

The Kehmeier Family Alaska Cruise in 2013

To celebrate their 65th anniversary, Norman and Dorothy Kehmeier paid for all five of their children and their spouses to travel to Seattle and take a 7-day cruise to Southeast Alaska on August 17-24, 2013. Except for excessive worrying about arrangements and delayed flights to Seattle, the celebratory vacation cruise ended with no serious problems and many good feelings. We all enjoyed the occasional wildlife, fantastic vistas, delightful villages, great food, and numerous hours of family conversations. It is hard to imagine a better family vacation.

The Kehmeier children in birth order (with spouses in parentheses) are Nancy (Ron), Ruth (Dale, who was absent), Ralph (Margrit), Paul (Olga), and David (Ellie). In addition to these core family members, the group included three near-family members: Barbara Karsch and her husband Greg; and Ela. Barbara and Ela are very distant relatives but most importantly, they have spent many visits at the Kehmeiers in Eckert, so they are like family. Ela flew in from Oldenburg, Germany; Ralph and Margrit from Germany; Nancy and Ron from Minnesota; David and Ellie from California; and the rest from Colorado, except for Barbara and Greg who took a bus from their home a few miles northeast of Seattle.

The voyage was on the Westerdam ship of the cruise line Holland America, which the senior Kehmeiers like best among the cruise lines they have experienced. We were all impressed by the gourmet food, the luxurious furnishing, and the extraordinary service by some 800 service employees.

That is about one service person for every two and a half passengers.

Some places on our cruise have extremely high rainfall, e.g., Ketchikan has over 155 inches of rain/year. Folk wisdom claims that a typical Alaskan cruise has only one day of sun, but the sun came out for a while on more than half of the days. Luck was with us as rain did not begin until right after we returned from shore expeditions on each of two days. Outside it was light jacket weather all week, but generally quite comfortable.

Victoria was the only foreign port, but the security procedures for disembarking and re-embarking the ship were essentially the same for each port. Each passenger carries around a credit card, to identify the account to which anything like wine, trinkets, local excursions, and photo shoots can be charged. But the plastic card also functions as a door key and a “passport” identity card to allow for any departure or re-entry to the ship. At the ship’s exit and entrance door, someone scans the barcode on each person’s personal card and in less than a second it brings up a person’s photograph and all identifying information. With this technology, the ship was able to load and unload its 2,000 passengers remarkably fast.

For the most part, it did not feel crowded except sometimes in the cafeteria-style eating areas where we had breakfast and lunch. At dinner, we stayed seated while young men from Indonesia served four-course gourmet dinners that lasted almost two hours.

Two of the seven dinners were so-called ‘formal dinners’ where suits and fancy

dresses were the required attire. The clothing police were lax about standards and allowed people to attend even if they did not have elegant clothing or even a coat or tie. This formal attire of 'high society' is a holdover from the first half of the last Century, when only the well to do and missionaries could afford to travel on a ship, plane, or even a train.

Formal dinners probably also survive due to the age distribution of passengers on cruises. Almost all of the passengers on our cruise were over 50, and a surprising number are over 70. When the millennials (age 18-30) start to cruise in large numbers, they will put an end to the custom of formal dinners on cruises. Actually, the industry statistics show that in the past 20 years that average age of cruise passengers has been declining, probably because of the rise of cruises that cater to families with young children and because of the rising wealth of those in higher income groups. Industry passenger statistics also show that women outnumber men by 2 to 1. On this cruise, a good number came on board in wheel chairs, both powered and unpowered.

The easiest way to organize notes and photos is by day or by port, so the description begins with Seattle. The ports include Glacier Bay, even though we did not disembark; however, we spent an entire day cruising the bay to watch glaciers. The first full day of the cruise was a day "at sea" because we never stopped as the ship sped along at about 25 mph all the way from Seattle to Juneau, our northern-most port. Otherwise, each day centered on a specific port in the following order: Seattle, Juneau, Glacier Bay, Sitka, Ketchikan, and Victoria BC.

Seattle

Ralph and Margrit arrived a week early, visiting with several sets of friends, while staying with Barbara and Greg at their home in Woodinville. Nancy and Ron arrived on Friday night and stayed in a motel close to the Space Needle and the Gates Foundation Visitors Center, both of which reside in the Seattle Center, first built for the 1962 World's Fair. That night Ron walked up the steep Queen Anne Hill to the popular Kerry Park, which has the most scenic views of downtown Seattle, to capture on camera the Space Needle and City at night. You can find the bright lights night view of Seattle among the photos. Most of the remaining members of our party arrived on Saturday morning, just in time for the ship's departure.

After everyone boarded the ship in mid-afternoon on Saturday, August 14, we slowly glided out of the Seattle dock, past the Hemp Festival, and then Port Angeles, and through the Puget Sound. Perhaps the most unusual scene was the world famous Hemp (code for marijuana) Festival on the shoreline in front of Queen Anne Hill. The sunshine at departure was symbolic of pleasant days to come.

At Sea

The first part of the day at sea took us through very light waves, but by evening, we were feeling a lot of ship roll. The Captain told us that there were two heavy currents coming together from two different directions causing the rolling. We had strong winds, but normal wind/wave action is counter-balanced by the ships stabilizers. According to the Captain, these stabilizers were useless for the roughness caused by two currents crashing into each other. Only one in our group felt ill. Most of us took advantage from time to time of the walking path on deck 3 around the outer rim of the

deck. Although partially covered, most of the path was outside, so walking that evening was very difficult because of the strong bursts of wind and the occasional blowing rain.

Like most other days of the cruise, we spent several hours around dining room tables talking and planning what we were going to do next and how we could do things together. The solution that we came up with was to always pick a couple of tables for our group on the starboard side of the ship. Early risers were charged with grabbing a table early for breakfast, and then early for lunch, with the rest of us joining the group fluidly throughout the morning and early afternoon, unless we were in port. It was pleasant to always have somebody to talk to without feeling that you had to follow a rigid schedule in order to be social.

Perhaps the most excitement of the day was whale watching. The whales remained visible for several hours. The whales teased us by blowing a spray of water, sometimes revealing a sliver of their humped backs. On only a handful of occasions did a whale thrust its tail in the air as it prepared to dive to the depths. As the photos show, some of their tails were covered with barnacles. Herds of porpoises or dolphins could be seen occasionally. Some of us spent hours watching the action; others took naps or read books. Binoculars were the technology of the day.

Juneau

On Monday (8/19), the Westerdam slowing slid into central Juneau and docked at noon. Our arrival was a bit early because a passenger on board had gotten very ill and required additional medical treatment and hospitalization. He was taken off ship first, and was flown to Anchorage where more advanced medical facilities were available.

Juneau is the smallest State capital in America, with only 30,000 year-round residents. Even Governor Sara Palin did not live there, but flew her small plane 450 miles from Wasilla for meetings. Juneau must be one of the few towns that has an airport for seaplanes right in the central city and only 2-3 blocks to the State capital buildings.

Half of our group had made plans for hiking around the Mendenhall Glacier a few miles away. The rest of us took the Mt. Roberts Tramway nearly 2,000 feet up the steep mountain. At the top, we not only had great scenic views but we went to a concert by the 'Alaska String Band.' It was a family of five (father, mother, and three teens) who put on a very polished performance. They tour all over the world and can be seen and heard on their website at <http://alaskastringband.com/>

From the top of the Mt Roberts, we had a bird's eye view of Douglas Island, just across the channel from downtown Juneau. A bridge to this "nowhere" island was built and now a fourth of the Juneau population resides there. After the mountain excursions, we wandered around the town of Juneau, while a few of us holed up in the Public Library to use the free Internet. We had Internet access on the ship, but it was quite slow and cost about 50 cents a minute. Most of our group gave up use of the Internet as well as phones except in the ports. No one seemed to suffer much deprivation from this.

A Day on Glacier Bay

Tuesday was the most scenic day of the trip as we were blessed the whole day with glassy-calm water, beautiful, colorful views of glaciers and the mountains surrounding them. Glacier Bay is actually a national park with ship speed limits and other regulations

to preserve many natural habitats. Glacier Bay is about 50 miles long and almost 2,000 feet deep in the center. Believe it or not, Glacier Bay was completely covered with ice only 225 years ago. The glaciers in the bay continue to recede at a rapid rate.

As we entered Glacier Bay, several National Park Rangers boarded the ship and then provided educational lectures and glacier narration as we crawled slowly passed by one glacier after another.

Actually, we came somewhat close to only four glaciers. The ship sat in front of Margerie Glacier for several hours, with Grand Pacific Glacier off to the side. Finally, after a long wait, it calved (gave birth to a baby iceberg) with a roar and a splash. Many gasps and shouts were heard throughout the ship. Next, we glided over to the Johns Hopkins Glacier, just as a float plane flew back and forth over the glacier. Johns Hopkins Glacier is an unusually long glacier with an elegantly curving pattern. The ship slowly meandered past the small Lamplugh and Reid Glaciers as it headed out of Glacier Bay.

Another highlight of the cruise through the Bay was the animals along the shoreline. A lonely brown bear walked slowly on the rock while several wolves watched nearby, always keeping their distance. Some members of our group had already watched a bear near Juneau catch a salmon and carry it away in its mouth.

Sitka

Sitka (of day five) is situated outside of the Inside Passage, the long channel between the North American mainland and a string of islands all the way from Seattle to Skagway, north of Juneau. It is also the westernmost major town in Southeast Alaska. The ship moored for eight hours in the bay nearby the town. Sitka was the only port in the trip that required 'tenders.' Tenders are the boats that

double as lifeboats and shuttles taking passengers ashore.

Sitka has the feel of a village, although it is the home for 9,000 residents and a tourist port for over 100,000 cruisers. Its distinctiveness derives from a history that goes back at least 1,000 years for the Tlingit indigenous people. It was also a major town of Russian America for several hundred years until Russia sold Alaska to the United States in 1867. About a fifth of the town remains Russian, a fifth remains native, and most of the rest are inbred.

The town is filled with these ethnic symbols, such as Tlingit totem poles and Russian shops. The dominant religion is Russian Orthodox. Dozens of shops sell Russian-style products of many varieties. There are lots of hiking trails and historic parks, but most of us wandered around the town for a while and then returned to the ship for lunch.

Ketchikan

On August 22 (day six), the ship docked at downtown Ketchikan, and a huge sign greeted us saying that it was the first Alaska city. The permanent residential population is 14,000. However, 3 to 5 cruise ships dock on an average summer day, doubling the population. Ketchikan is famous for the 'Great Alaskan Lumber Jack Show,' which none of us attended because of its hokey advertising. Instead, we hiked the trails in and around the city.

The most memorable feature of the town was not the former red light district street called "Married Man's Trail," but it was the salmon filled stream winding through the city. Trails had been built so that it was possible to see the salmon struggling to get up the fish ladder and then the thousands of salmon spawning and quietly waiting for end of life in shallow pools above the ladder. After the eggs are laid in a depression of the creek bed, they hatch fairly

soon but may spend up to three years in fresh water before venturing out into the salt water of the ocean for five years or so. Their internal clocks tell them to return upstream to fresh water, and they find the same stream by a sense of smell. Meanwhile the elderly salmon quietly live out the remainder of their lives resting in the shallow fresh water pools where their youngsters are hatching. Unlike many humans, they let nature take its course without resisting their loss of life.

Victoria

Victoria, on the southern tip of huge Vancouver Island, was our last port before disembarking at the end of the cruise the next morning. It was the first port we visited that had road or rail access from the mainland. It is also relatively huge with a population of 350,000. Our arrival in Victoria was not until 6pm, so we had only a couple of hours of daylight for hiking and exploring.

The cruise ship harbor is about a mile from the Inner Harbor and the center of the city. The heart of the city is symbolized by the gigantic Empress Hotel and the elegant provincial parliament building. As the sun went down, it lit up like a Christmas tree. It revealed a busy harbor, only a fraction of which was due to the cruise ships.

Some of us walked along the enchanting ocean waterfront and then Beacon Hill Park to get to downtown Victoria. The photos capture some of the stylishness of this beautiful city.

Seattle & Home

All in all, the cruise was a very refreshing family event. Within the first two or three days, we became oriented to the layout of the ship. The fact that we spent relatively little time onshore, suggests that we felt comfortable with the lifestyle of the ship,

even though essentially a small town had been squeezed into an iron box much like a so called space ship. Like most cruise itineraries, one needs to retake the cruise several times in order to see and experience everything.

In the days that followed, many member of our family volunteered their thoughts and feelings about the trip by email. Nancy wrote "We are a crowd and all having great fun, laughing a lot." Barbara said "It was the best cruise introduction that reluctant cruisers could have. Thank you." Paul, who almost decided not to take the cruise, said, "We have great memories of the trip." After arriving home in Germany, Margrit wrote: We had a fantastic trip! I must say I really did enjoy every bit of it. It was great to visit with each of you at the dinner table, going for walks on deck 3, enjoying music, glaciers, whale tails and a great beer bar. I am still feeling the ship movement. I read in the internet that this phenomenon is known. It is not unpleasant and it is better since Sunday. It must be another proof that it was a very successful cruise trip as my brain wants to somehow stay on boat." Ellie replied, "I second everyone's sentiments about how enjoyable the cruise was and getting to spend time with everyone. Margrit, I don't think I realized the extent to which you had to be talked into it, but I'm sure glad you joined us. Greg and Barbara and Ela too! I like the idea that the lingering feel of the ship moving is our brain telling us that we want to still be there!" Ron said "I liked everything but I liked the food too much." To sum it up, the head of the family said, "A great success it was."

Note: Associated with this story are 132 fairly large-size photos with captions. They can be found at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ron-anderson/sets>

About half of the photos are appended below in the next 10 pages.



Seattle Skyline on 16aug13 DSC_4017



Hemp Festival Seattle 17aug13



Seattle Skyline 17aug13



barbara n greg on upper deck 17aug13



Hemp Festival n space needle 17aug13



Hemp Fest Police boat at Queen Anne Hill



Magnolia Hill Seattle 17aug13



Norway Cruise Ship Puget Sound 17aug13



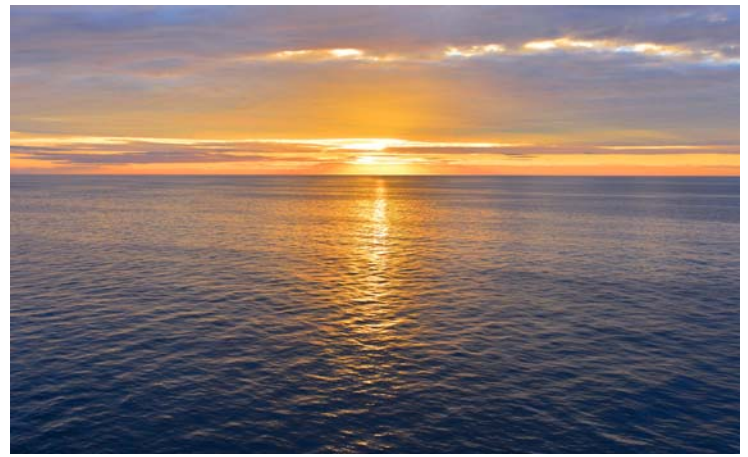
Lighthouse at Magnolia Hill 17aug13



Washington State Ferry Puget Sound 17aug13



Whale tail higher 18aug13



DSC_4491 cropped



Net fishing near Juneau



Base of Mt Roberts Tram



Juneau from Top of Mt Roberts



Eagle on Mt Roberts



Water Airport in Juneau Central



Bear with wolf Glacier Bay 1



Bear and wolf Glacier Bay



Gazing at Margerie and Grand Pacific Glaciers



Glacier Bay 20aug13 no. 01



Margerie Glacier distant reflection 20aug13 2



Margerie Glacier Calving 20aug13



Johns Hopkins Glacier 20aug13



Red rock in Glacier Bay



Johns Hopkins Glacier 20aug13 no. 54



Glacier Bay 20aug13 no. 61



Lampaugh Glacier closest 20aug13



Lampaugh Glacier snout 20aug13



totem pole - Sika



Sitka AK 22aug13 003



Sitka AK 22aug13 005



Downtown Ketchikan aug13



Jumping Salmon in Ketchikan Creek Aug13



Salmon Swarm on Ketchikan Creek



65th anniv couple



paul n olga



ruth and ela



david and ellie



greg n barbara



AK Cruise People Shots 01



AK Cruise People Shots 03



Ron n Nancy at dinner



Victoria Cruise Terminal



Driftwood Beach near Cruise Terminal



Nancy smelling flowers on Exclusive Douglas



Busy Inner Harbor - Victoria



Empress Hotel



Gardening Wonder on Douglas St - Victoria



Best family veranda photo no62 on 22aug13



Group dinner photo