

# Dreaming of an Alaskan Cruise? Try a Taste of True Alaska with True Alaskans

Southeast Alaska, the sliver of land more commonly identified as the Alaska Panhandle, begs to be explored aboard a small expeditionary cruise vessel. With hundreds of forested islands to deflect the wind and wave power of the Pacific Ocean, there are steep-walled glacier-carved fjords, narrow waterways with strong tides and uncountable numbers of marine wildlife and land animals to observe. It is a natural paradise.

Before my recent visit to the Panhandle in August 2013, I had explored pieces of the region three times over the previous 20 years, never once aboard the summer flow of cruise ship giants carrying two thousand guests or more. I had travelled aboard intimate, agile expeditionary vessels where engagement with the environment and coastal towns was the goal, and educational sharing about the area was predictably served up and as eagerly consumed by guests as the gourmet cuisine.



Why go back again? This time I was tempted by place names I had not heard of on the itinerary and the cruise company's mission that promised new experiences, visits to remote communities where tourism is an unfamiliar concept, and a chance to learn more about the region's earliest settlers: the Tlingit Indians whom archaeologists tell us arrived an estimated 10,000 years ago.

An authentic set of eyeglasses on the native heritage theme was an important motivation to me, so when I discovered that **Alaskan Dream Cruises** ([alaskadreamcruises.com](http://alaskadreamcruises.com)) had been in business through three Tlingit-family generations, I knew I was on firm ground where my interest in native heritage and present-day culture was sure to be satisfied.

After spending a few days exploring Sitka, Alaska, voted in 2013 as one of the most culturally-rich small towns in the entire United States, I sailed aboard the 58-passenger Admiralty Dream, one of three well-appointed ships in the Alaskan Dream Cruises fleet. For the next eight days/seven nights, I joined fellow guests from Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand on a truly remarkable adventure under the guidance of two expedition leaders who expertly represented what we had all come to share in Alaska. In their early 30s, both men were blessed with an ability to communicate their excitement and knowledge with a great sense of humor. No question or discussion point phased either of them!

Our naturalist Jon Ciser's illustrated presentations on marine life revealed fascinating insights about Steller sea lions, Orca killer whales, harbour seals, sea otters and of course, humpback whales - the stars of any wildlife show.



Whether learning about them in the forward lounge with a pre-dinner drink in hand or out on deck for hours with binoculars in hand, we all thrilled to the antics of the whales that frequently surrounded the Admiralty Dream, as it dropped to a slow idle for an hour or two allowing guests to take in this spectacle.

While feeding, diving with graceful tail flips or breaching into the air before splashing back into the water, the whales' agility was astonishing knowing they average 46 feet/14 meters in length and 80,000 pounds/36,500 kilograms.

Serving a native cultural ambassador role, our Tlingit expedition leader, Lee Vale, proved to be a talented storyteller. Recounting tales of his childhood so different from the life of an average North American child, he shared with equal ease traditional stories from his community that explain the ways of nature, the animals of land, sea and air, and the foibles of humanity. Through Lee's eyes, the

rich cultural heritage of the Tlingit people sprang to life, and our shore visits to villages and towns where Tlingit culture was a significant part of the itinerary were all the more appreciated.



As expected, our cruise included major attractions, not to be missed on any visit to Southeast Alaska. For a full day, we explored Glacier Bay National Park, the region's highest-profile crown jewel, with a knowledgeable park ranger and a native cultural interpreter taken on board while cruising this spectacular body of water fed by tidewater glaciers hundreds of feet tall. We also spent a day in Alaska's diminutive state capital, Juneau, accessible only by air and sea, then sailed away to an all-you-can-eat dinner of Alaska king crab legs and other sea food delicacies, hosted ashore by the company's Orca Point Lodge on Colt Island.

On another day we sailed the 32-mile length of Tracy Arm Fjord, with icebergs noisily fracturing off the glacier faces into turquoise waters, with endless waterfalls and spectacular cliffs rising thousands of feet. Later in the itinerary, we docked in a warm morning mist at tranquil deserted Hobart Bay for a day sampling some strange modern vehicles that facilitate Alaska wilderness living: 1.5-hour excursions driving two-person Remote Terrain Vehicles on former logging roads and two-person Zegos rather like a motorcycle on top of a mini-Zodiac for navigation in calm waters. I finished the day double kayaking along picturesque shorelines as the setting sun turned the bay golden and bald eagles nibbled their favourite food, migrating salmon.

With a stated mission to bring a rare taste of tourism experience and income to remote communities, Alaska Dream Cruises also introduced us to 100-year-old Petersburg, a flourishing fishing community founded by Norwegian immigrants, and to Kake, a largely-Tlingit community of 600 people where logging and salmon fish hatchery facilities are chief income earners. In both communities, we were treated to dance performances that speak to vibrant living traditions that span the generations.



With the exception of Sitka, Glacier Bay and Juneau, neither our destinations nor many of our activities are likely to appear on the itinerary of a large cruise ship any time soon. Alaskan Dream Cruises' motto is "True Alaska with True Alaskans". On our cruise, they delivered exactly that!

Bookings for all Alaska Dream Cruise itineraries may be made through US-based small-ship specialist, AdventureSmith Explorations ([adventuresmithexplorations.com](http://adventuresmithexplorations.com)) which handles every detail and question with unsurpassed knowledge and professionalism. All itineraries start or end in Sitka, creating an ideal opportunity to spend additional vacation days exploring Sitka itself. See our [Sitka-focused article](#) also in this issue.

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