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Get a closer look at Alaska's Inside Passage on a small ship



Steve Haggerty/Special Contributor

Summertime cruise passengers swamp downtown Juneau market streets.

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Special Contributors

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KETCHIKAN, Alaska — I trailed my fingers in the water as the Zodiac pulled away from the Sea Bird and headed for the forest, a dark line on the shore. The second hand on my watch clicked around as we passed a floating iceberg. Twenty seconds, 50 seconds, two minutes on the mark and by then my hand felt like a lifeless lump of ice. Meanwhile, in this land of extremes, the contrary Alaskan sun burned down like a torch, scorching my nose.

Behind us, our ship, the 62-passenger Lindblad Expedition vessel, floated serenely at anchor, alone in a hidden inlet. No big cruise ships in sight. Too small for them in this corner of the Tongass National Forest. Hey, check out the eagles on that tree! Look, did you see them? Then the Zodiac bumped up on the gravel and the eight of us, lugging binoculars and sunscreen, climbed out to walk on the beach.

"We've never seen bears here, but it's always a possibility," said Lindblad Expeditions Guide Steven Ruggles, jingling the bells attached to his pack. "If there are any, they'll take off when they hear us talking. They're as afraid of us as we are of them."

Think ahead to this coming summer and a blue-sky day on Alaska's Inside Passage, the coastal route between Vancouver and the Gulf of Alaska. If you chartered a float plane for an aerial look at this winding interisland channel, you could bet on seeing 10 mega-ships on the move and 15 more lined up at docks in ports like Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway.

Imagine it. Thousands of eager cruise passengers bumping elbows when they'd expected to see glaciers, brown bears and humpback whales. Precious vacation time spent climbing on tour buses and standing in line to buy souvenirs. Ships so large and ports so small it's a scrum on the ground. And the bigger the ship, the more Alaska fades out, reduced to wallpaper for ear-splitting music and cooking classes, yoga workouts and basketball courts, floor shows and wellness seminars.

That's not my Alaska. I want to toss a pebble overboard and listen to the splash. I want to remember

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kayaking along the shore looking for brown bears in search of a meal and sea lions hauled out on the rocks. We did all that on the Sea Bird and it spoiled me for anything less.

But this summer brings good news. Despite Cruise West's recent bankruptcy, at least five of her former small-ship fleet are still in Alaska sailing itineraries in the "silver triangle," the area roughly between Skagway in the north, Sitka in the west and Ketchikan in the south. The ships will visit old favorites and new discoveries, from Misty Fjords and Glacier Bay to Thomas Bay, Patterson Bay, Klawock (a native village), the Brothers Islands and Frederick Sound.

The greatest advantage a small ship brings is its maneuverability. On the Sea Bird, the captain deftly glided into shallow coves and lingered beside waterfalls in narrow fjords. Not bound by a rigid schedule, he was free to follow a pod of swimming orcas or to linger near a raft of sea otters.

Onboard marine biologists, geologists, historians and native culture experts guided the expeditions and led the daily pre-excursion orientations, often with spot-on timing. We were listening to a talk about the humpback whales' annual migration from Hawaii when somebody spotted a half-dozen whales bubble-netting off the bow. We were cruising off Chichagof Island, scanning the rocks for sea lions, when several popped up next to us, curious and unafraid.

Except for Juneau and Sitka, our arrival and departure towns, the only official port stop was in Petersburg, settled by Norwegian fishermen. A tiny village of perhaps eight streets lined with colorfully painted buildings, it wasn't too small to sport a half-dozen gift and sundries stores and an intriguing history museum. You think you know how fresh halibut should taste? Don't answer until you've tasted the seafood market's fresh, fried beer-batter fillets.

"The people who book this kind of a cruise are birds of a feather," said Joyce Hunter, a retiree from Michigan, who'd grown up in a Midwestern town like mine, one with a similar ethos. A kindred spirit, she chose the ship for its size, wildlife orientation and casual dress code. And we both liked the single-seating dinner with unassigned seats, the only way to get to know the other passengers.

Though most passengers on our cruise were between 45 and 70 years old, four were octogenarians celebrating a birthday. While we kayaked along the shore, they sat in the lounge and watched the panorama from afar. "Just being here," said 89-year-old Sarah, "means the world." As it did to most of us.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers based in Marina del Rey, Calif.

When you go

Lindblad Expeditions: Cruises include meals, ship-based excursions and use of kayaks, sports and weather gear. Not included are port-related shore tours.

InnerSea Discoveries: With an expanded fleet, exciting new routes and an emphasis on active adventure, this cruise company (sister to American Safari Cruises) will be giving Lindblad Expeditions a run for the money.

Cruise rates: Seven-day cruises cost \$3,000 to \$7,000 per person, depending on cabin type and the sailing date, in early season, midsummer or early autumn. Most rates include meals, tips, wines and use of onboard recreation gear. Bar drinks are typically extra.

Take along: The best map to the region is the "Inside Passage Cruise Guide," from Coastal Cruise Tour Guides, at \$15.95, at trektools.com. Recommended dress includes a raincoat and hiking boots or sturdy tennis shoes.

Finding your ship:

American Safari Cruises: americansafaricruises.com. 888-862-8881.

InnerSea Discoveries: innerseadiscoveries.com. 877-901-1009.

Fantasy Cruises: smallalaskaship.com. 800-234-3861.

Lindblad Expeditions: expeditions.com. 800-397-3348.

Silver Seas Cruises: silverseas.com. 800-334-6544.

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