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SMALL SHIPS, BIG VIEWS, SAILING ALASKA'S WILD COAST

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services,
[World's Fare](#)

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

"We could be the first people to ever step on this spot," said Matt Nilsson, a naturalist and our guide, as we picked our way over a rocky beach to the edge of an ancient Sitka spruce. "We've never seen anyone else in this fjord, not even a fisherman," he said quietly. "We must be the only ones who come here."

Fast-forward to this coming June, and a Monday morning in the port town of Skagway, population 832. If it's a classic day at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the midnight sun will glint off snow-flecked peaks, bald eagles will perch in the trees -- their heads look like popcorn balls -- and five giant cruise ships (and one small cruise ship) will squeeze into the harbor disgorging 8,999 eager passengers; that's nearly 9,000 people crowding ashore looking for fun in a village with one main street, a dozen gift and souvenir stores, two museums, a row of century-old storefronts, the White Pass and Yukon Railroad terminus the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park Visitors Center.

Skagway, founded in 1897 after gold was discovered near Dawson City, in the Yukon, Canada, was the port of entry for gold miners hoping to climb the infamously steep Chilkoot Trail over White Pass to the Canadian border. A boomtown, Skagway exploded overnight from a population of one to a muddy, bug-infested tent city of 10,000. When the Gold Rush went bust, the miners moved on, all except for a few hundred souls who stayed on to build a community. And so it was until the cruise industry arrived.

"You can hardly walk down the sidewalk or get a seat in a

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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 the fleet arrives, sailing north on the Inside Passage to ports like Juneau, the state capital, Ketchikan, Skagway and Sitka. And every year they grow in number and swell in size. The current generation of mega-monsters carry as many as 3,000 passengers; several 4,000-passenger ships are under construction. To these floating resorts, Alaska is wallpaper, the backdrop for around-the-clock entertainment, from casinos, restaurants and floor shows to Internet cafes, aerobics classes, basketball courts, shopping malls, climbing walls, designer spas, wellness seminars 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 a dozen small ships cruising the southeast coast on three- to 14-night itineraries. These vessels, too small to compete with the behemoths, focus their lenses on the foreground. They can turn in small bays and maneuver in narrow fjords, leaving the big ships behind. And their schedules are more flexible. When a pod of whales surfaced near the Seabird, the Captain slowed down and circled to let us look, then lingered, hoping to see the whales breach. Sailing on a big ship with a timetable to meet, we'd have kept going.

Casual dress is the rule on most small ships, so leave your tuxedo in the closet. And don't worry about how much to tip; on most small ships, tips, some shore excursions, guided wildlife tours and port fees are folded into the fare.

The 62-passenger Sea Bird, a Lindblad Expeditions ship, and its twin, the Sea Lion, sail 11-night trips with guided port tours, wilderness kayaking, beach landings and nature walks. Functional rather than elegant, the ships focus on adventure and discovery. Onboard guides and trained naturalists specialize in Alaskana, from marine life and flora, to pre-European cultures (Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik and Aleut) and regional history, with interpretive talks in the lounge.

You'll have an outside cabin with big windows, comfortable furniture and individual climate controls. Storage spaces are limited, but since casual dress is the byword, it works. The food is excellent, with choices for all tastes, and open seating gives everyone a chance to meet. It helps to be reasonably spry if you plan to go ashore in one of the Zodiacs (inflatable rafts), and rocky beaches call for sturdy hiking shoes; in any case, you'll see plenty from the deck.

Cruise West, based in Alaska, is the largest -- and oldest -- cruise company here. With eight ships sailing Alaska's coast, you've got a choice of a half-dozen possibilities. Each itinerary has a different theme, and they sail not only from Seattle and Vancouver, Canada, but also out of Whittier, Juneau and Ketchikan.

The smallest ships -- think of them as your private yachts -- are the 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia and her twin, the Spirit of Alaska. Next in size are the 84-passenger Spirit of Discovery and the 96-passenger Spirit of '98. The 102-passenger Spirit of Endeavor and the 102-passenger Spirit of Glacier Bay are more spacious; the

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138-passenger Yorktown just completed a \$2 million renovation.

Between them, these seven sail five different cruises, each one varying slightly depending on the weather, unexpected sightings of orcas, humpback whales and otters, or brown bears and moose onshore, and even on the weather. The shortest cruises, four-day and five-day circle trips in Prince William Sound, visit islets, channels and tidewater glaciers, a trip guaranteed to cap a longer land trip with a spectacular end. Two ships sail the Glacier Bay Highlights, a five-day close-up of this most famous of Alaska's coastal bays. All seven ships also sail the Gold Rush Inside Passage, an 11-day, one-way cruise going either north or south, between Seattle and Juneau.

Cruise West's eighth ship, the 120-passenger Spirit of Oceanus, is the company's only true ocean-going ship. A luxury all-suite vessel, it sails longer coastal runs and two Bering Sea cruises. Sailing from Whittier, these call at Kodiak Island, Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian chain, the Yukon Delta, Nome, the Pribiloff Islands and Little Diomedede in the Bering Sea. The Oceanus also sails the 25-day "In Harriman's Wake," cruise, a trip that reprises the 1899 scientific expedition led by millionaire railroad baron and art collector, Edward H. Harriman. You might have to be a millionaire yourself, to afford this one.

In its own glamorous category is Majestic America's sternwheeler, the 231-passenger Empress of the North, sailing its own version of the bawdy Gold Rush trek to the Yukon. You wouldn't guess that this Victorian look-alike isn't an original riverboat, but those brass railings, gilt mirrors, silk fringes and satin upholstery are new. The staterooms have televisions, DVD players, telephone, mini bar and bathrooms with tubs, and the onboard historian is a fount of Gold Rush anecdotes. This one sails a circle trip out of Juneau.

With so many ships, the damage to Alaska's fragile ecosystem is undeniable. On some days and in some small harbors, the early-morning fog looks faintly yellow and oily streaks on the water reveal tourism's dark side. But cruising is here to stay, if for no other reason than you can't see Alaska's mighty coastline, an immense panorama of deep fjords and vast forests, lacy waterfalls and tidewater glaciers, except from the deck of a ship. You can downsize, however, and go green. The smaller the ship, the larger the experience.

IF YOU GO:

GETTING THERE: Most Inside Passage cruises start in Seattle or Vancouver, Canada; some cruises sail out of ports farther north. Alaska Airlines, the state's homegrown carrier and the sentimental favorite, flies to most of these places.

PICKING A ROUTE: Don't sail in Alaska until you know the destination. Learn the topography with the essential detailed map, the "Inside Passage Cruise Guide," available at www.coastalcruiseguides.com (\$15.95).

BOOKING A CRUISE: To choose a ship and specific itinerary, check the following Websites. Book directly or through a cruise agent specializing in Alaska. Per-person prices reflect the cruise length and degree of specialization. Small ships, with one-on-one activities and service, aren't necessarily cheaper. Bigger cruise ships are more likely to offer last-minute discounts.

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