

# TRAVEL

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## ALASKA EXTREMES

### Shore excursions made a good cruise great

BY ANNE Z. COOKE  
Special to The Miami Herald

KETCHIKAN, AK — Like a lot of other summer travelers looking for the iconic Alaska adventure, I've already booked my cruise to the Last Frontier. I've got my cabin and I'm ready to roll. But that's not like me. I usually let the weeks slide by, hoping to score a last-minute deal on a cheap inside cabin on one of the 20-odd mega-ships sailing Alaska's icy waters.

Not this year, though. With travelers watching their wallets and hundreds of cabins up for grabs, I made my move early, nailing one of Princess Cruises' seven-day, one-way cruises for \$649 per person. I could have bought a roundtrip Royal Caribbean cruise for \$589 but I want to stay on in Alaska before flying home. As long as my stateroom boasts the bare minimum — a bed, a desk and a bathroom — I'm happy. If this cruise is like others I've taken, I won't be there much, except to shower and sleep.

Alaska's the kind of far-north destination where I'd rather be on deck with my binoculars, searching for breaching whales or sea lions on the rocks. If the sky opens up and it pours, look for me in the lounge, play-

• TURN TO SHORE EXCURSIONS, 4J

New ships, new excursions for Alaska cruisers, 6J



DONNA LAWLOR/AP

**NATIONAL PRIDE:** A bald eagle looks over Shoup Bay on Prince William Sound in Alaska.

Wildlife and glaciers in Prince William Sound

# Excursions made a good cruise great

• SHORE EXCURSIONS, FROM 11

ing bridge or learning how to tango. Either way, I figure that I'm paying about half of what Princess would like to charge me, if only the economy was leaning their way, and not mine. And Princess isn't the only cruise line with deals. I could be sailing with Holland America, Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, Carnival or Norwegian Cruise Line for about the same price.

I know what you're thinking: Use those savings on an airline ticket. But there's a smarter way to spend your dollars. Treat yourself to a couple of pricey but outrageously fabulous shore tours, the sort of blue-ribbon experiences you'd ordinarily bypass. Offered by every ship in nearly every port, these outings are unique to Alaska. You'll cry when you sign the charge card, but you'll kick yourself later if you don't.

## NATURAL WONDERS

If your ship stops in Haines, sign up for the Jet Boat Tour, a naturalist-guided foray into the heart of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a rich habitat not just for eagles but for brown bears and moose.

In Skagway, skip the jewelry stores for the White Pass and Yukon Railroad and a breathtaking ride up a narrow mountain track toward White Pass and the Yukon border (\$115).

Ketchikan's hottest new experience is the Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour, held on the Aleutian Ballad, the same fishing boat featured in the Discovery Channel's *Most Dangerous Catch*. The Ballad's owners, who continue to fish in the Bering Sea, anchored the ship at the dock in Ketchikan and refitted one side of the main deck with theater-style seats for guests. Experi-

## North to Alaska

**Shore tour tips:** All prices given in this article may vary and are subject to last-minute changes. After you know your dates, have booked your cruise and paid the deposit, pre-book the shore tours that most match your interests. Remember that helicopter and float plane tours will fill up first. If some tours are unavailable, ask again at the Shore Excursion Desk as soon as you board.

**Background reading:** Frommer's Guide, "Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call" provides organized, detailed information on each port, sights, shopping, restaurants, activities to do on your own and recommended shore excursions.



**RIDING THE RAILS:** The White Pass and Yukon Railroad takes passengers for a breathtaking ride up a narrow mountain track

JIM FRANCO/CELEBRITY CRUISES



BRIAN ADAMS/ALASKA TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

**STEPPING OUT:** Russian dancers entertain visitors in Sitka.

enced fishermen working on the far deck show you how crabbing is done, while the ship tours the harbor, followed by dozens of eagles following the scraps. For the best tickets prices, book in

advance on the website.

In Juneau, the half-day Four-Glacier Helicopter and Dogsled adventure (\$499) takes you on an adrenaline-rush flight over snowcapped peaks to the

glacier where a dozen dog teams and their handlers camp out for the season, taking visitors on half-mile dog-sled rides.

In Sitka, cold-water enthusiasts with dive experience can do a three-quarter day guided scuba dive, for \$435, including dry suits, gear and air.

"We recently introduced a community service tour, Cruise with a 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." The tour ends with a naturalist-guided walk on the beach and an introduction to Alaska's shoreline biology.

Back in the day, most Alaskan cruise ship shore tours could have passed for amateur fund-raisers. Bus tours, guided town walks and salmon bakes were fresh enough to startle and amaze first-timers. But shore tours today are an evolved species. Thirty years ago few guides talked about melting glaciers, warmer weather and endangered wildlife; today's trip leaders are sophisticated and informed.

"The first time I came, there's weren't more than a dozen different tours," said Leesa Burzynski, a shore excursion manager with Celebrity Cruises. "Now we work with more than 56 tour outfitters providing more than 161 different excursions."

## UP IN THE AIR

I asked Burzynski about the Glacier Flight and Feast tour, a flight trip over vast ice summits, followed by grilled salmon, salad, biscuits and dessert at Taku Glacier Lodge. She gave it a



ROBIN HOOD/ALASKA TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

**NATIVE ARTS:** Totems can be seen at many ports.



BRIAN ADAMS/ALASKA TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

**IN A WHIRL:** Helicopter rides give passengers a stunning view of glaciers.

thumbs-up.

"I tell people, if you're coming to Alaska and you don't get up 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 until you're right over them."

When I'm choosing a tour, I give a pass to stuff I can do anywhere, like mountain biking and zip lining. But read the fine print before you say no. In Sitka, kayaking is the best way to get out close to rafts of sea otters, seals on rocks and even orcas. In Ketchikan you can tour a Native American community and talk to the residents, descendants of Alaska's first people.

Some shore tours go for laughs, like the rides on the land-and-water, amphibious "duck" trucks, also offered in Ketchikan. But there are others — walking tours — that you can do by yourself.

For these, look for a self-guided map at tourist information centers, often located on or near the dock.

The Sitka Tourism Center keeps a list of recommended outfitters, historians, fishermen and naturalists who can serve as guides for kayaking, salmon fishing and wildlife tours, says Dav Nevens, director of Visitor Services. But don't count on making plans at the last minute, he advises.

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

Sitka's greatest treasure is the little-heralded Sheldon Jackson Museum, the repository of what many say is North America's finest collection of native Alaska crafts and artifacts. If you do nothing else, spend a few hours seeing these beautiful exhibits and peeking at the thousands of artifacts arranged in the collection drawers.

"And don't miss Sitka Russian dancers (tickets at \$8), or the historic Russian church (tickets at \$2), or the totem poles in the National Historic Park," Nevens says. The park accepts all federally-issued passes, including Senior, Lifetime and Annual passes.

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• Lima \$322	• Cartagena \$368	• Cancun 3 nights \$435	
• Santiago \$688	• La Paz \$475	• Salvador Bahia Puerto Seguro 5 nights \$950	• Las Vegas 2 nights \$399
• Guayaquil \$260	• Rio / Brazil \$584	• Lima Cusco (express) 3 nights \$590	• Galapagos Ecuador 4 nights \$1,490
• Panamá \$248	• Caracas \$320	• Buenos Aires Bariloche 5 nights \$420	
• Maragua \$260	• Montevideo \$528		

(\*) Fares do not include a federal excise tax of \$3.60 per U.S. domestic flight segment, defined as one takeoff and landing of a passenger's itinerary; up to \$18. per round trip in local airport charges; September 11th Security Fee of \$2.50 per enplanement originating at a U.S. airport. For International and Puerto Rico/U.S. Virgin Islands destinations, government taxes and fees up to \$180, varying per destination, are not included and may vary slightly depending on currency exchange rates at the time of purchase.  
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