



smart travel



The Sea Bird moves in close enough to see 1,000-year-old dirt bands in an Alaskan glacier.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

CRUISES | The northern experience

ALASKA: DOWN TO SCALE

Smaller ships bring you closer, leave less of an impact on environment.

By ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

SKAGWAY, Alaska | On a bright June day last year, the 62-passenger Sea Bird glided through a narrow passage on the eastern fringe of the Inside Passage and anchored in an isolated inlet. Far from the main channel, in a quiet corner of Alaska's northern wilderness, six of the ship's passengers climbed into an inflatable dinghy and went ashore for a walk in the woods.

"We could be the first people ever to step right here, on this spot," said Matt Nilsson, a naturalist and our guide, as we picked our way over the rocky beach and up into a stand of ancient Sitka spruce. "We've never seen anyone else in this fjord, not even a fisherman. We must be



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A mountain goat and kid graze along the shore. Smaller ship cruises often allow passengers to get closer to Alaskan wildlife.

the only ones who come here." Fast-forward to this coming June. Make it a Monday morning in Skagway, population 832 but a popular

port town for the last few years. If it's a classic day at the north end of Taiya Inlet, the midnight sun will glint off snow-flecked peaks, bald

MORE CRUISE INSIDE

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eagles will perch in the trees — their heads look like popcorn balls — and five giant cruise ships (and one small cruise ship) will squeeze into the harbor, disgorging nearly 9,000 eager passengers.

That's a lot of people crowding ashore looking for fun in a village with one main street, a few historic buildings, two museums, the White Pass and Yukon Railroad terminus, 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 Territory of Canada, was the port of entry for gold miners hoping to climb the infamously steep Chilkoot Trail over White Pass to the Canadian border.

A boom town, Skagway exploded overnight from a population of one (a single crusty pioneer) to a muddy, bug-infested tent city of 10,000. When the Gold Rush went bust, Skagway was abandoned, except for a few hundred souls who stayed on to build a community. 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. Skagway was never much of a town, but at least it was authentic."

SEE ALASKA | G5

ALASKA: Smaller ships offer intimate experience

FROM GI

The gold rush is on again in southeast Alaska, led by the cruise industry. Every summer the fleet arrives, sailing on the Inside Passage to ports like Juneau, the state capital, and Ketchikan, Skagway and Sitka.

Every year the behemoths grow in number and swell in size. The current generation of mega-monsters carries as many as 3,000 passengers per ship; several 4,000-passenger ships are under construction.

But 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, spas, wellness seminars and golf driving ranges.

So here's the question: 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 a dozen small ships cruising the southeast coast on three- to 14-night itineraries. These vessels, too small to compete with the big guys, focus on the real Alaska, viewed under a magnifying glass.

They can turn and maneuver, going where big ships can't, and their schedules are more flexible. When a pod of whales surfaced near the Sea Bird, the captain slowed down and circled to let us look, then lingered to look some more. On a big ship, we would have kept going.

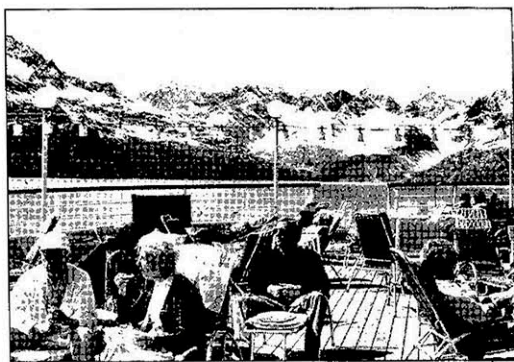
Casual dress is the rule on most small ships. And don't worry about how much to tip; on many small ships, the fare includes all tips, some shore excursions, guided wildlife tours and port fees.

The 62-passenger Sea Bird, a Lindblad Expeditions ship, and its twin, the Sea Lion, sail 11-night trips with guided port tours, wilderness kayaking, beach landings and nature walks. Functional rather than elegant, the ships focus on adventure and discovery. On-board guides and trained naturalists specialize in Alaskan, from marine life and flora, to pre-European cultures (Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Yupik and Aleut) and regional history, with interpretive talks in the lounge.

You'll have an outside cabin with big windows, comfortable furniture and individual climate controls. Storage space is limited, but since casual dress is the byword, it works. The food is excellent, and open seating gives everyone a chance to meet. It helps to be reasonably spry if you plan to go ashore in one of the Zodiacs (inflatable rafts), and rocky beaches call for hiking shoes; in any case, you'll see plenty from the deck.

Cruise West, based in Alaska, is the largest — and oldest — cruise company here. With eight ships sailing Alaska's coast, you have a choice of a half-dozen possibilities. Each itinerary has a different theme, and ships sail not only from Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, but also out of Whittier, Juneau and Ketchikan, Alaska.

The smallest ships — think of them as your private yachts — are the 78-passenger Spirit of Columbia and her twin, the Spirit of Alaska. Next in size are the 84-passenger Spirit of Discovery and the 96-passen-



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Passengers aboard the Sea Bird catch some summer rays as the small ship cruises near Seward, Alaska.



THE KANSAS CITY STAR

ger Spirit of '98. The 102-passenger Spirit of Endeavor and the 102-passenger Spirit of Glacier Bay are more spacious; the 138-passenger Yorktown just completed a \$2 million renovation.

Among them, these seven sail five different cruises, each one varying slightly depending on the weather, unexpected sightings of orcas, humpback whales and otters, or brown bears and moose onshore, and even on the weather. The shortest cruises, four-day and five-day circle trips in Prince William Sound, visit islets, channels and tidewater gla-

cers, a trip guaranteed to cap a longer land trip with a spectacular end.

Two ships sail the Glacier Bay Highlights, a five-day close-up of this most famous of Alaska's coastal bays. All seven ships also sail the Gold Rush Inside Passage, an 11-day one-way cruise going either north or south, between Seattle and Juneau.

Cruise West's eighth ship, the 120-passenger Spirit of Oceanus, is the company's only true ocean-going ship. A luxury all-suite vessel, it sails longer coastal runs and two Bering Sea cruises out of Whittier.

These go to Kodiak Island, Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian chain, then head northwest to the Yukon Delta, Nome, the Pribiloff Islands and Little Diomedea in the Bering Sea. The Oceanus also sails a 25-day trip called "In Harriman's Wake," a cruise that reprises the 1899 scientific expedition led by millionaire railroad baron and art collector, Edward H. Harriman. You might have to be a millionaire yourself to afford this one.

In its own glamorous cate-

gory is Majestic America's sternwheeler, the 231-passenger Empress of the North, sailing its own version of the bawdy Gold Rush trek to the Yukon. You wouldn't guess that this Victorian look-alike isn't an original riverboat, but those gilt mirrors, silk fringes and satin upholstery are new.

The staterooms have televisions, DVD players, telephone, mini bar and bathrooms with tubs, and the onboard historian is a fount of Gold Rush anecdotes. This one sails a circle trip out of Juneau.

With so many ships, the damage to Alaska's fragile ecosystem is undeniable. On some days and in some small harbors, the early morning fog looks faintly yellow and oily streaks on the water reveal tourism's dark side.

But cruising is here to stay, if for no other reason than you can't see Alaska's mighty coast-

TRAVELER'S CHECK | ALASKAN SMALL-SHIP CRUISES

Getting there

Most Inside Passage cruises start in Seattle or Vancouver, British Columbia; some start in ports farther north. **Picking a route**

Learn the topography with the essential detailed map, the "Inside Passage Cruise Guide," available at coastalcruiseguides.com (\$15.95).

Booking a cruise

To choose a ship and specific itinerary, check the following Web sites. Book

through a cruise agent specializing in Alaska or directly with the cruise line. Bigger cruise ships are more likely to offer last-minute discounts.

Cruise lines

■ Lindblad Expeditions: expeditions.com.

■ Cruise West: cruisewest.com.

■ Majestic America: www.majesticamericaline.com.

| Anne Z. Cooke, Special to The Star

line, an immense panorama of deep fjords and vast forests, lacy waterfalls and tidewater glaciers, except from the deck of a ship. You can downsize,

however, and go green. The smaller the ship, the larger the experience.

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