

Article

Kayaking in Alaska

Power and Majesty of Glaciers, Experienced from the Waters They're In.

By ABC News

Kayaking in Alaska

The sound of my paddle dipping into these frigid waters is like a heartbeat. It has been the defining cadence of our journey into the Alaskan wilderness, a journey we're making entirely by sea.

It takes work to get us where we need to go. Our shoulders sometimes ache miserably as we paddle hard against the current, and when the wind sweeps down from the massive blue glaciers above, it sometimes feels as if we're being slapped by the cold hand of Mother Nature.

We've been paddling for four days now, touring for a week a northern reach of Prince William Sound in southwest Alaska. We've paddled about 25 miles already, having left behind the Swiss-like charm of the port of Valdez and carrying all our belongings with us. At the moment, we're paddling through a system of yawning fjords that are impossibly serene, their vast scale unimaginable to the typical lower-48 landlubber.

The Only Way to Go

This is the only way to tour the Alaskan coast, we've decided. It is mid-June, and there are several tour boats around, massive, offensively white vessels that carry scores of Patagonia-clad adventure wannabes who gawk and snap photos from the deck. As far as we're concerned, they might as well be watching the whole scene on a big screen TV, isolated as they are from the actual touch and thrum of the experience of being on the water. In these sturdy but small sea kayaks, we are a part of this place.

Kayaks afford remarkably easy access to the nooks and beaches of the coastline. Because our approach is nearly silent, the wildlife here has come to see us as one of their own. Bald eagles regularly soar overhead, and curious 600-pound sea lions swim up and stare from just feet away.

Our group of four is loaded into three boats. I'm solo, and two friends of mine paddle ahead in a two-seater. Our guide, Matt, who we recruited out of Valdez from a company called Pangaea Adventures, is a 20-something, amiable and competent fellow. He reads the tides and finds the best beaches for us to set up camp.

The tides are important. Because the tidal currents are so strong at this latitude, we must ride with them lest we find ourselves standing still, or worse, pushed miles back, a kayaker's nightmare. Riding with the tides, we can cover over 10 miles a day, breaking once or twice for a quick lunch or a snack on random beaches along the shore. Last night, we made camp near a small lake where we cast our lines and caught enough rainbow trout to make a satisfying meal for four. Beneath the gaping Alaskan sky, we sleep exceptionally well.

Columbia Glacier

We've been paddling hard today, our fifth on the water. Our pace is quick because we're heading to the Columbia Glacier, the largest tidewater glacier in Alaska. Matt leads, pointing out the lone bald eagle posing imperially on top of an 80-foot pine, or a pair of carousing otters off the port bow. From two miles away, we can already smell the glacier. The air has a kind of fragrant heft to it, an earthy mixture of ice, sea water and pulverized stone.

Just ahead, our channel greets the broad glacial moraine, a five-mile wide groove carved out by the retreating glacier, where the cold Pacific waters kiss the glacier's face. We paddle into the sprawling ice field where chunks that have fallen from the glacier begin their journey to the Gulf of Alaska. The bergs are a brilliant blue, and come in forms from the banal to the bizarre, some of them so strange they might easily be exhibited in a museum of modern art.

Some of these icebergs, Matt explains, 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.

Given the pristine grandeur around us, it seems improbable to me that we are so near the location of one of the worst environmental disasters in American history.

Another half hour of paddling and we are as close as we can get. The ice field is so congested with bergs that even the smallest craft cannot pass. Columbia's 250-foot face looms about a mile away. It looks like a magnificent glass fortress out of a science fiction movie, something computer generated, not at all real. Strangely, what appears to be a solid, changeless form is just the opposite. According to scientists, Columbia 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 fjord.

It wasn't always like this. 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. The magnificent blocks of ice we are paddling around would be in far less abundance if the glacier stopped calving.

There is rock outcropping in the middle of the moraine and we climb to the top where we break out sandwiches and gorp as we listen to the chatter of kittiwake gulls roosting nearby. The hill offers the perfect vantage point to view the glacier.

We linger a while longer and then decide to get back to our boats to begin the long, satisfying paddle to our makeshift campsite on the shore. It is early evening, but the Alaskan sun hangs overhead like a medallion. The trip is almost silent, silent except for the hypnotic tranquility of the Sound and the comforting drip of my paddle in the water.