

Dodging Icebergs: A little focus, a little help, a little sunshine, a little flexibility and a little faith can melt life's biggest obstacles.

By Suzanne Wright

There's a wall of ice in front of me—and I'm paddling straight toward it. But first, I have to navigate the icebergs that surround my kayak.



I've been cruising Alaska's Inner Passage on a 36-person yacht. Today's excursion is the culmination of a week of wildlife watching, hiking and biking. This morning, we sliced through the waters of Ford's Terror, a steep and narrow fjord named after a naval crew member who rowed a dinghy into the narrow entrance at slack tide in 1889. As the tide began to rise, Ford was trapped in the turbulent current of the granite-chiseled canyon for six terrifying hours.

We've dropped anchor. The weather, so warm and sunny all week, has turned rainy, chilly and a bit melancholic but it's hardly terrifying. Still, Beth, our onboard exhibition leader, gives us a serious safety briefing before we launch our kayaks.



“Watch out for icebergs—and not just the big ones. Even the bitty bergs can capsize your kayak. Because you only see a fraction of the ice, you don't know what's underneath.”

Her words have a special resonance for me.

It's been a tough few months. Life has handed me series of challenges: difficulties with a kitchen contractor, spats with my boyfriend, uncollected invoices, a friend's battle with cancer, one too many rejection slips, ongoing depression. This

trip is a welcome distraction from the ongoing drama.

Witty and kind Bradley, a fellow passenger, brought his mother on the cruise. We've bonded over drinks and dinner, swapping book and movie recommendations, sharing sunblock and gossip. Bradley takes his position in the back; I sit in the front. His job is to steer; mine is to navigate.

The setting is both spectacular and surreal; I feel as if I am floating in a giant cocktail. Some chunks of ice are the size of cars; others the size of ice cubes. The water is gin-clear, aquamarine, smooth as glass. It's quiet, so quiet that the only sounds I hear are the paddle slapping water, a seal crying out and ice creaking, cracking, shifting, a soundtrack Beth has dubbed “ice crispies.” I take my camera out of its waterproof bag and begin clicking away, trying to capture this moment.

We begin to paddle, heading toward Dawes Glacier, which glistens a couple of miles ahead of us. It takes us a few moments to gain a rhythm, to get our paddling in sync, but I am grateful to have a companion to share this experience.



I make split-second decisions about the potential hazard of the icebergs—big and small—in our path. I shout out the simplest, most succinct directions: “Iceberg right, steer left.” “Big iceberg ahead. Bear right, then straight.” Sometimes the safest path is not the most direct; sometimes, we have to zig when we want to zag. Although we are paddling determinedly, focusing on the ice just a few feet in front of us, we begin to enlarge our view. We agree to deviate from a straight-ahead course.

We paddle toward a huge iceberg that glints like blue topaz. (Actually, Beth tells us the color is storis blue, a shade unique to icebergs). A harbor seal bobs ahead of us, popping its head above the surface. We paddle toward a mother and pup on an ice floe, getting within a paddle length before they slip into the water. We paddle toward the rocky shoreline, then back toward the glacier.

We take turns coasting, putting the paddles across our laps and taking photographs. Or just listening intently for the tell-tale thunder clap of calving, when ice breaks off the glacier and crashes into the water.

Sometimes one of us reacts too slowly and we bump a bitty berg heading while for our target. We brace ourselves, curse, hold our breath. Often, we laugh. There’s a sound that accompanies our miscalculation, a flat “thunk” as we make contact, then clear the icy obstacle.

It’s a little bit scary and totally exhilarating.

I feel very alive, very lucky and very present in the moment. Disappointments, frustrations and fears seem distant. Possibility looms.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the sun comes out. Misty clouds lift from the mountains. The icebergs begin to melt like a huge slushie. There are fewer, less imposing obstructions and we navigate with greater ease. Fewer words are exchanged. We have gained some mastery and more than a little faith in our abilities in the past hour.

Or perhaps we’ve just grown more comfortable with what we can’t see.

All too soon, Beth is signaling for us to return to the ship. Bradley and I are the last of the passengers to paddle in; we jokingly contemplate making a break for it, forcing the boat to chase us through the fjord, thinking we are nimble enough to elude the captain.

Back onboard, Elaine, the bartender, uses an ice pick to break up a CPU-sized block of glacier ice and proposes a martini. I accept, as does Bradley.

“It’s the purest ice you’ll ever have,” she says with a grin.

We toast.

A week later, back home and dining with friends, I am relaying the highlights of my trip. It hits me swiftly and with clarity: dodging icebergs is metaphor for life.

When I say it, I know it strikes a chord because several people nod their heads.

You can’t always know what lies beneath or beyond what you can see, whether you’re navigating the waters of Alaska, financial foibles, relationship issues or dark moods. Sometimes you’ll be unable to avoid the obstruction; sometimes you’ll be able to divert it.

My advice? Plan and execute with vigor. And know the sun will eventually shine.

