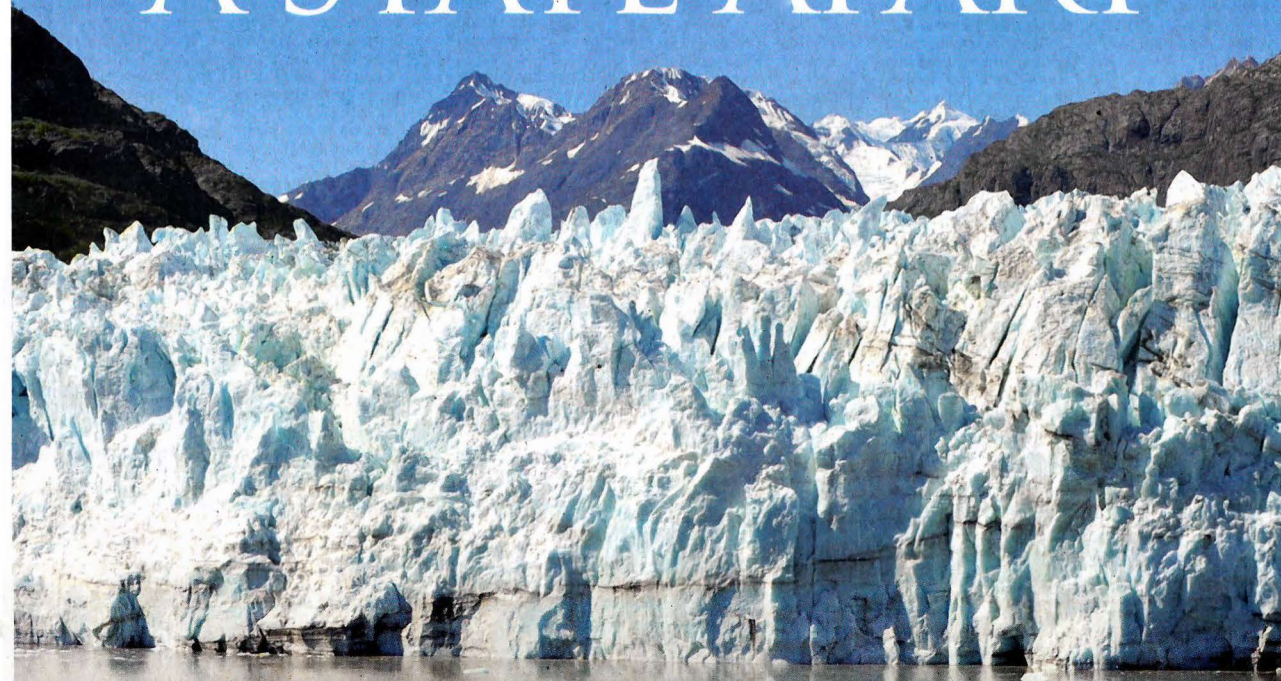


ALASKA ISSUE

A STATE APART



PRETTY IN WHITE: Glacier view in Glacier Bay National Park, as seen from Holland America's Westerdam.

FRAN GOLDEN

TRAVELWISE

How to choose an Alaska cruise

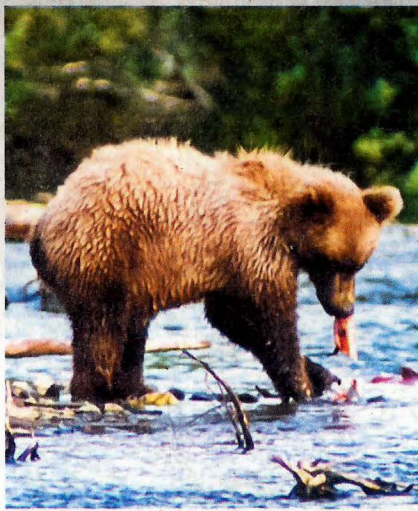
BY FRAN GOLDEN
Special to The Miami Herald

From a cruise ship in the calm waters of Alaska's Inside Passage, the wilderness unfolds with snow-capped peaks, coastal rainforests and pristine fjords. You embrace the high drama of an icy glacier crashing thunderously into the sea. Bald eagles fly overhead, whales spout streams of water into the air, and you keep your binoculars poised, hoping to spot a grizzly bear.

Alaska is the antithesis of the fun-in-the-sun Caribbean cruise experience — the slight chill in the air a reminder that you are somewhere very different and truly amazing.

During the May-to-September season, Alaska is one of the top cruise destinations in the world, annually attracting about 1 million cruisers. They come to Southeast Alaska to experience the delights of nature, Gold Rush history and native culture.

Inside Passage and Gulf of Alaska itineraries operated by all the major cruise lines visit glaciers and



STEVE HAGGERTY

WILDLIFE

On the hunt for a grizzly sighting

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
AND STEVE HAGGERTY
Special to the Miami Herald

TOGIAK, Alaska — Do you want to see grizzly bears in the wild? Of course you do. An Alaska cruise wouldn't be complete without photos to post to Facebook. What's the Last Frontier all about without hard evidence? But don't count on getting picture-perfect close-ups of Smokey's oversized cousins.

Of the millions of travelers expected to visit Alaska this year, only a lucky few will see a brown bear — *ursus arctos horribilis* — as the Alaskan grizzly is called. If it does happen, it's likely to be at long range. I know. I've been disappointed more than once.

"See that brown shape moving beside the bushes, near the big rock," the Denali National Park tour bus driver says, pulling to the side of the road. And you look and look

CATCH OF THE DAY: A grizzly tears into a salmon.

• TURN TO GRIZZLIES, 5J

• TURN TO TRAVELWISE, 6J

Follow the salmon if you want to find the bears

• GRIZZLIES, FROM 11

and everyone around you peers and points, and finally you see the bear, a blotchy brown spot that might as well be a cow.

But if you really want to see a grizzly doing its wild thing, IN the wild, nothing could be easier. What's the secret? You have to go where the bears go out to dine. And where are they irresistibly drawn and have been every summer for the last hundred thousand years? To the rivers, brooks and creeks where salmon, their primary diet, swim upstream to the pools and eddies where they were hatched and where they will spawn and die.

When Alaskan salmon get the signal to spawn — no one's quite sure how — they return from the ocean where they've spent their adulthood, gorging themselves on smaller fish. Nearing the coast, they separate into groups, each one heading to the mouth of the river where they were born. Here they mill around, still in salt water, waiting for that magic moment. When it comes, they head upstream, swimming so close together they make you think of gridlocked traffic on the freeway.

As for the bears, they've been lingering along the stream banks for days, watching and waiting. When the fish arrive — an endless banquet — the bears hustle into the water, snapping and snatching at every fish within reach. Busy putting on calories, they're oblivious to almost everything else, even people snapping photos.

Once a bear snags a fish, it climbs onto the bank or gravel bar and rips the fish apart, devouring the richest parts and tossing away the carcass. These bits of carcass will feed the trout, birds, other small mammals, insects, microorganisms and the trees and bushes. The rest of the carcass dissolves in the stream as nutrients for the entire ecosystem.

As long as the feast lasts, the bears will be there. And you could, too, armed with your camera, a long lens and a safe position onshore. But remember to look sharp. Never get between a brown bear and its dinner, or a mother and her cubs, or between two males vying for top-bear fishing rights. Angry bears can and do kill interlopers.

If you're taking a post-cruise tour while the salmon are running — June and July



STEVE HAGGERTY

GONE FISHIN': With guide Josh Fitz, even a novice can catch a coho salmon.

are primo — your bus driver may pull off near one of the salmon streams that flow near the highway. Roadside signs mark the places this occurs and where you can see the salmon swim up.

To see bears, you need to get away from the road and deeper into the bush, on foot or by float plane. The best way to do this is to go with a guide, someone who knows where to find the

bears, and how you can stay safe.

Here's my solution. Add a couple of days onto your trip and spend them at a wilderness or fishing lodge that advertises bear-watching outings as one of its activities. Or book a day trip from Anchorage with a guide and outfitter who fly visitors to a distant lake or river.

Is a day trip worth the expense (\$200 each and up) just to watch bears eat? Oh, my, yes. The flight alone is half the thrill. Flying low over creeks and forests, I've seen moose, herds of caribou, wolves and swans on their nests. When our flight route crossed an ocean inlet I spotted pods of white beluga whales cruising at the surface. Circling over Katmai National Park — a favorite bear locale — we got a good look at the Novarupta Volcano and the crater that was left in 1912 when the volcano exploded. Yes, siree, flight seeing is momentous in its own way.

If you do see bears in the wild, treasure the moment. Now you've seen the salmon-to-bear food chain and understand why it's important to protect Alaska's rivers. Pollutants and mining chemicals dumped into ocean-bound streams will destroy the annual salmon

runs, an American tragedy worse than the near-extinction of the buffalo.

Without salmon, Alaska's most magnificent predator will slowly starve to death and the rivers themselves will be unfit for man or beast. I can't imagine Alaska without its brown bears.

If you miss the bears on this trip, take the kids (and your friends) to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, in Portage Valley near Girdwood, an hour from Anchorage. The center, a rescue and rehabilitation center, takes in orphaned and threatened wild animals, including brown bears, and raises them in multi-acre outdoor pens. You can tour the center by car or on foot and will be rewarded with photo ops aplenty.

Whenever possible, the center releases healthy animals into the wild; others remain there, including three adult brown bears, moose, musk oxen, a thriving Wood Bison herd (arctic "buffalo" reintroduced from Canada), coyotes, elk, eagles and owls. Every year brings another crop of cuddly babies, including furry musk ox babies and spindly-legged moose calves. I wouldn't miss it, and you shouldn't either.