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Closer to Alaska

Along this wild coast, the smaller the ship, the bigger the adventure.

By Anne Z. Cooke
For The Inquirer

SKAGWAY, Alaska - I trail my fingers in the water as the Zodiac pulls away from the ship and heads for the forest, a dark line on the shore. The second hand on my watch clicks around as we pass a floating iceberg. Twenty seconds, 50 seconds, two minutes on the mark, and by then my hand feels like a lifeless lump of ice. Meanwhile, in this land of extremes, the contrary Alaskan sun shines like a torch, scorching my nose.

Behind us, the 62-passenger Sea Bird floats serenely at anchor, alone in a hidden inlet. No big cruise ships in sight - they're too big for this corner of the Tongass National Forest.

Check out the puffs of white on the tree - two eagles! Does anyone else see them? Then the Zodiac bumps up onto gravel, and the eight of us climb out for a walk in the woods.

"I think we're the only people who stop in this cove," says Matt Nilsson, the ship's naturalist and our guide as we climb up the rocky beach for a two-mile walk through the rain forest. "We've never seen anyone else here, not even a fisherman."

It's a sharp contrast to a sunny Monday morning in the port town of Skagway, population 832. On a typical summer day at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the snowcapped peaks will gleam, bald eagles will perch in the trees, and four or five mega-cruise ships will squeeze into the harbor and unload their passengers.

Imagine it - 8,000 people tramping through a town with one main street, narrow sidewalks, two museums, a half-dozen cafes, a row of century-old storefronts, the White Pass and Yukon train station, and a couple of dozen souvenir and gift shops.

Skagway, which sprang up in 1897 after miners found gold in the Yukon, was the port of entry for American fortune-seekers crossing into Canada via the notoriously steep Chilkoot Trail. Exploding overnight, the town grew from a population of one to a muddy, bug-infested tent city of 10,000. When the gold rush went bust, the miners went home, leaving a few hundred hardy souls to create a community. And so it was, more or less, until the cruise industry blossomed.

"You can hardly walk down the sidewalk or get a seat in a restaurant," grumbles Jason Kerr, who sailed north on the Alaska Marine Ferry and is hitching a ride to Anchorage. "Lines in restaurants, people everywhere, stores selling souvenirs," he says, frowning. "Skagway was never much of a town, but at least it was authentic."

Every summer, the gold rush is on again in southeast Alaska. Starting in early May, the fleet arrives, sailing north through the Inside Passage, docking at Ketchikan, Skagway, Sitka, and Juneau, the state capital.

No matter that Alaska recently increased the per-passenger head tax and tightened water-quality regulations. The parade continues, each ship a little bit bigger and taller.

For these floating resorts - and I've sailed on a few - Alaska is less destination and more wallpaper, a backdrop for nonstop music, casinos and cooking classes, yoga workouts and basketball courts, and all manner of shopping malls.

That's not my Alaska. I'd rather kayak in solitude near the shoreline, watching brown bears turning over rocks to find a meal. Or ride in a Zodiac near Point Adolphus, where the sea lions hang out on the rocks. I've done both on Lindblad Expeditions' Sea Bird, sailing its eight-day Coastal Wilderness itinerary between Juneau and Sitka.



The 62-passenger Sea Bird gets into fiords such as Tracy Arm that larger cruise ships can't explore. SVEN-OLOF LINDBLAD/Lindblad Expeditions

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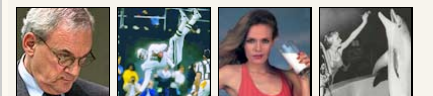


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While the behemoth cruise ships have to stick to the Inside Passage's Main Channel, the Sea Bird - as graceful as its namesake - can maneuver in shallow coves and through narrow fiords, or "arms," as they're called in Alaska. Freed from a rigid timetable, the captain has the flexibility to wait or to hurry, to follow a swiftly moving pod of orcas or to idle near a colony of sea lions.

"Each trip has an intended itinerary and locations," says Brian Silver, an expedition specialist for Lindberg. "But these are expeditions with a purpose, to see wildlife and the wildness, and since animals travel and weather conditions vary, it's possible that you'll visit slightly different places."

On most days, the Sea Bird's naturalists and tour guides - experts in marine biology, geology, regional history, and native cultures - give a pre-activity talk, followed by a walk, a Zodiac tour, or paddling one of the 20 one- and two-person kayaks in a quiet bay.

One morning, during a program about the humpback whales' annual migration from Hawaii, someone looks out the lounge window and spots a pod of whales surrounding the ship. Some are bubble-netting - shrieking and blowing bubbles to round up fish to eat - near the bow.

Another time, we're riding in the Zodiacs off Chichagof Island, looking for sea lions on the rocks, when a half-dozen of them swim alongside, turning their heads to look at us.

My most intriguing walk is the "Bog Walk," on a two-mile dirt-and-boardwalk trail through Petersburg's marshy north shore. A fishing village settled by Norwegians, Petersburg reminds me of Bergen, Norway, with its colorful wood houses, a museum, and three blocks of stores. A half-dozen fish-and-chip joints fry up the most delectable beer-battered fresh halibut, served with a cup of fried potatoes.

This is the itinerary's only port of call, and we split into six or seven groups - some to shop for toothpaste or postcards, others to visit the museum, and a few to take a one-hour flight on a float plane (\$150 per person) for bird's-eye views of glaciers, valleys, and remote rivers.

We bog-walkers, accompanied by a naturalist, get a firsthand look at the complex ecosystem in the bog, a surprising variety of plants, berries, ferns, fungi, flowers, and fry (recently hatched fish) flourishing in the brackish water. And we get a brisk walk to match.

Back aboard the Sea Bird, I relax in my bright, comfortable cabin. All 31 cabins are on the outside of the ship, with small but adequate bathrooms, individual temperature controls, and big picture windows. On the two bright moonlit nights, I lie in bed and watch the waves curl away from the bow.

As on most of these small ships, dress is casual - jeans, khakis, and sweaters - and dinner is served at a single seating with no assigned tables. I can move around and eat with people I'd met on a shore tour or a nature walk - usually travelers who share my interests, educational background, and even politics.

Meals are planned with sophisticated travelers in mind. Breakfast and lunch are buffet-style, with scrambled eggs, soup, lasagna, salads, sandwiches, and fruit. Leisurely three-course dinners feature entrees such as braised lamb with a reduction sauce, fresh halibut with a teriyaki glaze, and a vegetable ragout with pasta. I could always order a New York strip steak, chicken breast, or chicken Caesar salad.

We all linger over coffee and dessert of apple pie, crème brulee, or a fruit plate - at least until one of the naturalist programs starts in the lounge.

There are four octogenarians on board, celebrating a birthday and an anniversary. They mostly stay on the ship and watch the wildlife from the bow. The rest of us, generally 30 to 65, are spry enough to climb into and out of a Zodiac and to walk on uneven ground.

Lindblad is not the only small-ship cruise operator sailing the Inner Passage. The most well-known line, Cruise West, shut down last summer, but there's the new InnerSea Discoveries, a sister line of American Safari Cruises.

InnerSea Discoveries' two 49-passenger ships are booking eight-day cruises between Juneau and Ketchikan from May 21 through Sept. 3. High-energy adventures will include hiking, kayaking, snorkeling, and fishing in remote fiords and bays. The only "port" stop will be a native fishing village that no other cruise line has visited.

American Safari has been sailing the Inside Passage for 13 years, with exploration of Glacier Bay National Park with a park ranger.

Two other small ships are the Silver Shadow and the Island Spirit.

Silverseas' 392-passenger Silver Shadow, a six-star luxury vessel, is sailing a traditional ports-of-call trip. Evening meals are more formal, including some optional dress-up evenings.

The Island Spirit, a 32-passenger yacht owned and captained by Jeff Behrens, who has been sailing these waters since 1976, is the next best thing to complete freedom.

"Our goal is to get people up close and personal" to the native wildlife, says Brenda Blythe, one of the ship's relief captains.

Dress is casual, guests like the ship's comfortable family atmosphere, and the two dedicated chefs create what Blythe calls "extraordinary cuisine."

No ports-of-call, no television, no blaring music. The ship anchors overnight in quiet coves and follows the sun.

Now, that's my Alaska.

Exploring Alaska

Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic have teamed up to promote conservation and wildlife education and awareness. The Sea Bird's first 2011 Alaska itinerary, "Alaska, A Photo Adventure," sailing May 1, is one of their joint projects. National Geographic experts and award-winning photographers will be on board to enhance Lindblad's cruise experience and to help amateur photographers capture better images. The eight-day voyage is priced at \$5,990 per person in a double cabin.

Travelers who book before March 31 will receive a free round-trip airfare between Seattle and Alaska, and a \$500 value certificate from B&H Photo (in New York City) to buy camera equipment. Other Sea Bird sailings booked before March 31 will also receive free round-trip airfare between Seattle and Alaska.

Lindblad cruises are all-inclusive except for alcoholic beverages. Tours such as helicopter rides, dog mushing, and charter-boat salmon fishing cost extra.

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Most cruisers fly into Seattle or Vancouver and then fly to Juneau, Ketchikan, or Sitka.

United and US Airways fly nonstop to Seattle from Philadelphia. The lowest recent round-trip fare was about \$398. Alaska Airlines flies nonstop between Seattle and Juneau; the lowest recent fare was about \$625.

Inside Passage

Most of Alaska's small-ship itineraries sail among the Inside Passage's islands and channels from Ketchikan, Glacier Bay, and Sitka.

To appreciate the immense size and complexity of this region, a detailed map is essential. I use the Alaska and Canada's Inside Passage Map by Coastal Cruise Tour Guides, \$14.36, available at www.trektools.com. Buy and read it before you go.

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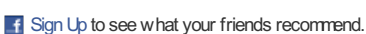
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