

Travel

A vacation in Argentina, building homes, friendships. **Personal Journey, N3**



Oceania Cruises' new ships are "upper premium" havens for food lovers. **N3**



EYE-TO-EYE WITH WHALES

Small expedition-style ships get you closer to Alaska's wildlife and dramatic terrain than the mammoth cruise liners that sail the Inside Passage.

The Sea Bird, a 62-passenger vessel, sails in Glacier Bay. The expedition-style ship can reach spots along the Inside Passage where large cruise ships can't venture. STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty
McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

FREDERICK SOUND, Alaska — "There's a whale right here, next to us!" whispered 15-year-old Will, leaning over the railing and frantically trying to focus his camera on the shiny black hump off the port 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 Expeditions cruise ship, idled in Alaska's Frederick Sound. Like kids at the circus, afraid of missing something, Will and his cousin Dagney — my

nephew and niece — dashed back and forth across the deck, counting the whales. Gently rippling the water's glassy surface, the behemoths rose, blew long, frothy breaths, and, with a flip of enormous, white-flecked flukes, dove out of sight.

Warmed by long, sunny days, the Inside 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 — which haven't eaten in five months — patrol the Sound, following the food, surfacing, diving, hunting, and eating nonstop, putting on pounds for the return swim to Hawaii.

"You don't have to whisper," said See **INSIDE PASSAGE** on N4



Dave Pahl, founder of the hammer museum in Haines, Alaska. Many are from "people leaving them on the front steps."

ALAN J. HEAVENS / Staff

Museum houses tools that can make an impact

By Alan J. Heavens
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

HAINES, Alaska — Almost every click of the TV remote control brings someone's perception of Alaska into your living room.

For some, it's digging for gold. For others, state troopers snowmobiling through the winter's long nights to crime scenes, or crab fishermen on stormy seas.

No matter how many times you click the remote, however, you'll never see anything about Dave Pahl and his hammer collection.

For that experience, you'll

have to travel by ship north from Juneau along the Inside Passage to the upper Lynn Canal to Haines, population 1,800.

Midway up Main Street, eight miles from the Alaska Marine Ferry terminal, stands a 19-foot-by-8-inch hammer in front of a white-and-green frame structure that houses Pahl's collection of somewhere between 1,400 and 2,200 ways, as he puts it, to make an impact.

"I haven't counted since I opened, but I've been making a mental note of what I've added and taken away," said Pahl, adding that his current renova-

See **HAMMER MUSEUM** on N4



Ketchikan, a major port for mega-cruise liners and smaller expedition-style ships in southeastern Alaska, welcomes visitors to "The Salmon Capital of the World."

checkin

Top 10 List

IdeaWorksCompany, a consultant on travel loyalty programs, ranks airline programs for ease in booking award flights for October 2012 during the annual Switchfly Reward Seat Availability Survey. The survey was based on ease of booking award flights for October 2012 during March 2012. Here are the Top 10.

— *Miami Herald*

10. British Airways
9. JetBlue
- 8., 7. AirTran, United (tie)
6. Virgin Australia
5. Singapore Airlines
4. Lufthansa/ Swiss/ Austrian
3. GOL
- 2., 1. Southwest, Air Berlin (tie)

GeoQuiz

Question: Where was the hottest temperature in the world recorded?

— *Chicago Tribune*

(Answer below)

Gadget Guru



Light tent a heavyweight

MSR is the Porsche of backpacking tents. These beauties, a brand of Cascade Designs, are sleek and comfy, with cutting-edge construction that maximizes space and sturdiness while minimizing weight. The new top-of-the-line, double-occupancy model is the Carbon Reflex 2, which weighs just 3 pounds, including poles, stakes, and rain fly — lighter than many one-person tents. You get an airy mesh body with double-zippered doors front and aft and a solid, water-resistant, polyurethane-coated bathtub floor. The precisely aligned, moss-green, rip-stop nylon rain fly has twin vestibules to match the doors. Holding it all up are two flexible carbon-fiber poles. This is not a free-standing tent (MSR opted to save the extra weight), so you'll need to use the included stakes. All this comes at a price, and you'll spend more to get the optional custom-fit "Footprint" ground tarp, which protects the floor from water and abrasion, and earns its keep.

— *Judi Dash*

MSR Carbon Reflex 2 tent is \$499.95 (matching Footprint ground tarp is \$39.95) at www.msrtents.com. Info: Cascade Designs at 206-505-9500 or 1-800-531-9531.

Web Buzz

App for global travels

A social travel guide that will change the way you decide where your next vacation will be.

Name: Minube

Available for: Android, iPhone, iPod touch, iPad

What it does: The Minube app sets your sights on the world with pictures, videos, and destination recommendations from more than 500,000 international travelers.

Cost: Free

What's hot: It's the best travel inspiration finder I've seen in a smartphone app. I love the versatility. You can search for things to do by destination (when you already know where you're going), or use the "Inspiration" light-bulb page to get ideas based on how far you want to travel, how long you want to be gone, the type of trip you'd like to take: something exotic, a bit of history and culture, fall in love again, or, my personal favorite, disappear. You can even tap your friends on Facebook, Twitter, through your contacts, by text or e-mail.

What's not: As much as I loved the Inspiration finder, I found myself wanting to set multiple filters, such as "three days," "to relax," and "within 200 miles" at the same time. Not happening. When I tested it, the app would bring up destination choices as soon as I touched a single filter. Also, watch out for in-app purchases for thematic lists. The price tags are apparent, but you're only two clicks away from charging your account.

Worth it: Yes. Even if you don't have big trips on the horizon, consider it your personal weekender consultant.

— *Jen Leo, Los Angeles Times*

Answer: On July 10, 1913, the mercury hit 134 degrees in Death Valley, Calif. That figure had been considered the second highest in the world until last year, when a team from the World Meteorological Organization decided a 136-degree reading taken at El Azizia, Libya, on Sept. 13, 1922, was invalid.

Inside Passage

Continued from N1

Jonathan, the ship's onboard naturalist, 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. But we're the only ship with the time to stay and watch."

Being alone is what wildlife watching is all about, especially in the hidden inlets of the Inside Passage, the inter-island coastal route between Vancouver and the Gulf of Alaska. Come July, however, if you chartered a floatplane for an aerial tour of the main channel, you could count on spotting 10 mega-ships on the move and 15 more docked at ports from Ketchikan and Sitka to Juneau and Skagway.

And on shore? Thousands of disappointed travelers standing in line when they'd expected to see eagles, orcas, and sea otters. Precious vacation time spent waiting for tour buses and queuing up to pay for souvenirs. Towering 3,000-passenger ships so big calling at ports so small that the sidewalks feel like Times Square. Floating hotels so huge that Alaska is little more than scenery for onboard cooking demonstrations, yoga classes, floor shows, and wellness seminars.

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.

Cruise West's fleet used to sail these routes. But the company folded in September 2010. Fortunately, five of its expedition-style ships still sail in the "silver triangle," the waterways roughly between Skagway in the north, Sitka in the west, and Ketchikan in the south.

Three of those ships now belong to Un-Cruise Adventures.

"We focus more on adventure and less on the on-ship experience," said spokeswoman Sarah Scoltock. "You can pick a ship and route that best fits your kind of adventure — luxury, active, or heritage."

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, and 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 than watch.

As for the Sea Bird, it sails where giant ships can't go, maneuvering in shallow coves and through narrow fiords. With flex time built into the schedule, its captain is free to follow a pod of swimming orcas.

"Each trip has an intended itinerary," said Brian Silver, an adventure specialist at Lindblad's headquarters. "But these



Steller sea lions, which are listed as a threatened species, laze in an islet in Glacier Bay reachable by Lindblad Expeditions' Sea Bird. STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld

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 naturalists on our trip — experts in marine biology, geology, regional history, or native cultures — guided most onshore outings 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 the water.

Our only port-of-call was 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 drug store. And we sampled one of the town's fish-and-chip joints, serving the 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 and meals are casual, with buffet service at breakfast and lunch.

Hearty three-course dinners with white and red wine were waiter-served at a single seating, 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 and sometimes even politics.

"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 ranged from 35 to 65 years old, with 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.

To comment, e-mail TravelTalk@phillynews.com

Alaska by Smaller Ship

To understand the region, invest in a good map, the *Inside Passage Cruise Guide*, from Coastal Cruise Tour Guides, for \$15.95, available at www.trektools.com.

Prices

Rates for a seven-day cruise on a smaller expedition-style ship can range from \$3,000 to \$7,000, depending on the cabin type and date: early season, midsummer, or late summer. All meals, table wines and use of kayaks, snorkels, rubber boots, and Zodiac excursions are usually included; alcoholic beverages and tips may not.

Itineraries

Most small-ship cruises in the Silver Triangle sail half-circle routes between Juneau and Sitka. Check websites for specifics.

Information

Un-Cruise Adventures

www.un-cruise.com, 1-888-862-8881.

Fantasy Cruises

www.smallalaskaship.com, 1-800-234-3861.

Lindblad Expeditions

www.expeditions.com, 1-800-397-3348.

Silver Sea Expeditions

www.silversea.com/expeditions, 1-877-276-6816.