



AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF ... - ALASKA'S INSIDE PASSAGE - EAGLE, WATERFALLS, WHALES ENLIVEN CRUISE

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Perched on a Sitka spruce, a bald eagle poses, as if for a publicity photo, its white head and tail feathers unmistakable against a dense thicket of green. From the stern of Celebrity's cruise ship Summit, the raptor is one of the first things my husband and I see as we take in Alaska's Inside Passage.

The famed waterway -- the largest sheltered inland waterway in the world -- looks not so much like the ocean but a river, flanked by steep, jagged hills, with wispy clouds clinging to great, furry evergreens.

My husband points out a streak of "snow" that, as we get closer, turns out to be a huge waterfall, rushing white in a near-vertical drop to the sea. Anywhere else in the world, a waterfall of its magnitude would have been a bona fide tourist attraction. But this is Alaska. And here, it's just the first of dozens that streak the rocky hillsides like veins of milky quartz.

As rain begins to fall in a fine mist, a singer nearby croons James Taylor's Fire and Rain. For the moment, the world feels magical -- the waterfalls, the eagle, the music, the rain -- and I keep thinking, "So this is Alaska."

These days, Alaska is hot. According to the U.S. Maritime Administration, Alaska has experienced the most dramatic growth in the cruise industry, recently surpassing Bermuda to become the No. 1 seasonal destination.

Once considered the province of the "newly wed and nearly dead," cruise lines have breathed new life into their itineraries with amenities geared toward a broader market. The Summit, with its boutiques, Milanese coffee bar, discotheque and spa, seems clearly intended for a youthful crowd. And as the cruise lines have built the amenities, the people have come.

But then, if there's any destination that can draw the young and young at heart, it is Alaska. The mere mention of America's 49th state conjures up images of the last frontier -- unpopulated, inaccessible, unforgiving.

Knowing this, cruise lines provide plenty of opportunities to test one's mettle, albeit in a safe and controlled environment. An Alaska cruise is less about the ship than it is about the side trips, with adventures that include sport fishing, gold panning, hiking, biking and kayaking. But cruise lines also offer plenty of ways to view the state's splendors with less exertion, including bus, jeep, plane and helicopter tours.

The options offered by Celebrity fill a spiral-bound booklet. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume, my husband and I decide to take our chances by booking side trips directly with the tour operators on shore.

Ketchikan: Totem poles

The weather in Alaska takes getting used to. Departing Vancouver, British Columbia, guests lounge poolside in shorts and swimsuits. But the rest of the trip, the sky is cloudy. Some days, delicate clouds rake the sky like spun sugar. Mostly, the sky is heavy and gray as a wet Army blanket.

In Ketchikan, a passenger on our tour asks our guide, Patrick, whether it's true the city gets only 25 days of sunshine a year.

"No," he replies, "we get 24. And we had it all last month."

Still, Ketchikan is the prettiest of our stops, with plank streets built on dock pilings, waterfront tourist shops and clapboard homes painted in robin's-egg blue, mint green and cotton-candy pink. Nestled in the crook of a mountain, the city requires an inordinate number of stairways -- 33 percent of the city is stairs, Patrick says, which reminds us of Bisbee.

For our tour, we've picked the "duck" tour, named for our transport, an amphibious vehicle. Idling on the dock, it resembles an odd-looking boat on wheels, with a Plexiglas top intended to keep passengers dry while providing an unobstructed view.

With Patrick providing constant narration, we roll past the city's attractions -- totem poles, former bordellos and an inordinate number of jewelry shops -- then plunge into the water for the harbor tour, with its fishing vessels, flight planes and canneries.

Patrick is a Tlingit Indian belonging to the Raven clan, with hair as black and shiny as that bird's feathers. His wife is of the Bear clan. This lends authenticity to his explanations of tribal clan systems, Tlingit legends and the origins and symbolism of the area's totem poles, which make up one of the world's largest collections.

Stopping at a salmon-choked stream, Patrick uses his fingers to teach us how to remember the five types of salmon - chub (the chubby thumb), sockeye (the pointer, which can "sock" your eye out), king (longest), silver (for your ring finger) and pink (pinky).

Pointing out the federal building, he warns us not to call it pink. The "p-word," he informs us, is a punishable offense: There is only one color appropriate for a federal building in a place such as Ketchikan, and that, naturally, is salmon.

Skagway: Gold rush

We arrive in Skagway in a light but steady rain. Fortunately, a shuttle meets us at the dock and takes us into town, where we decide on a bus trip along the Klondike Highway.

Chris, our guide, relays stories about the gold-rush years, in which 10,000 souls poured over this route into the Canadian Yukon, and the adventures (and ultimate demise) of miscreants with names such as Soapy.

Just before the turnaround point, we briefly enter Canada, where we exit the bus to explore a glacier-carved valley inhabited by dwarf trees and still pools the color of turquoise.

The hemlock and spruce trees do not reach my hip, but they are ancient, Chris tells us. Growing at a rate of one-eighth of an inch a year, some of these trees are 500 years old. If you were to cut one down, Chris says, you would need a microscope to count the rings.

Under Chris' guidance, we examine tiny broccolilike lichens and admire what remains of the alpine wildflowers.

Back in Skagway, we digest all we've seen at a local saloon over a plate of beer-battered cod, and head back to the ship, where we are happy to be warm and dry.

Juneau: Sea 'giants'

Named for a gold prospector, the state capital has a waterfront populated by multi-story buildings, warehouses and an extensive shopping district. Disappointed by the shops, where we find the same selection of ulus (knives used traditionally by Eskimo women), T-shirts, smoked salmon and bear-claw salad tongs we've seen at every other port, we settle on a whale-watching trip, lured by the money-back guarantee.

"Dolphin Dan" boards our shuttle with a warning that the seas are choppy, and offers a refund for anyone who's worried. Two people get up and leave, but two others quickly take their places, and soon we're off.

Our shuttle stops briefly at Mendenhall Glacier. More than 200 feet high, nearly three miles wide and 12 miles long, it is one of the largest glaciers in Alaska accessible by car. We take the requisite photos, pile back on board and soon are deposited dockside, where we break up into two groups. Half of us are installed on an enclosed boat with 18

others, including Captain Jake and a fresh-faced naturalist named Christine. The other half boards a similar boat.

Once under way, Christine instructs us to watch for puffs of steam, as humpback whales surface and exhale. This event, she tells us, will be followed by the appearance of a dorsal fin and, if we were lucky, a flip of the tail.

90,000-pound wonder

Weighing as much as 90,000 pounds, with 15-foot dorsal fins and lungs the size of VW bugs, these mammals come to Alaska to eat. While they are here, they must gain up to 20,000 pounds, swallowing microscopic plankton before departing for warmer seas.

Someone spots a pair at 11 o'clock. Before we can turn and properly focus, someone else heralds another, a single, at 7 o'clock. We delight as these mammals rise and fall, more than once catching the flip of an enormous tail. Then, in one awe-inspiring moment, a puff of steam blows not more than 50 feet from the boat, followed by a broad fin that seems almost close enough to touch.

Convinced that nothing will top this, and fearing the weather, we turn back, sailing past ramshackle homesteads and million-dollar mansions. But the trip proves difficult. Waves break over the bow, and water streams through seams in the windows.

The boat crashes into wave after wave. If you've ever taken the log ride at Knott's Berry Farm, think of the sensation when the log makes its final roller-coaster drop into the pond below, leaving your stomach in your throat and making a huge splash. Only here, this happens over and over again. And you're acutely aware that here, there's no track. It's frightening and exhilarating all at once.

Still, we're all happy to see the dock, and even happier to learn that the whale-watching expeditions scheduled for later in the day were canceled because of the weather. Tonight, at dinner, we will have stories to tell.

Yakutat Bay: Icebergs

Even humpback whales seem insignificant the day the ship navigates the icebergs in Yakutat Bay, then stops and turns, giving us a panoramic view of 6-mile-wide Hubbard Glacier, a 300-foot-tall river of ice, where chunks the size of the Wrigley Mansion calve off and plummet into the sea. It is as dramatic and as grand as anything we've seen.

It is also the last noteworthy sight. In Valdez, made infamous by the 1989 oil spill, we board a bus that takes us into town, where we rummage through the most promising tourist attraction -- a trading post reminiscent of a gigantic Pic-N-Save -- and head back.

The next day, at Seward, we are unceremoniously vacated at 6:30 a.m. and placed on board a train to Anchorage so the cruise line can prepare for an evening departure with a new complement of guests. It seems an abrupt end.

But this is part of the problem with large cruise ships. Sometimes you feel a bit like the proverbial cattle. In addition to the ordeal of boarding and departure, there are lines to get off the ship and lines to get on. You dine at a precise time, in shifts.

But when it comes to seeing the Inside Passage, as well as attractions such as Glacier Bay, there aren't many options. And here's where the cruise lines have the corner on the market. In the end, it is all worth the trade-offs. After all, where else can you sit in comfort, see a bald eagle and glide past a steady procession of attraction-worthy waterfalls while the rain falls in a mist?

Only in Alaska.

See Sidebar: "Cruise lines vary ways to take in Alaska's coast"

Reach the reporter at (602)444-8671.

CAPTION: Alaska by sea CAPTION: Part of Alaska's breathtaking allure, Mother Nature's handiwork towers over a

couple on a side trip in a skiff. CAPTION: An Inside Passage cruise offers views of 6-mile-wide Hubbard Glacier, in Yakutat Bay (above); a humpback whale, with its puff of steam, near Juneau (below left); and kayakers at Ketchikan, with its clapboard homes, plank streets built on dock pilings and waterfront tourist shops.

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Correction: Published correction ran 2/10/04: A story on Page T2 of Sunday's Travel section about cruising in Alaska misidentified a kind of salmon found there. The correct term is chum.

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