



OUR ALASKAN SONG JOURNEY

by Neill Archer Roan



I can't remember

the first time I pondered Heaven's meaning. It might have been in Sunday school, in church, or maybe even bobber-fishing on one of Wyoming's wild rivers with my father when I was still too young to bait a hook. I do know this: this last week on the Alaskan Song has reset the bar when it comes to defining what paradise means. I imagine God made Heaven first, practicing before he created the Alaskan Southeast.





Imagine resting comfortably in your deck chair, warm pipe in hand, watching a young bear taking wobbly-clawed swipes at salmon jumping up a waterfall's misty cascades. Envision sunlight spilling through towering clouds onto jade-green cove waters so still that your own reflection seems even stiller than you are. Sunsets here paint the horizons the same color as salmon flesh. Everywhere you look, the wild thrives.

It was a week ago today that Wendy and I boarded the Alaskan Song in Petersburg, Alaska. We rose early in Seattle that morning, boarded our Alaska Air flight North, and made our way to Petersburg's port by shortly after Noon. We have been steadily transiting south through the Inside Passage since our mid-day dash south through the Wrangell Straits.

Ever since my good friend Richard Friedman invited me to come North to help get the Alaskan Song back to its Winter port in Bellingham, Washington, I had been keenly looking forward to returning to Southeast Alaska. The last time my eyes feasted on Alaska's wild reaches was in November of 1984 when I toured Southeast's native villages, logging camps, and port communities, playing concerts as a part of Arts Alaska.

When I first came to Southeast, I was flown everywhere in float planes. While there is a magical quality to sharing an eagle's view, it is nothing like what one sees from a boat's deck. Because there are very few roads in this part of the world, there is no driving. To really see this part of the world, traveling by boat is the way to go.

As anyone soon discovers, there are boats and then there are boats. At nearly one hundred feet in length, the Alaskan Song seems much more than just a boat. By any reasonable person's definition, she is a yacht - a sleek, and narrow-hipped vessel that slides through the water with a stealthy whisper





like a beautiful woman who doesn't want to be noticed walking across a room.

To me, she is more than a yacht. The Alaskan Song is a home – a home filled with stunning Native Northwest art, exquisite oriental rugs, glowing teak, leather, and fine linens. There is no question that she is luxurious, but there is not a trace of ostentation or pretentiousness anywhere.

In some places, art can remove one from a place to transplant the consciousness in some faraway time or place. The Tsimshian and Haida panels, sculptures, paddles, and masks onboard the Alaskan Song do just the opposite. Their cedar grains, slate black argillite contours, and abalone accents are talismanic gateways to the deeper, primal-shadowed essence of this place. So, whether I am inside one of her staterooms or outside on her decks, I always feel like I inhabit this place in the deepest sense of what place can mean.

It has been written that home is a place the heart makes so it is no wonder that this home is so welcoming and warm. These words define Richard and Nancy Friedman; the Alaskan song reflects their generous, genuine spirits.

From the moment Wendy and I stepped onboard we were made to feel that this was our home. We have had some of the best night's sleeps of our lives snug in our stateroom, and without question some of the finest meals I have ever eaten I have taken in her forward salon.

Lithesome and tall with glacier-blue eyes and a sunny smile, Nancy Friedman is as much sorceress as chef. I could spend this entire post writing about nothing but her skills in the galley. Her panko-Reggiano encrusted fresh halibut with pineapple- mango-jalapeno salsa almost made me cry it was so scrumptuous. Every part of the meals served is made fresh from scratch and often with ingredients that were still in the water or the ground





only a few hours ago.

Not only are the meals amazing, but so are the wine pairings. It is ridiculous, in my opinion, that in addition to Richard's other myriad skills and accomplishments, he could probably work as a sommelier. The cellar here rivals the best restaurants in Washington, DC. The difference is that I probably couldn't afford to order the wines I've imbibed here. Wendy and I love good wine, and we have been gobsmacked by the range and quality we've enjoyed onboard the Alaskan Song.

Nancy also has an impish sense of humor. Wendy and I have found ourselves bent over double, howling with laughter over and over again. The other morning, as I peeked out through my sleepy morning eyes over steaming coffee, Nancy demurely inquired, "So Neill, how did you like the three-peckered billy goat?" After nearly blowing my coffee over my breakfast companions, I learned that this is a blend made by an Alaskan coffee-roaster: Raven's Brew Coffee. It was great coffee, by the way.

A few nights ago we feasted on cold-smoked black cod that Richard and I had just bought from a Petersburg fishmonger before we left port. The Friedmans have resolved to provision the Alaskan Song from local Alaskan producers so the double-smoked bacon we had with breakfast was smoked in Juneau. The spruce-tip jelly was put up in Sitka. Needless to say, if the fish weren't locals they swam a long way before being caught.

The most amazing aspect of meals, however, is where they are taken. Usually, there is not a single clue that anyone has ever set foot or weighed anchor where we are sitting. The simultaneous sensations of pristine wilderness, refined cuisine, hearth, home, and friendship must be experienced. I simply cannot describe them, try as I might.





One guest summed it up pretty well when he observed, “This restaurant has the best view in the world.”

Living in metro-Washington, DC, the first thing I noticed upon retiring was the exquisite silence. If it is possible for silence to be sumptuous, that is what I have discovered here. Upon waking, I heard nothing but the loon’s cry or the eagle’s shriek. It amazes me how silence can scrub the soul and make a day seem so fresh as to squeak on daybreak.

One only need gaze at the photos I’ve shared to get a sense of the landscape here. Alaska’s wild, fierce beauty is evident everywhere. Everything towers. Whether Sitka Spruce, island peak, boulders, or clouds, the bigness of things constantly reminds me I am small, and that my existence flees like the feathery cirrus clouds overhead. Still, nobody could be in this place long without inhaling its essence and ultimately enlarging one’s inner landscape.

