

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 they calve into the sea, 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 and endlessly fascinating.

The fact that approximately 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, 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 Yukon Territory, or the Canadian Rockies.

Even before you cruise, we can predict you'll want to visit again. Jerry first visited 32 years ago and claims he's never been the same—the place put such a spell on him that he's gone back every year since, sometimes two or three 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.

1 The Best of Alaska's Ships

- **The Best Ships for Luxury:** Crystal Cruises' 940-passenger *Crystal Harmony* is the big luxury ship in

the Alaska market. We're talking superb cuisine, elegant service, lovely surroundings, great cabins,

and sparkling entertainment. It also has what we consider to be the prettiest public room afloat—the Palm Court. If you want a more casual kind of luxury (a really nice ship with a no-tie-required policy), Radisson Seven Seas Cruises' *Seven Seas Mariner* offers just that, with plush all-suite cabins (most with private balconies) and excellent cuisine (plus, you get complimentary wine with dinner). And for the ultimate Alaska small-ship experience, check out the yachts of **American Safari Cruises**, where soft adventure comes with luxury accoutrements.

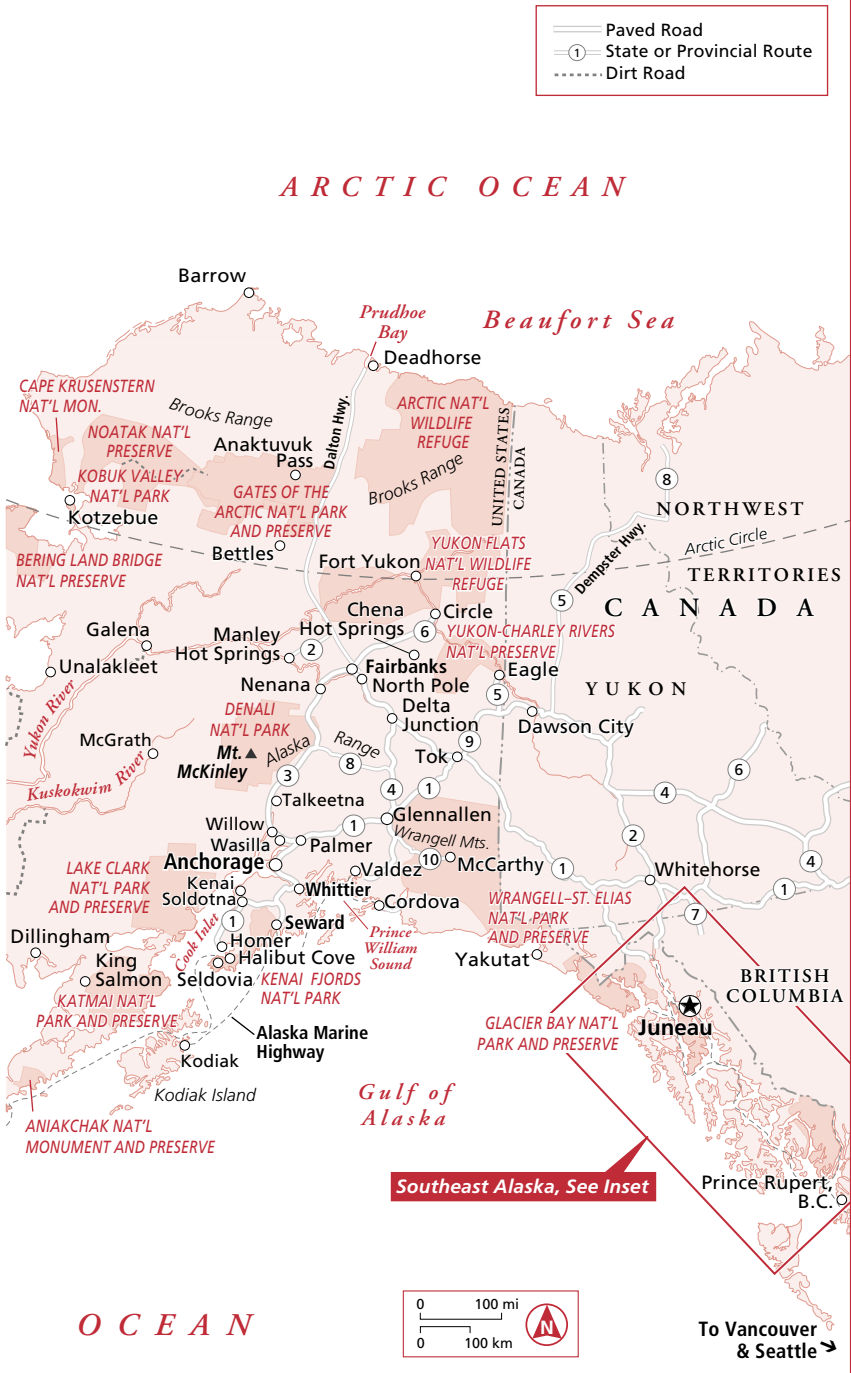
- **The Best of the Mainstream Ships:** Every line's most recent ships are beautiful, but Celebrity's *Infinity* is a true stunner, as is sister ship *Summit*. These modern vessels, with their extensive art collections, cushy public rooms, and expanded spa areas, give Celebrity a formidable presence in Alaska. And the late model *Sapphire Princess* and *Diamond Princess* (which debuted last year) have raised the art of building big ships to new heights.
- **The Best of the Small Ships:** Clipper Cruise Line's newest vessel, the *Clipper Odyssey*, is a really gorgeous little ship, offering a higher level of comfort than most of the other small ships in this category. The most adventurous small-ship itineraries in Alaska are offered by Glacier Bay Cruise-line, whose *Wilderness Adventurer* and *Wilderness Explorer* both concentrate on kayaking, hiking, and wildlife, hardly visiting any ports at all over the course of their 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 special 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, while *Crystal Harmony* pampers all around, 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.
- **The Best Shipboard Cuisine:** Radisson and Crystal (in that order) are tops. 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 the *Infinity* or *Summit* (\$25-per-person service charge) 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. And the line's *Carnival Spirit* in Alaska boasts the Nouveau Supper Club (\$25-per-person service charge), 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 a very full roster of 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' ScholarShip@Sea program is a real winner, with excitingly packaged classes in such diverse subjects as photography, personal computers, cooking, and even pottery.

Alaska





Personal Reminiscence

One of the great delights of Alaska is that you're never quite certain what to expect. It constantly surprises you. Just when you think you've seen it all—there's more! Never was that point more vividly illustrated than on a recent trip to the 49th state. Both during the cruise portion, on Celebrity's magnificent *Infinity*, and on land, during a Denali Park rail ride in Royal Celebrity's plush domed cars, one wonder followed another.

You should know upfront that I have cruised in Alaskan waters at least once a year since the early 1970s and have done the Denali trip umpteen times—often by rail, sometimes by coach. Yet on this particular trip I saw things I had never seen before.

I was with a small group of people, some of whom were visiting Alaska for the first time. My wife, Margaret, was with me, and although she's most decidedly not new to Alaska cruising, she had somehow missed out on Denali all these years. A few in the group regretted that *Infinity's* itinerary did not include Glacier Bay but featured, instead, Hubbard Glacier. I offered the opinion that I'd rather visit Hubbard any day of the week. I'm not sure many of them believed me, but it's true. The approaches to the mouth of Yakutat Bay and Hubbard, I told them, are scenically spectacular, with the St. Elias Mountain Range stretching as far as the eye can see in either direction. And I added that, in my experience, Hubbard was more active in calving huge chunks off its ice wall than other glaciers I had seen.

"Be on deck early and don't forget your cameras" was my sage advice.

Fortune smiled on us on the day of our visit. The air was chilly, but the sun was bright, and the peaks—Mount Vancouver, Mount Logan, Mount Hubbard, Mount St. Elias, and the other snowcapped sentinels by the bay—stood out in sharp relief against a clear blue sky. It was a dream day to be in such a place. When we got into Enchantment Bay, at the top of Yakutat, in which Hubbard is located, the glacier was every bit as active as I had predicted. In fact, I had to admit that its calving—both in the size of the falls and the accompanying thunderous sounds—was even more impressive than I had seen in the past.

At dinner that night, my advice to the group was validated by their reactions to what they had seen. There was so much activity on the ice wall, one of my companions complained, that he wore himself out running from one side of the deck to the other trying to capture the perfect picture. His wife, a sun lover, admitted that she didn't expect to stay on deck for long once she realized how cold it was. "But I didn't dare leave," she said. "There was so much going on." Hubbard Glacier had been, in every respect, a success.

And then came the whales!

In my 3 decades of savoring Alaska, I had seen whales—hundreds of them. But until a few years ago, I had never seen one breaching. When

a whale breaches, it hurls itself clear out of the water and drops in again on its back with a mighty crash and a mountainous splash. Scientists aren't sure exactly why whales do it. According to one theory, it could be a form of communication. Another theory proposes that the creatures are trying to dislodge barnacles and parasites clinging to their bellies. Or it might be that they're just playing. Or warning off their enemies. I had seen pictures of this activity but never experienced it firsthand. Until this voyage!

On a wildlife cruise (a shore excursion) out of Juneau, we watched not one but two whales breach in rapid succession. Each must have been 6 feet clear of the water. It seemed almost orchestrated—like something from a Samuel Goldwyn extravaganza. I sort of expected Esther Williams to put in an appearance. It was, in every way, an awesome sight, made all the more awesome by the fact that it was my first personal experience of the phenomenon.

But it was left to Denali Park to put on the biggest show of all. I eyed that segment of the cruisetour with some trepidation. Margaret had never been there before and was so excited at the prospect that I worried that perhaps the weather would disappoint her. I cautioned her and the others that I had been in that area for days on end on some previous trips without getting so much as a glimpse of Mount McKinley. Its 20,320-foot summit—and for that matter, its entire bulk—is often shrouded in clouds and impossible to see. For Margaret's sake, and for the sake of the others, I didn't want that to happen on this occasion.

I needn't have worried. The hugely photogenic mountain was visible the whole time. And the best was yet to come.

I've taken wildlife tours of the park before—and seen precious little wildlife! If you see Mount McKinley, a moose, a caribou, a Dall sheep, and a grizzly bear on the same day, you are said to have seen "the Grand Slam." I never had. I had seen four of the five and three of the five and, on a really bad day, just two of the five. But this time—bingo!

Not only did we see all components of the Grand Slam, we saw them at close range. A mother grizzly and her cub foraged, unconcerned, along the side of the road as our bus stopped not 10 feet from them, with passengers' cameras clicking and whirring. The caribou and moose were just 40 or 50 yards from us, and the Dall sheep were everywhere. And Mount McKinley stood out as clear as day, outlined against a high, blue sky. As a bonus, we also had a very clear sighting of a red fox and numerous brushes with the state's national bird, the willow ptarmigan.

So there we were, one old Alaska/Denali hand and a number of neophytes. And the neophytes had seen on their first cruisetour what it took me 30 years to see! It's stuff like that that keeps me going back to Alaska.

—by Jerry Brown

- **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 show productions, 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 American West Steamboat Company's *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 absolutely a luxury ship, and it really isn't a small ship (it holds 235 passengers). Warmly decorated with rich brocade wall coverings, 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 Glacier Bay Cruiseline 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, 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 really know what they're doing. Some of the other lines actually buy their land products from Princess or HAL. Holland America's strengths are its 3- and 4-night cruises combined with an Alaska/Yukon land package. In addition, the company's exclusive entry into the Yukon's Kluane National Park last year proved extremely popular. Not only will it continue in the Kluane area this year, HAL has added yet another Yukon gem—Tombstone Territorial Park, about 90 minutes drive up the Dempster Highway from Dawson City. Tombstone is 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 also introduced its fifth wilderness lodge—the Copper River Lodge, by the entry to hitherto difficult-to-access Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. Its addition gave Princess an attractive new cruisetour component, which has become more popular each year with the growing public awareness. This year, getting to the company's wilderness lodges in Denali will be easier and faster than ever before with the inauguration of a "Direct to the Wilderness" rail link. Passengers will board trains right on the dock in Whittier and whisk through some of Alaska's most scenic areas to Denali.

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 coffee vendor 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. Yes, it's all of that. 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 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 *Northern Exposure*, and is a great place to spot eagles and other wildlife. Some ships also stop at Haines as a port of call.

3 The Best Shore Excursions

Flightseeing and helicopter trips in Alaska are absolutely unforgettable ways to check out the scenery if you can afford them. But airborne tours tend to be pretty pricey—sometimes \$400 or more. 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 and Yukon Route Railway out of Skagway to the Canadian border at Fraser—the route followed by the gold stampedes of '98. 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 *no* white water. Generally, the group will stop for a picnic lunch en route and return to the staging area by motorcoach or automobile.