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Let's get into it.

ALASKA ISSUE

ALASKA'S
WILD COAST

THE INSIDE PASSAGE | Scenic tour works especially well for those cruising area for the first time

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
AND STEVE HAGGERTY

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

"Hi there, Judy, is that you?" she called. "How are you? What have you been up to?"

"We finally went to Alaska," we said. "It's been fantastic 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. "Did you ever spend such a relaxing week? 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 when you're traveling. You have to buy them when you see them."

Curious, we craned our necks around to see who was talking.

Judy blinked. "Are you sure you were on the Inside Passage?" she said, sounding doubtful. "It doesn't sound anything like our cruise. We were outdoors, hanging over the rail most of the time. We saw whales and bears, and we hiked in the rain forest. I bought some books in Skagway, but..."

The crowd moved up, the women stepped away and we missed the rest of the conversation. But we weren't surprised. Put any 10 cruise travelers together and you're likely to hear 10 different takes on Alaska's Inside Passage. In recent years, we've taken a half-dozen trips north to the 49th state, and not one of those ships or trips was alike, though the route hasn't changed since 1592, when explorer Juan de Fuca discovered the deep-water passage north.

Options aplenty

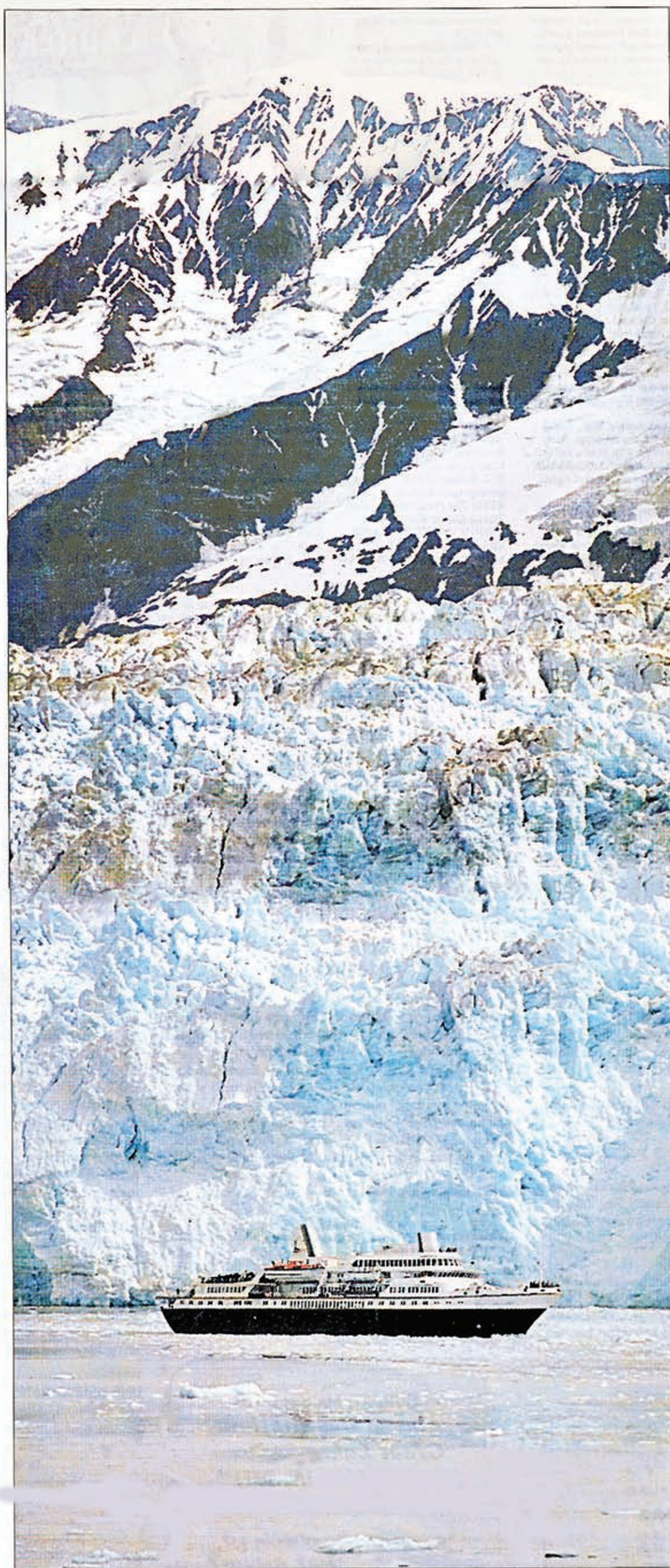
Now, as then, the basic coastal voyage remains the standard, the trip most travelers try first. Sailing between the ragged Pacific coastline and hundreds of outer islands, the route charts a path between Vancouver, Canada (or Seattle) and the Gulf of Alaska, skimming the highlights and calling at A-list ports like Ketchikan, Sitka, Skagway and Juneau.

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SEE CRUISE, PAGE 4C



A cruise liner passes Hubbard Glacier, Yakutat Bay, Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park in Alaska. Spectacular views like this come frequently on Inside Passage cruises. | PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY



These totem poles in Ketchikan are among the many attractions that grab tourists' attention in Alaska.

FROM THE COVER

CRUISE | Smaller vessels get you closer views of the wonders of nature

Cruise West — can run from seven days to nearly two weeks, sails either one way or roundtrip and may include such iconic marvels as Glacier Bay, Yakutat Bay, Prince William Sound and Seward. A perennial favorite, the route is so popular that even companies like Cruise West, known for small ships and expedition-style cruising, offer it every year.

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

But as the number of ships in Alaska has grown, so has the environmental impact. Yet visitors (and yes, I confess, that includes us) keep coming, lured by visions of lofty peaks and tidewater glaciers. The same siren song that calls us north to the United States' true "last frontier" calls everybody else.

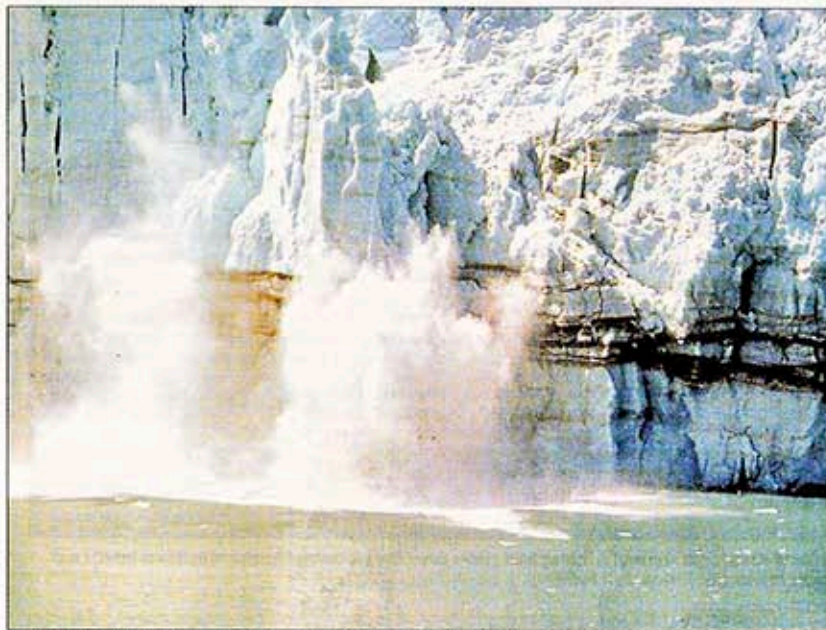
According to the Northwest Cruiseship Association, 27 ships sailed in Alaska last summer. The giants included six Holland America ships, five Princess ships, three Celebrity Cruise Lines ships, three from Royal Caribbean, three from Norwegian Cruise Lines and one each from Carnival and Regent Seven Seas. Together with another dozen small ships, they made an astounding 2,500 ports-of-call between mid-May and late September. The state capital alone, Juneau, reported 504 cruise arrivals between mid-May and late September.

Convenience vs. close-ups

To give them their due, megaships are a thrill a minute. More hotel than ship, these floating resorts have panoramic views and glam entertainment. Luxury dining, dance bands, spa treatments, nightclub acts, casinos, Internet access, a choice of restaurants and staterooms with picture windows are standard fare. Art collections, investment seminars and children's programs juke up the choices. And storm friendly? Most definitely. These goliaths are so stable, it's hard to tell when you're moving.

But that same gain will be too wide and sit too deep in the water ("draft" it's called) to sail close to shore. If there's a brown bear prowling that distant beach, he'll look like a dot. If the captain has his hand on the throttle and you're not standing in the stern holding your binoculars you'll miss the sea lions on the rocks.

Small ships that are shorter and narrower might cover fewer nautical miles, but they can slip into small inlets and edge close to the shore, leaving the big ships behind. If they spot something special, they have the time to change course, to linger and even to anchor. On-board naturalists, standard on all expedition-style



This shot of ice plunging off a glacier in Prince William Sound is among the many spontaneous sights you wouldn't want to miss while cruising in the area. | PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY

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 with her family. "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 and spent 45 minutes watching them."

Lindblad Expedition's two ships, the Sea Lion and the Sea Bird, stay in Alaska for the summer, sailing various wilderness adventures, with bonus activities such as kayaking, Zodiac beach landings and wilderness hiking. The two, 62-passenger vessels aren't posh, but they are smart and functional, with great outside decks. All the cabins are outside, too, with big windows. The lounges, where people meet to socialize before and after dinner, are inviting. The dining room, with open seating, serves hearty food with lots of variety. The dress code for dinner, interpretive talks and shore excursions is expedition-casual.

Best compromise

For a combination of small ship convenience and large ship entertainment, check out the Empress of the North, Majestic America Line's 231-passenger sternwheeler. This riverboat look-alike sails seven-night loop cruises out of Juneau, reprising the bawdy days of the 1898 Gold Rush to the Yukon. You'd never guess that that Victorian silk upholstery, brass railings, gilt mir-



Cruise passengers can get tours of Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau. The state capital has plenty to offer visitors. (See story, Page 3C.)

rors and silk pillows are new. So are the amenities, including TV, DVD player, telephone and minibar. Bathrooms come with showers and tubs. The onboard historian is a fount of Gold Rush anecdotes.

Alaska's oldest cruise company is Cruise West, with eight small ships. Each cruise has a specific theme, and they sail not just from Seattle and Vancouver, Canada, but out of Whittier, Juneau and Ketchikan. Wilderness discovery is the overall theme; casual comfort is de rigueur.

"My husband wouldn't have gone if he'd had to dress up for dinner," said Powell, explaining why she chose Cruise West. "Our lifestyle's pretty casual. We live on a ranch with horses and dogs. He's kind of a cowboy, anyway, and loves to be outdoors."

The smallest vessels — think

of them as yachts — are the 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia and the Spirit of Alaska. The others range in size from 84 and 96 passengers up to 138 passengers. Between them, they cruise to all of the Inside Passage's best places, plus extra time is built in for off-the-grid adventure. This might depend on the weather, on unexpected sightings of brown bears and moose, or orcas and humpbacks. The company's shortest cruises, four- and five-day circle trips, stay within Prince William Sound. Popular with Alaskans, they make a spectacular top-up to a longer land tour. Cruise West's eighth ship, the 120-passenger Spirit of Oceanus, sails to the Bering Sea.

Before you book a cruise, get yourself a detailed Inside Passage map. Then investigate each cruise company's Web site, comparing the routes to the map. Those sim-



A mountain goat and her baby are among the wildlife you can see. Some of the other wildlife, like bears, are best seen from a distance.



Sea lions gather and sun themselves on rocks in Kenai Fjords National Park, which is near Seward.

IF YOU GO

CHOOSING A ROUTE: We recommend "Alaska & Canada's Inside Passage Cruise Tour Guide" showing the region in detail, with interpretive text. Order at www.coastalcruiseguides.com for \$15.95, plus postage.

TIP: Anchorage is not a cruise port. Itineraries ending there disembark passengers in Whittier or Seward and bus them into town. Whittier is at the west end of Prince William Sound. Seward is south of Anchorage on the Kenai Peninsula. Hubbard Glacier is at the north end of Yakutat Bay, in the Gulf of Alaska. Icy Strait is a channel west of Juneau. Sitka, a town on the west side of Baranof Island, is south of Juneau. Tracy Arm is a fjord southeast of Juneau. Misty Fjords National Monument

plified cruise catalog maps make the routes look alike, when they could be very different.

Though the cruise ships are in Alaska to stay, the state's environmental regulations, the toughest in the nation, are forcing the cruise industry to get on board. You can help too, by asking the hard questions. Make

is east of Ketchikan.

SMALL SHIP CRUISE LINES

Cruise West: cruisewest.com
Lindblad Expeditions: lindblad.com
Majestic America: majesticamericainline.com

LARGE SHIP CRUISE LINES

Carnival: carnival.com
Celebrity: celebritycruises.com
Holland America: hollandamerica.com
Norwegian: ncl.com
Princess: princess.com
Regent Seven Seas: rssc.com
Royal Caribbean: royalcaribbean.com

sure the ship you choose obeys the law, burning cleaner fuels and installing new systems for processing garbage and waste water. If your ship hasn't gone green, keep looking.

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