

Alaska Trip Report:

M/V Four Seasons, Summer 2005

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As we approached the entrance to Dry Pass, I pulled the boat out of gear. We slowly drifted to a stop as I studied the charts.

“We’re going through that?” Donna asked.

“Apparently,” I said.

There was red “28” on a pole on top of a rock, followed almost immediately by red “26” on the northern island. The southern island was maybe three boat widths from the northern island. We were expected to pass between the two islands, keeping the red marks on our left. And this was the easy part. Stretching off in the distance we could see a forest of red and green markers zig-zagging through the narrow, tortuous channel called Dry Pass, leading ultimately to the wider El Capitan Passage further east and down the west side of Prince of Wales Island to Craig and Hydaburg.

At least it was mid-tide and rising. Our original plan had us anchoring just west of Dry Pass and going through the next morning. At low tide. Donna’s insistence on traversing it at higher water proved well founded, even though the charts insist there is 12 feet of water all the way through. At one point, as the shoals slid past on either side, the depth sounder reported 11 feet under the boat in an 8 foot tide. That would mean 3 feet under the boat at zero tide, which would require four wheel drive.

This has been a trip of new adventures, beginning with Nakwato Rapids in British Columbia. All rapids and narrows require your full attention. Currents through Nakwato (pronounced nak’-wah-toe) can reach 15 knots. Since our boat is only capable of 8 knots, it would be suicidal to approach it at other than slack water. This is the baddest of the bad; no other navigable rapids anywhere in the world runs faster. It’s only about 100 yards long, and during slack, it’s a pussy-cat! There’s an island smack in the middle called “Tremble Island”, so called because at full speed, the current makes the whole island shake. A whole world of deep fjords, high mountains, waterfalls, and seclusion opens up behind Nakwato. The rapids provide an excellent filter: few cruising boats venture up here, though it’s trivial if done correctly. It’s educational to look at the charts and see the vast amount of water that all has to rush in and out of Nakwato Rapids, about 1200 feet wide and 40 feet deep, four times a day with the tides.

Although we did almost this same trip last year, we have not stepped in very many of our own footprints. We have tried to take different routes, see different things, stop at different anchorages, while covering generally the same ground as before. For example, we have stopped in Shearwater, British Columbia before, but this time we arrived from the east, through Gunboat Passage. This is another twisty, turny place that looks a lot bigger on the chart than in reality. I think I speak only for myself when I describe these places as “fun”. Donna rolls her eyes.

We both drew the line at taking the “inside smooth-water passage” that Don Douglass describes in his Alaska guidebook from Lisianski Strait to Sitka in the Gulf of Alaska. This is a rock-strewn labyrinth hardly worthy of the name “passage”. It’s “inside” only because there are thousands of pointy rocks, not all charted, that tend to break the worst of the ocean swell. When you have to look for white paint someone has splashed on rocks to know where to turn, we’ll take a pass. The reason Don gives for this “passage” is to avoid the ocean swells. Well, yeah, but if the swells are that bad, you probably shouldn’t be doing this passage anyway. We listened carefully to the weather, exited Lisianski Strait, went 3 miles outside the rocks, and found the Gulf to be remarkably calm all the way to Salisbury Sound outside of Sitka, an easy one day 60-mile passage.

On the way up to Juneau, we intended to go up to the end of Tracy Arm and look at North Sawyer and South Sawyer Glaciers. We did it last year, and it was a memorable experience on a sunny, calm day. Ice from the glaciers is a variable thing, though, sometimes clogging the inlet completely, sometimes relatively sparse. Last year we had very little ice; this year we bulldozed our way as far as the last turn toward the glaciers though ever thickening ice and were finally stopped by an impenetrable wall. There were two cruise ships up there that had rammed their way far enough to get at least a glimpse of the glaciers, but there was no way we could do it. We hung out about 2 miles west and waited for the “Spirit of ‘98” to come out, using her 500-foot length and 30 foot beam as our icebreaker.

One thing we (I) really wanted to do was to go into Ford’s Terror. (Doesn’t everyone?) However, this is another adventure spot that, because of the rapids, behind which an early explorer called Ford was trapped in a small boat until the tide changed, you can only enter or leave on high water slack. This occurs for about 5 minutes approximately every 13 hours. So you can go in, then you must stay for 13 or 26 hours before you can leave. The anchorages inside are marginal and there’s only room for one or two boats. We couldn’t make the tides work for us, it being low slack during the day and high slack near midnight. So with much disappointment on Donna’s part, we didn’t go in. We did go up to the entrance and look, though, and it’s as formidable as its name.

Ford’s Terror is an offshoot to the east from Endicott Arm. Tracy Arm and Endicott Arm are at right angles to each other in the same entrance bay off Stephens Passage. These are the first places as you head up toward Juneau from Petersburg that you can see glaciers up close and personal. In Tracy Arm there are two: North Sawyer and South Sawyer Glaciers. In Endicott Arm, there is a hanging glacier called Sumdum at the entrance, and a tidal one at the very end past the Ford’s Terror entrance called Dawes Glacier. Since we had been frozen out of both Sawyer Glaciers (so to speak) we decided to see if we could make it down to Dawes. Turns out, that was no problem. Little ice, and we got right up to within ¼ mile of the face of the glacier and took some magnificent pictures. In addition, guest Bill got a fantastic picture of two eagles perching on top of a fairly large iceberg.

Heard on the VHF radio coming into Ketchikan:

Boat calling Ketchikan Harbormaster: “Do you have berthing available for a 40-foot sailboat?”

Harbormaster: “Yes, we do. Where are you?”

Boat calling: “55-degrees 20 minutes north by 130 degrees 38 minutes west.”

Harbormaster: “...um.. I was thinking more about how far you are away from the harbor.”

Boat calling: “Wait a minute, I’ll look out the window.Oh yeah. We’re just passing the Coast Guard Station.”

My daughter Janet was on board for the trip into Glacier Bay. She took massive quantities of photographs of virtually everything that moved. One was a particularly picturesque boat in North Sandy Harbor just about sundown. She printed the picture from her digital camera on my HP photo printer and it looked so good, she wanted them to have a copy. She and Donna dinghied over and presented them an 8 ½ x 11 photo of their boat. “Wow!” exclaimed the not-so-tech-savvy owner. “That’s great! How did you do this? Do you have a darkroom on board?”

We caught a few fish including a huge lingcod that we released, a 33” King salmon, several Coho salmon, and a bunch of small halibut. Considering the amount of time spent fishing, though, the catching was pretty dismal.

Boat problems have been minor and few. We lost the main engine alternator just as we were leaving Glacier Bay and had to change it in Elfin Cove. Leaving Khutze Bay I pulled up a large chunk of greasy 2” diameter cable on the anchor that probably weighed 2500 pounds or more, because it nearly stalled the anchor winch. Two giant jellyfish, on two separate occasions, committed suicide by getting sucked all the way through the external screen, 8-feet of ¾” hose and into the generator water strainer, thereby stopping the generator. This is a really fun event. There is no way to get them out except to take the water intake system apart and scoop out the glop.

We feel like we were suckered this year by the fine, balmy weather we had last year. This year was pretty normal for Alaska: constant rain. Ketchikan gets over 250 inches of rain per year. It was still a nice trip, though. Well worth doing a second time. We have hankerings to get back to Mexico, but I’m sure once we’re there, we’ll miss the northwest. You just can’t please some people.