



A stellar day on a fancy cruise ship, heading across the Bering Strait to Little Diomede island.



Jumbled ice blocks, one of several obstacles on the walk across the Bering Strait to Big Diomede.



Looking down on the village of Little Diomede with Big Diomede/Russia just across the Bering Strait.

# A trek to Little Diomede



The village of Little Diomede as viewed from the cruise ship on the Bering Strait.

Contributed

It's not easy to get to the tiny Alaska location; the weather is difficult, the residents open and welcoming

BY TROY HENKELS  
For the Telegraph Herald

Twenty-five years ago I quit my 9-to-5 corporate job in the Midwest and left for Alaska. I was looking for something more out of my life than commuting to work and wearing a suit and tie every day.

Now, after 15 years in the same job, again I felt my life had become to mundane. In desperate need of a change, I quit my Monday through Friday job in Alaska, for one that offered something quite different.

My new job, based in Nome, Alaska, is a big change and offers much more than I ever expected. As a traveling telecom technician in remote Alaska, I could explore remote places that I would never get to see otherwise.

One day, out of the blue, my boss told me to catch a helicopter and go to the village of Little Diomede. In the middle of the Bering Strait, it's not the easiest place to reach. It's only 26 miles from mainland Alaska, but it's right on the International Dateline and sits only three miles from the Russian island of Big Diomede.

My employer had been unsuccessful in getting a technician onto the island for several months due to some of the worst weather in the planet and helicopter breakdowns. Getting onto Little Diomede is not only challenging but also dangerous.

I was no stranger to this part of the world or the Bering Strait. In 2005, I spent six weeks in Wales on an expedition to try to walk across the Bering Strait to Russia and back. It was a precarious endeavor, at best.

We didn't make it, but we did spend eight days on the strait and rode ice floes with the currents and wind for more than 60 miles — in the wrong direction. It was a good lesson in humility and a reminder that you can't fool Mother Nature.

In the summer of 2010, I attempted to be the first to kitesurf across the Bering Strait

to Russia. This also was a failed expedition, this time due to rescue boat breakdowns.

So, as you can imagine, getting to Little Diomede, and at least part way across the Strait, was high on my list.

On a rare nice day, I waited in Wales for the helicopter to arrive and take me to the island. After several hours, I was told the pilot had a mechanical problem, turned around, returned to Nome and was grounded. Parts had to be ordered and there would not be another flight until the repairs were made.

My supervisor wanted me to stay in Wales for a few days and see if by chance, repairs were made in a timely manner.

So I got busy visiting old friends from my expedition days and was surprised to find out there were several expeditions, as well as a fancy cruise ship, coming to Wales in the next few days.

Sure enough, the next day a group of Italian and Russian swimmers showed up to try to swim the three miles from Little Diomede to Big Diomede. Considering the weather, water temperature and currents, it's an extremely daunting task. Later that afternoon, the fancy cruise ship did show up, full of wealthy Italian tourists.

Wales is hardly a cruise ship destination, but when authorities would not let the ship into eastern Russian, cruise directors came up with a new plan and stopped in Wales to get a taste of the local native culture.

While the tourists strolled around Wales, I was on the beach talking with the ship's expedition crew. I had a lot in common with many of them. Most had spent considerable time in the same polar regions as me: Antarctica, Alaska, Greenland, Iceland and Spitsbergen.

I learned that they were heading to Little Diomede later that afternoon. I half-jokingly asked if I could hitch a ride with them. After consulting with the ship's captain and in spite of legal protocols, they said yes, as



Troy Henkels explores on Little Diomede.

long as I did not post anything on social media about it.

I was ecstatic and grabbed my gear and was quickly put on a zodiac with the Italian tourists and shuttled offshore to the anchored ship.

The moment I stepped on board I was handed a glass of champagne and taken right to the upscale restaurant for lunch. On an extremely rare and beautiful day, I sat outside on the deck, having lunch with tourists from around the world, in sunshine and a short-sleeved shirt.

Of course, everyone thought the weather there was always that beautiful, but I knew better. The weather in this part of the world is the worst I have ever experienced, and to be hitching a ride on a ship bound for Little Diomede, in sunshine and no wind, was overwhelmingly surreal, to say the least.

After lunch, the anchor was raised, and we headed west across the Bering Strait. I'd had enough of tourists and questions. I headed for the top deck with the best view and reveled in my good fortune to finally be crossing the Bering Strait, and in such fashion.

It then dawned on me that I should let someone know what I was up to. I called my

boss, and his directive was to do whatever I had to do, to get on that island. I didn't mention that I was already on my way. What a cool job that lets me do this kind of thing and get paid for it.

The hour cruise to Little Diomede was uneventful, but stunningly beautiful. A random conversation with a tourist, also enjoying the solitude of the top deck, reminded me of how small a world it really is. Turns out he was from Davenport, Iowa, and a John Deere retiree — the same as my dad, Pete, who retired from the Dubuque plant. Although he didn't know Dad, he did know of him.

I was taken by the dichotomy — that I could make it across the Bering Strait in such a short amount of time, in stunning weather, after years of time and effort previously invested in trying to get across it.

Finally, I was ecstatic to be standing on Little Diomede. I ended up spending four days there, working, hiking and exploring.

It remains one of the wildest places I have ever been. The weather is absolutely deplorable, but the small population of locals who call this place home were

During summer, I've seen herds of hundreds of walrus swimming through the strait, while the local hunters do what they can to feed the village.

Last winter, the three miles of water between Little Diomede and Big Diomede froze enough for me to make the trek to Russia's Big Diomede. I had to do that in a full-on whiteout blizzard, so as to not be noticed by the Russian military, who have a base there and don't take kindly to visitors from the American side.

I suppose my experiences with Little Diomede and the Bering Strait are a good lesson for me. For years, I wanted and tried to find my way across the Bering Strait and only found disappointment and failure. It was a place I had long ago given up on ever seeing. But I somehow, unexpectedly, found my way there.

Sometimes, it's the days you wake up and don't expect anything to happen that end up being some of the most memorable days of your life.

Henkels is Dubuque native and a 1985 graduate of Walnut Catholic High School. He lives in Denali Park, Alaska. Read about his adventures in the TH published book, "Life On The Edge" and follow him at [www.troyhenkels.com](http://www.troyhenkels.com).

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