



ADVENTURE ALASKA

Encounter glorious glaciers and fascinating ports on an Inside Passage cruise with Princess.

BY DENNIS R. HEINZE

As if on cue just before we departed from Juneau during our cruise of Alaska's Inside Passage, a bald eagle took off from the forested mountainside that rose up abruptly next to the ship and circled over the deck several times, seemingly to bid us farewell as we glided out of port.

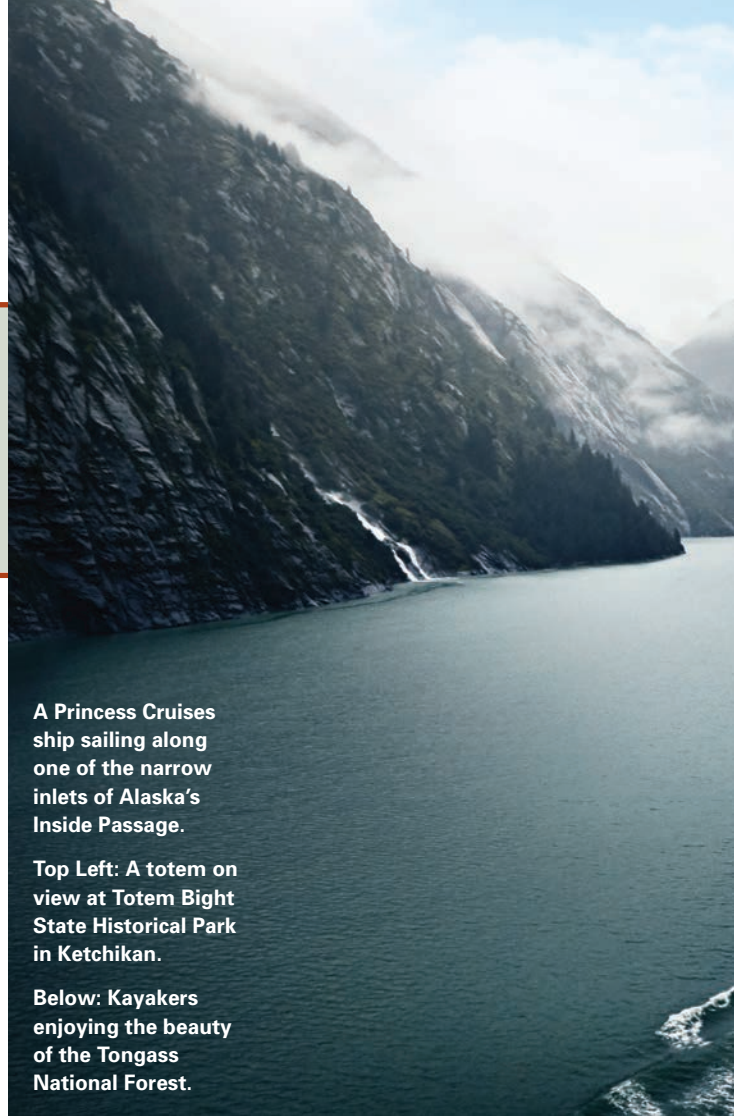
The late afternoon spectacle was just one of many memorable moments that rightly confirmed our Alaska adventure as a bucket-list trip. During our seven-day Voyage of the Glaciers cruise on the *Royal Princess*, our family encountered wildlife, Native cultures, lively coastal towns, and impossibly beautiful scenery highlighted by snow-capped mountains and two days of glacier viewing.

Princess Cruises celebrated its 50th year of sailing in Alaska last year and typically has up to eight ships offering itineraries that showcase the Great Land. Cruises were suspended during 2020 due to COVID-19, but the cruise line has plans to offer Alaska cruises again in 2021 with new health and safety guidelines to keep passengers safe, including enhanced health screenings before boarding, increased sanitization, reduced capacity in some onboard activities, and more.

PADDLES AND HIKING BOOTS

Carved by the staggering force of massive glaciers millions of years ago, the Inside Passage is a network of waterways that runs from Puget Sound in Washington up the Pacific Coast of British Columbia and into the Gulf of Alaska. With more than 1,000 islands, coves, fjords, and seemingly endless forests, the scenery constantly changes as you make your way through the serene landscapes.

After embarking on our journey from Vancouver, British Columbia, the first Alaska port was Ketchikan, known as the "Salmon Capital of the World." An abundance of salmon drew the Tlingit people to this area, and fishing still plays a major role in its economy. Among the many excursions, ship



A Princess Cruises ship sailing along one of the narrow inlets of Alaska's Inside Passage.

Top Left: A totem on view at Totem Bight State Historical Park in Ketchikan.

Below: Kayakers enjoying the beauty of the Tongass National Forest.



passengers can opt for a salmon fishing trip or a visit to Totem Bight State Historical Park, which is home to 14 totem poles centered around a community clan house, offering a look into the Tlingit and Haida Native Alaskan cultures.

"At that first dock in Ketchikan, when we opened the curtains and there was this pretty little coastal village, it was an amazing experience for us first timers," said Phyllis Shontz of Leawood, Kansas, who along with her husband, Tom, were on their first cruise. "Seeing the totem poles at Totem Bight was just something you don't see everyday. All of the excursions were a highlight for us, and the scenery

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT THIS PAGE: DEBBIE ANN POWELL/ISTOCK.ADOBE.COM; PRINCESS CRUISES; DENNIS R. HEINZE



Above: The Mount Roberts Tramway offers a breathtaking view of Juneau.

Below: Eagles are a common sight along the Inside Passage.

giant crab legs, try the creamy crab bisque.

Reinvigorated, we boarded the Mount Roberts Tramway for an 1,800-foot ascent that provided outstanding views of the Chilkat Mountains, Gastineau Channel, and Juneau. We hiked a one-mile loop through a forest of western hemlock and Sitka spruce and watched as Native artisans carved

throughout the cruise was absolutely breathtaking.”

We savored some of that scenery in Ketchikan when we opted for sea kayaking in the Tongass National Forest, which is the nation’s largest national forest and covers most of southeast Alaska. After a short van ride, our family of four boarded tandem kayaks for a two-hour paddle around rugged Eagle Island where we glimpsed bald eagles and were joined for a time by seals peaking their heads out of the water.

On the way to our next port, the capital city of Juneau, the ship navigated through the Gastineau Channel past undulating mountainsides. Founded as a gold-mining camp in 1880, Juneau is the nation’s only capital inaccessible by road. Atop the mountains above Juneau is a giant ice field from which flows a number of glaciers, including Mendenhall Glacier. On an excursion to the site, we learned about the glacier in the U.S. Forest Service visitor center before taking a short hike to the base of Nugget Creek Falls where we glimpsed the impressive glacier that stretches for 13 miles and ends at Mendenhall Lake.

A mountain of crab legs at Tracy’s King Crab Shack was a satisfying lunch in Juneau. The no-frills dock-side restaurant serves up a mouth-watering taste of Alaska. In addition to

totem poles with hammer and chisel.

GLACIERS AND DOGSLEDS

The northernmost point of the Inside Passage is Skagway, which was central to the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897. Exploring streets lined with wooden boardwalks offers a feel for life in the 19th century. Within restored buildings are shops, brew pubs, and restaurants.

In its heyday, the rough-and-tumble frontier port boasted more than 80 bars, including the Red Onion Saloon, which also served as the town’s most infamous bordello. Belly up to the bar to enjoy the lively and bawdy atmosphere. Tours of the brothel museum shine a light on the site’s colorful history.

After shopping, we embarked on a Sled Dog and Musher’s Camp excursion to experience the excitement of Alaska’s official state sport: dog mushing. At the camp, mushers explained how dogs work in tandem to pull 300-pound sleds, and they offered insight into the grandfather of all races: the Iditarod. We met sled dogs and toasted marshmallows over a campfire, but the highlight was cuddling adorable puppies.

The crown jewel of the cruise, however, was exploring Glacier Bay National Park. Comprised of 3.3 million acres of



FROM TOP RIGHT: STATE OF ALASKA/BRIAN ADAMS; STATE OF ALASKA/CELESTYN PRIDE



Left: Margerie Glacier cascading through the mountains to the tidewater in Glacier Bay National Park.



Right: A sled dog letting out a howl at a musher's camp near Skagway.

Below: Skagway has preserved its Gold Rush atmosphere.



mountains, forests, waterways, and hundreds of glaciers, Glacier Bay is one of the world's grandest destinations. For about eight hours, we cruised through the spectacular scenery, and two National Park rangers who boarded the ship offered commentary as passengers gathered on deck to gaze at a number of tidewater glaciers—those that spill out of the mountain valleys and meet the ocean.

"When you're in Glacier Bay, you're in one of the most wild places you're ever going to visit," said Ranger Becca Miller of the National Park Service, who noted that many of the glaciers are in retreat and thinning because of climate change.

Royal Princess spent nearly an hour at the base of Margerie Glacier, which soars about 250 feet above the waterline and stretches more than a mile wide. The ship slowly revolved in place so passengers could get a good look at the natural wonder. The rangers compared the area to a church, worthy of reverence. Indeed, they stopped their narration for a time so passengers could enjoy the sight in silence.

On the following day, more glaciers were on display, this time in Prince William Sound's College Fjord, where railroad tycoon Edward Henry Harriman led an expedition in 1899. On that trip, which included famed naturalist John Muir, the scientists aboard named the glaciers after Ivy League schools, including Yale and Vassar. At one-and-a-half miles wide and 200 feet thick, Harvard Glacier is the most dramatic.

SHIP'S DELIGHTS

When not exploring Alaska's engaging ports, we enjoyed all the amenities that the *Royal Princess* offered, including the glass-bottomed SeaWalk, an enclosed walkway on the top deck extending 28 feet beyond the ship's edge that provided dramatic views to the sea below.

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Making transactions and finding our way around the ship more convenient were the OceanMedallions that we wore. The high-tech, quarter-sized devices unlocked our stateroom doors as we approached, and we could use them to make purchases. They also interacted with an app that we downloaded on our phones, which provided directions to places we wanted to visit on the ship, and we could locate each other and communicate through it. We could use the app to order drinks or room service, and it allowed us to monitor our expenses.

At night we alternated between top-notch shows in the Princess Theatre and movies under the stars that are shown on a giant screen on deck. Fleece blankets are available to snuggle under along with hot chocolate to stay warm.

Helping fuel our activities was an array of top-notch cuisine. Passengers can choose traditional dining with preset seating times or a more flexible, restaurant-style experience at their leisure. Don't pass up the specialty dining venues available for an additional fee. Sabatini's offers authentic Italian fare curated by Italian chefs across the Princess fleet, while Crown Grill deliciously celebrates steak and seafood. When *Royal Princess* resumes cruising, dining options likely will be altered, including reduced self-serve buffets.

After settling into the cabin and reflecting on the wild beauty that we experienced each day, the words of Muir, who was irresistibly drawn to Alaska and its glaciers on several trips in the late 1800s, resonated even more.

"Our burning hearts were ready for any fate, feeling that, whatever the future might have in store, the treasures we had gained this glorious morning would enrich our lives forever," he wrote after paddling away from the glaciers in 1879. We sensed the same notion as we boarded a flight in Anchorage for our return home. ●

Dennis R. Heinze is regional editor of AAA Midwest Traveler.