

# Shore excursions to the authentic Alaska

By Anne Z. Cooke  
FOR THE INQUIRER

**KETCHIKAN, Alaska** — Cruise ships big and small get you close to Alaska's picturesque fjords, towering glaciers, and frolicking wildlife. But for even better views, you'll need a plane, a kayak, or sturdy hiking boots.

"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,'" says Leesa Burzynski, a shore excursion manager with Celebrity Cruises. "You simply can't appreciate how vast these tidewater glaciers are until you're right over them."

From Juneau there's the three-hour Glacier Flight & Feast Tour (\$299), with a floatplane soaring over vast ice summits before landing on the Taku River for a lunch of grilled salmon, salad, biscuits, and dessert at Taku Glacier Lodge. (Information: 907-586-6275, [www.wing-sairways.com](http://www.wing-sairways.com).)

Also from Juneau, the half-day Four-Glacier Helicopter and Dogsled Adventure (\$499) takes you on an adrenaline-rush flight over snowcapped peaks to Norris Glacier, where a dozen dog teams and their handlers camp out for the season, taking visitors on half-mile dog-sled rides. Information: 907-789-3772, [www.juneau-guide.com/trDogSled.htm](http://www.juneau-guide.com/trDogSled.htm).)

Such excursions are a far cry from the tame bus tours, guided town walks, and salmon bakes offered to first-time cruisers 30 years ago. In those days, few guides talked about melting glaciers, warmer weather, and endangered wildlife; today's trip leaders are sophisticated and informed.

"The first time I came, there weren't more than a dozen different tours," Burzynski says. "Now we work with more than 56 tour outfitters providing more than 161 different excursions."

Offered by every ship in nearly every port, these outings are unique — and expensive. You'll cry when you charge the fee to your cabin, but you'll kick yourself later if you don't.

When I'm choosing a tour, I pass up things I can do anywhere, such as mountain biking and zip lining. But don't be too hasty.

In Sitka, kayaking is the best way to get close to colonies of sea otters, seals sunbathing on rocks, and even pods of orcas. In Ketchikan you can



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**For the best view** of glaciers, mountains, and wildlife, cruise ship passengers can board a plane, paddle a kayak, or don hiking boots. But it won't come cheap.



**From Juneau, a helicopter ferries tourists to Norris Glacier where, dogsled teams give half-mile rides.**

tour an American Indian community and talk to the residents, descendants of Alaska's first people.

If your ship stops in Haines, sign up for the Chilkat River Adventures Jet Boat Tour (\$99). A naturalist will guide you into the heart of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a rich habitat not just for eagles but for brown bears and moose. (Information: [www.jetboatalaska.com](http://www.jetboatalaska.com)/

[tour.htm](http://tour.htm).)

In Skagway, skip the jewelry stores for the White Pass and Yukon Railroad's breathtaking three-hour ride up a narrow mountain track toward White Pass and the Yukon border (\$112; information: 1-800-343-7373, [www.wpyr.com](http://www.wpyr.com)).

Ketchikan's hottest new experience is the 3½-hour Bering Sea

Crab Fishermen's Tour (\$159), taken on the Aleutian Ballad — a fishing boat featured on the Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch*.

The Ballad's owners, who continue to fish in the Bering Sea, refitted one side of the main deck with theater-style seats for guests. Experienced fishermen working on the far deck show you how crabbing is done, while the ship tours the har-

bor, with dozens of eagles following for the scraps. (Information: 1-888-239-3816, <http://56degrees-north.com>)

In Sitka, cold-water enthusiasts with dive experience can do a seven-hour guided scuba dive (\$435 including dry suits, gear, and air). (Information: [www.shoreexcursioninformation.com/sitkaexcursion.html](http://www.shoreexcursioninformation.com/sitkaexcursion.html).)

Some shore tours go for laughs, such as amphibious duck-boat rides on land and water in Ketchikan. Others help you pitch in with community volunteer work and collection of scientific data.

"We recently introduced several community-service tours," says Sarah Scoltock, a Holland America spokeswoman. "One of them is the Whales & Glaciers tour (\$199), which includes a trip to Auke Bay on a marine science vessel to record and document humpback whales, collect water samples, and measure plankton concentrations."

The tour ends with a naturalist-guided beach walk and an introduction to Alaska's shoreline biology. (Information: [www.hollandamerica.com](http://www.hollandamerica.com).)

There are walking tours that you can do by yourself — just look for a map at tourist information centers on or near the dock.

The Sitka Tourism Center keeps a list of recommended outfitters, historians, fishermen, and naturalists who can serve as guides for kayaking, salmon fishing, and wildlife tours, says Dave Nevins, director of visitor services. But don't count on making plans at the last minute, he advises.

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

Sitka's greatest treasure is the little-known Sheldon Jackson Museum, the repository of what many say is North America's finest collection of native Alaskan crafts and artifacts. Spend a few hours seeing these beautiful exhibits with thousands of artifacts arranged in the collection drawers.

"And don't miss Sitka's Russian dancers [\$8], or the historic Russian church [\$2]," Nevins says, "or the totem poles in the National Historic Park."