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### Small boat, big adventure An Alaskan cruise with a difference

By Maryann Hammers

Ships don't usually sport bumper stickers. But if they did, "We brake for bald eagles" would be pasted on the stern of Cruise West's *Spirit of Endeavour*.

Having been on a few cruises, I thought I knew the drill – dressing up on formal nights, lining up at buffets, joining conga lines by the pool. But on this nine-day journey through Southeast Alaska's inside passage, there was none of that.

I did spot countless bald eagles, a couple of grizzly bears and piles of sunning sea lions looking like so many fat slugs. I watched a dozen or so porpoises frolicking around the boat, while whales almost as big as our ship spewed towers of foam into the sky. I saw glaciers crash into the sea; I felt the cold of blue-tinged icebergs. I hiked through a rainforest, and I joined a dance circle at Alaska's only Indian reservation.

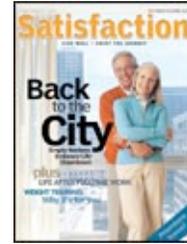
Starting in Juneau—Alaska's capital and the state's second-largest city in square miles—we journeyed along the Lynn Canal, spent a day in Glacier Bay and then traveled to Sitka, which shows influences of both the Tlingit Indians, who lived here for centuries, and the Russians, who arrived in 1799. We traversed remote, ice-choked Frederick Sound and docked at Petersburg, known as Little Norway. We cruised past dramatic 3,000-foot-high granite walls at Misty Fjords, and spent a morning with the Tsimshian community on Annette Island in Alaska's only Indian reservation before our final stop at Ketchikan and our flight home.

"There are no roads to Juneau," the bus driver informed us at the start of our trip, en route from the airport. "Everything comes by air or ship; everything is imported except fish and timber." But the town did have plenty of souvenir shops with displays of hooded sweatshirts, \$9.95 raincoats and Eskimo dolls, as well as ample bars. There was nary a Starbucks, but Heritage, the local coffeehouse sold irresistible bear-handled mugs with a totem-pole design and the slogan "Life's short. Stay awake."

A gleaming Princess ship had docked at the waterfront, and her thousands of passengers crowded Juneau's streets and stores. The 102-passenger, 217-foot *Spirit of Endeavour*, my home for the next week, looked like a toy in comparison. In fact, there were downsides to the smaller boat's size.

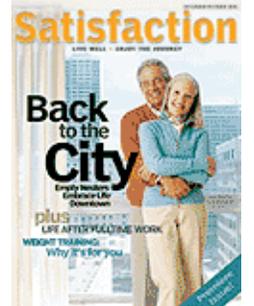
For me, a lack of any sort of fitness facility was a drawback. One long sea day, I resorted to walking in circles round and round the deck, 48 times. Cabins were cramped, with short beds, no balconies and windows that didn't open. There was neither Internet access nor entertainment, other than a video lending library, a few board games and occasional talks by National Park Service rangers. (The star of the ship was Chef Irv, who announced dinner each night by calling out "Y'all ready to eat?")

But I was to soon learn the small ship's advantages. While grand vessels that accommodate 3,000-plus passengers boast Las Vegas-style shows and casinos, nimble boats like the *Endeavour* pride themselves on their ability to venture into narrow, shallow channels, hovering so close to shore that I felt I could grab a branch off a pine tree. If we sailed past a spot



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remarkable for scenery or wildlife, the captain lingered until everyone had a chance to gather on the bow with cameras and binoculars.

The major cruise ships, with their strict schedules, could not offer that kind of flexibility. We docked at remote ports and saw tiny villages uncongested with tourists. And we met a diverse range of hardy folks who hold on to centuries-old cultures and beliefs while living without what most of us regard as basic necessities.

This small-ship journey through Southeast Alaska's inside passage is designed for travelers who want to get as close as possible to the wildlife, wilderness and wonders of our nation's largest and most pristine state. And it excels at that.

On one stop, we docked at Haines at the foot of the Chilkat Mountains, overlooking Lynn Canal. Haines borders 20 million acres of protected wilderness, and the largest concentration of bald eagles in the world congregate along the Chilkat River. I joined a rafting trip in hopes of spotting the regal birds. Suited up in life vests and rubber boots, we floated along, pointing binoculars at arctic terns, more eagles than we could count and two massive eagle nests (which can weigh more than a ton).

Our guide, a lean, curly-haired Texan named Scott, said he came to Haines to climb mountains. He told tales of living without electricity or running water, said he endured frequent run-ins with bears and explained there's no phone service in Haines. Folks call the local radio station to leave messages, which the DJ reads every afternoon. When we asked if we would see wildlife, Scott dramatically pointed at a blob and shouted, "Bear scat!" He announced that four invisible specks at the top of a nearby peak surely were mountain goats.

None of us could really pinpoint where the truth ended and his whoppers began. Life in Haines is tough for single guys, Scott lamented, because there are so few available women. "If you're a gal, the odds are good," he noted. "But the goods are odd." That time, he may have been telling the truth.

On day four, we docked in Sitka—the first capital of Alaska. The Russian influence is still apparent there, in everything from the baroque architecture to nesting dolls displayed in store windows. St. Michael's Cathedral, built in the 1840s, was the first Russian Orthodox Church in America. It burned to the ground in 1966, but most of the icons and statues were saved, and grace the replica that was built.

Suffering from cabin fever and desperate for exercise, two of us skipped the formal tours and headed for the hills the instant the ship docked. On Gavan Hill Trail, we identified newly discovered plants: skunk cabbage, a broad-leaved, yellow-flowered favorite of bears emerging from hibernation; devil's club, with its nasty, stinging barbs but bark that makes a swell healing ointment; and wild berries galore. With the lush rainforest canopy sheltering us from a misty drizzle, we trekked persistently uphill, passing waterfalls and skipping over creeks until it was time to make our way back to the ship.

A few days later, we docked at Petersburg, a tidy fishing village on Mitkof Island, where blindingly blond schoolchildren wearing laced-up blue vests and hand-embroidered skirts danced for us in the Sons of Norway Hall. We had arrived, coincidentally, on Norway's Independence Day, so the town, already in full spring bloom, was decked out with flags celebrating the mother country's emancipation from Swedish rule. This place is so picture-perfect that even the police station is decorated with painted flowers. Instead of burglar-alarm placards, homes sport friendly "vilkommen" signs.

Another day, we stopped in tiny Metlakatla, Alaska's only Indian reservation. The Tshimshian Nation from British Columbia settled here in the 1880s. Today, in this heavily Christian community, there are more than a dozen churches, but no hospital. Winds sometimes approach the 100-mile-per-hour range, and the area averages nearly 100 inches of rain yearly. Not surprisingly, according to our guide, 80 percent of graduating high school seniors leave for college or the military and don't return.

There are just two buses in Metlakatla, and we were on the one that broke down, so we completed our tour on foot, passing the mini-mart, movie rental place and homes with totem poles in front yards. At the community center, the Killer Whale Dancers, decked out in traditional red and black garb and animal masks, welcomed us with stories and ceremonial dances. Their final song was a beautiful, lilting melody performed with arms outstretched, moving several *Endeavour* passengers to join the circle.

In Frederick Sound, we saw orca (killer) whales portside, while on the starboard side humpbacks displayed their mighty tailfins and occasionally their impressive full length. We heard the ear-splitting cacophony of hundreds of groaning sea lions on the nearby shore. Porpoises romped a few feet from our ship; eagles perched on icebergs and soared above us.

A juvenile bald eagle bobbing in the water was apparently unable to fly off. We paused for more than an hour as the crew sought ways to rescue the distressed bird. Sadly, we had to leave it

behind, at the advice of raptor experts who feared we might cause more harm. But a ranger who joined our ship the next day assured us that the eagle managed to swim its way to shore.

Prior to this cruise, my vision of Alaska consisted of polar bears, penguins and ice. Glacier Bay—a national park since 1980 and World Heritage site since 1992—was the closest I came to that snowy picture, minus the polar bears and penguins. Ice walls towered around us, more than a mile wide, hundreds of feet high and hundreds more feet below sea level. Some were pure white, others tinged perfect Tanzanite blue. And some were crisscrossed with black lines, indicating where two separate glaciers had joined hundreds of years ago.

We gathered on deck, listening for the crackles and pops that heralded a glacier about to “calve.” Then, with a heave and loud sigh, an explosion of ice would break off the glacial wall. Those same glaciers are doubtless playing out the identical drama for a fresh batch of cruise ship passengers at this moment.

As David, the leader of the Killer Whale Dancers, told us, “In our language, we have no word for goodbye. We believe life is circular, with no beginning, no end.” But my Heritage totem pole coffee mug with the bear-head handle says, “Life’s short. Stay awake.” And I believe that, when it comes to Alaska, both sentiments are right on.

[An Alaskan cruise with a difference](#)  
[Seeing southeast Alaska from a small ship](#)

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