



A RIDE OF PASSAGE

By Susan Zimmerman • Photography by Randall Hyman

The Boat Company provides an intimate Alaskan experience – kayaks and skiffs are de rigueur.

“You came to southeast Alaska and didn’t bring a raincoat?” the Alaska Airlines flight attendant teases me, assuming I know this is the wettest part of the state. The joke’s on me. It’s September, it’s the rainy season, and my leaky coat is a laughing matter for good reason. My cruise is through the region’s illustrious Inside Passage, which happens to be surrounded by the Tongass National Forest, the largest temperate old-growth rainforest in the world. Something tells me this is going to be a very wet ride.

The celebrated route, which stretches about 1,000 miles from Seattle to Skagway, is a series of channels between the mainland and thousands of islands along the coasts of British Columbia and Alaska. The Inland Passage, another alias for this scenic byway, overflows with natural treasures and is the course of choice for cruise ships because while the outside open ocean is exposed to the Pacific’s rough waters, it’s all smooth sailing on the inside.



Mist Cove anchors in Tracy Arm Fjord.



A native carver crafts a Tlingit totem pole.

THE BOAT COMPANY

Looking to cruise the Inside Passage? Consider The Boat Company if:

- You dream of being on a private yacht with two dozen newfound friends.
- You desire a spacious cabin with a view.
- You treasure experiencing nature without interruption from an exercise class.
- You enjoy hopping in a kayak or a skiff to take a closer look at the scenery.
- You'd like to try your hand at fly fishing, spin casting, trolling, and shrimping.
- You savor dining in comfortable elegance yet dressing in casual attire.
- You delight in handwritten schedules on dry-erase boards in lieu of printed itineraries.
- The only souvenirs you wish to take home are memories, pictures, and maybe that big salmon you caught (packed on ice).

For more information, visit The Boat Company at www.theboatcompany.com.

— S.Z.

Frame of Mind

Seeing the Inside Passage through the eyes of a small cruise line like The Boat Company means getting lost in the remote beauty of the area. The six-day jaunt from Juneau to Sitka mainly navigates around Admiralty, Baranof, and Chichagof islands, three of the passage's larger isles. While this ride is a mere drop in the bucket compared to the entire passage, meandering is *Mist Cove's* forte. The skiffs, kayaks, and fishing poles aboard are telltale signs that this 157-foot luxury ship pauses to play.

"You don't get much more isolated than this while still enjoying all the comforts of home," says one passenger as we leave civilization behind. Our "ship sweet ship" is custom-designed and fully loaded with all the essential amenities, from spacious cabins to fine wines, which guarantees that the intimate-sized group of 23 (24 is the ship's max) will be in good spirits for the week.

Cove-hopping to a different gorgeous anchorage every night is a skill that comes with years of experience, which The Boat Company has expertly honed after cruising southeast Alaska's remote byways for more than 25 years. The message is clear from the start that getting there in style is half the fun.

We sail away from the trappings of towns and cities, as though we're escaping the gravitational pull of life's daily distractions. A ride like this is not about *making* time, it's about *taking* time to watch eagles fly, bears splash in the water, and the blow of a humpback before our eyes. The Tongass teems with life around the clock, but there's nothing scripted about this passage's ride.



Fly fishing in Warm Springs Bay, Baranof Island



An Alaskan brown bear cub at the water's edge

A Glimpse of Nature

“We’re getting so close you can hear them,” says a passenger as he listens to a small group of humpbacks that surface near *Mist Cove* one afternoon. Wildlife appears out of the blue throughout the whole week. We cross wakes with orcas and Dall’s porpoises from the ship, seals and salmon while kayaking, and even cross paths with bears during several hikes. The Tongass reveals its nature unexpectedly so it helps to keep a constant eye on the forest – and it also pays to be an early bird.

A little less sleep is a small price to pay to witness a sow and her two little cubs out salmon fishing in the cove in the early morning. Some passengers hang over the bow, as others slip into kayaks for a closer peek, getting within a breathtaking 30 feet.

While wildlife is unpredictable, glacier spotting is a bit more foreseeable. Going face to face with chunks of ice that can at times be nearly a mile wide is chilling. Fortunately the day’s rare blue skies and sunshine warm things up as *Mist Cove* heads down Tracy Arm’s narrow 25-mile-long fjord in pursuit of the Sawyer “twins,” a tidal glacier with both a north and south face.

The water’s glassy surface becomes a checkerboard of ice while Captain Fisher carefully maneuvers the ship. “Today we’re going to be like an ice breaker,” he says as the sound of ice hitting this replica minesweeper’s aluminum hull seems to second his thoughts. When the ice congestion makes passage to Sawyer’s southern arm impassable, Fisher changes course and heads for the glacier’s warmer side.

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"We're going to park it here and get the skiffs going," announces the captain as he signals the crew to lower the boats and load passengers at North Sawyer. The small crafts get within a quarter-mile of enormous ice chunks crashing into the water while cracks of thunder from the calving fill the air. It sends chills down my spine and I'm grateful to discover the skiff is toting basic provisions like homemade cookies and hot cocoa with a splash of Baileys.

There are two sides to every passage, and glimpsing its brighter side at Sawyer is short-lived. During the next few days, the southeast's true nature takes hold as the clouds and gray skies drift over the forest of spruce, hemlock, and cedar giving this natural treasure its perpetual dreamy look.

Playing in the Rain

The sporadic misty rain adds a soggy charm to the ship's daily scheduled activities, be it kayaking, fishing, or traipsing through the Tongass. It doesn't take long to figure out that the key to enjoying this trip is good rain gear, as one Gore-Tex-covered passenger points out. Wetness is merely a frame of mind, I decide, while putting on my own still-damp gear before heading out in the rain (and promising myself that next time I'll be waterproof).

"Only tourists are out today," laughs a passenger as she gears up for the day's activities at Warm Springs. This small seasonal community on Baranof Island has a year-round resident of one and is our only "human" port-of-call the entire week. Everyone is game in the name of adventure to explore this little oasis that sports a large glacially fed freshwater lake and several warm spring pools.

STOPPING IN SITKA

"It has open-ocean, fishing, and mountains," says a local bus driver. "It's a cool place in the rain and really cool in the sun," comments a recent transplant. "You have to love rain – it's in a rainforest," remarks a hotel manager. They're all talking about Sitka – the small Alaskan town at the end of our ride of passage.

It would be a shame to disembark and run from this southeastern-exposed community of 9,000. Its 14 miles of road abounds with Native culture, Russian history, wilderness, and wildlife. Extending this last port of call a few days is a good move. So too is picking up a pair of Xtratufs, the local rubber boots affectionately known as "Sitka slippers."

Check out www.sitka.org for more information.
– S.Z.

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The day’s choices run the gamut from spin casting and fly fishing at the lake, to a dip in the springs. I try my hand at hooking a trout, but spend most of my time submerged in warm water sipping a cool mimosa served by a bartending deckhand who also doubles as the rifle-toting bouncer should any uninvited bears decide to crash the pool party. Most passengers are blissfully wet after hours of playing in the rain, as if the water washed all cares away.

By week’s end we’re tuned in to listening for the cry of the eagle, scanning the forest edge for bears, and searching the water for whales. Every passing day is another chance to experience life in the Tongass. Behind the curtain of clouds we witness some of nature’s most candid moments.

One early morning on the bow, we catch the split second a bear slips off a rock. Another day we land at a remote saltwater flat, where we trudge through sedge grass to reach a magnificent stand of old-growth forest. We eavesdrop from our kayaks as a family of bald eagles quarrel. And then there are the rainbows that appear out of the gray.

“We came looking for something, but we found an experience,” says a fellow passenger as we cruise the homestretch into Sitka. I second that. Though we’re in the same boat, the beauty of the Inside Passage is in the eyes of the beholder. I see the soul of Alaska, that passenger may see something else, but there’s one thing we all see eye to eye on: Wet or dry, going “inside” is a ride of passage. ■

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