

Whatever its length, Alaskan experience is big

By Anne Z. Cooke
and Steve Haggerty

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

WHITTIER, Alaska — Sometimes you can't help eavesdropping. We had just squeezed up to the buffet table at a crowded reception when the woman behind us spotted a friend.

"Hi there, Judy, is that you?" she called. "What have you been

up to?"

"We finally went to Alaska," said Judy, stopping to talk. "Eight days on the Inside Passage. That cruise we'd talked about for so long. How about you?"

"What a coincidence! So did we!" said her friend. "We danced every night, and we sat in the lounge and watched the scenery go by. We toured all those little

ports. We spent too much on native carvings, but you know how it is. You have to buy them when you see them."

Curious, we turned around to see who bought the carvings.

Judy blinked. "It doesn't sound anything like our cruise," she said. "We were outdoors, glued to the rail most of the time. We saw whales and bears, and we hiked in

the rain forest. I bought some gifts in Skagway, but . . ."

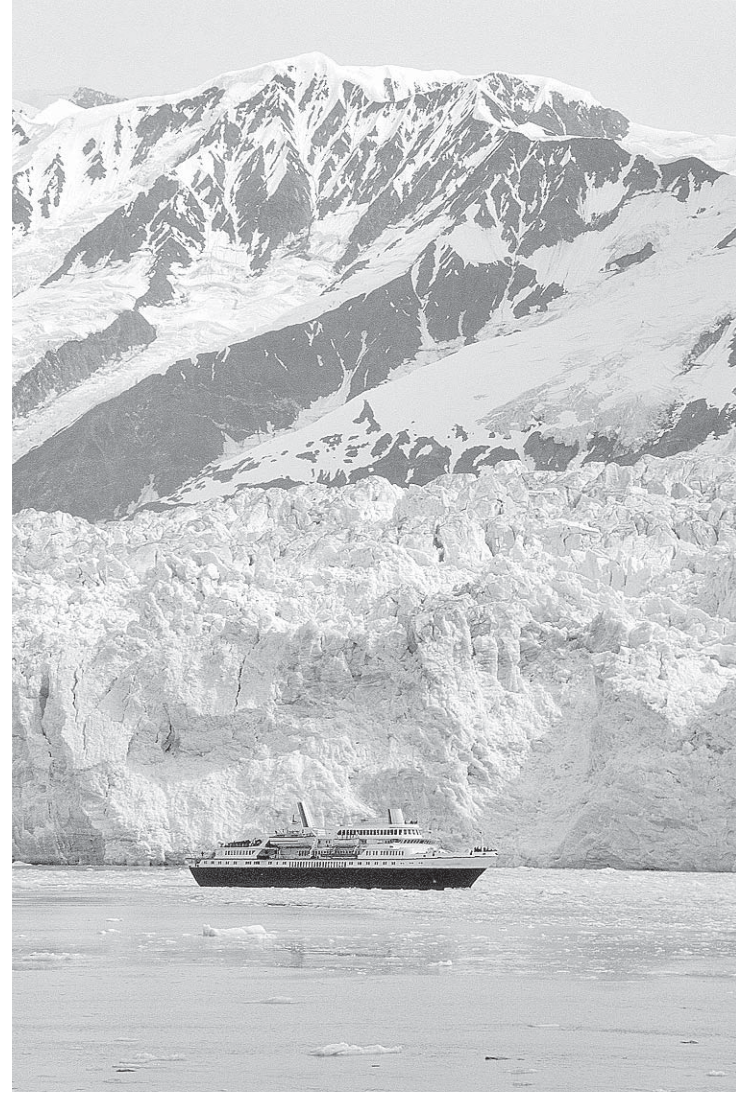
The crowd moved along, and the two friends stepped away. But we weren't surprised to hear such different experiences of Alaska's Inside Passage. Most of our first exploratory trips to Alaska included a cruise — with Celebrity Cruises, Holland America, Cunard, and Lindblad Expeditions — and not one of the ships, or the trips, was anything like the others. Though the ships follow the same ragged coast, traveling between Vancouver, British Columbia, in the south and the Gulf of Alaska in the north, each vessel has its own distinctive style.

There is, of course, the basic route, the one most people try first, and often just once. Ranging from seven days to nearly two weeks long, it's the trip from Vancouver (or Seattle) north to Glacier Bay, or on longer runs, to Hubbard Glacier or Seward. Offered by nearly every cruise line, the voyage skims the highlights with calls at the A-list ports: Ketchikan, Sitka, Skagway, Juneau, and Glacier Bay. It's such a favorite that even some small-ship companies, such as Cruise West, offer it every year.

"We call it the Classic Inside Passage," said Jerrol Golden, a Cruise West spokesman. "It's our most port-centric cruise, and a great way for first-timers to get an overview."

According to the NorthWest CruiseShip Association, 27 giant ships sailed in Alaska last summer, with more than 2,500 port stops. Between early May and late September, 504 ships docked in Juneau, 458 in Ketchikan, 399 in Skagway, and 129 in Sitka. This year, 29 behemoths will join the pack, not counting the dozen more small ships also cruising the same waters, bringing thousands of tourists and millions of dollars to the state.

A mega-ship can be a dream resort with movable scenery and 24-7 entertainment. Luxury dining, dance bands, spa treatments, nightclub acts, an Internet cafe, a choice of restaurants, and staterooms with picture windows and closets are standard fare. These



PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Hubbard Glacier, which stretches into Canada's Yukon Territory and is the largest tidewater glacier on the continent, looms over Yakutat Bay, on the Gulf of Alaska northwest of Juneau. A mountain goat and her kid are spotted ashore.



giants are so stable it's hard to tell that you're moving.

But that same 3,000-passenger goliath will be too wide and sit too deep in the water to drift in toward shore. Seen from a distance, that brown bear prowling the beach will look like a dot. When the ship is cruising at speed, you'll miss the sea lions on the rocks unless you're standing at the stern with binoculars in hand.

Small ships, ranging anywhere from about 65 to 200 feet long, may cover fewer nautical miles but they have no difficulty slipping into small inlets and getting nearer to shore for a closer look. If they spot something special, they have the time to linger and even to change course. On-board naturalists, standard on all expedition-style ships, add a unique dimension to the experience.

"I was looking out the window and the trees seemed to be coming closer, so close I could almost touch them," said Cheryl Powell of Vista, Calif., who sailed on Cruise West's nine-day Wilderness cruise. "Then suddenly the captain came on the intercom and said, 'If you look off the starboard bow you'll see a bear and three cubs.' We stopped right there for at least 45 minutes to watch them."

Lindblad Expedition's two ships, the 62-passenger Sea Bird and its twin, the Sea Lion, sail similar 11-night trips, also with kayaking, beach landings, and hiking. The two vessels aren't luxurious, but they are comfortable, and their programs emphasize adventure and discovery.

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SOURCE: ESRI, USGS

JOAN McLAUGHLIN/GLOBE STAFF

If you go . . .

Pick a route

Know where each itinerary goes before you decide to sail in Alaska. Consult the detailed map Inside Passage Cruise Guide, available at coastalcruiseguides.com for \$15.95.

Small ships

cruisewest.com
expeditions.com
majesticamericaline.com

Large ships

carnival.com
celebritycruises.com
hollandamerica.com
ncl.com
princess.com
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The sights, not the ships, are the thrill

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The cabins are small but efficient, with plenty of lighting. The closets are tiny, but you won't need much space; casual clothes are de rigueur. The bathrooms have showers but no tubs. The lounges, where passengers meet to read, talk, relax, attend interpretive talks, and get out of bad weather, are warm and inviting. The menus offer variety, with plenty of fresh ingredients. And open seating allows you to sit with different people each night.

Another Inside Passage option is Majestic America Line's 231-passenger Empress of the North, a three-deck sternwheeler sailing seven-night cruises. You would never guess this Victorian beauty is brand new, but those authentic brass railings, gilt mirrors, and plush red upholstery are just that. The staterooms have televisions, DVD players, telephone, minibar, and bathrooms with a shower.

Cruise West's 102-passenger



STEVE HAGGERTY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Skagway shows off a restored historic district that grew around the Klondike gold rush in Canada in the 1890s.

Spirit Of Glacier Bay sails three- and four-night loop cruises explor-

ing the complex of bays, channels, islets, valleys, and tidewater gla-

ciers in Prince William Sound. The cruises, a terrific addition to a land trip, start and end in Whittier, near Anchorage. The 84-passenger Spirit of Discovery and the 138-passenger Yorktown sail the nine-day Wilderness Passage and the 11-day Gold Rush trips. The 78-passenger Columbia and her twin, Alaska, sail the five-day Glacier Wonderland and the 11-day Gold Rush cruise.

Cruise West's 96-passenger Spirit of '98 and the 102-passenger Endeavor also sail the Gold Rush cruise, plus a nine-day Wilderness cruise round trip from Juneau. The 120-passenger Spirit of Oceanus sails 14-day coastal trips, then heads northward to the Bering Sea, stopping in Dutch Harbor, the Pribilof Islands, the Yukon Delta, Little Diomed Island in the Bering Strait, and Nome.

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