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Sailing away from it all

MAKING THE MOST OF ALASKA CRUISES

BY ANNE COOKE
Special to The Seattle Times

Like a lot of other summer travelers looking for the iconic Alaska adventure, I've already booked my cruise to the Last Frontier. I've got my cabin and I'm ready to roll. But that's not like me. I usually let the weeks slide by, hoping to score a last-minute deal on a cheap inside cabin on one of the 20-odd cruise ships sailing Alaska's waters.

Not this year, though. With travelers watching their wallets and hundreds of cabins up for grabs, I made my move early, nailing one of Princess Cruises' seven-day, one-way cruises from Vancouver, B.C., for \$649 per person. I could have bought a round-trip Royal Caribbean cruise for \$589, but I want to stay on in Alaska before flying home.

As long as my so-called state-room boasts the bare minimum — a bed, a desk and a bathroom — I'm happy. If this cruise is like others I've taken, I won't be in the cabin much except to shower and sleep.

Alaska's the kind of far-north destination where I'd rather be on deck with my binoculars, searching for breaching whales or sea lions on the rocks.

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The view is excellent from cruise ships in Alaska (here near the Hubbard Glacier), but plan ahead to get the best shore excursions in small towns such as Sitka and Ketchikan.

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FROM H9

I figure I'm paying about half what Princess would like to charge me, if only the economy were leaning their way, and not mine. And Princess isn't the only cruise line with deals — you can find Alaska cruises (from Seattle and Vancouver) with Holland America, Celebrity, Royal Caribbean, Carnival or Norwegian Cruise Line for about the same price.

With the money you save, treat yourself to a couple of pricey shore tours, the sort of blue-ribbon experiences you might ordinarily bypass. Offered by every ship in nearly every Alaskan port, you might cry when you sign the credit-card charge slip, but you'll kick yourself later if you don't. A sampling:

Haines: If your ship stops in Haines, sign up for the Jet Boat Tour, a naturalist-guided foray into the heart of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, a rich habitat not just for eagles but for brown bears and moose (about \$130).

Skagway: Skip the jewelry stories and instead board the White Pass & Yukon Railroad for a breathtaking ride up a narrow mountain track toward White Pass and the Yukon border (\$115).

Ketchikan: Ketchikan's hottest new experience is the Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour, held on the Aleutian Ballad, the fishing boat featured in the Discovery Channel's TV show "Most Dangerous Catch."

The Ballad's owners, who continue to fish in the Bering Sea, docked the ship in Ketchikan and refitted one side of the main deck with theater-style seats for guests. Fishermen show how crabbing is done, while the ship tours the harbor, followed by dozens of eagles after the scraps. For the best tickets prices, book in advance on the website (\$159, www.56degreesnorth.com).

Juneau: The half-day Four-Glacier Helicopter and Dog-sled adventure (\$499) takes you on an adrenaline-rush flight over snowcapped peaks to the glaciers where a dozen dog teams and their handlers take visitors on half-mile dogsled rides.

Sitka: Cold-water enthusiasts with dive experience can do a three-quarter day, guided scuba dive for \$435.

A boom in tours

Such tours for cruise passengers are a far cry from the days when most Alaskan shore tours could have passed for amateur fundraisers — bus tours and salmon bakes. Thirty years ago 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's weren't more than a dozen different tours," said Leesa Burzynski, a shore-excursion manager with Celebrity Cruises. "Now we work

IF YOU GO

Alaska cruises

Shore tours

After booking a cruise, prebook the shore tours that most match your interests. Helicopter and floatplane tours will fill up first. If some tours are unavailable, ask again at the ship's shore excursion desk as soon as you board.

Port advice

The guidebook "Frommer's Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call 2011" (\$18.99) gives detailed information on each port's sights; shopping; restaurants; activities to do on your own; and recommended shore excursions.

with more than 56 tour outfitters providing more than 161 different excursions."

When I'm choosing a tour, I give a pass to stuff I can do anywhere, like mountain biking and zip-lining. But read the fine print before you

say no.

In Sitka, kayaking is the best way to get close to sea otters, seals on rocks and even orcas. In Ketchikan you can tour a Native American community and talk to the residents, descendants of Alaska's first people.

Some shore tours go for laughs, like the rides on the amphibious "duck" trucks in Ketchikan. But there are others — such as walking tours — that you can do by yourself. For these, look for a self-guide map at tourist-information centers, often on or near the cruise-ship 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 Director of Visitor Services Dave Nevins.

But don't count on making plans at the last minute, he advises; do some online research and reserve ahead of time.

"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," said Nevins.

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