

30SHORT.DOC 10-30-03

On the fifth morning in Vancouver, we checked out of the hotel and crossed the bay to meet a ship to go up the Inland Passage. Went to the docks on Granville Island and boarded the *Sea Bird*, owned by Lindblad Expeditions.

Our cabin was next to the captain's on the top deck. Beds, bedding and bath ranked 10 to 20 times superior to a rusty little German tub we once sailed on in the Galapagos Islands. Sleeping on a life preserver on the deck of the *Sea Bird* would have been superior to the bunk beds in the hold of the Gallapago vessel.

You may have forgotten us having to carry an oar on the decks of the Galapagos boat to kill cockroaches, but I sure remember swatting those black monsters until the decks were as slick in carnage as a whaling ship. As we were to learn, gulls following the *Sea Bird* ate better than we did on a cabbage diet on the Pacific trip. Toward the end of that voyage, the passengers would have jumped overboard if they'd had the strength left to climb over the rail.

Right off, the style of the *Sea Bird* came forth in the salon. At the first briefing, flutes of champagne stood on a buffet among plates of cheese and smoked delicacies. All 45 passengers had plenty of space to eat and drink at tables and sofas. Trained servers whisked away empty

glasses and plates. Corks popped; more hot and cold appetizers appeared from the galley. Linblad has a reputation of style among travelers. Here it was first-hand.

The small ship and the reduced size of the passenger list gave us more for our money. Little or no time was spent waiting in line, or the proverbial delay for late arrivals holding up the programs. The economy and the curse of the September 11 tragedy are probably the reasons for the reduced bookings. We docked once next to a cruise ship carrying 3000 people. Lines leading to the gangplank looked like the mobs going into a football stadium for a Saturday playoff. Made the 70-passenger capacity of the *Sea Bird* sound like a life raft floating into harbor.

In the introduction of the staff, the captain said he grew up in Georgetown, north of Austin. The lakes on the Colorado River are the largest bodies of water close to Georgetown. Whatever talent the captain had for sailing, it sure wasn't an early beginning. He must have been self-conscious about being raised a landlubber, as he pitched in helping the crew load our gear. The few ship captains I'd known considered pulling out the chair for young ladies as heavy duty.

Departing from Vancouver was a slow cruise of the entire harbor area. Rain clouds cleared, arching a rainbow off port side. Decks were not crowded. No demands were made to dress for dinner, or restrictions imposed on seating in the dining room. I suppose such a small ship with a small passenger list was close to being a private charter.

The following days on the Inland Passage going north passed into narrow inlets and calm, deep fjords formed centuries ago by glaciers. Massive western red cedars made 200 foot long reflections in the water. Fragments of clouds fogged the upper reaches of the banks into white streamers frosting a green conifer background. Light mist cooled the hikes in to waterfalls and forest trails. The nautically inclined paddled kayaks in the still waters. Rare was the sight or sound of boat traffic. Ferries ran on reduced schedule because of the lateness of the season. Passengers seeking solitude were able to find empty chairs on the deck.

Servers in the dining room, young adventurous kids, had difficulty understanding my Southern drawl. First evening, my order of roast duck came as a breast of chicken. Table mates laughed until a second order of roast duck turned out to be chicken for an old boy from Boston, who spoke universal English. More laughter and more wine as

the other diners carved thick strip sirloins while the Boston guy and I ate an indifferent piece of fried chicken.

Mid-meal, the waitress caught the mistake. Aghast, she wanted to know what to do. Being appreciative of the language barrier and the temperament of sea cooks, I suggested she ask the cook to draw a picture of a chicken as a basic test. The cook may have been at sea so long he forgot the difference between a chicken and a duck. Never was able to catch her eye again to see if he'd comply.

Days became as calm as the water. Hardest work was raising our field glasses to our eyes or removing a marker from a book. A glorious time it was to be sailing the Inland Passage. Thus relaxed, my enunciation must have improved, as I was able to order duck one night for dinner.