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## Alaska, up close and personal

By Steve Haggerty, Anne Z Cooke

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Adventure Travel Alaska Cruises Discover America ... ☆ f 27 t 1 in 0 g+ 0

**New cruise line's winning formula puts creatures before home comforts, write Anne Z Cooke and Steve Haggerty.**



Expedition cruises allow passengers a greater opportunity to get close to nature. Photo / Michael S. Nolan

"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 side bow.

"And there's another one right there!" he said, pointing at a second giant head rising up to tip sideways and fix 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 children at the circus afraid of missing something, Will and his cousin Dagney dashed back and forth across the deck counting the whales - two close to Will, another four off the starboard bow, 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)

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patrol the Sound following the food. It's a life of surfacing, diving, hunting, and non stop eating, to put on pounds for the return swim back to Hawaii.

"You don't have to whisper," said Jonathan, the ship's onboard naturalist, up on deck to take photos of his own.

"The whales really can't hear us talk. 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.

But come July, if you chartered a float plane for an aerial tour of the main channel, you could count on spotting 10 mega ships on the move and another 15 docked at ports from Ketchikan and Sitka to Juneau and Skagway.

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 themselves onto the rocks. For me, being part of the scenery is what Alaskan cruising is all about.

Cruise West's fleet used to sail these routes. But the company is gone now, 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. A network of channels, bays and inlets protected by adjacent islands, the region teems with life.

Three of those ships now belong to **Un-Cruise**, formerly known as Inner Sea Discoveries (deluxe division - American Safari Cruises).

The new name, inaugurated in January 2013, reflects what the company has been doing all along, says Un-Cruise spokesperson Sarah Scoltock.

"We focus more on adventure and less on the on-ship experience," she says.

"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, snorkel and scuba gear.

As for the Sea Bird, she sails where giant ships can't go, manoeuvring in shallow coves and through narrow fjords. With flexibility built into the schedule, her captain is free to follow a pod of swimming orca 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 wilderness. 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 and led the daily pre-excursion orientations, sometimes with spot-on timing.



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Cuba



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Once, we were standing by the rail discussing melting glaciers when a giant chunk of ice suddenly and opportunely calved into the water.

### CHECKLIST

**Getting there:** [Air New Zealand](#) operates direct services from Auckland to Vancouver. Local carriers connect from there to Anchorage. A range of cruise companies offer expedition trips in the waters of Alaska.

- AAP

By Steve Haggerty, Anne Z Cooke



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