

PHILIDELPHIA INQUIRER

WRANGELL, Alaska - "You will be overwhelmed," Mark Theaman had promised us that first day, as our boat burrowed through a thick gray cloud cover at nine knots.

Even then standing on the MV OBSERVER's bow, trying to ignore the monotonous, windy, drizzle spraying our faces, the scenery of Southeastern Alaska was beautiful. The clouds hung low and stretched for miles, as if they had been wrapped around long strings, and from the midst of them rose snowcapped mountain tops. Through a tiny hole in the sullen sky came a glimpse of blue. For a few moments the sun filtered down, spreading a sheet of light on the side of a mountain and its dense drizzle-soaked spruce trees. They were expansive, powerful sights. But to be overwhelmed? It seemed doubtful, but Mark persisted.

During that first meeting of the 11 guests on board the 97-foot OBSERVER, he had gone on and on about what we would see. He clearly seemed to imply that the trip, if approached the right way, would somehow change us forever. He had taken this journey before, on this very same boat, with much the same crew - a nine-day summer passage through the islands and fiords of the Alaska Panhandle - so we begrudgingly accepted his ability to talk from experience. But we were in no mood for his superlatives. The cynicism of the East Coast, of one too many potholes and one too many overflowing garbage cans still had its hold.



"He's going to be a pain." my father whispered to me.

We laughed conspiratorially with each other as we ate dinner that night, quite content in our belief that of all the things able to make a difference in our lives, the power of nature would never be one of them. And after all, Mark was from the West coast, San Francisco, to be exact, where politicians blamed their murderous impulses on one too many Twinkies. That in itself explained a great deal.

Of course it would be Mark who would have the last laugh, although he was much too generous and kind a man to do that.

He would be right about the stirring beauty or the lush green islands and snow-covered mountains and crystal blue streams and giant rainbows that stretched before us day after day. He would be right about the camaraderie that would grow between the guests and the crew, leaving most of us lump-throated and teary eyed when it came time to leave. And he would be right about the ability of a nine-day trip in southeastern Alaska to change attitudes. Somehow to make everything a little different, and, yes, when everything was said and done, to overwhelm completely.

It took a little while for the transformation to set in, for us to leave behind our professional images and ingrown paranoia and shake off the skins of New York and Philadelphia and Washington.

We eyed each other warily that first night, trying to figure out where everybody stood. It was almost like being at summer camp the first day and figuring out who was cool and who was not, who was athletic and who was not, who was funny and who was just trying to be funny.

The talk was polite and congenial and stiff - solemn discussions of work and people we might know in common.

Who was Who

It became readily obvious from the book she constantly carried, describing 10,000 of the world's most favorite fauna, that Susannah Lawrence was the nature lover of the trip.

Larry Lucchino, a Washington lawyer, struck me as deadly serious. When, at the outset of the trip, I innocently suggested that I might do a travel story, he turned to me with a sneer reserved only for reporters and small, ugly dogs and said, "You do a travel piece and then everybody will want to come here." Steve Karmen, a composer of advertising jingles from New York, seemed much too fond of corny jokes.

And then there was my family. I was traveling with my parents and sister. It was our first family vacation in 15 years, and I had pretty much become resigned to the idea that at least one of us, and maybe two, would not come back alive.

Every first impression was wrong. With each hour of the voyage, more and more pressures began to slip away. The patterns of familiar relationships drifted off, and interesting new ones picked up. The farther we moved up the Panhandle, leaving behind all sign of human life but the coming and goings of our own ship, the happier we all become.

The scenery moved us and held us breathless. We were in the midst of something huge and powerful and seemingly undisturbed. And there was always the feeling of being here not by right, but by privilege. As we moved along at our snail's pace, the horizon seemed to stretch forever - sad gray skies giving way to soft patches of clouds, and then to an unsullied blue. Starting from Wrangell, a fishing and timber town of 3,200 at the lower end of the Alaska Panhandle, we made our way through Frederick Sound and Stephens Passage, winding around tree-laden islands by day and spending our nights in misty, secluded bays.

From Many One

Our disparate roots, so apparent at the beginning, gave way. All of us on board - the guests and the crew - became a single group, spurred on by laughter and a quick, deep love for our spectacular surroundings. We luxuriated in our incredible privacy, as if this vast wilderness were our own separate world. We became petulant at the thought of outsiders, angered by the sight of another boat, completely forgetful that we were traveling in a national forest area 500 miles long and 100 miles wide.

The Panhandle of Alaska, curving out from the main body of the state like a sagging tail, extends from Ketchikan to Skagway.

The biggest town, Juneau, is the state capital and has a population of about 30,000. The smallest, Baranof, has a standing population of one, a man named Wally Sonnenberg who fishes for king salmon off his two well equipped boats and runs a dark and musty general store where you can buy toothpaste, potato chips and fishing lures.

In a state where the true sign of status is not how rich you are, but how many degrees below zero you can endure, the southeastern Panhandle is generally snubbed. Alaskans in the true



north, their bodies proudly calcifying through the minus 30s and 40s and 50s of Homer and Nome and Barrow, want little to do with it.

It is an unfortunate perception. The Panhandle rarely gets below zero, but it is rich both in the natural beauty and the kind of outdoor lore that has made Alaska famous. Legendary bear hunter, crazed searchers for gold and bloody clashes between the Russians and natives in the early 1800s have all left their mark here.

The town for Sitka was the site of Russia's first permanent settlement in southeastern Alaska, When explorer Alexander Barranof built a base of operations for the Russian-American Co. in 1799. The Russians stayed there until 1867, when two U.S. generals, three Navy captains and 250 enlisted men stood in the rain to take official possession of America's newest territory, bought for \$7.2 million.

Gold Fever

Juneau, set against the base of 3,800 foot Mount Roberts, was the scene of such heated hold fever in the early 1880s that the Marines were called in to keep order.

And tiny Petersburg, spurred by the building of its first cannery in 1899 is still a fishing hotbed for halibut, herring and shrimp.

From the captain's bridge, 29 year old Douglas Cope, a handsome, hard-hewn man with blond hair and a square jaw, was guiding the boat toward the Glass Peninsula when he was the whales at 8 one morning [sic]. We reacted with all the grace of an ill-performed fire drill, running to our cabins for cameras and lenses and binoculars, running back to the bridge with all sorts of equipment and straps wrapped all over our bodies, trying hard not to asphyxiate ourselves.

Mark had his SLR poised and ready, equipped with the motor drive and the super-duper lens capable of shooting the wings of a fly at 20,000 feet. I had a crusty Yashica. And my father had a Kodak Disc, which, he would later confess, made action pictures of whales somewhat less impressive than he had hoped (He valiantly explained when passing around the snapshots, "See that infinitesimal dot in the water that looks like a scratch or a speck of dirt. That's a whale.").

At first, only their spouts were visible, jets of white spray appearing in the distance. But then we moved closer and could see them clearly - two huge, majestic creatures rising and falling through the glistening water as if their bodies were totally pliable, arching their backs and then flipping up their tails in perfect symmetry before submerging again.

Applause

A few minutes later, the whales slowly came alongside. We could hear the sound of breathing through their spouts, and as they dove through the water once more, we put away our cameras for a few seconds and clapped in admiration.

We moved through Tracy Arm, a narrow finger of water off Stephens Passage, Flanked on each side by rock-faced mountains rising straight from the water. It was a hazy, misty day, and the clouds once again clung to the mountains. We turned one bend and then another and another, or expectations heightening, until we saw the Sawyer Glacier = several hundred feet high, extending back for miles and miles, blue and craggy like the lines of an old man's face. Moving for a closer look in small skiffs, we saw hundreds of seals lying on chunks of ice that had broken away from the glacier.

We spied a mother seal and its baby, and we cut the motor and paddled toward them.

We got about 15 feet away when the baby, waking from its sleep, noticed us. It showed no fright at all but peered at us in our multicolored hats and down vests, curious and almost amused as we fumbled for film and whispered excitedly to one another.

The baby got bored and, turning away, burrowed its tiny whiskered face into the fleshy side of its mother. We paddled closer, hoping for the perfect picture, when the mother finally awakened. At first she seemed startled, then puzzled and finally terrified. She dove off into the water, leaving her baby behind. It lingered for a few seconds, took one last look at us, and then waddled off the ice and dove after her.

The sun shone so clearly in Gut Bay that the thin fishing lines glimmered in the light like an intricate spider's web. A stream cut through the mountains, the water green and dreamy, and for the first time all trip the weather was hot. I sat in a skiff with my mother and father, sweaters off, and shirt sleeves rolled up. The sun and stillness broken only by the kerplunk of lures hitting the water made me drowsy.

We cautiously held our fishing, afraid that finicky things would bend back and thrash us in the face if we did not treat them right and we made our bid for pink salmon and Dolly Vardens.

Anglers Luck

My father cast - and caught a fish.

My mother cast - and caught a fish.

I cast - and got tangled in the rocks.

A few minutes later:

My father cast - and caught a fish.

My mother cast - and caught a fish.

I cast - and my lure ricocheted off the outboard motor.

A few minutes later:

My father talked about buying a battery of fishing equipment.

My mother acted as if it was all very easy and somewhat boring.

I just wanted to be alone.

The food and wine passed back and forth freely at our last supper together. There were suggestions that our family, with our four distinct and separate moods, become the subject of a new Norman Lear sitcom. But the jokes and laughter were bittersweet. Steve Karmen seemed unusually quiet and Susannah Lawrence drifted off by herself to take a final melancholy canoe ride. The bay was still and calm, and her canoe left soft, round ripples in the water.

We passed around legal pads so we could write down our addresses and phone numbers. And we bought T-shirts for \$12.50 with the name of the boat on them. We promised to remain close friends. All of us, however, felt that same hollow feeling of leaving something that, in all likelihood, we would not return to again. Even if we did come back to the place, we knew that the experience would inevitably be very different. It was almost as if we were scared.

It was the same feeling I had had as a child at the end of every summer vacation, lying awake that final night as my mother went frantically from room to room packing boxes. With each

sound of another cardboard flap being folded and sealed, I felt more and more sadness, and in the pit of my stomach lay the horrible knowledge that everything would soon be over and I would have to go back to school. For two days, we had been anchored in Takatz Bay, a narrow stretch of water extending to the base of a snow-capped mountain. The day before, at 10:30 pm while it was still light out, the silver crescent of the moon had appeared on the ridge of a hilltop, between the spruce and hemlock trees, as if someone had balanced it there.

Now on the last night of our trip, it was a little after midnight, and the sky was a deep, dark blue. Off in the distance, silhouetted against the sky, was a range of snow-covered mountains. As you stood on the bow of the ship, the view held your breath and mesmerized. Nothing moved.

And you could hear no sounds, except for the rush of an unseen waterfall, invisible in the blue glow of midnight in the Alaska Panhandle.