

Cruising Alaska – Small Ships and Big Adventure

After choosing your itinerary, picking the right ship is the number-one factor in ensuring you get the vacation you're looking for. Cruise ships in Alaska range from small adventure-type vessels to resort-like megaships, with the cruise experience varying widely depending on the type of ship you select. There are casual cruises and luxury cruises; educational cruises where you attend lectures and cruises where you attend musical reviews; adventure-oriented cruises where hiking, kayaking, and exploring remote areas are the main activities; and resort-like cruises where aqua therapy and mud baths are the order of the day.



You'll need to decide what overall cruise experience you want. Itinerary and type of cruise are even more important than price. After all, what kind of bargain is a party cruise if what you're looking for is a quiet time? Your fantasy vacation may be someone else's nightmare, and vice versa.

Unlike the Caribbean, which generally attracts people looking to relax in the sun, people who want to spend all their time scuba diving and snorkeling, and people who want to party till the cows come home, visitors to Alaska usually all have a different goal: They want to experience Alaska's glaciers, forests, wildlife, and other natural wonders. The cruise lines all recognize this, so almost any option you choose will allow you opportunities to see what you've come for. The main question, then, is how you want to see those sights. Do you want to be down at the waterline, seeing them from the deck of an adventure vessel, or do you want to see them from a warm lounge or, even better, from your own private veranda?

Big ships operating in Alaska vary in size and scope, and include everything from a classic cruise ship to really, really big and really new megaships. They all offer a comfortable cruising experience, with virtual armies of service employees overseeing your well-being and ship stabilizers assuring smooth sailing.

The size of these ships may keep Alaska's wildlife at a distance (you'll probably need binoculars to see the whales), but they offer plenty of deck space and comfy lounge chairs to sit in as you take in the gorgeous mountain and glacier views and sip a cup of coffee or cocoa. Due to their deeper drafts, the big ships can't get as close to the sights as the smaller ships, and they can't visit the more pristine fjords, inlets, and narrows. However, the more powerful engines on these ships do allow them to visit more ports during each trip – generally popular ports where your ship may be one of several, and where

shopping for souvenirs is a main attraction. Some of the less massive ships in this category may also visit alternative ports, away from the typical tourist crowds.



Regardless of the port's size, the big-ship cruise lines put a lot of emphasis on shore excursions, which allow you to more closely explore different aspects of Alaska – nature, Native culture, and so on. Dispersing passengers to different locales on these shore trips is a must. When 2,000 passengers disembark on a small Alaska town, much of the ambience goes out the window – on particularly busy days, when several ships are in port, there may actually be more cruise passengers on the ground than locals. Due to the number of people involved, disembarkation can be a lengthy process.

Carrying upwards of 2,000 passengers, the megaships look and feel like floating resorts. Big on glitz, they offer loads of activities, attract many families (and, especially in Alaska, many seniors), offer many public rooms (including fancy casinos and fully equipped gyms), and provide a wide variety of meal and entertainment options, and though they'll usually feature one or two formal nights per trip, the ambience is generally casual. The Alaska vessels of the Carnival, Celebrity, Princess, and Royal Caribbean fleets all fit in this category, as do most of the Alaska ships in the Holland America and Norwegian fleets.

Just as big cruise ships are mostly for people who want every resort amenity, small or alternative ships are best suited for people who prefer a casual, crowd-free cruise experience that gives passengers a chance to get up close and personal with Alaska's natural surroundings and wildlife.

Thanks to their smaller size, these ships, carrying fewer than 150 passengers can go places that larger ships can't, such as narrow fjords, uninhabited islands, and smaller ports that cater mostly to small fishing vessels. Due to their shallow draft (the amount of ship below the waterline) they can nose right up to sheer cliff faces, bird rookeries, bobbing icebergs, and cascading waterfalls that you can literally reach out and touch. Also, sea animals are not as intimidated by these ships, so you may find yourself having a rather close encounter with a humpback whale, or watching other sea mammals bobbing in the ship's wake. The decks on these ships are closer to the waterline, too, giving passengers a more intimate view than from the high decks of the large cruise ships. Some of these ships stop at ports on a daily basis like the larger ships, and some avoid ports almost entirely, exploring natural areas instead. They also have the flexibility to change their itineraries as opportunities arise – say, to go where whales have been sighted, and to linger a while once a sighting's been made.

The alternative ship experience comes with a sense of adventure, although it's usually adventure of a

soft rather than a rugged sort, and offers a generally casual cruise experience: There are no dress-up nights, the food may be rather simply prepared, and because there are so few public areas to choose from – usually only one or two small lounges – camaraderie tends to develop more quickly between passengers on these ships than aboard larger vessels, which can be as anonymous as a big city. Cabins on these ships don't usually offer TVs or telephones and tend to be very small, and in some cases downright Spartan. Meals are generally served in a single open seating (meaning seats are not assigned), and dress codes are usually nonexistent.



None of these ships offer exercise or spa facilities like you'll find on the big ships – your best exercise bet is usually a brisk walk around the deck after dinner – but may compensate by offering more active off-ship opportunities, such as hiking, fishing, crabbing or kayaking (on three of Glacier Bay Tours and Cruises' ships, stern launch platforms actually allow you to kayak right from the ship). The alternative ships are also more likely to feature expert lectures on Alaska-specific topics like marine biology, history, Native culture, and other intellectual pursuits.

There are no stabilizers on most of these smaller ships, and the ride can be bumpy in open water-- which isn't much of a problem on Inside Passage itineraries, since most of the cruising area is protected from sea waves. They are also difficult for travelers with disabilities, as only three (Cruise West's Spirit of '98 and Spirit of Oceanus and Clipper's Clipper Odyssey) have elevators. And the alternative ship lines do not offer specific activities or facilities for children, although you will find a few families on some of these vessels.

By George DeFilippo

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Date: 2011-01-31

Article link:

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