

## taking off **G2**

More hotel upgrades come with a fee.

## tip sheet **G3**

It's time to think about booking summer travel.

## viewfinders **G2**



## midwest traveler **G5**

Little Rock, Ark., bustles with history and more.

# travel

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## In Alaska, a small ship is your best bet to see big wildlife

- Want to see whales and sea otters during your cruise in Alaska? Chances are better if you're aboard a small ship.

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
AND STEVE HAGGERTY  
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

"There's a whale right here, next to us!" whispered 15-year-old Will, leaning over the railing and trying to focus his camera on the shiny black hump off the port-side bow. "And there's another one, right there!" he said, pointing at the second giant head that rose up and tipped sideways, fixing a round black eye on the ship.

Humpback whales, too many to count, circled the Sea Bird as the 62-passenger vessel, a Lindblad Expedition cruise ship, idled in Alaska's Frederick Sound. Like kids at the cir-

cus, Will and his cousin Dagney, my nephew and niece, dashed back and forth across the deck, counting the whales: two close to Will, another four off the starboard bow and more in the distance. Gently rippling the water's glassy surface, the behemoths rose, blew long frothy breaths and with a final flip of enormous white-flecked flukes, dove out of sight.

Warmed by long sunny days, the Inland Passage's krill population explodes in summer, attracting hundreds of humpbacks — and in some places, nearly as many cruise ships. As long as the food lasts, the migrating whales, who haven't eaten in five months, patrol the Sound, following

the food and putting on pounds for the return swim back to Hawaii.

"You don't have to whisper," said Jonathan, the ship's onboard naturalist, out on deck to take photos of his own. "The whales can't really hear us talk," he told us. "They can hear banging and engine noises. High-pitched whines, too. If there were five or six ships here, they might swim away."

Being alone is what wildlife watching is all about, especially in the hidden inlets of the Inside Passage, the interisland coastal route between Vancouver and the Gulf of Alaska. Come July, however, the main channel is awash in mega-ships.

And on shore? Disappointed travelers standing in line when they'd

Alaska continues on **G6** ▶



STEVE HAGGERTY • ColorWorld/MCT

The Sea Bird, a 62-passenger Lindblad Expeditions ship, sailed in Glacier Bay.





Passengers on the Sea Bird take snapshots of snowmelt cascading into a fiord near Juneau, Alaska.



Passengers adventure off the ship to kayak, exploring coves in the Tongass Narrows on Revillagigedo Island. Un-Cruise Adventures includes "active" itineraries for cruisers who want to join the action.



Sea lions, sprawled on an islet in Glacier Bay, are wildlife eye candy for passengers on the Sea Bird.

# See big wildlife from a small ship

## ◀ ALASKA FROM G1

expected to see eagles, orcas and sea otters. Towering 3,000-passenger ships calling at ports so small that the sidewalks feel like Times Square. Floating hotels seemingly a mile high.

That's not my idea of wild country. I want to see the glaciers from a deck near the water, close enough to hear a fish jump. To kayak along the shoreline, looking for brown bears scratching up gravel in search of a meal. To snap photos of Bird Island, where sea lions haul out on the rocks. For me, being in the scene is what Alaska cruising is all about.

Fortunately, several expedition-style ships sail in the "silver triangle," the waterways roughly between Skagway in the north, Sitka in the west and Ketchikan in the south. A network of channels, bays and inlets protected by adjacent islands, the region teems with life.

Three of those ships belong to Inner Sea Discoveries and its deluxe division, Un-Cruise Adventures (known as American Safari Cruises until a few months ago).

Un-Cruise's seven-ship Alaska fleet has been redesigned to carry fewer passengers, more crew and a lot more outdoor gear: kayaks, inflatable rafts, snorkel and scuba gear. The company's so-called "luxury yachts" offer extras like yoga classes and spa treatments. The "active" ships are designed for travelers who'd rather join in than watch, sportsmen on the go.

"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 Un-Cruise spokesperson Sarah Scoltock. "Even with 80 passengers on board — and that's not a lot — each person has a truly personal experience."



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As for Lindblad's Sea Bird, she sails where giant ships can't go, maneuvering in shallow coves and through narrow fiords. With flex time built into the schedule, her captain is free to follow a pod of swimming orcas or to stop to photograph a raft of sea otters.

"Each trip has an intended itinerary," said Brian Silver, an adventure specialist at 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 onboard naturalists on our trip — experts in marine biology, geology, regional history or native cultures — guided most onshore outings



Spawning salmon leap the fish ladders at the Macaulay Fish Hatchery in Juneau, Alaska.

and led the daily pre-excursion orientations, sometimes with spot-on timing. We were

standing by the rail, talking

about melting glaciers just as a giant chunk of ice calved off into water.

Our only port of call was at Petersburg, a fishing village settled by Norwegians. We stretched our land legs on a guided "bog walk," then wandered about, visiting the history museum and the drugstore (handy if you run out of toothpaste). And we sampled one of the town's several fish-and-chip joints, serving the world's best (no kidding) fresh halibut, beer-battered and deep fried.

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

## IF YOU GO

**Lindblad Expeditions:** Per-person rates for Lindblad Expedition Cruises include all meals, guided shore excursions and use of kayaks, sports and weather gear. Eight-day Alaskan cruises begin at \$5,990 per person, double occupancy. Not included are alcoholic beverages and some outfitter-guided shore tours, mostly in Sitka and Juneau ([www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com); 1-800-397-3348).

**More cruise lines:** Other companies offering small-ship excursions in Alaska include the following:

**Un-Cruise Adventures:** [www.un-cruise.com](http://www.un-cruise.com); 1-888-862-8881

**Fantasy Cruises:** [www.smallalaskaship.com](http://www.smallalaskaship.com); 1-800-234-3861

**Silver Seas Cruises:** [www.silverseas.com](http://www.silverseas.com); 1-877-276-6816

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and meals are casual, with buffet service at breakfast and lunch.

Hearty three-course dinners with white and red wine, were served by waiters at a single seating, with no assigned tables. That gave us a chance to move around and sit with passengers we'd met on excursions, kindred spirits with similar life experiences. "The people on these kinds of cruises are birds of a feather," said Joyce Hunter, a retiree from Michigan.

For this or any expedition cruise, I recommend hiking boots or sturdy tennis shoes. You may have to walk on a dirt path or gravel beach, and will probably climb in and out of the Zodiacs. Our passenger contingent mostly ranged from 35 to 65 years old, but there were exceptions: a toddler, two teenagers and several octogenarians. While we tramped on the beaches and paddled kayaks, the seniors were happy to watch from the deck or the lounge. On a small ship cruise, Alaska is that close.

**« I WANT TO SEE THE GLACIERS FROM A DECK NEAR THE WATER, CLOSE ENOUGH TO HEAR A FISH JUMP. ... FOR ME, BEING IN THE SCENE IS WHAT ALASKA CRUISING IS ALL ABOUT. »**