

Cruising Alaska: A Travel Feature

by Ann Weber, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Just about everywhere you go, even Walt Disney World, you will find people who love the place and you will find people who don't care for it as much. In all the reviews I have read, I have not found one where the people did not love cruising to Alaska.

Yes, weather can be cold and rainy, customer service problems may arise, but overall the scenery and atmosphere in Alaska overcomes any possible issues.

When you first start planning your own Alaskan cruise, I would recommend you look at the locations visited on the different itineraries. Although some places like Juneau seem to be on most itineraries, others vary greatly. Glacier Bay National Park only permits two large cruise ships to enter Glacier Bay on any day, so many cruise ships visit other glacier locations instead. For me, Glacier Bay was a critical part of our trip, so this helped us eliminate some of the many options available. After having seen Glacier Bay and College Fjord, I can say that I am very glad we were able to see Glacier Bay. Although I have heard some of the other glacier areas are also spectacular, I would still recommend trying to see Glacier Bay if it works in your overall plans.

The next thing for us was to pick a cruise line. We were a multi-generational group and we are relaxed and conservative in our tastes. My parents had never cruised before and didn't have an opinion on the cruise line. We had been on a three day cruise on the Disney Wonder and so our kids, now 12 and 14, had high expectations for the kids club. My husband and I didn't want to feel like total outcasts if we didn't want to dress up for the whole evening and I wanted to see shows that were more along a Broadway tradition than a Las Vegas tradition. We ended up choosing Princess Cruise lines and it worked very well for us.

In my opinion, the shows were not up to Disney standards and there were some that were not family-oriented even early in the evening, but my husband and I enjoyed most of the shows we went to. The kids loved the teen and pre-teen club. On the Sapphire Princess the age groups can change. Princess does not have anything official at <http://www.princess.com> about how this decision is made. On our cruise there was an 11-13 year old pre-teen group and a 14-18 year old teen group. They had many activities scheduled but were willing to change the agenda if no one was interested in the scheduled activity. They did Karaoke, had a spa night, a movie night, an ice cream party

and more. We heard from two different families we met on the trip that young adults between 18 and 21 seemed to have a hard time finding where they fit in on the ship.

The next step for us was picking between the itineraries offered. Between the cruise lines we researched we found one-way northbound or southbound cruises between Anchorage (actual ports are Whittier or Seward) and Vancouver as well as round-trip cruises out of Seattle or San Francisco. Because we wanted to spend time exploring Alaska's interior before our cruise, we wanted a southbound cruise. We felt that Norwegian Cruise Line would have also fit our family well, but they only offered round-trip itineraries. Some ships and itineraries offer better hours in port than others. One thing I was disappointed in when we actually sailed was that the all-aboard time was somewhere between 30-60 minutes earlier than what was listed in the promotional itineraries. It turned out that the brochure listed the ship's actual departure time, not the all-aboard time for passengers.

The next step is to pick the actual ship. We loved the beautiful Sapphire Princess. I did feel she was a little crowded at some times. Many times it was extremely hard to find an open table at the buffet, even when we thought we were eating at odd hours. We were turned away from a show about 10 minutes before it started because the theatre was already completely full. Since the next show was at 10:15 pm, we had to opt-out - we had early shore excursions the next day.

One thing I would recommend when picking a ship is to look at other ship's itineraries and learn how many other ships will be in port on the same days. (You can see what ships are in port on certain days this year by going to <http://www.claalaska.com> and looking at the schedules for the individual towns.) For example, the Sapphire Princess and Diamond Princess sailed on Saturdays in opposite directions (i.e. The Sapphire sailed north while the Diamond Princess sailed south and vice versa.) The Island Princess and the Coral Princess sailed on Mondays following the same pattern. The Island Princess and the Coral Princess seemed to be competing with fewer other ships when in port. I believe this is due to most cruises sailing on weekends rather than weekdays. We heard from several people who wanted to walk the town and shop that the crowds made this difficult or unpleasant.

The final step is to pick your room category. Princess does not make this easy, as they offer over 30 categories. Look carefully - sometimes an obstructed ocean view cabin can be less expensive than an interior cabin. We booked an interior cabin for the 4 of us, and my parents had a handicapped-accessible balcony cabin. Both cabins were very nice. Ours was a little tight, especially when the bunks were down, but it

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worked for us. My parent's room was amazing. I was really glad we were able to share the balcony with them. Because it was a handicapped-accessible room, the balcony was almost twice the size of the other staterooms in their category. Plus, there is so much beautiful scenery in Alaska to enjoy. In Glacier Bay and College Fjord, the public decks were very crowded and it was difficult to get a railing spot to take pictures from. The balcony rooms tend to be very expensive on Alaskan cruises, but if you are going to splurge someplace, this would probably be the place to do it. Several times we missed a great sight because we were in our room changing or resting. We entered College Fjord at 6:00 am. It is much nicer to head out and watch it from your balcony rather than having to head to a public area to see the sights.

But at the end of the day, I definitely feel it was better to have had a cheaper, interior room than to give up our shore excursions or the week we spent in an RV in Central Alaska before embarking on our cruise. All in all, it was money well spent!

About The Author: Ann Weber is an avid vacation planner. Now that the two years of planning the Alaska adventure is behind her, Ann is diving into plans for her family's upcoming Disney Christmas vacation.

Article last updated: 8/16/2006

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