

The Best of Alaska Cruising

Alaska is one of the top cruise destinations in the world, and when you're sailing through the calm waters of the Inside Passage or across the Gulf of Alaska, it's easy to see why: The scenery is simply breathtaking.

Much of the coastline is wilderness, with snowcapped mountain peaks, immense glaciers that create a thunderous noise as chunks break off into the sea (a process known as calving), emerald rainforests, fjords, icebergs, soaring eagles, lumbering bears, and majestic whales all easily visible from the comfort of your ship.

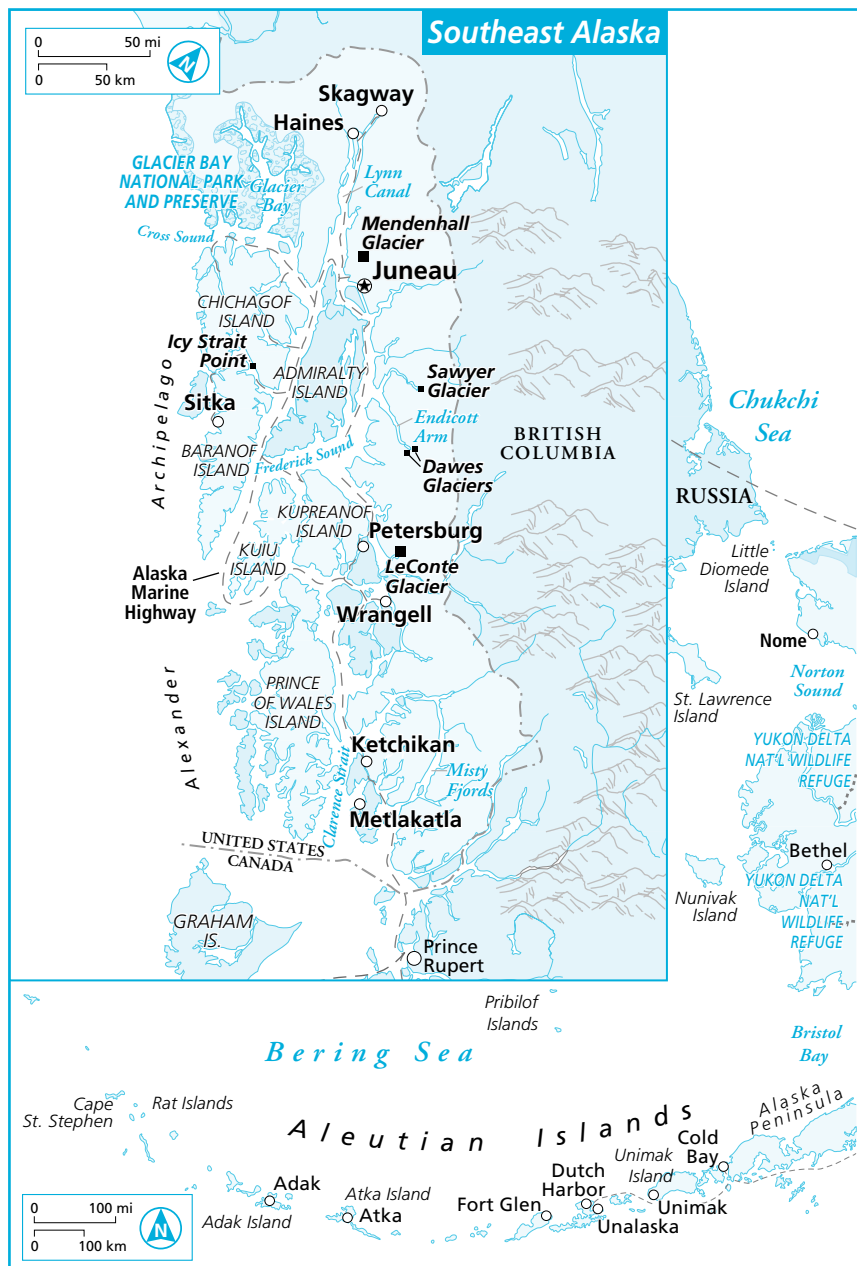
Visit the towns, and you'll find people who retain the spirit of frontier independence that brought them here in the first place. Add Alaska's colorful history and heritage, with its European influences, its spirit of discovery, and its rich Native cultures, and you have a destination that is utterly, endlessly fascinating.

The fact that a little over 700,000 cruise passengers—give or take a few—arrive annually in this last great frontier has had its impact, of course. In the summer, some towns turn into tourist malls populated by seasonal vendors and imported souvenirs. However, the port towns you'll visit—from Juneau, the most remote state capital in the country, to Sitka, with its proud reminders of Native and Russian culture—retain much of their rustic charm and historical allure. Sure, you may have to jostle for a seat in Juneau's popular Red Dog Saloon (a must-do beer stop) or ask other visitors to step out of the way as you try to snap a picture of Skagway's historic gold-rush buildings or Ketchikan's picturesque Creek Street, but these are minor hassles for cruise-ship passengers. And if you want to get away from the crowds by taking a small-ship cruise or an organized shore excursion, or touring on your own, there's opportunity for that, too. In addition, by signing up for the cruise lines' pre- or post-cruise land-tour packages (known as "cruisetours"), you can also visit such inland destinations as Denali National Park, Fairbanks, the Kenai Peninsula, the Yukon Territory, or the Canadian Rockies.

Even before you cruise, we can predict you'll want to visit again. (Jerry first visited in 1973 and claims he's never been the same—the place put such a spell on him that over the years, he's been back upward of 50 times. Fran's first visit to the state wasn't quite that long ago, but she also noticed that her view of the world was forever changed, and she quickly put the state at the top of her list of cruise destinations.) Alaska is like that. It grabs you by the scruff of the neck and won't let you go.

Whether you're looking for pampering and resort amenities or a you-and-the-sea adventure experience, you'll find it offered by cruise ships in Alaska. Here are some of our favorites, along with our picks of the best ports, shore excursions, and sights.

Alaska





1 The Best of Alaska's Ships

- **The Best Ships for Luxury:** With Crystal and Silversea out of the market, luxury in Alaska is now defined by Regent Seven Seas, which offers a casual kind of luxury (a really nice ship with a no-tie-required policy). Regent's *Seven Seas Mariner* offers just that, with plush all-suite cabins (most with private balconies) and excellent cuisine (which, as of Jan 1, 2007, includes liquor; wine is complimentary at all times). For the ultimate Alaska experience in a small-ship setting, check out the yachts of American Safari Cruises, where soft adventure comes with luxury accommodations.
- **The Best of the Mainstream Ships:** Every line's most recent ships are beautiful, but Celebrity's *Infinity* is a true stunner, as is sister ship *Summit*. These modern vessels, with their extensive art collections, cushy public rooms, and expanded spa areas, give Celebrity a formidable presence in Alaska. And the late-model *Sapphire Princess* and *Diamond Princess* (which both debuted in 2004) have raised the art of building big ships to new heights. Both of these vessels will again be in Inside Passage service this year—from Vancouver.
- **The Best of the Small Ships:** Clipper Cruise Line's newest vessel, the *Clipper Odyssey*, is a gorgeous little ship, offering a higher level of comfort than most of the other small ships in this category. Plus, it sails some of Alaska's most exotic itineraries.
- **The Best Ships for Families:** All the major lines have well-established kids' programs. Holland America and Norwegian Cruise Line win points in Alaska for their special shore excursions for kids and teens, and Carnival gets a nod for offering shore excursions for teens.
- **The Best Ships for Pampering:** It's a tossup—Celebrity's *Infinity* and *Summit* offer wonderful AquaSpas complete with thalassotherapy pools and a wealth of soothing and beautifying treatments, and the solariums on Royal Caribbean's *Vision of the Seas*, *Serenade of the Seas*, and *Radiance of the Seas* offer relaxing indoor-pool retreats. Luxury line Regent Seven Seas, of course, pampers all around.
- **The Best Shipboard Cuisine:** Regent Seven Seas is tops in this category. Of the mainstream lines, Celebrity is the best, with its cuisine overseen by renowned French chef Michel Roux. Dinner in the reservations-only specialty restaurants on both the *Infinity* and the *Summit* (\$30 service charge per person) is a world-class dining experience. And there are signs of a new and rather surprising challenger for the cuisine award: Carnival, which has upgraded both its main dining room and buffet offerings. The line's *Carnival Spirit* in Alaska boasts the Nouveau Supper Club (\$30 service charge per person), where you can enjoy just about as fine a meal as you're likely to find anywhere.
- **The Best Ships for Onboard Activities:** The ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean offer rosters teeming with onboard activities that range from the sublime (such as lectures) to the ridiculous (such as contests designed to get passengers to do or say outrageous things). Princess's ScholarShip@Sea program is a real winner, with exciting packaged classes in such diverse subjects as photography, personal computers, cooking, and even pottery.
- **The Best Ships for Entertainment:** Look to the big ships here. Carnival and Royal Caribbean are tops when it

comes to an overall package of shows, nightclub acts, lounge performances, and audience-participation entertainment. Princess also offers particularly well-done—if somewhat less lavishly staged—shows.

- **The Best Ship for Nostalgia:** No contest. It's Majestic America Line's (formerly American West Steamboat Company) *Empress of the North*, a paddle-wheeler, the likes of which hasn't been seen in Alaska in almost a century. The vessel defies characterization. It's clearly not a mainstream ship, it's not quite a luxury ship, and it really isn't small (it holds 235 passengers). Warmly decorated with rich brocade wall coverings and a fine collection of Western art memorabilia, the vessel features velvet booths in the dining room and a wonderful bar aft in which passengers can listen to live music while watching the paddle wheel throw spray against the floor-to-ceiling window. Sailing on the *Empress* is to take a step back in time to the golden age of steamboat travel.
- **The Best Ships for Whale-Watching:** If the whales come close enough, you can see them from all the ships in Alaska. Smaller ships, though—such as those operated by Clipper and Cruise West—might actually change

course to follow a whale. Get your cameras ready!

- **The Best Ships for Cruisetours:** Princess and Holland America are the entrenched market leaders in getting you into the Interior—of Alaska and the Yukon—either before or after your cruise. They own their own hotels, deluxe motorcoaches, and rail cars; and after many years in the business, they both know what they're doing. Some of the other lines actually buy their land products from Princess or HAL. One of Holland America's strengths is its 3- and 4-night cruises combined with an Alaska/Yukon land package. The company offers exclusive entry into the Yukon's Kluane National Park, and they've added another Yukon gem—Tombstone Territorial Park, near Dawson City, a region of staggering wilderness beauty, Native architecture, stunning vistas, and wildlife. Princess is arguably stronger in 7-day Gulf of Alaska cruises in conjunction with Denali/Fairbanks or Kenai Peninsula land arrangements. In 2002, Princess introduced its fifth wilderness lodge—the Copper River Lodge, by the entrance to hitherto difficult-to-access Wrangell–St. Elias National Park.

2 The Best Ports

Juneau and Skagway are our favorites. Juneau is one of the most visually pleasing small cities anywhere and certainly the prettiest capital city in America. It's fronted by the Gastineau Channel and backed by Mount Juneau and Mount Roberts, offers the very accessible Mendenhall Glacier, and is otherwise surrounded by wilderness—and it's a really fun city to visit, too.

As for Skagway, no town in Alaska is more historically significant, and the old buildings are so perfect you might think

you stepped into a Disney version of what a gold-rush town should look like. If, that is, you can get over the decidedly turn-of-the-millennium Starbucks operation in the Mercantile Center, the pizza parlor at the bottom of Broadway, and all the upscale jewelry shops that have followed cruise passengers from the Caribbean. There are people who will tell you that Skagway is hokey, touristy—and it is. But if you can get yourself into the right frame of mind, if you can recall the history of the place, the gold-rush frenzy

Personal Reminiscence

Photograph albums . . . old postcards that we bought and never sent . . . stateroom door key cards . . . brochures and faded newspapers . . . tacky souvenirs . . . excellent Native arts . . . restaurant and ships' dining room menus. Every so often, my wife and I (Jerry) like to browse through items like these, accumulated over 30-plus years of visiting Alaska. It happens every year around springtime when we start making our summer travel plans. And when we do, the memories come flooding back: the fun times, awesome sights, nice people—and sometimes not-so-nice people—wonderful weather, dreadful weather, and the occasional somber moment.

Alaska always provides more than enough positives to offset any bad weather or not-so-perfect personal encounters.

In the end, it boils down to scenery, wildlife, and people. These are the essence of Alaska, and of our memories. Cruises and cruisetours offer a way to experience all of these in abundance.

Let me tell you some of the events that Margaret and I recall most fondly when we dip into our Alaska memory bank. In no particular order . . .

- There was the night we sat with our two sons, then in their early teens, in Kyoto Restaurant, on the magnificent *Crystal Harmony*, now, sadly, departed from the U.S. scene. We had just entered Alaskan waters en route from Vancouver and were about to order dinner. Before we could begin, the waiter paused, pencil poised over his pad. We followed his gaze out to sea and there, frolicking alongside the ship, were several dozen porpoises. All activity in the room ceased. Diners mingled with waiters, bus boys, and maitre d's, all standing along the window side of the restaurant gaping as these delightful creatures entertained us. They crisscrossed one another, skimming the surface of the water at high speed. They jumped and flipped. They paralleled our direction of travel and then turned toward us—as if on cue—and turned away again. It was synchronized swimming at its best. Only when they peeled off did normal service resume in the restaurant. My sons still speak of that Kyoto dinner!
- We were on the then new *Island Princess*, leaving Glacier Bay after another spectacular day of ice-wall watching when something caught my eye. It was a brown bear. Not positioned on the bank along the tree line, where you might expect to see it, but in the water—swimming across the mouth of Johns Hopkins Inlet. In an instant, gawking passengers lined the rails of the ship. I'd swear this creature knew it was the center of attention! It rolled on its back, seemed to watch us watching it, and then, ever so nonchalantly, turned and swam on. It wasn't the most likely environment in which to find bears, but that's Alaska. Always expect the unexpected.
- Joe and Janie were Floridians, warm-weather folks who enjoyed Caribbean and Mediterranean cruises every year. He had a hankering to try this popular, though somewhat cooler, destination that he'd heard his

friends rave about—Alaska. She reluctantly agreed to alter their normal vacation pattern to accommodate him. Margaret and I befriended them on a cruise on Radisson's *Seven Seas Mariner*. Slowly at first, Janie began to realize just what Alaska had to offer. By the time we entered Yakutat Bay, for Hubbard Glacier, about the middle of the cruise, she was hooked. Before we disembarked, she had committed to another Alaska cruise the following year, never mind the weather. Alaska does that to people.

- Margaret and I often laugh over an incident during a Royal Caribbean *Legend of the Seas* cruisetour we took through Denali Park. On our first evening, after dinner, I went outside to the viewing deck and sat in the warm night air, gazing on the incredible vista of the Alaska Range, with towering Mount McKinley in the center. I was out there for an hour or more, a little longer than most people sit, I suppose. It seems, at any rate, that it was long enough to concern the staff of the Talkeetna Alaska Lodge because, sometime after 11pm (it was still daylight), one of the young ladies at the front desk came out and asked me gently, "Sir, are you okay?" I laughed and assured her I was enjoying the scenery and not in need of any help. Reverie-inducing scenery and a compassionate populace help make Alaska the destination it is.
- But not all of our Alaska memories evoke laughter. On another occasion, Margaret and I had enjoyed a northbound Gulf cruise on *Celebrity's Infinity*. We were scheduled to fly home from Fairbanks. It was September 11, 2001. Suffice it to say that we were grounded, as was the rest of the nation, and forced to spend the next week in Alaska's second-largest city. It was then that the welcoming spirit of Alaskans became evident as never before. Strangers went out of their way to make certain that we were made to feel at home. Little things made the difference: invitations to dine, offers of cellphones to call home, automobile rides downtown from our hotel. The residents—who clearly were feeling the pain every bit as much as the rest of the nation—strove to lessen our feelings of isolation. Because that's what Alaskans do best.

We've seen breaching whales, grizzly bears up close, herds of caribou, and delicate little beluga whales, the latter stranded in the mud in Turnagain Arm by the powerful tides characteristic of the area. We've eaten reindeer sausage and drunk locally brewed amber ale. We've roared with laughter at the hilarious patter of the host in the Red Dog Saloon in Juneau and we've risked frostbite on the shores of Tongass Narrows listening to the less-amusing commentary of a totem park guide. We've ridden the Haul Road to Prudhoe Bay and the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway to the Canadian border from Skagway. We've seen and done a lot of things in Alaska over the years and, such is the appeal of the 49th state in the union, we can—and do—relive the experiences in an instant. Every spring. Every year.

—Jerry Brown

that literally put the town on the map, it's easier to capture the true spirit of Skagway. The residents have made every effort to retain as much as possible of the architecture and historic significance of their community, and they don't mind sharing it with visitors during the cruise season. For a more low-key Alaska experience,

take the ferry from Skagway to Haines, which reminds us of the folksy, frontier Alaska depicted on the TV show *North-ern Exposure*, and is a great place to spot eagles and other wildlife. Some ships also stop at Haines as a port of call, usually for a few hours after Skagway.

3 The Best Shore Excursions

Flightseeing and helicopter trips in Alaska are unforgettable ways to check out the scenery if you can afford them. But air-borne tours tend to be pretty pricey—some of them approaching \$500 a head. A helicopter trip to a dog-sled camp at the top of a glacier (usually the priciest of the offerings) affords both incredibly pretty views and a chance to try your hand at the truly Alaskan sport of dog sledding. (Yes, even in summer: The sleds are fitted with wheels.) It's a great way to earn bragging rights with the folks back home. For a less extravagant excursion, nothing beats a ride on a clear day on the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway out of Skagway to the Canadian border at Fraser—the route followed by the gold stampeder of '98. While you're riding the rails, try to imagine what it was like for those gold seekers crossing the same track on foot!

And we also like to get active with kayak and mountain-biking excursions offered by most lines at most ports. In addition to affording a chance to work off those shipboard calories, these excursions typically provide optimum opportunities for spotting eagles, bears, seals, and other wildlife.

Another, less hectic shore excursion that goes down well with many passengers is a float ride down one of the more placid stretches of Alaska's myriad rivers, such as the Kenai, the Mendenhall, or the Chilkat. These outings don't involve a lot of paddling—which can be hard work—but instead use the natural flow of the river to propel the four- to six-person rubber raft downstream. And they involve little or no white water. Generally, the group will stop for a picnic lunch en route and return to the staging area by motorcoach or automobile.