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## Kayaking points north

In Alaska's glacial waters, adventurers come nose to nose with marine animals and icebergs.

By Erik Olsen, Special to The Times

Valdez, Alaska

So this is solitude.

I am alone in a kayak on a vast glacier-cooled sea in south-central Alaska. A moment ago a bald eagle soared overhead, and the loudest sound around me was the whir of its wings slicing through the wind. To my right, a glacier curls off the face of a mountain, giving the fleeting impression that it is going to fall on me and crush my bones. Of course, it's just an illusion. The glacier's thousands of tons of ice are locked in a frozen tumble, as they have been for centuries.

My friends Dork Alahydoian and Erik Riegler, two high school buddies from San Francisco, are in a tandem kayak about a mile ahead of me. Our guide, Matt Kandrick, paddling just ahead of them, leads our ragtag team and keeps a lookout for flora and fauna. We've been keeping a fairly brisk pace, covering about 12 miles a day. It's rough going at times but worth the effort. None of us has ever experienced anything like the beauty and scale of Alaska.

I can see Dork and Erik up ahead and wonder how they're faring. Between them, they have about a weekend's experience in craft like these. Not that I'm worried. The weather has been good, and our kayaks are stable and easy to handle. From the get-go, my friends, who, like me, are in their mid-30s, have had little difficulty.

This is our third day of paddling, and we are, by my estimate, 30 miles south of Valdez, the nearest town. Not long ago I slowed my pace to take in the scene around me. I hadn't expected Prince William Sound to be so glorious. The same goes for Valdez. That name is so firmly associated in my brain with the 1989 oil spill that I half-expected to be paddling around hulking tankers and past struggling flocks of oil-soaked birds. Far from it. In fact, we don't see any damage from the spill at all. The town, nestled into a dog-legged fiord, looks like a European village. Indeed, it is sometimes called Alaska's Little Switzerland.

We started our six-day vacation last June about 10 miles away at Shoup Bay, home to one of the state's largest kittiwake gull rookeries. Being in Alaska was a first for Erik and me. Dork had been here a year earlier for a friend's wedding. Just seeing the state on the map — its unfathomable sprawl — I knew it would be the perfect haven from city life, an ideal locale to get away from the pressures of work.

We hooked up with Matt, who is in his mid-20s, through a guiding outfit called Pangaea Adventures. He was eager and competent and had been guiding kayak trips for three years. We liked him immediately.

We put in several miles away from the rookery and paddled up to it as noiselessly as we could — not too hard in a kayak — so we wouldn't scare them away. Right.

Upon our approach, the birds, tens of thousands strong, took to the air in an avian pandemonium that echoed over the entire bay and momentarily darkened the sky. We covered our heads lest we became targets. The backdrop to all this was Shoup Glacier, a magnificent amphitheater of blue ice 70 feet high.

We camped and played cards that evening within a half-mile of the glacier. We dined on succulent salmon steaks and red potatoes that we had stuffed into the front of our kayaks. We had ample provisions to get us through the week, everything divvied up between our boats and packed neatly in the bow compartments. Of course, equipped with rods, we hoped to supplement our stores with some fresh-caught fish.

Our camp was hardly a camp at all. We merely tossed our tents and sleeping bags over the rocks high on the beach and prayed the sea would obey our tide table booklet, which said the waters would rise no more than 8 feet.

Through the night we listened to a concerto of creaks and groans as chunks of ice snapped from the glacier, calving into the water with a double-barreled splash that stirred us from our slumber. In the morning, the silted waters teemed with floating shards of ice, some of them as large as sedans.

### **Sudden storm**

Now, as we pass through the Valdez narrows past Sawmill Bay, I catch up with my three compatriots. Black clouds begin roiling overhead. We're about half a mile from shore, and as the winds pick up and scallop the frigid waters, Matt suggests we get to shore. The summer squall hits us with surprising ferocity. What had been a leisurely float becomes a potentially dangerous situation, and we paddle furiously for the closest beach.

The winds kick up to 40 mph and heave 10-foot swells at us, large enough that when I turn to look for my friends, I see instead a mountain of dark water. We finally reach shore, exhausted. My arms throb, and my heart thumps in my chest like a percussion grenade. We're safe.

As we sit unsheltered in the rain and wait for the storm to pass, Matt casually mentions he's relieved that no one capsized. Capsizing is bad, he says.

"Why is that?" I ask.

"You'd have made it about 10 minutes before your muscles seized and you drowned," Matt explains calmly. Then, noting our expressions, he realizes he should have exercised more prudence, that perhaps he had uttered, well, a fiordian slip.

As night approaches, we set up camp on a boggy slope just a few miles from Columbia Glacier and about four miles from where the storm hit us. A few conspicuous bergs bob offshore beneath a blue sky. It's already 10 p.m., but the midnight sun hangs like a medallion high over the horizon.

We hike back to a small freshwater lake rumored to be rich with wild fish. Less than an hour after casting our first line, we catch enough rainbow trout and Dolly Vardens to fill our hungry bellies.

The next day I wake to the smell of coffee and the squawk of a pair of juvenile bald eagles in a treetop. We pack up our dry bags with lunch, cameras and warm clothing and load them onto the kayaks. We're seabound within an hour and psyched for what lies ahead: Columbia Glacier.

We paddle for about a mile through a glassy lagoon and soon enter a field of floating ice sculptures. Some have assumed the most bizarre and alluring forms, wind- and water-hewn shapes that might easily be exhibited in a museum of modern art.

We paddle among them as the light plays off their faces and edges, giving them a glow as if they were powered by a source within. Their colors range from shimmering white to the deepest blue.

Some of these icebergs, Matt tells us, float 50 miles to the Gulf of Alaska, where they can become a hazard to oil tankers and cruise ships. In fact, one reason the Exxon Valdez departed from its usual shipping lanes and ran aground on Bligh Reef was to avoid Columbia's icebergs.

Columbia's 250-foot face, looking like a crystal city, a skyline of intricately carved glass, looms about a mile away. Even at that distance I see what a monument of nature it is. Strangely, what appears to be a solid, changeless form is just the opposite.

Columbia, the largest tidewater glacier in Alaska, is retreating up to 90 feet a day. The glacier is expected to shrink up to 10 miles in the next decade and create a new fiord.

It hasn't always been this way. When Capt. James Cook explored Prince William Sound in 1778, the glacier was advancing. But in the early 1980s, according to Kristine Crossen, a glacial geologist at the University of Alaska who studies tidewater glaciers, it began a serious retreat. Although global warming is a prime suspect, no one is sure of the cause.

But Columbia's retreat is to our advantage. Those magnificent blocks of ice we are

paddling around would not be here in such abundance if the glacier stopped calving. Also, the ice field keeps the massive cruise ships away. The closest they can get is the main opening to the sound, about five miles away.

Several times a day, it occurs to me as we are paddling that kayaking is a perfect way to get around these waters. Sure, it takes a bit of work — certainly more than walking around gawking from the deck of a cruise ship. But what you get in return for some shoulder ache is enormous.

Packs of sea lions have come up to us and checked us out. When we're weary or hungry, we simply land on a beach and break out the portable stove. And then there is the thrill of paddling past an iceberg and being close enough to kiss it.

### **Hooked on salmon**

On our last day, we pack up and paddle into a small inlet on the back side of Glacier Island, which rises straight up from the water. From a drooping ridge of jagged rock, a pair of puffins gazes down on me as I cruise past.

While we wait for the water taxi that will take us back to Valdez, we drop our fishing lines in and troll them behind us.

We see some fishermen nearby, a good sign, Matt tells us, that salmon are around.

I am not sure how I will land a full-size salmon on this small boat, and when one finally strikes I am still clueless about what to do. But I reel in the fish — a beautiful 11-pounder — and drop it into my lap, where it flops around for several minutes before finally coming to rest at my feet inside my boat. It was a clumsy maneuver, and my pants are covered in salmon slime and scales. But I have the fish, and that's what counts.

Once it stills, I slip the fish under the black bungee on the front of my kayak. It looks like a massive but eye-catching hood ornament.

The water taxi arrives a few minutes later, and when I paddle up to it, the driver eyes my fish with what I assume is jealousy. He is a short, stout man in his 50s, with large forearms and sunbaked skin that looks like jerky.

"Nice fish," he says. "Did you bring that little thing up on your boat?"

I nod yes but wonder what he means by "little thing."

On the ride back, I learn that my fish is indeed small for a chinook salmon. On average they grow to 30 to 50 pounds; the largest ever caught was a 126-pounder in 1949.

But I don't care that my fish is small. The thrill of hooking it from my kayak, not to mention the bliss of the last several days paddling along the coast of Alaska, makes it hard for me to be disappointed about anything for a while. Except, perhaps, going back to work.

Pangaea Adventures, 101 N. Harbor Drive, Valdez, AK 99686; (800) 660-9637 or (907) 835-8442, <http://www.alaskasummer.com> . This company was our outfitter, and we were pleased with our guide's competence and service. The cost for our six-day trip was \$1,195 per person; this year it costs \$1,240. Offers day trips as well as extended kayaking and camping trips.

— Erik Olsen

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*Erik Olsen works for ABC News in New York.*