



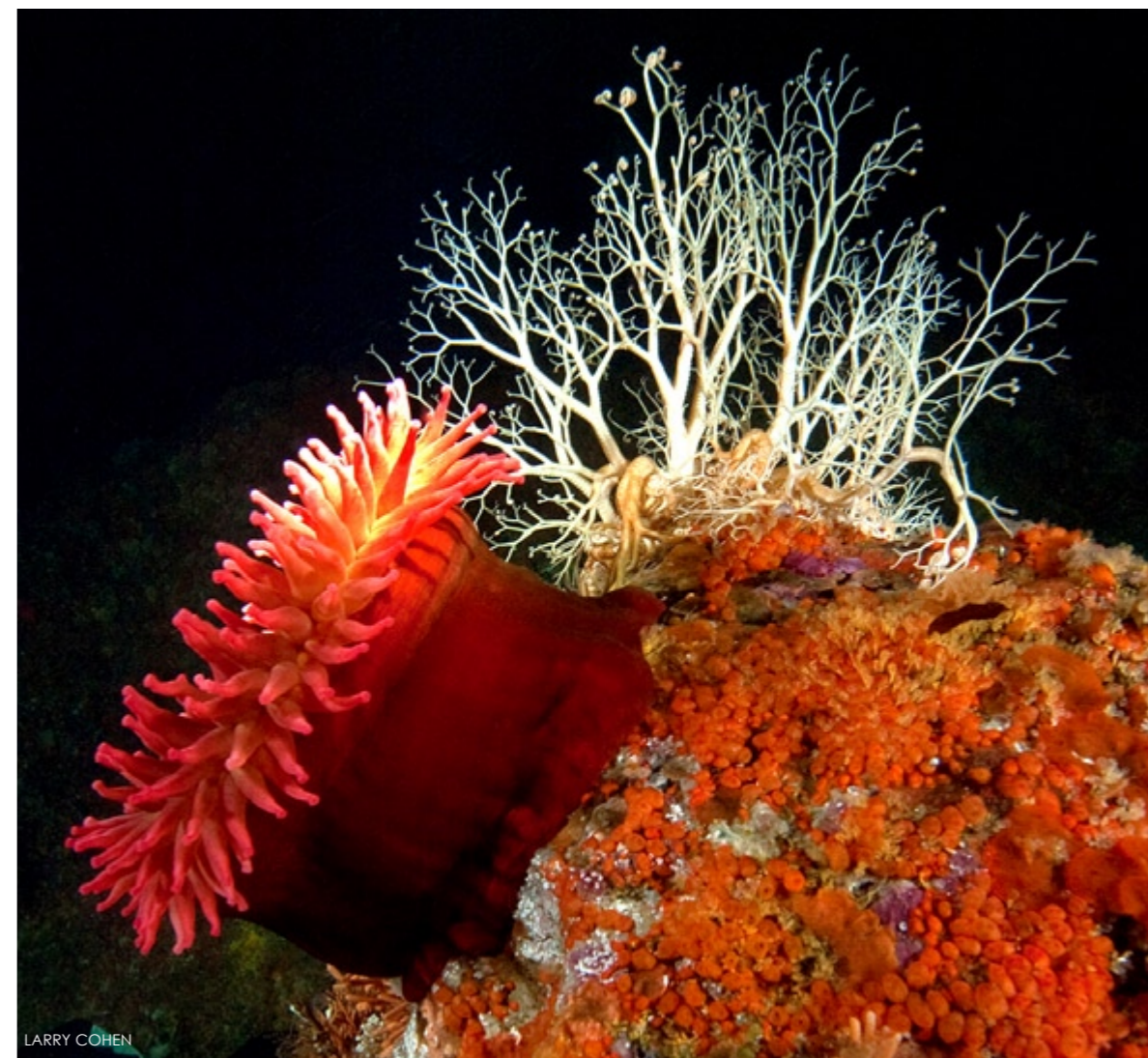
Juneau to Sitka Alaska

Text by Larry Cohen

Photos by Larry Cohen and Olga Torrey



Sitka National Historical Park, also known as Totem Park, has artwork decorated by Kiksadi Tlingit and Haida indigenous people



China rockfish at dive site near the Smudges. PREVIOUS PAGE: Magnificent view of the Mendenhall Glacier

A dive trip to the U.S. State of Alaska is a true adventure, both above and below the surface. The rich green waters of the Pacific Northwest are full of life and photographic opportunities. The liveboard dive boat, *Nautilus Swell*, is a great way to experience Southeast Alaska. This 100-year-old refurbished tugboat is the perfect platform for cold-water exploration. The crew is well versed in dive procedures in this environment. The itinerary began with boarding the boat in Juneau, followed by a week of diving, and departing finally from Sitka.

Before embarking on the *Nautilus Swell*, there was a chance to spend a few days in Juneau. This town started as a gold-mining camp in 1880. When Alaska became the 49th state of the United States in 1959, Juneau became the capital.

One of the not-to-be missed experiences right in downtown Juneau was the Tramway up Mount Roberts. The Mount Roberts Tramway was about 3,087-feet long and rose to around 1,745 feet in elevation. On the way up, one got a view of the upper inside passage, where many cruise ships were docked. Upon reaching the top of Mount Roberts, the Timberline Bar & Grill was a nice place for dinner, before exploring some of the well-marked hiking trails.

There were interpretive signs describing many of the flowers, plants, trees, birds and animals, that one might see en route. Trails started in a sub-alpine eco-

Crimson anemone and basket star on the wall (above). The *Nautilus Swell* (top)



OLGA TORREY



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

Crew on aluminum skiff, *Indie*, checks out next dive site system. Within another 300 feet, there was a true alpine environment.

Some of the wildlife encountered included eagles, ravens, ptarmigan, grouse, marmots, Sitka black tail deer, red squirrels, mountain goats, black bears and porcupines. Along the trails were trees with totemic carvings depicting native legends.

Mendenhall Glacier was also an amazing place to explore in Juneau. Mendenhall was formed during the Little Ice Age, which began about 3,000 years ago. The climate and geography of this area allowed the glacier to survive, while others in North America have already disappeared. Mendenhall Glacier continues to provide researchers with new insights into past, present and future climatic conditions.

The Mendenhall Glacier flows for 12 miles down the Mendenhall Valley and terminates near the visitor center. The ice flows at an average rate of two feet per day, but at the same time, it is melt-

Mendenhall Glacier viewed from TEMSCO helicopter (above); Ice flowing down to the ice fields (left)
NEXT PAGE: Roberto Chavez kayaking just before the iceberg calved

travel

Alaska





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



OLGA TORREY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TEMSCO helicopter on Mendenhall Glacier; The contrast between icebergs and mountains is breathtaking; A 27-year-old bear feeds on salmon

ing at a slightly faster rate. When the ice melts, large pieces of ice break off the face of the glacier. This is known as *calving* and creates the icebergs floating in Mendenhall Lake. When the rate of melting is higher than the rate of flow, a

glacier recedes. The Mendenhall Glacier has been receding since the late 1700s and currently retreats at a rate of 25-30 feet per year.

There are many hiking trails around the visitor center. Some of these short trails have viewing plat-

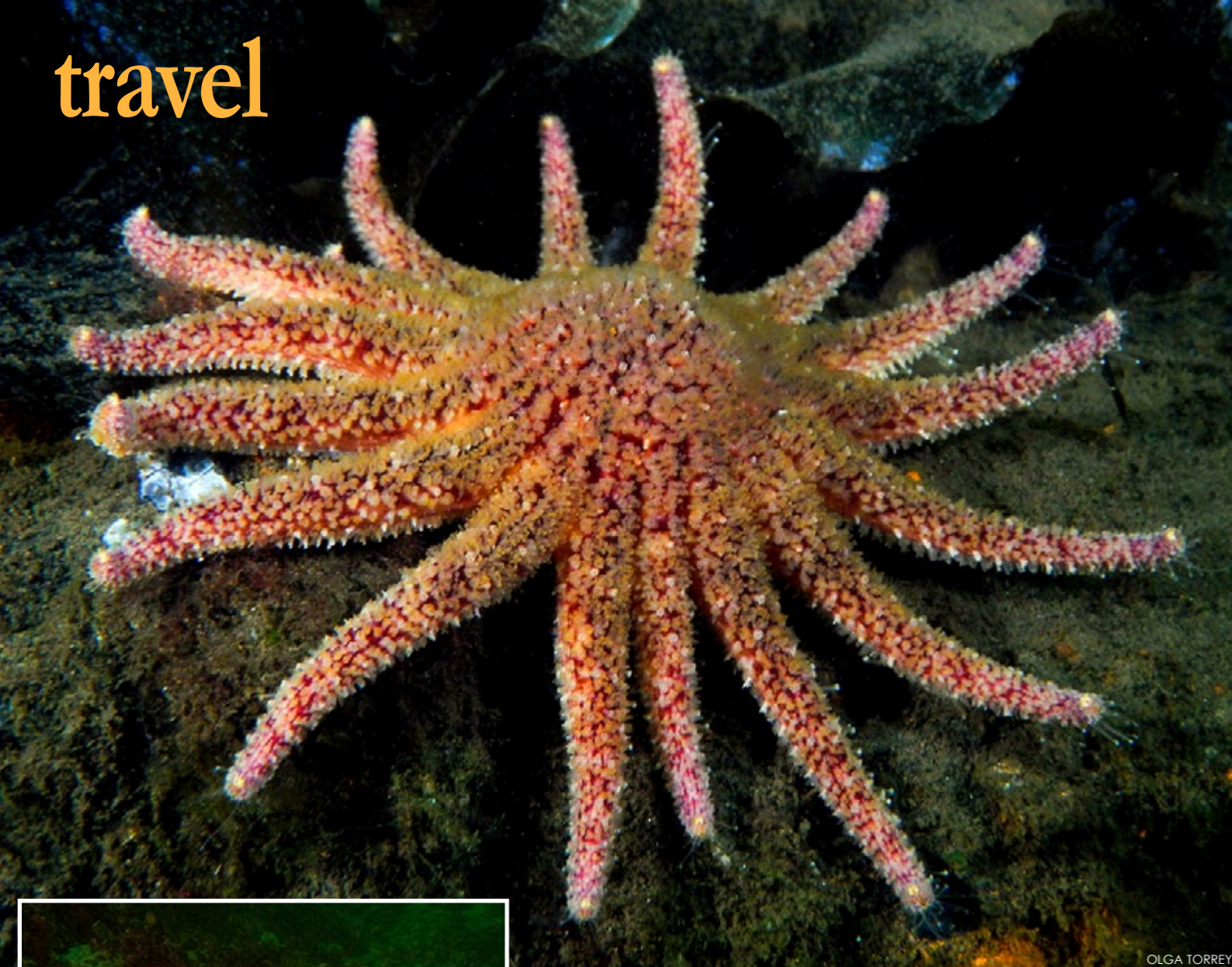
forms to see salmon and bears. Eagles are frequently seen in the area. Small mammals such as fox, coyote, porcupine, squirrel and snowshoe hare inhabit the valley floor. Several small herds of mountain goat can sometimes be seen

on the mountain peaks. The Trail of Time is an extremely pretty trail that is well worth visiting. Bears catching salmon in the stream can sometimes be observed.

Taking a helicopter to the top of the Mendenhall Glacier was a sce-

Icebergs floating in Mendenhall Lake





OLGA TORREY



OLGA TORREY



LARRY COHEN

Sunflower star at The Graveyard dive site

nic adventure. TEMSCO (an acronym for: Timber, Exploration, Mining, Survey, Cargo Operations) takes travellers on glacier tours. This company has been around since 1958. They used Hughes-500D choppers to get their passengers safely to the top of the glacier. Even when the weather was not very good, seeing the majestic mountain of ice was breathtaking.

After all these land-based adventures, it was time to go diving.

Diving

As the crew came to help my dive partner, Olga Torrey, and I load our dive gear, we were happy to see divemaster, Dan Dayneswood, who we knew from our *Nautilus Explorer* trip to the California Channel Islands. Also on board was chef, Enrique Aguilar, who we also knew from the *Nautilus Explorer*. So, even if the diving was



LARRY COHEN

Ling cod on the shipwreck, *State of California*; Dark dusky rockfish at dive site near the Smudges (top); Hermit crab hugging another hermit crab (right)



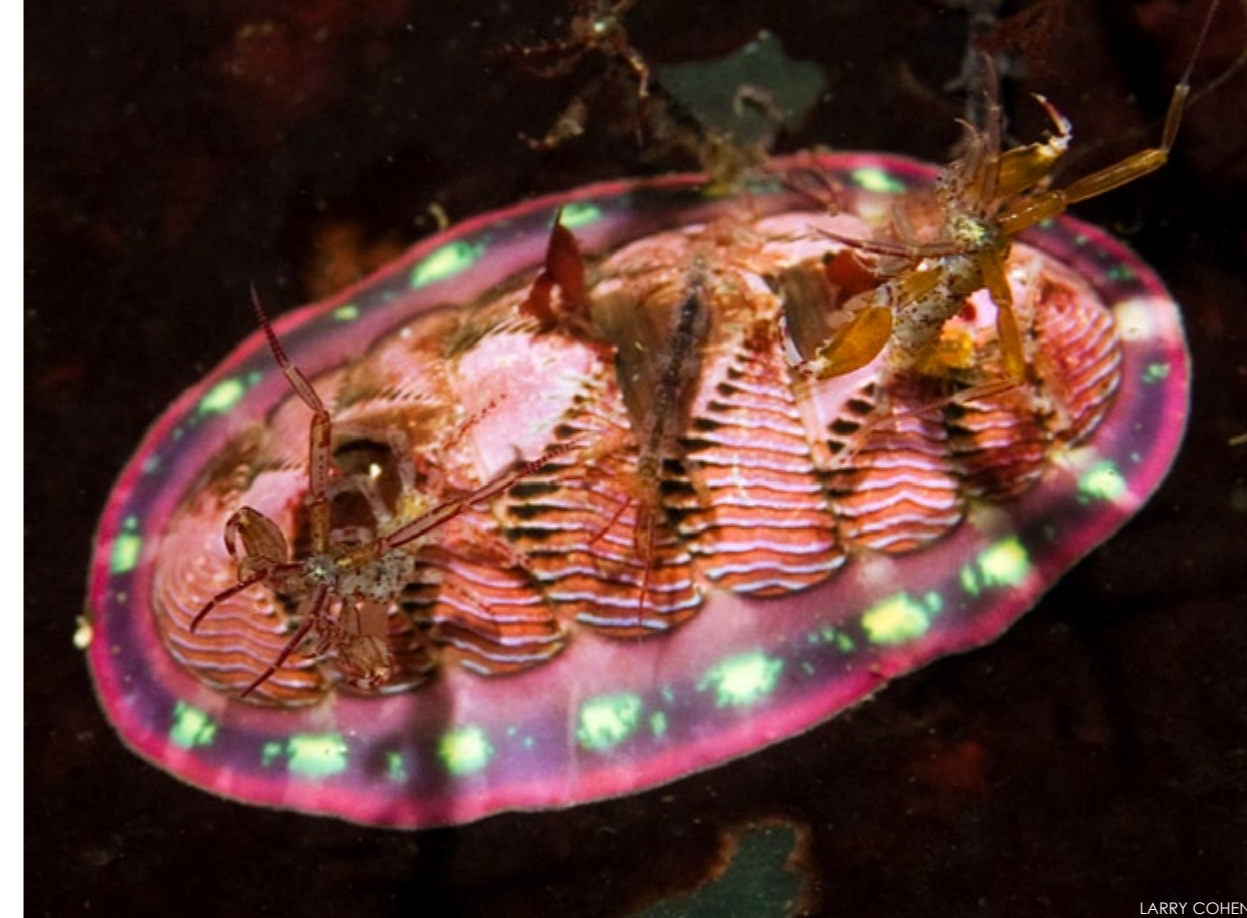
OLGA TORREY

Orange sea pen on Alaska reef





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Basket star at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Shrimp sitting on limpet; Buffalo sculpin at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Crab at The Graveyard dive site

whales breaching in the distance. We knew right then that this trip would be amazing. Most of the dive sites had walls blanketed with anemones, sea stars and other marine life.



LARRY COHEN



OLGA TORREY

Sitka, we had some amazing experiences.

The *Nautilus Swell* was a beautiful old tugboat that was extremely comfortable. The rooms were a little small but well-designed with ample heat, which guests could control. All dive operations took place on the aluminum skiff named, *Indie*.

State of California wreck. Alaska also has many historic shipwrecks. We dove the wreck of the *State of California* located in Gambier Bay. This 300-foot ship sank on the 17 August 1913. She sat in 220 feet of water, but the bow came up to 85 feet. The morning we did the wreck, it was so dark, it seemed like a night dive. Still the wreck provided many photographic opportunities since it was home to so much marine life.

Many of these dive sites were only visited by the *Nautilus* crew. This was the first season for the *Nautilus Swell*, but the *Nautilus Explorer* has been taking divers to explore Alaska since 2000.

All You Can Eat Shrimp. New sites were always being explored, including All You Can Eat Shrimp, named for the thousands of tiny shrimp crawling over every inch.

bad, we knew the food would be great! Well, in Alaska, bad diving just does not happen. As we headed south towards

As we departed Juneau, we got excited about seeing underwater Alaska. On the first morning, we saw humpback



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

If one stayed in one spot to allow the eyes to adjust to the scene, one would see a small area explode with life.

We were told that setting the cameras up with macro lenses was the only way to go. Well, while shooting some tiny sea stars, I saw some movement out of the corner of my eye. In the distance, there appeared to be a number of sea lions. They slowly got closer, and with macro lenses deployed, we now had four sea lion pups buzzing and playing with us. No images were captured, but that experience was burned into our minds' eyes.

Smudges. The jellyfish dive site called Smudges was a disappointment for us. This site was supposed to have thousands of jellyfish just like Jellyfish Lake in Palau. This was a case of *you-should-have-been-here-last-week*. We did see

and photograph a number of moon jellies but not in the numbers expected.

We then went to a nearby site filled with life including buffalo sculpins and other interesting fish. While photographing a China rockfish, my dive partner, Olga, had the unique experience of having a giant Pacific octopus come up between her legs and climb up her body. Another Alaska experience that went undocumented.

While near the Smudges, the crew got word of a pier thought to be worth exploring. Everyone on board got excited about being the first on this site. As we descended, the visibility kept getting worse. Under the pier, the bottom was dark, with thick black silt. When everyone surfaced, they declared this site to be spooky. So, it was named, The Graveyard. That being said, the site was filled with macro life. Tiny skel-



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In Alaska, even a one-inch square area is teeming with life; Mated pair of wolf eels are believed to mate for life; Orange sun star at All You Can Eat Shrimp dive site; Olga Torrey on the hunt to capture images of salmon



LARRY COHEN

Alaska

eton shrimp blanketed every inch. The site was also filled with crabs, anemones and sea stars.

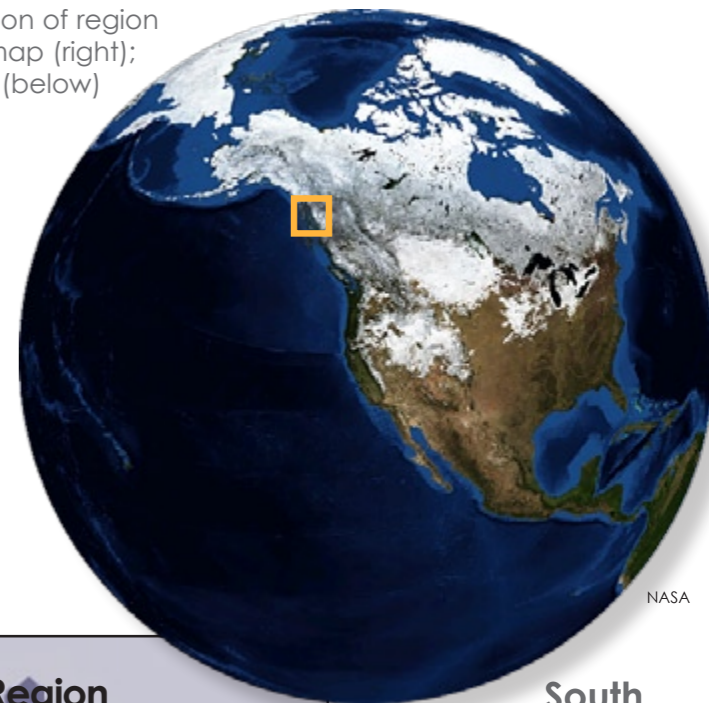
Snorkeling with salmon. Many of the adventures on the *Swell* did not involve scuba gear. Snorkeling with salmon was one of the highlights.

The first site we tried did not pan out. We saw very few salmon, so I used the time to photograph my dive partner in her OS drysuit. The yellow color of the water made an interesting background. Because of the mixture of salt and fresh water, a halocline was created. We had to be careful not to move around too much, or the water mixture would make our images appear out of focus.

The second site was much more productive. Taking a Zodiac upstream until it got very shallow, than it was time to jump in and swim. The water was two to five feet deep. The first thing we noticed were dead jellyfish. Drifting

into freshwater was not good for their health. All of a sudden the salmon appeared. There were hundreds of them. Some seemed to be at the end of their life cycles, but swimming and photographing the salmon was an experience that will remain in our memories forever.

Location of region on global map (right); Map of region (below)



NASA



South Sawyer Glacier

Another great non-dive adventure was the South Sawyer Glacier at Tracy Arm. Donning our drysuits to stay warm and dry on the surface, we took the aluminum skiff, *Indie*, up the passage to get up-

COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The kelp patch turns into a magic forest of giant Metridium anemones below 60 feet; Olga follows a salmon upstream; Schools of Alaskan king salmon swimming up stream



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN





LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN



LARRY COHEN

Harbor seals check out the tourist

The South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm (top left); Iceberg at the South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm (above); Leather sea star, blood star and green urchins on an Alaska reef

close and personal with the icebergs of southeast Alaska. The icebergs were not as large as the ones I experienced in Newfoundland, but they were just as majestic. Being small, they were easy to climb. It was tons of fun to go slipping and sliding on an iceberg. It was also a great place to have cocktails, which were prepared in advanced on the *Swell*.

Some of us took out kayaks to navigate the ice fields. When Roberto Chavez paddled away from an ice-

berg, it calved—a giant chunk of ice landed just where the kayak was moments before.

The *Nautilus Swell* also visits the fishing village of Port Alexander. This was a booming town with a population of 4,000 before the Great Depression. Today, around 80 people call this place home. Exploring this village transported us back to a bygone era. **Vancouver Rock.** It was time to get back to diving. The next site was Vancouver Rock. This beautiful cold-



OLGA TORREY



LARRY COHEN

Part of the trail leading to the Baranoff Island natural hot spring is built on a platform (left); Kelp crab at dive site near the Smudges (bottom left); Cruise ship docked in downtown Juneau (below)

forest of giant *Metridium* anemones. Because of the nutrient-rich waters, everything underwater in Alaska was huge. Some of these *Metridium* anemones were four feet tall. The size and large number of them were visually stunning.

Baranoff Island & Sitka

Before heading to Sitka, we spent time on Baranoff Island. A few of us jumped on *Indie* and did a tour of the bay. We saw a number of seals and sea lions sitting on the rocks. In the water, we saw sea otters. We then did a short hike to a natural hot spring, which sits right

next to a waterfall. While sitting in the hot water and listening to the rushing water, one had to wonder, "Does life get any better?"

Our last leg of the journey took us into the city of Sitka. Since we had an early morning flight, our cab driver gave us just a brief tour of the area. There was a strong Russian influence in the city. Sitka was the cultural and political hub of Russian America in the early 19th century. Sitting in the middle of town was St. Michael's Cathedral, an active Russian Orthodox church established in 1837.

The Kiksadi Tlingit native people have lived continuously in Sitka for over 50 centuries. We did a drive-by of Sitka National Historical Park, which is also known as Totem Park. Here, totems carved by both the Kiksadi Tlingit and Haida indigenous people can be seen along a pathway.

As we arrived at the airport and prepared to go back to the reality of New York, we knew we would miss Alaska. Thinking about all the adventure and beauty, returning to Alaska is definitely in our near future. ■

Alaska

GETTING THERE
Alaska Airlines has flights in and out of both Juneau and Sitka. In the United States, you can connect in Seattle, Washington. www.alaskaair.com

DIVING
The Nautilus Swell is a 100-year-old refurbished tugboat. This live-aboard is the comfortable way to experience Alaska diving. The boat's itinerary includes both Alaska and British Columbia. www.nautiluswell.com

ACCOMMODATIONS IN JUNEAU
Extended Stay Deluxe Hotel in Juneau is comfortable and convenient. It is located across the street from the airport. They provide a shuttle bus to take you downtown. www.extendedstayhotels.com/hotels/juneau-shell-simmons-drive-esd.html

THINGS TO DO IN JUNEAU
TEMSCO helicopters provide charters, plus glacier and dog sled tours. They are located near the airport and Extended Stay Deluxe Hotel. temscoair.com

Mendenhall Glacier is worth a visit. There are many trails where you can observe this beautiful environment and the wildlife that call it home. The Visitor Center is a good place to get information and to warm up after hiking. www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/mendenhall

Mount Roberts Tramway will take you up Mount Roberts around 1,745 feet. Enjoy the view from the tram and have dinner at the Timberline Bar & Grill. With the nature center, hiking trails and cultural attractions, there is plenty to do. www.goldbeltours.com/mount-roberts-tramway



OLGA TORREY

water reef started at 60 feet and gently sloped down to 90 feet. It seemed like there was a wolf eel in every crevice. This fish had a face only a mother could love.

The Kelp Patch. From here, we moved to The Kelp Patch, which is located just outside Warm Springs Bay on Baranoff Island. Below 60 feet, this rich kelp forest turned into a magic



LARRY COHEN

