

Alaska (2006)

When we discussed visiting Alaska, Keeb had one condition: no cruises. Therefore, Juneau seemed a good choice for our four-day visit as we would be able to take day trips out to see the sites that people on cruises saw from their cabins. Although it took 26 hours to get to Juneau from the Caribbean, it was worth it. Flying into Juneau we were struck by how picturesque it was with the snowcapped mountains and glaciers. These viscous, ice flows filled the valleys and were quite exotic to us tropical folk.

History

Our hotel was right next to the State museum, so we made that our first visit. We had an overview of Alaska's past starting with the native people and their influence, followed by the Russians. When the Russians sold Alaska to the Americans there was the whole gold rush period and the attempts to tame the land. The Russian Icons, the black and white photos of the western towns and the Tlingit (native) totems were interesting. But the most memorable artifacts to me were the intricately woven Tlingit basketry. They looked as delicate as embroidery. The museum also had an extensive collection of water colours of Rie Munoz who depicted Alaskan folklore legends and contemporary stories and I knew my Mum would find those stories particularly interesting. Incidentally, there was a mural in the centre of town of the origin of the world showing the raven, eagle and various other animals important to the native people and the man in it looks a lot like Juanes. Keeb astutely pointed that out. I could not take my eyes off it whenever we walked by.

The next day we took the Mount Roberts tram up the mountain so we could get a bird's eye view of Juneau - 2000' above the city. At the observatory we viewed an interesting video on the Tlingit, and saw a bald eagle in a rehab centre - it's wing was damaged and it will never fly again. Eagles are huge up close. We then attempted to go on a trail but were turned back by rain. Keeb saw avalanche warning signs so he was not too sorry that the weather was not cooperating.

Whale Watching

Later that day we took Captain Larry's tour. It was awesome. We saw several humpbacks, sometimes diving in pairs and the sight of their flukes standing out starkly against the sky as they made their dive will remain with me forever. We were also fortunate enough to see a young humpback breaching the surface of the water several times. As it spun around and its entire body rose out of the water, we could not help but think it was just having fun. The whole boatload of us were spellbound.

Tracey Arm Glacier Tour

The next day we did a ten-hour boat tour - not for the faint-hearted. Now, when I booked the tour I had no idea it was that long as it was the same price as the whale watching tour which was only 2 1/2 hours. The trip took us through a channel that was between sheer cliffs in which tiny pigeon guillemots nested. They reminded me of our red billed tropics in Tobago poised precariously on the rock faces, except instead of red bills, these birds had bright red feet. Maybe there's a law that says if you live on a cliff, you should have a bright red body part to brighten up the surroundings!

Alaska (2006) continued

The water gradually changed colour from grey to jade green and we started spotting ice bergs as we moved nearer to where the glaciers were located. The grey cliffs, that were previously clad in lacey green vegetation, were much barer and Keeb proclaimed they were now "The Cliffs of Insanity" (either a nod to the "Princess Bride" or indicating his general lack of enthusiasm of being stuck on the boat that long).

The cliffs also had waterfalls cascading down and they looked as though a fantasy artist had painted them in. Although it was really cold, I run out on deck to take pictures at intervals. We eventually got to Sawyer Glacier and I felt as though we were standing in front of an enormous blue gemstone. Then, right before our eyes there was the sound of thunder and a chunk of the "stone" fell into the sea followed by what looked like a waterfall of snow in the hole where the chunk had been. We were witnessing a calving glacier and the ice depositing in the sea was millions of years old. The glacier was retreating at a much faster rate since 2004. I felt that was strong evidence that global warming was on the rise. 'Keeb likes to quote Michael Crichton's other view on the issue.

Harbour seals were basking on hunks of ice around us. The mothers brought their young there to protect them from orcas, since orcas do not like ice. Obviously whales really are very intelligent, that place was *really* cold.

As we sailed back to Juneau, we stopped to watch humpbacks diving. No matter how many times I get to see it I will never lose my awe for this. Some of the whales were diving so close to the boat that we heard them exhaling through their blowholes – the sound reverberating through us. It seemed fitting that the last thing we did in Alaska was to feel closer to the whales.