

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.

In 2009, the state celebrated 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 seemed to hold celebrations in honor of the event, showing their Alaska spirit.

The number of cruise passengers visiting the state topped the one million mark in 2008, and despite cuts in the number of ships in Alaska in 2009, 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, 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. This is a place that puts a spell on you. Our writer Fran Golden first visited about a dozen years ago and found her view of the world was forever changed. She quickly put the state at the top

of her list of cruise destinations; numerous visits since have just confirmed her initial impression. Our coauthor Gene Sloan is more of a newbie to Alaska, but has become a big fan of the cruising scene—he found himself doing three cruises in 3 months in 2009. 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 all on 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 2010 by the midsize 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 Navigator* 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 liquor 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:** The newest ships of every cruise line 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* have raised the art of building big ships to new heights. The *Sapphire* is newly sailing out of Seattle this year, while the *Diamond* will again sail the Inside Passage between Vancouver and Whittier.
- **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 favorite of the four ships Cruise West is sending to Alaska in 2010 is the 102-passenger *Spirit of Endeavour* (formerly the *Newport Clipper*), which provides a higher level of comfort for a small vessel.
- **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 its 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* have 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* and *Radiance of the Seas* have relaxing indoor pool retreats. We are also big fans of the thermal suite (complete with hydrotherapy pool) in the Greenhouse Spas on Holland

Alaska





America's *Zuiderdam* and *Westerdam*. 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—if you want your filet rare, you'll get it rare. And while this may surprise some people, 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 as fine a meal as you'll likely 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' 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. Holland America Line has particularly impressive culinary classes.

- **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 presents

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 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 shortened 3- and 4-night cruises combined with an Alaska/Yukon land package (you get on a regular 7-night cruise, but disembark early to continue on your land tour). The company offers exclusive entry into the Yukon's Kluane National Park, and another Yukon gem has been added—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, has the very accessible Mendenhall Glacier, and is otherwise surrounded by wilderness—and it's a really fun city to visit, too. Recently, an addition to the tourist attraction roster is a drive past the governor's mansion, residence of the current governor Sean Parnell.

Sitka's Russian architecture, totem pole park, and Raptor Rehabilitation Center are all top-flight attractions. And what we like most about Sitka is that it hasn't been overrun with stuff for tourists—it still feels like a small-town place (in fact, on a visit 2 years ago, Fran heard plenty of complaints from locals about a chain tourist store that somehow snuck into the town—the locals vowing not to allow such shops anymore). Sitka is the kind of place real travelers (as opposed to tourists) will adore.

No town in Alaska is more historically significant than Skagway (which used to be one of our favorites), 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. However, you must first 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 locals, we were thrilled to discover that one such shop, Little Switzerland, had actually pulled up stakes and moved on after an unsuccessful 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 its true spirit.

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 *Northwestern 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 we're pleased to report this is one town that 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 \$215 to about \$600 per 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. In 2009, with the market in a slump, we were pleased to

see lines including Royal Caribbean actually discount some of their shore excursions—the first time we've ever seen that. And Regent was offering free, unlimited shore excursions for those booking their 2010 Alaska cruises in summer 2009, again, an unprecedented offer.

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 stampeders 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 cruise 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. On one 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 \$2,099 for a private luxury boat with captain that can take six people exploring from Juneau. Or \$1,765 for private Alaska touring in a DeHavilland Beaver floatplane in Ketchikan (again for up to six people).