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Her interest in the cosmos,  
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# CRUISING ALASKA

*A luxurious, activity-packed weeklong tour of the nation's 49th state provides a much-needed getaway*

**By Julie L. Kessler**  
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Although movement is my stability, I started to feel that my get-up-and-go had gotten up and gone. A dramatic scenery change was needed, one that didn't require an abundance of planning, packing or pain. Perfect solution: one week aboard Silversea's Silver Shadow cruising Alaska.

It was an odd choice for me: warm-weather junkie, urban aficionado and only theoretical "great outdoors" appreciator. Usually when I think of large bodies of water, it's the blue Pacific of my childhood or a bubble bath. Perhaps because this trip was so different from my other travels, it was memorable beyond measure.

I boarded the Silver Shadow in Vancouver and a few feet from the

gangway was presented with a glass of prosecco. As I read once that "sipping Champagne is not drinking," I felt guilty not one bit despite that it was nowhere near 5 p.m., which was a good thing since at 5 p.m. all aboard were required to head to their respective muster stations for the obligatory lifeboat drill. Although there's an air of levity among the life jacket-clad passengers, the crew of course takes it seriously.

Kicking off the voyage, I had dinner at Le Champagne, the ship's specialty restaurant, starting with a foie gras cone with scallop and mango amuse bouche followed by a mouthwatering rack of lamb so tender and flavorful, its sacrifice for my meal was nearly a religious experience.

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**Mendenhall Glacier, left, and Nugget Falls, right, in Juneau. At top, Silversea's Silver Shadow.**





# ALASKA

Continued from G1

Purchased in 1867 for \$7.2 million from Russia, Alaska became the 49th state in 1959. While it's the largest state in the union — double the size of the second largest, Texas — Alaska's population is just over 730,000. Visually it evokes a vast remoteness with mountains, forests, tundra, glaciers, snow, nearly 34,000 miles of shoreline and a plethora of animals — moose, bears, wolves, caribou, seals, walrus and beluga whales. However, Alaska also has a rich indigenous cultural life (Aleuts, Eskimos, Athabascans, Tlingit and Haida), farms, military bases, cafes, suburbs, college sports, great restaurants and art galleries. After oil production and commercial fishing (half the U.S. production), tourism is Alaska's third-largest industry.

SILVERSEA'S Silver Shadow possesses an air of intimacy with just 375 passengers. Most were in the 30- to 60-year-old age range, with a few lucky, well-behaved teenagers.

Alaska's scenery is magnificent. However, what sets Silversea apart from other cruise lines — in addition to its smaller ships: large, beautifully appointed staterooms with comfortable verandas; big, granite bathrooms with Jacuzzi bathtubs; great beds with pillow menus; and Pratesi linens — are its employees, who hail from virtually every corner of the globe. They are helpful, smiling and pleasant, so the ship resembles a sophisticated floating Four Seasons hotel, only with more panache. Each stateroom is assigned a butler, whose job is to make your life as picture-perfect as the scenic gifts Mother Nature so generously bestows as you cruise. If ever there was an antidote to life's stressors, it's here.

The first full day, the ship cruised the Inside Passage. This gave me time to check out the gym, library, observation deck and boutique; order a delightful room-service lunch (Silversea boasts 24/7 room service, with only a 20-minute maximum wait time); listen to an interesting Alaska history lecture by a university professor; read; and, most important, take a nap. This was followed by a cocktail party hosted by the captain, then a delicious dinner of porcini soup, grilled Maine lobster and chardonnay, with an impressive desert cheese selection.

## Ketchikan

We docked on Revillagigedo Island under unusually sunny skies, perfect for the scheduled 10-mile Clover Pass bike ride. Driving 20 minutes up the dramatic shore-hugging Tongass



The tiny town of Skagway, once called "hell on earth."



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Highway, our group of five collected our bikes and pedaled our way to three sets of rushing waterfalls.

In summer, days can last 20 hours; in winter that's reversed. The year-round Ketchikan population is 13,000, which might explain why there's an abundance of bars. Locals call it "a quaint drinking town with a fishing problem." Because of logging and fishing, men outnumber women 4-to-1. However, one local said, "While the odds may be good, the goods may be odd."

A short stroll from Ketchikan's waterfront is Creek Street, built on boardwalks above the creek, which until the 1950s was its red-light district where, as locals banter, "both fisherman and fish went upstream to spawn." Today it houses charming galleries, restaurants and shops.

## Juneau

Alaska's third-largest city, population 32,000, is hardly an ordinary state capital since no roads connect it to the outside world, and bears have been known to amble into town.

I spent the morning strolling Juneau, which reminded me of hilly San Francisco and the Swiss Alps with its colorful, architecturally interesting homes among snow-capped mountains. I stopped at the 1898 home of Alaska legend and Mount McKinley climber James Wickersham and took several of the town's staircases built into the mountainside for aerial views.

I also joined two couples for a 20-minute drive to a musher's summer training camp. Siberian huskies, shepherds, malamutes and

hound mixtures — mutts to the AKC, rock stars to everyone else — train for the arduous 1,100-mile Iditarod race every March from Anchorage to Nome. This year 78 teams entered with 36 led by women. The 2015 winner, Dallas Seavey, finished in a record-breaking eight days, 18 hours, 13 minutes.

A ride on the "blue bus" took me to the base of the massive Mendenhall Glacier, 1 mile wide and 12 miles long, which is receding despite the global-warming naysayers. From there I walked 2 miles round trip to the impressive Nugget Falls. Returning to my shipboard sanctuary, I enjoyed a dinner of sashimi and grilled salmon — both were so fresh I briefly considered naming them and requesting a fishbowl to go. Chilean sauvignon blanc made dinner perfect.

## Skagway

The literally one-horse town of Skagway has about 900 full-time residents, was originally called "hell on earth" and arose from the 1896-99 Klondike gold rush. Several original buildings on Broadway Street have been lovingly maintained, much to the delight of the more than 1 million visitors who descend between May and September.

I alighted a Jeep for the 20-mile drive up Klondike Highway and crossed the border into British Columbia's Yukon. The Yukon's moose-to-person ratio is 3-to-1, with 32,000 residents in an area three times the size of California. Driving 30 breathtaking miles along the Tagish and Tutshi rivers, we arrived in Carcross, a small enclave of mostly Tlingit and Tagish residents set amid snowcapped mountains and acres of trees. On returning, the undisputed mammoths of the ursine world, huge grizzly bears, appeared. One plodded across Klondike Highway feet from our Jeep, another strode alongside it and finally, a sow and cubs ambled hillside scavenging for lunch.

Dinner beckoned onboard at La Terrazza restaurant: caprese salad, followed by tagliatelle pasta with delectable black truffles and fresh

Parmesan. I was delightfully satiated, but who can turn away homemade chocolate gelato? Not I.

## Sitka

Formerly the capital of Russian Alaska, Sitka has 8,900 residents. Boarding an oversize rubber dinghy to Coogan Bay, I then climbed into a kayak for a 90-minute glide along nature's splendor. Halfway, near a bay with 6-foot-tall grasses, a massive grizzly made a Hollywood-style cameo appearance, just long enough for a true Kodak moment.

Sitka is also home to Sitka National Historical Park, which offers gorgeous, flat walking trails only 10 minutes from Silversea's tender platform. It starts with the 1-mile Totem Trail Loop displaying more than a dozen of the most skillfully carved totem poles in Alaska. Traversing the park is the Alaska Raptor Center, where injured birds of prey are cared for and where these majestic creatures can be viewed. The afternoon was complete with a stroll down Lincoln Street, visiting Lilliputian-size St. Michael's Cathedral and several other

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JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

**Julie Kessler's pontooned ride to Capps and Triumvirate Glaciers departing from Lake Hood, Anchorage.**

*Continued from G4*

buildings on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The final day at sea provided some of the journey's most dramatic seascapes. Passing majestic Turner Glacier while icebergs the size of semitrucks floated by, the captain tried to get close to the larger Hubbard Glacier but had to turn back — the icebergs were too numerous and large, and visibility too poor. After all that had been seen on this voyage, no one was disappointed. Besides, just at that moment, stewards appeared on the observation desk with trays of French pastries. Glaciers? What glaciers?

#### **Seward/Anchorage**

Disembarking in Seward, passengers boarded the Grandview train to Anchorage. Riders were treated to four hours of magnificently grand views of snowcapped mountains, rushing rivers, vast glaciers, gushing waterfalls and, naturally, moose.

The highlight in Anchorage was flight-seeing: a 90-minute ride on a Cessna 206 fitted with pontoons taking off from Lake Hood. Flying over Triumvirate and Capps glaciers with pods of beluga whales en route will be something I might never forget.

While I never considered myself a cruiser, I am now a complete convert. This is especially so to a destination as dramatically vast and unpopulated as Alaska. One could never see and experience as much on land alone. What I wanted was a rejuvenating escape with great food, wine, accommodations and staff, beautiful scenery and interesting destinations. What I got was precisely that, in spades. Silversea deserves a diamond-encrusted crown of cruising. And Alaska is the perfect trifecta of astonishing natural beauty, friendly people and, happily, bad cell service.

*Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty, the Clarity of Hindsight."*

## **IF YOU GO**

### **Alaska cruise**

- >> **Silversea's Silver Shadow:** Sails seven-day voyages from May to September from Vancouver to Seward/Anchorage and vice-versa that cruise the Inside Passage and make port calls in Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway and Sitka. There are also a handful of voyages that are round trip to/from Vancouver. For a lengthier journey with additional port calls, there are also several 12-day voyages on Silversea's Silver Discoverer that start in Seward/Anchorage, Vancouver or Nome. For solo travelers (on my cruise there were about a dozen), daily cocktail events are scheduled, in addition to several other activities. Silversea rates start at \$3,050 per person depending on voyage. Contact: 888-978-4070, silversea.com.
- >> **Packing:** Summer temperatures can fluctuate widely and can change on a dime. While I was there, daytime temperatures ranged from 48 to 78 degrees. Layering is key, as is a thin windbreaker or light raincoat. To avoid messing up one's circadian rhythm, it's a good idea to go to bed at your usual hour.
- >> **Getting around:** In most ports you can walk to all sights. Those signing up for port excursions are met by the respective guides just outside the gangway.

#### **WHERE TO STAY IN ANCHORAGE**

- >> **Hilton Anchorage,** 500 W. Third Ave. Contact: 907-272-7411, hilton.com. Summer rates start at \$220 for two, including breakfast and Wi-Fi.
- >> **Captain Cook Hotel,** 939 W. Fifth Ave. Contact: 800-843-1950 or 907-276-6000, captaincook.com. Summer rates start at \$310 a night for two, including breakfast, Wi-Fi, athletic club use and parking.

#### **WHERE TO EAT IN ANCHORAGE:**

- >> **Humpy's Ale House,** 610 W. Sixth Ave. Phone: 907-276-2337. Fresh Alaska salmon, great salmon chowder with Alaska ales on tap.
- >> **The Bridge Restaurant,** 221 W. Ship Creek Ave. Phone: 907-644-8300. Fresh-catch seafood buffet with views of salmon and fishermen during the season.

#### **WHAT TO DO:**

- >> **Flight-seeing in Anchorage:** Rust's Flying Service, founded in 1963 by World War II pilot Hank Rust, is outstanding. Rust's has glacier- and wildlife-viewing flights, Prince William's Sound glacier trips, fly-in fishing, glacier dog sledding trips and Mount McKinley/Denali National Park trips. The pilot I had on my six-seater Cessna 206 was Mark Stadsklev, a talented nature and wildlife photographer who also leads photo/safari flights in the region. A small sampling of his photography is available for purchase at Rust's office. Complimentary pickup from downtown hotels or drop-off to Ted Stevens Anchorage Airport. Contact: 800-544-2299 or 907-243-1595, flyrusts.com.
- >> **Land tours:** Silversea offers a variety of port excursions for every activity level that can be reserved directly on its site once specific cruise reservations are secured. For bike riding in Ketchikan, see southeastexposure.com. For the Jeep adventure from Skagway to the Yukon, see bestofalaskatravel.com. For the dog musher's summer camp in Juneau, see goldrushdogs.com. For kayaking in Sitka, see bestofalaskatravel.com.
- >> **Info:** See alaska.org and thealaskaapp.com.