

From the National Geographic Sea Lion in Alaska



Harbor seals



Bergie bit



Ford's Terror

Tracy Arm Ford's Terror Wilderness

The deep fiords of Endicott and Tracy Arms and the surrounding glaciated terrain within Tongass National Forest have been designated as a wilderness area because of their outstanding scenic value. Today we plied the waters by ship and Zodiacs to soak in the magnificence of such wild country. There was not a cloud in the sky to conceal the highest peaks. Only a few jagged summits had remained above the ancient ice that blanketed much of Alaska. Rounded ridge tops gave evidence of rock-studded glacial ice that had once covered most of the visible landscape. What a geologist's paradise! There were textbook examples of U-shaped valleys, glacial striations and chatter marks.

Our rubber boats maneuvered through icebergs and the smaller bergie bits and growlers for views of the Dawes Glacier itself. Medial moraines of rock and gravel looked like roadways or tractor trails curving down the middle of the glacier. The brittle ice was fractured with pinnacles known as seracs, and was cut by crevasses. We discovered ice swans and dragons. The sculpted ice varied in color. It was dark gray in sediment-laden pieces, bright white, clear as glass, or almost an unreal blue that seemed to radiate from within.

We carefully picked our way to avoid disturbance to the sausage-like harbor seals. A number of this year's pups rested with their mothers on floating ice where they found safety from predators. They studied us with blank eyes as we slowly slipped by.

After lunch the ship's anchor dropped at Ford's Terror. In 1889 this site was named for Harry Ford, a draftsman on the ship, *Patterson*. He entered the fiord at slack tide when the sea was calm, but on his return the conditions had changed. Standing waves, churning whirlpools, and bouncing icebergs provided a terrifying exit for Ford in his tiny rowboat. Fortunately, our Captain and Expedition Leader planned our outing to avoid these conditions today.

We boarded Zodiacs and cruised through a nearly hidden channel that leads back to an expansive fiord no longer touched by a tidewater glacier, but flanked by steep rock walls carved by glacial movement long ago. It was reminiscent of Yosemite, only with water covering the bottom. A distant Zodiac seemed insignificant against the immense cliffs. Brilliant green, delicate plants clung to cracks in the granite. Northern maidenheads caught the mist from crashing cascades and wispy rivulets that carried the snowmelt to the sea. We noticed splashes of color and drew closer to discover Indian paintbrushes, red columbines, chocolate lilies and lacy saxifrages. Alders, elderberries and young Sitka spruce trees gained a foothold here and there in often unlikely places.

We escaped Ford's Terror while the tide remained favorable, and the ship carried us out to Holkham Bay at the entrance to Endicott Arm. From there we turned into Tracy Arm to see another portion of the wilderness area. No houses lined the shorelines. No roads or power lines crisscrossed our view. There were no cars; no manmade scars on the hillsides. Hopefully these areas will remain as intact wild

habitats for future generations, and our memories of this day will return again and again once we leave this amazing coastal fringe of Southeast Alaska.

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