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## The Best of Alaska Cruising

**A**laska 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. Even thinking about it, we get chills of the good kind.

The fact that the number of cruise passengers who come here each year has been steadily increasing—2008 momentarily may be the year the number of cruise passengers tops one million for the first time—has had its impact, of course. In the summer, some towns turn into tourist malls populated by seasonal vendors, including jewelry stores geared towards the cruise crowd (15 such stores in Skagway alone at our last count) and shelves filled with 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 cultures—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. If you want to get away from the crowds by taking an organized shore excursion or touring on your own, or booking a small-ship cruise that goes to more remote parts, 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 less-populated inland destinations such as Denali National Park, Fairbanks, the Kenai Peninsula, the Yukon Territory, or the Canadian Rockies.

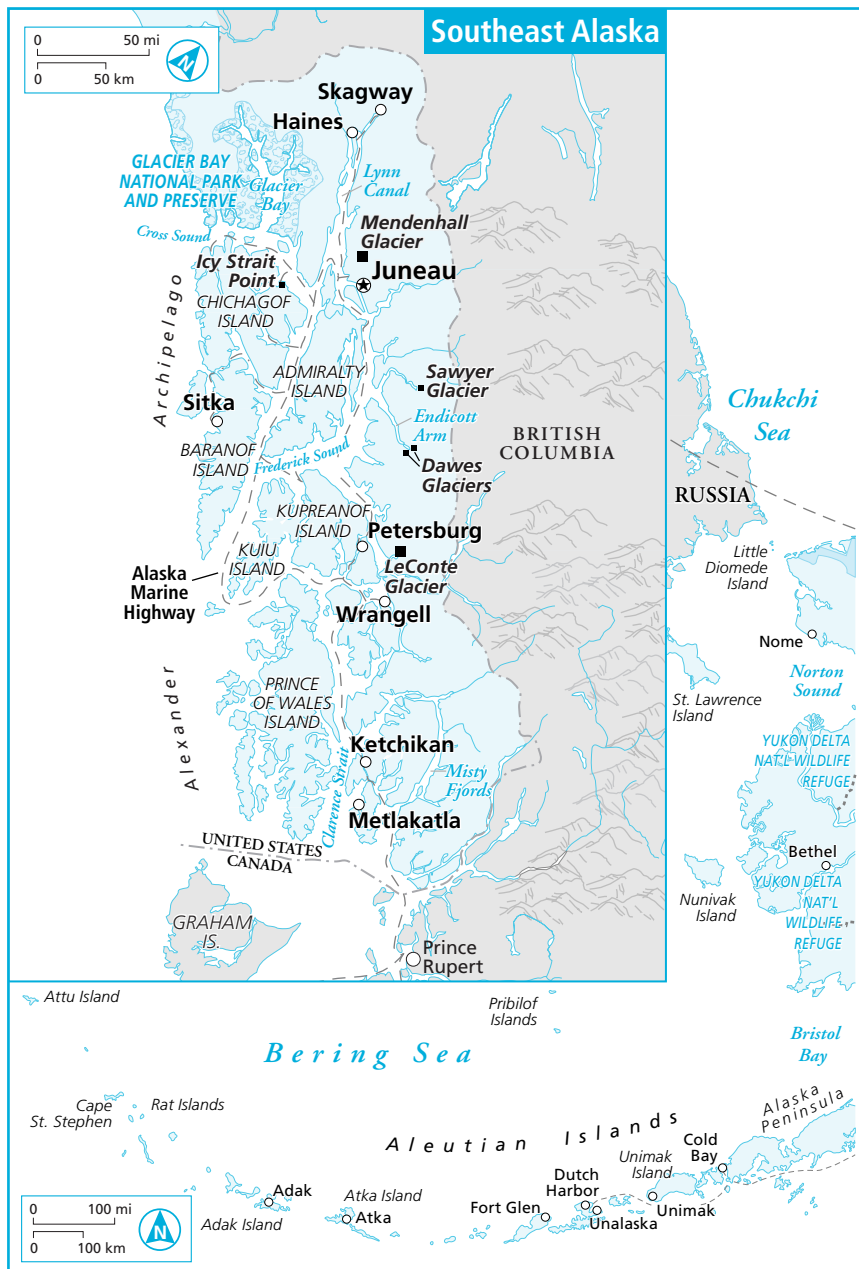
Even before you cruise, we can predict you'll want to visit again. Jerry first visited in 1973 and claims he's never been the same—the place put such a spell on him that over the years, he's been back upward of 50 times. Fran's first visit to the state wasn't quite that long ago, but she also noticed 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.

## 1 The Best of Alaska's Ships

- **The Best Ships for Luxury:** Luxury in Alaska is defined in 2008 by the midsize ships operated by Regent Seven Seas and Silversea Cruises, the latter returning to Alaska after a 1-year absence. If you want a more casual kind of luxury—a really nice ship with a no-tie-required policy—the *Seven Seas Mariner* offers just that on an all-suite vessel (most cabins have private balconies) with excellent cuisine. Silversea, on the other hand, with its *Silver Shadow*, represents a slick, Italian-influenced luxury experience with all the perks—big suite cabins, fine food, fine linens, and fine companions. Both lines include fine wine and booze and gratuities in their cruise fares. If you're more the small-ship type, for the ultimate Alaska experience in an intimate setting, 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 stunner as is its sister ship, *Millennium*. 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—departing from Vancouver.
- **The Best of the Small Ships:** Cruise West is the biggest small-ship player now that Clipper and Glacier Bay Cruiseline have vanished from the scene. Our fave of the fleet is the *Spirit of '98*, which has the cool hook of looking and feeling like a Victorian steamship—although it was actually built in 1984. And for real nostalgia, Majestic Cruise Line's *Empress of the North*, a real stern-wheeler, is hard to beat (the ship was out of service for a time in 2007 after it hit some rocks off Juneau, but was expected to be operational in 2008). Sailing on the *Empress*, watching the paddle wheel throw spray, is to take a step back in time to the golden age of steamboat travel.
- **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 *Millennium* offer wonderful AquaSpas complete with thalassotherapy pools and a wealth of soothing and beautifying treatments, and the solariums on Royal Caribbean's *Rhapsody 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. Ditto for the very posh Silversea Cruises.
- **The Best Shipboard Cuisine:** Regent Seven Seas is tops in this category, especially in the creative department, although Silversea, with its emphasis on preparation, has plenty to appeal to foodies as well—you want your filet rare, you'll get it rare. Of the mainstream lines, Celebrity has impressed in the past, though they recently dropped their affiliation with renowned French chef Michel Roux. Dinner in the reservations-only specialty restaurants on both the *Infinity* and the *Millennium* (\$30 service

# Alaska



 Paved Road  
 State or Provincial Route  
 Dirt Road

ARCTIC OCEAN



PACIFIC OCEAN

charge per person) is a very special, pampered dining experience. But somewhat surprisingly, the Nouveau Supper Club on the *Carnival Spirit* (service charge \$30 per person) also presents an impressive dining experience that will especially appeal to fans of elegant steakhouses—the beef is properly aged and expertly grilled. Carnival has also upgraded both its main dining room and buffet offerings.

- **The Best Ships for Onboard Activities:** The ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean have 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 pottery—they even recently added scrapbooking to the mix.
- **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 Ships for Whale-Watching:** If the whales come close enough, you can see them from all the ships in Alaska. But smaller ships—such as those operated by Cruise West, Lindblad, and American Safari—might actually change course to follow a whale. Get your cameras ready!
- **The Best Ships for Cruisetours:** With their own fleets of deluxe motorcoaches and railcars, Princess, Holland America, and more recently Royal Caribbean Cruises (which owns Royal Caribbean and Celebrity) are the market leaders in getting you into the Interior of Alaska, either before or after your cruise. Princess and Holland America also own lodges and hotels, and some of the other lines actually buy their land product components from these lines. 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-night Gulf of Alaska cruises in conjunction with Denali/Fairbanks or Kenai Peninsula cruise-tour arrangements.

## 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 at the Mercantile Center and the 15 or so upscale jewelry shops that have followed cruise passengers from the Caribbean (like some

of the locals we know, we were thrilled last year to discover that Little Switzerland, one such shop, had actually pulled up stakes and moved on after a not-very-successful run in Skagway). 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 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, usually for a few hours after Skagway, and this is one town we're pleased to report has not been changed by the advent of cruise-ship visitors.

### 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 airborne tours tend to be pretty pricey—some of them approaching \$600 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 may be 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—the route was expanded in 2007 to take passengers to Fraser, at the border, and on to Carcross (also known as Caribou Cross) in the Yukon Territory, some 30 more miles into Canada. The train route is the same one followed by the gold stampedeers of 1898. While you're riding the rails, try to imagine what it was like for those gold seekers crossing the same path 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. Ziplining is just plain fun for those who want to try soaring on a wire above the treetops—the adrenaline rush can be addictive.

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.