

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

And 2009 is a particularly special year with the state celebrating its 50th anniversary of statehood. It was in January 1959, that the Union accepted what had once been a territory as a fully-fledged state—the 49th. Every city, town, and hamlet will be holding celebrations in honor of the event. There will be parades, song and dance presentations, fireworks displays, sound and light shows—you name it. Alaska is surely going to put its best foot forward for its half century birthday party.

The number of cruise passengers visiting the state topped the 1 million mark last year and the numbers have had an impact. 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, and the oldest tourist attraction in the state) 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; numerous visits since have just confirmed her initial impression. 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 2009 by the midsized ships operated by Regent Seven Seas and Silversea Cruises. 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, slightly more formal luxury experience with all the perks—big suite cabins, excellent food, fine linens, and top-notch service. 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 for soft adventure with luxury accommodations.
- **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 Princess' late-model *Sapphire Princess* and *Diamond Princess* 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.
- **The Best Ships for Families:** All the major lines have well-established kids' programs, with Carnival, Royal Caribbean, and Norwegian Cruise Line leading the pack in terms of facilities and activities. Princess gets a nod for their National Park Service Junior Ranger program designed to teach kids about glaciers and Alaska wildlife—the kids can even earn a Junior Ranger badge. Holland America's Culinary Arts program includes cooking classes that are a favorite of 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. We are also big fans of the thermal suite (complete with hydrotherapy pool) in the Greenhouse Spas on Holland America's *Zuiderdam* and *Westerdam*. Luxury line Regent Seven Seas, of course, pampers all around. Ditto for the very posh Silversea Cruises.

Alaska





- **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—if you want your filet rare, you'll get it rare. And while this may surprise some, of the mainstream lines we are most impressed by the buffet and flavorful dining room cuisine on Carnival. The *Carnival Spirit* in Alaska also 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. Norwegian Cruise Line's Teppanyaki restaurant (\$25 per person charge) is also an experience not to be missed—yummy food and a show by knife-wielding chefs.
- **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, computers, cooking, and even ceramics, so you can make your own take-home souvenirs.
- **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. Holland America has made recent improvements in this area including adding comedians and magicians to its roster.

- **The Best Ships for Whale-Watching:** If the whales come close enough, you can see them from any ship in Alaska—Fran recently spotted a couple of orcas from her balcony cabin on a Holland America ship. 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 and binoculars 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 cruisetour arrangements.

2 The Best Ports

Juneau and Sitka are our favorite ports this year. Juneau is one of the most visually pleasing small cities anywhere and

certainly the prettiest capital city in America (once you get beyond all the tourist shops near the pier). 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.

Sitka replaces Skagway in our favorite category (see below). Sitka's Russian architecture, totem pole park, and Raptor Rehabilitation Center are all top-flight attractions. And what we like most about Sitka is it has not been overrun with stuff for tourists—it still feels like a small-town place (in fact, on a visit last year Fran heard plenty of complaints from locals about a chain tourist store that somehow snuck into the town—the locals vowing not to allow any more such shops). Sitka is the kind of place real travelers (as opposed to tourists) will adore.

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 presence of

a 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 to discover that Little Switzerland, one such shop, had actually pulled up stakes and moved on after a not-very-successful run in Skagway), and all the other tourist shops and attractions. Skagway has become hokey and touristy. 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 the place. 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 by floatplane or helicopter in Alaska is an unforgettable way to check out the scenery, if you can afford it. Airborne tours tend to be pretty pricey, from \$275 to more than \$500 a head: A helicopter trip to a dog-sled camp at the top of a glacier (usually among 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, and 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 recently expanded so that some of the trains go not just to Fraser, at the border, but on to Carcross (formerly

known as Caribou Cross) in the Yukon Territory, some 30 more miles into Canada. The steep train route is the same one followed by the gold stampede 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!

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's become increasingly popular is whale watching. Last year, on an evening excursion from Juneau in May, passengers on one of the small whale watching boats got the thrill of seeing an entire pod of orcas, more than a dozen of the giant

creatures frolicking before their eyes. For those with big bucks or big groups, some lines are now offering private tours. For example, Holland America passengers can spend \$1,960 for a private luxury boat with captain than can take six people exploring from Juneau.