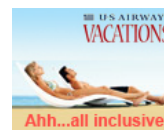




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## Cruise port is breath of fresh air

By Anne Kalosh

 hale-watching, fishing, mountain biking, hiking and a potlach salmon bake are among the activities awaiting visitors to Alaska's first new cruise destination in years.

Icy Strait Point, a new port development near Juneau, has secured 33 calls for its maiden 2004 season, from Celebrity Cruises' Mercury and Summit and Royal Caribbean International's Vision of the Seas.

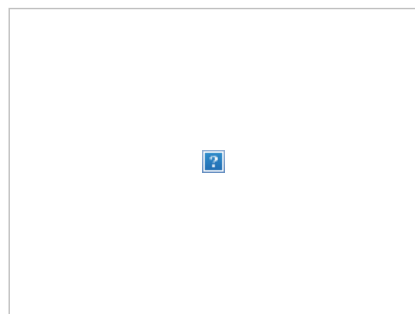
The port pops up on seven-night itineraries between Vancouver and Seward that also stop at Juneau, Ketchikan and Skagway.

"We're sticking our necks out by taking three ships, but we think it's important for the future of Alaska cruise tourism to have some new ports to go to," said John Tercek, vice president of new business development for parent company Royal Caribbean Cruises.

Built around an old cannery about a mile outside of Hoonah, Alaska's largest community of Tlingit Indians, Icy Strait Point "puts guests right at the doorstep of the Alaska wilderness," according to Michael Greve, president of Global Destinations Development, the promoter of the multimillion-dollar project that's a joint venture between two Alaska companies.

The forests, waters and skies around Icy Strait Point are home to brown bears, humpback and orca whales, Dall's porpoises, sea lions and bald eagles.

"The whale-watching is by far the best in Alaska. You're out there where the whales are," Tercek said.



Besides wilderness, Icy Strait Point offers a cultural experience based around the native Tlingit people.

Another key selling point, Tercek pointed out, is the fact that cruise ship visits are limited to one per day.

Passengers will tender the short distance from their anchored vessel to a pier that leads to the Icy Strait Packaging Co. Cannery. This renovated 1930s fish cannery will serve as the dispatch area for tours and the starting point for passengers who explore on their own.

The building now houses a museum that tells the story of Alaska's early pioneers, as well as food and beverage outlets and shops. The nearby Native Heritage Center will provide a live show that shares the history and folklore of the Hoonah Tlingit.

Few people have heard of Icy Strait Point, but that is about to change, Greve said. "We recognize that educating travel agents about this new site is paramount to our plan. It's very, very important."

A dedicated Web site has launched at [www.icystraitpoint.com](http://www.icystraitpoint.com), the port's first newsletter will go out to several thousand agents in late October and a direct-mail campaign will begin in early winter.

Travel agent Walter Littlejohn, president of Great Vacations in Union, N.J., welcomes a new port because of the growing number of repeat cruisers to the 49th state.

"Originally, Alaska was believed to be a once-in-a-lifetime destination, but over the past couple of

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years, we've started to see people go back two or three times," he said.

Littlejohn reserves judgment on Icy Strait Point until he's assured it offers the infrastructure and tour selection that passengers have experienced elsewhere.

"There has to be enough variety in tours so you can accommodate a wide range of interests," he said. "Ports with three or four excursions rate poorly."

Icy Strait Point plans 15 tours, according to Greve. They range from whale-watching to flightseeing over Glacier Bay, brown-bear tracking in Tongass National Forest, guided saltwater and stream fishing and alpine mountain biking.

"It looks like there are some interesting things to do," said Jan Hammond, general manager of Sixth Star Travel in Plantation, Fla.

She noted that Icy Strait Point replaces Sitka on Royal Carib-bean and Celebrity itineraries.

"They still include Skagway, Juneau and Ketchikan. Those are great towns with a lot of Alaskan feel to them. Going to Icy Strait Point gives an opportunity for some different types of excursions," Hammond said.

Both Littlejohn and Hammond praised the fact that Icy Strait Point will handle just one ship per day.

"That is a phenomenal selling point, if they hold to that and communicate it," Littlejohn said. "One thing people are saying is that there are too many ships in Alaska."

"We never discuss the crowds because you don't want to paint a negative picture to the clients, but we all know that Juneau, Ketchikan and Skagway do get a little crowded," Hammond said.

"[Icy Strait Point] is a breath of fresh air because it's a new and pure port that enables clients to get into the Alaska wilderness and do some different sightseeing and shore excursions."

Cruise lines will be watching to see how Icy Strait Point delivers.

"It's unlikely we'll get to visit in 2004," said Charlie Ball, president of Princess Tours.

Princess might sample the new port on a longer, 10- or 11-day cruise, but Ball said the company probably won't change its seven-day itinerary.

"We've got Glacier Bay just at the right time [on the route], and we're not going to drop Glacier Bay," he said.

*To contact the reporter who wrote this story, send e-mail to [twdestinations@ntmlc.com](mailto:twdestinations@ntmlc.com).*

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