

By Matthew Bailey

Solstice on the Sikumi

A summer celebration among the ice

For the seventh time today, my 14-month-old son, Parker, leads me around the boat on his wobbly and unstable legs. Over the port door's ledge we go, past the stash of personal flotation devices and kayak paddles headed for the upper deck and forward to the bow. Check on the anchor again—still there. A quick look at the shrimp pots stacked out of the way and then swing by the bridge to visit Captain Mercury

before heading to the stern. The skiff is still in tow, the kayaks are neatly stowed, fishing gear is within reach and the barbeque sits at the ready—all's ship shape. We descend the starboard stairway and make a quick walkthrough of the sleeping quarters to complete our loop in the ship's salon, where I do what I normally do on a weekday afternoon: refill my coffee and consider what the remainder of the day might bring.

It's a Tuesday, but this is no day at the office. This is a trip of a lifetime. My family and I are aboard the M/V *Sikumi*, a 67-foot luxury cruiser powered by twin, 300-horsepower diesel engines and equipped with everything an energetic team of outdoor enthusiasts could need, all served up in the lap of luxury. An Inupiat word which roughly translated means "among the ice," the *Sikumi* is where we would spend the next few days, including my favorite Alaska "holiday": the summer solstice.

Small enough to access places larger cruise ships cannot go, such as the shallow waters beside tidewater glaciers and the narrow passages nearby, the *Sikumi* is large enough to afford every amenity and provide a smooth and comfort-



A solstice bonfire highlights the longest day of the summer. The M/V *Sikumi* [FACING PAGE] goes places most large cruise ships cannot, which makes it an ideal ship for exploring Alaska's waterways.

MATTHEW BAILEY; FACING PAGE: KELVIN DOYLE

able ride in the bigger waters. Three family friends join my son, his mother Mauri and me, and five crew members as we set out from Whittier into Prince William Sound on a glorious expedition.

Instant Gratification

Surrounded by monitors and electronic devices in the wheelhouse, Capt. Mercury Michael steered us out of Passage Canal toward Port Wells. As Mauri kept Parker's outstretched fingers just out of reach of the dazzling panel of lights and gadgets, Mercury told us about Capt. James Cook charting these waters more than 200 years earlier. Cook was a master navigator and cartographer, and the work he did here is still reflected on charts used today. It wasn't long before we realized that

Mercury, like Cook, knew the labyrinth of land and sea that is Prince William Sound like the back of his hand.

Mere minutes off the dock, we stopped at a kittiwake rookery where thousands of birds swarmed, swooped and screeched as they circled and dived around us. Carlee, the *Sikumi's* naturalist and guide, explained the birds' behavior as they fed themselves and tended their nests. Some frolicked



OUTDOOR ADVENTURES
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in the thunderous waterfalls that enveloped the boat in a fog of mist and birds. Mercury made a few passes and we were on our way.

Steaming to our next destination, we came across a gillnet fisherman hauling in his catch. “I wonder what he’d want for a couple of those?” Mercury asked aloud. No sooner had the thought been uttered than a deal was struck: two fresh sockeye salmon for a couple of dozen cookies still warm from the oven.

We left the fisherman to his work and continued on our way as sea otters dipped and swam, some carrying pups on their bellies while backstroking through the chilly waves. Dropping anchor at midday, we slogged up the gentle, soggy slope from Hobo Bay. In stark contrast to the rusty, half-sunken tractor poking out of the spongy muskeg were bog laurels, bog cranberries and slender bog orchids, as well as the shooting star flower just coming into bloom and the sun dew, Alaska’s only carnivorous plant.

We’d been on the sound less than half a day and already we had seen wildlife diverse enough to round out an entire Alaska adventure. And it was just the beginning.

Back on the boat, we made our way through Wells Passage, passing larger and more frequent chunks of ice. Our destination was Surprise Glacier and though it seemed the frozen giant was nearly on top of us, we were still a safe half-mile away. Seals rested on floating heaps of ice while otters popped their heads up, and small pieces of ice tumbled and splattered into the water as the glacier grumbled and snapped its way toward the sea. The sun set behind the massive river of ice and we all stayed on the aft deck to watch the sky turn pink over the blue-and-white monolith, the close of an amazing day at sea.

The next morning, I paddled a kayak for the first time. Mauri and I took turns paddling as Parker tagged along with Mercury in the skiff. Drifting over the calm, protected water of Shoestring Cove, two bald eagles, and then a third, soared overhead, riding high on the wind currents. Beneath me, anemones, starfish and kelp were momentarily darkened by the shadow of the kayak. Snap weed, blue mussels and barnacles clung to the rocks. Chum salmon rocketed from the depths and splashed back into the water. I floated



Shore excursions on remote lands led by naturalist Carlee Ashen [TOP] and sight-seeing aboard a skiff with Capt. Mercury Michael [ABOVE] are among varied activities guests of the *Sikumi* enjoy throughout Prince William Sound.

past a rock covered with gulls as a heron took flight in the distance. I was disappointed when I had to give up my turn in the kayak to Mauri, but riding alongside my son in the skiff, seeing him smile and hearing him squeal with excitement as the small outboard motor roared, canceled any regret.

Later, two humpback whales cruised alongside us breathing mist into the air, mighty blasts like an 18-wheeler applying its air brakes. They stayed with us for a few minutes and then sank away leaving cloudy patches dissipating in their wakes. A flipping

tail bid us a final farewell.

The thrill had not yet subsided when we spotted Dall porpoises racing in front of the bow. We clapped and whistled and tapped the steel railing as they leaped across the surface then glided back into the deep, dark water. Fifteen minutes after the porpoises drifted away, we were floating off Perry Island watching sea lions hauled out on the rocks, basking in the sun. The roar of their barks escalated to an intense and amusing cacophony until one very large male emitted an authoritative “Aaaarph!” as if to say “Enough!” and

Kayaking Prince William Sound

is a great way to get an up-close-and-personal view of the sea, its creatures and the surrounding landscape.



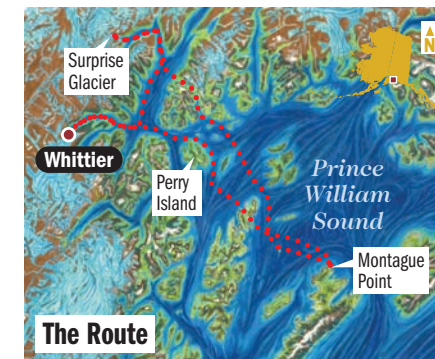
all was quiet. This lasted a few brief moments before the crescendo was reached again; this time the big fella seemed too tired or lazy to restore order.

While taking a closer look at the sleepy beasts, I peeled my face from a pair of binoculars when I heard the zing of a reel spinning. I turned to see that Mercury had hooked into some black bass hanging around the ledge in front of the haulout. He pulled in three fish in three casts, and then I reeled them in as fast as I could cast. A type of rockfish, black bass make great fish tacos. On our final pass I looked down to see a flash going back and forth beneath the surface—apparently sea lions like rockfish too.

Bragging Rights

Earlier, we had dropped shrimp pots baited with the remains of the traded-for sockeye salmon in Esther Pass. My name was scrawled in black magic marker on the buoy marking their location, and I was sure my string of pots would bring in the lion’s share of the bounty. The pots dropped by another guest, Crista Hahn, soaked only a few hundred yards away and she was equally convinced that her pots would be the ones to bring us the most shrimp. The bet was on and we both became quite vocal with our projections for the outcome.

I lost on a technicality. Locked in a tie, Crista was granted the victory thanks to the special contents in one of her pots: a 12-pointed sun star. Brilliant red in color with a pale underside, and slimy to the touch, it was another example of the variety and abundance of life carrying on in the waters of the sound. Later we hauled in an octopus, more starfish and various shellfish with our shrimp.



Redemption for me came later in the form of the largest of seven halibut we caught. I had been bumping my herring-baited jig for only a minute or so off Montague Point when the whopper struck. It was only about 35 pounds after all, but the biggest fish of the day was also the biggest fish I’d ever caught. Another guest hooked into three and lost as many while I hauled in as fast as my tightening arm muscles

could bear. Crista held her own, pulling in two flatfish in 15 minutes, and was soon posing for photos and grinning ear to ear. Mercury had planted us right on top of the action: At one point, four of us were hooked into fish.

Shortest Night

The evening of summer solstice found us on the beach on Seal Island. A driftwood-covered shoreline was the perfect spot to ignite a bonfire and celebrate the longest day of the year. We stoked the fire as the still-setting sun hung just out of sight, silhouetting the snow-capped peaks.

Before long the sky began to brighten. We had been out all night and already the sun was rising. We all had stayed up too late—even Parker refused to give in to sleep’s call. The sense of isolation and the sound of the waves crashing on the beach as the fire crackled and popped had hypnotized us. No one noticed it had been raining until it came time to leave and we discovered that our coats, safely piled well outside the fire’s reach, were damp.

To Die For

Being with the crew of the *Sikumi* was like traveling with family. In addition to Captain Mercury and naturalist Carlee, deckhand Henry brimmed with

Continued on page 67



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW BAILEY



SIKUMI: Continued from page 57

a love for the outdoors and an insatiable hunger for adventure. Amy, the ship's stewardess, was an invisible cleaning tornado. She left the galley polished after each meal and we found our staterooms spotless each morning after breakfast. Chef Gabriel's kitchen creations were magical. He grilled the shrimp we caught on skewers and served them up in hand-rolled banana leaves with a Thai peanut sauce. A mountain of tempura-fried halibut followed. Mauri still recalls the Spanish Basque bread wistfully. One night, we toasted with champagne that complemented chicken curry and beef kabobs, and there were salads that qualified as meals themselves: chicken cobb with apple-cider vinaigrette; another of mixed spring greens with pecans, goat Gouda and balsamic-vinaigrette dressing. Desserts during our trip included cheesecake and homemade cinnamon ice cream; fudge brownies made with rice flour to accommodate Mauri's special dietary needs; and more cookies—double chocolate chip and oatmeal. French toast made from bread that

If You Go

»The *M/V Sikumi* season runs **May-September**. Bring items for all types of weather, from sunscreen for the clear, sunny days to cold-weather jackets for when the wind blows and rain comes down sideways, as conditions at sea vary and are often unpredictable. Rain gear and rubber boots are available onboard. Don't forget your fishing license if you plan to do some fishing and, most importantly, a camera.

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Gabriel baked early in the morning was out of this world.

We were pampered to a level I am not used to but could easily grow accustomed to given the opportunity. Although the crew worked hard the entire time, collectively they were a well-oiled machine, and business melted with pleasure. The atmosphere was one of

Chef Gabriel Aguilera [ABOVE LEFT] at work in the ship's galley preparing fresh spring rolls to accompany barbecued shrimp kabobs. Deckhand Henry Thoreen gets friendly with a jumbo prawn [TOP]. Parker Bailey ensures the anchor line is secure while making the rounds and checking up on the *Sikumi's* equipment.

intense excitement and laid-back appreciation of the sublime beauty all around.

I awoke Friday morning to the sound of the diesel engines roaring to life. Our adventure was close to its end and I found myself alone in the salon as we headed back to Whittier. Fresh-brewed coffee and a blank pad of paper before me, I began to jot notes. So many highlights, so much to recall. Will Parker remember any of this? I could already feel the nostalgia growing inside me. I would miss this boat and her crew. Our once-in-a-lifetime experience was their routine and I couldn't help but envy them.

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