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Travels in Alaska, John Muir

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Description :

Quotes from the superbly readable account of John Muir's three trips to South East Alaska in 1879, 1880 and 1890, illustrated with images from my recent small boat trip.

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Recently my wife and I took a small boat cruise to SE Alaska, stopping in some of the places Muir explored in the late 1800's. To read his descriptions of the glaciers, the people, the travel on our journey was an interesting contrast for what is a relatively few years. He traveled by steamer, paddlewheel, canoe or foot to his locations, we on a diesel powered 160 foot cruise boat accommodating 54 passengers. We encountered tourist jams in several of the Alaska towns---towns that either did not exist or were recently founded in Muir's time. Muir laments the coming of the tourists but probably did not foresee the actual numbers that would visit SE Alaska's shores, glaciers and waters.

From John Haines' Foreword:

John Muir's Travels in Alaska can be read in several ways, and the sum of them is, I think, something more than the conservationist outlook we are accustomed to.

As an adventure story it reads quickly and well, with any number of splendid views, first ascents and naming of things, and with a minimum of introspection to slow the narrative. There are hardships and dangers, narrow escapes and momentary disappointments, but the predominant note is one of exhilaration and thanksgiving. p vii

To read Muir's descriptions of the Southeast Alaska coast as it was then, to recognize the places he stopped at and explored, and to sense the changes that have come to them, is for me not an entirely charming experience. In these drenched forests and cold, rich waters, we encounter for a last time the original abundance of life, a plenty of bird and fish, of tree life and animal variety. And we learn that we are looking at, and listening to, a world vanished in less than a hundred years. p viii

Now Haines's foreword tends to strike a legitimate toll for the losses SE Alaska has suffered due to the coming of mining, logging, fishing, sealing, and any number of other extractive or exploitative operations, but it seems to me he tends to be a bit harsh on what Alaska has yet to offer to the explorer or tourist who comes to learn and see the wonders that Muir recorded in these pages. The massive impacts of huge cruise boats on SE Alaska are abundantly apparent standing in Juneau, Skagway, Sitka, or Ketchikan. These behemoths disgorge upwards of 5000 persons each into town sites barely large enough to allow standing room for half of these masses....however in many cases the extractive industries which served Alaska well in the past 100 years are alive and well extracting dollars from the wallets of these hoards. Unfortunately, the large cruise industry is involved in a double extraction...transport and then sales in the small town shops in "company stores". It is entirely possible to get off these well-pounded tracks and still have a glimpse of the Alaskan beauty that Muir saw and recorded in *Travels in Alaska*. And it is entirely possible to avoid the tour industries shops and tours and find your own way on foot or bus to local eateries, shops and industries that benefit Alaskans.

I strongly encourage potential tourists to SE Alaska to choose smaller boats for their transport...Alaska Marine Ferries or small ship operators that carry 100 passengers or less and are US registered and crewed. These cost a bit more than the foreign monster boats but are well worth it for the more intimate contacts with Alaska and have far less impact to Alaskan sites.

Our boat journey on the *Spirit of Discovery* was a southbound trip, starting in Juneau and ending 11 days later in Seattle. Muir travels via steamer northbound through the Inside Passage and Alexandra Archipelago, he visits some of the same places our boat docked...in slightly different style however.

So now on to ***Travels in Alaska*** .

1879

John Muir's journey was undertaken to further his understanding of glaciation and get acquainted with parts north.

After eleven years of study and exploration in the Sierra Nevada of California and the mountain-ranges of the Great Basin, studying in particular their glaciers, forests, and wildlife, above all their ancient glaciers and the influence they exerted in sculpting the rocks over which they passed with tremendous pressure, making new landscapes, scenery, and beauty which so mysteriously influenced every human being, and to some extent all life. I was anxious to gain some knowledge of the regions to the northward, about Puget Sound and Alaska. With this grand object in view I left San Francisco in May, 1879, on the steamer Dakota, without any definite plan, as with the exception of a few of the Oregon Peaks and their forests all the wild north was new to me. p 3

The steamer, Dakota, departs from San Francisco making stops in Victoria and Seattle. Muir took side trips on Vancouver Island, up the Frazer River and around the Puget Sound area.

The most interesting of these and the most difficult to leave was the Puget Sound region, famous the world over for the wonderful forest of gigantic trees about its shores. It is an arm and many-fingered hand of the sea, reaching southward from the Straits of Juan de Fuca about a hundred miles into the heart of one of the noblest coniferous forests on the face of the globe. All its scenery is wonderful---broad river-like reaches sweeping in beautiful curves around bays and capes and jutting promontories, opening here and there into smooth, blue, lake-like expanses dotted with islands and feathered with tall, spiry evergreens, their beauty double on the bright mirror-water. p 7

Well, these expanses of trees are long gone except for areas on the Olympic peninsula protected in the Hoh Rainforest and Olympic National Park. The area still has its mirror-water and other scenic attractions but the trees that caught Muir's eyes are a thing of the past.

Muir explores the Puget Sound area for a few weeks finally making his way to Portland where he catches the mail steamer, California bound for Alaska via the Inside Passage.

To the lover of pure wildness Alaska is one of the most wonderful countries in the world. No excursion that I know of may be made into any other American wilderness where so marvelous an abundance of noble, newborn scenery is so charmingly brought to view as on a trip through the Alexander Archipelago to Fort Wrangell and Sitka. Gazing over the deck of the steamer, one is borne smoothly over calm blue water, through the midst of countless forest-clad islands. The ordinary discomforts of a sea voyage are not felt, for nearly all the whole long way is on inland waters that are about as waveless as rivers and lakes. So numerous are the islands that they seem to have been sown broadcast; long tapering vistas between the largest of them open in every direction. p 11



Alexander Archipelago Small islands, British Columbia/SouthEast Alaska

Muir takes the steamer round trip from Wrangell to Sitka and back cruising through the heart of the Alexander Archipelago.



Wrangell Narrows in Moonlight



Peril Strait Narrow strait to Sitka

Muir sets out on several trips around Wrangell and then eventually makes his way north by canoe through the Chatham Strait and on into the Icy Strait, looking for new ice fields.

All the landscape was smothered in clouds and I began to fear that as far as wide views were concerned I had climbed in vain. But at length the clouds lifted a little, and beneath their gray fringes I saw the berg-filled expanse of the bay, and the feet of the mountains that stand about it, and the imposing fronts of five huge glaciers, the nearest being immediately beneath me. This was my first general view of Glacier Bay, a solitude of ice and snow and newborn rocks, dim, dreary, mysterious. I held ground I had so dearly won for an hour or tow, sheltering myself from the blast as best I could, while with benumbed fingers I sketched what I could see of the landscape, and wrote a few lines in my notebook. Then, breasting the snow again, crossing the shifting avalanche slopes and torrents, I reached camp about dark, wet and weary and glad. p120



Glacier Bay



Glacier Bay, Lamplugh Glacier Under Ice Waterfall

1880

Muir returns the next season to Fort Wrangell and then again makes his way north, this time to Sum Dum Bay, the bay that leads into the fjords of Tracy Arm and Endicott Arm.

About noon we rounded Cape Fanshawe, scudding swiftly before a fine breeze, to the delight of our Indians, who had now only to steer and chat. Here we overtook two Hoona Indians and their families on their way home from Fort

Wrangell. They had exchanged five sea-otter furs, worth about a hundred dollars apiece, and a considerable number of fur-seal, land-otter, marten, beaver, and other furs and skins, some \$800 worth, for a new canoe valued at eighty dollars, some flour, tobacco, blankets, and a few barrels of molasses for the manufacture of whiskey. The blankets were not to wear, but to keep as money, for the almighty dollar of these tribes is a Hudson's Bay blanket. The wind died away soon after we met, and as the two canoes glided slowly side by side, the Hoonas made minute inquiries as to who we were and what we were doing so far north. Mr. Young's object in meeting the Indians as a missionary they could in part understand, but mine in searching for rocks and glaciers seemed past comprehension, and they asked our Indians whether gold-mines might not be the main object. They remembered, however, that I had visited their Glacier Bay ice-mountains a year ago, and seemed to think there might be, after all, some mysterious interest about them of which they were ignorant. Toward the middle of the afternoon they engaged our crew in a race. We pushed a little way ahead for a time, but, though possessing a considerable advantage, as it would seem, in our long oars, they at length overtook us and kept up until after dark, when we camped together in the rain on the bank of a salmon-stream among dripping grass and bushes some twenty-five miles beyond Cape Fanshawe. p175

Sum Dum Glacier is now a hanging glacier in the Endicott Arm, the southern arm of two fjords that empty into Sum Dum Bay.

The upper half of the fiord is about from a mile to a mile and a half wide, and shut in by sublime Yosemite cliffs, nobly sculptured, and adorned with waterfalls and fringes of trees, bushes, and patches of flowers; but amid so crowded a display of novel beauty it was not easy to concentrate the attention long enough on any portion of it without giving more days and years than our lives could afford. I was determined to see at least the grand fountain of all this ice. As we passed headland after headland, hoping as each was rounded we should obtain a view of it, it still remained hidden. p 181



Tracy Arm, Fjord Walls



Tracy Arm, Crepuscular Rays

"Ice-mountain hi yu kumtux hide,"—glaciers know how to hide extremely well,—said Tyeen, as he rested for a moment after rounding a huge granite shoulder of the wall whence we expected to gain a view of the extreme head of the fiord. The bergs, however, were less closely packed and we made good progress, and at half-past eight o'clock, fourteen and a half hours after setting out, the great glacier came in sight at the head of a branch of the fiord that comes in from the northeast. p 181



Glacial Ice Growler Ice

The discharging front of this fertile, fast-flowing glacier is about three quarters of a mile wide, and probably eight or nine hundred feet deep, about one hundred and fifty feet of its depth rising above the water as a grand blue barrier wall. It is much wider a few miles farther back, the front being jammed between sheer granite walls from thirty-five hundred to four thousand feet high. It shows grandly from where it broke on our sight, sweeping boldly forward and downward in its majestic channel, swaying from side to side in graceful fluent lines around stern unflinching rocks. While I stood in the canoe making a sketch of it, several bergs came off with tremendous dashing and thunder,

raising a cloud of ice-dust and spray to a height of a hundred feet or more. "The ice-mountain is well disposed toward you," said Tyeen. "He is firing his big guns to welcome you." p 181-182



Sawyer Glacier, clear Tracy Arm



Sawyer Glacier, in cloud Tracy Arm



South Sawyer Glacier and Arm

1890

Muir returns to Alaska a decade later. Juneau is now an active mining town; Haines, Ketchikan, Skagway, and a host of smaller settlements are growing and busy places of industry and tourism to the scenic wonders Muir experienced in his earlier visits.

We arrived at Wrangell in the rain at 10.30 P.M. There was a grand rush on shore to buy curiosities and see totem poles. The shops were jammed and mobbed, high prices paid for shabby stuff manufactured expressly for tourist trade. Silver bracelets hammered out of dollars and half dollars by Indian smiths are the most popular articles, then baskets, yellow cedar toy canoes, paddles, etc. Most people who travel look only at what they are directed to look at. Great is the power of the guidebook-maker, however ignorant. I inquired for my old friends Tyeen and Shakes, who were both absent. p 232



Maynard Linder, 8" Fish River Ulu, Dale Chudzinski Puukko, Books Ulus are now common tourist fare. Please buy Alaska made products, from Alaska owned craftspersons and shops.

Travels in Alaska is a highly recommend book. I have particularly chosen quotes that would best serve to illustrate some of my images but I have left out many of his best passages. Stories of his solitary walks to study glaciers and document their effects in "real-time" which contributed greatly to the understanding of how much the earth was recently shaped by glaciation are to be found in this text. His adventures with a little dog, Stickeen, is excellent reading. His trips up to Glenora, following the gold seekers path is excellent, his bonfire building outside of Fort Wrangell which alarmed the residents is one of my favorite passages. Really just an excellent book but coupled with a trip to the same areas makes it even more special.

Resources

Travels in Alaska, John Muir, 1915. My edition from Sierra Club Books, San Francisco with an introduction by John Haines was published in 1988. Many editions are available from used book dealers. An on-line text from the [Sierra Club](#) site (along with many other of Muir's works) is also available, but I much prefer a hard copy.

The direct link to *Travels in Alaska* at the Sierra Club [exhibit](#)

Dancing Man Knives and Ulu Maynard Linder PO Box 2119 Homer, Alaska 99603

Ulus, are traditional women's knives of the Northern peoples and examples can be found in many tourist shops around SE Alaska. Please avoid those made outside of Alaska for the tourist market. Native Handicrafts or Made In Alaska products support the local economy. Linder produces a number of traditional pattern Ulus and his workmanship is excellent. His Ulus are available in carbon saw steel with natural handle materials of antler, wood, copper, and Sea Cow bone. Write him for a price list or watch for his distinctive work in various handicraft shops in Alaska...you will not see his work in the typical tour boat owned shops. I have been using my Ulu daily since our return as a general purpose kitchen knife and it is a very useful and efficient tool. Highly recommended.

Travels in Alaska, John Muir

More information on Maynard Linder's Ulu can be found in *The Ulu Knife* another of my articles [here](#).

[Dale Chudzinski](#) made the Utility/Puukko in the image. His knives are much like Linder's...highly useful, efficient to use, and made in the traditional way with natural materials. I felt his Puukko was a perfect match for the Ulu.

[Cruise West](#) was our small boat operator of choice for our trip. We chose the *Gold Rush South* as our itinerary, an eleven day cruise from Juneau to Seattle. Our small vessel would accommodate 84 passengers but our trip only had 54. Early season is recommended to avoid the major influx of massive cruise ships.



Muir Glacier Colored half-tone from a painting by Thomas Hill, cover image, Courtesy of the Sierra Club Muir website

Post-scriptum :

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