



INTO THE WILD

A cruise through Alaska's Prince William Sound brings sailors into the heart of the splendid wilderness

Story and photography by Julien Girardot

Qilak noses up to Meares Glacier, a tower tidewater glacier in Unakwik Inlet.



Literary masters including Jack London and John Muir have described the beauty of Alaska with more talent, strength and sensitivity than I could ever muster. I was left mostly speechless during a cruise of Prince William Sound as I tried to take in this masterpiece of nature.

I experienced the natural wonder aboard a 52-foot aluminum schooner designed and launched in 1999 by naval architect Michel Joubert, who made the passage from Northwest Greenland to Alaska in 2012 with polar explorer Janusz Kurbiel. Now owned and operated by a father-son team, *Qilak* is used for expedition sails through Prince William Sound and Kodiak Island.

An excursion on *Qilak* was the best way to get up close and personal with the melting glaciers and colonies of sea lions in



Fish Central in Valdez offers all your fishing needs. *Qilak* sails through Prince William Sound, top. Dorian goes high to navigate through the ice as *Qilak* leaves Columbia Bay.

the Last Frontier, the nickname given to this extraordinary state with a rough and tumble history where nature rules. In the heart of the forest, bears, moose and mountain lions outnumber people. In the sea, otters, orcas, whales and dolphins frolic.

My journey to meet up with Didier and Dorian Forest went through Anchorage's small domestic airport terminal, which was full of business travelers on a mid-summer Sunday afternoon. Given the long distances and the limited road network, the preferred way to reach isolated destinations is by plane, seaplane or helicopter. A few outdoor travelers like us stood out in contrast to the corporate types. We were en route to Valdez and the propeller plane took off with a roar and we flew over the Chugach Mountains and glaciers. Just 45 minutes later I met up with Forest and boarded *Qilak*.



Forest said owning *Qilak* and the business gives him the opportunity to explore this wild place, but he also knows it won't last forever.

"I hope to leave *Qilak* and the business to my son, so he can continue these unforgettable voyages," Forest said. "I am getting older and Dorian is as passionate as I am."

We pulled away from the mooring in Valdez in mid-June, heading for the Columbia Glacier. After motoring for two hours, we entered Columbia Bay, and suddenly it became much colder. Icebergs of all sizes surrounded us and Forest nosed *Qilak* up to the foot of the glacier. As we moved forward, the sound of crackling was heard over the purring of the diesel engine. Rather than pushing against the ice in the calm fjord, it felt as if *Qilak* was sailing through a giant glass of ice cubes. On the port side, two other huge glaciers that were once part of the main Columbia glacier plunged

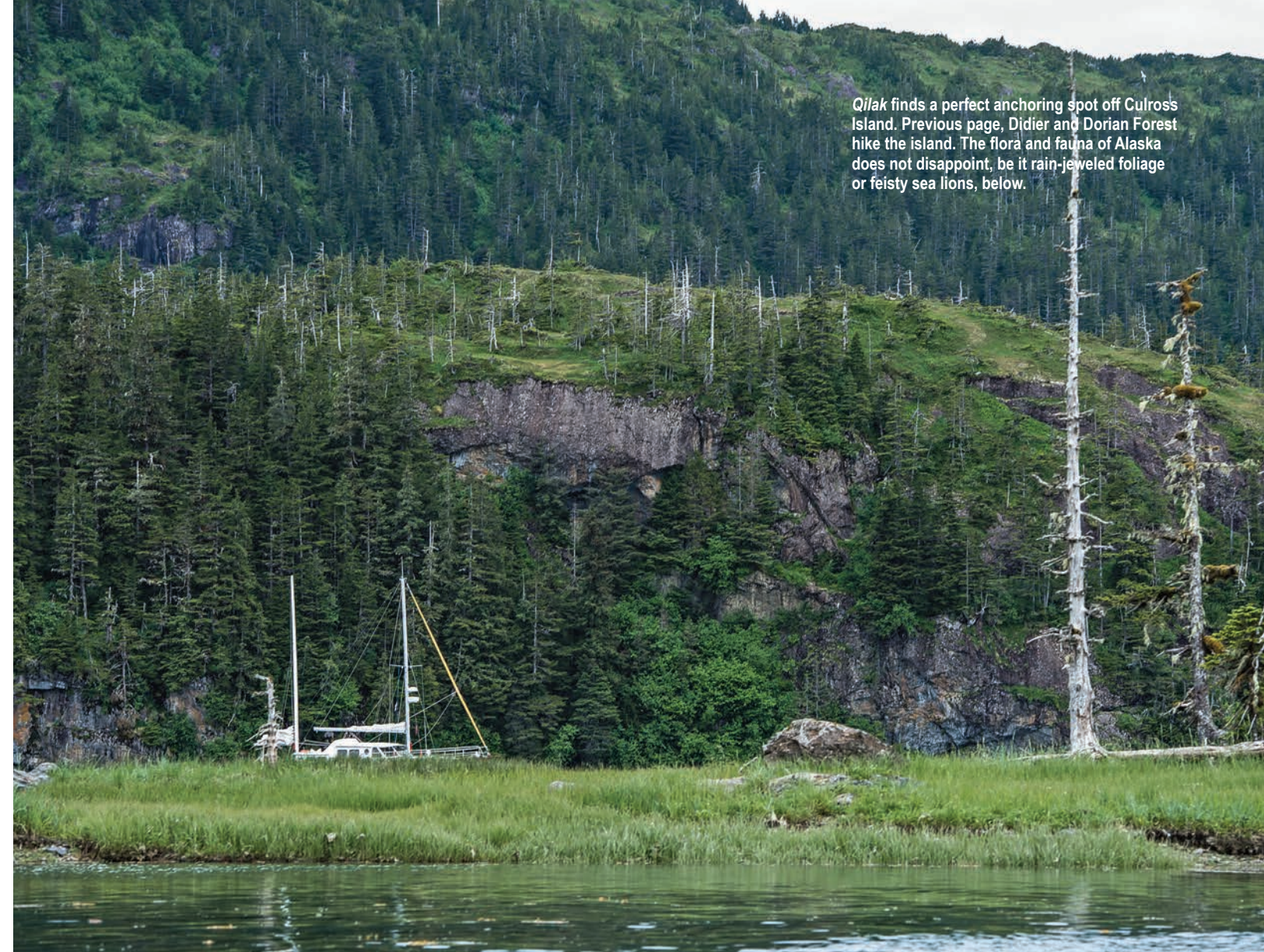


together into the bay. Blocks of entangled, compressed ice, amassed for millennia, arrived at their final destination—the sea—falling into the bay with a heavy thud.

We were at the end of the glacier, a wall of ice that begins 32 miles upstream and 10,000 feet up in the heart of the Chugach Mountains. Scientists are closely monitoring Columbia because it contributes more to sea-level rise than any other glacier in Alaska. Since 1983, when it began to retract, it has lost 12 miles in length and 1,600 feet on each of its main flanks. Scientist hope for a stabilization when it reaches the bottom of the bay. A tidewater glacier remains relatively insensitive to climate change because it generates its own micro-climate. Its behavior is typically composed of recurrent periods of advancing through freezing, alternating with rapid withdrawal, punctuated by periods of stability.

The forces Columbia generates are phenomenal, and deafening cracks of thunder come from deep within. When in motion, the glacier carves the cliffs like a bulldozer, lifting rocks and other





Qilak finds a perfect anchoring spot off Culross Island. Previous page, Didier and Dorian Forest hike the island. The flora and fauna of Alaska does not disappoint, be it rain-jeweled foliage or feisty sea lions, below.

debris that accumulates on the flanks of the glacier, in moraines that appear like black lines.

The tide began to rise and the ice floes became too close for comfort. Dorian climbed the mast to guide us through the small growlers. We stopped to observe a colony of sea lions. Hundreds of animals languished and wriggled on this beach and we could clearly hear their growls and long grunts. Moving clumsily on land, once they took to the water they became acrobatic dancers. Curious, they swam out to gaze at the boat, poking their muzzles with long whiskers out of the water.

We headed west to the next fjord to explore the Meares Glacier. Orcas kept us company, while keeping their distance and we watched their breath and fins popping above the water's surface. Like Columbia, Meares is a tidewater glacier, but it is in an advanced phase. It begins in the mountains, and heads down the valley to the ocean, calving many icebergs there. At its approach, the contrast between ice and vegetation is striking. The height of the terminus is incredible, making us seem very small aboard *Qilak*. We turned southwest toward the uninhabited island of Culross, setting anchor in a sound with strong current running through it.



It was here where I took my first step ashore for a hike in the wild. We walked on a rocky ground covered with a thick moss that was heavily saturated with water. The moss permeated the landscape, from tree trunks to rocks. For a moment I felt like Alice in Wonderland, but I quickly brought myself back from fantasy to pay better attention to the surroundings. This is the land not of the Cheshire Cat, but of grizzly bears and brown bears after all.

On the other side of the island, during another hike in the pouring rain, we observed from a distance a scene from a Jack London novel. The whole world was soggy and I was soaked to the bone, but as I looked up I watched a brown bear feasting on berries. Wild animals are very shy, so the meeting was brief, but it made the cold hike worth it.

The excursion was filled with such pleasures. Vast expanses of untouched nature interspersed with share moments between species. All too soon, my two-week voyage was nearly over.

But before heading to Whittier, we hitched up the Harriman Fjord that leads to the Blackstone Glacier, a massive shelf of ice embedded between two cliffs. In this submerged valley, it was easy to lose perspective. There are more than 10 glaciers of all kinds,



huge cedar forests and huge waterfalls. The sun lit up the mountain tops at the peak of the glacier, and a black sand beach dotted with tree stumps lay at the foot.

As the end of the day approached in the last week of June, the sun dipped below the horizon around midnight before rising again around 4 a.m. I found a spot on the bow for a moment of meditation, and looking out over the dark blue water, forest and rocks, it did not resemble night. This was the 60th parallel, with the Arctic Circle only 6 degrees to the north. At the heart of this clear night, the reflections of the calm waters of Prince William Sound captivated me and I got lost in my thoughts before falling asleep peacefully.

Forest dropped me off at Whittier, a fishing town of 200 people where I spent a night in a hotel that looked like it could be in the movie “The Shining,” but it turned out to be cozy and comfortable. With soft jazz playing in the background, I grabbed a pint of beer in the restaurant overlooking Passage Canal. I watched as *Qilak* headed off toward Kodiak, south of Prince William Sound, savoring my final moments in the Last Frontier. 

For more information, visit www.qilak-expeditions.com.



*Qilak's crew looks back on Surprise Glacier, an active tidewater glacier with its own microclimate in Harriman Fjord, top. Didier shares the route through the Northwest Passage taken by *Qilak's* designer and former owner, above.*