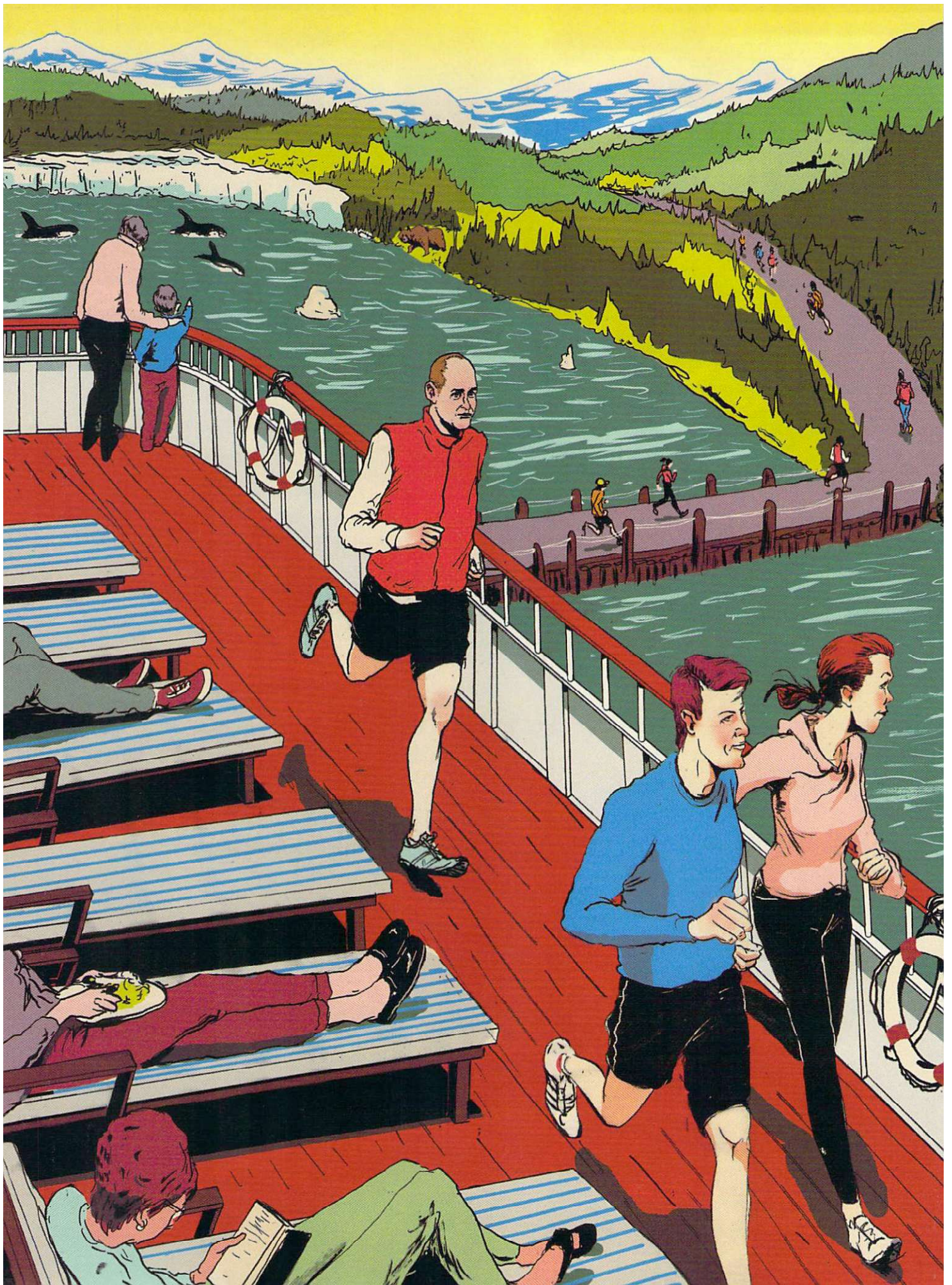


For one slothful writer, a running cruise to Alaska was more than a passage to paradise—it was a mission to rescue the happy runner imprisoned in his curmudgeonly soul (while not getting eaten by bears)









## All At Sea

### **It's after Coach Jenny suggests, at the beginning of a 10-mile run**

starting at the bottom of an Alaskan mountain, that I should "make friends with the hills," that I realize I have made a big, stupid, and possibly life-threatening mistake. ■ I suspect there are grizzly bears living on the mountain, for starters. Does Coach Jenny want me to make friends with them, too? There is the fact that the person to whom I have entrusted my safety calls herself Coach Jenny and that she is married to a guy who goes by the Penguin. I don't trust people with nicknames. There's the uncomfortable reality that while I'm supposed to swiftly move myself 10 miles today—and, by the end of the

next five days with Coach Jenny and the Penguin, a total of 26 miles—thanks to a knee injury and some motivational issues, I haven't technically "run" in 12 years and had recently gained so much weight that when I walked, my superstrength backpacking flip-flops, which I spent a lot of time researching before I purchased them at a high-end camping store, squeaked.

I'm wearing running shoes at the moment, gazing up at the unfriendly-looking "hills," surrounded by scores of men and women who seem less worried than I am. They are stretching, smiling, and laughing, while I reflect on a lifetime of other big, stupid mistakes (the Hawaiian shirt I wore on my date with the Tri Delt; trying to befriend, in graduate school, the pit bull next door; hitting on the nun/counselor at the rehab unit).

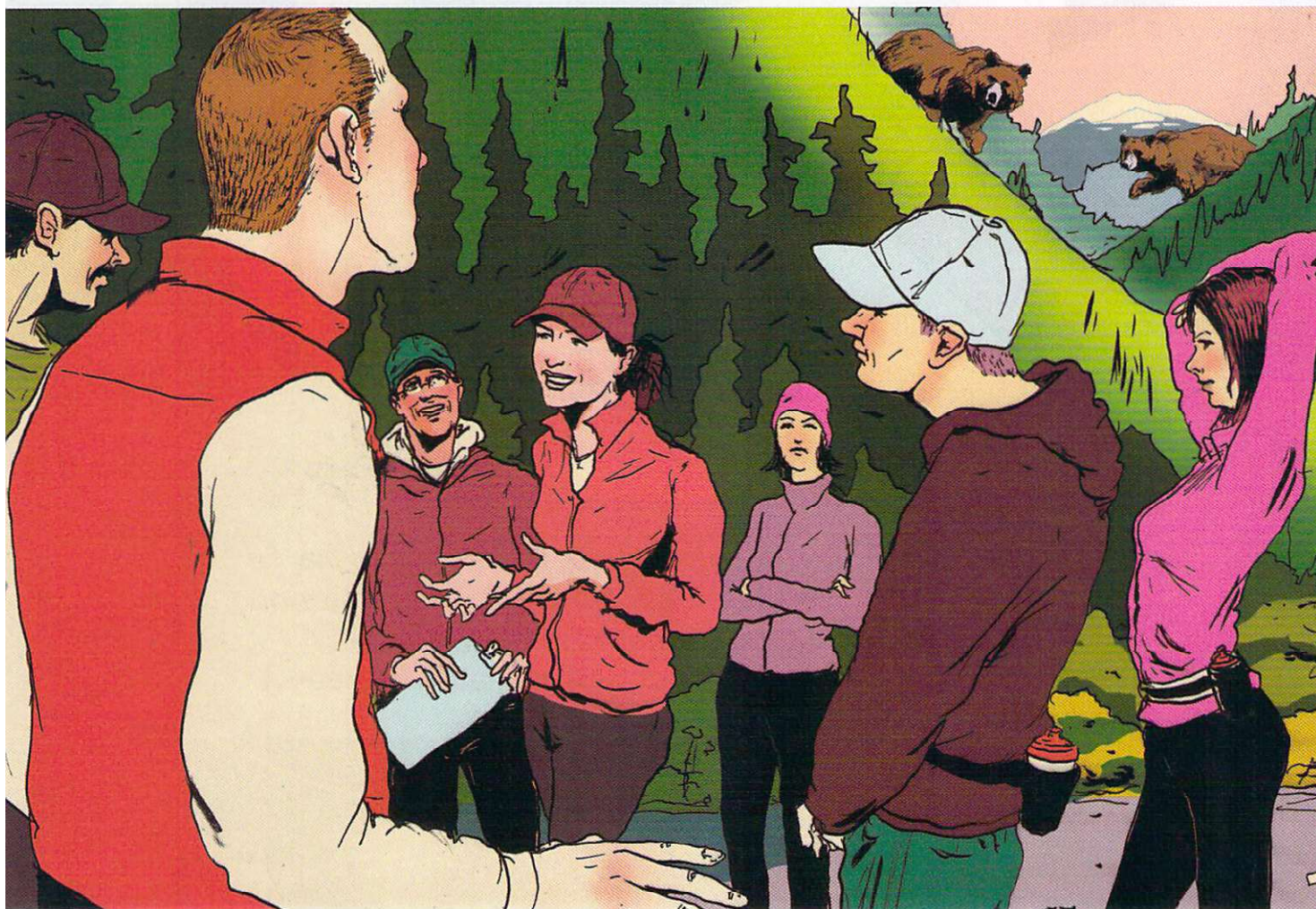
"Today's trail is a mystery to all of us," Coach Jenny says, as the Penguin, standing next to her, smiles and nods. He does kind

of look like a penguin. Is that where he gets his name? "We're going by the Web and by photos."

"What!" I hiss under my breath, but one of the cheerful runners shushes me. Up until this moment, Coach Jenny and the Penguin have been very, very specific and detailed about all aspects of this journey, especially the need for good spirits, stretching exercises, and wet-weather gear.

"I don't think this is a supertechnical trail," Coach Jenny says, "but it might be."

"Mystery?" "Might be?" I regard Coach Jenny and the Penguin and, rising out of the Alaskan mists, the terrible, likely terminal heights. I admire the couple's spirit, their blithe good cheer. I wonder how much money they're raking in from this mysterious expedition. I start chugging toward the first incline. Might this be the beginning of my biggest, stupidest mistake of all?





**T**he world's only staged maritime marathon," the Web site said. I had stumbled on it months ago, during one of my periodic searches for adventure, fun-and-not-too-tough paths to fitness, and meals cooked and served by someone other than me. "Every day brings a new distance, new terrain, and new racing experiences." *Excellent*, I thought. "The ultimate destination marathon." Why not? Here's why not.

Cruise ships in general give me the creeps. The first and only time I had been on one, I'd bunked with a cruise-ship comedian in the entertainers' quarters and spent the week consorting with chain-smoking trumpet players, dancers who wore fruit on their head, and an exceedingly bitter middle-aged male singer whose signature closing was "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." I started taking antidepressants shortly thereafter.

Speaking of medication, soul-sickness, and the unbearable sadness and crushing solitude of a life without purpose (which is to say, cruise ships), anyone who has ever spent a few nights in a portholed hell and who, like me, leans toward self-pity and distressing-if-not-life-threatening moroseness, will admit that the experience of traveling over water in a gigantic ship stuffed to its life-preservers with 24-hour buffets, gushing supplies of alcohol, mullet-headed trios playing songs that were annoying when they were new in the '80s, ice sculptures of large-breasted mermaids, round-the-clock bingo games, and other markers of



**Surrounded by runners stretching and laughing, I gaze at the terrible heights, wondering if I've made the biggest, stupidest mistake of all.**

a once-feisty-and-proud civilization in decline—the experience is not all bracing sea breezes and frolicking orcas.

Still, I hoped this cruise would be different. It would be a *running cruise*. My fellow athletes and I—there were 100 of us out of a total of about 1,400 people on the ship—would be running five of our seven days at sea. We would jog a three-mile "fun run" around the deck, a 10-mile race around Juneau, 6.2 miles in Sitka, and a final seven miles in Ketchikan. That's a total of 26.2 miles: the Great Alaskan *Marathon* Cruise. I had to prepare myself, which would not be easy. Even if I could—through some self-directed affirmations and visualization exercises suggested by my therapist, who happens to be psychic—arrive at some sort of existential accommodation with the terrible ice-sculpted reality of life on the Holland America Line's MS Rotterdam (setting sail from Seattle on July 10 for points north and icy), there was also my lifelong tendency toward seasickness with which to contend, including an embarrassing vomiting episode in deep waters off Miami Beach when I was 8 years old that haunts me to this day. On the upside, we would be sailing the calm waters of the inland straits of Alaska. On the downside, deep in those calm waters, I was certain, swarmed schools of oceanic white-

tipped sharks (the species that has eaten more humans than all other shark species combined—I've done the research).

I could deal with all that. I could do the meditation my psychic shrink had specially devised for me, as well as cut down on my long stretches in front of my television, watching *When Animals Attack!* and *Human Prey*, which she had also suggested.

But there was one problem that no psychic therapist could solve. The trickiest challenge for me would be the least psychological, which is to say, the no-running-for-12-years issue.

I decided to tackle it scientifically, with six months of a low-fat diet and gradual, low-impact, aerobically challenging daily exercise, involving cross-training, targeted muscle groups, anaerobic workouts, and other phrases I had read about.

Due to factors beyond my control, though (sloth, gluttony), I hadn't managed in those six months anything more strenuous, ambulation-wise, than hurrying a few blocks to grab a couple of slices before my neighborhood pizza joint closed. So a week before I was to fly across country and set sail, I turned to Plan B. I visited a sports-medicine doctor, explaining that I hadn't run in 12 years and that I was about to go on a cruise where I was supposed to run a marathon, cumulatively, in less than a week.

"I see," he said.

I told him that I considered strengthening the muscles around my knees, and the tendons, that I still intended to do so, because I'm committed to long-term health and am conversant with the latest trends in sports medicine and human adaptation.

"Okay," he said. Was that a glint of admiration in his eyes?

"But in the meantime, I've heard about this synthetic chicken juice doctors can inject into joints, and it lubricates things, so it doesn't hurt to run. I was wondering if you could hook me up."

He stared. The glint seemed to have dulled.

"It seems like I'd be a really good candidate, right?" I said.

"It's made from rooster combs," he said. "It lasts up to six months. There are some very good reports."

"Rooster combs. Great. Could you hook me up?"

"Well, we'd want to take x-rays first, to make sure you need it, and to rule out other problems. When are you going?"

"Um, in six days."

He stared some more. Definitely no glint.

He offered me some superstrength, topically applied anti-inflammatory drops, prescription strength. "Why don't you try these, and see how they work, and then we'll talk about some x-rays, and maybe injections, when you return?"

"I was really hoping you might hook me up with the injectable cartilage stuff. I'm kind of a serious athlete and I've been doing lots of reading and..."

He shoved some sample drops into my hands and, totally glint-free, wished me well.

**A**t dinner the first night onboard the Rotterdam, I am seated with seven other Great Alaskan Marathoners. They are all very chipper and very fit. They talk about marathons past and running shoes and their daily routines and the great joy they derive from getting out of bed every morning and into their daily routines.





I poke at my chicken glumly. The portions here in the formal dining room seem small. That upsets me. So does all the running talk. Being upset makes me hungry. I consider sneaking out to the all-you-can-eat buffet table on another deck, but stay put. Being known as the chubby whiner is one thing. The secret-buffet-sneaker, though, is a label I don't want to risk.

"I bunked with a cruise-ship comedian once," I announce to the table. "You should have heard the stories he told. There was this one dancer, who dressed up like a pineapple and..."

A runner named Diane cuts me off. She wants to sing the glories of the running GPS she just purchased. The others at the table are interested in this. It seems they all have running GPS contraptions. They also are on intimate terms with the wisdom of Coach Jenny and the Penguin. The conversation moves from running technology to running wisdom to running aches and running pains, and it's then that I see my opening.

"I hear you, Diane," I say, when she mentions a sore knee. "I can relate. I know what you're talking about. I just saw a doctor the other day. I've been having some problems on my daily runs, and he's going to hook me up with some rooster-comb juice when I get back. He'll shoot it straight into my knee. It's like fake cartilage. Very minimal risk. I'm sort of a serious runner and..."

My fellow diners stare. I hear Diane make a *tsking* noise.

"Rooster combs," I thrash on. "That's the thing on its head, the red thing. It's kind of spongy. But we're going to wait until I get back. In the meantime, I'm using these prescription-strength drops. I'd be glad to share them if you'd like."

My tablemates look away. Worse, I feel the ship tilting. These waters don't feel calm. I excuse myself and stagger to my cabin. I am all at sea.

**"My doctor is going to hook me up with rooster-comb juice," I say. "He'll shoot it straight into my knee." My tablemates look away.**



**B**y the time all 100 of us gather for our first run, we have already listened to the first bits of wisdom from Coach Jenny and the Penguin. (Their real names are Jenny Hadfield and John Bingham, and both are beloved figures in the world of running, not least for their contributions to this magazine.) They had addressed us in the Wajang Theater on the first morning, reminding us to bring our wallets when we went ashore (we'd need our ship identification badges to re-embark) and to eat plenty of bagels for breakfast and to not forget naps—"Nap when you can," the Penguin had exhorted us, which made me like the Penguin, because he had just clearly enunciated one of the pillars of my three-pillared philosophy of life. The bagel exhortation made me wonder, until I realized that my fellow running cruisers, unlike me, ate healthfully and sparingly, avoided sugary and coma-inducing trips to the usually-open dessert bar on the Lido Deck, and did not think of "carbo-loading" as an excuse to eat apple fritters upon waking.

He also had suggested that we pace ourselves and that we not cheat and that we remember to have fun. *That seems reasonable*, I had thought. "That seems reasonable," I had said to a bright-eyed, slim, blond pony-tailed woman with muscular calves and trim ankles sitting next to me. She had given me a look.





Now we are clustered at an interior door on the fourth deck (there are 10 decks, filled with the usual cruise-ship casino and buffets and teen disco hangouts and bars and theaters and such) for “a fun warmup,” according to Coach Jenny. This 10 and a half laps around the deck, for a total of three miles, would count as the beginning of our marathon. We had been told to choose partners so that we could time each other, and I had asked the slim-ankled woman who had given me a look if she’d like to be mine. She had mumbled something about an appointment later that day and declined. An appointment? On a cruise ship? This was going to be a very long week.

Before the run, in my cabin, I had unpacked my prescription-strength anti-inflammatory drops but couldn’t find the dosage instructions. Was it four drops per knee or 40? It was one of those, I was sure. I had split the difference and put thirty on each knee, and except for not being able to feel much below my waist, I complete the three miles with no problems. It takes me 27 minutes, 40 seconds, even dodging nonrunning cruisers, surprising me and filling me with optimism.

That sense of optimism has evaporated by the time we gather for dinner that evening, replaced by a sense of queasiness and impending doom and bad memories of that long-ago adventure off the coast of Miami, which involved my 8-year-old self and a sailfish and chunks of a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich floating in the briny sea. The ship is rolling from side to side.

I excuse myself from dinner and retire to my cabin, where I stare out the porthole, moan, wish I were dead, and then fall into an uneasy sleep. I dream about napping grizzly bears I have awakened from their slumber and about trying to run from them, but being unable to because my knees hurt so much.

I wake the next morning to calm seas and cloudy skies and a view of the forbidding dark-green fir trees and perilous, jagged peaks—excuse me, *friendly hills*—rising from the town of Juneau. This would be the second section of the marathon—10 miles. I shuffle down to our breakfast meeting; listen to a pep talk from Coach Jenny and the Penguin about the joy of running and how the object of this trip isn’t speed or winning, it is fun; slather on some possibly-organ-rotting-but-so-far-so-good prescription-strength anti-inflammatory drops; and then we are at the starting line of our first Alaskan land expedition and, I hope, not my last. Except for the fun run, this and the other runs would be about 90 percent trail and 10 percent road.

“We’re going to do the best we can,” the Penguin assures us, as some people begin to ask whether there will be aid stations and whether there will be water at the aid stations, and what will happen if anyone actually sees a grizzly, and what if it rains, and what if someone twists an ankle. It comforts me to hear that others are waking up to the sure terrors ahead.

“And the volunteers are going to do the best that they can.” (Each race is helped enormously by members of that town’s running club, motivated by nothing more than goodwill and a chance to hawk ugly T-shirts and coffee mugs emblazoned with racing-team logos.) “But everyone needs to just try to have fun.”

I begin slowly, because even though I often squeak when I walk and beg knee injections from doctors, I am not a total idiot.

But I pick up speed after a racewalker passes me. I decide that even if I suffer terribly, I will not let any racewalkers defeat me this trip. That is one of my primary goals. The other goals are not vomiting and not serving as a plague vector for any of the terrible illnesses that have made me afraid of cruises in general. Also, avoiding the cruise-ship entertainers, who for some reason seem to me to provide portals into the black, bottomless horror of existence. And not getting eaten by a bear.

I make friends with the first hill, walk up it, and am passed by the same walker whom, in retaliation, I had rocketed past. I start running again and re-pass him. At the end of the first mile, I have left him far behind. I would smile, but I feel faint—whether it’s from too much exertion or overdosing on my anti-inflammatory drops, I’m not sure—and I’m having trouble breathing, and my neck hurts from scanning the woods for grizzlies.

By the time I am midway through the 10 miles—where there is an aid station, with water, for which I’m grateful—I have learned that once I get through the dizziness and pain and anger at the Penguin and Coach Jenny and worry about the keening emptiness, running through beautiful scenery can be fun, as long as I don’t think too hard about grizzlies and don’t say “nice socks” to the slim-ankled woman who dissed me so unfairly when I asked her to be my timekeeper. (I tried that at mile four of this race, and she ran away from me.) At the end of the race, in a crowded Juneau coffee house, I have the best cappuccino I ever tasted and chat with a few other runners. My time is 1:53:50, about which I am hugely, inordinately proud. I’m thinking like a runner now. How bad can the rest of the trip be?



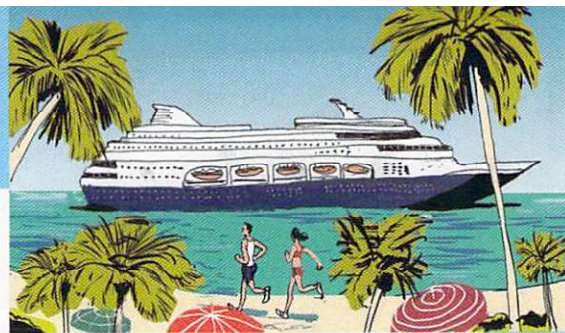
**I see the slim-ankled blond and think she might benefit from hearing my three-pillared philosophy of life. As I approach, she narrows her eyes.**





# Ship Shape

OCEANGOING ADVENTURES FOR RUNNERS



## The Great Alaskan Marathon Cruise

July 23–30, 2011

**COST** \$1,179–\$7,059, plus \$195 race fee

**SPEAKERS** John Bingham, Jenny Hadfield

**SHIP** Holland America Line's MS Westerdam (capacity: 1,916 guests; 817 crew)

### SCHEDULED RUNS

→ Deck race aboard the Westerdam: 2 miles

→ Juneau: Half-marathon

→ Sitka: 5 miles

→ Ketchikan: 10-K trail run

**INFORMATION** gammcruise.com

## The Caribbean Islands Marathon Cruise

February 19–26, 2012

**COST** \$750–\$2,069, plus \$195 race fee

**SPEAKERS** John Bingham, Jenny Hadfield

**SHIP** Royal Caribbean's Adventure of the Seas (capacity: 3,114 guests; 1,185 crew)

### SCHEDULED RUNS

Five races, from 5-K to 12-K, including:

→ St. Thomas: Hill run

→ St. Kitts: Road race

→ Aruba: Trail race

**INFORMATION** marathonexpeditions.com

## Cruise to Run Caribbean

January 22–29, 2012

**COST** \$699–\$1,099, plus \$250 race fee

**SPEAKERS** Bart Yasso, Sarah Reinertsen

**SHIP** Princess Cruise's Caribbean Princess (capacity: 3,100 guests; 1,200 crew)

### SCHEDULED RUNS

→ St. Thomas: 5-K prediction run

→ Tortola: 5-K hill run

→ Antigua: 8 miles

→ Dominica: Trail run, distance TBD

→ Barbados: 5-K race

**INFORMATION** cruisetorun.com

**L**ate that afternoon, back on board, I approach the slim-ankled blond in the Explorations Café. I see she has scored one of the window recliners and that she is working on a crossword puzzle in between studying corporate spreadsheets and sending e-mails. I think she might benefit from hearing about my three-pillared philosophy of life, the second pillar being, during ostensibly idle, relaxing hours, one should *relax*! Before I can say anything, though, she spins and demands to know “What’s that noise?”

“What noise?” I say. “I didn’t hear any noise.”

She narrows her eyes, squints at my flip-flops.

“Maybe it was a mouse,” I offer. “You’d think they would take care of that stuff with all the money we’re paying. Right?”

She continues to squint.

“Great run today, huh?” I say. “I went for a negative split. I think I landed one. I think I’m going to buy a GPS when I get back home. A top-of-the-line one.”

She spins back toward the window, to her crossword puzzle and her spreadsheets and her computer. I groan a little, say something about foot cramps, and then I remove my flip-flops, so when I walk away, she won’t hear me squeak.

I do my best to stay cheerful. That’s what the Penguin has preached—remaining cheerful in the face of adversity, embracing the joy of movement—and he is, after all, according to cruise material, the “Pied Piper of the Second Running Boom.” (Coach Jenny is “coach to this generation of runners.”) To my fellow marathon cruisers, I mention negative splits, interval training, overpronating, and other phrases I have heard but don’t completely understand. I express a kind of resigned acceptance regarding bicyclists, a feeling that they’re not evil so much as misguided. I sigh with mildly disapproving ennui when I say “cyclists.” This seems to resonate with my fellow running cruis-

ers. Ultramarathoners? “Impressive athletes, sure,” I sniff, “but isn’t there something, how I shall I say it, *unbalanced* about them?” I think my fellow cruisers are starting to like me. I don’t mention the rooster juice or my knee drops anymore.

Still, there are problems. The blond continues to shun me, for starters. And I don’t care for the way a woman from Texas barks like a seal during our morning meeting in the Wajang Theater with the Penguin and Coach Jenny, or how she says “awesome” and “rock on” and “cool beans” whenever they tell us about a sight we’re going to see, or a trail we’re going to run. Also, though I have no hard proof, I’m pretty sure a few members of the Michigan contingent are hogging the morning bagels. That pisses me off. That seems really un-Great-Alaskan-Marathon-Cruise-like.

Then there is the matter of rough waters. The ship is rolling again. I approach Angelika, the liaison between the cruise line and the rest of us. Angelika, we have been told, is the go-to person for details like changing cabins, what documents we need, and passport issues. Angelika has portrayed herself thus far as efficient and semi-omniscient. She speaks with a clipped German accent and is extremely clear and insistent about details like timeliness, ferry schedules, and the harsh and exacting penalties for those unfortunate cruisers who are late or who forget their paperwork. She could not be more precise when it comes to nonrefundable deposits. But when I tell Angelika that the first night was choppier than I had been led to believe by the online depiction of the event, and then inquire as to whether the rest of the trip will be calmer, as I remember the brochure had promised, Angelika is suddenly vague. Angelika is suddenly clueless.

“I do not know,” Angelika says.

“You do not know?” I inquire. I do not mean to, but I believe by (unconsciously!) eschewing the traditional contraction of “do” and “not” I am sounding sort of Teutonic. Angelika does



something with her mouth that makes her look like she ate a bad piece of salmon. I think she thinks I'm mocking her.

She shrugs her shoulders. "It's Alaska," she says.

This makes me unhappy.

There are the still-smallish portions of food at dinner, too; that bothers me. And the squealing kids around the pool on the Lido Deck. Can't Holland America put them in a soundproof day-care room? I make a note to discuss that with Angelika when she's not so cranky. And some of the nonrunning cruisers, who, compared to us runners tend to be lazy, overweight slugs (I say that with no judgment), tend to snatch up the reclining window seats in the Explorations Café, where I like to sprawl, eat apple fritters, and stare into space. Sprawling while I stare into space—technically one activity—is the third pillar of my holy trinity of life philosophy. Eating apple fritters is just something I like to do.

Those are quibbles, though. I'm getting to like some of the other runners, and discovering that when it comes to strangers and small talk, running makes things so much easier. If I'm stuck for something to say, I can ask how someone is feeling, or whether they're enjoying the runs, or remark on how beautiful the landscape is, or crack wise and mildly nasty about cyclists. Except for the ponytailed blond, other runners respond well to this.

By the time of our second long run, a 6.2-miler through the

friendly and still grizzly-infested roads and trails of Sitka, I have even made a few friends. A Texan named Belinda offers me some ginger at dinner when she sees me turning green. A Marylander named George, to whom I had confessed my 12 years of sedentary-ness, compliments me on finishing the three-mile deck warmup and the 10-mile Juneau run. Even the noncruisers say to me (and the other runners, all of us in our complimentary red Great Alaskan Marathon Cruise vests), things like "Go get 'em!" and "You guys are animals!" as we disembark. When this occurs, the woman from Texas makes seal noises and yells "Awesome!"


My best pal is Corey, a 46-year-old librarian from Oregon, who in Sitka decides he'll slow down his usual seven-minute pace (his marathon personal record is 2:42) to keep me company. We run through high marshes and past thick, old totem poles and below soaring bald eagles, and we discuss our lives. We bond over the natural beauty, and how good it feels to be moving through it under our own power. We discuss the death of print and the greatest sports movies ever made (*Hoosiers* and *Rudy* are no-brainers; there is some spirited debate regarding the *Rocky* series versus *Field of Dreams*). We agree on the enduring and underrated value of board games. "If you were playing Risk in college," Corey says, "and you wanted to be on the Kamchatka Peninsula, then you were a functional moron."

"True," I say, "so true," as we jog up hills, across flats, beneath wispy clouds. Running with someone is so much more fun than running alone! I feel that Corey is my brother now. I also suspect, though I can't tell for sure because he merely grunts when I bring it up, that Corey sympathizes with my resentment of the children by the pool and the recliner-grabbers in the Explorations Café. I *know* he shares my bafflement and hurt at the behavior of the attractive blond, who, as it turns out, is from Chicago. She has rebuffed him, too. Aren't Midwesterners supposed to be friendly? We agree that women are strange creatures. On Corey's behalf, when we run alongside the Chicagoan (she's slim-ankled but no speed demon), I mention to her that I have heard from locals that there are rabid grizzlies up ahead, and she should be careful. Yes, it's childish, and I'm not sure bears can be rabid, but it gives Corey and me a good laugh nonetheless.

Near the end of our run, I realize I forgot to dose myself with the prescription-strength drops, and to my delight and surprise, my knees don't hurt. Is it the company or the springy terrain? Is it the fresh air, the gentle enthusiasm of Coach Jenny and the Penguin, whom I am beginning to love? Corey's kindness? Is it because at some molecular level, I know that the more I run, the less I have to hate myself for my fritter-inspired afternoon naps? Maybe Coach Jenny and the Penguin and a nascent life of running have inspired a new and improved philosophy of life. Not that I'm ready to give up napping, relaxing, or staring into space while chewing on a nice fritter, but still, it's a thing to consider.

I don't know, but by the time of our fourth and final run—a seven-miler starting and finishing at a park 15 miles outside Ketchikan—I'm actually excited to lace up my trail-running shoes. I know that my new life of running might be more difficult without Corey as the carrot and the racewalker as the stick, and without the Explorations Café as

(continued on page 119)

  
**Remorseless, I close on my prey.  
My speed is so great it seems as if he is  
walking. Maybe because he is walking.**





## ALL AT SEA

Continued from page 99

a place to rest and rejuvenate, and without all the free food, and without the urging, camaraderie, and support of the Penguin and the barking seal woman et al, but still, as a general principle, I'm beginning to think that this running thing might have merit.

After we disembark ("Have fun!" I shout at our fat, lazy, kind but pitiable nonrunning cruise compatriots. "I know we're going to!"), a bus drives us to a shelter built by the WPA (you don't go to Alaska without learning some local history) and after a few words from the Penguin and Coach Jenny, we're off. Corey has abandoned me, so I start at what I think will be a comfortable pace, enjoying the scenery (more trees, more clouds, some big black birds that might be crows; honestly, the Alaskan splendor looks pretty similar to me each place we stop), befriending every hill. I hold off a few charges from the fast walker, pass a few cruisers, and midway through the run, my muscles feel loose and my spirit is light. I'm alone along the banks of a beautiful Alaskan lake, the arctic wind (at least I think it's the arctic wind; I have a bad sense of direction) caressing my face. I feel an unfamiliar serenity. Are there grizzlies lurking nearby? So what if there are? If they eat me, perhaps it's meant to be. Grizzlies get hungry, too. Grizzlies have spirits. Grizzlies are runners. I feel a great surge of kindness for my furry, clawed cousins as I run through the wilderness, and that surge spreads out to all living creatures, including the Michigan bagel-hoggers and even the Explorations Café recliner-grabbers. The latter might not run, but do they not bleed?!

I stride from the forest and spy one of the bagel-hoggers in a clearing ahead. He is lean and fit. But he is not too far from me. What if I defeat him on this last run? I know the Penguin has told us that having fun is the primary directive here, but kicking a bagel-hogger's ass would feel awfully good. And who's to say that's not a form of fun?

I lengthen my stride. I pump my arms. I'm not a chubby apple fritter—gulper anymore. I'm a wolf now, an arctic wolf, solitary but not lonely, loping and purposeful. And the bagel-hogger is a rabbit, about to meet his fate, about to sacrifice his life so that his superior on the food chain might live and lope some more. I consider all the bagels I missed because of the Michigan contingent, and I am angry—I am an outraged lupine killer!—and now I am a blur. I am not a man whose flip-flops squeak. I am not neurotic. I do not have a dependence on prescription-strength,

topically applied anti-inflammatory drops. Slim-ankled blonds do not turn from me.

Remorseless, alone but not lonely, I close and when, 200 yards from the finish line, I pass the bagel-hogger, my speed is so great it seems as if he's walking. That might be because he is walking. He is also, I see now that I'm close enough, carrying a video camera, rotating in lazy circles, shooting the wildlife around us, the lake and the trees and the flowers, and the friendly hills in the distance.

"Great run," the bagel-hogging, video-shooting rabbit man shouts as I lope past. "You're looking great. Great form!"

**T**he next day we spend mostly at sea. I wake early, stare out my porthole, plot tactics for getting a good window seat in the Explorations Café. We will meet as a group for the final time today, and the Penguin and Coach Jenny will give us all medals, and there will be a slide show featuring shots of us running to the song "We Are the Champions," and there will be tears and laughter and seal-honking. Some of the tears will be mine. Corey and I will speak of women and sports movies, and agree that yes, it'd be great to meet in Oregon one day soon. I'll smile at the Chicagoan and she'll frown. I will retire to my cabin and send e-mails to landlubbing friends, bragging of my accomplishments. Also, I will consult my calendar; pick a week to get the rooster-comb injections. I think they might make me faster.

Before all that happens, though, I do something that surprises me. Instead of putting on my flip-flops and squeaking to the Explorations Café, I get out of bed and lace up my running shoes. Instead of an apple fritter, a staring-into-space sprawl, and a nice morning nap, I head outside to the deck. I start running, slowly but surely. My marathon is over, my goals have been met, but I'm still running. It's not on the schedule, and neither Coach Jenny nor the Penguin nor Angelika has commanded me to do so, but I'm going to anyway. I'm going to run 10 and a half laps today. Three miles. Just for fun. **FW**

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