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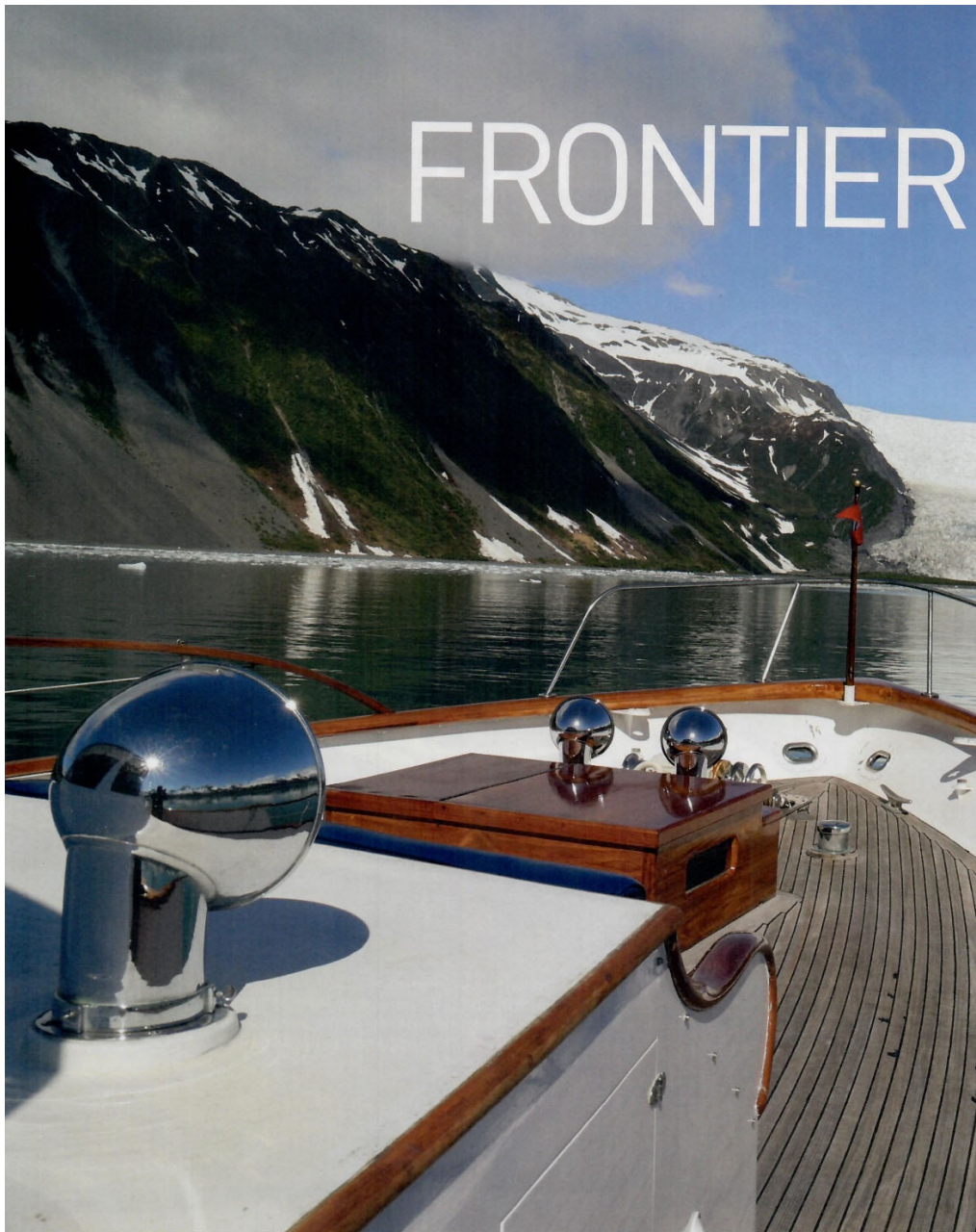
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FRONTIER



OF FIRSTS

A SUMMER SPENT CRUISING IN ALASKA OFFERS A LIFETIME OF
FIRST EXPERIENCES FOR CHARTER GUESTS AND CREW ALIKE. BY NORRIS COMER

Sea Star steams at an easy 10-knot cruise. Sitka, Alaska, fades aft into the nebulous gray. Seward beckons 500 miles off our bow. The twin Caterpillar D343s purr-growl-grind just right. Sea Star's way of telling us all is well. Sea Star is a 1965 aluminum-hulled motoryacht built by the Wisconsin-based Burger Boat Company. She is 78 feet, 6 inches at the waterline and weighs in at 235,000 pounds.

"O.K. crew, this is how the crossing is going to work," Capt. Erik Teevin says as he brings us into the wheelhouse. He is the owner and operator of Sea Star and the charter company North Pacific Expeditions. He is also a Boeing engineer with a curriculum vitae that includes Telluride Film Festival projector operator and commercial captain gigs for 200-ton rated salmon tenders. Summer 2021 represents the company's first fully booked season and my first as a member of the crew. The post-lockdown tourism boom is a welcome relief after the 2020 season kept Sea Star collecting bills while resting on her Seattle mooring.

At Erik's side is first mate Tracy Meyer, a former U.S. Navy officer, licensed mariner and North Pacific Expeditions co-manager. Also aboard is chef Steve Carter and deckhand trainee Mila Lassuy. Chef Steve is an Iraq vet (with the scars to prove it) turned Art Institute of Seattle alum and traveling chef. He's had culinary stints ranging from kitchens on Martha's Vineyard to a Bering Sea commercial trawler.

Erik frames the stakes: "Crossing the Gulf is very dangerous." He previously shared a Sea Star Gulf-crossing story of a crewmember who was thrown by foul seas and broke his leg. Another Gulf-crossing story includes 50-knot winds during a commercial fishing season. Erik and Tracy pick our weather window carefully.

He explains that we're going to do half-hour engine checks and that there will always be two or more crew on watch. Breakable things like framed portraits are stowed. We don ear protection and go below for the engine check tutorial. The Cats purr magnificently. We record parameters in a logbook, including water and fuel tank levels. We shine a small flashlight into the dark recesses of the bilge, looking for oil leaks or suspicious water. We listen for abnormal sounds.

Days pass as a series of wheel watches and egg-timer-prompted engine checks. Gentle yet massive rollers give us a 1- or 2-knot boost. Sea and sky are a windless gray. We're sometimes visited by fellow northward migrants like albatross and humpback whales. Alaska pulls us all northward.

Looming large in our minds as the Final Frontier, Alaska invokes nostalgic images of Balto and his sled dog companions delivering diphtheria medicine to Nome. But as I sit behind the wheel of Sea Star at night and spare glances toward the blank radar display, I don't associate with a shrinking horizon of unknowns in a waning age of



Clockwise: Sea Star among the Northwest Glacier ice field; starting the day with a breakfast from Chef Steve Carter; Erik Teevin and Tracy Meyer during the Gulf of Alaska crossing.



Clockwise: Taking in the Alaska scenery during a shore trip; loading up the dinghy to explore; Sea Star carries tandem kayaks that can be deployed for a paddle.

exploration. I'm struck more with the thrill of doing something for the first time. To me, this is not a Final Frontier, but a frontier nonetheless. A Frontier of Firsts.

Sea Star glides through a Nassau Fjord ice field to Chenega Glacier. The calving terminus of the tidewater glacier is about 1.5 miles wide and hundreds of feet tall. Over 5,000 feet above the glacier's downslope flow sits the Sargent Ice Field, a massive alpine ice complex that feeds multiple iconic glaciers in this corner of Prince William Sound. Aboard is a full roster of clients, a fun group of mostly middle-aged couples on a "trip of a lifetime." They soak it all in from the foredeck with oohs and aahs while bundled under blankets.

I patrol *Sea Star's* stern swimstep where I've shouldered a landing net like the Queen's Guard. Icebergs are defined as pieces of ice greater than 16 feet across, and a few of them pass. Harbor seals and their pups either nap or watch us warily with their big doll eyes. The ice field is a perfect place for them to raise their young during summer.

I'm after bergy bits, the catch-all term for ice pieces smaller than the fridge-sized growlers. Erik is at the helm aiming us near suitable targets. I swoop and pull; the net barely fits around a perfect piece. True to the saying, most of the mass is underwater. I lift with my legs, grunt, and mumble a few f-bombs under my breath. It doesn't come aboard willingly. A lunger.

"Locally grown, sustainably harvested, gluten free, vegan, non-GMO cocktail ice coming right up!" I announce to the foredeck gathering as I present the catch. The clients buzz with interest while I use a small pick to break down the lunger into suitable cocktail ice. This piece has pronounced layers that mark bygone years like a tree's rings. Who knows exactly how far back in time I carve.

"Look, look, look!" Tracy points to a section of the glacier. A torrent of ice probably 300 feet tall falls into the sea with a distance-delayed *BOOM*. Ice chunks the size of school buses cascade with the rest. The ice field buckles under the waves; hundreds of pupping harbor seals act nonchalant about the whole affair.

"It's definitely retreated some since we were here two years ago," I overhear Erik say. Exposed rock mars the otherwise pristine ice face, hints of the glacier's retreat. According to a paper I'd later find, the rate of retreat of the area's land-based glaciers have more than doubled since 2004 to 2006 compared to the rate of the preceding 50 years. Tidewater glaciers behave a little differently but have still lost six percent of their total mass in the Sound since the 1950s. Perhaps soon, Chenega Glacier will not be a tidewater glacier at all.

In a practiced flurry of professional hospitality, Chef Steve, Tracy and I disappear and reemerge with platters of freshly baked cowboy cookies and hot cocoas. Peppermint schnapps and Port Chilkoot Distillery bourbon join the spread, perfect for spiking the cocoa or enjoying on the rocks of my harvested ice. Once all drinks are in-hand—the crew with nonalcoholic ones—a toast is raised. For one of the couples, this is their anniversary. Cheers. Sips. A kiss. Another first: Glacier ice fishing for cocktail anniversary toasts in front of a calving ice giant.





Harbor seals congregate on glacier ice to pup; glacier watching with blankets, cookies, and cocoa in-hand when cruising in Alaska.

Sea Star is on the hook in one of our Prince William Sound spots, 150 feet of chain out in about 50 feet of depth. The sun sets at nearly 2100 hours. The sleeping clients are stuffed with a three-course meal and Chef Steve's famous apple pie. And more than a few glasses of wine. I ease into the V-berth, Chef Steve snoozing below me. I undress down to my boxers, close my eyes, and start to drift off...

"*Sea Star!*" A stranger's voice hails from outside my cracked port-hole window. Surely, I am asleep and starting to dream. "*Sea Star!* There is a tsunami warning! *Sea Star*, are you there?" My eyes fly open and I launch upright. Two kayakers from the only other boat in the bay, a mid-sized motoryacht, hail us.

Adrenaline surges throughout my body as I rush—still in my boxers—to Erik's quarters. "Captain, there are two kayakers outside. There's a tsunami warning!"

"...huh?" Erik begins to wake. I loom over him, eyes more than a little bloodshot and manic.

"There's a tsunami warning," I say numbly. We rush to the kayakers. Sure enough, the Coast Guard announced a tsunami warning less than an hour ago. An 8.1 earthquake was detected 70 miles off Chignik, a small town a few hundred miles southwest of us. The size of the wave is unknown, but all vessels are advised to immediately stage in waters deeper than 150 feet and await further updates.

"I'm going to start the engine and stow the skiff. When the generator is on, weigh anchor. We're getting out of here," Erik says. I jump into shorts and begin the process. Anchor chain only comes in so fast, but the Cats purr and before too long we are out of there. We drift with our newly met tsunami buddies in the night. The guests gather as a confused assembly on the couches of the salon.

"You better chat with the clients," Tracy says to Erik. Erik and I go aft while Tracy takes the helm and monitors the VHF.

"Well folks," Erik begins with a shrug of disbelief and clasp of his hands. "Here's the situation." He updates them on the tsunami

warning while underscoring that we—in a comfortable yacht over deep open waters—are in the safest possible place. I get the coffee percolating and slice the leftover apple pie. A slumber party mood descends upon the group as pie is stress eaten. I return to the wheelhouse as the yacht begins to rock. Large swells are hitting us broadside.

"This could be it"

"Is this it?" The clients worry-yell from their seats.

"This is it!" I warn and brace myself in the companionway. The boat rocks and rolls. I grit my teeth. I hear laughter from the wheelhouse.

"What's going on up there?" I ask. Tracy points and I see running lights.

"It's the freakin' ferry wake!" she laughs. We all laugh. It's early morning by the time the emergency warning ends. The tsunami measured half a foot in Seward. Another first: Weighing anchor in my underwear and stress-eating leftover apple pie during a nighttime tsunami warning.

We aren't long out of Seward when we hear the news from the Tokyo Olympics; 17-year-old Seward, Alaska, native Lydia Jacoby wins gold for the women's 100-meter breaststroke. When we left port only days before, every other window displayed a proud "Go Lydia!" sign. In this flashpoint in history, "Go Lydia!" is Alaska's state motto.

"I heard that race was amazing," Tracy says during wheelhouse banter. "It would've been fun to be in Seward. I bet the whole town went wild." We had just baited and dropped our shrimp pot, a ritual of ours to give clients a spot prawn appetizer. The pot soaks overnight outside our sheltered moorage in about 350 feet of water. Our bait? The smelliest fish bits leftover from Chef Steve and expired cat food. We transit through the entrance to our mooring, a





Tracy Meyer (right) with happy guests near Chenega Glacier; dramatic Chenega Glacier calving with pieces the size of school buses—or bigger.

narrow passage between two rocky islands.

"What's that?" I point to a black form crossing our bow.

"It can't be," Tracy starts. "It's a bear!" Sure enough, a black bear with an aura of determination swims her way between the islands. I rush to the clients and soon they are on deck enjoying the spectacle. We go idle and give her right of way, port-to-port.

"Do bears swim in the ocean like this often?" asks one of the clients. I look to Tracy. We shrug.

"I've never seen this before, but it's Alaska. All bets are off," she says.

"Go Lydia!" One of the clients jokes. True to her namesake, Lydia the swimming bear makes great time and disappears into the forest with a rush of water. Yet another first: An ocean-swimming bear named after a local Olympian crossing our bow.

We idle about a quarter mile from the plunging cliffs of Kenai Fjords National Park. Our clients gather on the foredeck, eyes straining for black fins.

"There they are!" I point to a pair of fins, a mother and calf. We've been watching them work the shoreline for salmon. Erik and Tracy emerge with their newest contraption, a hydrophone.

"Let's hope this thing works," Erik says as they deploy the hydrophone and plug it to a speaker. We huddle around the speaker like a campfire for a minute or two listening to the sound of light background noise. At last the orcas sing a haunting duet, a conversation between a parent and her child during dinnertime.

The firsts continue to define the season. Pulling in spot prawns by hand and eating them with Chef Steve's yellow pepper coulis. The intertwining of sea otter courtship, her nose torn from his gripping bite. A dinner of halibut with chimichurri sauce interrupted by a bear sighting on the beach. A trio of sei whale backs and spouts punctuated with a mountain backdrop. The thousands of trills from a kittiwake rookery set among a thundering fjord waterfall. Anchoring over the translucent carpet of a moon jelly smack with wine glasses in hand.

The summer season ends with *Sea Star* docked in Whittier, Alaska. Erik and Tracy scheme the southward run back to Seattle. *Sea Star* will depart with the same whales and birds whom we crossed the Gulf with on the way up. But also like the birds and whales, *Sea Star* will be back next year. The timeless seasonal pilgrimage to and from Alaska, the Frontier of Firsts, is always felt anew. □

