



Casa de San Pedro
BED & BREAKFAST



SOUTHEAST ALASKA – TRIP REPORT with Karl Schmitt and Patrick Dome of the Casa de San Pedro

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*Photos and report
by Peg Abbott*





All of our group agreed with a whale's point of view that Southeast Alaska is a summer heaven. During our week long stay, we felt immersed in grandeur, great food, and whales! Hosted by Patrick Dome and Karl Schmitt of the Casa de San Pedro, our happy group settled right in. Surrounded by feasting Humpbacks in Glacier Bay's Icy Straits, we could re-script that fabulous Peter Matthiessen title, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, using whale frolicking its positive theme.



I was looking for an "un-cruise" option for Naturalist Journeys and several years back found Gustavus, a tiny community next to Glacier Bay National Park, home to the wonderful Gustavus Inn. Here, in a historic home with large picture windows looking out to Icy Straits, Dave Lesh, the owner and proprietor, has welcomed guests for over 35 years. He carries on a Lesh family tradition of three generations. His hard work, and that of his great staff and his wife Joanne, gave us the chance to land in the midst of Southeast Alaska's legendary scenic beauty, and simply soak it all in!



We arrived in Gustavus on a scheduled Alaskan Air flight; an ample airstrip allowed our jet to land after a brief stop in the Alaskan capital city of Juneau. Coming in, we had wonderful views of glaciers and lush green forests, and could see the vast margin of land and sea so key to the area's ecological richness. Gustavus sits on Icy Straits, a sheltered area bathed by currents that reach in from the Gulf of Alaska. In the long hours of sunlight, zooplankton blooms with ferocious frequency and Humpbacks feed on this and the abundant schools of herring and other fish that respond to the summer food-chain burst of productivity.



From one cozy base, we would then explore on land and sea, taking a park-service cruise up Glacier Bay, going afield in Icy Straits with local fisherman and a whale-watching boat, the Taz. We walked through lush forests, open meadows and rocky shorelines.



Humpback Whale adults can measure over 50 feet long. The individuals we watched on this August tour regularly swim between Alaska and Hawaii. They are muscular icons of strength and endurance, and we got to watch them day after day, so much at home in this realm. As we approached these whales, standing on the deck of a small boat, we really appreciated their size.



We spent several days on the water, plying the wilds of Icy Straits in search of close encounters with whales. We followed the spouts, sometimes over a dozen in view, and follow them, choosing where to park quietly, engines off, to watch and wait. Whales often came so close we could see their skin texture, their blowholes bigger than dinner plates. They fed with such determination; we'd see three or four at a time, sometimes in open water and sometimes close to shore where mini-currents caused swells in their plankton and fish-rich soup.



We admired their muscular tails, watch water drip off the arc of the flukes, and over several days, we started to recognize a few individuals by the pattern of white on the underside of the tail. Angie was particularly mesmerized, having never seen a large whale — her smile made the whole trip worthwhile!

I think all of us will remember that feeling of joy, surrounded by nature in abundance, on our days with whales. The sheer beauty of the place was a magnet for us to venture out, this ocean playground framed by rugged peaks of the Fairweather Range and the brooding forests of Chichagof Island.

Out on the water we also had close encounters with Sea Otter, Steller Sea Lion, and seabirds: Common Murre, Marbled Murrelet, Rhinoceros Auklet, and both Horned and Tufted Puffins. These tough birds bobbed like corks in the rather quiet swells we encountered, we steered quite close and were happy to see their finery.



We ventured out to remote Elfin Cove, a fishing village poised on the tumultuous open ocean edge, and had puffins galore around us. We had time to wander around the small village where summer life's focus is on fishing, some of the best in the world.

On the coastal margin we found more animals; Revin spotted two Sitka Deer feeding on the rack line, we found geese and mergansers, Belted Kingfisher and Great Blue Heron, and everywhere, sometimes over 40 a day, Bald Eagle stole the show. Clouds of Black-legged Kittiwake gathered at

prominent points where upwelling of herring occurred. Their sounds rest alongside the visual memories.

But not all our time was spent on the sea — we had grand times ashore, so comfortably housed in the family-home ambiance of Gustavus Inn. We shared the Inn with other guests, interesting people from



around the world, all drawn in by Southeast Alaska's wildlife and scenic allure. We had our own table at which we feasted, multiple times a day, on local fare. Breakfast was home-crafted granola, rhubarb sauce, sourdough pancakes with real maple or local sprucetip syrup, eggs, thick-cut bacon, and delicious coffee or tea. Lunch was often soup and salad from the garden, or sandwiches when we were afield.

And dinner was an event! The various courses came out with precision, each night a different fresh fish, garden vegetables, a few luscious complementary side dishes, and then desserts that could be featured on the cover of *Gourmet* magazine for their beauty. Rhubarb was made into sauce and sweets. There were some international touches in the cuisine too; peppers in salsas gave a good kick! We foundered on the entrees, often taking seconds, "May I have just a little more ...?"



It was at meals when we really got to know each other — we all enjoyed the conversations and connection. The dining room was that of the original homestead, and it carried that ambiance well. We gathered ahead of the meal to sip wine and local beers and talk over all we'd seen each day.





Some of our group ventured out by sea kayak to Pleasant Island, a real adventure in the cold and challenging waters of Icy Straits. It turned out they had a banner day with fairly calm seas, giving them time to hike and explore the island, where plants tell an interesting story of how the land rebounds once freed of the burden of ice.

The real surprise was having company arrive on this very remote small island — not just everyday company, but tribal members of the Tlingit nation arriving to dedicate the newly-completed Huna Tribal House, *Xunaa Shuká Hít*, two days later as part of Glacier Bay National Park's celebrations of the park service 100-year anniversary. As our group sat on the beach, in came the red-painted, freshly carved canoes!



The tribal delegation had paddled across the straits from the community of Hoohah, where carving of the 40-foot boats helped bring the community closer to each other and their cultural identity. Over a century

ago, a surging glacier chased Tlingit residents out of Glacier Bay. Establishment of the national park precluded their return. This voyage marked the Huna Tlingit's physical and spiritual return to their ancestral homeland of Glacier Bay. And our kayakers were there to witness it in person!

Peg also spotted the canoes coming in from the Taz, a local whale-watching boat. The captain agreed to veer off course to get a better view. While we missed the actual celebration, we felt a part of the story by being there for the canoe landing. Here are some press stories of this grand event:

<http://juneauempire.com/art/2016-04-13/log-dugout>

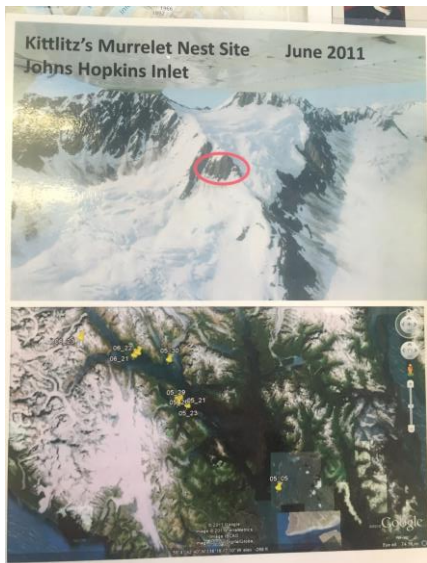
<http://juneauempire.com/art/2016-08-31/after-hundreds-years-huna-tlingit-return-ancestral-homeland-glacier-bay>



While not a birder's top ten destination, Glacier Bay gave us a nice cross-section of northern species and some spectacular seabird viewing. Marv and Margaret were dedicated in their spotting, along with Peg helping all to enjoy what species we could find. Late summer is slow for the land birds, but we delighted in views of Red-bellied Sapsucker, Rufous Hummingbird, and warblers: Orange-crowned, Yellow, and Wilson's, feeding in the garden and fruiting shrubs around the Inn. And Bald Eagles — a common bird!



Seabirds were stunning, and amassed in good number — including rafts of Surf Scoter each with over 1000 birds, migratory flocks of Red-necked Phalarope bobbing in the sea by the thousands, attracting Parasitic Jaeger in for the hunt. Black-legged Kittiwake were the most common, absolutely gorging themselves on herring. For many it was the first sighting of Marbled or Kittlitz Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklet, and the iconic puffin — two species, Tufted and Horned, in our views. The jade green water was fairly calm during our stay, making it easier for us to observe.



It was nice that the context of our birding was educational — the park ranger on our Glacier Bay cruise was up to date on the latest research on Kittlitz Murrelet nesting on high mountain promontories, fascinating! The sounds of Glaucous-winged Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Canada Geese, and Bald Eagle filled the background of our many adventures. In the forest we listened for the chatter of Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and the never-ending serenade of Pacific (Winter) Wren.

Mammals were grand, with super views of Sea Otter, Harbor Seal, and Steller Sea Lion in easy photo range. Some of the Sea Otters were grand old dams with white heads; several showed nose scars marking scuffles with aggressive breeding males. We saw some with still-nursing pups, and marveled at how at home they were far from any land or kelp bed, bobbing like corks on their backs in the ocean swells. Sea Otters could be solo or in the company of many; we observed “rafts” of them, twenty or more at time. One day we circled around a massive kelp island and from the vantage point of a small





fishing boat saw the patterned coats of Harbor Seals, and their inquisitive expressions. Steller Sea Lions seemed tough; two huge ones hung around the docks and gave the impression one would not want to mess with these bad boys of the sea. We saw them in large groups on rocky haul-out spots in Glacier Bay and near Elfin Cove. Watching their muscular bodies ply the jade green as they fished for herring and pollock was impressive.

For many, the Orca show we had was a trip highlight. We first saw a line of tall dorsal fins round a point

close to shore near Adolphus Point where we waited for Humpback Whales. Soon there was massive commotion and Orca began leaping. We watched several come out of the water, full bodies in perfect arcs as they dove back into the sea. There was a young one, just pint-sized (comparatively), and it stayed in the middle of the action with glee, never shirking as the huge bodies lobbed like cannons above. The frenzy went on for over ten minutes, and the motion moved in-between our two small boats — the whale-watching boat the *Taz* and another fishing craft. The Orca of Icy Straits are mammal-feeders, and this group it seemed had a Steller Sea Lion kill. We could not see the kill, but certainly watched the celebratory show that followed. Wow!



We also saw another Alaska icon, coastal Grizzly Bear, on our cruise up Glacier Bay. We first saw a large male on the coastal margin, turning up huge boulders to scrape off mussels underneath. We could see how it used its massive forelimb to pull up the rock like a pry bar and its tongue and teeth to feed in delight. We then saw a female with three frisky cubs, also feeding on the rack line. As we approached

she walked them back to the forest edge slowly, with plenty of time for a few romps and wrestles — what a handful she had with those three! That same day we spied Mountain Goat on steep slopes near waterfalls. We saw them in some fairly barren landscapes. A theme of the park-ranger led trip up the Bay is plant succession, and as lush lichen vegetation emerges, it seems the goats are there, ready to feed.

We traveled a long way up Glacier Bay, right to the edge of the ice. What an experience of beauty! We were mesmerized, especially following a big cruise ship in which was totally dwarfed by the glacier's size.





Gustavus Inn was the perfect spot for us to gather. It is a small enough Inn that we were able to fill many of the rooms. There was a cozy library we could gather in, and when the sun was bright the outdoor porch overlooking the garden was grand. A long deck welcomed us to the interior, where it seemed there was always some lovely snack, or a great glass of wine awaiting. Fresh mint tea from the garden was a treat. When we cooed over the food, they would emerge with recipes, Halibut Caddy Ganty was such a treat.



<https://akcooking.wordpress.com/2011/03/10/alaska-recipe-halibut-caddy-ganty/>





One morning, we enjoyed a hike on a sunny morning around a loop on the Nangoonberry Trail, a Nature Conservancy Preserve. It was level, through a mix of cottonwoods and conifers with breaks for an ocean view. Flowers were late-summer in their growth, with the Fireweed going to seed. We got to a nice vantage point with a view of the bay, then walked back along a Canal where many cottonwoods grew.



In many ways, it was the small things that made our trip, as well as the grandeur of scenery and wildlife. We were pampered without any sense of it being over the top. Color was great in the misty northern realm, from the fishing floats tied to the storage area, to our linens and furnishings. We had flowers on our salads, and they often decorated our pies and cakes. All through the Inn there is wonderful art, much of it from the island of Gustavus — quite an impressive collection.

There was a local gallery and coffee shop just a block away, and after dinner we could easily walk to the Salmon River, with Icy Straits in view, checking for birds and working off just a few wee calories. We enjoyed the local scene, the fish packing plant, the little grocery, and the small art galleries. We left behind a contribution, inspired by the carnival-theme fund-raising event for the island's girls to go on a school trip to Costa Rica, held in the park next door. Feeling a bit like a local was part of the charm.





It was also our wonderful group that made the trip. We blended well, some were keen naturalists and others inspired by all of life, yet all very much enjoyed the sense of place we found in Gustavus and the time to share it together. Our active ones could hop a bike and go exploring, or enjoy a walk to the docks. Karl and Patrick, our hosts, are prized for their hospitality, and their graciousness and encouraging smiles made this trip feel like an extension of the spirit at their Inn, the Casa de San Pedro. Peg wore her characteristic happy smile, and helped us find the birds.

Back in Juneau we had a pleasant last night meal with conservation activists Bart and Julie Koehler. Peg and Sid stayed on for some incredible bear-viewing at two sites they accessed by float plane. Judy, Jim and Kathy ventured up to Haines, rode the White Pass Train and came back by ferry. Others headed home, but Marv, Margaret and Peg got one last birding hike in at a lush and lovely trail.



Until the next adventure!