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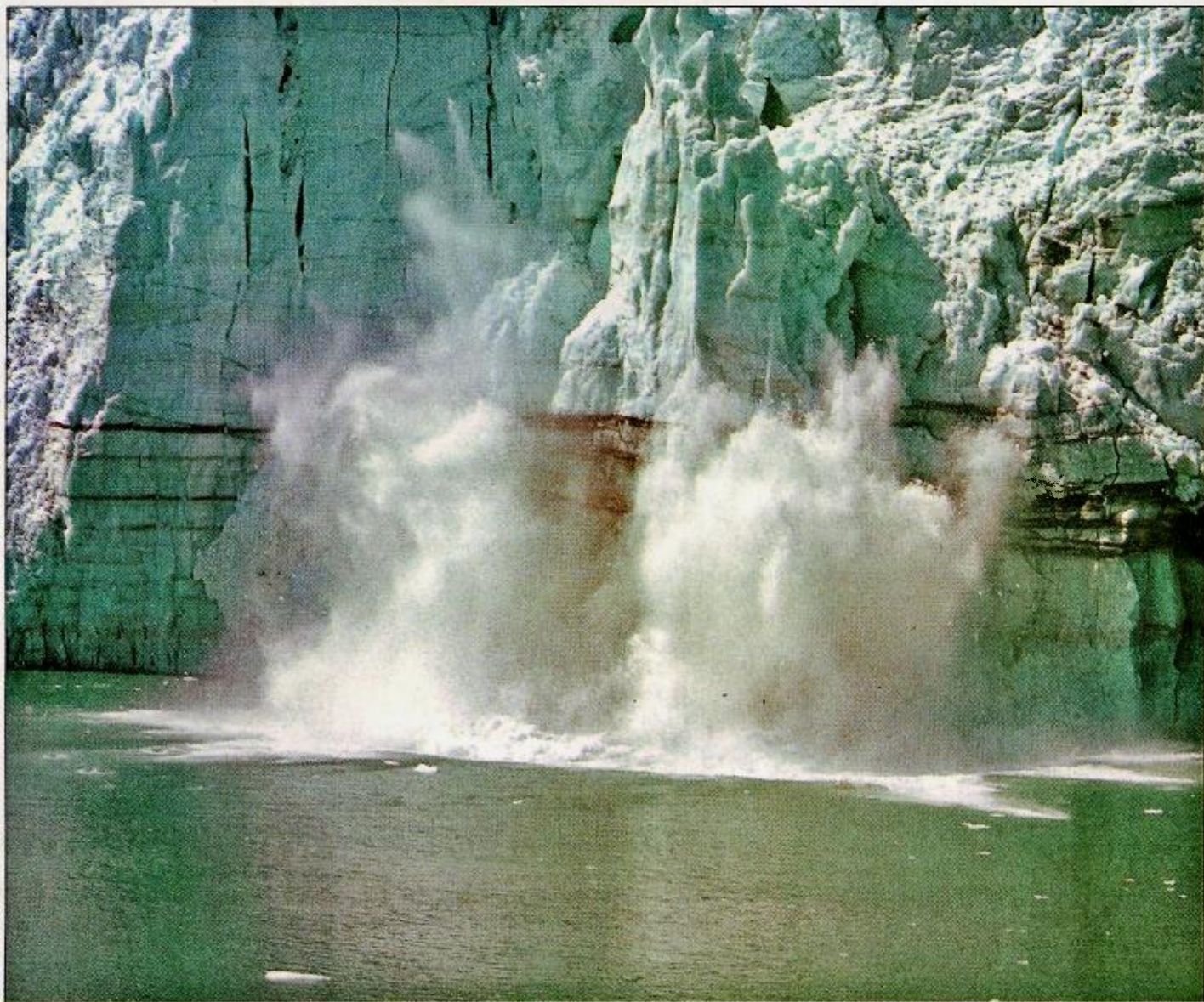
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MARCH 18, 2007



BIG VIEWS SMALL SHIPS

Forget 3,000-passenger liners — see Alaska's wild coast by small ship

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

SKAGWAY, ALASKA—A year ago, on a bright June day, the 62-passenger Sea Bird glided through a narrow passage into a remote inlet on Alaska's Inside Passage and anchored. Here, in a quiet corner of the vast northern wilderness, far from the sights and sounds of the Passage's main channel, we climbed into an inflatable dinghy and went ashore for a walk in the woods.

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Fast-forward to next June, 2007, and a Monday in Skagway, population 860. If it's a classic summer day at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the midnight sun will glint off snow-flecked peaks, bald eagles will perch in the trees — their heads look like popcorn balls — and four giant cruise ships (and one small cruise ship) will squeeze into the harbor and disgorge 8,999 eager passengers.

That's nearly 9,000 people swarming ashore looking for fun in a village with one main street, two small museums, a restored historic railroad, a dozen shops and the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park Visitors Center.

Skagway, founded in 1897 after gold was discovered near Dawson City, in the Yukon, was the port of entry for gold miners hoping to climb up the infamously steep Chilkoot Trail and over White Pass into Canada. A boom town, it grew overnight from a population of one lone pioneer to a muddy, mosquito-infested tent city of 10,000. And like all such towns, Skagway eventually shrank to a few hundred souls who stayed on to build a village. And so it was, until the cruise industry arrived.

"You can hardly walk down the sidewalk or get a seat in a restaurant," grumbled Jason Kerr, who had sailed north on the Alaska Marine Ferry and was hitching a ride to Anchorage. "Lines in restaurants, people everywhere, stores selling souvenirs," he said, frowning. "Skagway was never much of a town, but at least it was authentic."

The gold rush is on again, in southeast Alaska, led by the cruise industry. Every summer, more ships sail north through the Inside Passage to ports like Ketchikan, Juneau and Sitka, and every year these behemoths swell in size.

The current generation of mega-monsters carries up to 3,000 passengers each; several 4,000- to 6,000-passenger ships are under construction. These floating resorts don't focus on the destination; they celebrate entertainment, from casinos, restaurants and floor shows to internet cafes, aerobics classes, basketball courts, shopping malls, climbing walls, designer spas and golf driving ranges.

So the question is: Will you feel cheated if your ship is so huge and tall that you can't see a grizzly bear on a distant beach or the furry heads of sea otters floating in the water?

If you think so, see Alaska on one of 12 small ships cruising the southeast coast on three- to 14-night itineraries. These ships, too small to compete with the Big Guys, focus on seeing Alaska, in person, close up. They can turn and



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

Ice falls off a glacier in Prince William Sound, top. Above, passengers catch some rays cruising near Seward, Alaska. Below, the National Historical District of Skagway features beautifully restored Victorian buildings.



IF YOU GO

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● Intrav's Clipper Odyssey's 14-night cruises start at \$8,145. Call 800-456-8100.

● Majestic America's seven-day trips start at \$3,699. www.majesticamericaline.com.

Please see **ALASKA** on **D15**

Smaller the ship, the larger the experience

■ ALASKA

Continued from Page D14

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The cabins are small but pleasant, with good lighting. Storage space is very limited, but since casual dress is the byword, it works. The bathrooms are adequate, but no more. The public lounges, where we gathered for interpretive talks, were

warm and comfortable. The meals were very good, made with fresh ingredients and lots of vegetables. Open seating gave us a chance to meet our fellow passengers, people who were curious about Alaska and eager to learn. To get the most from the trip, however, you need to be reasonably spry and able to climb in and out of an inflatable raft.

Cruise West, with seven ships in Alaska, is the largest — and oldest — cruise company here. Owned by an Alaskan family, it offers a wide variety of itineraries, each designed to explore a particular region. The 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia, for example, sails three- and four-night cruises entirely within Prince William Sound, a spectacular complex of bays, channels, islets, valleys and tidewater glaciers.

The Columbia's twin, the 78-passenger Spirit of Alaska, also sails three- and four-night cruises, but on a round-robin itinerary out of Juneau, the capital city, stopping in Skagway and touring Glacier Bay. If you're touring Alaska by land, adding one of these short cruises would make a terrific addition to your experience.

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from Seattle or Vancouver, all on the Inside Passage. Each is themed differently, but all mix wilderness exploration with stops at popular ports like Skagway and Sitka. Again, dress is casual, cabins are small, the food is excellent and the focus is on seeing and doing.

For explorers, the crown jewel is Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus, a 120-passenger ocean-going ship, sailing 13-night, one-way cruises in the Bering Sea. An all-suite ship, the Oceanus is a step up in luxury, but the mission is the same: to discover and explore rarely visited gems like Dutch Harbor, the Pribiloff Islands, the Yukon Delta, Little Diomed and Nome.

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Finally, for a more traditional approach, Majestic America Line's two coastal cruisers include the 231-passenger Empress of the North, a new three-deck sternwheeler that relives the fancy-free years of the

Gold Rush. The tiny 48-passenger Contessa, a three-level luxury yacht, looks like a converted fishing boat with an open-roof sun deck.

The Empress sails seven-night, round-trip itineraries out of Juneau: Victorian décor, with red satin and dangling fringes, is really a kick, but the staterooms also have television, DVD players, telephone, minibar and a bathroom with a shower AND tub. To learn more about the Gold Rush, the onboard historian loves to talk. High-stepping dancers in the Gold Rush showroom offer some real kicks.

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Unfortunately, so many ships in such a fragile environment is not good news. On some days, a pale cloud of diesel smoke hangs in the air, and rainbow streaks on the water are bits of leaking engine oil. *But it's not likely to stop soon.* The irony is that the only way to see Alaska's mighty coast, an immense panorama of deep fjords and vast forests, lacy waterfalls and tidewater glaciers — is from the deck of a ship.

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March 18, 2007 1:09 PM

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