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travel

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Quiet splendors of an Alaskan voyage

By Jeffrey Scheuer
Special to The Inquirer

It was early evening as the Alaska-bound vessel Columbia steamed out of Seattle's vast harbor. From the after rail, we watched the glory of Puget Sound glide by in stately procession beneath a fading halo of dusk.

My wife and I, escaping one of the muggiest summers in New York memory, had just arrived in the Pacific Northwest with a baby and too much luggage in tow, looking for nature's magic. It may have been partly anticipation, but now, just minutes from the pier, we were already bewitched.

Porpoises wheeled in the Columbia's wake, and the whole Seattle skyline unfolded behind us as the ship steamed toward open water. To westward, twilight silhouetted the distant peaks of the Olympic peninsula. To the south, beautiful Vashon Island lay in rolling green folds of Douglas fir at the lower end of the sound; behind it hovered the snow cap of Mount Rainier, in solitary grandeur, like a mystic presence in the sky. Our voyage had begun with an epiphany.

But that idyllic vista was just the prelude to a much longer adventure. We were traveling on the Alaska Marine Highway — the ferry service run by the state of Alaska that links the nation's northwest corner with the lower panhandle of the 49th state. Our route would take us 900 miles up the Inside Passage, a network of coastal waterways through the vast island wilderness of the Alexander Archipelago. Our destination: Juneau and points north.

Leaving Seattle at 6 p.m. on a Friday, the Columbia would not make its first stop until early Sunday morning at Ketchikan, Alaska's fourth largest city, at the lower end

of the panhandle. After brief calls at the coastal towns of Wrangell and Petersburg, we would reach Juneau late Sunday night.

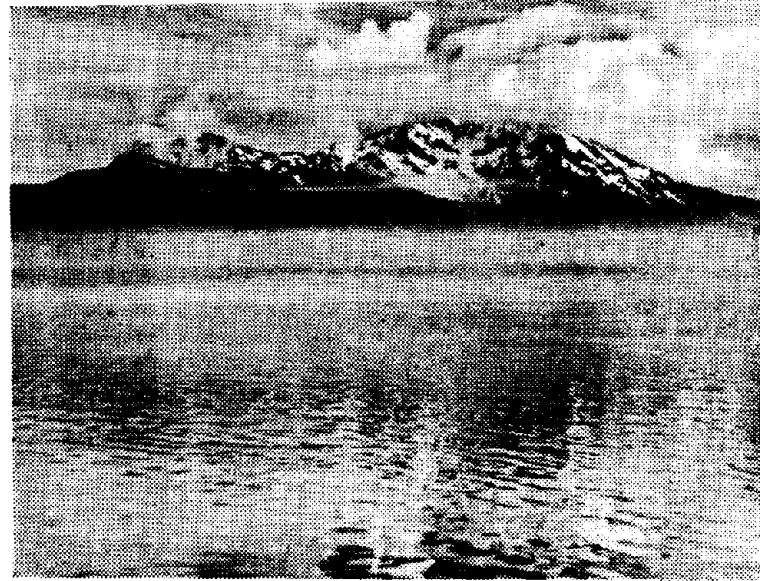
After the thrill of that first watch on deck, we had a chance to look around the ship, and it turned out to be public transportation at its best. Built a decade ago for \$20 million, by the wealthiest state in the union, the Columbia was modern and comfortable, without frills. It had spacious indoor lounges forward, with ample windows for viewing the scenery ahead.

It was midseason, and the lounges that evening were full of passengers: adventuring college students, homeward-bound Alaskans, families on tour (my 2-month-old daughter was not the youngest), and a large contingent of retired vacationers from all over the United States. Most, like ourselves, were excited at the prospect of seeing an enormous chunk of America for the first time.

The Columbia also had outside decks port and starboard; the vessel's only shortcoming is that one can only see forward from inside. Astern, near where we had stood an hour earlier, the deck was partly covered by a heated solarium, and here younger and hardier travelers who had not booked cabins were now beginning to pitch tents and unroll sleeping bags. They were a festive crowd, aglow in the evening light.

We were glad to have our starboard cabin, which was small but quite comfortable, with a large window that afforded an excellent view to one side of the ship; like the other nondormitory cabins it also had a toilet and shower. Nevertheless, I couldn't help envying these more communal passengers. To sleep in the open air on deck, be-

neath the stars or under the cover of the sun roof, seemed, at that moment, the height of romance: maybe not the last word in steamer passage, but certainly great camping.



Indian Arts and Crafts, Seattle

Morning mist in the Tracy Arm, part of the Inside Passage

Three decks below was the automotive traffic — assorted trucks, cars and campers from all over the Lower 48 — and above that, three cabin decks. These included the two viewing lounges and a theater-style lounge for films and slide shows, a fully equipped bar, a snack bar and, just below the solarium, a dining room with a panoramic vista astern.

Here we ate dinner a little later that evening; the food was better than expected and considerably enhanced by the view. We were plowing through the glassy Strait of Juan de Fuca as the sun dipped into the Olympics; and as dusk fell, we had our second glimpse of the sublime, passing among the ghostly, hilly forms of the San Juan Islands. Here again, nature in its beauty seemed to flirt with unreality.

In darkness, we steamed past the towns of Anicortes and Bellingham, and into Canadian waters, sailing up the Strait of Georgia between Vancouver Island and the mainland of British Columbia. An hour later, the lights of the city of Vancouver were visible off the starboard side.

Posted on board the Columbia was a detailed nautical chart of our route, to which I now repaired, along with some fellow passengers, to track our progress. We were threading through what looked like a maze of forgotten islands, their strange names suggesting a queer and forbidding magic. Alert Bay, Upright Head, Obstruction Island, Active Pass, Protection Island, Refuge Cove, Peapod Rocks, Gossip Island, Trincomali Channel, Cape Caution — lonely, isolated places, invisible in the darkness around us; places named and remembered by sailors. It seemed strange to be passing them at night, in the sheltering comfort of the ship.

Later, back in the cabin, I opened a novel called *The Sea Runners* by Ivan Doig — an absorbing tale of Scandinavian sailors, indentured in the 1850s to the Russian colony at what is now Sitka, Alaska, who escape down this coast by canoe. I escaped with them, but was overtaken by sleep.

By daylight Saturday morning we had left Vancouver Island behind, and the coast of British Columbia was a hilly and desolate expanse of evergreen forest. The sun was shining, but a stiff breeze chilled the deck. Except for occasional trips outside to take photographs, most of the day was passed contentedly indoors, looking out.

At midday we saw our first sign of the scattered human presence in the archipelago, passing the native settlement of Bella Bella. Actually, there were two Bella Bellas, representing two civilizations. The old Bella Bella was a barely visible fishing hamlet on one side of the passage. The new Bella Bella, on the other side, was testimony to the price of progress: a rural sprawl of shacks along the shoreline and vast clearcuts on the hills behind.

By afternoon the surrounding peaks were getting higher, and patches of snow began to appear. Mountain after forested mountain, through deep broad channels and great open sounds, we watched the silent natural drama and waited hopefully for the ultimate prize: a glimpse of the humpback whale.

Despite a brisk wind, the sea was remarkably calm. Those who enjoy the pitch and yaw of a rolling deck, or sheets of salt spray across the face, would probably be disappointed on the Marine Highway; the Inside Passage is sheltered from the Pacific by the 450-mile-long archipelago and warmed by the Japanese Current. We lumbered up the coast at about 15 knots, on a virtual carpet of water. The smooth, even pace added to the odd sense of detachment — the feeling of being there, but not quite — as if looking, with unnatural ease, at something naked and beautiful.

At 5:30 Sunday morning, in gray daylight, we pulled into Ketchikan, the largest town in the Alaskan panhandle with a population of about 14,000. Originally the site of the Tlingit Indians' summer fishing camp, Ketchikan, like much of Alaska, first saw white men when the Russians came to collect fur pelts for the czar. They were followed by British fur traders, then American gold prospectors, and eventually fishing and timber interests.

From the ferry dock there was not much to see: We were still two miles from downtown. Around the Ketchikan wharf there were only a few shabby buildings, nestled under steep hillsides. Here too the surrounding slopes were partly lumbered off.

As it turned out, I had barely enough time to walk down the main road, buy a local newspaper and get back to the ship before it left. In the news, the talk of Ketchikan was the unification of Alaska into a single time zone. This is understandable considering the predominant fact about Alaska: It is enormous. The state is more than twice the size of Texas; overlaid on the Lower 48, the distance from Ketchikan to the far-

thest Aleutians would span from Jacksonvile, Fla., to San Diego — 2,300 miles.

Later in the day we stopped at the smaller hamlets of Wrangell and Petersburg; here again, there was little to see — with the exception in Wrangell of some prehistoric Indian petroglyphs or rock carvings at one end of town — and no time even to visit these before the ship pulled out.

Wrangell, first settled by the Russians in 1834, and later by the British, appeared to be little more than a pier, a few huts and a nondescript building with a handpainted sign saying "trading post." The road disappeared around a bend, without promising very much; none of these towns can be reached overland.

Strategically located at the mouth of the Stikine River — one of the major navigable streams into the interior — Wrangell was the site of a Russian fort, guarding the entrance to the river against trappers of the Hudson's Bay Company, and became an entrepot for fur trading with the Athapaskan Indians of British Columbia.

The Russians later leased the port to the British, before selling all of Alaska to the United States in 1867, for \$7.2 million. Gold was discovered at the headwaters of the Stikine in the 1860s, and for a while Wrangell was a boom town, supplying prospectors and running steamboats up the river; but the gold ran out a decade later. Since then, lumber has been king.

Petersburg, our next port of call a few hours later, was settled by Norwegians. With 3,000 inhabitants, Petersburg is about the same size as Wrangell. But being a fishing port, it looks bigger, with a busier waterfront, including several canneries and processing plants for the local catch of salmon, crab, halibut, herring and shrimp.

As we left these ports behind and headed into the open water of Frederick Sound, our attention turned again to the scenery and wildlife. Above all, one sensed the emptiness of the place, at least in human terms: There was not a trace of civilization on the distant shores, and we sighted few other ships. An occasional tanker or barge would pass, or a fishing boat — improbable reminders of human commerce, along this otherworldly coast. There were few small craft, and those we spotted were often traveling in pairs for safety.

In this region — part of the Tongass National Forest — the changing blend of mountain, water and sky was a constant feast for the eye. But glimpsing the wealth of wildlife this country concealed was more difficult from a passing ship, and one had to carefully scan the shorelines of the narrower channels.

For the most part, shipboard passengers had to use their imaginations, helped by a U.S. forest ranger who had come aboard, to fill the forest with bear, moose, caribou and lynx; the sky with hawk, bald eagle,

osprey and loon; the waters with walrus, otter, seal, king crab and king salmon.

In the pursuit of our ultimate visual prey, however, we were not disappointed. Late Sunday afternoon, amid the desolate beauty of Frederick Sound, a large school of humpback whales appeared a mile or so off our port side.

To see the humpback breach and blow is to forge a lasting memory. My first and dominant impression was one of unreality: It was all too lovely and mysterious. The black flukes, with their sculptured twin curves, suddenly pierce the smooth skin of water; a graceful twist, a plunge, and then gone, each repetition identical, like a practiced dance. The quick, fluid rhythm was mesmerizing, suggesting a kind of animated perfection — or *coup d'oeil* of something transcendent.

The mystic quality of the scene was no doubt enhanced by the frame nature provided. Huge expanses of water, earth and sky, powerfully silent and calm, suffused in a gray overcast, all color yielding to form: a perfect setting for these flashes of magic. Suddenly the grandeur of sunset on Puget Sound, and the twilight mysteries of the San Juan Islands, seemed insignificant. In these few minutes watching the whales, my journey was made complete.

Late Sunday night, in a dim blue light that profiled the steep surrounding peaks, we could see the giant Mendenhall Glacier near Juneau and prepared to disembark. The Columbia would continue up the Inside Passage to the picturesque town of Skagway, once the gateway to the Yukon's Klondike region, before returning south the next day. We would spend a week in Juneau with friends, and visit Skagway by jetfoil, before continuing on to Fairbanks, Anchorage and Seward.

Like so many Alaskan settlements, Juneau strikes the outsider as a curious place: an undistinguished but harmless guest amid natural splendor, wedged between the mountains and the water. An island in every respect but geography, Juneau clings to its controversial role as the state's capital city.

Along with its native population and resident bureaucrats, it is a magnet for an odd mixture of Americans from the lower part of the continent: hunters and hermits; people looking for a new life or a fresh start; seekers of wilderness, fortune or freedom.

Juneau also has about it the inspiring feeling of an alpine village. On one side are lofty peaks covered with fireweed and columbine, hemlock and spruce; on the other, islands and bays teeming with the peaceful rhythms of life.

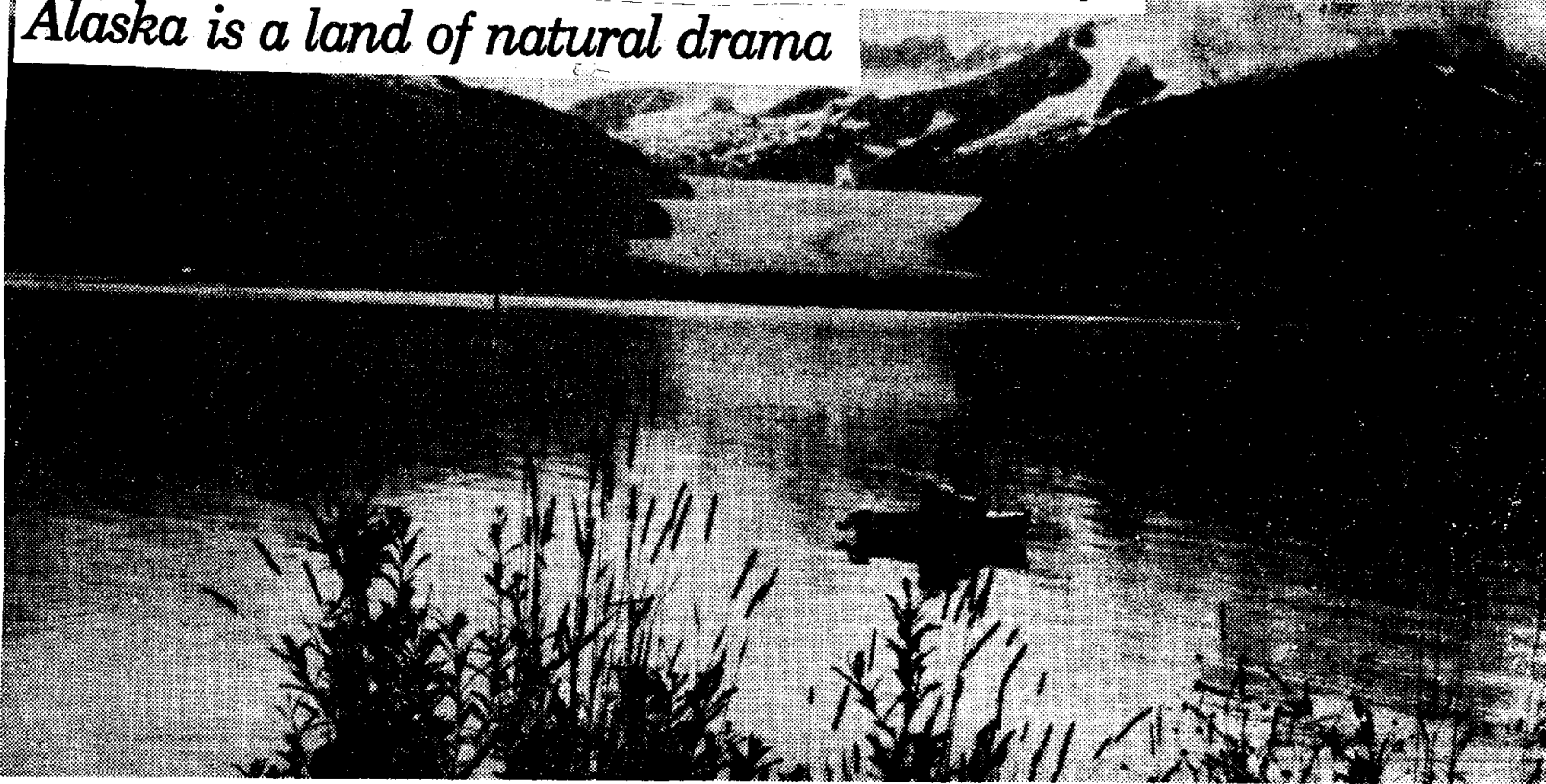
In summer you can walk along the creeks outside town and watch the salmon die as they fight their way upstream to spawn: discolored, decaying, an impressive reminder of nature's cycles. For a more tranquil vision of eternity, stroll up behind

the capitol to Juneau's cemetery; seen in a sloping, tree-lined meadow between the town and the mountains, it is a place of singular beauty.

Like other Alaskan towns, Juneau has about it a feeling of impermanence, of being merely an intermediate waypoint, between civilization and an unthinkable vast beyond. Such a place remains exotic in spite of itself, because of where it is: an outpost of sorts, nondescript, yet a place where some things end and others begin; a lonely human coordinate on the final frontier of the wild.

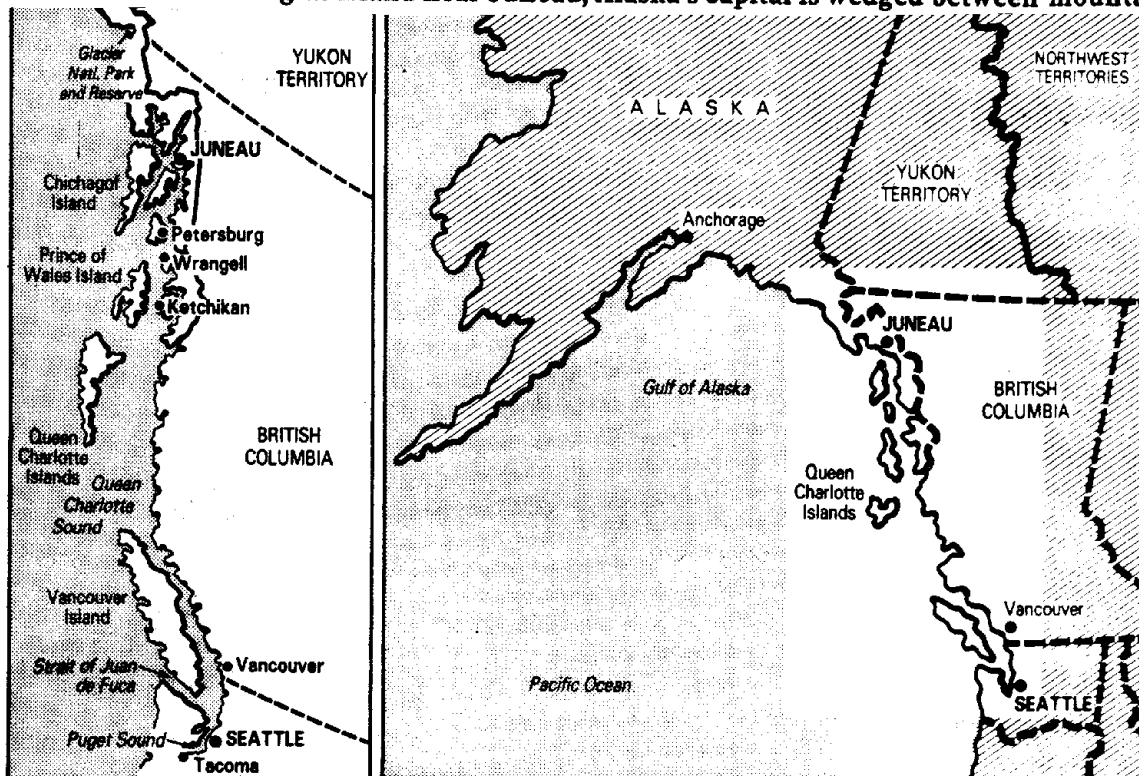
And yet, on the beach at Douglas Island, opposite the city, a plaque marking the site of the defunct Treadwell Mine lends another perspective, and a bit of poetry. Detailing the history of the mine, it concludes: "Shaft depth reached more than 2,800 feet. . . . Gold production totalled some 3.3 million ounces. Daily payroll long exceeded more than a thousand men. Life here was good."

With towering glaciers and abundant wildlife, Alaska is a land of natural drama



Special to The Inquirer / JEFFREY SCHEUER

The Mendenhall Glacier as seen from Douglas Island near Juneau; Alaska's capital is wedged between mountains and water



The Philadelphia Inquirer, KENNETH MILLER

Sailing aboard the Columbia

The Columbia carries 1,000 passengers and has space for 180 automobiles. The Alaska Marine Highway fleet, which includes three other large ferries and several smaller ones, operates from May through September, along two route systems: the southeastern and southwestern (Aleutian) coasts of Alaska.

Ticket prices vary according to accommodations: noncabin passage; dormitory berths; or two-berth, three-berth or four-berth cabins with bath facilities. The through fare from Seattle to Juneau starts at a base price of \$178 (without berth); additional fares range from \$68 for a dormitory berth for four people, to

\$188 for a four-berth cabin with sitting room.

Baggage-handling facilities are not provided, except to convey luggage from the terminal to the car deck of the ship; coin-operated storage lockers are available on board. Pets are allowed on the car deck only and must remain inside vehicle.

For further information, contact your travel agent or the Alaska Marine Highway, Pouch R, Juneau, Alaska 99881; or telephone Juneau 907-465-3941, Seattle 206-623-1970, or Anchorage 907-272-4482. Reservations are required for all sailings to and from Seattle, and payment is required 45 days before sailing date.

— By Jeffrey Scheuer