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High thrill tours a shore thing in Alaska

CRUISE | Guarantee yourself the full Alaskan experience by tacking on high-thrill tours

Comments

May 31, 2009

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

HAINES, Alaska -- It used to be that if you waited until June to book an Alaska cruise, you'd find yourself begging for a bunk.

Now, it's the cruise lines who are begging. And with cabins on Alaska-bound cruise ships still unsold, prices have sunk lower than Davy Jones' locker.

» Click to enlarge image



Cruise ship passengers in Alaska can hop on smaller vessels for a more personal tour of glaciers in Prince William Sound.

(AP)

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Fly to Seattle or Vancouver, where round-trip Alaskan cruises depart. For one-way cruises, fly to Seattle or Vancouver, or to Anchorage, for departures from Seward or Whittier.

SHORE TOUR TIPS: Pre-book your shore tours online as soon as you've booked a cruise and made a deposit. The most popular tours fill up quickly. If some tours are unavailable, try again to book them as soon as you board your ship at the Shore Excursion Desk.

BACKGROUND READING: The guidebook *Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call 2009* (Frommer's Cruises, \$18.99) provides organized, detailed information on each port, sights, shopping, restaurants, activities to do on your own and recommended shore excursions.

The Alaska fleet's biggest ships -- and there are more than two dozen of them -- are awash in space, with sale-day rates down 10 to 40 percent. Book a voyage on one of these behemoths and you'll save a big chunk of change -- money you could apply toward an airline ticket.

But there's another way to use your savings. A smarter way, I think. Spend that serendipitous windfall on a high-thriller shore tour. All cruise ships offer these uniquely Alaskan adventures and most are worth every nickel. You'll experience sights and sounds you might not encounter ever again.

Let's say you book a seven-night cruise on the *Serenade of the Seas*, one of three Royal Caribbean ships in Alaska. Originally priced at \$899, it's now \$699 a person. Or, you decide to sail on Celebrity Cruises' *Radiance*, paying \$599 for an \$899 cruise. Or go to sea on one of Princess Cruises' three ships, now offering six nights and a two-for-one "Escape the Economy" bonus starting at \$449.

Not to be outdone, Holland America, with eight ships in Alaska, is selling its seven-day, one-way Glacier Discovery cruise, originally \$949 per person, for the desperation rate of \$449.

Any one of these bargain savings would pay for one of my favorite shore excursions. What would I choose? In Haines, my vote goes to the Jet Boat Tour, a naturalist-guided foray into the heart of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, in search of eagles, brown (grizzly) bears and moose. In Skagway, I'd relax on the White Pass

and Yukon Railroad for a ride up the Gold Rush Trail and over the Chilkoot Pass to the Yukon (\$115).

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My top choice for Juneau? The Four-Glacier Helicopter and Dogsled adventure (\$499), offered by almost every large cruise ship. The sled ride is short, but it's on snow and you can watch the teams as they run. And you get to pet the puppies.

For extreme adventure, I'd consider Sitka's seven-hour guided scuba diving expedition, especially since the price includes dry suits and air (\$435).

"We've got a new, community-service tour this year, called 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." Afterward, volunteers assist a naturalist with a beach clean-up as part of an introduction to Alaska's shoreline biology, she said.

Narrowly focused, these outings are an evolved species, generations away from the one-kind-fits-all excursions available 30 years ago. In those heady days when Alaska cruises were dewy fresh, bus rides, natural history museums, city tours and salmon bakes were standard fare.

"The first time I came, there weren't more than a dozen different port tours," said Leesa Burzynski, a shore excursion manager with Celebrity Cruises, which offers the scuba diving. "Now we've got more than 161 different excursions from 56 vendors. You want something very special but mid-priced? Go snorkeling in Sitka for \$99." The gear and dry suit are included.

If you can walk a mile, you can see most ports on your own. Since every port of call – from Ketchikan and Juneau to Skagway, Haines and Sitka – was once landlocked (most still are), they perch at the water's edge. And so do the historic neighborhoods, museums, shops and tourist attractions.

As you disembark, look for the nearest tourist information office, a source of self-guided walking maps and details on local highlights. Or ask for a list of local tour guides, historians, fishermen, naturalists and other one-man outfits who might be available on short notice – and potentially charge less money than the cruise ships. A big downside of going with an independent operator, however, is if something goes wrong and you're late getting back to the boat, you're on your own when it comes to catching up with the ship.

Don't assume outfitters will be available for last-minute bookings. The most popular outings – kayaking, salmon fishing and wildlife tours – sell out in advance, says Dave Nevins, with the Sitka Tourism Center.

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

Another assumption to avoid: The higher the price, the better the tour. Some low-priced, low-profile excursions open a window to another world. True, you can kayak on any lake. But in Alaska you paddle quietly through silver seas, floating among rafts of sea otters, perhaps even seeing seals and orcas. Native American village tours introduce kids to clan ceremonies and traditional dances. For outdoor lovers, Tongass National Forest hikes explore the northern rain forest. And some novelty tours are entertaining, like Ketchikan's combined land and harbor tour aboard an amphibious "duck" truck, built for land and water.

Virtually any option you choose will have a price tag attached. "You should see Sitka's wonderful Russian dancers and the historic Russian church, but they charge a fee: \$8 for the dancers, \$2 for the church," Nevins said.

Don't miss the National Historic Park, with totem poles and a visitors center, which also charges a fee. Or enter for free with your National Park-issued Senior, Lifetime or Annual pass (formerly called Golden Age, Access or Eagle Pass).

How do you pick a tour? That depends on your age, energy level, health and interests. Faced with 50 choices, I ask myself: Can I ride a motorcycle or a mountain bike at home, see totem poles in Seattle, get my jollies on a zip line at Lake Tahoe or fish for trout in Colorado? If I can, I try something unique to Alaska.

"My favorite, since you ask," said Burzynski of Celebrity Cruises, "is the Glacier Flight and Feast. You flight-see over three immense glaciers, then land at Taku Glacier for grilled salmon, salad and cornmeal biscuits at the Taku Glacier Lodge. It costs a little more [\$299]. But 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 when you see them from the ship."

Anne Cooke is a California-based free-lance writer.

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