

# Alaska Whales and Glaciers Photo Safari in Juneau: A Disney Cruise Line Shore Excursion Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

When we took our second Alaskan cruise with Disney, we knew immediately which shore excursion we wanted to do when we got to Juneau, and it had to involve whale watching.

The whole trip was a celebration of a very special birthday for my husband, and he's always wanted to see orcas, and Juneau was our best bet.

We'd tried on our first Alaskan cruise in 2011, without any joy, and I decided I wanted to do a slightly different excursion, as I didn't just want to repeat anything. The one that caught my eye immediately was Alaska's Whales & Glaciers Photo Safari, being a keen photographer. It was described as a "nature photographer's dream", with the promise that this tour would "scour the seas in search of whales, glaciers, and wildlife with the guidance of a professional photographer guide". So did it deliver? Well, yes and no has to be the honest answer. I say that because, disappointingly, once again, we didn't find any orcas, but apart from that, I couldn't fault this excursion.

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□ However, there was much more to it than first meets the eye when you read the description on the Disney Cruise Line website. You have to read the small print to find out the full extent of what you'll discover on this excursion, as it's not all about whale watching. We joined our bus from the Wonder with our wonderful guide David, who told us he was recovering from a cold, but you really couldn't tell. He knew everything there was to know about photography and clearly loved sharing his experience with people. On the way to our first stop, we were treated to a slideshow of some of his shots on the bus, and they were just breath taking. I have been told I'm a good photographer, but trust me, compared to him, I really am not!

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□ The first part of this tour is at the Mendenhall Glacier, but this gives you a very different perspective on it, which I liked the sound of, having visited it during our first Alaskan cruise. We took what's called the Trail of Time, a gentle mile long hike through the neighbouring rainforest that brings you out by the glacier. Once again, David would give us plenty of hints and ideas about how to get different and more creative photos, although my only criticism about this portion of this tour was that we didn't have time to stop and actually put the ideas into practice.

He'd make a suggestion, we'd stop, and then be moving on less than a minute later, and I would have liked longer to play with different angles.

The scenery along the way was beautiful, not stunning as a lot of Alaska is, but if you enjoy your photography, as presumably you would to take this course, you'll find plenty that will pique your interest. I was particularly interested in the markers they had as we approached the glacier itself, which showed where it would have reached in years gone by. It truly brings it home to you just how much it's receded over the years. Sadly, we could even see the difference ourselves, and that was only in the four short years since our last visit here.

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□ There wasn't much time at the glacier itself, which didn't bother us, as we were able to fully explore the visitor center on our first Alaskan cruise, but if you are interested in the glacier, it's something to bear in mind. If you want to see the glacier, you may be best off picking another of the tours on offer.

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□ From there, we took the drive over to the harbor, where we'd be heading out into the water. On our first Alaskan cruise, we'd done whale watching, but the reason this appealed to me is because this was aimed at photographers. David quickly got to work as soon as we were in the water, going through the settings on everyone's cameras, to ensure we all had the best possible chance of capturing whatever wildlife we would see during our cruise.

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□ It's certainly not an easy thing to do, as every time we got a sighting, the boat would come to a halt, and we'd literally bob and down in the water like corks. Given that, it's really tough to keep your camera straight, and focused, and to get a decent photo, especially as you don't know where the next sighting will come from, and more importantly, where the whale will next surface. It does take a lot of practice and patience, and my first few attempts were woefully pathetic as a result.

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□ Eventually, my confidence grew, and finally we were both able to snag some photos of these majestic creatures, including shots of a tail fin. It was truly wonderful not only to see them in their natural environment, but to be able to capture them on a camera as well, knowing you'd always have those memories to look at. However, the best bit for me was ironically listening to them, as the noise they make as they surface, and blow air was much louder than I could ever have imagined. I felt very privileged to be in a position to see and enjoy all of this.

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□ I honestly don't know how many whales we saw during our cruise, and although sadly we didn't spot any of those elusive orcas, we had more than enough sightings to keep us happy. As a result, the time on the

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water seemed to just fly by. It wasn't all about whales, we also spotted eagles, and sea lions while we were out, and the scenery with snow covered mountains in the distance, was just glorious, and one of the main reasons we'd returned to Alaska, because the views are just breath taking.

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□ Even on the bus on the way back to the Wonder, David continued to talk photography with us, explaining about the effects you can achieve by digitally manipulating photos. This is something I'd heard about previously, but had never really understood, so for me, it was a fascinating glimpse into what was a completely new world for me.

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□ This really was a wonderful excursion, although the caution I would give is that you do at least need to be relatively interested in photography, otherwise you probably won't get as much out of this tour as you could. You certainly don't need to be an expert, and I don't think any of our group would class themselves as that. We were all keen to learn a bit more, and hopefully snag a few good shots of the scenery and wildlife of Alaska, and that's what this shore excursion allowed us to do.

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□ Alaska's Whales & Glaciers Photo Safari costs \$210/adult, and \$149 for those aged between 5 and 9, although Disney only recommends this excursion for those aged from 10 and upwards and says only those at least 60 inches tall can participate. You are expected to be in good health to take this tour, and wheelchairs and electric scooters are not permitted on this tour.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

Article last updated: 05-26-2016

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