



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

The Mackenzie River flows through its delta, rich with wildlife, on the way to the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

Northern light

The summer sun stays out late as the Norweta plies Canada's Mackenzie River

By ANNE Z. COOKE
and STEVE HAGGERTY
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

If the good ship Norweta, cruising on the Mackenzie River in Canada's Northwest Territories, had known ahead of time, we wouldn't have missed the wedding. But it was 9 o'clock on a July evening when we disembarked at Fort Good Hope, 25 miles south of the Arctic Circle. By that time, the bride and groom, dressed in their best beaded moccasins, had already left the church and walked to the park.

In southern climes, the celebration would have been half over. But here in the western Arctic, where the summer sun shines 22-7, the party was just beginning. The guests, gathered at picnic tables, stared in surprise at the strangers suddenly in their midst. A bonfire crackled and strips of moose sizzled on a dozen barbecues. On the dance floor, a low wood deck, the musicians had started to play.

"C'mon, let's dance," whispered Adele Chilli, the Norweta's cabin stewardess, a member of the Dene (Athabaskan Indian) people. She smiled shyly and tapped her foot as nine wiry men, each holding a large, flat hand-held drum, began to pound out an insistent rhythm.

"I have a second cousin here and they've invited us," she said, tugging on my sleeve. In a minute we'd met the newlyweds and were circling with two dozen other dancers to the thundering beat of a traditional dance.

A wedding was the last thing we'd expected when we booked a cruise on the 103-foot Norweta, sailing from mid-June through July on the Mackenzie River, or Deh Cho, "Big River," as the Dene people call it. But surprise is what makes this cruise so unusual.

REAL PLACES

"These are communities, not tourist destinations," said Margaret Whitlock, 68, the Norweta's co-owner and a fourth-generation resident of Hay River, on the south shore of Great Slave Lake. "We're never sure what we'll find until we get there, but it's always interesting, and definitely historic."

The ship's eight- and 10-day cruises, between Great Slave Lake and Inuvik (in-NOO-vik), an Inuit town on the Mackenzie River Delta, follow the historic route pioneered in 1789 by explorer Alexander Mackenzie.

Along the 1,000-mile journey, the ship docks at a half-dozen sleepy outposts — Dene and Gwich'in villages, historic forts and towns built around former fur trading posts — where we and the other 18 passengers disembarked to explore.

In Norman Wells we found a small but attractively designed museum, with detailed exhibits and a shop selling beaded moosehide moccasins, hand-knitted hats, jewelry and baskets. In Fort Good Hope, we visited the church, decorated with classic folk art designs, recently restored. In Tsiigehtchic (TZIG-eh-chik), where the Arctic Red River flows into the Mackenzie, we arrived just in time to watch a local hunter pull in with a moose — just shot — stuffed into the prow.



The Norweta, docked at Fort Providence in Canada's Northwest Territories, offers eight- and 10-day cruises on the Mackenzie River.



At 11 p.m., the midnight sun colors the walls of the Ramparts river gorge a deep gold.



At Fort Good Hope, a bride and groom wear beaded vests and moccasins.



TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

- A. Tuktoyaktuk
- B. Inuvik
- C. Fort Good Hope
- D. Norman Wells
- E. Fort Norman
- F. Fort Simpson
- G. Hay River

What would you look for if you were to buy a cruise vacation?

Silversea Cruises of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., put that question to 5,000 people in affluent communities throughout the United States last year.

At the top of their lists: a small ship. Chief Executive Albert Peter sees that as vindication of Silversea's commitment to smallness at a time when cruise ships keep getting bigger and bigger. Silversea (www.silversea.com) has four ships each carrying 200 to 300 passengers — practically tiny compared to new Carnival or Royal Caribbean ships, which typically hold more than 3,000 passengers.

At least a half dozen cruise lines like Silversea are betting that a certain well-heeled segment of the cruising market still prefers small ships. They say that bet is starting to pay off after a rough few years following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks and the subsequent falloff in travel.

Now, they say, small ships are benefiting from an aging population that has more time and money for vacationing than previous generations and from the popularity of cruising overall.

While it's true that big ships make smart economic sense — costs get absorbed a lot faster with 2,000 ticket holders than with 300 — small ship operators say bookings are up. And that's allowing them to raise prices and boost profits.

"The small ships don't have as robust a bottom line, but they have enough of a bottom line so that an entrepreneur or two will be satisfied," said Larry Pimentel, chief executive of Coconut Grove, Fla.-based SeaDream Yacht Club (www.seadreamyachtclub.com), which operates two cruise ships each holding 110 passengers. SeaDream charges about

If you're new to cruising, nothing could be finer than a three- or four-night Caribbean sailing. Prices can be low — sometimes as little as \$300 or less — and you will get an excellent introduction to what cruise going is all about. Once you have tasted the meals, seen the shows, participated in the onboard activities and visited the ports, you will pretty much know if a seagoing vacation is for you.

But what if you have taken a few cruises and those sunny Caribbean ports are beginning to blur in your mind? Fortunately, today's cruise ships ply most of the world's waters. You may pay more than for a Caribbean trip, but your cruise could still be a bargain, what with the aforementioned meals, shows and onboard activities included in the price, plus frequent discounts off brochure prices. (Just don't get carried away with the "extras," such as alcohol, gambling, shopping, art auctions and shore tours, unless you have no fear of a hefty credit card bill.) Here are a few cruises afloat near and far from Caribbean waters:

Radisson Seven Seas has a What-a-Fare Deal on its July-August week-long Baltic cruises, in which you get to choose your bonus: free round-trip economy air from 86 North American gateways including Santa Barbara, a \$400 business class air upgrade (with purchase of an economy air add-on) or \$1,000 off the cruise fare. With the air deals, Baltic voyages aboard the Seven

SPECIAL CRUISING SECTION



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

From Fort Simpson, a flightseeing trip is available to the 300-foot-high Virginia Falls in Nahanni National Park Reserve.

River excursion showcases the wilderness

■ CANADA

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THE RIVER

The Mackenzie River, North America's second-longest river system (after the Mississippi), is a mammoth body of water, draining one-fifth of Canada. Flowing from southeast to northwest, it bisects the Northwest Territories, a region twice the size of Texas but with a population of just 45,000.

In an odd twist of fate, the river was busier in the 19th century than it is now. Travelers heading downstream wrote of seeing Indians fishing from their canoes, trappers laden with furs for the trading posts and riverboats ferrying cargo and passengers. But as the fur trade vanished, so did the traffic, and the advent of the airplane made riverboats unnecessary.

Today the trip is a wilderness adventure, past mountains, cliffs, islands and forests, where trees grow in the trillions. There are so many trees, in fact, that each summer, 30 or 40 lightning-started forest fires burn at any one time, fated to smolder until winter snows put them out.

"No one pays any attention to them, not unless they're threatening a town," said George Whitlock, 73, the Norweta's co-owner, and Margaret's husband, as he scanned the horizon. "It's part of the natural cycle. But there isn't much else out there, you know. Just a few hunters."

The Norweta, with four decks, is a small but functional ship, built for deep water but maneuverable on the river. The engines and crew cabins are on Deck 1, below the water line. Guest cabins, on Deck 2, have large private bathrooms with showers, built-in furniture, drawers and clothes closets. Screens on the portholes keep out mosquitoes. You can close the inside hatch to block out the midnight sun, or pull the curtains.

The combination lounge and dining room is on Deck 3, with a narrow promenade deck around the perimeter. The sun deck, behind the bridge on Deck 4, is surfaced with artificial turf and equipped with deck furniture. Because of the ship's small size, some cabins are close to the engines; but as earplugs and noise-cancelling earphones are now part of our standard travel kit, we were prepared.

The meals, mostly American cuisine, are delicious but not fussy, prepared with first-class ingredients and served restaurant style. Late evening snacks of cookies, cake and fruit are also laid out. You can purchase wine, beer or mixed drinks.

If you don't get enough exercise on shore, the ship has a treadmill, or you can walk around the promenade deck, where 22 rounds equals a mile. Owing to space limitations, most onboard activities are necessarily sedentary: board games, cards, reading, crossword puzzles (bring your own), birding (bring binoculars) and conversation.

We brought a couple of best-sellers and our laptop. Other passengers brought knitting, stationery and trip diaries. The ship's library has a nice collection of regional histories, Canadian travel, animal identification guides, nature references and a few best-sellers.



Smoke billows from forest fires near Norman Wells. Lightning strikes in the region cause 30 to 40 fires per year.



Ibyuk, the largest of 1,450 pingos on the Arctic Coast, is ancient, compressed, soil-covered sea ice.

FORT SIMPSON

As the scenery rolled by, there was always something to see, from mountains to rock formations, the Ramparts river gorge, the occasional cargo barge going the other way, Coast Guard vessels and eagles in the tree tops.

Fort Simpson, a former trading post built at the confluence of the Mackenzie and the Liard rivers, offers an interesting choice of several onshore activities.

"We're a real town," said guide 82-year-old Steve Rowan, whose dry wit and wry smile enliven his historic walking tours. "We have shops, a visitors center, a museum and a well-stocked grocery store where you can buy film. We even have a Historical Society — with two members, including yours truly."

He stopped next to an old clapboard house built 40 feet above the river. "It didn't take long for people to realize they couldn't build next to the water," he said. "One year the river ice jammed up during break-up and rose up and into this front yard."

Fort Simpson is also the jumping-off place for flightseeing trips west to the 300-foot-high Virginia Falls, in Nahanni National Park Reserve, a mecca for kayakers and rafters. If the weather is clear and the planes have space, splurge on this one (rates run about \$300 per person); you'll be sorry later if you don't.

OTHER STOPS

Our favorite shore tour was the

IF YOU GO

The cruise: For complete information about the cruise itinerary, the ship, recommended dress, choosing a date, booking a cabin and making airline reservations, visit the Norweta Web site, at www.norweta.com, then call Margaret Whitlock directly at (866) 667-9382.

Prices per person for the cruise start at \$4,914 for a cabin with two single beds, and \$5,229 for a cabin with a double or queen bed. All meals are included. Alcoholic beverages and Canadian taxes are extra. Most shore excursions are free; the Tuktoyaktuk and Nahanni National Park flightseeing cost extra.

Arctic travel: For maps, pamphlets and other information about Northwest Territories tourism, call (800) 661-0788 or go to www.explorenwt.com. For national parks information see www.pc.gc.ca. For Inuvik, or visits to Maureen Pokiak, go to www.arcticnaturetours.com.

Guidebooks: Lonely Planet's "Canada" guide offers a concise introduction to the Northwest Territories. Also see "The Journals of Alexander Mackenzie," a diary of the explorer's 1790 and 1793 river trips; Narrative Press, at www.narrativepress.com.

where I met and married my husband, a native Inuit and a hunting guide," she explained. Together they raised a family, and Maureen learned how to prepare *muktuk* (whale blubber), dry fish, skin muskrats and sew fur parkas, traditional skills she integrated into her family's otherwise modern lifestyle.

"I'm living in two cultures," she said, slicing off bits of smoked and steamed whale and offering us a taste. "Go ahead," she added, with a mischievous smile. "Tell me what you think. Really."

It was delicious — crispy, salty, like snack food, although we wouldn't make a meal out of it.

In Fort Norman, our tour guide, Jim LaFleur, picked us up in his truck — bringing a cuddly new puppy — and showed us the town's half-dozen streets, past the 1880s log cabin that served as an Anglican church, the cement-block community center and his house, a pre-fab cottage perched high on the bluff overlooking the Mackenzie.

"I came out here a long time ago," he said. "Before that, I was a farmer in Saskatchewan. Here I was the janitor at the school, but I'm retired now. I never get tired of looking at this river."

Afterward, some of us decided to walk back along the beach. Here we met some town kids, Mandy and Arlene, both 12, and Steve, 9, who'd built a campfire and were swimming and splashing in the river. As curious about us as we were about them, they asked where we lived and if it snowed there. Enchanted by their smiles and friendly courtesy, we lingered longer than we should have.

"Bye," they called, as we headed back to the Norweta. "Come back soon."

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.

Hawaii and San Diego could benefit from your expertise.

We would like to hear about your best travel experiences, including but not limited to attractions, lodging, dining and tour guides. Hints about other destinations are also most welcome.

Send recommendations to Al Bonowitz, Santa Barbara News Press, P.O. Box 1359, Santa Barbara, CA 93102-1359 or e-mail abonowitz@newspress.com. Include your name, address and phone number and the address, phone number and Web site of the place or person you are recommending.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

A survey of business travelers around the world shows that most — 61 percent — would rather not see cell phone use permitted on airplanes.

Europeans — 70 percent of them — were most strongly opposed while North Americans were most amenable, with just 57 percent against cell-phone use during a flight.

Cell phone use is not now permitted on airborne planes for fear that it might interfere with navigation, but a new communications system designed to avoid that problem is scheduled to debut on a couple of European airlines later this year.

The survey of business travelers from 12 countries was commissioned by Minneapolis-based Carlson Wagonlit Travel.

The survey showed that pet peeves vary among business travelers by region. The top annoyance among business travelers in the Asia-Pacific region is crying babies; Europeans are bothered by travelers not checking bags when they should; Brazilians can't stand being disturbed by other passengers; and the

No. 1 annoyance among North Americans is people stowing luggage far forward from their seat. All agreed that vacationing travelers are the least of their annoyances.

Those surveyed were less concerned about work-life balance issues and terrorism than in last year's poll.

Airport security lines topped the list of issues with the most negative impact on business travel, with flight delays coming in a close second.

Fifty-eight percent of business travelers say they extend their business trip to include leisure or vacation time at least once a year. Of those, 47 percent said they occasionally or frequently have family or friends join them for the leisure portion of the trip.

The telephone survey randomly sampled the opinions of 2,100 business travelers and 650 travel managers, including customers of the company as well as non-customers, between Oct. 27 and Nov. 23.

Respondents were surveyed in Australia, China, India, and Japan; France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom; Brazil; the U.S. and Canada.