

Western Canada and Glacier Bay (It's NOT the Alsek!)

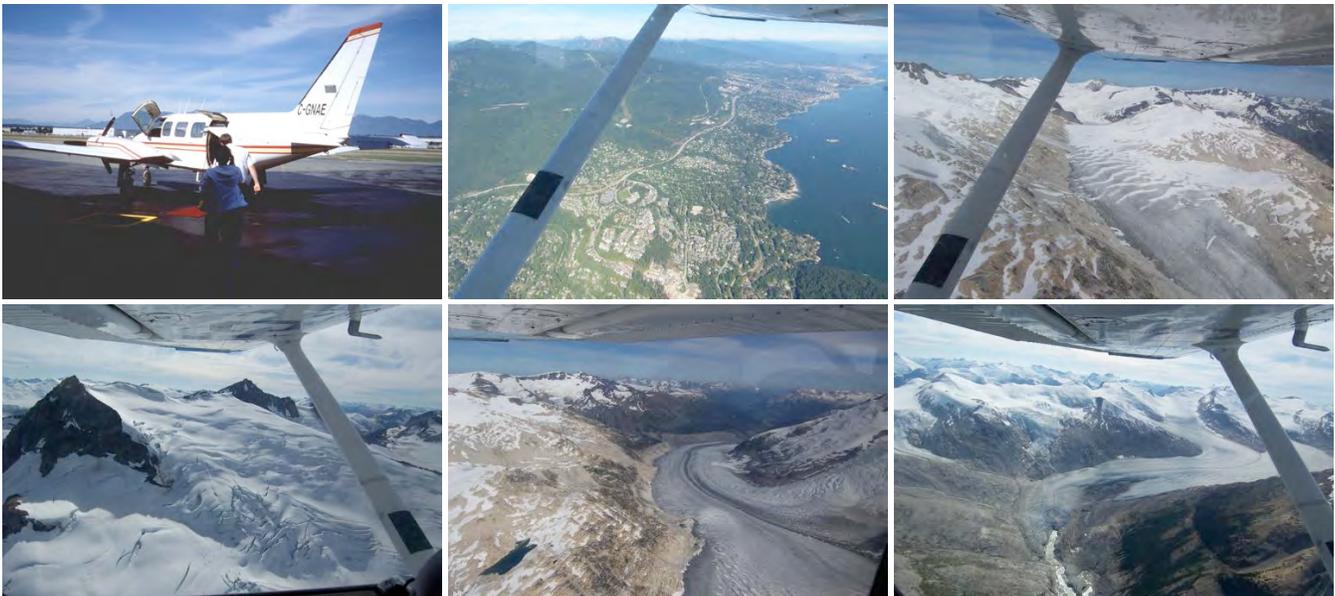
Rafting in British Columbia, All Over the Board in Alberta's Rockies



Left to Right: Rev. Mark reading from good book, beautiful Chilcotin, Mt. Athabasca - the only good day in Alberta

Trips in Western Canada

Living in the northwest, I have casually visited British Columbia (e.g. Vancouver or Victoria) probably a dozen times. My first real outdoor trip to Western Canada, though, was the Alsek, which encompassed the Yukon, British Columbia, and Alaska; that long and serious trip is justifiably written up in its own stand-alone report. This collection focuses on 2 back-to-back birthday trips: a spectacular and satisfying rafting trip down the Chilko-Chilcotin-Fraser (in 2006) and a less satisfying whirlwind tour through Alberta's far-too-developed Rocky Mountains - basically, Banff to Jasper (in 2007).



Left to Right: leaving and over Vancouver, over the Coast Range

Rafting the Chilko-Chilcotin-Fraser, August 2006

After a flawless trip down the Selway (June 2006), I doubted anything could equally amaze me again this summer. Shortly thereafter, however, my father unexpectedly passed away and I seemed to lose all short-term memory. Even so, I never questioned doing this trip (mostly because it was my birthday). My original plan, though, had been sea-kayaking Glacier Bay but, when this trip failed to fill, I switched to ROAM's (OARS' Canadian affiliate) Chilko, a serious whitewater river trip that had been on my list for 4 years - because I thought it would be a good warm-up for ROAM's more insane Ram River. The Chilko originates on the eastern slopes of the B.C. coast range and flows northeast, first joining the Taseko to form the Chilcotin, and then dumping into the Fraser. About 10 days before the trip, I called OARS/ROAM to ask a minor packing question and was told we were a woman-dominated trip (6/8 passengers, 4 being solo female travelers). After a similar distribution on the Hulahula, I wasn't sure this was good (i.e. too much estrogen). Little did I know, however, that we'd have crazy Mark as our leader (who chelated estrogen in ways I'm not sure even I understand) and Tamar, only the third professional female guide I've had or met (who also became my first class V paddle leader on Bidwell). Indeed, another surprise realized only a few days before leaving was that, although OARS calls this trip a class IV, Bidwell is widely rated class V. Based on Google-ing safety/accident/death statistics, I also discovered Bidwell killed 5 advertising executives in 1987 - albeit under funky circumstances (indeed, there is even a movie starring still-DDG Alan Alda). Many web responses had been written about this incident, including a serious diatribe/rant about how rafting companies should stop running Bidwell (the apparent policy at Canadian Rafting Expedition, a competitor of ROAM). Hmm. Although I've done a handful of class V's on the Grand Canyon, all were as a passenger (i.e. holding on tight at all times). Of course, there are purists who don't believe any Grand Canyon rapids are class V because the Colorado is a relatively controlled environment with good evacuation potential. In contrast, Chilko is remote and the ROAM trip is done, for the most part, paddle-assist (i.e. paddlers plus a central oarsman). Paddling puts people on the boat edges, subject to direct and/or irregular hits of huge water - meaning the probability goes way up for falling/flying out of the boat. Although I was planning to eventually paddle a class V, I'm not sure I had mentally planned to do it right now (i.e. near my birthday, so close to my dad's death). Who could predict what my state would really be

when I found myself in that kind of water? The Chilko's other claim to fame (which I did know about) is Lava Canyon, 15 miles of continuous class III/V. What I didn't fully understand, however, was that Bidwell represents the first major whitewater - the gateway to Lava (i.e. if you fall out, you will be swimming big water for a long time). Oh well - too late to back out now.



Left to Right: (top) over Chilko Lake; (bottom) landing at Chilko Lake and lakeside lodge

August 19-20 - to Chilko Lake

Being lazy, I flew to Vancouver, the meeting place for this trip. The plane fare was ungodly expensive. Were I to do it again, I'd take a bus or train. My 7 a.m. departure from Portland also - given my travel preferences - mandated a hotel stay the night before (as I live 2 hours away from the airport). Fortunately, Allison was willing to drive me there on the 19th so I could retire at 8 p.m. Still, I had to wake at 4:30 a.m. because flying to Canada now constitutes a full-on international trip, complete with passport requirements and customs hassles. I landed in Vancouver at around 11:00, following a 2-hour layover in Seattle. Not thinking, I mindlessly followed the airport signs - winding up in a customs line that took just over 60 minutes to process. The whole time, I desperately needed to use the bathroom but was unable to give up my spot in the thick crowd winding some 15 zigzag chutes of security cordoning. Apparently, this lengthy wait was unusual - the product of a just-arrived 747 full of Asian tourists ultimately bound for Las Vegas. Given that the trip meeting place was 15 minutes away by cab - at a charter terminal/hanger near the domestic flights-only South Terminal - I did have the sense to order and stuff my face with fast food, intimidating a couple solo male travelers by throwing my large duffle and backpack down at the bar area - seriously, the only open chair/table in the entire food court. Although I was assured cab drivers knew where the charter area was, I don't believe a single cabbie carrying anyone from our group knew where this hanger was (including mine). Instead, they dropped people off at the busy/noisy South Terminal - which then required a 5-10 minute walk across 2 parking lots. Even though the charter terminal was air-conditioned and posh, the only food was that found in 2 vending machines that only took Canadian. Typically, Chilko charters leave at 3 p.m. A week before, though, OARS/ROAM asked to delay until 4 p.m. To my surprise, there was already someone from our party in the terminal when I arrived. I liked Barb, an accountant from Minneapolis, immediately - although her hard-body figure intimidated me throughout the entire trip, particularly given that she was a year older than me. Barb, like a lot of folks on this trip, was a rafting virgin (a major surprise given the difficulty of Bidwell/Lava). But Barb had been celebrating her 40th for several months, having recently taken up skydiving and rock-climbing. Notably, Barb also had ROAM's Ram trip on her priority list. After an hour, Elina, a recently-graduated medical student and rafting virgin from Michigan, arrived. At the time, Elina seemed stressed because she had redone her entire flying schedule to make the 3 p.m. departure - only to learn after the fact that the charter time had been moved to accommodate her. Shortly thereafter, Virginian residents Sarah (Ph.D. candidate in political science) and John (Ph.D. candidate in education) showed up. At around 2:30, the charter pilots arrived and we begged them to let us leave early. Their response: we would be flying in 2 planes (8- and 4-seater) and we could leave once 6 of us arrived to fill the former. Shortly thereafter, California retiree Arlene showed up. As we were leaving, Barry and Nancy from Boston arrived and I, for one, felt guilty for appearing to leave quickly. But they loved their private flight. Barry, a public health MD, was somewhat famous - treating us to several songs from his and his best friend's health-care parody/musical "Damaged Care" (which you can read all about on-line). Barry was also kind enough to provide me with his entire CD collection of gorgeous pictures, some of which I used in this report.

The flight from Vancouver headed north over the Coast Range. As such, it was HIGHLY spectacular, reminiscent of my clear flights over the Alaska panhandle. Where our flight to Chilko took up this mountainous corridor west of Whistler, our flight back took us over Whistler and by Garibaldi. We flew close to several rocky summits and stunning glaciers. Before reaching the southern end of Chilko Lake, we actually had a distant view of legendary Mt. Waddington. Until the lake, the flight had been smooth. Dropping over the pass and into the drier/warmer high desert proved bumpier - which was nerve-wracking given that the lake is 55 miles long and our lodge was at the northernmost end. There were a couple other ranches along the lake, plus more down-river from our lodge. Flying above the latter, we made about 3 lunging spirals as we approached the uneven, gravel runway - the lake straight down at several points. Chilko Lodge, a destination in and of itself (i.e. not owned by ROAM and available for general vacationers) was upscale but remote. Although flying in is an option, you can drive there from the

east (the final 50+ miles on gravel/dirt roads). The lodge's thick-accented summer manager, Wolfgang (who reminded me of a more macho version of Francis' B/B ranch boss on "Malcolm in the Middle") was the designated greeter. In addition to the main lodge/dining hall, there was a bank of 12 cabin-like rooms with adjoining walls plus 4-6 larger individual cabins. We were given rooms in the former, most lakefront with excellent views. As we departed for our rooms, I clearly heard we had about 45 minutes to freshen up - at which time we would meet the guides in the main lodge, get our gear, and then have dinner. After showering, I made my way to the lodge but, for some reason, saw no one familiar. In retrospect, I was confused by the Europeans on the deck - because, in fact, my group was just inside in the bar. Returning to my room, I decided to try and enjoy a nap. After 10 minutes, there was a knock at my door and this weird looking, crazy-bearded redhead was asking whether I was going to join the meeting. This was our trip leader Mark, the most simultaneously insane and serious guide I've ever worked with. Indeed, they don't exactly grow them like that in the states - not even Alaska. But make no mistake - I loved Mark and he stands equal with Alsek Brian. Even so, my first impression was less flattering. Although Mark refused to state his age during the trip (unlike everyone else), I was given credible information after the trip that he was 32 (contrasting my guess of 38-42). What throws me (still) are his mature leadership skills, looks (which suggest more wear, tear, and loss of hair), and 15-year rafting history plus advanced degrees in geology and math. The best statement about Mark, though, was made by a fellow woman who will remain nameless: Mark is the kind of guy who, if he came up to you in a bar, you might chuckle at... but out here on the river - the male guide mystique makes him interesting and charming. In light of that analogy, I will end this paragraph by noting that it's also fair to say that several womenfolk found it difficult to believe he was married.



Left to Right: Mark, Tamar, and Andy

But I digress. Upon entering the bar, I was struck by how different people looked (as stated, though, my short-term memory has been shorter since July). After introductions, Mark gave a verbally wandering presentation about himself and the trip. For a minute, I was concerned Mark was going to be a BIG talker (a la Hulahula leader, who often drove me nuts) but this did not turn out to be the case because Mark was also humbly self-aware. Although Mark was easy to get going and even easier to distract into crazy tangents, he could switch on a dime to being extremely professional and reverently quiet - which is what you want in a wilderness leader. Our second guide, Tamar (a female name I'd never encountered before), was a wandering Montrealite and aspiring-novelist. Over time, Tamar came to remind me of a younger version of Patagonia Sara - both for her disposition, subtle sense of humor/laugh, and - to some extent - appearance. Although most trips of this size (8 passengers) only call for 2 boats with 2 guides, we were fortunate because pre-licensure Andy was also on board rowing the gear boat (just like Brock/Alsek, including not being able to take passengers on some sections). After the bar presentation, we went down to the guides' cabin and received our gear: splash jackets, helmets, wetsuits, big drybags (most of which were, like, 5 feet tall), little drybags (ammo-can equivalents), and sleep kits (if we rented them). Although a couple passengers did fill these drybags, half of us found them WAY too large. I actually exchanged mine for a smaller one, uninterested in basically climbing in there every time I had to deal with the contents. Unfortunately, dinner was not going to be served until 8, 30 minutes even after packing. Thus, we assembled in the bar for exorbitant drinks (e.g. my albeit good Shiraz ran \$12). Famished, we finally sat down to an excellent dinner: grilled Romaine with parmesan salad, a lamb/pasta/asparagus main course, and some ungodly delicious dark chocolate mousse. For better or worse, I had Mark sitting next to me. I felt bad because he inadvertently brought up the "1987 incident" (but not explaining it was this river and there were many deaths) because it established several Canadian laws about river safety and wetsuits. He seemed surprised when I reflexively said: oh, you mean Bidwell? But he readily explained the story in more detail than even I knew: the advertising executive who organized this trip insisted all 12 men paddle the same huge boat (something unheard of, frankly); and the crew did Bidwell/Lava twice successfully, got fairly drunk, and messed up on the third try - over-confident, tired, and hung-over (it is possible to do Bidwell more than once because there is road access at both ends of Lava Canyon). Although most others in our group (who had no idea this river had killed anyone) seemed taken aback by this information, I was relieved to hear the actual circumstances of the case... not that anything justifies 5 men dying. Anyway, the plan for tomorrow was breakfast at 8 a.m. in the lodge, a short hike, lunch by the guide's cabin, and put-in around 1. Mark alerted us at some point that we would be joined by a 6-member family for the rafting portion of the day, a mutually-beneficial service ROAM provides to the lodge. He also explained that 4 day-only lodge patrons would be visiting on the Lava/Bidwell day. I think it is safe to say that a few of us were a little taken aback by the notion of random/unknown people adding onto our trip for day-only fares - because it could interfere with team building, because of safety issues, and because of paddling position selection (i.e. who would/should get preference?). Some of us (myself included) did have an open conversation with Mark about this topic after Lava - not as a matter of complaint but because we wondered if weird/problematic situations ever arose (i.e. was it as weird for the guides as it was for some of us?).

August 21 - River Day One (To Around Mile 18)

Although I enjoyed my granola/yogurt/fruit breakfast, I had been expecting French toast (incorrectly written on the menu). Fortunately, John was kind enough to offer me his bread, which accompanied his salmon/asparagus frittatas (the most popular dish). The after-breakfast hike departed around 10, leaving us time to do all final packing and carry gear to the guides' cabin. En route to the rudimentary trail, we all visited the lodge's corral, the horses old, tired, and docile - not to mention a little dirty.

Only Tamar joined/led the hike, a dusty/dirty horse-trail basically UP the shallow ridgeline to the right/west. Even so, I was my usual slow self, pulling up the rear with Barry. After sort of topping out on the ridgeline (still quite sylvan), we walked north for maybe 20 minutes, and then dropped somewhat more steeply. Given the extensive trees (deciduous aspen and evergreen pines), the views were limited - although we did get a few reasonable vistas. The last 10 minutes of the hike were on a dirt road - which, I'm fairly certain, was the aforementioned access road. Pretty much coated with dust, dirt, and sweat, I raced back to my room for a final shower before the all-camping part of this trip. At the put-in (i.e. by the guides' cabin), lunch was being set up and our day-tripping British family had amassed in full gear, their 4-8 year-old sons having run out of patience given that we were 30-45 minutes behind. Oh well - in some ways, it felt like payback for some of our concerns (indeed, multi-day teams tend to have more patience because it's not just about a single day). Lunch - all lunches, for that matter - were magnificent and creative sandwich spreads. Given the extensive options (and my goal to NOT gain any weight on this trip), I developed a new, effective strategy: eating 2 modest open-face slices of bread, each with a different and lighter combination of spreads. My personal favorite was a thin layer of cream cheese and jalapeno jelly topped with a single slice of turkey (equally good with chutney). Even though it was clear and sweltering, I maintained plans to wear my magic wetsuit every day - being that it had brought perfect weather all week on the Selway. In the end, I forfeited those plans (at Mark's and Tamar's indirect insistence), bringing us freezing conditions that night and semi-nasty weather the next day. Consequently, I donned the wetsuit all other days - and we were granted gorgeous daytime weather and reasonable nights. Go figure.



Left t to Right: so-so hike before put-in, put-in near Chilko Lodge, camp 1 tents and view

By around 1:30, we were on the water. Since it was 98% flat, Andy was able to take guests - good because I'm not sure how we would have fit 14 people onto just Mark and Tamar's boats. That first day, I rode with Tamar in the back, enjoying conversations with Arlene given our extensive river experience and the fact that the scenery along the upper part of the river was not, like, mountain-DDG. In fact, I had been warned by a Chilko-savvy friend to expect a lot of development; given the direness of her warning, though, things seemed less impacted than anticipated. Because the Chilko is fed by a large blue glacial lake that naturally traps all silt/sediment, the river is a stunning clear blue - like you'd see in the Caribbean. THAT - in addition to Lava, the access flights, and the hoodoos during the final few days - is why the Chilko is beautiful. Although the wildlife can be spectacular, the most notable animal we saw en mass were eagles (often, 1 every 10 minutes in groups of 4-6). Other fauna (grizzly, black bears, salmon) were seen in low numbers, with - disappointingly - no sightings of bighorn sheep once we hit the true desert. Tamar estimated the river was running 5000-8000 cfs. From my perspective, it looked like the Colorado/Grand Canyon at put-in. Like many northern rivers, the Chilko braided out from time to time that first day - which meant seeing blood-red salmon swimming upstream just below the surface (the major run 2 weeks away); or it meant getting hung up in funky narrow sections - one of which landed Elina and Arlene in a tree jam, covering both with a number of respectable flesh wounds. The latter left Elina a little spooked - particularly given the rapids tomorrow and her virgin rafting status. My only slight concern was that Tamar seemed to be having some trouble with her oars - both in terms of having them pop out of their holders as well as out of her hands at times. Fortunately, all these issues vanished quickly. Our camp for the night was 18 miles downriver. The campsite, in an open lodgepole forest, was up a moderate slope and accessible by a dirt road (to accommodate daytripper exchanges). Most of us camped close on the bank above the river. All equipment borrowed from ROAM was excellent, including the straightforward 2-man ASolo tents provided to our trip's many singles (Barb, Elina, Arlene, and myself). Although not notably significant that first night, the level of alcohol provided by ROAM exceeds that which I've been provided on ANY professional trip (rafting or otherwise). Indeed, the general trend on most US-based trips is that guides are not allowed to provide any alcohol for liability reasons. On this trip, there were 10-15 cans of beers (Canadian and Guinness), 4-5 bottles of good and diverse wines, and - with a few exceptions - a choice hard liquor or port EACH day. That's for 11 people total. I do suspect that Mark was holding back that first night given tomorrow's rapids. Since we are talking about drinking, too, it is worth mentioning that - once again (a la Hulahula) - the guides insisted the pre-Chilcotin water was clean enough to drink unfiltered (downstream, human/cattle impact required treatment). Mark even cited actual studies that had directly assayed for giardia (and, presumably, other things like coliforms) and found nothing. Mark did say that anyone who was more comfortable filtering water was welcome to use the team water filter. To my knowledge, however, everyone - including me - drank the water straight up. Nonetheless, I remain skeptical about reports of zero anything and would advise people with questionable immune systems to use the filter or bring treatment systems of their own.

As with most nights, happy hour began 1-2 hours before dinner was served (the latter between 8 and 8:30 p.m.). Dinner featured salmon (or amazing tofu in my case), salad, asparagus, and potatoes. Like ARTA, ROAM always prepared desserts, although I remember few of these since I was, as stated, trying to eat less on this trip. In general, I would rate ROAM's meals as good as those of ARTA - with their ability to prepare salads and vegetables competitive with Alaska Discovery on the Alsek (definitely, the gold standard). After dinner, Mark delivered the scariest bear talk I've heard - although I do give comparable lectures to my students in Yellowstone. This likely explains why I had major sleeping issues every night of this trip. As with all Mark's serious talks about safety stuff, he began with the most likely/least dangerous scenario and ended with the least likely/most dangerous. Although none of the basic information was new, 2 pieces of information - in combination with Mark's

level of seriousness (a stark contrast to crazy Mark) - were troubling to me. The first was the relative grizzly numbers in B.C. as compared with Yellowstone: 23,000 vs. 400. Although I haven't done the math, I remain convinced that there are more grizzlies per unit area in B.C. Mark freely admitted they had dealt with grizzlies and black bears in camp kitchens. Indeed, an open strategy they used was making sure the kitchen was more attractive than the tent area - without being, like, unsafe messy. In response to my question about whether he'd EVER dealt with bears in tents, Mark's story about a Firth trip tops ALL bear stories I've directly heard. Like the Hulahula, the Firth ends on the Arctic Ocean, where Mark's group was camping during a south-blowing storm. During most summer months, the ice (and polar bears) is/are well out to sea. But, with incoming wind, Mark and the second guide decided to take shifts guarding the camp all night - concerned the ice (and polar bears) might make landfall. I'm not sure if it was Mark or the second who fell asleep - but, in any event, that person awoke with the keen sensation that something was wrong. Indeed, a HUGE polar bear bottom - its front INSIDE a tent - was spotted. Inside, the polar bear's face was less than a foot above the 70-something wife of a beverage company founder. It was about then that her sleeping husband turned and grunted a loud snore, scaring the polar bear away. See - all I need is a story like that to keep me up for a week in grizzly country. Notably, the woman's first words/sentiment once the guides got to her were something to the effect of: I've never smelled anything so bad. Within an hour of dinner, I was ready for bed. Unfortunately, I had not made a daylight trip to the groover and - sufficed to say - now had to go. In retrospect, I'm actually not sure how we managed to not visit the groover during the bathroom spiel (entirely focused on NOT throwing any non-TP items, including the cardboard roll, into the can - relevant later). Given Mark's recommendation that a buddy system be used for all night trips, Arlene and I made our LONG way to the groover (definitely the farthest and scariest groover walk on this trip). Despite previous comments about bear-induced insomnia, I slept reasonably well that first night - likely the product of the freezing temperatures and Arlene's snoring a few tents away (which, in contrast with other's opinions, I found familiar and soothing).

August 22 - River Day Two (To Around Mile 45)

Everything come morning was covered by frost - water bottles left outside frozen nearly solid. Fortunately, the hot breakfast call wasn't until 8 a.m., leaving me in my sleeping bag until the sun physically hit the camp. Of course, the guides did have coffee/hot drinks ready at 6:30 for crazy people, cold breakfast at 7:30. Most days, I had hot chocolate, yogurt/granola/fresh fruit. Our guest passengers, I believe, were scheduled to arrive around 10 - which meant we hoped to be packed up by 9:30, the boats loaded by the time they arrived (and they were). As with the bear talk, Mark's whitewater safety/scenario speech was blunt and 98% serious. Again, it's not like I had never heard all these things before. But, given the class V and Mark's relative seriousness, everything felt more ominous than usual. Perhaps more than other leaders, too, Mark was extremely frank about everyone's need to be fully active in his/her own rescue - particularly given the real scenario of falling out in Bidwell (something that, indeed, happened to a friend of mine - rescued after 2 miles of swimming). Intensifying everything, Mark - at the end of the speech - insisted we close our eyes and give him a thumbs up or down as to whether we were prepared to accept the risks and act accordingly. I honestly wondered if anyone would bail - given that there was a big SUV waiting to take you back to the lodge, like, RIGHT there. But no one did. Even though I am not sure - given the virgin status of so many people on this trip - that this was a logically meaningful exercise, I definitely think it was useful and I'll probably start using that as a good bellwether assignment if I do any more crazy V rivers. Shortly thereafter, we were in the boats. Something I was REALLY pleased to have the guides do on this trip was assign boats and positions on class IV/V rapids - albeit after some passenger input. Every paddling trip I've done to date has, at some point, been wrought with frustration because there always comes a big water day when the number of interested paddlers exceeds the available seats. No other leader has EVER had the balls to make actual decisions that impact passengers at that level. Although several of us were concerned there were only a few paddling spots, Mark and Tamar also made spots for everyone. Because I wasn't sure how I'd respond to a Lava in my face for an hour, I requested a back spot and Mark respected that - although neither he nor Tamar viewed the back spot as fundamentally safer... just less in your face. In retrospect, the back 2 positions were WAY better than the front 4. Each of the 2 front positions had a tiny hole (maybe a foot square) in which to sit. Each middle front position had 10 inches between the seats for cramming legs and feet. Relatively speaking, I had 1.5 X 3 feet of space. Between all left and right positions were metal cages and more gear piled 1-2 feet high. Although these were useful for holding on to, they made paddling a more isolated experience. In Tamar/my boat were Barb, 4 day-tripping guests, and me. Another reason I took the back was because Barb - given her thrill-seeking tendencies - deserved that always-soaked front/right position. Tamar's paddle commands were familiar, although she (and Mark) used "take a break" instead of stop, as well as "hold on" (which literally meant stop paddling and hold onto the gear). Mark and Tamar were also more insistent about paddle-holding (i.e. hands on the T-bar at all times). Holding only the shaft was not an option, particularly because both guides had witnessed or personally sustained T-bar injuries, usually in the mouth or face. It actually took me several days to train myself to always grip right/top.

But we were still an hour from Bidwell, the water fast and blue - with several decent class II's for practice. At several places, the riverside scenery changed dramatically into impressive walls of large-block columnar basalt. We also came upon a grizzly bear fishing in a riverside pool; smelling us, it stood up, sniffed the air in several directions, and then ran up the steep hillside. I can't recall if we saw our 3 black bears (including a mother and cub) before or after Bidwell - but we came upon said animals twice. Unfortunately, my camera was stowed and I took no pictures (except at the scout). In what seemed like no time, we were pulled over on river left - Mark announcing casually: Bidwell is just around the corner. Being that it was after noon, lunch was in order... although I can't say that I - or many others - could eat much, owing to jitters about that distant roar around the bend. Exacerbating said nerves, the scout was INSANE - definitely the worst in my rafting history. A rotting path cut up this dusty, steep, dirt/rock gully. For the first 30-40 vertical feet, we were on our own, sliding and falling back upon each another. For the last 30-40 vertical feet, Mark rigged a rope because it was THAT steep and slick. Scared the crap out of me. And, even when you finally reached the small shelf of slightly flat earth at the end of the rope, the rest of the way was edgy, cliff-hanging, and ultimately dropped through more crazy shit to this grassy open spot with an encompassing view of the entire rapid (from, by the end, 30-40 feet up). In retrospect, I can honestly say that climbing to scout was AS SCARY as running Bidwell. For me, though, the thing about Bidwell is that it was featured as an OARS catalog cover a few years ago and thus looked - in my opinion - friendly in a familiar way. Although it had a few very dangerous rock-oriented technical features, most

of it was hydraulically large waves that, because of the curving nature of the river, were messy. The general run involved coming around the bend to this dangerous spot where the majority of the flow was pushing river left. The problem: there were some extremely bad rocks 5-10 feet from the steep left bank, creating a slot-like channel that you absolutely didn't want to go down, get hung up on, or fall into. Thus, the minute you came around the bend, you had to paddle like hell toward river right - keeping the boat reasonably straight as you dropped into this HUGE hole/wave of at the base of the evil rocks, and then through an uneven mess of unpredictable waves/holes thereafter. Within 100 feet of the rocks, the river turned again, meaning you also had to negotiate big, uneven whitewater around another bend. After that, we couldn't see anymore, but obviously suspected it went on and on like that. Although some people seemed extremely nervous after seeing Bidwell, I felt more secure about it because I felt that I'd paddled comparable waves and rocks, albeit not necessarily in this combined or large format. After lunch, we quietly got on the boats, double-checked everything, and went for it. Oh - and Mark did his obligatory full-body dunk... which, despite looking like something he just did for good luck, was intended to prevent a gasp reflex in the event he came out of the boat. I suspect he would have preferred we all did this. Oh well.



Left to Right: scrambling to the Bidwell scouting viewpoint, me above Bidwell, boats and Chilcotin along camp 2

As for the run: all I can say is great rapid, great run - all moves executed well. Thankfully, Tamar did call a BIG "hold on" as we hit the first GIANT wave/hole, which was appreciated because the back of the boat burst up as we popped over the final crest. Even if she hadn't, I would have had to do so anyway just to stay in the boat. Right as we were about to lose our view back to Bidwell (we being in the second boat), Tamar and I (and probably a few others) turned to check Andy's descent. To our horror, Andy was not able to make the sharp right and our last image of him was heading down the skinny left channel. Although Bidwell hadn't scared me out of my nut before, the image of Andy heading down the chute totally freaked me out. After rounding another couple of tight curves - Andy nowhere in sight and Tamar yelling to Mark since he didn't know what was going on - we found a tiny eddy and pulled over on river right. Tamar and Mark calmly ordered us to stay put and took off upriver along the steep, forested bank. Given that Andy had obviously gotten stuck in the chute, we were all nervous, watching the river for Andy and/or the gear. After 10 minutes, though, Andy and his intact raft appeared - followed by Mark and Tamar returning along the shore. Miraculously, he freed the boat by mostly brute force methods - jumping and prying things. Although he obviously knew the intended line, Andy said that so much gear had been put on his boat (because just Mark/Tamar could take passengers) that the entire vessel was completely unwieldy. A few contents of some people's drybags were a little wet that night - likely because much of his boat flooded while stuck... and, I suspect, some bags were packed/sealed better than others. Once everyone had a moment to calm down, we were off again. And the whitewater began within 100 feet. Given that few people raft this river, there are no official river maps. Occasionally, Tamar yelled out the name of some class IV thing that was, indeed, larger than the huge waves that defined most of the canyon. And then we would crash through beastly waves/holes and hold on. The only specific rapid I actually remember, though, was called Maytag (yes, the washing machine). After 10 minutes, we ran the Green Mile... and after 10 more minutes, the White Mile. The latter was definitely larger, with 4-6 foot tall waves crashing everywhere. It was at some point in the middle of the White Mile that I sustained this serious moment wherein I consciously acknowledged: gee, this IS sort of dangerous. Normally for me, big whitewater is over quickly. Yeah - you get all worked up... but then it's over. Even intense trips like the Selway and Middle Fork, for the most part, have reasonably long breaks between big rapids. Lava Canyon, however, truly is continuous and LONG - providing MUCH time to feel and ponder a wider range of emotions and intellectual processing. After insisting for MANY years that I had yet to reach my whitewater fear limit, I came close in the middle of White Mile. So, maybe I'll be less crazy on future trips. At some point during White Mile, Tamar yelled something about Thompson rock. Although most people didn't get the reference, I did. This was the actual place where several of the aforementioned men perished post-Bidwell, presumably against the rock. Although I was aware they had been washed down-river prior to dying, I didn't fully appreciate that they swam so far and survived that much whitewater. Indeed, in thinking about the story now, I don't even think their raft fully flipped; there was just a jolt in Bidwell and 5 were thrown out. Within 10 minutes, the river pinched into this deeply boiling channel through a narrow, dark gorge of mossy, dark columnar basalt: Magic Canyon. Of all places to NOT have camera access... I was going out of my mind not being able to take pictures. For this section, no paddling was allowed; apparently, the guides entertain some drink-related bet about hitting the walls on the way down. The level of difficulty is further raised by the sideways rule (as in floating sideways). Although there was an appropriate air of levity in Magic Canyon - exacerbated by the quieter and superficially flatter-looking water - the river was definitely not to be taken lightly here. Had anyone fallen in, they would have been pulled down by the incredible currents roiling against the gorge walls.

Shortly thereafter, the whitewater and canyon diminished and, at least for our guests, there was remorse that the daytrip was ending. Shortly before the road access point, the Chilko joined the milky gray Taseko, officially forming the Chilcotin - which now looked like a giant daiquiri (perhaps explaining the subsequently higher levels of drinking). After saying our goodbyes, we continued an hour - Sarah and John joining our crew. Our camp was along river right in thicker forest, behind and above which were cow-trodden pastures. Given how much of the river lies along grazing land, though, I was pleasantly surprised how little evidence of cows we saw (i.e. no actual cows, less than 5 shit patties). By now, though, the skies had grown

overcast. We were able to erect most of our tents and enjoy 30 minutes of downtime before a moderate and persistent rain began to fall - pretty much during happy hour/appetizers (3 luxurious cheeses and sinful liver pate). After intensifying showers, 2 oar-supported tarps were raised over the kitchen and chair circle. To everyone's surprise, we still made a fire under the latter - which cut the cold/wet edge of what could have been a difficult evening. Given all the whoopla, dinner ran behind and into the dark: Italian-style marinated chicken breasts, tomato-basil-fresh mozzarella sides, and the best grilled polenta (ever!). Unfortunately, Barb and I stuffed our faces and left without desert, diving into respective tents for much-needed slumber. The only other thing I'll mention about the camp was that it was near these contemporary sweathouse structures used by local natives (alas, I don't know any regional tribe names): skeletal domes (5-10 feet in diameter) made of tree branches lashed together using rope or twine. When in use, they were covered with heavy tarps and filled with hot rocks, like a sauna.



Left to Right: dip-netters, our only interesting whitewater, the porn raft

August 23 - River Day Three (To Around Mile 75)

After a lot of fear-induced tossing and turning, I did sustain 4 hours of slumber prior to waking at 7:30 - still marred by weird dreams about my father. The rain kept up for much of the night, leaving everything soaked - including my wetsuit. Thus, everyone spent the morning trying to dry clothes by the fire. Although I ate my usual cold breakfast, most others enjoyed hand-stuffed Brie and strawberry French toast. My other father moment came when we had to take down the tarps: Mark said we had to treat the tarps like flags when we folded them (precisely and never letting them touch the ground). Less than a month before, I'd been subjected to my dad's full-on military honors funeral, including the flag-folding. Although I didn't, like, abandon my duties and run off crying, I was quietly and intensely shaken. After a few small rapids, today was mostly flatwater and big open vistas. In theory, we were passing below the sprawling yet tiny town of Hanceville - not to mention its major access road. Although we saw some structures in the distance, I never saw actual road or heard vehicles. What was interesting, though, were the dip-netting stations (short little wooden piers built precariously along the riverside, a man dipping a giant net and a woman preparing fish there-behind) 10-15 miles along the river in the Hanceville area. But, mostly, today was the day that Barb, Elina, and I fully unleashed Mark's wild, crazy, dirty side... worse than Jenn and I did on the Grand Canyon with Rick D. (hard to believe but true). Mark did claim he'd never had this many women on a single trip, and - concomitantly - he also attempted to convince us he'd never been so wickedly leveled during a professional trip. And, you know, I almost believe him. In any event, it was probably best it was just the 4 of us on his boat... even though it was said we could be heard cackling, screaming, and laughing from miles. For the record, though, we initially did engage Mark with serious discussions about other trips and clean personal questions. But then Elina (sitting in the back of the boat, a difficult place to hear from) innocently misheard what did off-season: his actual answer was construction and flooring; she heard construction and porn. And, sufficed to say, that was the turning point. During the latter part of the day - following lunch on a likely-ephemeral island - Mark put each of us through the oars, something he also claimed he seldom let passengers do much or for long. Each of us rowed nearly an hour - which was nice because I'd never had a professional guide give me a rowing lesson. Given that Mark instructs ROAM's guiding school, he did an excellent job explaining things and working with me without being too assertive. Although I screwed up left/right a great deal (because I suffer mild dyslexia, I swear), I made progress with reading the water and planning small moves in advance... as opposed to making exhausting brute-force moves too late. And, even if I turned the boat left instead of right, I actually did get better at switching my plans and fixing the problem with less effort (not to mention understanding what I did). But no rapids. Given my rate of picking up river skills, I need years of rowing simple water with moderate current to get things in my head before I could do anything faster.



Left to Right: Dolomite camp, porn star happy hour

That night, we camped on a small, non-ephemeral island that was separated from the mainland by a 10 foot-wide river channel. Above and behind were several multi-colored limestone walls and cliffs, reminiscent of the Dolomites. Although

these campsites were said to be cramped, it wasn't bad. Barb, Elina, and I formed a triangle together at the far end. Appetizers and dinner were under the glowing face of a HUGE golden limestone wall. I nearly screwed up my diet with the antipasto (cheese-stuffed red peppers and salami). Dinner included a decadent prawn/scallop risotto and tiramisu - the first time I'd ever had either dish on a rafting trip (which, indeed, earned ROAM big points). Tonight was the first night I felt everyone was truly engaged during and after dinner, having been distracted with newness the first night and rain-soaked the second. Elina seemed to have the most interesting repertoire of conversation topic starters: tonight - figure out your porn name (first childhood pet plus the street name where you mostly grew up), and explain your dream career. The former was more insanely memorable: Tuffy 24, Sydney Smith, Gidget Washington, Jack Oakwood, Valentine Mockingbird, Muffy Marguerite, Bingo Furman (with liberties taken on the spelling), and that is where my memory ceases. Later, Barry entertained us with selections from his aforementioned musical, Nancy preceding his performance with the forewarning that she hoped we knew he wasn't a trained singer. Actually, I thought Barry had a nice voice and could carry a tune. I slept so-so that night, mostly because the river was loud and close... which can go either way in terms of either soothing or distracting me.



Left to Right: high desert riversides, approaching tricky eddy by camp, boats lashed along camp eddy

August 24 - River Day Four (To Big Creek, Around Mile 90)

Today was a short river day because of a planned hike. Given the magic wetsuit, the weather was awesome. Looking at the itinerary and my sparing pictures, though, I remember little about the river portion - other than it was the women (Barb, Elina, and I) in Tamar's boat. The scenery also became more high desert-like, with light-colored mudstone hoodoos increasingly prominent. Although I cannot remember lunch, I do recall stopping before the final bend to Big Creek because we needed to space out the boats - Mark going first so as to be fully prepared to haul us in second, and all of us prepared to haul Andy in last. If any of us missed the miniscule eddy (in the otherwise class II/III narrows upstream from incoming Big Creek), we would have to move downstream to a less scenic camp with no good hiking options. But we all made it fine. Aside from a long, rocky fire-line, Big Creek was a glorious camp - albeit clearly used/impacted. While unloading the rafts, 2 paddle-only boats flew screaming down the rapids. Apparently, a company in Hanceville runs daytrips out of that town (I'm not sure where they take out). Lugging all that gear up the hill in the sun, I initially decided I wasn't into the afternoon hike, a straight-up climb (on a game trail) of the visible "golden dome" across Big Creek. A decent bath was calling hard, a surprise even to me (who prefers to get as dirty as possible - stop laughing Roger and Jenn). After setting up the tent in the shade and enjoying some lying down/meditation time ultimately, however, I changed my mind.



Left to Right: (top) Big Creek at 4 vs. 7 p.m., golden dome goal; (bottom) to, on, and from golden dome

With Tamar and Arlene guarding the camp, the rest of us went up. At first glance, crossing Big Creek seemed like it was going to be simple and straightforward. Upon closer inspection (done several times as we walked upstream, looking for place to ford), it was actually big and fast. After about 10 minutes of searching, Mark called the crossing spot and, thankfully (sort of) he and Andy fixed a line. Of course, their definition of a decent crossing spot was not mine (mine being probably 30 minutes upstream). Already jittery watching Mark waist-deep in fast water, I decided I was going first to get this mess over with.

Compared with my hardest ford to date (upper crossing on the damn Bechler, Yellowstone), Big Creek was not as long - but definitely faster and deeper. The bottom was covered with nasty big rocks, between which it was easy to slip a foot. But the rope helped a great deal, and the water was surprisingly pleasant to get into. Once across the river, we made our way through dry, open forest to the base of a ridgeline with an obvious trail angling up at 30°. From this point, the grassy ground was intermittently covered with tiny prickly pear cacti (clusters of grape-sized lobes with thorny spines). The ridgeline views were spectacular, the hike along this section more fulfilling than I was expecting. In the distance, we saw the goal, the golden dome... with 4-6 parallel tracks leading straight up the 40-50° hillside. At this point, nearly everyone started racing up WAY faster than Elina or I could go. In Elina's case, it was asthma; in mine, it was vertigo combined with the fact that my heart rate was elevated - something that really floods images of my dad's death (something I did finally confess to Mark). In the end, Mark led Elina all the way up but I insisted they leave me alone. After sitting by myself and briefly calming down, I actually sustained a big cry. Something about that big open landscape, the sun shining between the clouds just got to me. I was able to compose myself fully by the time the rest of the party returned 30 minutes later. The hike down proceeded without incident, although Big Creek was definitely deeper. Upon returning, I enjoyed an exquisite sponge bath down among the boulders. Dinner that night: burritos, including excellent margaritas which explained why some of us felt the effects the next day. Elina also decided we needed to share our best scar stories. I can't say I slept great that night, tossing and turning until at least 2 a.m. given that most tents were spread out and my bear-related comfort level was low.



Left to Right: unworldly sandstone near big class IV, the landslide area, approaching Farwell Canyon

August 25 - River Day Five (To the Fraser, Around Mile 120)

Breakfast this morning included my most serious diet-breaking indulgence: sinfully excellent eggs benedict (traditional or Haida/smoked salmon). Afterwards, Barb and I were the first ones packed (probably because we had the mildest hangovers). In any event, Barb will kill me for not telling this story and Mark will kill me for telling it. Given that I fear Barb more than Mark, here goes: after Barb and I carried our gear down to the boats, I stopped Mark near the kitchen to ask some simple question (which, given subsequent events, I no longer remember). Mind you, it's not like I was near his tent or that he was running behind (no pun intended), or that anything in my conversation (to my knowledge) was relevant. But Mark, mid-sentence, fully dropped and exchanged pants. Even at the time, I was wondering how much more clothing was on its way off and how careful he was going to be with that long shirt - which, from my perspective, covered the full monty. In many years of outdoor recreation, I have behaved as such with friends and/or lovers... and I've had at least 1 tacky climbing instructor overtly undress in front of me and other women students. But I wasn't sure where or whether Mark fit into that spectrum. Assuming I was the only witness, I chose to move right along. Unbeknownst to Mark and I, Barb was sitting 30 feet behind him (indeed, her show featured the full moon). Within 10 minutes, Barb caught up with me, asking whether Mark - indeed - just did that. Since we were riding with Mark (behind him, to be specific), we pretty much just asked what was up once we were all seated. Initially, Mark was slightly embarrassed (because he had no idea Barb was back there). But then he decided we both needed some half-moon rowing because we seemed too uptight about his free camp dressing. I don't think Barry/Nancy (up front) had a clue what all the snickering was about. Indeed, Mark represents 1 of 2 guides I've known who could get away with that (Colorado Matt being the other). But I digress: today was the second major whitewater day, with a huge stand-alone class IV and then Farwell Canyon, a continuous stretch of class III/IV. I honestly don't recall how long we were on the water before hitting the first rapid. I know, for the first hour, the sandstone scenery was spectacular. At some point, we passed some spiral geological formations that Mark was all excited about. Above, miraculously tall mudstone hoodoos became fairly continuous, the river wide and chalky blue. After rounding a major gooseneck, we pulled onto a gravelly peninsula on river right, several cyclists visible on a higher plateau (where there was a road). Our choices: to quickly climb a 200-foot hill to the scout or to stay with the boats. Given that I'd been trying to photograph this HUGE hoodoo wall around the previous bend, I opted to stay back at the boats - walking out to the peninsula tip for pictures. When everyone returned, Mark seemed slightly uncertain how this rapid was going to feel/proceed given the water was lower than usual. Consequently, he decided to put Barb and I up front for the rest of the day. For several days, he had built this rapid up as having possibly THE biggest wave on the river. Indeed, some remnants of "serious" Mark emerged again, actually concerning me a bit. As we proceeded, it was clear that this rapid lay in this twisty constriction under a tall bridge (70-100 feet high) - which held quite an audience: several RV's and a large bike touring group. Lovely, I am in the front paddling something Mark is slightly uncertain about AND there are people watching. Seriously, though, it was a good and fun run, with no waves close to anything in Bidwell/Lava. Of course, I did get thoroughly soaked with major water in the face and down my entire front. Within the hour, we passed by this interesting section where - I believe - 3 years ago, a HUGE landslide dammed the river for a few months. At the time, people apparently thought the river would be dammed for years. During those months, a lake built up behind the slide that was just 30 feet under the aforementioned bridge. At some point shortly thereafter, we pulled over on river left for lunch.

From slightly afar, Farwell Canyon was indicated by a tall, looming talus slope formation. After passing this point, the HUGE river pinched into this narrow, high-walled canyon. Although not as long as Lava, it was as impressive in terms continuously large waves, and serious rapids. There were also a surprising number of rocky restriction points with technical curves that

were sustained and challenging. Indeed, Mark had us digging so hard, fast, and long that I was fatigued to the point I literally had no more to give (Barb felt similar - so I'm fairly certain it wasn't just wimpy me). Being that was wearing my rainjacket (as opposed to my misplaced splash jacket), I was amused to find - once we were out of the canyon - every pocket physically full of water... fascinating subterranean rivulets running all sorts of places under my wetsuit. Sadly, the confluence with the Fraser was 10 minutes past the Farwell terminus - a giant T in the distance, where the daiquiri Chilcotin merged with the green-brown Fraser. Here, it was suggested we lash all the boats together and enjoy a social float to camp, still 1-2 hours away. This was accomplished somewhat haphazardly while floating. Although the feel of the Fraser seemed lazy and smooth, the MASSIVE river was swift and had some pretty treacherous boils. With the boats side by side, Andy and Sarah were in charge of rowing, each via 1 outer oar. But mostly we were content to tell bad jokes. Mark also continued to read from the river equivalent of "How to Shit in the Woods." Although Mark's choice of published "roll V" stories were amusing, all paled in comparison with his personal tale... with the preface that you recall his emphasis on NOT throwing toilet paper rolls into the can. Just 3 weeks ago, Mark looked into the groover a few nights into a different trip, noting a toilet paper roll resting in/on the shit. Knowing the problems this would later cause, he hand-fished said item out. Following trips, groovers are taken to standard RV hookups where a vacuum hose is used to suck out the contents. Well - Mark had that renegade roll on his mind as he emptied 3 trip groovers a week later. While the first went fine, the second hose blocked and Mark knew what was up there. Consequently, he bare-arm removed said item (notably an arm's length up the hose). Unfortunately, it was no surprise when the third groover also stopped. Assuming the same problem, Mark went in after what he thought was a single tube. Unbeknownst to him, however, there were actually 2 tubes, separated by a foot of liquefied human waste. Consequently, when he tugged the lower tube, it released said contents down upon him - the end of the hose at beard level. Backtracking, Mark explained that emptying groovers had not made him want to throw up in, like, 15 years. Looking down at the current waste covering his torso - while disgusting - initially did not warrant a puke. But then he noticed undigested corn bits from the burrito dinner in his beard and immediately ran off hurling in several directions. After the trip, I told this story to Allison (because she needs to hear non-glamorous guiding aspects) and my mother, who hadn't laughed so hard in awhile.



Left to Right: out of Farwell with Fraser in the distance, drifting down the Fraser in our 3-raft boat, the team at final camp

Our only problematic moment during the float to camp was a short section of class I whitewater that jostled the loose inner oars, smacking and momentarily pinning Arlene. In terms of scenery, I was expecting all this development once we hit the Fraser. But there were only eroding high desert features: water-carved mudstone slopes and dry forest hillsides. To the dismay of at least 1 person, we saw no California bighorn sheep, a virtual guarantee (based on the trip literature). For our final camp, we pulled up to the low end of this substantial ramp of sand. From here, we hauled all gear about 75 feet up to the eventual kitchen. Personal gear was hauled another 75 feet to a higher sandy bench. It felt good to run around barefoot, the sand warm and soft (at least until I stepped hard on a sharp buried root/stem the next morning... which took almost 2 weeks to fully heal). Everyone left the rain-flies off their tents that night, the promise of (indeed) AMAZING stars more than evident in the massive sky above. The last meal theme was Greek - appropriate given that I was born on a military base in Turkey and spent my first year in Greece: pitas with THE most amazing parmesan-artichoke dip, Greek salad, dill potatoes, a tomato/eggplant side, and grilled lamb - the first time I've had that on a river trip. And, of course, there was the obligatory and memorable birthday cake - Black Forest, with canned cherries. After dinner, most of us stayed up to watch the impressive stars (although there were few shooting displays). I'd love to say I slept well but, for some reason, I tossed, turned, and made 2 wine-related pee runs, unable to fall asleep until at least 3 a.m.



Left to Right: camp late-afternoon and twilight, me and Mark with the Black Forest birthday cake

August 26 - The Last Day and Home (sort of)

Given that it was my birthday, I was more somber than I was expecting. Although I never got, like, terrifically weepy, the sum of my emotions over the course of the day was as high as they were on the Alsek. Because I had the earliest flight (8 p.m., approved by OARS when I signed up for this trip), I also presented additional stress to our state of hurriedness. ROAM trip literature strongly advises (and the guides prefer) that passengers stay a night in Vancouver before flying home. Unlike

others, though, my flight was 1 hour and to visit my mom. Plus, she'd be waiting at the airport - not a trivial feat because it was something my dad usually did. Packing up camp seemed to take the usual time, after which we took the obligatory team photo. Our final float lasted maybe 90 minutes, Barb and I riding with Tamar. While Barb seemed introspectively quiet, I enjoyed talking with Tamar about her writing. When we arrived at the take-out, it was already exhaustingly hot. At first glance, the rocky beach looked reasonable in terms of our task. Closer inspection, however, revealed a second higher tier up steeper rocks to the actual parking lot. Our driver, a classic cowboy (who looked lifted straight out of Montanny - as did the scenery, in general), was waiting on shore. Tamar originally thought ROAM's CEO-equivalent would be there too - but evidently Brian skipped out on the opportunity to meet yours truly (indeed, I'd hoped to meet this guy after hearing tales from rafting friends). Our team decided that the best approach to unloading gear was to carry everything twice - first up the lower beach tier (about 100 feet, not much elevation), and then to the actual van/second tier (another 100 feet, this time up about 15 feet). After completing move 1 (more or less), Mark was ready to have some of us carry the boats (fully inflated) all the way up to the vans. Well, 1 raft wiped me CLEAN out - although, by this point, I was already feeling mild heat-stroke, had run out of water, and my stomach was rumbling. Locating the main water carboy, I had to take a long time-out, drinking profusely while sitting between the van and the trailer hitch in the sparing shade - sweat running down my back and my head throbbing. Indeed, the latter part of take-out was a major blur for me. At some point, lunch was called and we started sorting our gear, separating rental items from our own. I can't say food agreed with me, but I did force down bread and salami. Despite an hour of hydrating, though, I had yet to pee a thing. Just as folks started piling into the van (we were ALL driving to "Mile 108" - said to be a couple hours away via a bad dirt road and then good highway), my bladder decided it wanted to be emptied and it took some time to find a remotely private spot to pee. By the time I had returned, all but the front/gunner seat was taken - which Mark insisted was my birthday present (and I was not about to turn it down).



Left to Right: various shots of take-out

Given that Mark was a crazy balding redhead, I wound up in a long discussion with him about Jay, the only other crazy balding redhead I know. Since I was heading back to spend a week with my mom, I had been trying to decide whether I wanted to finally talk with Jay, who lives nearby and has remained friends with my folks over the years. He and I, on the other hand, haven't talked for 6 years - ever since he went on this year-long sabbatical/mid-life crisis. Although I sometimes thought about Jay (particularly early on), I became too busy with work and travel to acknowledge how many years have passed. While at home this summer, I actively avoided Jay after my dad died - unwilling to muddy my grief process. Indeed, Jay is someone who still invokes an array of emotions - from someone I loved for many years, to someone who truly frustrated me because he represented everything I wanted in terms of my career/life and yet never seemed fulfilled or happy. After Mark and my many words across the cowboy landscape, we came to opposite conclusions: as a hopeless romantic and risk-taker, Mark (who finally seemed younger to me) felt strongly it was time for a visit. But I disagreed because I am neither of those things when it comes to that man. Maybe when I was younger, I had those kinds of balls with him... but these days, I'll take my risks with crazy whitewater because there are fewer emotions involved. An hour later than Mark expected, we arrived at the small airstrip by Mile 108. By my calculations, we should be back in Vancouver around 6 - close but still doable in terms of my flight. By now, several of us were going to burst if we didn't find a restroom (or stoop to going in the shrubbery). Fortunately, someone in the hanger found an open lavatory. Within 10 minutes we were rolling down the runway, Mark And Tamar giving us full-moon salutes goodbye. Indeed, this probably explains why I wasn't teary-eyed for long. As with the flights in, our party returned in 2 planes: a 6-seater (mine) and a 4-seater (which included Barb). Having eaten little for lunch, I was now sugar-low freaky. Making matters worse, the flight was INSANELY bumpy for the first 45 minutes (total time in the air about 90) and I was closing my eyes for extended periods of time to talk myself down. Our pilot was a young woman who looked barely older than most of my juniors - despite 8 years of licensure. For 30 minutes, we flew over flat lowlands dotted with lots of lakes and/or wetlands, and some hill-covered forested areas with LOTS of clear-cutting. Next, the HUGE and unmistakable Fraser River canyon appeared, a dry brown gash down the land. After this point, we flew over increasingly rockier and snow/glacier-covered mountains - the turbulence ironically diminishing. It's funny because if you'd asked me at the time which flight featured better mountain views, I would have said the second... but now, being cogent and having both sets of pictures to compare, I definitely would say the first. This flight, though, definitely featured more green meadows and visible hiking trails... whereas the first in was dominated by inhospitable snow and ice. Indeed, most of what we flew over during the last 20 minutes of mountain scenery was Garibaldi National Park. During the last 10 minutes of the flight (i.e. after passing over/by most of the mountains), we flew over Whistler proper - decent views of the popular Squamish rock climbing area. Shortly thereafter, Mt. Baker came into view, distantly towering above the Vancouver skyline. There was definitely a strong sense of fall in the air, though: the long shadows of the clearly-shorter day shimmering off the water and in between the islands and peninsular land. Indeed, it was about 5:45 as we started circling for landing. I was nervously thinking about all my next moves, most concerned that - as with my arrival - there would be another 60-90 minute customs line to deal with that could threaten my flight home. Sadly, the smaller second plane arrived JUST as my taxi drove up and I was unable to say real goodbyes to everyone - Barb, in particular. I'm still hoping she'll forgive me for that necessity. In the end, I made it to the international terminal around 6:10, faced a 15-minute customs line, and was enjoying a banana, croissant, and super-large

Chai by 7:00. Although the flight was short and there were too many obnoxious teenagers with some sort of east coast accent (all returning from an Alaska cruise), our flight attendant was the funniest and most efficient Alaska Airlines staff member I've encountered to date. As expected, my mother was about 20 minutes late and had no idea how to use any of the automatic parking pay stations as we left.



Left to Right: flight to Vancouver (top) plains, Fraser, hills; (bottom) NOT Chilko Lake, Coast Range, Garibaldi

Over the next week, I had 1 very specific task: to organize 10 years of my dad's hard-copy photographs, many still in their original developing envelopes (albeit labeled well). Notably, the pictures - when stacked on end - reached about 12 feet. Although challenging at times, I came to several realizations: some good (i.e. that he had definitely enjoyed himself and seen a LOT after retiring at 55) and some troubling (i.e. that long hikes ended around 1997, coinciding with troubling and visible weight gain). During the last couple years of his life, too, he had begun organizing many of his beloved photographs into detailed album reports - with completed collections devoted to the Swiss Alps, Japan, and the Colorado Plateau. Although I'll never be able to get inside his head enough to adequately complete this task, I do know that he understood my efforts with these reports and was a serious writer and photographer himself.

I Wish I Didn't Want To Quit You (But I Do!) - Canadian Rockies, August 2007

In initially choosing this trip, I was motivated by several factors: to celebrate my 40th birthday (hopefully, as nicely as on last year's Chilko), to check out this particular company (another new group for me) because they ran a unique Tibet trip I have been thinking about, to visit Lake Louise, to visit the Burgess Shale, and to see some places from Brokeback Mountain. In mid-July, however, insufficient people had signed up. At first, the company wanted me to move to an earlier offering - but work made this impossible. Next, they wanted me to move to a different style trip (promising it was guaranteed to run with 6 participants) that did only front-country, multi-sport things. Unfortunately, having not enjoyed my multi-sport Futaleufu trip, I spent several days emailing the company with LOTS of questions. In the end, I would be lying if I said I was 100% committed to this trip - particularly given such favorable responses to Italy and Wilderness Travel. But it was too late to bail - despite this ebbing sense that I probably should have.



Left to Right: Kicking Horse River in Yoho National Park, near the end of Parker's Ridge, Mt. Athabasca

August 24, 2007 - Introduction and to Calgary

The key reason I didn't bail, though, was that this trip was cheap - both the tour price (because it was all car-camping) and the airfare. My easy flight to Calgary involved an hour flight to Seattle, an hour layover, and a 90-minute flight to Calgary. The latter was especially spectacular, featuring gorgeous views of the Picket Range (southern and northern, with Luna Peak soaring between) and stupendous Mt. Assiniboine. Arriving around 3 p.m., I easily cleared customs, retrieved my bag (a miracle after the last 2 trips of lost luggage), and found the hotel shuttle area (which we were to use on our own). After 40 minutes (and 2 calls to the hotel), my ride arrived and, within 15 minutes, I was at the hotel. Fortunately, the place was not a dive. Unfortunately, within an hour Bryan was calling me with potentially devastating news: the ultra-cold freezer with all my

irreplaceable research specimens just went down and the best our physical plant could do (given that it was Friday and 5 p.m.) was temporarily install some sub-optimal part that may or may not last over the weekend... after which a real service appointment could be made with the manufacturer. Even though things were ultimately managed, this situation exacerbated my stress level for the next week (until I reached Bryan once again). Shortly thereafter, I was in the lobby - the meeting area for our pre-trip discussion - along with at least another full group. After sorting things out, our team headed to a small meeting room by the hotel restaurant. Although the original trip literature suggested this dinner was "on our own," we were fed well... all 12 of us (with another person still on her way). Indeed, promises of a small group were NOT met on this trip. Making matters worse, 8 members of our party were German - with only 2 able to converse in English. Of those remaining, 4 were British... and then there was me. The other interesting fact - discovered 5 days in - was that 2 German couples won this trip via some sporting event raffle. Sadly, none of them had appropriate gear or much/any experience with camping and, honestly, all suffered stoically through much of this trip. The other Germans (a mother/daughter pair and 2 solo male travelers) seemed more comfortable with hiking but, again, lacked significant experience and/or camping equipment. Meanwhile, all the Brit's (1 couple, 1 solo female traveler, 1 solo male traveler) were appropriately prepared. To my surprise (because I'd paid for a single supplement), I was informed that Clare (the solo female Brit) was my assigned tent-mate. Oddly, we were not hotel roommates... meaning somebody had things right - but the tent/gear people had no clue (and the soonest another tent could be delivered was day 3). Not surprisingly (since people on my Italy trip warned me about this company's leadership choices), our single guide for this trip was a 22-year-old female (bilingual in English and German). Much as I wanted to enjoy and respect her, there simply are things you don't know and can't do or manage well at that age... especially with 13 people who don't speak all the same language, and/or have the same abilities and expectations. Mostly, though, I felt sorry for our leader because her level of responsibility was insane and no company should run trips like this with so little staffing/support.



Left to Right: (top) the beast, Banff camp unloading and kitchen; (bottom) Clare and our well-erected tent, Banff hiking

August 25, 2007 - Calgary to Banff

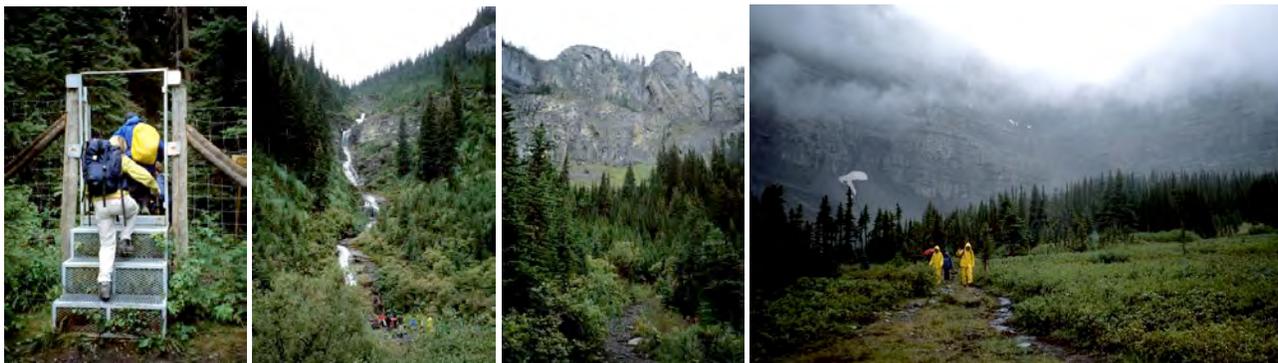
After a pleasant but disjointed breakfast in the hotel restaurant (i.e. the Germans were at 1 table, the Brits/me/leader at another), we piled into my (and many people's) bane on this trip: the 14-person van with trailer. I don't know about other states, but Oregon outlawed 14+ passenger vans (in terms of state use/motor pools) several years ago because of rollover issues. Although I never felt unsafe, the HUGE van drove me batty all week... and frustrated many Germans. After a couple days, the seating situation became: Brits up front and Germans in the back. Although I began near the front, I felt obligated to share the back seat with a prize-winning couple. If I had been German - I honestly would have felt second-class on this trip... given the van, the focus on English first... After loading belongings into the trailer and boarding the beast, we headed down the road to Wal-Mart (yes, WAL-MART... UGH) so half the party could buy missing gear: sleeping mattresses, waterproof clothing/raingear, flashlights... Several days into the trip, I noticed all the rudimentary sleeping bags (mostly hanging in the sun to dry); we're talking thin, cotton floral prints... cheap things parents buy their kids for slumber parties. After an hour, we were off again... passing near downtown Calgary and then onto the main highway - the Rockies visible in the distance. En route, our leader insisted on this peculiar drive-thru tour of Canmore (we're talking: get off the highway, drive the short length of town, continue to Banff). To this day, I have NO idea why we made this ridiculous stop. I was also not moved by much of what we'd seen to this point, with everything highly developed: too many roads, train tracks, buildings. We'd even been warned that trains audibly passed by nearly all our campsites, blowing horns at all hours (indeed, this was the case). Anyway, we arrived at the large and busy Banff campground around 3; Banff proper was 20-30 minutes away on foot. The only good thing about the facilities: RV's were segregated to the lower area, tents upper. Unfortunately, our neighbors (rednecks and college kids) were loud, rude, and obnoxious. Between the trains and the people, we didn't get a lot of sleep - although the Banff camp was THE WORST (by a long shot). The campgrounds did include shower facilities with electrical outlets (our group was the ONLY one lacking blow-dryers and curling irons); every night, the female college students were down there primping - heading into bars in town. Thankfully, every 4-6 sites also shared a 3-walled structure with a wood stove for cooking and eating when it rained (note - I did NOT say "if"). Fortunately, though, it was sunny when we arrived and erected our tents. The company provided so-so Eureka tents: fairly roomy, reasonable quality, but a little flaccid to the point that if you

didn't erect them well, the rain would find its way inside (as was the case with many Germans). Although we were provided with foam pads, packing additional mattresses was recommended. Given my solitary habits, I was pleased that Clare (whom I stuck with all week), was a superb tent-mate - not surprising as she was a 50-something veterinarian who lived alone (never married, no kids) in small town Britain. Given similar sleeping patterns, we seldom got in each others' ways. Although we also shared a similarly wicked sense of humor, Clare was fitter, more stylish, and much cuter than me. Lunch (i.e. sandwiches) that first day was prepared and eaten in camp (in contrast with other days when we ate in transit). As well-stated in the trip literature, everything relating to meals was a group chore; unfortunately, this became an increasingly problematic element of the trip because, simply put, some people never helped (while a few key people were involved with every meal). Over time, some individuals hogged things like hot water (e.g. filling entire thermoses without re-boiling more for people still eating breakfast). Consequently, our leader was left doing endless work 1-3 hours extra every day because she let others walk all over her. Indeed, even I slacked off when I noticed others getting away with doing little to nothing in the kitchen. But that first day, most people were on good behavior. After lunch, we proceeded to our afternoon hike: originally, a flat hike along Lake Minnewanka. However, recent grizzly altercations shut down said trail. Instead, we basically walked a crazy trail along the Bow River to Banff - the first quarter mile descended super-steep loose-rock chutes; the second bushwhacked gullies along the river's edge; the middle sections were all over the board; and the final section scrambled along and then up all these wild slopes to the major road between the famous luxury inn and Banff proper. Indeed, several of us were wondering what the rest of the hiking was going to look/feel like (in fact, all other trails on this trip were decent). Once we arrived in Banff, our leader somehow thought we wanted to go shopping and run around the town for 2-3 hours. Fortunately, like-minded Clare and I walked back to camp via the main road because we wanted to clean up and relax. I found Banff strangely sprawling and very domestic; in addition to the super-rich homes by the river and the trendy (but under construction) main street, there were a surprising number of middle class neighborhoods, schools, etc. Not even close to charming... as I had imagined.



Left to Right: riverside views, rapids section/waterfall under Banff Inn (third shot), main street in Banff (under construction)

Half the group returned an hour early (paying to ride a public bus), the rest walking as planned. Dinner was ready within the hour - albeit in near darkness. Indeed, most days ran too late - with dinners and clean-up rushed and chaotic. I did not like this because I do not enjoy feeling stressed and hungry at the end of the day, and because I did question how well things were being washed/put away given that we were in grizzly country. While most campgrounds visibly embraced bear issues (e.g. signs, bear-proof garbage containers), the level of enforcement was nil (e.g. all our neighbors left nightmarish levels of food and alcohol out - nobody official patrolling the area). Of course, both our neighbors were also up yelling, playing music, and shooting firecrackers DEEP into the night. Only the rain, which started between 1-3, shut them up.



Left to Right: Bourgeau trailhead gate, falls (about 2.5 miles in), limestone, meadows by lake (note raincoats)

August 26, 2007 - Bourgeau Lake Hike

Although the rain diminished a tiny bit, we ate breakfast and prepared lunch in the shelter - drizzly clouds moving across the skies. Today's hike to Bourgeau Lake was 10 miles/2500 feet; a 1-2 mile trail to some pass/peak above the lake was an optional extension. A couple comments about hiking policies on this trip that were different from all other companies I've used: given only 1 guide, hiking on this trip was on-your-own. Indeed, our leader turned us loose completely (i.e. didn't join us at all) a couple days. There were/are at least 2 drawbacks to this style: the potential for decreased safety (bears, getting lost, the assumption that everyone knew what they were doing) and clients abusing the system (this happened a couple times - with the German mother/daughter pair going off and doing their own variation, knowingly showing up late, causing everyone to wait). After having 3 guides and 2 different hiking options every day in Italy, I obviously prefer that system. Like I said,

though: you get what you pay for. This was a cheap trip... so who needs a guide? Anyway - the nondescript trailhead for Bourgeau was 10 miles west of Banff. After parking, we passed through this elaborate gate; indeed, Canada basically fences off areas along the highways (presumably to prevent animals from getting slaughtered). As compared with Jasper (which I preferred - and not just because our weather there was better), southern Banff/Yoho was thickly sylvan, the treeline MUCH lower. As is well-established, I am not a big fan of sloggng through endless trees... and less so when combined with a rainy day. Thus, today sucked... which is sad because it was my birthday (oh well - karmic payback for last year's sunny day). Of the 5 miles UP, 4 were in trees, the moss so substantial that, yes, you KNEW it must rain a LOT in these parts. While the first 3 were moderately steep, the 4th was super-steep, and the final was meadow. As usual, I pulled up the rear with the British couple - the closest to my pace, and great company. Given dynamic mist, occasional views to higher limestone formations were alright... but, at no point, was there any visibility epiphany or mind-blowing scenery. At the lake, what had been a light drizzle turned into a constant shower. Half the party (including me), called it quits and began descending. The rest continued higher, with all making it 1 mile up to some zero-visibility pass. The German mother/daughter then continued with 1 of the Brit's (who had a LOT of outdoor experience), vehemently insisting they were going up the peak despite being unable to see/find the trail. Meanwhile, the rest of us waited in the van 2 hours; again, I want to reiterate the problem of letting people wander guide-free through unfamiliar terrain (no map, visibility, common sense, or respect for others). Although we all did hit the road by 5, there was still a ton of stuff on the itinerary before we would be back in camp eating. While half the group went for a soak at the developed Banff Hot Springs (for an additional fee), our leader spent 2 hours shopping for the next 3 nights of food. After warming up around the grocery's rotisserie chicken unit, he rest of us (me included) walked the streets (in the rain) in search of a coffee house (and, you guess it: we settled on Starbucks). After finally regrouping, we were not eating dinner until 9 (in the shelter as it was dark and pouring rain). Notably, we had to actively clear out the college students, who had set up an inflatable bed inside the shelter (probably the rotating fuck area, Clare and I agreed), amidst massive quantities of food and booze strewn everywhere. Although I did get a cake and some birthday singing, I probably won't remember the 40th fondly (or, hopefully, for long). And thus Clare and I crawled - soaking wet - into the tent for night of solid rain.



Left to Right: the town of Lake Louise, first views of Lake Louise and Mt. Victoria/Victoria Glacier

August 27, 2007 - To Yoho National Park via Lake Louise

The next morning, we packed up and headed west, taking the "more scenic" Bow Valley Parkway (in my opinion, a waste of time). In contrast with trip literature (which suggested we were going to Yoho and hiking by Emerald Lake), most of the day was spent at Lake Louise - our first stop at the town (mostly - to fill the van up). Clare and I enjoyed hot drinks, yogurt, and - in my case - a savory tofu pasty. We then continued driving up the hill to Lake Louise proper (10 minutes from town). Although the weather was not great, we could see hints of Mt. Victoria across the blue-green water. And, praise the lord, it was not raining OR snowing (yet). Today's short hike, straight from the big luxury inn (where my parents officially honeymooned), was Lake Agnes (4.4 miles, 1300 feet) - with the Beehive (another 1 mile, 400 feet) being the optional extension. This popular trail was initially paved, climbing along the right side of the lake. Although it was sunny for a few moments during the first switchbacks, the emerging rain turned into a wicked driving snow (seriously). I made it 1.5 miles up before I had it - what was the point? Neither my pack nor my shoes had dried out from yesterday. And so I headed down by myself, meeting up with a woman on a lodge-to-lodge Smithsonian Institutes tour; we enjoyed a lovely discussion about Venice. Ah Venice - how much I missed Italy at that moment in time. By the time I reached the lake, though, it was sunny (perhaps it had been all along - we'd just been in a nasty cloud up higher). Miraculously (given the crowds), I found a quiet, empty bench along the shore. There, I spread out all my damp gear (which finally dried), ate my lunch, and fully enjoyed the sunny stillness.



Left to Right: views looking down/across from the hike, poppies by the inn, the inn, the canoe rental hut

Eventually, I explored the inn - but I wasn't impressed. The place can house 1000 guests and charges \$300/night. Everyone returned fairly close together, with no reports of the German mother/daughter doing anything silly. Leaving Lake Louise around 4, we drove 50 miles into British Columbia - just past Field in Yoho National Park (most famous for the Burgess Shale).

Visiting said formation requires many things, however: a strenuous hike, arrangements with a park guide, a fee. Thus, our group was not going to visit the Burgess Shale. Although I could have campaigned harder to convince my team-mates it was worth the effort and money, I did not; even so, not seeing it remains a disappointment. The other complicating factor was that the only day to see it (i.e. tomorrow) was also the only day available for the Kicking Horse River (another extra-cost side-trip several of us wanted to do). As rafting used a local outfitter, we camped on their private property tonight and tomorrow. After all the insanity in Banff, our pretty camp along the Kicking Horse was a serious relief - train sounds notwithstanding.



Left to Right: Yoho camp on rafting outfitter's land, camp views down and up the Kicking Horse River

August 28, 2007 - Rafting the Kicking Horse, LOTS of Downtime

Although today was relaxing and necessary, I - in hindsight - should have gone on the hike. Things were more complicated than usual because the group split up (5 rafting, 3 doing a long hike, 6 a short hike) and our leader had to make an emergency trip back to the Banff because someone had accidentally left their tent. Thus, the long-hikers were dropped off near Takakkaw Falls around 9, the plan being that they would thru-hike the Iceline (8-mile/2300 feet) and be picked up at Emerald Lake between 5-6. Meanwhile, our leader would find the tent in Banff, return for lunch, and take the short-hikers out (I'm not sure where). In researching the rafting outfitter before the trip, I was not sure what our plan was - as the company ran a couple options on the Kicking Horse. Our leader could only say that the guides would arrive between 10-12. Given the late season and low water, my (accurate) feeling was that we were only going to do the upper half. Although I enjoyed sleeping in until 9:30, I did grow bored over time. At noon, several staff (cooks and guides) appeared - along with 18 other clients (who had signed up independently). To the chagrin of the hungry short hike folks (our leader still not back from Banff), us rafters were treated to a spectacular barbecue... although, even at the time, I joked with Clare (who had never rafted before): they're just buttering us up because the whitewater sucks. Next, the outfitters loaned everyone full wetsuits, fleece, splash jackets, AND booties. Although the group was large, we fit comfortably in 3 boats of 7-8. To my surprise (after the Futaleufu), this outfitter used non-ghetto paddle-assist boats (i.e. 6 paddlers in front, with the oarsman seated on a REAL metal/wood frame designed specifically for the rearmost area of the raft). Even so, our oarsman did everything; I thought the minimal paddling he ordered was mostly to amuse us. Like I told Ginnie (who has paddled the whole Kicking Horse in high water), this was my first one-day raft trip and, although it had a couple neat rapids, it was lame and convinced me that I need to stay away from short rafting venues. Our total time/mileage on the river was 90 minutes/12 miles: a few class 2's, and 1 decent class 4 (a rocky technical feature). Although the highway and railroad tracks were near the river at all times, you didn't always see them. Incidentally, the name "Kicking Horse" refers to an event (a horse kicking some historic man) - NOT the disposition of the river (although lower sections are supposed to be killer in high water). After being picked up in a school bus, we were back in camp in 20 minutes. After the other clients left, I enjoyed a hot shower - nice because I was feeling run down and terribly congested. Just as I was sitting down to dry my hair in the sun, our leader began gathering everyone up to visit Emerald Lake and pick up the long-hikers. To her dismay, 3 of us (including me) passed on going up - probably good (for us) in light of what happened. As suggested, the German mother/daughter did their own thing, leaving the route to explore, and made no effort to respect the pick-up time. After an hour of waiting, our leader hiked up some trail and found them. But no one returned to camp until nearly 9. Unfortunately, those of us in camp had not been told what to cook; had we been, we would have prepared the entire dinner. Needless to say, it was a sort of strange and frustrating evening... and you know who got stuck washing dishes.



Left to Right: Natural Bridge over the beautiful upper upper Kicking Horse, train in the Spiral Tunnel, Peyto Lake

August 29, 2007 - Icefields Parkway to Wilcox Creek Campground

Today was mostly about driving to Wilcox Creek along the Icefields Parkway. Our target camp, the least developed site we used on this trip, was first-come-first-serve and so we had to get there early. Because of last night's Emerald Lake problems, though, several little things had been skipped. And our leader seemed determined today to cram in as much as humanly possible... which drove me (and the folks in the back of the van) batty because there were WAY too many stops (each involving dumping the van, a 5-10 minute look/see, and then cramming back in). Although I really didn't grow up doing

stereotypical "bad family road trips," I think today's craziness must be what that's like. Prior to entering the Icefields Parkway, stops included, in order: Natural Bridge (on the truly upper section of the Kicking Horse - pretty, geologically interesting), Spiral Tunnel (circuitous tunnels that relieve the grade en route to Kicking Horse Pass - after waiting 20 minutes, the scheduled train arrived and could be seen winding up and through the forested hillside), and the town of Lake Louise (where, thankfully, I received word from Bryan that the freezer situation was under control - although he laughed heartily when he heard I was wearing 4 layers of clothing, including a down jacket). From near Lake Louise, we headed due north up the lower Banff section of the Icefields Parkway. Unfortunately, I grew hungry (as we never made a formal lunch stop) and can't recall all the places we stopped. Insanely crowded Peyto Lake was the longest. By the end, half the van simply stopped getting out. Some promising things, though: the weather was improving and the terrain was more open and alpine (and it wasn't just that we were getting higher... the entire feeling of the land was different... and I liked it more than I was expecting). Overlooking the parkway, Wilcox Creek Campground was pleasant and quiet (NO TRAINS). Thus, it was sad we only stayed here 1 night. Although there were no flush toilets or showers, there was a shelter for cooking/eating with a wood-burning stove. But, as usual, our leader was determined to get us hiking after setting up our tents. Parker's Ridge (3 miles/700 feet) was 10 minutes south down the road and, despite cold and blustering winds, we went up there. Even though I was skeptical of this hike so late in the day, I did enjoy the trip: no monotonous forest - just open meadows and alpine tundra - and so we reached the ridge easily for surprisingly nice views of mountains and glaciers. I think the whole hike took 2 hours, meaning we were back for dinner by 5 - a miraculously welcome luxury after the last several days of dark, rushed suppers.



Left to Right: (top) Wilcox Creek shelter/kitchen; (bottom) Parker Ridge hike shots, including Saskatchewan Glacier

August 30, 2007 - Wilcox Pass Thru-Hike, the BEST Hike

After waiting and waiting for good weather, it finally came. Most sources I found (accurately) said Wilcox Pass (our thru-hike version being 8 miles/2500 feet) was the best hike we'd be doing on this trip. Unfortunately, most people (lacking a shuttle system) only do a shorter in/out hike from Wilcox Creek. In contrast, we drove north 15 minutes; at this big curve, we stopped at this obscure parking lot on the left side (Tangle Ridge, I believe). Although there were glaciated mountains to the north and west, I don't recall signs or a pit toilet; even the trail (across the road) didn't have signs and was indistinct for the first 500 feet. I was determined to hike with fast Clare all day - a challenge given that I was still feeling run-down. My lungs occasionally burning, the climb to the first meadow was steep. To the south, Wilcox Pass was obvious - although it's hard to call it a real pass... it is more like a LONG high plateau with many summits. Halfway to the second level section, we ate half our lunches. We were the second party in our long, strung-out group; even German mother/daughter were behind us, likely aware we would be watching them - keeping them in line (given that our leader was not even on the trail!).



Left to Right: trailhead view, climbing first pass after first lunch spot, high tundra at first pass

After eating, Clare and I huffed up to the first pass. In the distance, though, we saw a higher pass, deflating what had been my ambitious pace. At some point during this climb, the German mother/daughter overcame us - although they stayed with us a good hour thereafter. Even though our leader told us there would be a LONG middle section, even I was surprised how extensive and rolling this huge plateau was: definitely alpine tundra, reminding me of the Brooks range. Most memorable,

however, was the completely howling wind that picked up once we reached the second level area. Although I cannot say it was that freezing (i.e. I added only a medium top - but kept hiking in shorts), it was bracing - both physically and in terms of being colder. At some point, we came to a big rocky field where the trail vanished save a few short cairns. Here, we began meeting hiking parties coming from the other direction.



Left to Right (top) pass 2 climb, looking back, rocky section; (bottom) right peak, left peak, south peak from mid-tundra

After a minor descent to what had likely been a pond a week before, and a short ascent to another pass, we came to the final flat area before the big descent to the trailhead. Here, I found a few willows where I could take a pee and change the old pad (given that, as usual, I started my period). Within 10 minutes, we arrived at this lush, green meadow: Zen-like boulders, marshy ponds reflecting the intensely blue sky, views across the valley to Mt. Athabasca and the Columbia Icefield. Despite all that icy grandeur, though, I took a strange liking to Nigel Peak - this pointy, rocky thing that looked like it was made of discrete layers like a topographical map. Several parties doing the in/out hike only were distantly visible, gathering around 3-4 bighorn sheep grazing out among some boulders. Here, German mother/daughter left the trail - obviously following the others and the sheep. Hungry for lunch number 2, Clare and I found a rocky windbreak and ate the rest of our packed food.



Left to Right: (top) me and Clare, Athabasca, final meadow; (bottom) Nigel Peak(?), Clare and lunch 2, descending

It was 1:30 when we began down. In retrospect, we should have lingered more. Thinking about the descent now, it took hardly any time - although it was steep and we stopped frequently to let incoming hikers pass. For being almost September, Clare and I were impressed how green it still was (particularly after the gold/dying meadows on Parker's Ridge). After passing a trail repair crew chopping brush and trees, we hiked just 10 minutes to the parking lot. Sadly, everyone who had opted out of today's hike (i.e. BOTH prizewinning couples) were just sitting in the van with our leader (and had been the last 5 hours). I

figured they would have done SOMETHING (e.g. visit the Athabasca, do a shorter hike)... but, no, they just sat there. Given that Clare and I were the second ones down, we sat likewise for 90 minutes (the last party arriving an hour longer than the leader's anticipated hiking time). Indeed, I felt strongly that most hiking expectations on this trip were harder than the trip rating suggested (e.g. high easy to low moderate). Granted, I have never traveled with this company... but their ratings of comparable trips I'd done with other groups were the same (e.g. both rated the TMB strenuous, which I agreed with).



Left to Right: (top) Athabasca Glacier, Mt. Kitchener, Wilcox trailhead; (bottom) Athabasca snout area, Athabasca Falls

A key reason others had not visited Athabasca Glacier, though, was that our leader would be taking us all there. Indeed, trip literature suggested that interested people could even book a trip ON the glacier (i.e. pay to ride a snow vehicle high onto the ice and then run around for 30 minutes - with tracks visible from Wilcox Pass). In reality, this option was not feasible on our trip. After regrouping, we drove 15-20 minutes down to the insane Athabasca Glacier viewing area, hiking 10-20 minutes up to the snout - where a roped-off area was available for walking (as in on the dirty gray, exposed ice). Not surprisingly, a few people in our group left the official area. Although the whole Athabasca area was nuts and campy, I did enjoy walking on the ice in my Chaco's (which I believe was a first for them). The rest of the day was 100% frustrating - representing major steps backwards. Our ultimate goal was a campground in Jasper, 70 miles north. Mind you, it was 4:30 when we hit the road. Once again, the drive was interrupted by silly, piddly stops - initiated by our leader and the pushy German mother. The biggest was Athabasca Falls, where - thankfully - we narrowly missed a flood of Japanese tourists. When we FINALLY arrived in Jasper, our leader turned us loose downtown while she spent 2 hours shopping. Famished, I had to be hauled away from KFC (Mmmm - fried chicken); instead, Clare and I blew an hour in a coffee shop (where I did eat a HUGE piece of pie and potato chips) and another hour in a sporting goods store. Sufficed it to say, I bitchy, sweaty, dirty, tired, and poorly nourished. It was after 8 when we pulled into camp. After erecting the tent, Clare sent me off to shower (as she detected I was beyond disgusted) while she helped with dinner; when I was done, we traded positions. In the end, we ate burgers and chips in the dark. I don't remember when it started raining that night - but I know it did... and it was significantly colder.



Left to Right: downtown Jasper, stable/horses, Clare being her charmingly silly self and killing time at the stables

August 31, 2007 - Day Off With the Horses

According to trip literature, today offered many choices: hiking by Maligne Lake (30 miles away), trail riding (by Pyramid Lake), or sailing. For a few days, Clare and I had discussed that we both wanted to go riding (which, like all non-hiking options, cost extra). Given our late arrival last night, though, our leader seemed taken aback when we reminded her we were interested in that option (i.e. now she had to make arrangements). A major surprise, in my opinion, was that riding option people would just be dropped off in downtown Jasper at 9:30 the next morning - expected to either pay for a cab or walk 2 miles to the stables. Because our ride (the longest 3-hour option) didn't begin until 1, this also meant we had to (AGAIN) blow a couple hours in town (i.e. more pie and another run to the sporting goods store). Clare and I elected to walk, despite overcast skies and a few sprinkles. Within 10 minutes, we ran out of sidewalk - walking briefly on a curvy paved road through thin forest (and startling a few drivers as they rounded corners). Within 15 minutes, we found an actual trail that took us through the woods to the stables. Although I don't consider myself a seasoned rider, I have done enough riding to appreciate how spectacular these facilities were - cowboys, service, horses, everything. For the first time on this trip, we enjoyed a small group (YIPEE) - SOOOO pleasant after SOOOO many days feeling crowded. Both our lead and rear cowboy guides were enthusiastic females who made the most effort to teach riding skills of anyone I've worked with. Half the ride was easy with so-so forest and lake views; the other half was moderate to difficult, climbing steep rocky terrain where I appreciated what riding experience I had. Our summit view featured a decent view up the valley - which would have been fantastic had it not been overcast. But, amazingly, it didn't rain until the last 10 minutes. Given that we weren't done until 4:45, Claire and I never dreamed we'd be waiting 2 hours outside for our leader to show up... particularly given that we all voted to enjoy dinner in town and made reservations for 6 p.m. Unfortunately, the stables closed up shop - leaving us under this open shelter with a fire and lots of wood. Claire and I did entertain each other the whole time - mostly making lewd comments about the regional rodeo publication (several copies piled by the fire). When our trip leader finally showed up, it was useless to even wonder what made everyone late as this was pretty much a natural event on this trip. Although the pizza-oriented restaurant/bar received good reviews from the guides, I didn't think it was anything to write home about. For some reason, our leader had been hoping we were all going to want to hang out at the bar after dinner (something about live music). Given the events of the day, though, over half the group wanted to return to camp to catch up on sleep. I was not surprised - particularly given that it was a dark deluge by the time we all climbed into the van.



Left to Right: Jasper bus/train station, hotel views in Edmonton

September 2, 2007 - Escape

That night, I slept like hell and my health took a serious downturn, including a third bout of coughing up green. Many times, I awoke half-feverish or half-chilled, feeling distressingly like I did in Europe/2004 with pneumonia. Making matters more interesting, today was a natural breakpoint: some people were ending and heading home (I don't know how they booked this option as it was not presented to me); most others were heading down the Athabasca River in canoes for 4 days of wilderness camping (including being joined by another group, the total up to an astonishing 19 - ARGH). After discussing this with the leader, the bottom line for me was the weather... because 4 days of rain plus these activities were not going to improve my health. And so I elected to be dropped off at the bus/train station in Jasper, where I easily changed my flights over the phone (leaving tomorrow), and enjoyed a 5-hour ride to Edmonton. Our trip leader made sure the company contact in Edmonton would pick me up and take me to a hotel that night (which they booked but I paid for). Although the first 30 minutes were scenic, everything then became flat and thick with trees until Edson. This region corresponded exactly with the area they were paddling (i.e. I felt I was missing nothing). The other thing that didn't impress me here or throughout the trip was how damn much the locals smoked. In all my travels, I have honestly never seen so many smokers (despite visiting Argentina, Germany, and Italy... NONE came close to Canada). Who'd have thought Alberta would offend me this much? Our driver epitomized this trend with his pre-stop call (stated at ALL of the 7 stops we made): this stop will be 5 minutes so get your cigarettes out. At the bus station in downtown Alberta, I was graciously picked up and taken to the Marriott (the company's cheaper alternative was full). There, I enjoyed the following: a fabulous view over the river/city, awesome bath, room service dinner, warm bed, and - the next morning - a splendid buffet breakfast. Although the company did their best to provide a voucher for the local airport shuttle service, the driver would not honor the piece of paper I was given - and so I forked out \$20 US for a ride to the surprisingly distant airport. I LOVED the small and pleasant Edmonton airport - and my 2-hour flight home was scenic and roomy (the plan barely half-way full).

Closing Thoughts

As stated at the beginning of this report, I was openly testing out this company because they ran a unique Tibet trip I have been thinking about. Unfortunately, so does Wilderness Travel - who vastly exceeded my expectations on their Italy/Dolomite trip earlier this summer. Having said that, though, this company did have some merits: low cost, more group interaction potential, a decent range of multi-sport activities (although all cost extra, this company facilitated everything well), definitely filling every day with activities (and mostly following their advertised itinerary), and - at least on the surface - a lot of exotic and remote destinations (although I would not call Alberta one of them). In terms of things I did not like about this trip, half were things that were company decisions, the other half were beyond the company's control. In terms of the latter, our shitty

weather was a strong negative factor. I also was completely disappointed with the level of development the Canadian Rockies: endless trains, buses, roads/highways, mega-lodges and HOARDES of people at every location, too many cities/towns sprawling every 20-50 miles, insane levels of smoking... Although I know there are backcountry trails beyond what we visited, there isn't - in my opinion - a lot of space between the roads and towns on the maps. Thus, I can only conclude that Alberta has sold its soul to tourism. In terms of things I think the company needs to improve: First, and I hate to say this (because, in an ideal world, such a situation sounds really nice): having such a strong language difference did more bad than good on this trip. Second, there were too many people, particularly given the mode of transportation. Also, too many people seemed ill-prepared for camping. Third, there should have been another guide and, honestly, our leader was too young and green for this group and itinerary. Although she REALLY tried to keep everyone happy and facilitate all the obligations of the itinerary, there were simply too many things going on, too many serious delays, and nearly every day was too busy (with too many dinners run chaotically and in the dark). I don't know whether the whole hiking-alone policy was a plus or a minus; given the liability issues travel companies deal with, I'm frankly shocked we were turned loose as such in grizzly country. Although the selfish German mother/daughter tended to suggest the policy was a minus, I could see it being a plus if the group and situation was different. I do know that the only merit to car-camping was saving money; however, in my mind, this was NOT worth it because most camps offered zero solitude and zero to mediocre views. Indeed, this style of trip probably turned many Germans off camping forever - which is sad because true wilderness camping can be sweet. Lastly (and like I said), I didn't see a goddamn thing from Brokeback Mountain. Oh well - it will be easy to quit the Canadian Rockies.



Left to Right: cabin view morning 2, me and Reid Glacier, "mom" and kayaks at Dundas Bay (note mosquito headnet)

Glacier Bay – It's NOT the Alsek – June 2010

For three big reasons, this report is going to be challenging to write: (1) I've been on the road for about six weeks now and Glacier Bay proper (the main tourist area, vs. the northern area, where I visited during my 2004 Alsek trip) was my first destination... and it feels VERY far away; (2) more recent destinations (e.g. Iceland) impressed me more; and (3) compared with my other trips to Alaska (like the Alsek), southern Glacier Bay couldn't hold a candle (although I knew that even when I was on the trip, fresh at the start of summer). This is not to say that this trip sucked... it just did not have the WOW factor of the Alsek or Iceland. And so I will do my best to write a fair, balanced, and accurate account. I should also say that I have tried to visit this part of Glacier Bay twice before – specifically via a kayak/camping trip run by Alaska Discovery/Mountain Travel Sobek (with whom I did the Alsek). Unfortunately, neither filled and were thus canceled. This year, I had been signed up for a big "Across the Alps" trip with Wilderness Travel (WT) – but this also failed to fill. Instead of canceling, I traded in for their/this cushy boat trip (with day-kayaking) to Glacier Bay and then Iceland (see separate report).



Left to Right: flying to and landing in Juneau, Gustavus old school luggage retrieval

June 19, 2010 – Getting to Gustavus/Bartlett Cove

After a little fussing (including canceling a flight between Portland and Seattle), I set out from Seattle (where Ellen and I had briefly visited my mother) for Gustavus – via Juneau. My mother dropped me off at the airport around noon – and the flight departed around 2. Although weather in both Washington and Oregon had been sucking (as it has much of this year), the situation once we cleared Washington was fantastic... meaning incredible views of the snowy coast range and fjords immediately north of Vancouver. This kept me and my camera busy during the entire 2-hour flight (showing great restraint, I included only 2 of my over-100 shots). At one point, I even saw the Devil's Thumb – the monolith made famous (at least to me) by Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. As with my previous landing in Juneau (during the Alsek trip), this one was exciting: mountains JUST to the right and left of the wings as we gently descended this long, impressive valley towards Alaska's capitol. I'm not sure what the deal is but – in contrast with access to other nearby towns (like Haines, which requires using a small regional company) – flying to equally TINY Gustavus can be done via Alaska Airlines on a large plane. I heard claims that some politician facilitated state-based pork subsidies to support this flight (which was MAYBE 25% full) because of some fondness (or maybe family dealings) with Gustavus, the tourist gateway to Glacier Bay. But I have not bothered to figure out what's going on and/or verify these claims. In any event, the same plane from Seattle continued on to Gustavus – 13 minutes

away. I did disembark during the 40-ish minute Juneau layover just to stretch the legs. Other than being on a big, empty plane, the flight to Gustavus felt like that to nearby Haines – we never got much above 5000 feet: low green hills, island-dotted waterways, and taunting glaciers spilling variously. Even though Gustavus' airstrip and airport were bigger, we were still in the middle of nowhere once we landed - 10 miles from "town" and 20 miles from the national park. Of course, I was also yelled at by some kind of security official for stepping off the tarmac path to take a picture of the plane. More amusing, the luggage retrieval system was a funny little shelf-window structure (maybe 15 feet wide, at the most) where airline workers threw bags as they were carted over from the plane... no moving carousel, no significant cover from inclement weather (not a problem today). Needless to say, this resulted in something of a clusterfuck – particularly because only about half the arriving group (including me) initially didn't understand the system and there were no announcements by the otherwise-officious airport staff. Making matters worse, I had also been immediately (as in – right after being yelled at) distracted by our WAY-too-energetic Glacier Bay bus driver, who was trying to organize his group (among at least 4 other pick-up organizations). But within 15 minutes, I had my luggage and was loaded onto a rafting-esque school bus – and we were heading 20 miles to the Glacier Bay visitor center and lodge complex at Bartlett Cove.



Left to Right: (top) visitor center and lodge complex, my room; (bottom) down by dock and bay (note "Boomer" research vessel)

All said and done, we arrived at the visitor center/lodge complex just before 6 p.m. For whatever reason, I LOVED the lodge facilities... even though they were a little 1970's in terms of design, style - and a little old/run-down (not to mention television-free). My room/cabin was a short boardwalk away – which was good because there was no easy way to move luggage other than to carry it (including up/down several short step sections). After unpacking a few relevant things and changing, I needed a walk – and proceeded down a short path to the beach and dock area. En route, I unfortunately failed to photograph a fascinating Tlingit trail marker depicting an octopus, a creature I seldom see stylized in Native American art. For some reason, the smell of the sea was a little surprising, given that all my other Alaska trips have pretty much been inland. Also, the number of boats at the dock or in the immediate bay was surprising. Two large boats were very conspicuous: one was another company's vessel that slept 40+ people, the other was the official park concession boat that took visitors on various daytrips (the longest being a \$200 all-day trip up the Tarr Inlet). Although I don't regret doing things the way I did them this time around, it was clear that one could see a lot via daytrips using park-affiliated services (including a kayak concession) for much less than we paid. There were also several private boats – including a couple I spoke with who were loading up for their weeklong vacation. Finally, our ship (the Sea Wolf) was obviously bobbing on the water as well – looking very much like the catalog picture. After exhausting the walking opportunities (under-whelmingly limited, frankly), I headed back to the lodge complex ready for dinner. Alas, I remain overall unimpressed with the dining facilities; the food was sufficient but the service was slow, unresponsive, and easily overwhelmed. After a too-long dinner (mostly waiting), I returned to my room and prepared for bed. I'm not sure when it got dark because I put on the sleeping mask around 9:30 – the room-cabin featuring these high windows that had no shades. Based on later impressions, it seemed fairly light until after 11 - then lightening again around 3.

June 20, 2010 – On the Boat: Geikie Inlet and Up the West Arm to Reid Glacier

The next morning, I enjoyed a decent breakfast buffet at the lodge around 7 – knowing that a lodge van would be taking our luggage to the dock around 7:45. Our group was 12 in number; 9 had stayed at the park lodge and were the first on board the ship, and the remaining 3 were staying back in Gustavus, arriving 10 minutes later. When I booked this trip, the WT agent made a point of telling me that – at the time – it was just me and 2 families (2 and 1 child, respectively). I'm not sure why WT felt the need to basically give me the option of bailing based on said information – although I have gone on at least one trip (August Middle Fork of the Salmon – multiple families with multiple kids under 11) where I might have bitten, had I been given the choice. Since I booked, though, 2 other couples also added – balancing out the child-free adults (so to speak). Given that this trip did not involve particularly hard-core activities, our group had no major issues functioning well (although the kids hoped I'd play with them more during ship downtime). The ship crew was nearly all women: the captain, cook (also the

owner), 2 guides/naturalists, and the go-for/helper. Only the engineer was male... oh – and the surprisingly nervous ship dog. We amassed in the dining room for an introduction and safety overview, all over some kind of banana-chocolate coffee cake. By 9, we were moving – making our way slowly (9-10 knots = max) north, up the Sitakaday Narrows. I, along with the family of four, was given a cabin on the top deck – meaning an interesting ladder just to get upstairs. I would describe the cabins as the same size as those that Allison and I shared in the Galapagos (i.e. tight for 2 but great for 1). The only differences: no diesel smell, bigger windows, and no bunk ladder. Knowing this was my room for the next 5 nights, I REALLY unpacked (we're talking – put stuff in the medicine cabinets, separated clothing into all the drawers...). Consequently, I was visibly upset when the lead guide knocked on my door and asked if I would be willing to change rooms with the parents because some mistake had been made regarding room assignments (something about the parents hoping to be RIGHT next to the kids... vs. around the corner). In the end, we agreed that it wasn't worth the fuss – and the kids (a boy/15 and a girl/14) would be fine (they were).



Left to Right: my cabin, salon, bridge

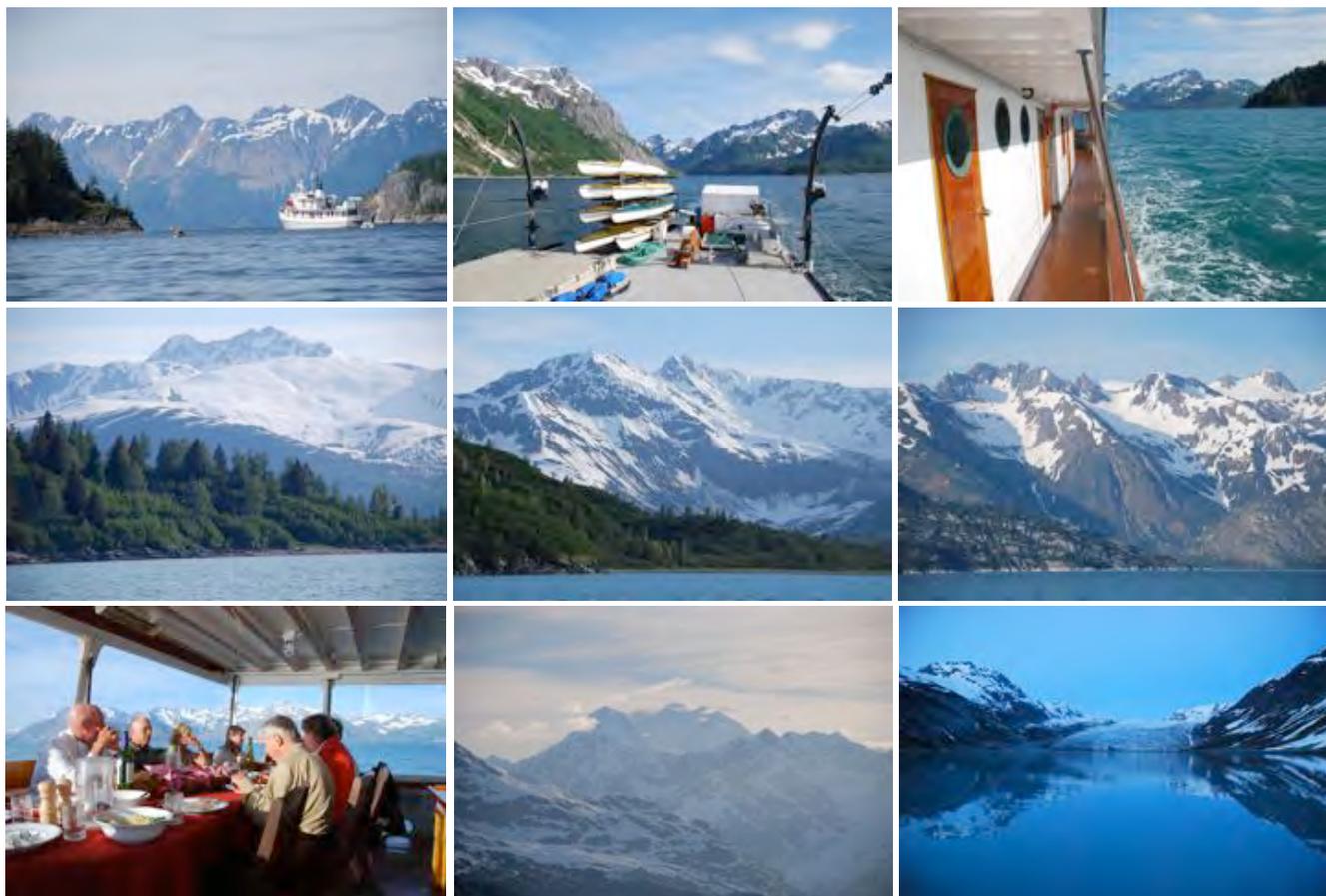
Today's actual itinerary deviated a little from the paper plans we received in advance. Originally, we were to kayak Geikie Inlet in the morning and then sail 4 hours to Reid Glacier, where we were going to do a short walk before dinner. Ultimately, we had lunch around 11 and kayaked for 4 hours after lunch. We didn't arrive at Reid until around 9 – and anchored there without going ashore (at least - not until tomorrow morning). One of the things that may surprise people (especially those who have been to the Galapagos) is that our ship anchored every night, meaning that all traveling was done during the day. While this meant you never missed any scenery, it did reduce the amount/extent of daily activities – not to mention how much of the park we saw. In any event, we enjoyed a fabulous lunch – although I think the ship owner/cook was not thrilled with my apparently confusing diet. Somehow, my pre-trip food statement (which read: "no fish, avoiding red meat") was interpreted as "vegetarian" – and so when I explained I would eat chicken, it seemed to exasperate her. Of course, several others (mostly the kids) made mid-stream dietary changes pretty much day (e.g. didn't like certain fish or vegetables) – and so I think the owner/cook was, in general, not generally enthusiastic with our picky habits. Of course, it is worth mentioning that the owner was not the usual cook; said individual took what sounded like a last-minute vacation. Nevertheless, the meals were fabulous and everyone was satisfied with the many options ultimately prepared.



Left to Right: (top) loading the sea kayaks, paddling, beach; (right) more beach shots, salty Pacific Silverweed/Potentilla

At around noon, we anchored in the first little thumb within Geikie Inlet (obvious on any park map). Just under half of us (me not included) had a fair bit of sea kayaking experience. In contrast with Allison and my Galapagos experience (where the stated sea kayaking opportunities were a joke!), I was entirely pleased with the sea kayaking options on this trip (3-4 hours nearly every day). The ship was outfitted with 7 double kayaks and 1 single. While the launching system was being lowered and prepared, the lead guide gave an overview about kayak procedures and safety. And then, of course, I was the first one who had to actually get in the kayak... which was no big deal – except that my issued spray skirt did not fit the boat. But this didn't matter because the weather was great... plus, I was carrying the big camera in a dry bag – and accessing that was

easier without the spray skirt. Anyway - today I was assigned boat #1 with the second guide – a woman I really liked because she was quiet, thoughtful, a former park ranger, and a current elementary teacher in the tiny school at Gustavus. After our launch, though, it took FOREVER to get everyone else in their boats and on the water. Honestly, I was also not a natural at using a double paddle – and I cannot say that I improved much during the course of this trip. Although I wasn't a lilly-dipper, I didn't sit up straight (and found the seats non-conductive to good posture) and I seemed to constantly splash water around. We paddled along the shore and up the little thumb, enjoying low-tide views of all the rocks with their algae, mussels, and other sea-life. Another odd feature of this trip was the park rule about maximum party sizes when making landings; specifically, you could land with 12 but no more. Because we were technically 14 (with the guides), we had to split up – one group landing on one side of the thumb beach, the other group on the other side. It seemed like a silly and unnecessary rule – one that certainly is not followed on the Asek (especially given camping issues). Our on-land visitation lasted 30 minutes and involved a little botanizing walk, including tasting a few edibles (which I cannot do without thinking about, you guessed it, Into the Wild). And then we were heading back to the ship, fighting some moderate wind and waves as we made our way along the opposite shore.



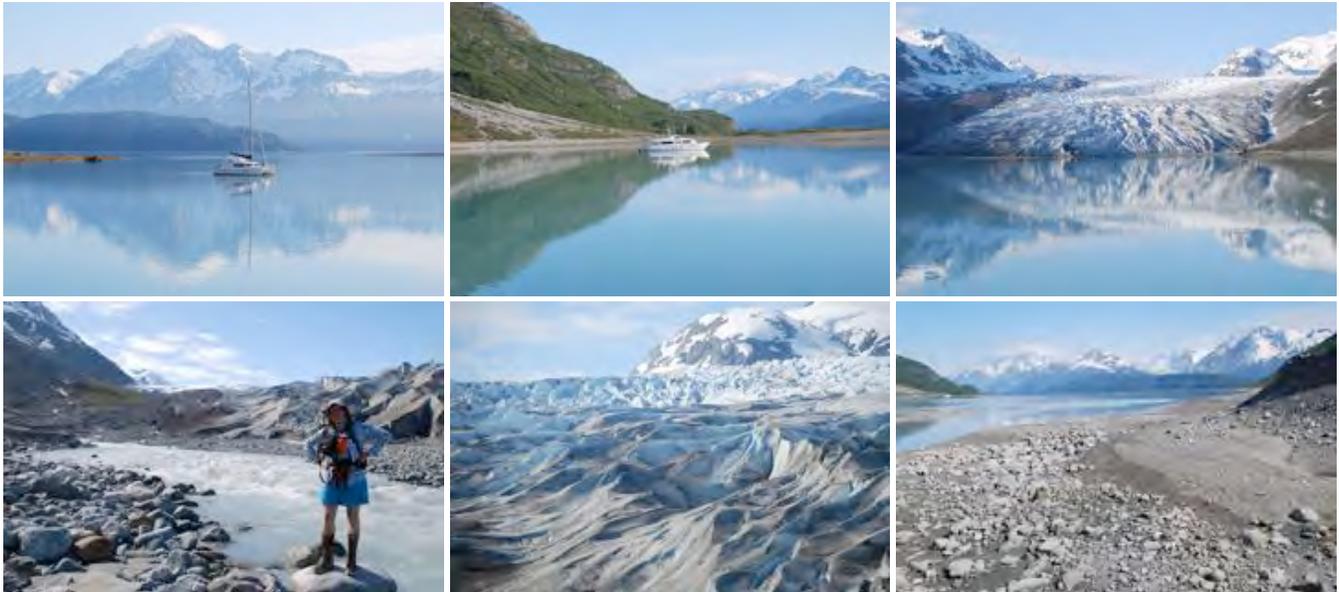
Left to Right: returning to boat, fabulous dinner views, bottom/middle = Mt. Fairweather, Reid Glacier at 3:06 a.m.

We were back at the boat by 4 and began our long cruise up the West Arm to the Reid Glacier. Being that the weather was warm and agreeable, I spent much of the time just watching the mountains from the front of the boat – the light too bright to photograph well (even though I tried a lot). The scenery reminded me of big sections of the Asek near the Confluence: impressive mountains and glaciers soaring above water. At some point, we slowed to pass a beached whale carcass – hoping to see bears... but, alas, there was only well-mowed grass (by bears) and a few bald eagles. At around 7:30, we enjoyed dinner with all-around views of the mountains – the light ideal. One of the things I REALLY hoped to see on this trip was Mt. Fairweather, the highest in the range (over 15K) – which we'd seen from the north/Asek for 3 days straight; shockingly, Fairweather appeared after dinner – wisped with a few high clouds and set behind lots of other foreground peaks. It looked a lot like Rainier from the west – in contrast with its stand-alone pyramid-shape from the north. Alas, we only saw her for 30 minutes, before turning left and heading up the short inlet to Reid. Perhaps not surprisingly, a couple other boats were anchored here when we arrived. We spent a good 30 minutes trying to put down a reasonable distance from them but the anchor didn't catch well (something about all the glacial silt?). As with pretty much all my nights on this trip, I was in my cabin preparing for bed by 9:30 – easily getting 8-9 hours slumber. Of course, on this night, I – for no apparent reason – awoke at 3 a.m. for 30 minutes. Given that I suspected the light and views were stunning, I actually got fully out of bed and walked out on deck with my camera – the water placid and the white of the snow bright against the navy blue early-morning sky.

June 21, 2010 – On the Boat: Reid Glacier, Margerie Glacier to Gloomy Knob

As with yesterday, our day deviated somewhat from the pre-trip paper plans. Originally, we were to proceed immediately to Margerie Glacier for a kayak, sail to Lamplough Glacier, and then sail to Gloomy Knob, where we were going to do a short walk before dinner. Instead, we visited Reid after breakfast – this time using the skiff (not kayaks). As with our landing at Geikie, we had to split the party in half – each group visiting one side of the glacier. One of the things I really wanted to do on

this trip was actually walk on a glacier (as we'd done on the Alsek)... but this level trip was apparently amenable to risk-taking and our leader seemed almost too cautious at times. Nonetheless, landing groups were split into "families" and "child-free" – with my group heading out first and going to the southern side of the glacier. Although we had better overall views and more interesting terrain to walk, the family group got closer to the ice. In our case, a glacial river prevented us from getting right to the ice. Had this been the Alsek, a way would have been found either across said river or by using the skiff to drop us off on the other side... but this was not the Alsek. After walking towards the glacier, we climbed a little up the adjacent hillside to look at birds and plants – running into a tent with some kayakers (the occupants likely out hiking... or maybe on the glacier!?!). And then it was back to the boat.



Left to Right: (top) neighbors and reflections in Reid; (bottom) landing at Reid

It is worth mentioning that, in the top/middle shot above, the left green peninsula represents the site of the former cabin of Tom and Muz Ibach – who effectively homesteaded there in 1938, mining and landscaping (including planting this area's only spruce – still visible/growing) until 1959, when Muz became ill and was taken to a hospital in Juneau where she died. Within a year, grief-ridden Tom committed suicide. We were told that people aren't allowed to visit what's left of the site – even though one of our neighbors did make a landing there. Meanwhile, we lifted anchor and proceeded north to the Tarr Inlet – a couple hours away. Within an hour of leaving, we were enjoying lunch – although today was the first day we saw (and discussed) the cruise ship industry, a controversial topic (in general and among our group). I couldn't tell if the guides defended it to be politically correct or if they themselves genuinely supported it. What was clear, though, was that the park definitely received a shitload of revenue from it – \$15-20K per ship (2 being allowed in per day – between May and September). When I asked whether Glacier National Park proper kept the money or it was put into some general federal fund, however, no one could answer that... which means you know it's going into the general fund and very little is returned to the park proper. Indeed, consider that said park wasn't even formed until the early 1980's – and visitation (excluding BIG cruise ships) is relatively low. Also, consider that cruise ships MUST spend 5 hours in the park and they are not allowed to overnight or do any landings. Their main (possibly only) objective is to cruise up the West Arm as fast as possible, to sit in front of one of a couple glaciers to wait for some calving, and then leave. I actually do not recall their being any speed limit (just time) – but I know the ships are MONSTROUS, FAST, and left a giant, detectable wake in their path.



Left to Right: spectacular scenery... and monster cruise ships en route to Tarr Inlet

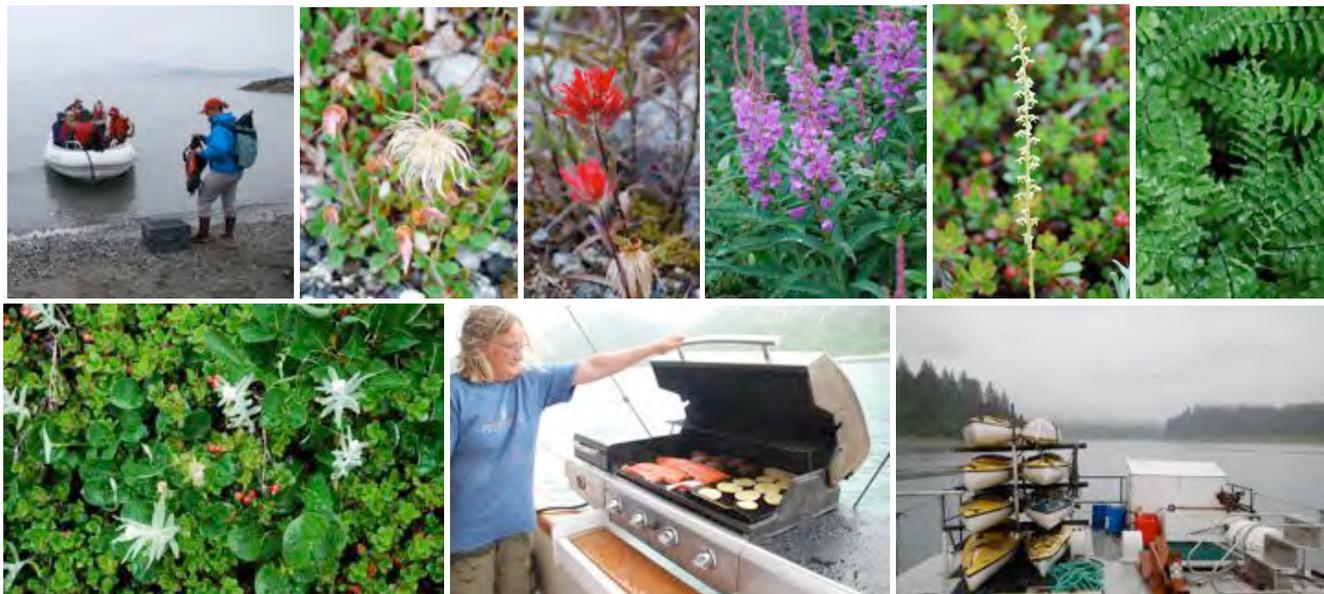
In addition to seeing (and feeling) 2 cruise ships, we also saw stupendous mountains and glaciers. Because of glacial retreat, we were effectively traveling back in time the farther up the West Arm we got: nearer to Bartlett, there were robust forest ecosystems that had had more time to develop; nearer to Reid, there were some scrubby plants but little else; nearer to Margerie/Grand Pacific, there was hardly any greenery because, until the early 1900's, this was covered by ice. In contrast with pre-trip paper plans, though, we never sailed to the Lamplough Glacier. Rather, we barely saw its miraculously blue terminus as we whizzed distantly by its origin: the Johns Hopkins Inlet, a place I'd hoped to spend more time. Perhaps we avoided it because, on the way up, there was a cruise ship there and, on the way down, the weather was bad and we were

possibly running late? Said cruise ship was thankfully on its way out, having done its business at Margerie – which the guides seemed to be trying to work around in terms of timing our sea kayak. When we were 30 minutes from the Margerie and the MASSIVE face of the Grand Pacific (at THE terminus of the Tarr), this HUGE second ship bombed by us and I suspect the planned schedule got off again because now there were concerns about both iceberg conditions as well as the wake. Thankfully, this ship only sat in front of Margerie for 30 minutes (the length of time it took us to get ready to kayak). Disturbingly, the top ship deck area featured this football-stadium-sized video screen where the face of the Margerie (despite being, like, RIGHT there) was being broadcast. The whole thing was silly and insane... although others justified that said screen was likely benefiting folks with cabins on the non-glacier side of the cruise ship. In addition, there was all kinds of obnoxious microphone-amplified garbling blasting from the ship. In the quiet words of one of our group members: THIS is exactly why I picked THIS trip. Indeed.



Left to Right: kayaking, my (at the time) best shot of puffins, retreating with the weather closing in

We set out in sea kayaks around 2, all conditions excellent. Because a couple folks had problems keeping up during yesterday's kayak, the guides redistributed a few of us – combining me and the mother in the family of 3. I took this as a sign that I didn't wholly suck... plus, mom and I did superbly. Today, I assumed the back position – meaning I was in charge of the foot-peddle steering. I don't know if I sucked or if my rigging was off (despite fussing) – but mom often had to paddle-steer, which was fine because it was more familiar (given my rafting experience). I was surprised how pussy-footed the guides seemed about even small pieces of ice. I kept thinking of how much the oarsmen RAMMED our rafts through the ice at Lowell Lake on the Alsek; it seemed hard to imagine what were mostly bergy bits doing anything to our vessels. Today, we were on the water 4 hours – first making our way to the front of the glacier, then trying to maintain our position in front of the glacier (the tide was going out so we had to keep paddling north) for an hour, and then making our way back along some sea cliffs teeming with birds. For a long time, there was no calving action. Then – corresponding with me handing my BIG camera to our leader to take a shot of me and mom – this HUGE chunk fell. This resulted in nearby smaller pieces to slowly come off... nothing big but all noisy. Returning to the ship, we paddled under these Norway-esque cliffs: kittiwakes, puffins, eagles, and waterfalls. Back at the boat, we enjoyed some downtime before dinner – INSIDE given that funky weather had consumed the skies. That evening, we sailed a good 3 hours (dining while we moved) before anchoring near aptly-named Gloomy Knob. Probably owing to weather, time, and lack of wildlife, we did not make a planned landing here before dinner.

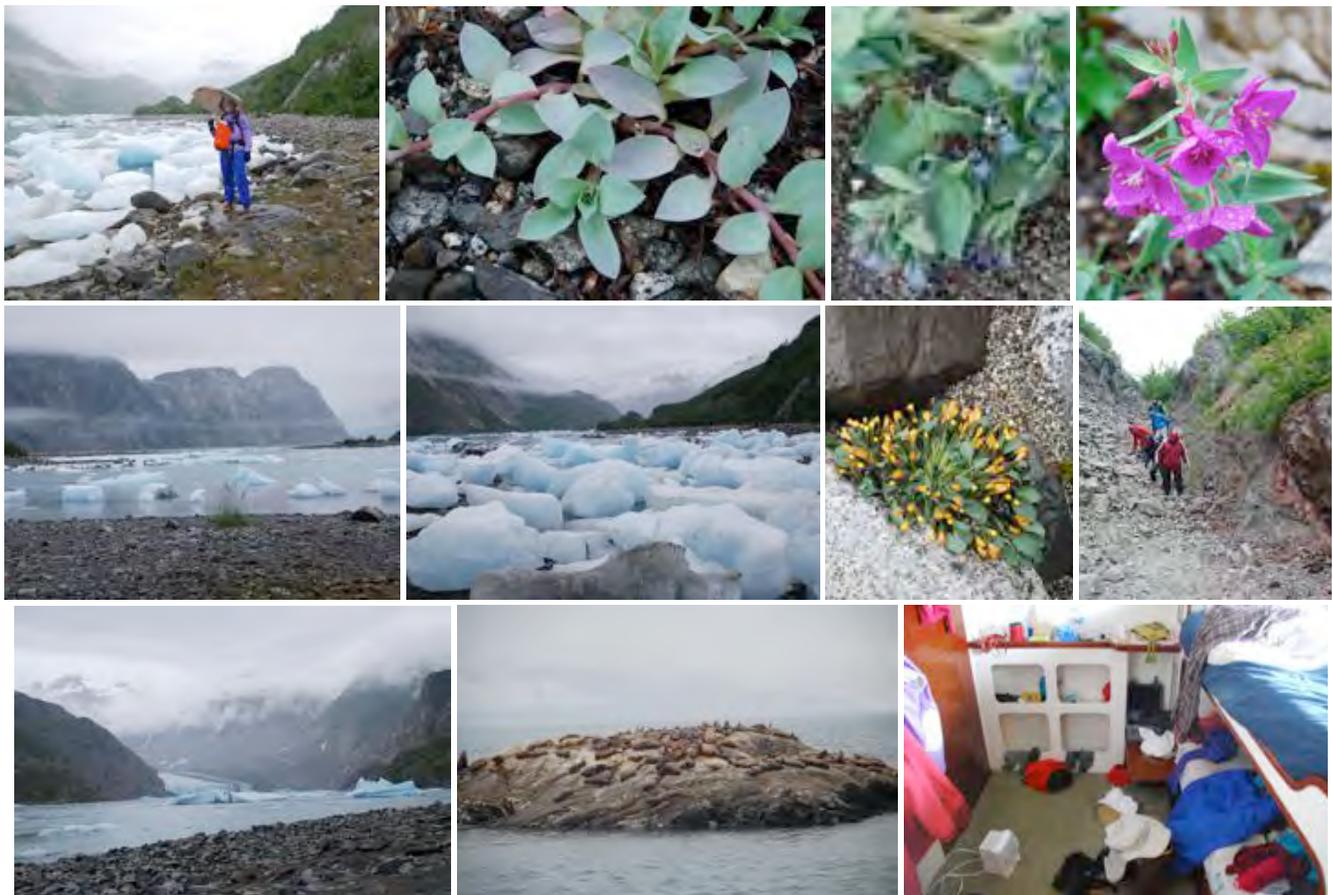


Left to Right: most = "botany" trip (dryas, paintbrush, tall fireweed, orchid, maidenhair fern, groundcover), outdoor grill, anchorage

June 22, 2010 – On the Boat: The Rain Begins

Today's actual itinerary deviated moderately from the pre-trip paper plans, although a couple locations remain sketchy. Originally, we were to spend the bulk of the day visiting the Muir Inlet/McBride Glacier – but instead we focused on tomorrow's itinerary: North Sandy Cove. However, having anchored near Gloomy Knob, we began our day there... but I cannot recall if we precisely landed at Gloomy – or sailed to a nearby beach. All I know is that my first shot – showing us disembarking the

skiff – was taken at 10:29 a.m., which seems late. The other thing I know for sure is that it was actively raining and (overall) a shitty weather all day (which probably explains why we held off on the Muir/McBride itinerary). As usual, we had to divide up the party for the landing, today based on interest: those wanting a more rigorous climb went up this rocky business (backside of Gloomy Knob?) with the leader; those wanting a short, botany-oriented walk stayed low with the second guide. Believe it or not, I went with the botany folks – half out of interest and half because sliding around on wet rocks in rubber boots was not appealing. Today began several days of carrying my umbrella (pimp-daddy leopard-skin), which amused folks but please me because umbrellas are highly effective in the rain. I would say that the total mileage walked by my group was MAYBE 0.1 (the other group = 0.2). We did see a good representation of flowers – although my prize (a lady slipper) had already come and gone. I did see a very cool new plant (moonwort), which none of the guides could identify... and my shaky umbrella camera skills could not capture; native people apparently believe that moonwort carries magical abilities – including making one invisible. While the first skiff-full of wet kids made its way back to the ship, mom and I wandered off to this interesting rocky area that looked like it might have some good tide-pooling; this was not entirely the case but it was interesting. We then returned to the boat and sailed south to North Sandy Cove, lunching en route. After lunch, the weather no better, it was announced we were still going out to kayak around this little island – one group (including me) going counter-clockwise with the leader, the other with the second guide. I reluctantly went – and I'm glad I did. After trading out spray skirts (definitely needed a functional one today), I erected my umbrella by poking it down my life-jacket to the point I could paddle under it. Sadly, I did not bring my camera (TOO WET!) and, to date, no one has shared pictures with the group (someone did take a hilarious one of me). But also sadly because the tide-pooling here was GREAT: TONS of sea stars (orange, blue, purple...), beautiful algae, and mussels. Mom, my paddle partner for the rest of the trip, LOVED to pick them up. Of course, mom's husband and their son willfully wandered ahead of our poky group - CLAIMING to see a mother and baby moose on the shore just around the corner. Nobody believes them, however, as they were well-known for tall-tales and cheating during the nightly card games. But I did understand their need to wander; what should have been a quiet, lovely paddle in the rain was frustrated by our leader's need to yack too much (about nature, micro-managing things, etc.). Indeed, memories of similar responses to our arctic Hulahula leader (who couldn't stop wanting to be funny and tell jokes during otherwise beautiful, peaceful moments) started surfacing, much to my chagrin. After returning to the ship, we motored up the Muir Inlet before dinner, anchoring near our target (the McBride Glacier) for the night.

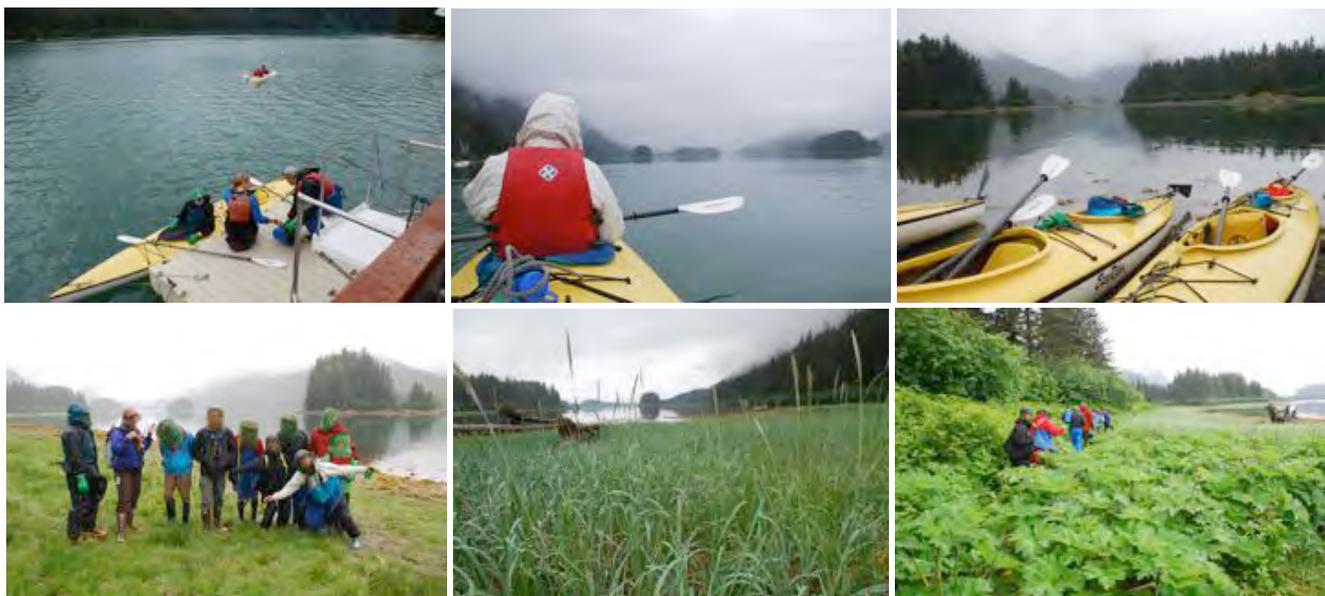


Left to Right: (top) me and the icebergs, my favorite new plant – oysterleaf & its flowers, bluebells, fireweed; (middle) along inlet, mystery flower, funky scramble; (bottom) McBride front, sea lions, messy cabin!

June 23, 2010 – On the Boat: The Rain Continues, Muir Inlet

Like I said in the previous entry, we basically switched out today's and yesterday's itineraries – likely hoping for better weather... which never came. I don't recall whether we were anchored right by our landing, or whether we motored a little to get to the landing area. Given that my first photo of the day (disembarking the skiff) was shot after 11, I suspect we motored awhile. Today, we were divided according to "families" and "child-free" – with everyone, despite the split, walking the same route to the same final destination. The skiff landed slightly up this little waterway along a flat beach that was BARELY above sea-level. Although I thought it would be muddy, it was actually hard and rocky. The bird-people on this trip (one of our

couples were life-listers who vacationed with an emphasis on seeing new avian species) really enjoy our initial walk. I, on the other hand, could only keep my eyes on the distant shore: icebergs everywhere, emerging from the mouth of the McBride Inlet. Although we never walked to that area proper, we continued up along the inlet through some alder – and broke out into a much more dramatic little lagoon full of even cooler ice. En route, we spied a GIANT pile of weird looking grizzly shit... little pellets, no berry color or grass. Presumably this bear was VERY constipated. Dr. Oz would NOT have approved. We also came across my favorite new plant discovery on this trip: beautiful oysterleaf, with blue-green leaves and bluebell like flowers at the ends of its trailing vines. From the lagoon, we bushwhacked over this little mound (presumably lateral moraine debris)... I hid my camera because it was wet, the footing was bad, and there were alder branches slapping from every direction. Climbing 30 vertical feet, we then descended an open loose-rock gully on the other side. Although the front of the McBride was distantly visible, we never got anywhere near it. We did meander down the beach awhile (alongside impressive grizzly tracks) and then climbed up this little draw where some petrifying stumps could be seen – remnants of trees that were mowed down by the last glacial advance. The drizzle unrelenting, we made our way back to the ship. Today, however, offered no sea kayaking. Given my messy cabin, I elected to get everything dried out, do some cleaning, and take a long nap. Eventually, I awoke because the boat was banking a lot: we had arrived at South Marble Island, halfway to Dundas Bay. Here, we made various passes to look at Stellar sea lions. Afterwards, we continued on but, to this day, I have no idea where we anchored. The original pre-trip literature said we'd be in Dundas Bay tonight – arriving there early enough to make a beach landing for botanizing. But we definitely did NOT travel far – as my first image from Dundas (taken tomorrow) was shot at 1:30 – which means we spent much of the morning motoring there.



Left to Right: Dundas Bay afternoon kayak – loading, paddling, landing, posing, walk through grass and cow parsnip

June 24, 2010 – On the Boat: The Rain Continues, Dundas Bay

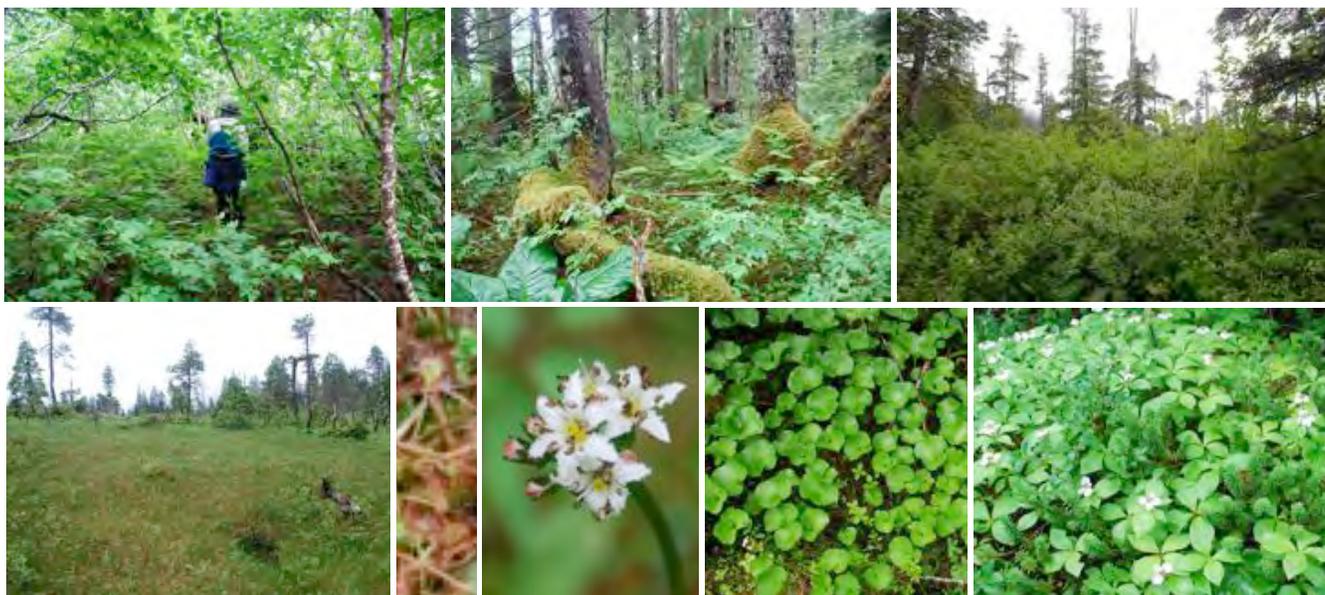
Given that we were running late relative to the pre-trip plan (i.e. we didn't even arrive at Dundas Bay until lunch), we only did one foray here – not the 2 that had been planned (a skiff/hiking trip to visit the muskeg, followed – after lunch – by an afternoon kayak). Based on the recorded time of my first image (showing the second team getting into their kayak), we set out around 1:30. Today's paddle was our longest – meandering almost 3 miles between islands and ultimately landing at this grassy beach. As should be obvious by the second picture above, it was raining for some of the way... but, in general, it was not terribly wet and things did taper off by the end of the day. However, the bugs were HORRIBLE... even on the water (which was shocking). Before even setting foot on land, most of us had to don our mosquito headnets (provided by the ship, if you happened to have forgotten yours). Because a couple people were not interested in doing the paddle today, our group totaled 11 (only our leader came along – no second guide), meaning we did not have to do split landings. Those who chose not to paddle were given a short skiff-only tour later in the day.



Left to Right: Chocolate lily, happy grizzly poop, white bog orchid, cladonia or lipstick/marching men lichen, old fishing gear

After our landing, we enjoyed some botanizing on the shore – hiking up through the grass to the edge of what looked like an impenetrably thick alder forest. We followed an obvious animal path through cow parsnip along the forest edge – in the middle

of which was our most impressive pile of grizzly shit on the whole trip. We then came to a big field where we crossed some interesting little creeks. Out nearer to the water's edge were some short piling-looking things with big iron cording: a fish trap system used before the region became a national park. We visited one stump and admired the many impressive lichens – marching men/lipstick and pixie cups. The overall goal, though, was to find an acceptable entry point into the forest and then climb to some muskeg. This was shortly accomplished and I was surprised, at first, by how close the muskeg was... and, second, how weird and interesting the muskeg was. It felt sort of like we had climbed to some high alpine meadow almost – albeit in a matter of maybe 1000 feet of total distance: first through slide alder and then through evergreen forest. I'm not sure I could have remotely told you what muskeg was before this trip... and I probably can't fully explain it now. But I can describe my impressions: an open bog of thick, weird and diverse plants interrupted by a few remaining fir trees... the final stage of ecological succession. Of most interest (even though they didn't shoot well): sundew, which are insectivorous – eating bugs to supply necessary fixed nitrogen because muskeg is so lacking in these essential compounds.



Left to Right: (top) alder, evergreens, near muskeg; (bottom) muskeg plants – sundew, bog bean, mystery , bunchberry

I could have spent a long time exploring the muskeg but we really weren't given adequate time to even remotely look at things in detail or hike around. Given the unusual nature of this ecosystem and the relative hike-ability, it seems like more time should be devoted to exploring this place. It's hard to tell whether the original itinerary would have allowed for that – but said walk looked longer and more involved... therefore I imagine it would have been more satisfying. After 10 minutes (some of us still shooting pictures of plants), our leader started heading back through the forest. On the way back, we hiked this lower grass area that was more along the water. After making it to our kayaks, the paddle back seemed to take longer – even though I believe we were paddling with the tide in our favor. I don't recall when we arrived back at the boat; I know there had been some kind of proposal from the teenage girl that she be allowed to jump off the ship into the water; she, of course, hoped everyone would partake... which, I can assure you, most did not. In the end, she did it twice and I believe she had 4 others join her (all male) – including our oldest passenger: 83, wearing a pacemaker (not sure the guides were excited about that). According to most people in the water, it wasn't THAT cold... although none stayed in long. Of course, the current was so strong that they had to bring the skiff up for safety; most people were immediately dragged 8-12 feet relative to where they first plunged into the water. After taking a few funny pictures, we all retired to shower and warm up before dinner. A few of us, myself included, positioned ourselves on the bow – determined to see a grizzly. The grassy beaches almost all around us seemed like the perfect habitat and even I was shocked when no bear was ever seen... not that people screaming and jumping off the boat several times helped in any way. Dinner, later than usual, was followed by a little more socializing. Much to the kids' chagrin, though, I was tired – and not interested in some way-too-complicated charades variation.

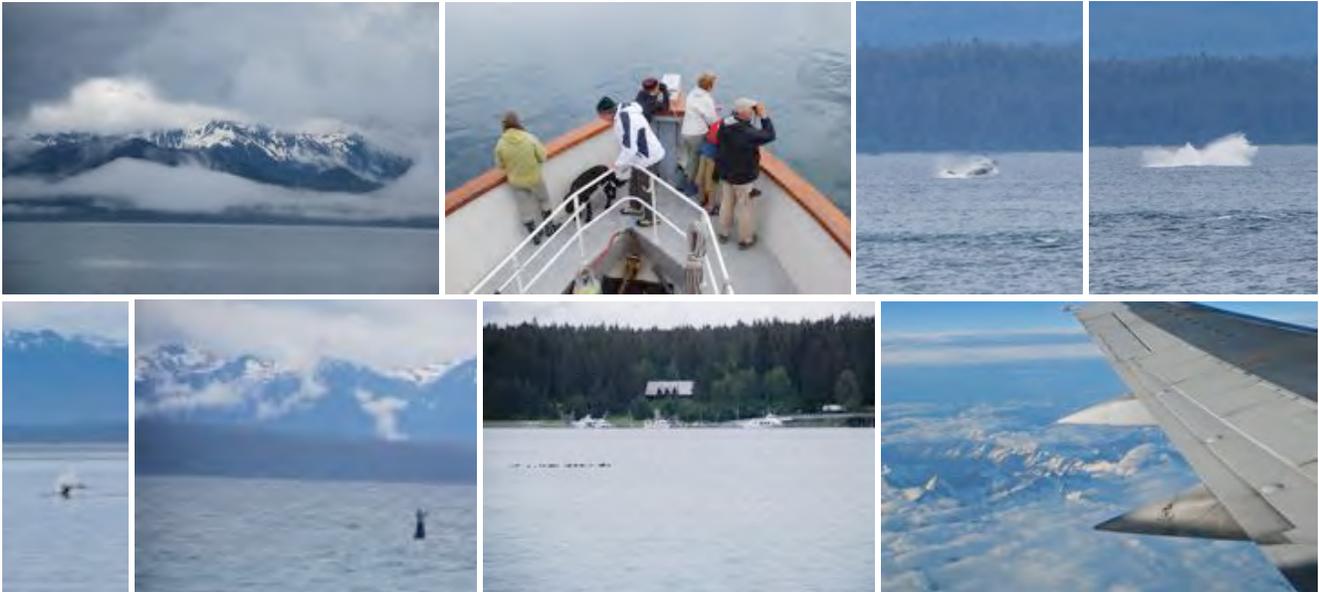


Left to Right: hiking back through the rye grass, grass detail, our oldest passenger takes the plunge

June 25, 2010 – Last Day: Whale-Watching and Returning Home

Our last day was spent according to the pre-trip plan: sailing Icy Strait and around Point Adolphus looking for whales. Although it didn't rain, the skies were mostly cloudy and none of the legendary skylines – featuring Fairweather herself yet

again – were enjoyed in the least. Technically speaking, neither Icy nor Adolphus lie within the park boundary. However, they do lie in direct contact with ocean currents, meaning the water was choppy and wavy – exacerbated by an enormous riptide that was nevertheless attracting a LOT of sea-life. As we neared Point Adolphus, the number of whales we saw was INCREDIBLE: typically surrounded distantly by 4 groups, including at least 2 mother-calf pairs who (to my surprise) were whole-heartedly breaching – mom going first and calf following immediately thereafter. Apparently, this is fairly common: the mother teaching the calf to breach because it provides some kind of cleaning mechanism. However, most of the breaches were EXTREMELY far away. The best shots I got (below) represent, like, 1/50th of a full picture... already magnified to the max by my humble lens. In addition to basic moves (arching backs/fins and then a little tail before a big dive), we also witnessed what I can only describe as tail-wagging: usually a couple whales interacting underwater... but with their tails out, slapping, saber-rattling, and flailing about. Even though my pictures don't do any of the experience justice, I – as someone who normally does not get super-excited by charismatic mega-fauna – did truly enjoy all the whale-watching. HOWEVER, we were being tossed around SO much that I wound up with serious sea-sickness in the form of dock-rock (see Galapagos story) that required a whole week of serious meclizine to clear up. Consequently, I think I am going to have to stay away from the ocean.



Left to Right: (top) today's weather, watching from the bow, breaching whale; (bottom) whale tails, back to the lodge, sunset over SE Alaska (or is that British Columbia)

By around 2, we arrived back at the lodge. With little fanfare, we waited there an hour for van service to Gustavus and the airport – and then we waited at the airport a couple hours for our flight. At Juneau, there was another 2-hour layover – during which time I enjoyed dinner at the much-improved (since 2004) cafeteria... even though I left my camera by the coffee/tea area for about an hour before noticing it was gone. That it was not stolen is a MIRACLE that could only happen in Alaska, I think. Given that the weather was not great in either Gustavus or Juneau, I was pleasantly surprised to see many glorious mountains during the first hour of the flight to Seattle. By the time we landed, though, it was nearly midnight and completely dark. Thankfully, mommy was there to greet me.

Closing Thoughts

Probably the best thing about this trip was that I purposely timed it for my first vacation trip – right after school, when I just need a nice break... a little appetizer for the rest of the summer. Given a nice group of companions and a cushy floating home-base, this trip served that purpose. In that vein, I think this trip would be fine for an Alaska virgin or a family with younger kids but I'm not sure I would recommend it to anyone with a serious interest in experiencing what Alaska is really about in terms of wild wilderness. There are SO many other places and venues that I would recommend over this trip for that purpose. And, in the spirit of brevity and succinctness, I think the title of this report says it all when it comes to my feelings about where the "real" Glacier Bay National Park lies.