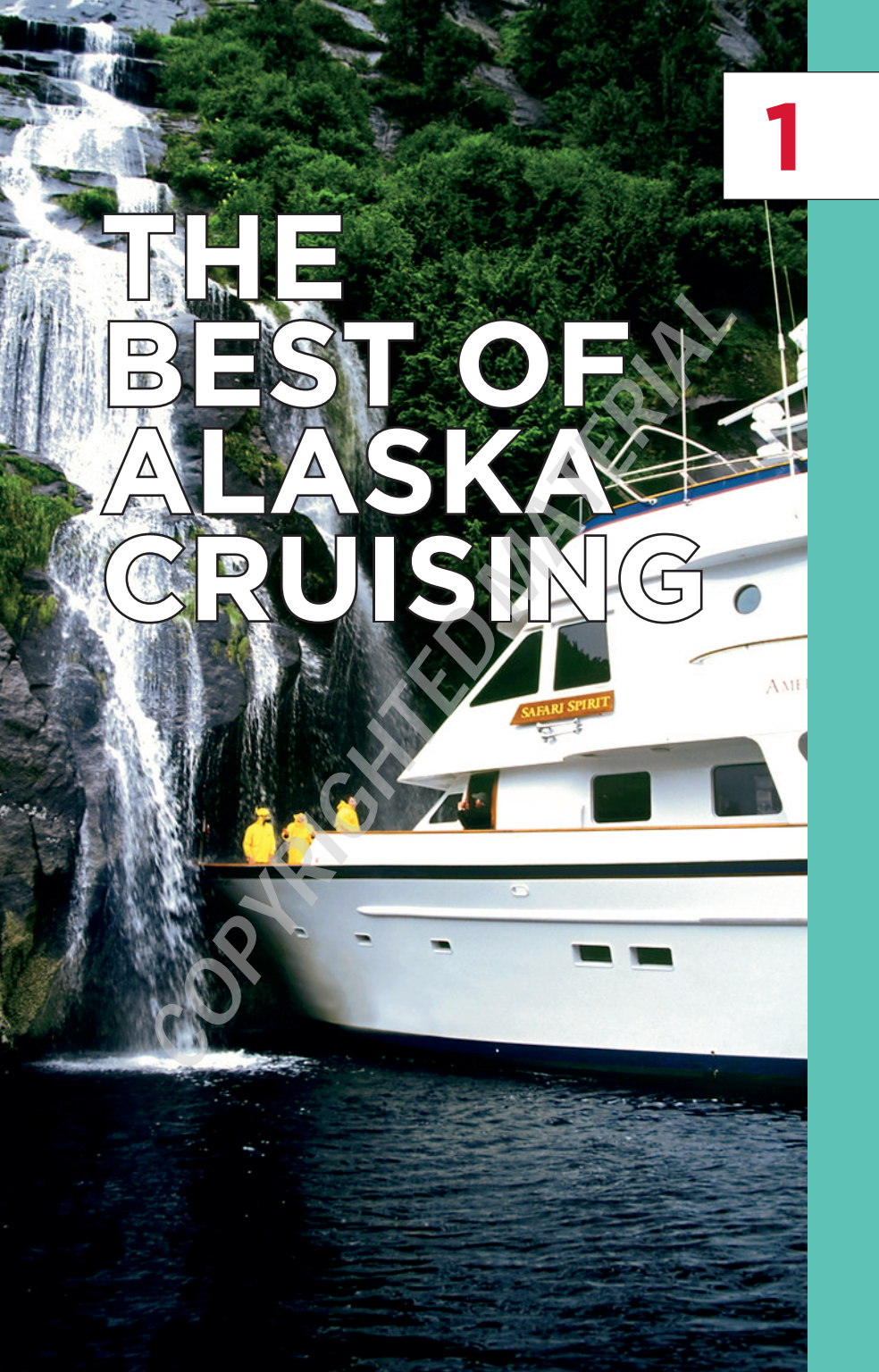


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# THE BEST OF ALASKA CRUISING



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 jaw-dropping scenery is simply breathtaking.

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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.

Three years ago, 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 full-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 back in 2008, and even though the numbers dipped to about 868,000 in 2010 and were estimated at about 933,000 last year, in summer some towns still turn into tourist malls. We're talking seasonal vendors, including jewelry stores geared towards the cruise crowd 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—also manage to 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. Fran first visited more than 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. She even visited in winter for the first time a couple of years ago, attending the Fur Rendezvous (Fur Rondy) in Anchorage, and discovered a whole new side to Alaska (where they know how to have fun even in the cold). Gene is more of a newbie to Alaska but has become a big fan of the

PREVIOUS PAGE: Small ships like the *Safari Spirit* allow passengers to get up close with the Alaskan wilderness.

cruising scene—he found himself doing three cruises in 3 months at one point. 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.

## THE best OF ALASKA'S SHIPS

- o **The Best Ships for Luxury:** Luxury in Alaska is defined in 2012 by Regent Seven Seas and Silversea. If you want a more casual kind of luxury (a really nice ship with a no-tie-required policy), Regent's Seven Seas *Navigator* offers

### THE STATE OF ALASKA cruising

There is optimism in Alaska this year, with state and cruise industry leaders hoping for increased good relations after a contentious period that centered largely on a controversial cruise passenger head tax.

To fight the tax, Royal Caribbean, Princess Cruises, Norwegian Cruise Line, and Holland America all downsized in 2010 and 2011, moving their ships to Europe and other cruise markets or cutting down on their number of Alaska itineraries. The cruise lines also filed a federal lawsuit against the state.

After much debate and even a visit by Gov. Sean Parnell to the Cruise Shipping Conference in Miami, the cruise industry's annual major conference, in an attempt to make nice, the Alaska legislature in 2010 approved a reduction of the \$50-per-cruise-passenger tax that had been passed by Alaska voters in 2006. The tax was originally designed to support the infrastructure at the ports and to enforce environmental compliance, but whether it was all used for that was subject to debate.

Beginning last year, the tax was reduced to \$35—with separate taxes in Juneau and Ketchikan also downsized.

That everything was friendly between the state and the lines was displayed when Parnell, in Miami for a second year, told the 2011 cruise conference, "What a difference a year makes, huh?" The governor said his main message for the cruise industry was "Alaska listens, and we acted."

Obviously, Alaska wants ships and cruisers back—the decline in cruise passengers in 2010 alone meant some \$150 million in lost revenue, including onshore spending. Everyone is looking forward to a more fruitful 2012.

That the cruise lines are looking more favorably at the Alaska market is evidenced by increased capacity this year. Good news for Alaska cruising has come in several forms, including Disney Cruise Line's return for its second year. Disney debuted in Alaska for the first time in 2011 and drew much attention to the state as a family destination (so much so that Princess launched new family programs, too). Market leaders Holland America and Princess Cruises have a substantial presence in Alaska this year, with seven ships each—Princess added a ship, and Holland America has 130 departures, representing a 6% capacity increase.



**Alaska**





The Compass Rose Dining Room on Regent *Seven Seas Navigator*.

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 and excellent food, linens, service, and companions. Both Regent and Silversea include fine wine and booze in their cruise fares. For the ultimate Alaska experience in a small-ship setting, check out the yachts of American Safari Cruises, where soft adventure comes with upscale accoutrements.

- o **The Best of the Mainstream Ships:** *Celebrity's Infinity* is a modern stunner, as is its sister ship, *Millennium*, and both ships were being upgraded as Celebrity prepared for 2012, to bring them even more up to date. These vessels, with their extensive art collections, cushy public rooms, and expanded spa areas, give Celebrity a formidable presence in Alaska. And **Princess's** late-model *Sapphire Princess* and *Diamond Princess* have raised the art of building big ships to new heights. Both will sail the Inside Passage this year, north- and southbound between Vancouver and Whittier.
- o **The Best of the Small Ships:** **American Safari Cruises** is the most intimate and upscale of the small-ship players. You can't get much more personal or pampering than the line's 12-person *Safari Spirit*, a favorite of such stars as Kate Winslet, Emma Thompson and their families. The only hiccup for would-be Alaska adventurers: the price, which can run well in excess of \$575 per person per day. Fortunately, the founders of ASC launched a new small-ship line last year, InnerSea Discoveries, providing a slightly more affordable way for adventurers to comfortably explore (prices starting from \$300).
- o **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—and for recently increasing its shore excursions geared toward families. **Holland America's** Culinary Arts program includes cooking classes that are a favorite of teens. But no one can beat **Disney**, returning for its second year in Alaska in 2012 and cruising from Seattle with the *Disney Wonder*—and with its presence really responsible for putting Alaska cruising on the family travel map.



Holland America's Culinary Arts program caters to budding cooks of all ages.

- **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 a hydrotherapy pool) in the Greenhouse Spas on **Holland America's** *Zuiderdam* and *Westerdam*. Luxury line **Regent Seven Seas**, of course, pamperers all around. Ditto for the very posh **Silversea Cruises**.
- **The Best Shipboard Cuisine:** **Regent Seven Seas** appeals to foodies, especially in the creative department, and shares the top tier with **Silversea**, with its emphasis on preparation—if you want your filet rare, you'll get it rare. Of the mainstream lines—and this may surprise some people—we are most impressed by the buffet and flavorful dining room cuisine on **Carnival**. The *Carnival Spirit* in Alaska also boasts the Nouveau Steakhouse (\$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'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. **Holland American 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



Royal Caribbean's ships, such as the *Rhapsody of the Seas*, feature a wide range of entertainment options.

this area, including adding comedians and magicians to its roster. Of course, in its second year in Alaska, **Disney** is also tops in this area with its family-oriented fare.

- **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 **Lindblad**, **American Safari**, and the new **InnerSea Discoveries** and **Alaska Dream Cruises**—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 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, and has been emphasizing its 3-night land options combined with weeklong cruises in addition to longer options.

# THE best PORTS

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THE BEST OF ALASKA CRUISING

The Best Ports

Juneau and Sitka are our favorite ports this year, as last. **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, lies near 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 a few years ago, Fran heard plenty of complaints from locals about a chain tourist store that somehow snuck into the town—the locals vow 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, 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 *Northern Exposure* and is a great place to spot eagles and other wildlife. Some



Sitka is renowned for its Russian flavor, nowhere more apparent than in St. Michael's Cathedral.

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.

## 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. However, 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 stamperders 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 offering private tours. For example, Holland America passengers can spend \$2,099 for a private luxury boat with captain that can take up to 18 people exploring from Juneau, or \$1,765 for private Alaska touring in a DeHavilland Beaver floatplane in Ketchikan (for up to six people).



Kayaking is a favored shore excursion with cruisers of the Inside Passage.