



Northern Exposure

Take a small yacht through the Inside Passage, and discover that wildlife watching can be very civilized.

Story by Katy Neusteter

The water 20 feet ahead of our yacht, which rocked placidly in the cold waves of Alaska's Inside Passage, exploded in a crescendo of foam and barnacled black snouts. Massive jaws exposed soft pink pallets and bristling baleen, and deeply grooved throats ballooned with food and water as the whales sank into a cauldron of flapping pectoral fins.

Humpbacks — nine of them — were “bubble-net” feeding on fish and krill that the 30-ton mammals captured by blowing a net of bubbles and lunging through the swirling schools in a well-timed display. Nearby, a bald eagle squawked, bullet-fast Dall's porpoise splashed playfully, and a shy harbor seal peeked at us with suspicion. And there we were, standing on the observation deck of the Safari Spirit, giggling

with the exhilaration and wildness of it all.

You don't see bubble-netting humpbacks every day, not even in Alaska. After the show, my shipmates and I (all seven of us) packed up our digicams, toasted our good fortune with a glass of pinot noir and relaxed in the hot tub. (Oh, and then there was the pod of orcas — but we'll get to that.) You see, we were on an American Safari Cruise, and those things just happen.

Founded in 1996 in Seattle, American Safari Cruises (ASC) offers week-long yachting excursions to passengers who have a hankering for spotting wildlife, whether from the cockpit of a kayak or while sipping bubbly on the observation deck.

The company operates three mega yachts (that's “super luxurious” in boat-speak): the Safari Quest, Safari Escape and Safari Spirit. Each follows a different itinerary depending on the season, cruising either in the Sea of Cortez, the California

Do you know Juneau?

If you have time to spare, Juneau is worth a few extra days' visit. The 30,000-person capital city lies at the foot of Mt. Juneau and Mt. Roberts, along the Gastineau Channel. The Tlingit (KLING-ket) people inhabited the area around Juneau for thousands of years before 1880, when a mighty gold rush brought prospectors to Alaska's southeast. Today, while it's abuzz with cruise ship passengers—900,000 of them descend on the colorful port town each summer—Alaska's third-largest city still has plenty of charm.

Lodging



Alaska Capital Inn

Alaska Capital Inn, a 4,500-square-foot home built in 1906 by successful prospector John Olds and just uphill from the state capital building, has been beautifully restored to its original Arts and Crafts period style. The seven medium-sized rooms with private baths are arguably the most romantic in town. Munch on a fresh-baked cookie in the formal dining room, chat it up in the kitchen with the friendly owners, or go for a soak in the gazeboed hot tub out back. \$125-\$275. Telephone: 1-888-588-6507 www.alaskacapitalinn.com.

Museums

From the inn, go down the stairs toward the waterfront to the fascinating Alaska State Museum. This is a great place to start your tour of town. Comprising over 27,000 artifacts, the museum has a fine collection of authentic native art ranging from totem poles and delicately-woven baskets to waterproof gut parkas. Telephone: 1-907-465-2901 www.museums.state.ak.us.



Alaska State Museum

A 45-minute stroll to the end of Basin Road lands you at The Last Chance Mining Museum, where thousands of original tools, machines and photos from the old gold mine are on display in the mine's old service center warehouse. History buffs and kids will enjoy the dusty relics and panning for gold in the aptly named Gold Creek. Telephone: 1-907-586-5338.

Food and Drink

The heart of Juneau spans six blocks along Franklin Street, where the cruise ships dock. Tucked between tour operators and souvenir shops are a few great restaurants and pubs (try the Alaska Hotel and the kitschy Red Dog Saloon—check out the size of that halibut!) www.reddogsaloon.cc.

Sidle up to the Hangar on the Wharf, a local seafood favorite, and order a halibut burger and the state shot. Called a Duck Fart, the drink is a combo of Kahlua, whiskey and Baileys Irish Cream that slides down surprisingly easily. Or opt for a pint of Juneau's own Alaskan Brewing Company micro-brew. Telephone: 1-907-586-5018 www.hangaronthewharf.com.



Alaska Capital Inn

Wine Country, on the Snake and Columbia Rivers, or in the 49th state's Inside Passage.

Summer is busy in the passage, southeast Alaska's network of waterways and mile-deep fjords about 900 miles north of Seattle. While humpbacks migrate from Hawaii to gorge on herring and mackerel, salmon move into the streams, and cruise ships carrying passengers from the lower 48 thread their way between great icebergs calved by the area's thousands of glaciers.

Thanks to the region's rich biodiversity and ASC's knack for escaping the din of humanity, Alaska is the company's most popular destination. The trips are so popular that up to half the clients are return customers. That's a high approval rating for a company whose product runs about \$5,000-\$8,000 per person.

The experience is decadent. ASC's guests benefit from an exceptional crew whose expertise and fun-loving exuberance expel the pretense you'd expect on a luxury yacht. As Spirit Captain Rod DuFour likes to say, "We want you to feel like you're on your best friend's boat." And the amazing thing is that you actually do. Of course, in this scenario, your best friend is a multi-millionaire, gourmet chef, sommelier, marine biologist and engineer.

Earlier in the year, DuFour and ASC's president and CEO, Dan Blanchard,



FLUKE OCCURRENCES: Previous page, a humpback investigates the Safari Spirit. Above, bunchberries in flower; Clockwise from top: A zodiac is dwarfed by an iceberg; cruisers get close to a calving glacier; humpbacks bubble-net feeding; kayaks at the ready; the Safari Spirit head out.

COURTESY ALASKA CAPITAL INN

COURTESY ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

COURTESY ALASKA CAPITAL INN

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breated the 105-footer, built in 1981, to a \$2 million overhaul. And in May 2005, the strikingly elegant Spirit set out on her, ahem, maiden voyage: a brand new eight-day itinerary cruising round-trip from Juneau.

Though it's not the company's largest boat (that's the 120-foot Safari Quest), the Spirit boasts the biggest staterooms. Real care has been taken with the details. Each of the six staterooms is trimmed, like the rest of the yacht, in American cherry and 100-percent cotton bedding, Jacuzzi tubs and flat-screen TVs.

And spend a moment to admire the loo. To avoid dumping blackwater (a nice name for sewage) into these fragile waters, ASC equipped the Spirit with Incinolets — toilets that reduce waste to ash, which is discarded after the trip. The Spirit is the first cruise ship in Alaska to employ such eco-friendly methods.

But don't be deceived. With so much to do, you're not going to camp out in your room. Many of my shipmates spent their days chatting with the captain on the bridge, or on the observation deck, scanning the horizon for the puffs of spouting whales. Often, after an early-riser breakfast of homemade muffins and fresh fruit, we loaded into the 13-passenger skiff for a stone's-throw viewing of whatever nature served up: calving glaciers, Steller's sea lions, or, yes, killer whales.

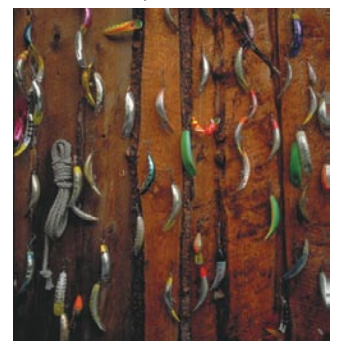
The only pre-requisite for life on the Spirit is enjoyment. Spa lovers lounge in the sauna or in the four-person hot tub on the Library Deck. Nappers retreat to the remarkably quiet library,

a fantastic whale-spotting perch with plenty of books on the area's natural history.

And you won't go hungry. Night after night, Chef Dave Gipson created lavish spreads that included grilled white king salmon, roasted rack of lamb and fresh salads. No matter the menu, wine flowed freely and dessert was always decadent.

However, the most striking characteristic of the Spirit's Juneau-to-Juneau cruise is its flexibility. Large ships are bound by a rigid schedule, which rules out braking to admire a pod of porpoise or a humpback cow and calf. As a result, many passengers never notice the details: dainty arctic terns, painted harlequin ducks, or mountain goats climbing the rocky fjord walls.

But the Spirit isn't locked into an itinerary. There's no rushing to keep a schedule; the captain simply follows the wildlife. (Of course, ASC knows exactly where to go for the best sightings.) En route



ALASKA'S A LURE: Above: Tenakee Springs, population 100, was built around a hot spring with a temperature of 108. Above: Fishing has always been a hook for Alaska's tourism industry. Right: The author gets smilingly close to a raft of Steller's sea lions.

LURE PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF FRANK FLAVIN, ATIA

to the night's mooring, which is always in some secluded cove or inlet, you might paddle a kayak around icebergs and tidal pools, or hop on land for a nature walk ending with a soak in a warm spring. In addition, the ship's relatively small size allows the captain to cruise into tiny bays and rugged fishing villages that most visitors seldom see. At one point, we nosed so close to a waterfall in Red Bluff Bay that sitting on the Bow Deck, I got soaked with chilly spray.

We were getting soaked as the killer whales splashed us: 'Does it get any better than this?'

Along with the unconstrained agenda, the onboard expedition leader makes an ASC cruise a true safari. Not only was our expedition leader, Casey Cohan, extremely knowledgeable, but his finely honed eyes guaranteed that every day presented at least one incredible natural moment. It was Casey who first spotted the killer whales.

On our last day aboard the Spirit, we were sailing back to Juneau on water that was glassy and dark. I was lounging in the salon when Casey ran in beaming and said one word: "Orcas." Without hesitation, my shipmates and I threw on

our standard-issue coast-guard life vests and took off in the skiff.

We motored around, with no sign of the killer whales, when the tip of a dorsal fin stabbed through the surface not 15 feet away. It grew into a six-foot triangle, pointed and black. And as the distinctive white eye patches slid into view, the orca spouted and drew in a deep, raspy breath. Smaller animals poked up and engulfed us in a bevy of black and white faces. Mothers, bulls and calves just days old

bounced past us, occasionally popping up to investigate, staring at us with one marbled eye. Casey grabbed my life vest and nearly shook me off the boat with excitement.

We were surrounded by killer whales, and loving every spatter of water bouncing off of their slick bodies. "Does it get any better than this?" a shipmate, called out. "I don't think it can," yelled Casey. He was absolutely right. **GI**

For more information:

American Safari Cruises' Alaskan itineraries run from May through August. Per person rates are \$4,895-\$7,995.



Adventure Landings

Cruising through the Inside Passage's gaping fjords, it's easy to forget that you're in the middle of a rainforest. About 73 percent of the southeast is covered in 200-to-700 year-old Sitka spruce and hemlock, comprising the 17-million-acre Tongass National Forest, the largest national forest in the U.S. There's a lot to do on land, and most of it is right outside Juneau's backdoor.

Hiking

The city of Juneau prides itself on having 41 miles of paved road and more than 260 of hiking trails. One of the most accessible trails starts right in town, at the end of 6th Street, and climbs up Mt. Roberts. If the peak looks steep that's because it is. The 2.5-mile hike to the top of a tram, which hauls visitors from town, takes about two hours, and you will break a sweat. Once at the observation deck, check out the bald eagles being rehabilitated at the Juneau Raptor Center. From here you can either continue on to the 3,800-foot summit or return to sea level via the tram. www.alaska.net/~junotram.

Glacier Walk

Juneau's top tourist attraction is Alaska's only drive-up glacier, the Mendenhall. The river of ice lies 13 miles north of the city and has a terrific visitor center with lots of information about the glacier's past and future. To experience the glacier up close, contact Becky and Sean Janes



GLACIER WALK

of Above and Beyond Alaska tour guides. Natives of Juneau, both are experienced mountaineers and climbers. Before your six-hour trek, they'll provide you with crampons, an ice ax and the know-how to climb through a crevasse field. Make no mistake, this is a physically demanding day that will test (and fray) your nerves. But it's also a fascinating glimpse into the ancient flows that carved out the Inside Passage thousands of years ago.

Telephone: 1-907-364-2333
www.beyondak.com.