

Sheets of ice calve from the face of South Sawyer Glacier in Tracy Arm, near Juneau.

ALASKA WILD

Coastal adventures in the Great Land

BY ERIC LUCAS

High overhead, the spring sun is playing hopscotch with a squall line. Fleeting orbs of sunlight bounce around nearby green hills, chased by quick clouds, kiting zephyrs and curtains of rain. The sea beneath us shifts from indigo to slate to platinum to sapphire on a moment's notice, depending upon the light's lens—cloud, mist, rain or clear Alaska skies. The temperature is about 45 degrees, but the feel of the air varies from 32 to 62, depending on its many meteorological personas. Sudden snow pellets thunk the brim of my cap, but just when I think I should go back inside the ship's lounge for hot chocolate, the sun reappears, vaporizing the thimbles of water on the boat deck of Alaska Sea Adventures' M/V *Northern Song*.

The air is as fresh as a laugh. Eagles and gulls call like choirs.

Through it all, I keep up my vital work, jigging for herring. I drop the weighted line 100 feet or so, bob the multi-colored metal spinner on the end up and down, and wait for the heavy feel that indicates fish have latched on to the hooks below. The tub on the deck already has a dozen 10-inch specimens, glinting like beach glass in the light.



Above: Passengers on board the MS *Oosterdam* admire the majesty of an Alaska glacier. Below: Hubbard Glacier, one of the largest in Alaska, stretches 76 miles from Mount Logan in Canada to Alaska's Yakutat Bay.





LESLIE FORSBERG

there is no better cruise destination in the world for active adventures”—such as jigging for herring off the back of the boat, or wetsuit-clad snorkeling in quiet bays, kayaking into misty inlets and hiking into rain-forest valleys.

But while the small-ship end of the industry is growing, the vast majority of Alaska’s cruise visitors board one of the modern era’s large ships, which may carry more than 2,000 passengers. Dozens of such ships ply the waters of Southeast Alaska, traversing the famous Inside Passage, from May through September each year. These massive vessels offer the unparalleled onboard amenities found on big ships throughout the world’s oceans, such as multiple dining venues, swimming

pools, spa facilities and onboard theaters. Every day, passengers marvel at massive walls of ice in Glacier Bay, Tracy Arm and Yakutat Bay; enjoy salmon bakes in spice-scented cedar groves; watch Tlingit dancers; and admire Haida totems.

Cruise passengers contribute a significant amount to Alaska’s economy. The state’s 1 million annual cruise travelers represent more than half the total annual number of visitors to Alaska, and each year they contribute more than \$530 million to the state’s approximately \$3.4 billion tourism economy. More than three dozen ships, representing more than a dozen lines, together make around 500 sailings to Alaska each summer, and one-quarter of cruise passengers add a land-based journey to their

“Hey, you got some,” observes Dennis Rogers, captain of our boat, stepping down onto the deck. “I’ll cook ’em up for appetizers tonight.”

This is just one episode in just one day of an Alaska cruise, and it illustrates many things about this top American cruise destination. First of all, there’s really no such thing as “just another day” on a boat in Alaska: The Great Land’s matchless landscape lies outside every window every day on every ship; the state’s rich and varied human story line is visible on shore at every stop, from century-old Gold Rush history to indigenous cultures dating back millennia; and wildlife watching, the top attraction for most Alaska visitors, is a frequent pastime.

All these advantages draw more than 1 million cruise passengers every year to Alaska. The state is among the world’s most popular and dreamed-of cruise destinations, for both Americans and travelers from other lands—and a favorite for the maritime professionals who sail there.

“Just like our customers, we’re passionate about Alaska,” says Dan Blanchard, CEO and principal of Seattle-based Un-Cruise Adventures (formerly InnerSea Discoveries and American Safari Cruises), which carries about 6,500 travelers a year to Southeast Alaska aboard seven “small-ship” cruise boats, a designation that generally refers to ships holding fewer than 100 passengers. “Alaska’s waters have unique attractions and adventures the rest of the world doesn’t offer,” he says. “And

Above: The immensity of the mountains and glaciers in Yakutat Bay dwarfs even the largest cruise ships. Below: Alaska cruises provide passengers with opportunities for up-close and unforgettable glimpses of wildlife.



JIM NAHMENS / NATURE'S SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY



ALASKA SEA ADVENTURES / YACHTALASKA.COM

Above: A bald eagle swoops down to the water in pursuit of a meal of herring. Below: A glacial iceberg gleams blue in the summer sunlight in Tracy Arm.

sea voyages. Cruising in Alaska is convenient: Passengers can board a round-trip cruise in Seattle or Vancouver, B.C., or book a one-way trip and disembark in Anchorage or another community, and return home via regular flights on Alaska Airlines.

Not only is cruising big business in Alaska—but Alaska is big business in cruising. For some companies, such as Princess Cruises and Seattle-based Holland America Line, the state continues to be a major foundation of their business. The Alaska cruise industry traces its roots back to the 1880s, when the Pacific Coast Steamship Company began ferrying leisure travelers from San Francisco to

Southeast Alaska and back, largely for excursion purposes—a novelty in those days. Alaska has been a key cruise destination ever since.

While Alaska is one of the world’s top-five cruise destinations—ranking third, after the Caribbean and Mediterranean, in one 2011 survey—it offers a distinctly different set of attractions. In Alaska, passengers gather on deck to watch immense glaciers calve sheets of ice; they marvel at humpback whales breaching, bears prowling the shoreline, waterfalls plunging hundreds of feet into emerald

fjords, eagles staring impassively from waterfront nests, snowcapped mountains rising into the sky.

Luckily, for all the state’s popularity as a cruise destination, there is plenty of room to roam in the waters of Alaska, whose mainland coastline stretches 6,640 miles (more than all other states combined)—a number that nears 34,000 miles when you add in the state’s many islands. “You can sail for days and see virtually no one,” Blanchard says. Even on the very biggest ships, travelers will usually spy another cruise boat only in port—such as Juneau, Ketchikan or Sitka—and in the most popular remote destinations, such as Glacier Bay, Tracy Arm and Yakutat Bay.



PAUL SOUTHERS / WORLDPHOTO

And the sheer scale of the landscape tends to “shrink” even the biggest vessels: Framed against Hubbard Glacier, a 2,500-passenger cruise ship seems like a toy model.

That’s what makes the Alaska cruise experience unique. Even for seasoned world travelers, an Alaska cruise aboard any type of ship is certain to create a lifetime memory. Over the years I’ve been lucky enough to savor this experience several times, and each one has brought a treasure of memories that linger unfaded still. I’ve been on big, medium and small boats; I’ve sailed from Seattle northward and back, and I’ve taken journeys that start and end in Juneau. I’ve labored to catch herring, and stood with other passengers atop an observation deck a hundred feet above the water to take in the wonders of the landscape.

For example, aboard the *MS Oosterdam*, a Holland America ship in the 1,900-passenger class, the highlight of a recent seven-day round-trip itinerary out of Seattle came at Yakutat Bay, 120 miles northwest of Juneau. Here, in a broad expanse of turquoise water, the *Oosterdam* paused lengthwise before Hubbard Glacier, one of Alaska’s biggest, for an hour of glacier viewing. While Alaska’s thousands of glaciers are impressive examples of nature’s majesty in and of themselves, they periodically offer a special spectacle that is tops on visitor wish lists—“calving,” the term used when sections of ice peel off the face of the glacier and drop into the ocean.

This is what we’re all waiting for—and while nature does not always perform according to human desires, today we’re a lucky crowd: Two vertical spires of ice collapse into the water, one following the other by mere moments after about 15 minutes of waiting. The sensory details of the experience remind us of the scale of our arena: A clap of sound, like a cannon blast, reaches the boat a few seconds after we’ve seen the ice fall (while the glacier seems close and looms over the 14-story ship, it’s actually several thousand yards away). The ice face where the glacier has calved is an intense, shimmering cobalt glacial blue, unlike any other color I’ve

seen, and almost a minute later, waves bump the ship, sending vibrations through the 82,000-ton, 950-foot-long vessel. Exclamations of delight greet the glacial exhibition and—a uniquely human novelty—so does applause, as if the glacier is to be rewarded with approval. “I’ve wanted to see that exact sight all my life,” says a passenger behind me. Two others nearby trade high fives.

Neither tourist exclamations nor the sheer heft of the ship detract from the geographic immensity at work. Yakutat Bay, a place reached by no road, lies between two arms of the Wrangell–St. Elias Mountains—the pinnacle of which, 18,008-foot Mount St. Elias, is North America’s fourth-highest summit and by far the most impressive visible from any North Pacific ocean venue. Hubbard Glacier arises 76 miles away on Canada’s Mount Logan, the continent’s second-highest peak at 19,551 feet, which is not much less than Denali’s 20,320 feet. Hubbard is colloquially known as the “Gallop-ing Glacier” for its mysterious propensity to alternately advance and retreat. In the midst of all these terrestrial superlatives, Yakutat Bay itself, at 18 miles wide, holds 1,000-foot cruise ships as if they were park-pond play toys, dwarfed by their gargantuan surroundings.

A distinctly different experience awaits on another cruise, in Southeast Alaska’s Tracy Arm, 70 miles south of Juneau. This time I’m aboard the *Admiralty Dream*, a small-ship cruising vessel operated out of Juneau by Sitka-based, Native-owned Alaskan Dream Cruises, a subsidiary of Allen Marine. Unlike spacious Yakutat, Tracy is a narrow fjord braced by towering cliffs and snowy summits, with rocky fjord walls bare of life and snowfields clinging to escarpments high above. Frosty air grows thick and still as we approach the sea-level face of Sawyer Glacier, and this time we four-dozen travelers are on the front promenade deck listening to cruise naturalist Lee Vale offer interpretive commentary.

“See those specks of black on the ice floes? As we get closer you’ll notice them starting to wiggle—they’re harbor seals, up here because it’s a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 171

FROM PAGE 43 safe refuge. Orcas can't get them, bears can't get 'em, so they come in here to haul out and raise their pups," Vale explains. Everyone peers ahead; sure enough, there are more than a hundred wiggling black specks on ice floes. A few minutes later the glacier calves; everybody claps and cheers, and a few seals hit the water.

Unlike the big ships, which moor by day in ports of call such as Juneau and sail at night, Alaskan Dream boats such as the 66-passenger *Admiralty Dream* find their way to remote, peaceful anchorages for overnight stops. One such spot is Hobart Bay, where, the next day, I head out for a foraging expedition with guide Larisa Manewal. We're looking for mushrooms but, finding none, "settle" instead for fresh blueberries—big, flavorsome ones, hanging at thigh level on bushes tucked beneath dwarf hemlocks. We grab anything handy to collect them in (handkerchiefs and caps) and grow philosophical.

"Not a bad consolation prize for not finding any mushrooms," Manewal declares. "You just never know if you'll find really good berries, so when you do, you better not pass them up." That night, our 1-pound haul of fresh berries is transformed by the boat's chef into a berry cobbler.

Such adventures typify Alaska cruising, whether your conveyance is large or small. My journey aboard Rogers' eight-passenger *Northern Song* perfectly illustrates the marvelous diversity of Alaska's shipboard adventures. While the big ships carry their passengers into Glacier Bay and Juneau's Gastineau Channel, there are seven of us on board *Northern Song*, a converted 84-foot yacht with just four staterooms. And it's not summer, it's late March—we're here to enjoy one of Alaska's greatest natural spectacles, the billions-strong spring herring spawn in Sitka Sound. Each day is spent sailing the area's waters, highlighted by Mount Edgecumbe's snow cone and calling out sightings of humpback whales, rafts of sea otters, convocations of bald eagles, pods of harbor seals, even a northern fur seal that has

ventured here from the Bering Sea. There are so many animals to see that our initial wonder is soon supplemented by jocularity.

“Yep, saw another humpback breach off the starboard side,” one guest announces at lunch. “Skinny fellow, evidently just got here from Hawai‘i, still wearing a lei.”

Each evening, we all gather around one table in the salon next to the galley to share dinner and compare our impressions. Some nights, Rogers—an erstwhile commercial fisherman and longtime Petersburg sea salt—cooks an Alaska novelty: baked salmon head or braised herring (the dozen I caught) or sautéed herring roe.

This intimate conviviality is the key facet of the small-ship experience. As an Alaska cruise passenger, I may be just one among millions, but at one particularly memorable moment I feel like one in 7 billion—the only person on Earth treasuring the sight below me.

It’s an experience I have in an unnamed creek edging

CONTINUED ON PAGE 180

Alaska Cruises

Literally hundreds of sailings each summer head to and/or through the waters of Southeast Alaska, with a few ships continuing as far as Anchorage. Major departure and disembarkation ports include Seattle, Vancouver, B.C., Juneau and Anchorage, all of which have regular service by Alaska Airlines. Travelers may book Alaska Airlines Vacations packages featuring cruises in the Great Land, or a cruise-only vacation; visit alaskaair.com for more information.

Cruise trips can range from five to 14 days (the average length is one week) and usually cost from less than \$1,000 to \$6,000 or more. Many companies offer land-based add-on tours, such as trips to Denali National Park and Fairbanks; Princess also operates lodges in Alaska, and Holland America operates lodges in Alaska and the Yukon.

Most big-ship (1,000 passengers or more) trips depart from Seattle or Vancouver, and traverse the Inside Passage through British Columbia. These ships

usually have port calls in Ketchikan, Sitka and Juneau, and include visits to either Glacier Bay, Tracy Arm or Yakutat Bay for glacier viewing. Smaller ships generally depart from Juneau and sail the waters around Southeast Alaska for five days to a week or more. These trips typically include glacier viewing, fjord visits, wildlife watching and a few port calls. Boutique cruises depart from various ports in Southeast Alaska, such as Petersburg, Sitka and Juneau.

For complete information on the larger companies operating in the Great Land, visit the **Alaska Cruise Association** at www.akcruise.org. Notable operators include the following:

Holland America Line: This venerable company has been sailing Alaska waters since 1975; its seven Alaska ships are in the 1,200- to 1,900-passenger range, with sailings starting below \$1,000 among its 130-plus 2013 itineraries; www.hollandamerica.com.

Princess Cruises: Another big-ship operator in the Alaska market also sails seven ships in the region this summer, with more than 120 sailings, including the most to Glacier Bay; www.princess-cruises.com.

Alaskan Dream Cruises: ADC's three boats hold 36–66 passengers, have naturalists and chefs on board and include journeys to remote waters; www.alaskan-dreamcruises.com.

Un-Cruise Adventures: This Seattle company's ships range from smaller 22-passenger yachts to the new and impressive 88-passenger replica steamer *SS Legacy*, which offers history-themed cruises. Alaska itineraries focus on outdoor adventures such as kayaking and hiking; www.un-cruise.com.

Alaska Sea Adventures: Dennis Rogers' engaging itineraries can be adjusted en route according to weather, wildlife movements and passenger desires; www.yachtalaska.com.

First-time Alaska cruisers are advised to review potential cruise itineraries and ship styles, and choose a trip according to

their tastes and interests. Here are some of the major ports of call and their key characteristics.

Ketchikan: Jumping-off point for Misty Fjords National Monument; has an excellent city museum, and two splendid Native culture centers on the outskirts.

Sitka: Alaska center for Russian-American history; most important sights are within walking distance for cruise passengers. Attractions include the Alaska Raptor Center, Sitka National Historical Park, Sheldon Jackson Museum, St. Michael's Cathedral and the New Archangel Dancers.

Juneau: Alaska's capital has an impressive gold-mining history. One of Alaska's most popular attractions, Mendenhall Glacier, is about 20 minutes outside the city. The Alaska State Museum, Alaska State Capitol Building, Mount Roberts Tramway and Juneau-Douglas City Museum can all be reached on foot.

Skagway: This Gold Rush history capital has a well-preserved historic city center, and is the access point for Yukon land tours, hiking the Chilkoot Trail and riding the White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad. The Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park can be toured on foot.

Seward: This commercial-fishing and glacier-touring center is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park and, on the Alaska Railroad, to Anchorage and the Interior. It's also the home of the marvelous Alaska SeaLife Center.

Anchorage: Attractions in Alaska's population and business center include the Alaska Native Heritage Center, Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center Gallery at the Anchorage Museum.

Hoonah: This enterprising Alaska Native village has transformed an old cannery complex into a uniquely appealing cruise-ship destination called Icy Strait Point, with indigenous culture attractions, wildlife viewing tours, a splendidly scenic setting, and the world's longest single-span zipline. —E.L.

FROM PAGE 174 Windham Bay, 100 miles south of Juneau. The shallow amber water is alive with the ripples of spawning salmon—including, in this case, the largest sockeye I've ever seen, a big buck at least 20 inches and 7 pounds. Magnificently crimson along 80 percent of his length, he has a green collar roughly the color of the Sitka spruce boughs overhanging the small pool he's chosen for this final verse in the infinite song of life that members of his species compose anew each fall.

As I step closer to watch the salmon, I look down for footing and notice a mellow glint in the gravel. It's about the size of a fleck of spring snow, and when I pick it up, it reveals itself to be—yes, possibly—a tiny flake of gold. I cradle it in my palm; it catches the soft glow of the September sky above.

"Real gold?" I ask our guide, *Alaskan Dream* captain Eric Morrow. This is a unique shore excursion on some of the company's itineraries: a multiday stop at a remote lodge on an otherwise uninhabited bay. During the day, guests kayak the inlet, watch for seals, eagles, bears and moose, or simply relax. A few of us have hiked up this small stream to watch the salmon, Morrow clapping his hands at each bend to warn off neighborhood bears.

"Oh, probably," he replies, as casually as if I'd asked about a sock. "There was a lot of gold mining here about 100 years ago. That piece"—he peers close, smiling indulgently—"is worth about a buck."

Actually, as an Alaska cruise souvenir—and as a metaphorical symbol—it's priceless. I can't decide whether to keep it or put it right back, so I ask all the spirits involved: the salmon, spruce, sea, stream and sturdy ground. The reply rests as strong in my memory as Alaska itself. ▲

Eric Lucas is the author of the Michelin Must Sees Alaska guide, published this past spring. He writes from Seattle.

GETTING THERE



Book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations cruise package online at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.