

AgInt02,2b: Uncovering Alaska's past

Part of the Alaskan traveler's essential kit, is a couple of bells. They're quite like the bells we have on our cat's collar in London to warn birds in the garden that they're about to be pounced on, but these were grizzly bear bells, big ones, about the size of an egg. Among the piles of bright yellow overalls, woolly hats and thigh-length waders I couldn't see any instructions about attaching these bells. But fortunately, before I started talking about our cat to the bearded, barrel-chested assistant, the penny dropped. I of course would be the one wearing the bells. And they were to be ever useful where we were going.

The archaeological survey was among the Kenai fjords in the Bay of Alaska. Yes, there is archaeology in Alaska: many sites, dating back about a thousand years, have been found recently by archaeologists from the Arctic Studies Center of the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. It was the disastrous oil spill by the tanker Exxon Valdez in 1989 that gave archaeology a spur. During the clean-up, archaeologists found over a thousand sites, all along the coast, and since then expeditions have been recording and studying them.

I hadn't expected such a spectacular landscape. There are fjords all along the coast and I looked up at pale blue walls of ice 150 feet high above my head where glaciers ended in the sea. The glaciers growled and grumbled as bits the size of double-decker buses cracked and broke off into the fjord. During the last millennium, villages had to be abandoned as walls of ice inched towards them. The glaciers began retreating in the 18th century but the inhabitants never came back. Our search vessel anchored in the bay and as we headed for the site of a village in a rubber dinghy I looked across the water and saw a black dorsal fin of a shark circling around us. The sea here is teeming with sharks, seals, sea lions and at times whales which may suddenly appear too close for comfort. In Aialik Bay we landed on a bank of shingle that marked the edge of a small piece of forested land that clung to the mountain side of the bay. Our first find was among the roots of a tree that had been blown over. As often happens it had rooted itself over a house and in a hole in the ground we could see an ancient floor, where oil lamps and polished stone tools had been left. There was also a lot of burnt and cracked stone that was typical of the steam baths, a sort of ancient sauna that the Alaskan natives used to build into their houses.