



## WORD TRAVELS FAST

**FARAWAY NUPTIALS:** Destination weddings are gathering steam as couples ride the bridal trains of celebrity weddings. Learn the ins and outs of DWs with *The Knot Guide to Destination Weddings* by Carley Roney and Joann Gregoli (Clarkson Potter, \$19.95).

EDITOR: Lisa Lenoir TO REACH US: (312) 321-2194, travel@suntimes.com

# CRUISING

# ALASKA



Travelers cruising Alaska's waterways can take advantage of excursions from port cities, like this helicopter tour to Mendenhall Glacier out of Juneau. —STEVE HAGGERTY/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

## SMALLER SHIPS LEAD TO LARGER EXPERIENCES

BY ANNE Z. COOKE  
AND STEVE HAGGERTY

**S**KAGWAY, Alaska — On a bright June day last year, the 62-passenger Sea Bird glided through a narrow passage on the eastern fringe of the Inside Passage and anchored in an isolated inlet.

There, far from the main channel, in a quiet corner of Alaska's northern wilderness, six of the ship's passengers climbed into an inflatable dinghy and went ashore for a walk in the woods.

"We could be the first people ever to step right here on this spot," said Matt Nilsson, a naturalist and our guide, as we picked our way over the rocky beach and up into a stand of ancient Sitka spruce. "We've never seen anyone else in this fjord, not even a fisherman."

Fast-forward to this coming June and a Monday morning in the port town of Skagway, population 860. If it's a classic day here at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the midnight sun will glint off the snow-flecked peaks, bald eagles will perch in the trees — their heads look like popcorn balls — and four giant cruise ships (and one small cruise ship) will squeeze into the harbor, disgorging 8,999 eager passengers.

That's nearly 9,000 people swarming ashore looking for fun in a village with one main street, two small museums, a restored historic railroad, a dozen shops and

the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park Visitors Center.

Skagway, founded in 1897 after gold was discovered near Dawson City in the Yukon, was the port of entry for gold miners hoping to climb up the infamously steep Chilkoot Trail and over White Pass into Canada. A boom town, it grew overnight from a population of one lone pioneer to a muddy, mosquito-infested tent city of 10,000. And like all such towns, Skagway eventually shrank to a few hundred souls who stayed on to build a village. And so it was until the cruise industry arrived.

"You can hardly walk down the sidewalk or get a seat in a restaurant," grumbled Jason Kerr, who had sailed north on the Alaska Marine Ferry and was hitching a ride to Anchorage. "Lines in restaurants, people everywhere, stores selling souvenirs," he said, frowning. "Skagway was never much of a town, but at least it was authentic."

The gold rush is on again in southeast Alaska, led by the cruise industry. Every summer more ships sail north through the Inside Passage to

ports such as Ketchikan, Juneau and Sitka, and every year these behemoths swell in size. The current generation of mega-monsters carry up to 3,000 passengers; several 4,000- to 6,000-passenger ships are under construction. These floating resorts don't focus on the destination; they celebrate entertainment, from casinos, restaurants and floor shows to Internet cafes, aerobics



Cruising Alaska's waterways on small ships, like the 48-passenger Contessa with its open sun roof, allows tourists to get up close and personal with the real Alaska.

**These ships, too small to compete with the big guys, focus on seeing Alaska, in person, close-up.**

classes, basketball courts, shopping malls, climbing walls, designer spas and golf driving ranges.

So the question is: Will you feel cheated if your ship is so huge and tall that you can't see a grizzly bear on a distant beach or the furry heads of sea otters floating in the water?

If you think so, see Alaska on one of 12 small ships cruising the southeast coast on three- to 14-night itineraries. These ships, too small to compete with the big guys, fo-

cus on seeing Alaska, in person, close-up. They can turn and maneuver, going where big ships can't, and their itineraries are more flexible. When a pod of whales appeared near the Sea Bird, the captain slowed down and circled to let us look — and look some more. On a big ship, we'd have kept on going.

Casual dress is the rule on most small

# ALASKA

Continued from Page 1C

## Small ships lead to big experiences

ships, so leave your tuxedo at home. And don't worry about how much to tip; the fare usually is a single price that includes all tips, shore excursions, guided wildlife tours and port fees.

Lindblad Expedition ships, the 62-passenger Sea Bird and its twin, the Sea Lion, sail 11-night trips that include kayaking, beach landings and hiking. As the company explains, these vessels are utilitarian rather than deluxe, with programs that emphasize adventure and discovery. Onboard guides and trained naturalists specialize in Alaskan, from marine life, flora and fauna to native people and regional history.

The cabins are small but pleasant, with good lighting. Storage space is limited, but since casual dress is the byword, it works. The bathrooms are adequate, but no more. The public lounge, where we gathered for interpretive talks, was warm and comfortable. The meals were very good, made with fresh ingredients and lots of vegetables. Open seating gave us a chance to meet our fellow passengers, people who were curious about Alaska and eager to learn. To get the most from the trip, however, you need to be reasonably spry and able to climb in and out of an inflatable raft.

Cruise West, with seven ships in Alaska, is the largest — and oldest — cruise company here. Owned by an Alaskan family, it offers a wide variety of itineraries, each designed to explore a particular region. The 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia, for example, sails three- and four-night cruises entirely within Prince William Sound, a spectacular complex of bays, channels, islets, valleys and tidewater glaciers.

The Columbia's twin, the 78-passenger Spirit of Alaska, also sails three- and four-night cruises, but on a round-robin itinerary out of Juneau, the capital city, stopping in Skagway and touring Glacier Bay. If you're touring Alaska by land, adding one of these short cruises would make a terrific addition to your experience.

Four Cruise West ships — the 84-passenger Spirit of Discovery, the 84-passenger Spirit of '98, the 102-passenger Spirit of Endeavor and 138-passenger Spirit of Yorktown — sail 10-night cruises from Seattle or Vancouver, all on the Inside Passage. Each is themed dif-

ferently, but all mix wilderness exploration with stops at popular ports such as Skagway and Sitka. Again, dress is casual, cabins are small, the food is excellent and the focus is on seeing and doing.

For explorers, the crown jewel is Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus, a 120-passenger oceangoing ship, sailing 13-night, one-way cruises in the Bering Sea. An all-suite ship, the Oceanus is a step up in luxury, but the mission is the same: to discover and explore rarely visited gems such as Dutch Harbor, the Pribiloff Islands, the Yukon Delta, Little Diomed and Nome.

Intrav, the tour company, now owns the 128-passenger Clipper Odyssey, an upscale ship. This summer it will sail on 14-night cruises on several dates between Nome and the Russian coast and between the Gulf of Alaska and Prince Rupert in northwest British Columbia. This ship, like several similar charter cruise ships, has limited availability and cabins are more expensive. But its itineraries include some rarely seen places, so it can't hurt to check.

Finally, for a more traditional approach, Majestic America Line's two coastal cruisers include the 231-passenger Empress of the North, a new three-deck stern-wheeler that relives the fancy-free years of the gold rush. The tiny, 48-passenger Contessa is a three-level luxury yacht that looks like a

converted fishing boat with an open-roof sun deck.

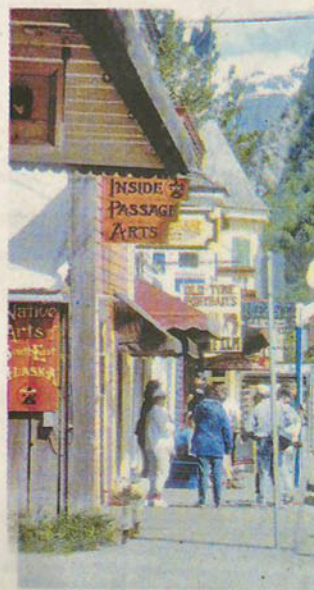
The Empress sails seven-night, round-trip itineraries out of Juneau; Victorian decor, with red satin and dangling fringes is really a kick, but the staterooms also have a television, a DVD player, a telephone, a minibar and a bathroom with a shower and tub. The onboard historian loves to talk about the gold rush. High stepping dancers in the Gold Rush showroom offer some real kicks.

The Contessa is quite different. A modern yacht with all-suite cabins, it sails seven-night, one-way trips between Ketchikan and Sitka. Small and speedy, it slips up to tidewater glaciers, seals basking on rocky shorelines and waterfalls.

Unfortunately, so many ships in such a fragile environment is not good news. On some days, diesel smoke hangs in the air, and rainbow streaks on the water are bits of leaking engine oil. But Alaska cruising won't be going away soon. Or ever. The reality is that the only way to see Alaska's mighty coast, an immense panorama of deep fjords and vast forests, lacy waterfalls and tidewater glaciers is from the deck of a ship. And the smaller the ship, the larger the experience.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based freelance writers.

Casual dress is the rule on most small ships, so leave your tuxedo at home.



Left: Restored Victorians buildings in Skagway's National Historic District. Right: A totem pole collection in Ketchikan attracts cruise passengers. — STEVE HAGGERTY/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES



A ship cruises alongside Hubbard Glacier in Yakutat Bay at Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park.

## IF YOU GO

### ALASKA CRUISES

**GETTING THERE:** Many airlines fly to Seattle, Vancouver and Anchorage. However, Alaska Airlines, our sentimental favorite (you feel as if you're already there), not only has the most flights, but knows Alaska best. Usually (but not always) prices are comparable to its competitors.

If your cruise doesn't start in Seattle or Vancouver, you will have to fly to Anchorage and then on to the closest regional airport.

**BOOKING A CRUISE:** Most cruise companies prefer you book your trip with an experienced travel agent.

The prices below, per person double occupancy in a cabin, reflect trips of different lengths. For a true price comparison, visit the Web:

**Lindblad Expedition:** 11-night cruises start at \$4,840 per person; [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com).

**Cruise West:** Three-night cruises start at \$1,099; [www.cruisewest.com](http://www.cruisewest.com).

**Intrav's Clipper Odyssey:** 14-night cruises start at \$8,145; call (800)456-8100.

**Majestic America:** Seven-day trips start at \$3,699; [www.majesticamericaline.com](http://www.majesticamericaline.com).



Your local news source ::  
Select a community or newspaper »

Select a community

Select a STNG publication

Freestyle Your Way  
 Alaska in May Experience Alaska with Freestyle Cruising from NCL  
 CLICK HERE!  
 NCL NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE FREESTYLE CRUISING  
 Carlson Wagonlit Travel  
 www.carlsontravel.com

# CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

suntimes.com

Member of the Sun-Times News Group



77°F  
Partly Sunny

Traffic • Weather: "RUMBLY"

Search »

Site  STNG  
Make us your Home Page

- Subscribe
- Easy Pay
- Reader Rewards
- Customer Service
- Email newsletters

Home | News | Sports | Business | Entertainment | Classifieds | Columnists | Lifestyles | Ebert | Search | Archives | Blogs | RSS XML

TRAVEL :: [PRINTER FRIENDLY »](#) [EMAIL ARTICLE »](#) [BOOKMARK](#)

- Lifestyles
- Archive
- Crossword
- Fashion/Beauty
- Eating In
- Food
- Gardening
- Health
- Lottery
- Religion
- Sudoku
- Susanna's Night Out
- Travel
- Columnists
- Laura Berman
- Ask Ellie
- Dave Hoekstra
- Susanna Homan
- Horoscopes
- In Society
- Lauren Streicher
- Paige Wiser

[BOOKMARK](#)

## Cruising Alaska

### SMALLER SHIPS LEAD TO LARGER EXPERIENCES

March 25, 2007

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

SKAGWAY, Alaska -- On a bright June day last year, the 62-passenger Sea Bird glided through a narrow passage on the eastern fringe of the Inside Passage and anchored in an isolated inlet.

There, far from the main channel, in a quiet corner of Alaska's northern wilderness, six of the ship's passengers climbed into an inflatable dinghy and went ashore for a walk in the woods.

» Click to enlarge image

"We could be the first people ever to step right here on this spot," said Matt Nilsson, a naturalist and our guide, as we picked our way over the rocky beach and up into a stand of ancient Sitka spruce. "We've never seen anyone else in this fjord, not even a fisherman."

Fast-forward to this coming June and a Monday morning in the port town of Skagway, population 860. If it's a classic day here at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the midnight sun will glint off the snow-flecked peaks, bald eagles will perch in the trees -- their hea

VIDEO :: [MORE »](#)



Travelers cruising Alaska's waterways can take advantage of excursions from port cities, like this helicopter tour to Mendenhall Glacier out of Juneau.

(Steve Haggerty/Sun-Times)

#### IF YOU GO

**GETTING THERE:** Many airlines fly to Seattle, Vancouver and Anchorage. However, Alaska Airlines, our sentimental favorite (you feel as if you're already there), not only has the most flights, but knows Alaska best. Usually (but not always) prices are comparable to its competitors. If your cruise doesn't start in Seattle or Vancouver, you will have to fly to Anchorage and then on to the closest regional airport.

**BOOKING A CRUISE:** Most cruise companies prefer you book your trip with an experienced travel agent.

**COST:** The prices below, per person double occupancy in a cabin, reflect trips of different lengths. For a true price comparison, visit the Web:

**Lindblad Expedition:** 11-night cruises start at \$4,840 per person; [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com).

**Cruise West:** Three-night cruises start at \$1,099; [www.cruisewest.com](http://www.cruisewest.com).

**Intrav's Clipper Odyssey:** 14-night cruises start at \$8,145; call (800)456-8100.

**Majestic America:** Seven-day trips start at \$3,699; [www.majesticamericaline.com](http://www.majesticamericaline.com).

heads of sea otters floating in the water?

If you think so, see Alaska on one of 12 small ships cruising the southeast coast on three- to 14-night itineraries. These ships, too small to compete with the big guys, focus on seeing

like popcorn balls -- and four giant cruise ships (and one small cruise ship) will squeeze into the harbor, disgorging 8,999 eager passengers.

That's nearly 9,000 people swarming ashore looking for fun in a village with one main street, two small museums, a restored historic railroad, a dozen shops and the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park Visitors Center.

Skagway, founded in 1897 after gold was discovered near Dawson City in the Yukon, was the port of entry for gold miners hoping to climb up the infamously steep Chilkoot Trail and over White Pass into Canada. A boom town, it grew overnight from a population of one lone pioneer to a muddy, mosquito-infested tent city of 10,000. And like all such towns, Skagway eventually shrank to a few hundred souls who stayed on to build a village. And so it was until the cruise industry arrived.

"You can hardly walk down the sidewalk or get a seat in a restaurant," grumbled Jason Kerr, who had sailed north on the Alaska Marine Ferry and was hitching a ride to Anchorage. "Lines in restaurants, people everywhere, stores selling souvenirs," he said, frowning. "Skagway was never much of a town, but at least it was authentic."

The gold rush is on again in southeast Alaska, led by the cruise industry. Every summer more ships sail north through the Inside Passage to ports such as Ketchikan, Juneau and Sitka, and every year these behemoths swell in size. The current generation of mega-monsters carry up to 3,000 passengers; several 4,000- to 6,000-passenger ships are under construction. These floating resorts don't focus on the destination; they celebrate entertainment, from casinos, restaurants and floor shows to Internet cafes, aerobics classes, basketball courts, shopping malls, climbing walls, designer spas and golf driving ranges.

So the question is: Will you feel cheated if your ship is so huge and tall that you can't see a grizzly bear on a distant beach or the furry

#### TOP STORIES ::

---

##### NEWS

[Firefighter's final call](#)

##### BUSINESS

[Tailored by Toyota](#)

##### SPORTS

[UCLA's aura too much for Kansas](#)

##### ENTERTAINMENT

[Art Shay: Storyteller](#)

##### LIFESTYLES

[Cruising Alaska](#)

#### BLOGS ::

---

##### FULL COURT PRESS

[Can Scott Skiles take the Bulls to Point C?](#)

##### HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

[If John Calipari leaves Memphis, things could get interesting with Simeon star Derrick Rose](#)

##### HOEKSTRA

[Real Country Near 66](#)

##### MITCHELL

[Friend of Curie LSC Chair speaks out](#)

##### SWEET:

[Sweet Friday column: Obama tells Sun-Times links with YouTube anti-Hillary admaker only "attenuated." Small world--Obama Senate spokesman once roomed with ad creator.](#)

Alaska, in person, close-up. They can turn and maneuver, going where big ships can't, and their itineraries are more flexible. When a pod of whales appeared near the Sea Bird, the captain slowed down and circled to let us look -- and look some more. On a big ship, we'd have kept on going.

**THE GOLD RUSH:**  
Oscars 2008 date set

Casual dress is the rule on most small ships, so leave your tuxedo at home. And don't worry about how much to tip; the fare usually is a single price that includes all tips, excursions, guided wildlife tours and port fees.

Lindblad Expedition ships, the 62-passenger Sea Bird and its twin, the Sea Lion, sail 11-night trips that include kayaking, beach landings and hiking. As the company explains, these vessels are utilitarian rather than deluxe, with programs that emphasize adventure and discovery. Onboard guides and trained naturalists specialize in Alaskan, from marine life, flora and fauna to native people and regional history.

The cabins are small but pleasant, with good lighting. Storage space is limited, but since casual dress is the byword, it works. The bathrooms are adequate, but no more. A public lounge, where we gathered for interpretive talks, was warm and comfortable. The meals were very good, made with fresh ingredients and lots of vegetables. Open decks gave us a chance to meet our fellow passengers, people who were curious about Alaska and eager to learn. To get the most from the trip, however, you need to be resourceful and able to climb in and out of an inflatable raft.

### Short cruises enhance land trips

Cruise West, with seven ships in Alaska, is the largest -- and oldest -- cruise company here. Owned by an Alaskan family, it offers a wide variety of itineraries, each designed to explore a particular region. The 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia, for example, sails three- and four-night cruises entirely within Prince William Sound, a spectacular complex of bays, channels, islets, valleys and tidewater glaciers.

The Columbia's twin, the 78-passenger Spirit of Alaska, also sails three- and four-night cruises, but on a round-robin itinerary out of Juneau, the capital city, stopping in Sitka and touring Glacier Bay. If you're touring Alaska by land, adding one of these short cruises would make a terrific addition to your experience.

Four Cruise West ships -- the 84-passenger Spirit of Discovery, the 84-passenger Spirit of '98, the 102-passenger Spirit of Endeavor and 138-passenger Spirit of Yorktown -- sail 10-night cruises from Seattle or Vancouver, all on the Inside Passage. Each is themed differently, but all mix wilderness exploration with stops at popular ports such as Skagway and Sitka. Again, dress is casual, cabins are small, the food is excellent and the focus is on seeing and doing.

For explorers, the crown jewel is Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus, a 120-passenger oceangoing ship, sailing 13-night, one-way cruises in the Bering Sea. An all-suite ship, Oceanus is a step up in luxury, but the mission is the same: to discover and explore rarely visited gems such as Dutch Harbor, the Pribiloff Islands, the Yukon Delta, Little Diomedes and Nome.

Intrav, the tour company, now owns the 128-passenger Clipper Odyssey, an upscale ship. This summer it will sail on 14-night cruises on several dates between Nome and the Russian coast and between the Gulf of Alaska and Prince Rupert in northwest British Columbia. This ship, like several similar charter cruise ships, has limited availability; cabins are more expensive. But its itineraries include some rarely seen places, so it can't hurt to check.

Finally, for a more traditional approach, Majestic America Line's two coastal cruisers include the 231-passenger Empress of the North, a new three-deck sternwheeler that relives the fancy-free years of the gold rush. The tiny, 48-passenger Contessa is a three-level luxury yacht that looks like a converted fishing boat with an open-roof sun deck.

The Empress sails seven-night, round-trip itineraries out of Juneau; Victorian decor, with red satin and dangling fringes is really a kick, but the staterooms also have a television, a DVD player, a telephone, a minibar and a bathroom with a shower and tub. The onboard historian loves to talk about the gold rush. High-stepping dancers in the Gold Rush showroom offer some real kicks.

The Contessa is quite different. A modern yacht with all-suite cabins, it sails seven-night, one-way trips between Ketchikan and Sitka. Small and speedy, it slips up to tide glaciers, seals basking on rocky shorelines and waterfalls.

Unfortunately, so many ships in such a fragile environment is not good news. On some days, diesel smoke hangs in the air, and rainbow streaks on the water are bits of oil.

engine oil. But Alaska cruising won't be going away soon. Or ever. The reality is that the only way to see Alaska's mighty coast, an immense panorama of deep fjords and forests, lacy waterfalls and tidewater glaciers is from the deck of a ship. And the smaller the ship, the larger the experience.

*Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based freelance writers.*

#### Ads by Google

##### Alaska Cruise

Compare all cruise lines prices. Info. on prices, services, ratings  
[allcruisesallthetime.com](http://allcruisesallthetime.com)

##### Norwegian Cruises

All Cruise Lines & Destinations. Big Web Discounts - Save up to 75%!  
[AmericasVacationCenter.com](http://AmericasVacationCenter.com)

##### Mediterranea Cruise Ship

Discounts On Costa Cruises Book An Italian Style Cruise Now!  
[www.CruiseDeals.com](http://www.CruiseDeals.com)

##### Alaska Inside Passage

Search a Wide Selection of Cruises. Find Low Rates & Book Here!  
[www.ORBITZ.com](http://www.ORBITZ.com)

##### Celebrity Alaska Cruises

Sail Aboard the Celebrity Summit on a 7 Day Alaskan Cruise-\$1250/person  
[www.Cruise.com](http://www.Cruise.com)

---

suntimes.com: [Feedback](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Make Us Your Homepage](#)  
Chicago Sun-Times: [Subscribe](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Online Photo Store](#)



© Copyright 2007 Sun-Times News Group | [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

