters. He and Clemmons' family — Mini and Joe — are aboard a 42-foot Nordic Tug planning to rendezvous with them in Bartlett Cove,

as in an iceberg-boarding party. Sean, Ryan and Joe locate a 'berg that slopes gently into the water on one end, providing relatively easy boarding access. Ryan keeps a tight grip on the dinghy's long bowline as the intrepid trio gingerly walk to the top of the floating ice cube, where they triumphantly raise their arms skyward like a team that has just scaled Everest. Meanwhile, since icebergs are known to break apart without notice, Clemmons and the anxious father keep a watchful eye on the conquering iceberg climbers, in the

where the park headquarters is located. A few hours later, the two boats meet, raft up and anchor for the night. Mini works wonders in the Nordic Tug's galley, much to the delight of the wearisome sojourners whose combined culinary skills barely surpass a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

True to the marine weather forecast, the adventurers awake the next day to cloudy skies. With the bulk of the photography in the can, most of the day is devoted to fishing. Clemmons locates a few submerged shelves that, to his credit, are home to some nice halibut. It isn't long before everyone has landed a few fish — everyone except for Ryan, that is. For some inexplicable reason, he's skunked all day. And for some reason, everyone else keeps reminding him of it. "Wow, what a thrill reelin' in those halibut, huh? Oh, that's right, *you* didn't catch any, did you Ryan?" But justice comes in surprising ways. For Ryan, revenge comes in a deck of poker cards: "How many aces did you have in that hand? Oh, that's right, you didn't have *any*, did you?"

It's dusk when the tag team of Nordic Tugs pulls into Hoonah, a tiny fishing village off the Icy Strait with a population of approximately 800. This quaint little vil-



WONDRIOUS EXPLOITS The bow of the *Vitus* is a great spot to take in the landscape and wildlife of Alaska's Glacier Bay (above); Ryan communicating via Uniden VHF/GPS, which comes in handy for the crew during their journeys (top).

WHEN YOU GO

Juneau (www.juneau.com) is an ideal hub from which to base your travels up and down the famed Inside Passage. The city is accessible only by boat or plane. An international airport lies at the outskirts of town. You can also travel the renowned **Alaska Marine Highway System** (www.akferry.org), which offers ferry service from Washington State to Skagway. Many trailer boaters from the lower 48 states use this system to bring their boats to Alaska. Numerous cruise lines also come into Juneau. A helpful list can be found at www.claalaska.com.

Nordic Tug Charters (206/919-7887, www.nordictugcharters.com) provides the boats used for this adventure. These sturdy trawlers, built in Washington State, are made to handle the rugged waters of Alaska and to do it in comfort and style. Nordic Tug Charters has most of its fleet of boats (ranging from 32 to 52 feet) based in Juneau, but it recently added a small fleet of boats in Ketchikan. You can go to their website to check on boat availability by date or boat, and even make reservations if desired. Be sure to browse the photos taken by previous clients, which are breathtaking. June through August offers the best weather, but discounts are available in May and September. — R. Scott



ICE AGE Ryan (left) and Brian (right) triumphantly stand atop an iceberg near South Sawyer Glacier.

lage has the distinction of being the largest Tlingit community in Southeast Alaska. As Clemmons maneuvers dockside, Joe, in an attempt to help, makes a miscue jumping for the dock and falls into the frigid Alaskan water. He pulls himself out so quickly, however, that Ryan says it looked like he has walked on water. Steam shoots from Joe's clothes as he is helped back into the boat unharmed but embarrassed. Needless to say, he doesn't live down the experience. Every time he leaves the cockpit thereafter, he's offered a life vest.

The next day is spent fishing and sight-seeing. And, sadly, the only thing Ryan catches is flak from everyone else: "You did put a hook on your line, didn't you?" Ryan doesn't really mind the friendly chiding, however, because the beauty of his environs compensates for his lackluster fishing. They see so many whales in the course of the day that everyone quits counting early on. At one point they see a pod so large that before one spout of spray clears, 10 other spouts go airborne. The biggest thrill comes when they're fishing in a cove, and a whale surprises them by surfacing less than 50 feet away.

The VHF weather reports that are continually monitored sound ominous, prompting the two crews to head for shelter. When the boats reach the wide confluence of Icy Strait and Chatham Strait, whitecapped seas quickly build to 4 feet, and the ride gets rough. The nearest safe harbor is across the rough waters of Chatham Strait in Funtner Bay on Admiralty Island. It's a slugfest, but

the two stalwart tugs finally pull into the bay, and everyone lets out a collective sigh. Before docking for the night, the crew sets out four crab pots in the hopes they'll be treated to fresh Dungeness crab in the morning.

Admiralty Island, though beautifully lush and vibrant, isn't somewhere you want to go traipsing off on. It has the distinction of being home to

more bears per square mile than anywhere else in the world — an estimated 1,600 bears on the island outnumber human occupants by a 3-1 ratio. Many of these are brown bear, which along with the polar bear comprise the largest carnivore mammals in North America. The crew isn't surprised when Gary finds bear scat within 100 yards of the dock. No one ventures 101 yards.

The wind shifts direction and blows into the bay that night, making retrieval of the crab pots a difficult ordeal in the choppy water the next morning. Using a gaff, Ryan reaches over the gunwale to snag the pot's buoy line. While he pulls up the pot, someone else holds onto his belt to keep him from being tossed into the water. The first pot reveals one lonely crab, which discourages onlookers. However, Ryan can barely pull in the next pot and wonders if it's snagged on something. After considerable effort, he finally brings it to the surface but is totally exhausted and can't pull it over the gunwale. Joe helps him while Sean and Gary hold onto the struggling duo as the boat is tossed about in the chop. To everyone's amazement, there are 24 crabs in the pot. They catch 42 in all.

The ride back to Juneau is rough at times with rain, gusty winds and areas of 6-foot swells. The tugs handle it with aplomb, however. As the Alaska adventure nears its end, some hump-back whales breach in the distance, adding another indelible memory to an already long list. 