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SMALL SHIPS BIG ADVENTURES



Exploring hidden Alaska is easier if you downsize your cruise ship

ANNE Z. COOKE
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

HOONAH, 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 down like a torch, scorching my nose.

Behind us, the 62-passenger Sea Bird, a Lindblad Expeditions 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.

Check out the puffs of white on the tree! Two eagles! Did anyone else see them?

ALASKA continued on T4



RALPH LEE HOPKINS PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR

The 62-passenger Sea Bird, an expedition ship that offers cruises of Alaska's remote waters, sails through Le Conte Bay while passing the Stikine Flats of Tongass National Forest.

TRAVEL

Want to really see Alaska? Think small

ALASKA from TI

Then the Zodiac bumped up on the gravel and the eight of us climbed out, lugging binoculars and sun screen for a two-hour beach exploration.

"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 in Alaska, and a clear day on Alaska's Inside Passage. If you had chartered a float plane to follow this winding, interisland channel, the route that follows the Pacific Coast from Vancouver to the Gulf of Alaska, you could count on seeing 10 ships on the move and 15 more docked in ports like Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway.

Imagine it. Thousands of eager cruise passengers hoping for a glimpse of orcas, sea lions, brown bears and humpback whales, and bumping into each other instead. Would-be adventurers just like them, climbing onto tour buses together, waiting in line to buy souvenirs, filling the sidewalks. Take a look at a map and you'll see why. Few of Alaska's coastal ports are large enough for cruise ships to dock.

But the larger problem is today's bloated mega-cruise ships, floating resorts built to carry swarms of people, typically from 1,800 to 2,800 passengers. And the bigger the ships have grown, the more Alaska has been reduced to the status of scenic backdrop, wallpaper for ear-splitting music and cooking classes, yoga workouts and basketball courts, floor shows and wellness seminars.

That's not my Alaska.

I'd rather be sailing with the Sea Bird, close enough to the water to toss a pebble and hear the splash. Or kayaking in solitary near the shoreline, watching brown bears turning over rocks to find a meal. Or floating in one of the Sea Bird's 12-passenger Zodiacs, idling in the shallows near Point Adolphus, where the sea lions haul out on the rocks. I did them all, recently, on the eight-day "Coastal Wilderness" itinerary, and it spoiled me for anything less.

As graceful as its namesake, the Sea Bird leaves the Inside Passage's Main Channel behind, deftly manoeuvring in shallow coves and through narrow fjords—"arms" as they're called in Alaska. Freed of a rigid timetable, her captain can choose to wait or to hurry, to follow a swiftly moving pod of orcas or to linger near a colony of sea lions.

"Each trip has an intended itinerary" said Brian Silver, one of Lindblad's expedition specialists. "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 on-board naturalists and tour guides — chosen for their expertise in Alaskan: marine biol-

ogy, geology, regional history and native cultures — led all onshore outings and daily preexcursion orientations, often with unerring timing. We were sitting in the lounge, watching a program about the humpback whales' annual migration from Hawaii, when somebody happened to look out the window and saw that a pod of whales had surrounded the ship and were bubble-netting near the bow.

Near Chichagof Island, we were riding in a Zodiac looking for sea lions on the rocks when a half-dozen appeared next to the skiff, popped their heads up to look at us.

The most intriguing hike was the "Bog Walk," a 3.2-kilometre dirt and boardwalk trail along a marsh in the village of Petersburg, the only port stop that the Sea Bird made. Petersburg perches on a hill above a scenic harbour, a charmer with neatly painted wood houses, a single main downtown street, an intriguing history museum and a couple of fish-and-chip joints that fry up the most delectable beer-battered fresh halibut ever.

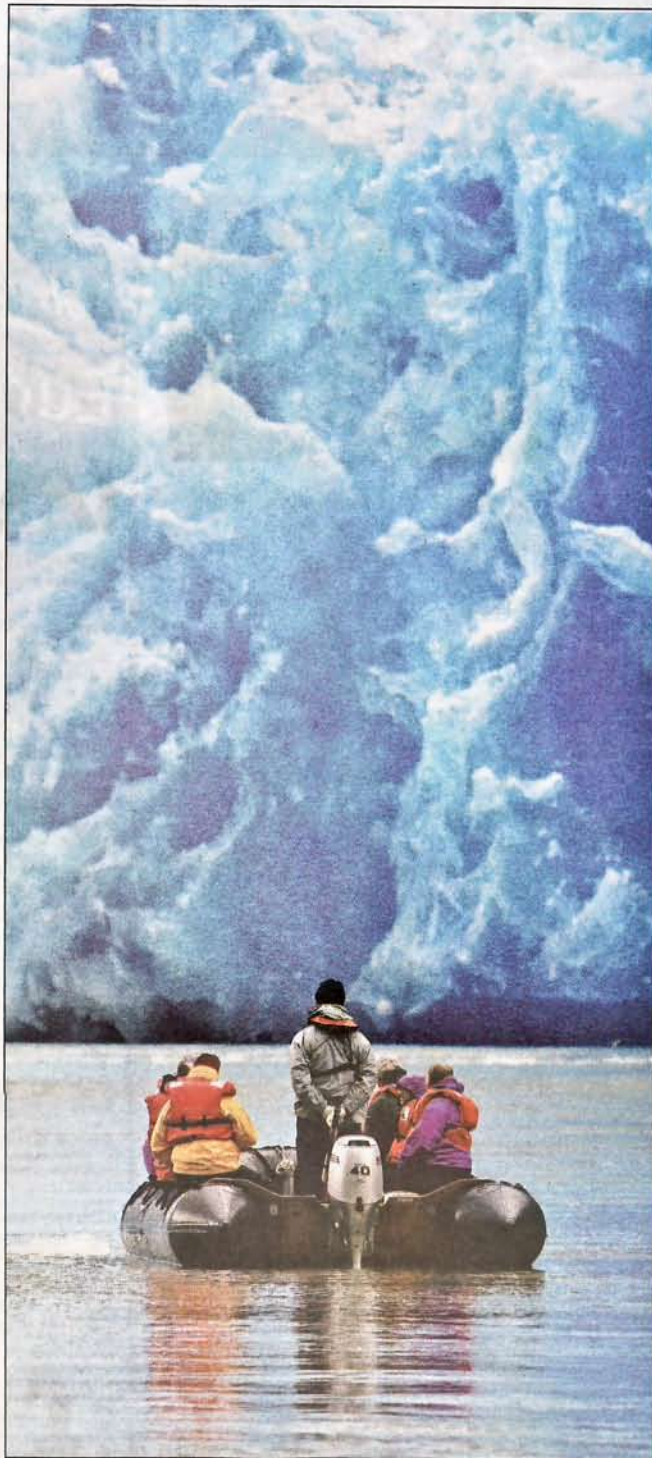
Updated annually with a contemporary colour scheme, the Sea Bird's 32 cabins and public lounges are simple but comfortable. Despite the Sea Bird's dedication to expedition-style travel, our evening meals included roasted beet salad, lamb with a reduction sauce and halibut with teriyaki glaze. Red and white wine were included.

To get the most out of this cruise, you need to be spry enough to climb in and out of a Zodiac, get your feet wet and step over fallen logs. Hiking boots are recommended.

The age range on board ran from 30 to 65, but there were four octogenarians as well, on-board to celebrate a birthday.

"Just being there," they said, "meant the world."

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance journalist based in Marina Del Rey, Calif.



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Zodiac and travellers at South Sawyer Glacier, Tracy Arm Fjord.

Sailing north: Try one of these ships

If you're a cruise fan already and wondering why I haven't mentioned Cruise West, Alaska's home-grown cruise company and the largest presence in the region, it's because the company declared bankruptcy last year. Meanwhile, other small ships have stepped in to help fill the void.

New this summer is Innerseas Discoveries' two 49-passenger ships sailing eight-day cruises between Juneau and Ketchikan. An arm of the American Safari Cruise company, Innerseas is creating high-energy adventures from hiking and kayaking to snorkeling and fishing in remote fiords and bays. There are no port stops except at a native fishing village. The itineraries, designed for hands-on explorers, are likely to be cruise world's most ambitious and physically challenging.

Also in Alaska this summer are the 392-passenger Silver Shadow and the 32-passenger Island Spirit. The former, a Silver Seas ship, is a six-star luxury vessel sailing the traditional Inside Passage route, with daily ports-of-call.

Day-wear is casual, but evening meals are more formal with some dress-up evenings.

In contrast, a trip on the Island Spirit, a 32-passenger yacht owned and captained by Captain Jeff Behrens, is akin to sailing with a friend who knows the region and has been based here since 1976.

"Our goal is to get people up close and personal," said Brenda Blythe, one of the Spirit's relief captains. "We don't advertise because our repeat passengers and small groups buy our space early in the season. But we do get a few open cabins, so don't hesitate to call us."

Dress is casual, guests like the ship's comfortable family atmosphere and two dedicated chefs create "extraordinary cuisine." Absent are ports-of-call, television reception, music over the intercom and a fixed itinerary.

The ship's anchors overnight in quiet coves and follows the sun. She's the private yacht you always wanted to own.

Anne Z. Cooke

JUST THE FACTS

Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic have joined forces to promote conservation and wildlife education/awareness. This summer, the Sea Bird's first itinerary, sailing on May 1, is "Alaska, A Photo Adventure," one of their many joint projects. National Geographic experts and award-winning photographers will be on board to photograph the region, help amateur photographers and enhance the overall experience. The eight-day voyage is priced at \$5,990 U.S. per person in a double cabin.

FACTS AND FEES: Lindblad Expedition Cruises, sailing a loop trip between Sitka and Juneau, include all meals, naturalist-led shore excursions, and use of kayaks, sports and weather gear. Not included are alcoholic beverages and outfitter-provided shore tours in Sitka and Juneau. I recommend a detailed map such as "Inside Passage Cruise Guide," from Coastal Cruise Tour Guides, \$15.95, available at www.trektools.com. Buy and read it before you go.

CRUISE CONTACTS & RATES: Lindblad Expeditions: www.expeditions.com. 800-EXPEDITIONS. \$5,990 per person. Silver Seas Cruises: www.silverseas.com. 800-334-6544. \$3,158 per person. Innerseas Discoveries: www.innerseasdiscoveries.com. 877-901-1009. \$2,295 per person. Fantasy Cruises: www.smallalaska-ship.com. 800-234-3861. \$4,495 per person.

