



WINTER 2012

CØLD SNAP

EXPLORING ALASKA'S FROZEN FRONTIER

The sunlight poking through the end of the frozen arch should be a red flag. It should stop me from even nearing the bus-sized entrance to the massive donut-shaped iceberg. Instinct should tell me to ignore the inviting room walled by blue marble and topped by a streaming waterfall. But the call of the unbelievable is too strong. This dream-world formation will never happen again. The arch will fall—I'm literally watching it melt—but not today. Probably. I could reason my chances all day, but the water dripping from the arch is cold, and I haven't taken enough risks lately. Time to paddle; every stroke counts when you're playing Russian roulette at the edge of the glacier.

Alaska is nothing like Los Angeles. Let's start with the glaring contrast that only sharpens on our direct flight from Long Beach to Anchorage right onto the Alaska Railroad journey south to Seward. It's been a big winter and with the July sun poking through after 20 straight days of rain, water is everywhere. Creeks are gushing. And with more coastline than the rest of the United States combined, the state's paddling opportunities are endless: downwinders, self-support overnights, river trips, sea tours, lakes, lagoons, elusive surf, bore tides, not to mention the fishing missions. We'll have three days.

The rare sunshine melts the tar patches on the Seward docks where we finalize our gear with Chris Mautino. He's eyeing his friend Brendan's 16-foot, rigid-hull inflatable boat. The tubes hold air, but the floor leaks. Brendan applies a duct-tape patch as Chris explains the logistics of getting to our SUP base camp. Brendan will drop him 12 miles down the Kenai Peninsula with our overnight gear, capitalizing on the high tide in order to make it up the river to our planned camp on the lagoon at the foot of Bear Glacier. Photographer Robert Zaleski and I aren't exactly sure what this all means. We'll take a water taxi with his partner Pam Sousa, he explains, then surf into shore, and carry up to the camp. It's all part of his test to see if overnight SUP trips are possible at the edge of Bear Glacier.

"This is going to be an adventure," Chris says, before motoring away. "You guys are definitely the guinea pigs."

Pam drives us south of Seward to Lowell Point, where we pick up four boards at the Liquid Adventures outfitting base and head to our pickup site. It's a typical beach day in Lowell Point with eight locals basking in the sun—a typical beach day where we're comfortably wearing drysuits and wool hats. Capt. Louis Garding beaches his split-V, 30-foot landing craft, using an electric hand-drill to open the aluminum boat's bow gate. We scurry to strap boards to the roof. "You're cutting into my fishing time," Louis jokes, "The silvers are running." And so are we, bouncing through the chop on Resurrection Bay as the view opens with mountains falling steeply into the sea.

Louis kills the motor, and with it, the carbon splurge that's led us here from car to plane to train to truck to boat. We're ready to power ourselves as we climb onto





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the boards and paddle to the beach, where we walk up to find the camp Chris has set inside the rocky moraine arm that divides the Pacific waters to the south from the lake-like Bear Glacier lagoon.

Chris tells us that two weeks ago, he couldn't even paddle in to the lake there was so much ice. But with the lake entrance now clear and the east side laid out like a labyrinth of smaller bergs, we set camp and take to the boards.

In geologic time, things are happening fast. The glacier inches toward the lake like a river of ice, stretching and compressing, the march ending at the waterline. But, winding down from the mountains at such a low angle, we're not too worried about chunks falling from the wall into the lake. Rather, it's the smaller chunks of berg rolling and breaking apart into the shallow lagoon water.

"Yeah, hopefully we don't get any rollers," Pam says, as the four of us paddle into the first grouping. The worries are soon forgotten as we spread out among the formations, getting lost in the striation lines, marveling at the unbelievable shapes, the perfect cubes, the structural impossibilities. We become children staring into clouds: "Oh, look, I see a sphinx ... There's a rabbit! Doesn't that look like a pirate ship?"

I find a berg wall that looks like the hollow swell from the famous Japanese print, *The Great Wave*. It hides a small room with walls that look no thicker than Hawaiian shaved ice. In close, hearing only the drips, my breath, and the echoes of my strokes, totally alone, there's no way to explain it.

"It's like that planet Superman's from," Chris says as he paddles by the entrance. We sound like a couple of stoners, two bags of Doritos deep, sliding into a couch. Going on a few hours of sleep and the fact it's probably close to 8 p.m. with the sun still overhead doesn't help shake the dream-like parallels. Drifting off into my thoughts I add, "It's like that—"



*THE FOG ENVELOPES US IN LESS THAN A
MINUTE, THE HORIZON DISAPPEARS,
VISIBILITY IS LESS THAN 20 FEET.*

BRRRROOM. Before I can finish, the resonant boom thundering brings us back to reality. On the other side of the lake, a half-mile away, a chunk rolls off the largest berg. I expect waves, or ripples at least, maybe the momentary surge inward that Chris says can mimic the tidal flux before a tsunami hits. Nothing. But it's sure easier to feel the breeze shifting off the glacier, raising hairs on the back of our necks. So we head back to camp, stopping only to pull a little chunk of brash ice onto the nose of my board—we didn't bother packing ice for the drink cooler.

I retire to my tent, realizing that I'm still wearing sunglasses. The sun's shining again when I wake the next morning. I have no idea what time it is, and am glad not to. The empty view south to the open ocean shows nothing, no signs of development, and adds to the serene feel. I'm also seeing no waves. With the protected waters of the glacial lagoon behind my back, on one side of the moraine, and what Chris says is the best-exposed break in the region, we figured we could cross two biggies off the Alaska SUP list. But the ocean is flat. At least we can enjoy the clear and sunny conditions in a dynamic environment that can quickly turn.

We make a plan to explore another side of the lagoon over a breakfast that Chris and Pam whip up together barely needing to exchange words. They have their system dialed. Both Southern California natives, Chris

first came to Alaska with fishing buddies and returned to guide trips 10 years ago. It didn't take him long to figure out he wanted to guide his own. Pam arrived in 2004 and they've been building their mom and pop business since with targeted marketing for their bread-and-butter multi-day kayak tours. SUP is slowly catching on in Seward as Alaska's northernmost ice-free port.

But it's been a difficult journey for the pair to spread the stoke, between the astronomical shipping costs associated with boards and uniquely Alaskan challenges, for instance, the SUP demo day they had to cancel in Seward because of a dead moose in the town lake.

They see the potential in standup paddling and have been integrating new tours and trips. Theirs is a nimble, self-made business. As long as they fill their trips, they can spend their winters in Baja in Chris's F350 camper rig, loaded with seven months worth of fishing poles, surf and SUP boards and books. "We're busy for 90 days then we can live and sustain off of it," Chris says. It's a simple and enviable life that allows them to see the seasons stretched between two of the West Coast's last frontiers of undeveloped open space.

Pam had a past life in marketing for the Association of Volleyball Professionals. For Chris, the journey of working in the field has been the only one he has known. His laid-back, reserved demeanor masks his wealth of experiences, but as the details emerge—boatman in Samoa, nearly two decades on Ocean Kayak's pro fishing team, a solo paddle down the Sea of Cortez in 52 days, shark fishing, monoskiing, you name it—this guy could go story for story with the Most Interesting Man in the World.

This morning, the stories veer toward close calls. He's got a head-on

I WAS SO FOCUSED ON STAYING ON MY BOARD THROUGH THE RAPID THAT I ALMOST MISSED TWO HUMPBACK WHALES SURFACING IN FRONT OF ME.



car collision, near-death gem. Then he easily one-ups my go-to yarn about an encounter with a Mexican drug-runner with one about a brutal rock-climbing fall that had him break his arm in four places. On that note, we decide it's time to head back into the calving icebergs.

Pam follows me under the questionable entrance to the giant waterfall-filled donut. The arch does not fall, but in my slack-jawed gawking, I almost knock her off her board as we try to soak in the view, turn our boards, and quickly exit the eerie room. Seals dart away from our advances to the lagoon's north end as the weather moves in: first as a thin line that cuts the mountain at the lagoon's western edge in two, then as an approaching wall of smoky fog. We've just found our first bona fide "alley," as we snake in a line through a small canyon of ice. The fog envelopes us in less than a minute, the horizon disappears, visibility is less than 20 feet. The group spreads into the haze. I roughly know the whereabouts of the shore, so I continue in my own direction.

I'm blind, alone, and stuck in a maze, but couldn't be happier. I'm jumping back and making buoy turns around outcroppings, racing through tiny slots. Chris and Pam have a pretty amazing niche they've carved out. And they've done it themselves, from building their own outpost barn, fixing their own gear, servicing their own vehicles. It's a self-reliant streak that not only runs through everyday life up here, but also a necessary one to guiding trips in the field. I'd



known it from my own years spent guiding wilderness raft trips—enjoying the exhausting days, wearing what works, life stuffed in a bag, exerting utter competence for the good of the group, a bank of stories from the peak moments—and I'm left to wonder why I ever left it.

The next day we're back in Seward in the pouring rain, holed up in the Aloha Room of the Sea Treasure Inn. The CNN stories flashing across the TV don't provide convincing reason to return: record temperatures scorching the Midwest, an economy on the brink of collapse, a lone gunman shooting people in a Colorado movie theater.

I think back to the final paddle out from our camp to the sea for our water taxi pickup. The draining lagoon formed a welcoming river-current, what Chris called a "Jurassic look" against the mountains, and an exciting final rapid where the current met the ocean. I was so focused on staying on my board through the chop that I almost missed two humpback whales surfacing 50 yards in front of me—a reminder of the much bigger picture. All it took to reshape my priorities was a board and a new trail blazed in an amazing corner of the world. Plus a few days unplugged and on the water.

Now I'm back online, studying a map of Baja. ■