

# TRAVEL

The Miami Herald



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2012 | EDITOR: MARJIE LAMBERT travpress@MiamiHerald.com 305-376-4939

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## ALASKA ISSUE

# ALASKAN ENCOUNTERS OF THE WILD KIND

*Cruising closer  
to nature on  
a small ship*

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Special to The Miami Herald

**H**OONAH, Alaska — I trailed my fingers in the water as the Zodiac pulled away from the ship 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

• Uniquely Alaskan experiences available, 7J



**ON THE ROCKS:** Sea lions sprawl on an islet in Glacier Bay, above. Below, the calving face of Sawyer Glacier.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD

down like a torch, scorching my nose.

Behind us, the 62-passenger Sea Bird, a Lindblad Expedition ship, 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 puffs of white on the tree! Those are eagles! Then the Zodiac bumped up on the gravel and the eight of us, lugging binoculars and sun-screen, climbed out to walk on the beach.

"We've never seen bears here, but it's always a possibility," said Steven Ruggles, our Lindblad Expeditions guide, 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

• TURN TO CRUISE, 8J



ALASKA

# Cruising close to nature on a small ship

• CRUISE, FROM 1J

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 another 15 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.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

That's not my Alaska. I want to toss a pebble overboard and listen to the splash. I want to kayak along the shore, looking for brown bears turning over rocks in search of a meal. I hope to remember Point Adolphus, where sea lions haul 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 the recent sad demise of Cruise West, at least five of her former fleet are still in Alaska with new owners, sailing one-way and circle trips within the "silver triangle," roughly between Skagway in the north, Sitka in the west and Ketchikan in the south. These channels and bays, refreshed by ocean currents and protected by



**BUSY PORT:** Ketchikan is an arrival and embarkation point for many small ships.

outer islands, teem with wildlife — migrating humpback whales and birds, orcas on the hunt, sea lions and sea otters and dozens of bird species.

Inner Sea Discoveries, sailing expeditionary cruises, and its deluxe yacht division, American Safari Cruises, purchased three Cruise West ships, of which two are refitted to carry fewer passengers, more crew and mountains of outdoor gear. Devoted to creating quality cruising, the company's mission is to take guests to the heart of the Last Frontier.

"We've gotten very good at breaking up large groups into units of eight or 10, each with a guide, so that when you're out in a Zodiac or walking along the beach, you feel like one of a very few," said Sarah Scoltock, Inner Sea spokeswoman. "Even with 80 passengers on board — and that's not a lot — each person will have a truly personal experience."

With Inner Sea's fleet now at three ships sailing seven itineraries (including Cruise West's Spirit of Discovery, now the Wilderness Explorer), the destinations have doubled, including places not even an old-timer could find on a map: Peril Strait, Thomas Bay, Patter-

son Bay, Klawok (native) Village, Chichagof Island, Frederick Sound, Icy Strait, Baranof Island, Brothers Islands, and of course, Glacier Bay, Tracy Arm, Misty Fjords, Wrangell, and the three primary arrival and departure ports, Ketchikan, Sitka and Juneau.

American Safari's new Safari Endeavour (formerly Spirit of Endeavour) also debuts this summer, with similar wilderness encounters, but offering more deluxe quarters and spa treatments, yoga classes, premium wines and all-inclusive pricing.

Not to be outdone, Alaskan Dream Cruises bought the former Spirit of Columbia and Spirit of Alaska, which will sail under a new flag as Admiralty Dream and Baranof Dream.

## SIDE TRACKED

On our seven-day Sea Bird adventure, we glided effortlessly across Glacier Bay, deftly maneuvered in shallow coves and lingered beside waterfalls in narrow fjords. Not bound by a rigid schedule, the captain was free to follow a pod of swimming orcas or to linger near a raft of sea otters.

"Each trip has an intended itinerary," said Brian Sil-

ver, an adventure specialist in Lindblad's headquarters. "But these are expeditions with a purpose, to show you wildlife and the wildness. And since animals travel and weather conditions vary, it's possible that you'll visit slightly different places."

The ship's onboard naturalists — experts in marine biology, geology, regional history or native cultures — guided most onshore outings and led the daily pre-exursion orientations, often with spot-on timing. We were listening to a talk about the humpback whales' annual migration from Hawaii, when somebody spotted a pod of whales clustered around the ship encircling a school of krill near the bow. We were cruising off Chichagof Island, scanning the rocks for sea lions, when a half-dozen popped up next to us, wide-eyed with curiosity.

The most intriguing hike, I thought, was the "Bog Walk," in Petersburg, a two-mile dirt and boardwalk trail along a marsh. One of the Sea Bird's few port stops, Petersburg was built against a hill beside a scenic harbor. A village of neatly painted wood houses along a single main street, it boasts an intriguing history museum, a half-dozen stores and a couple of fish-and-chip joints. You think you know how fresh halibut should taste? Before you say yes, try one of these fried, flaky beer-battered filets.

While some of the passengers shopped in town, a dozen of us bog-walkers followed our guide past brine-loving plants and lowly mosses, stopping to hear about the complex ecosystem and to peer at berries, ferns, fungi and flowers.

The Sea Bird's interior is small but efficiently designed, with several lounges, a dining room and 32 outside double cabins. The décor, in plain blue and white, is renovated annually; the cabins have adequate storage space and spotless efficiency bathrooms.

Dress and meals are casual, with buffet service at breakfast and lunch. Delicious three-course dinners



**COMING DOWN:** Snow melt cascades into Tracy Arm, a fjord south of Juneau.

## Small-ship cruising

**Lindblad Expedition Cruises:** Per person rates include all meals, guided shore excursions, and use of kayaks, sports and weather gear. Not included are alcoholic beverages and some outfitter-guided shore tours, mostly in Sitka and Juneau. Most small ship routes sail from Juneau to Sitka, cruising through or to Frederick Sound, Glacier Bay, Icy Strait and Petersburg. Check the websites for daily details. **Cruise rates:** Rates for a seven-day cruise on any small ship can range from \$3,000 to \$7,000, depending on the cabin type and date — whether it's early season, mid-summer or late summer. All meals, tips, wines and use of kayaks, snorkels, rubber boots and Zodiac excursions are generally included. Other beverages and shore tours may be extra.

**Learning more:** To understand the region, bring my favorite map, the "Inside Passage Cruise Guide," from Coastal Cruise Tour Guides, at \$15.95, available at [www.trekktools.com](http://www.trekktools.com).

## CRUISE LINES

**American Safari Cruises:** [www.americansafaricruises.com](http://www.americansafaricruises.com), 888-862-8881

**Inner Sea Discoveries:** [www.innerseadiscoveries.com](http://www.innerseadiscoveries.com), 877-901-1009

**Fantasy Cruises:** [www.smallalaskaship.com](http://www.smallalaskaship.com), 800-234-3861

**Lindblad Expeditions:** [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com), 800-397-3348

**Silver Sea Cruises:** [www.silversea.com](http://www.silversea.com), 877-276-6816

included white and red wine, and were waiterserved at a single seating, with no assigned tables. That gave me a chance to move around and sit with passengers I'd met on excursions, and with people of like mind, kindred spirits who shared my interests, life experience and even my politics.

"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 with a similar Midwestern ethos. On most evenings we sat until the last tea cup and wine glass were empty — or until one of the naturalist pro-

grams started in the lounge. To get the most out of this cruise, you need to be spry enough to climb in and out of a Zodiac, to walk on gravel, get your feet wet and step over fallen logs. I recommend hiking boots or sturdy tennis shoes.

Passenger ages on our cruise ranged from 30 to 65, but there were four octogenarians celebrating a birthday. While we tramped on the beaches and through the woods, they watched the scenery from the lounge, happy to see it in person.

"Just being here," said 89-year-old Sarah, "means the world." As it did to most of us.

