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					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

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Affordable Alaska Review - Cruises And Tours

By [Anne Z. Cooke](#), Photos by [Steve Haggerty/Colorworld](#)

ALASKA BY SEA -- FOR SALE IN 2009.
 Story by: Anne Z. Cooke
 Images:©ColorWorld/Steve Haggerty

Time was, if you waited until June to book an **Alaska cruise**, you'd find yourself begging for a bunk. Now it's the cruise lines who are begging. With dozens cabins on Alaska-bound cruise ships still unsold, prices have sunk lower than Davy Jones' locker.

On most of the Alaska fleet's biggest ships, cabin rates per person are down as much as an amazing fifty percent. Several ships are offering two-for-one discounts.

Family deals, with four-sharing a cabin, go for the price of one. Book an **Inside Passage Voyage** this year and you'll save a chunk of change.

I know what you're thinking. You could apply that money to your airline ticket. But I think there's a better way to use that windfall. Treat yourself to one of your cruise ship's uniquely Alaskan shore excursions, a thrill-a-minute adventure on land. Every cruise line offers them; most are unforgettable.



Glacier cruising in Yakutat Bay, AK.



Cruise passengers on the Inside Passage dine on deck.

Let's say you book a seven-night cruise on the *Serenade of the Seas*, one of [Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines](#) three ships in Alaska. Originally priced at \$899, the cruise is now \$699, a savings of \$200. Or, sail on [Celebrity Cruises'](#) *Radiance*, paying \$599 for an \$899 cruise, \$300 off. Or book a [Princess Cruise Line's](#) six-night voyage priced at \$499 for two sharing a cabin.

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Cruise passengers shopping in downtown Skagway, AK.

Not to be outdone, **Holland America Line**, with eight ships in Alaska, sells their seven-day, one-way Glacier Discovery cruise, originally \$949 per person, for the low-low price of \$449 good on some ships on some dates. **Celebrity Cruises** and **Norwegian Cruise Line** offer similar discounts.

Any one of these bargains would pay for a couple of my favorite guided shore excursions, to wit: In **Haines**, sign up for the **Jet Boat Tour**, a naturalist-guided foray into the heart of the **Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve**, home of eagles, brown (grizzly) bears and moose. In **Skagway**, board the **White Pass and Yukon Railroad** for a breathtaking ride up and over the steep **Chilkoot Pass**, following the Gold Rush trail to the Yukon (\$115).



Cruise ships dock near the boat harbor, Resurrection Bay, Seward, AK

In **Juneau**, test your nerve with the **Four-Glacier Helicopter and Dogsled adventure** (\$499). Spectacular aerial views of fractured blue ice end with a short sled dog ride on snow; afterwards you can pet the puppies. In **Sitka**, go underwater with a seven-hour guided **Scuba Diving expedition**; the price (\$435) includes dry suits and air.

"We've got a new, community service tour this year, called Cruise With Purpose," said **Sarah Scoltock**, a **Holland America spokeswoman**. "A marine science vessel takes you from Juneau to Auke Bay to record and document humpback whales, collect water samples and measure plankton concentrations." A biologist-guided beach walk is included.

These new shore excursions are an evolved species, generations removed from the one-kind-fits-all tours available 30 years ago. In those heady days when **Alaska cruises** were dewy fresh, bus rides, natural history museums, city tours and salmon bakes were standard fare.

"The first time I came, there weren't more than a dozen different port tours," said **Leesa Burzynski**, a **shore excursion manager** with **Celebrity Cruises**, which offers the scuba diving. "Now we've got more than 161 different excursions from 56 vendors. You want something very special but affordable? In **Sitka**, try snorkeling, for \$99. It includes the gear and dry suit."

"My favorite, since you ask" she said, "is the Glacier Flight and Feast. You fly over three immense glaciers, then land at Taku Glacier for a grilled salmon, salad and cornmeal biscuits at the **Taku Glacier Lodge**. It costs a little more (\$299).



Teenage native Alaska resident models an Athabascan dress winter parka.



Cruise passengers land on Mendenhall Glacier, Juneau, AK.

"But I tell people," said **Burzynski**, "if you're coming to Alaska and you don't get up

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in the air and fly, you're not going to see things in perspective. You simply can't appreciate how vast these tidewater glaciers are when you see them from the ship."

How do you pick a tour? That depends on your age, energy, health and interests. Faced with 50 choices, I ask myself: Can I ride a motorcycle or a mountain bike at home, see totem poles in Seattle, get my jollies on a zip line at Lake Tahoe or fish for trout in Colorado? If I can, I don't do it in Alaska.

But price is never a good yardstick. Some medium-priced, low-profile tours open a window to another world. You can kayak just about anywhere. But in Alaska, paddling silently on silvery seas takes you into another world, of sea otters, seals, sea lions and even whales.



Sea lions bask on the rocks in the Lynn Canal, near Juneau.

Native American village tours introduce kids to clan ceremonies and traditional dances. In the [Tongass National Forest](#) you'll discover the unique northern rainforest. Some tours are great for kids, like [Ketchikan's "Duck Tour,"](#) a land-plus-harbor tour aboard an amphibious "duck truck." And some are the same standard excursions -- city tours and bus rides -- offered when [Burzynski](#) came to Alaska.

Happily these have been upgraded, with better guides and contemporary narratives. Twenty years ago nobody talked about warmer winters, melting glaciers and threatened wildlife.



Shore tours start in Whittier's harbor.

If you can walk a mile, you can see most ports on your own. Since most ports -- from [Ketchikan](#) and [Juneau](#) to [Skagway](#), [Haines](#) and [Sitka](#) -- are accessible only from the water, historic neighborhoods and tourist attractions are close to the cruise docks.

Tourist Information Offices, near the docks, are your best source for self-guided walking maps, places to eat, craft shops and museums. You can also get a list of local outfitters, historians, fishermen, naturalists and others who might be available on short notice.



Cruise passengers at the Saanaheit totem pole and carved house posts, Totem National Park, Sitka, AK.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can wait until the last minute to find a tour. The best adventures -- kayaking, salmon fishing and wildlife tours -- sell out in advance, advises [Dave Nevins](#), with the [Sitka Tourism Center](#). Nor should you expect a big break on the price, he says. Tour fees are standard throughout Alaska.

"Tell people they need to do a little internet research ahead of time, see what's available and make reservations," said Nevins. "When a cruise ship docks in Sitka, we get a line of people in here who aren't sure what they want to do and now they find they have to scramble and make a lot of calls to see who's free."

"Be sure to see the wonderful Russian dancers and the old Russian church," says Nevins. And don't miss the Visitors' Center, totem poles and Russian Bishop's House at the [Sitka](#)

[National Historic Park](#), near the dock. Each charges a small entrance fee.



Getting that tidewater glacier photo, Prince William Sound.

IF YOU GO:

GETTING THERE: Fly to Seattle or Vancouver, where roundtrip cruises depart. One-way cruises fly between Seattle or Vancouver, and Seward and Whittier (Anchorage).

SHORE TOUR TIPS: Pre-book your shore tours online. All tours fill up quickly. Or check for availability after you board the ship.

BACKGROUND READING: Frommer's Guide, "[Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call](#)" reviews ports, sights, shopping, restaurants, self-guided activities and recommended shore excursions.

THE CRUISE LINES: For shore tours, rates, dates and promotional prices visit these websites:

<http://www.celebritycruises.com>

<http://www.hollandamerica.com>

<http://www.ncl.com>

<http://www.princess.com>

<http://www.royalcaribbean.com>

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