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Alaska

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For many people, visiting Alaska is one of those once in a lifetime trips that you dream of one day taking. There's something about the notion of experiencing the sweeping landscape of America's last wild frontier, that appeals to both our romantic and adventurous sides. I was no exception and jumped at the opportunity to travel with Royal Caribbean on a "cruisetour" of the 50th state.

The beauty of a cruisetour is that the package offers all of the pleasures of cruising, combined with also being able to experience the places you really want to see on land — where your cruise ship obviously can't go. On Royal's Alaska cruise for example, there is usually seven days aboard a ship traveling from Vancouver to Seward (or if you prefer, you can travel North to South) and then there's three to seven days of land tours to choose from, depending on your budget and what you have time to include. There is a little plus, that I particularly love. You never seem to have to hassle with dragging around your luggage, which can wear out even the most robust traveler. At all of the hotels we stayed on land, all I had to do was stick my bag outside my room in the morning and it miraculously appeared at the next destination.

I boarded Radiance of the Seas (www.RoyalCaribbean.com) in Vancouver. By the way, Vancouver is one of the world's most beautiful cities in my opinion and if you can manage a day or two to experience it before boarding, definitely do so. Even though there were about 2000 other people on board, the ship's 11 floors of open areas, and lots of open and glass enclosed decks looking out over the Pacific made it feel spacious and uncrowded. There is a day of cruising at sea hugging Alaska's Inside Passage before arriving at the first port of call, Ketchikan.

That one day, where there is absolutely nothing to do but enjoy the ship and relax was the perfect way to begin the trip. When is there ever an opportunity to just do nothing? Of course there's tons of things to do aboard the ship if you are looking for activity — clubs, champagne bars, two pools, spa, gym, casino, a teen center (Royal Caribbean is very, very family friendly) and much more -- but I was relishing just sitting on board, putting my feet up and doing nothing more than looking out on to the sea and spotting a group of Humpback whales popping out of the water in the distance.

I also had an opportunity to briefly visit the bridge and our Norwegian born captain, Claus Anderson. I was amazed to see that this floating city was steered by something that kind of looked like a glorified joystick. Captain Anderson rolled his eyes and assured me it was far more complicated than that. "The ship is always manned and it's my responsibility to keep everything running safely at all times." Well thank goodness for that, now I can safely go back to my manning my binoculars and a margarita back on deck.

The first stop is Ketchikan, a charming, former logging town, where fishing comes in a close second to tourism these days. If you need to shop till you drop, there are all the usual suspects selling Tanzanite and watches that you'd find along cruise ship stops in the Caribbean (and you'll find the same discounted prices even though there will obviously be no duty-free paperwork on a domestic trip) Every other shop seems to be selling smoked and canned salmon too and



there is certainly a reason why. During the summer months, the waters here are filled with red snapper, halibut, and salmon. A Duck Tour (in a vehicle that can be converted into a boat) is a great way to get an overview of the town and my guide even helped me spot a bald eagle's nest, complete with a baby bird popping his head up to take a look at me. The tiny town also includes one of the State's largest collections of Totem Poles. But by far the most interesting thing about a visit to Ketchikan was seeing salmon by the thousands spawning up a small stream to lay their eggs in the same stream they were born in three years earlier only to die at the end of the journey.



Sure, everyone has seen it in a TV nature documentary, but there's something extraordinary about seeing this wonder of nature with your own eyes. Even though they have been living in the ocean for their entire lives, I saw literally a traffic jam of silver salmon from a wooden perch above the freshwater stream, furiously and instinctively throwing themselves against the

rushing tide. It's an incredible sight. Once back onboard Radiance, I dined at Portofino, one of two specialty restaurants on the ship. Where the rest of the dining onboard the cruise is included in the cost of your travel, the specialty restaurants are an additional \$20 (which includes gratuities) and require reservations. It's well worth the money, for the private restaurant service and delicious meals.

While the cruise will carry on to Skagway, Icy Strait Point, Hubbard Glacier and Seward, I disembark in Juneau to begin the land part of my journey. First, it's transferring by plane to Fairbanks to meet my very knowledgeable local guide, Roberta Warner. Even though she was born and raised here, Roberta can't be called a native she tells me, as that's a term only used to refer to Alaska's indigenous peoples.

Fairbanks, can be a city of extremes. It is sub arctic and temperatures can swing wildly. There have even been reports of snow in the summer, even though June, the sun is visible for 21 hours and 49 minutes. The winters are long and cold, but it's also probably one of the best places to see the Northern Lights. "It's difficult to see that in the summer, when it never gets pitch black outside." Roberta says. "In September, when the nights start to get dark, that's when we will start seeing the Northern Lights." A great excursion here is onboard the Riverboat Discovery down the Chena River. Even though the day was kind of cold and wet, the boat was warm and dry and made some really interesting stops along the way, including visiting the home of dog sled champion Dave Monson, who is continuing the legacy left by his late wife, four-time Iditarod champion and local legend, Susan Butcher.



There's a chance to see a turn of the century fish camp that would have been used by the areas' Athabascan Indians. I liked getting up close and personal with a reindeer (sorry, no Santa sightings though). In Fairbanks, Pike Waterfront Lodge (www.pikeslodge.com) is a very comfortable place to stay and also to see a fine collection of Alaskan art.



About four hours later, we arrived at the McKinley Village (www.alaska.org/denali/mckinley-village.jsp). It sits on the edge of the Nenana River and just on the outside of Denali National Park and the home of Mt. McKinley. Denali is the native word meaning "The High One" and the name most people here use when referring to McKinley. The preserve (www.nps.gov) is one of the National Park Service's crown jewels and it's absolutely huge — nearly the size of Massachusetts.

And just like an African safari, it has its own "Big 5" list of animals that call this place home. Grizzly bears, caribou, wolves, Dall sheep and moose all roam this massive acreage. But unlike Africa there's no absolute promise you are going to see any of them! A group who headed out before and after mine saw plenty of animals, but my bus (everyone inside the park travels on National Park service buses to cut down on the carbon footprint), was so starved for a little wildlife action that when an arctic hare was spotted, cameras snapped furiously,

someone burst the bubble by declaring, "It's just a rabbit!" It hardly mattered. A panorama of rivers, mountains, forests and meeting an Athabascan Indian guide, whose family still sustains themselves on what they can hunt and gather here, brought natural history to life.

Just outside the park I got a chance to visit Jeff King's Husky Homestead (www.huskyhomestead.com) a kennel where the Iditarod Champ raises his future winners. Even if you aren't a dog lover, you will find the tour fascinating. The sled dogs train all summer and it's hard to believe how excited they can get when they are



hooked up to an ATV to head out for a practice run. King, who has been in the world's most famous dog sled race twenty times, is also a hysterical storyteller, who really gave me a sense of what it must be like to trek over the frozen tundra for 1100 miles. "Warm is over-rated!" King jokes about the sometimes -50° temperatures he faces with his team. If you are a dog lover, you will absolutely love it here. To socialize the dogs to all kinds of people, you are likely to get handed a 10-week-old puppy to snuggle with. Don't fall in love and try to sneak one of the adorable little critters away in your bag. I know from experience — they count them!



After leaving Denali, I took a four-hour trip on the Alaska Railway (www.AlaskaRailroad.com). If you have the opportunity, don't miss it. Royal Caribbean has its own glass-domed cars on board

that are clearly the nicest on the line. Leather-reclining seats, drink service and a gourmet dining car would be worth the trip alone, but you are traveling through winding paths of black spruce, streams, flowers and the Alaskan wilderness just as spectacular as you always imagined it would be. I disembarked in Talkeetna, a quirky little town that's a must visit. This place with its tiny main street and collection of shops, fishing guides and air-taxi tour operators, is the home of the Moose Dropping Festival in July (yes, they drop real moose droppings). It's said to have been the model for the TV show Northern Exposure.



Talkeetna is also the last stop for climbers planning on making the treacherous climb up Mount McKinley. The interesting little cemetery just outside of town, includes a monument to those who died trying to make it up its steep inclines at



temperatures as low as -75.5 °F (-60 °C) and wind chills as low as -118.1 °F. America's largest mountain (20,320 feet) is so high, that I am told it's often obscured by clouds and only completely visible about 30% of the time. Luckily, I was able to see it in its spectacular glory at sunrise from my hotel, the Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge

(www.talkeetnalodge.com). Be sure to ask the front desk for a wake-up call if the mountain becomes visible or if there's an Aurora Borealis. The views from their back patio make the bleary-eyed trip downstairs well worth your while.

My journey ends in Anchorage. About 300,00 people or 40% of Alaskans call this home, but it hardly has a big city feel. There's not a lot of hustle and bustle or skyscrapers for that matter. But there are great restaurants, lots of shopping and a bike path surrounding the city, where a moose may just cross your path and you can regularly spot whales in the Cook Inlet. I loved the Alaska Native Heritage Center (www.alaskanative.net), just outside of the city. It's a great way to get an overview of Alaska's many different indigenous cultures, see performances and very interesting indoor and outdoor exhibitions.

There are very few places left on earth where you can experience nature in such an awe-inspiring way. But Alaska is also vast and it would be impossible to see everything it has to offer in just one trip. I'm already plotting my return.

WHEN TO GO

The main tourist season in Alaska is from the end of May to about mid-September. In June there are flowers blooming everywhere. But by the end of August there's fall foliage and bargains to be found at the end of the tourism season. It can be rainy, but it also can sometimes be dark enough at night to see the Northern Lights.



WHAT TO WEAR

The one thing that seems to be predictable in Alaska is that the weather is always unpredictable. Temperatures in the summer can reach 95°F to -65°F in the winter months. So be prepared with layers of clothing and rain gear. Take along a few evening outfits for the cruise, but generally the vibe is relaxed and comfortable. Good walking shoes, a sweater, and even a jacket are smart to bring along even in the summer. I donned a jacket, gloves, and a scarf one day in Denali and then just a few hours later in Talkeetna it was time for shorts and a T-shirt.

WHERE TO BUY

Royal Caribbean's onboard gift shops always have good deals on jewelry, perfumes, and clothing.

Mostly Moose Gift Shop, Main Street in Talkeetna. Fun and unusual gifts.

Two Spirits Gallery. 333 West 4th Avenue in Anchorage. A co-op for some of the best native artists in the State. Many native crafts carry a state certified tag.

Stewart's Photo Shop, 531 West 4th Avenue in Anchorage had the best deal in town on Jade and other jewelry and they also have a remarkable photo gallery.

Oomingmak, 64 H Street in Anchorage. A co-op of native women make handknits from Quiviut, a fiber made from Musk Ox fur. It is as beautiful and much more durable than cashmere.

Del Sol, 328 Mission Street in Ketchikan. T-shirts, nail polish and hats that change color when exposed to sunlight.

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