

# It doesn't get better in Alaska

Whales, glaciers, totem poles and a great ship.

By Mary Welch

Alaska is one of those unique places on earth that is so vast and overwhelming in visual grandeur, so wild, mysterious, untouched and unspoiled, it is on virtually everyone's "bucket list," as a place we simply must see on this side of Heaven.

In reality, visiting Alaska means taking a cruise, so deciding to visit our largest state also involves selecting a cruise line that offers the itinerary, price and ambience that fits your needs. We chose Holland America, which offers a more classic, traditional, upscale experience. As one of the officers said, "You can stay up until 4 drinking and pass out in the lounge. But there are other cruise lines where you'd be more comfortable doing that."

Our ship, the Oosterdam, is a manageable-sized vessel with about 1,800 passengers that was commissioned in 2003. It has 28 rooms equipped for the disabled, and all were booked. Cruisers in wheelchairs easily get around the ship. Not only does the elderly crowd enjoy the experience, but youngsters do as well. There were infants to teens on our ship and the Loft, aimed at the teen crowd, provided a variety of activities, including basketball, arcade games and just hangin'.

Yes, there are "militant" cruisers who attack the food buffets as if the ship would run out of food (it won't) and hit the stores with a vengeance so that by midweek they are wearing nothing without Alaska or Holland America on it. But there were also young couples and an awful lot of multigenerational and extended families on board. In fact, a lasting memory was watching a World War II vet and his 33-year-old grandson sit together watching the scenery and drinking Bloody Marys.

What was particularly nice about our cruise experience was that it was restful. Yes, there were some onboard activities, such as bingo, fitness classes, and flower arranging, but they were out-of-the-way, so they didn't interfere. In other words, the ship didn't go into overdrive to ensure a happy time. The experience alone did that.

Alaska is a perfect place to sit on a deck and watch the world go by. Even on cruising days when we couldn't see land, there was wildlife that kept us amused. An occasional pod of whales would go by or a sea lion would pop its head up.

The Oosterdam made three stops in Alaska: Juneau, Sitka and Ketchikan and one in Victoria, Canada. Each offers a different experience. Juneau, the state's capital, offers a touristy shopping experience down its two main streets. Be sure to stop for a drink at the Red Dog Saloon. Yes, it's a tourist trap but a fun one, and it should be visited – once. The saloon is styled just as you would expect with sawdust on the floors, animal heads on the walls and lots of junk covering every inch of the place. A rowdy and

somewhat off-color show delights visitors. See if you can leave without buying a souvenir.

There are better things to do in Juneau. Whale watching for one. The cruise lines tend to offer trips, but hiring a boat off the docks is just as easy, cheaper and provides better viewing. The big attraction in Juneau, of course, is the Mendenhall Glacier. The glacier's visitors center was built in 1962 and is worth the visit. The exhibit's gallery is through a simulated ice cave, and there are monitors that visitors can activate to show animated views of the



Sitka

Photo by Brian Adams

glacier advancing and receding. All in all, a great lesson about global warming and geology.

Our next stop was Sitka, the ancestral home of the Tlingit Indian nation and a Russian stronghold until the United States bought Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million in gold in 1867. Sitka has less of a touristy feel to it, and visitors are greeted by a 50-foot totem pole. The cornerstone of Sitka is St. Michael's Orthodox Russian Church, although we found a delightful Episcopal church down the street, St. Peter's By the Sea, which was built in 1898 and has a beautiful stained-glass rose window with a Star of David in the middle.

There is a show featuring traditional Russian dances, but for our money, we had the most fun stopping by local restaurants sampling the reindeer hot dogs, clam chowder and crabs. In Sitka one could walk down to the water, pull up a plastic chair and have a fisherman cook you up a fresh crab and corn on the cob. It doesn't get more local – or fresh than that.

Ketchikan is a mixture of both cities. A larger port, it, like Juneau, attracts cruise ships and several at once. So tourist traps abound. But there also is a lot of charm. Take a walk to the Creek Street Historic District with its zigzagging boardwalk on pilings. The creek was best known – up until the 1950s – as the red light district, and Dolly's House, where Madam Dolly Copeland Arthur lived from 1919 to 1970, is now a period museum. The tour offers a look into the seamy side of life, complete with a hidden exit in a bedroom for use by married men. It's worth the visit and, for once, the cheeky souvenirs justify the price. Don't miss the Totem Heritage Cultural Center, the Totem Bight State Park or the Saxman Totem Park.

Our favorite day was actually one spent sailing when the ship went to Yakutat Bay and the Hubbard Glacier. The Hubbard Glacier stretches for 76 miles and is the longest tidewater glacier in Alaska, with an open calving face more than six miles wide. Tidewater glaciers calve when giant pieces of ice crack off the head of the glacier and fall into sea.

The Oosterdam cruised into the bay and simply let the passengers glow in the amazing scenery of water so clear the reflection of the mountain was perfectly seen. Thousands of pieces of the glacier dotted the water, and the glacier and nearby Valerie Glacier provided a picture-perfect summary of Alaska.

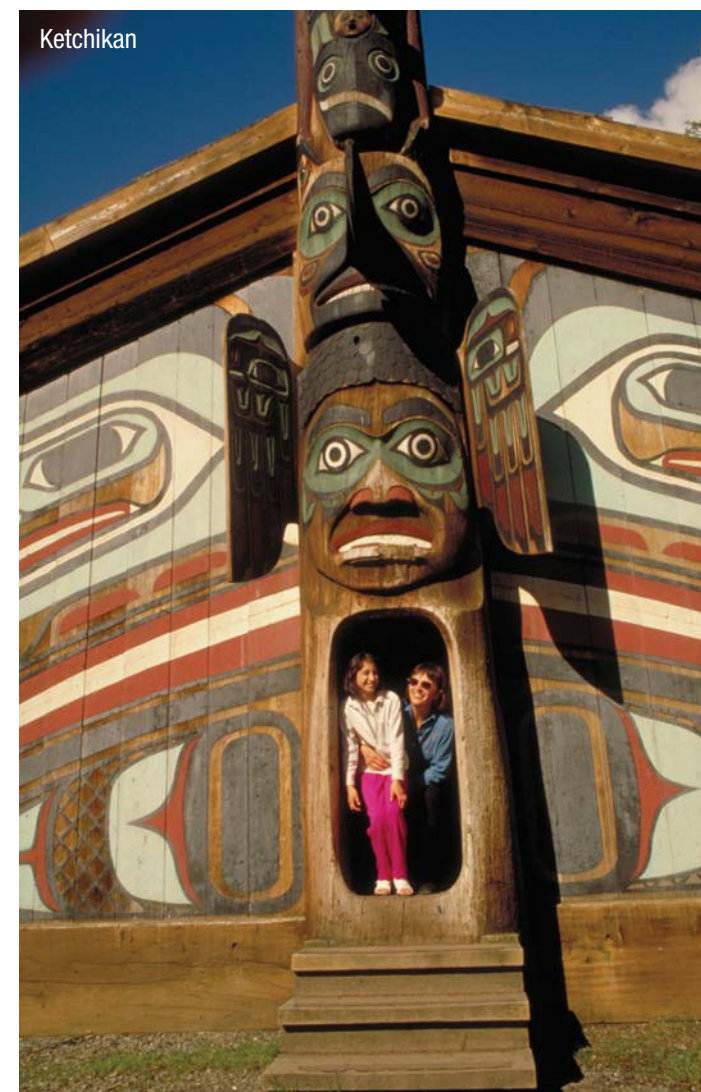
The ship had a salmon barbecue on the back deck as cruisers sat outside eating great food and enjoying good company and unparalleled scenery.

It doesn't get any better in Alaska than that.

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Holland America's The Oosterdam at the Hubbard Glacier



Ketchikan

Photo by Frank Flavin