

# Ketchikan: the Rainiest Town in America

Continuing Frank G. Carpenter's Travel Story of Alaska

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I AM in Ketchikan, the first port at which our steamers call in entering Alaska. It is at the southern end of the Panhandle, that strip of islands and mainland at the lower end of our territory that seems to be cut, as it were, out of British Columbia. The Panhandle begins just above Skagway near the pass over the mountains to the Klondike and Dawson, and it extends for more than 300 miles. It consists of many large islands and a strip of mainland about thirty miles wide which runs from the Pacific Ocean to the crest of the coast mountain range, the whole making a territory as big as South Carolina. This district is known as Southeastern Alaska. It has its own climate, its own vegetation and its own peculiar products and resources. It is covered with green from one year's end to the other and it differs from the great interior as much as Maine differs from Florida. I shall be traveling within it for some weeks to come.

## In a Marine Paradise

THE town of Ketchikan lies not far from the international boundary. It is only forty miles north of the Portland Canal and within six hours' sail of Prince Rupert, the terminus of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway, and the port which the Canadians expect to make the gateway to the shortest route to Japan and the Orient.

Ketchikan is as far north of Seattle as the distance between New York and Toledo. I sailed for more than 500 miles through Canadian waters before I came to the boundary of Alaska, and from there made my way in and out among the islands to Revillagigedo, on the shores of which Ketchikan lies. The trip took me more than two days and the fare was \$22.

Leaving Seattle, I crossed Puget Sound, the Mediterranean of the Pacific, and then went northward past the city of Vancouver for more than 200 miles through the Strait of Georgia, which flows between British Columbia and Vancouver Island. Vancouver Island is half as large as Ireland and it lies so close to the mainland that the trip seemed like going through a great river. At the end of the strait we crossed Queen Charlotte Sound, and then wound our way on among islands, some of which had mountains more than a mile high, until we reached Dixon Entrance, on the line of the boundary between our country and Canada. The whole way was through inland waters and the steamer moved as smoothly as those which ply the Ohio from Pittsburg to Cincinnati or the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans.

I despair of giving you any idea of the beauties of this voyage. They are so many and so varied. The route from Seattle to Skagway is known as the Inside Passage, and has often been compared to a trip on a great river. It is more. It is a winding in and out among half-submerged mountains. It is floating through great lakes studded with islands. It is traveling along and within fiords like those of west Norway. Now you have the wonders of the Swiss lakes, now those of the inland Sea of Japan, and now beauties like those on the coasts of New Zealand. There are all sorts of combinations of sea and sky, of evergreen slopes and snow-capped mountains. The color effects are beyond description, and the sunsets indescribable in the changes and beauties.

These are the characteristics of Southeastern Alaska. The whole district between the Portland and the Lynn Canals is composed of islands covered with evergreen trees. The whole country is timbered and some of the trees are four or five feet in thickness. Many of the islands have snow-capped mountains that rise in green walls almost straight up from the water and their heads are often crested with silver. The most of the mainland is also one mighty wall of green.

The islands are of all shapes and sizes and they float upon sapphire seas. When the tide is low—and the tide here rises and falls to the height of a two-story house—these islands seem like floating gardens. There is no vegetation below the mark of high tide. The islands are bedded upon the rocks and as the

water falls the living earth seems to be lifted. Then the forests are seated on rocky pedestals of stone, and mountains of green and white rise high above their rocky foundations. Then the vegetation does not begin until fifteen or twenty feet above the water, and there are only steep walls of black rock below. As you sail it is easy



"The Harbor of Ketchikan Is Protected by Islands"

to believe that the earth is made of rock. The rock shows out through the trees. Here bold cliffs, brown and gray walls several hundred feet high, rise straight up from the blue waves; there the rocks show out of the thin growth of pines on the hillsides, and everywhere you have the rising and falling black rock foundation.

The channels vary as you sail on to the northward. Now they widen into great lakes, now they are rivers as narrow as the Hudson or Rhine. At times you pass through gorges walled by islands and the mainland, and at times are in fiords like those formed by the half-sunken Andes along western Patagonia near the Strait of Magellan. This part of our territory is made up of the heads of submerged mountains and in places the waters are a thousand feet deep. In other places there are great rocks as steep, as high and as sharp as the Washington Monument, which come within twenty or thirty feet of the surface. These are the terrible pinnacle rocks that rip open the hulls of the steamers. They are now being searched for and marked with buoys by the wire drag of our Coast and Geodetic Survey. But that is another story.

## An American Town on Piles

LET us go back to Ketchikan. The town is situated on the southern shore of Revillagigedo Island, in a region where the salmon come in great hordes every summer and near banks from which are taken most of the halibut that go from Alaska



On the Steamer's Deck, Skirting the Southeastern Coast

to the United States and to Canada. Revillagigedo is about as large as Porto Rico. It is fifty miles long and twenty miles wide and is made up of mountains which for much of the time have their heads in the clouds.

Ketchikan lies right on the water. The mountains rise in green walls behind it. Their tops are sprinkled with snow, and great rocks show out through the evergreen trees that cover their sides. The houses are built on the rocks. The harbor is the shape of a halfmoon protected by islands. It has no beach to speak of and the business part of the town rests upon piles. The streets are planked roadways upon posts, and much of the freight is carried about on trucks and carts pushed by men. There are several drays hauled by horses, but horses are unpopular, for their shoes roughen the planks, and they shake the town as they trot through the streets. Of late automobiles and motor delivery trucks have come in and these will probably be the future traffic conveyors.

The residence section of the city is located on the sides of the cliff higher up. It is so steep that you have to climb stairways to reach certain streets, while other streets have winding roadways of boards upon which slats have been nailed to the planks to keep one from slipping. The Ketchikaners make you think of the tree dwellers, who have to climb ladders to get to their homes.

The best houses are high on the cliffs, far above the harbor. They seem to grow out of the rocks. Nevertheless,

some have little patches of garden, although the soil has to be sprinkled with gold dust to make them.

In this connection the captain on my steamer coming up told me a story of a Ketchikan man who called with him last month. This man was sitting at the captain's right hand at dinner. During one meal he was in a brown study. Course after course passed and he ate but little. At last he burst out in an agonized soliloquy:

"I knew I'd forget it! I knew I'd forget it! I knew I'd forget it!"

"What?" said the captain. "Have you forgotten something your wife told you to bring back from outside?"

"Yes, I have," was the reply. "And I knew I'd forget it. She made me promise to bring seven sacks of good soil to lay on the rocks and make her a garden. And now I've forgot it."

This is the character of a great part of Southeastern Alaska. The hills are so steep that the soil runs off with the rains.

## Every One Wears Oilskins

NEVERTHELESS, Ketchikan has some beautiful gardens. The most of the homes are frame cottages, and nearly every one has its little law with bushes and flowers. Some of the citizens raise vegetables and berries. In the garden of H. C. Strong I saw raspberry bushes as high as my shoulder which give him all of that fruit he can eat for more than two months during the summer. The berries are large and a fine flavor, and they never become mushy when ripe. Ketchikan also grows currants and salmon berries and it has as many beautiful flowers as a section the same size in Seattle or Portland. It is a wet city, and the moisture is such that the plants will grow on the rocks with soil to speak of. It has been raining steadily ever since I arrived and today during a downpour

asked one of the citizens: "Does it never stop raining Ketchikan?"

He replied, with a laugh hardly know. I have lived only fifteen years."

The city really has rain for more than two-thirds of the year, over eleven feet of water fall that time. It is this that makes the vegetation so green, the leaves of the trees dripping almost steadily as those of the famous forest which is sprinkled by mist of the Zambesi Falls in Central Africa.

Indeed, the southern coast of Alaska is one of the rainiest parts