

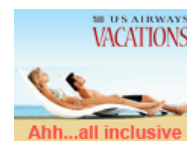


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Cruise lines consider adding small ports of call

By Rebecca Tobin

What Alaskan cruiser hasn't been to Skagway, the Gold Rush town; Ketchikan, where it rains 364 days a year; or Juneau, the state capital, which can entertain up to five cruise ships on a busy summer weekday?

But there certainly are ports less visited. And the small-ship cruise lines can go to the more obscure places: Cruise West this year added a stop on several of its cruises called Elfin Cove, a roadless town (people get from place to place via boardwalks) with only 60 full-time residents.

I think more and more of these other ports will be developed, said Dean Brown, Princess Cruises executive vice president of fleet operations.

Princess, for example, has a 10-day cruise that could be open to port experimentation, Brown said. Currently, Princess is satisfied with its seven-day itineraries to Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway.

One of the issues in Alaska is space. Alaska might be the biggest state in the U.S., but when it comes to cruising, it can get pretty crowded.

As the popularity of Alaska cruises continues to grow, particularly in the tight summer weekdays, cruise line executives are convening and parceling out berths. Some of the smaller ports might fit into a cruise lines itinerary.

Here are a few up-and-comers:

Icy Strait Point

Who calls there: Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cruises. Look for other lines to add their names to the roster in 2006. The port said it has preliminary requests from cruise lines for 62 calls in 2006, up from 37 in 2005.

The port limits the number of ship calls to one per day.

Claim to fame: Icy Strait Point is the first custom-developed cruise call in Alaska. The port is owned by the Huna Totem Native Corp., which represents the Tlingit people of Hoonah, a town about 1.5 miles from Icy Strait.

A laid-back call: Icy Strait Point originally had a salmon cannery operation, and the original cannery building is now a museum and shopping arcade; the dining hall was converted into a seafood restaurant. Passengers can hike in the hills on recently created trails, whale-watch at nearby Port Adolphus, take a bike tour or walk to Hoonah to mingle with the residents.

Don Rosenberger, vice president of tourism development for Huna Totem and Icy Strait, said bear- and whale-watching tours sell out every day.

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This is a very unique call, Rosenberger said. Its not in a city; it provides guests with a real contrast.

Shore excursion: For \$120, Royal Caribbean takes passengers on a sea wildlife tour. Humpback and orca (killer) whales, Steller sea lions, harbor seals, bald eagles and other animals are on the list for potential sightings.

Haines

Who calls there: Cruise West, Crystal Cruises, Glacier Bay Cruiseline, Holland America Line, Norwegian Cruise Line, Princess Cruises.

Claim to fame: Haines calls itself the Valley of the Eagles, a reference to an annual fall gathering of the regal birds. But there is a year-round population of about 300 bald eagles, and passengers frequently see the birds flying by the ship.

Whats new for 2005: Haines has a grant to build a pavilion at the dock, which provides a covered shelter area with benches, rest room facilities and phones. The city also is looking into building a totem pole boardwalk from the dock to nearby Lookout Park.

Skagway neighbor: Even if your ship doesnt call at Haines, you can reach it from Skagway via a fast ferry (a 35-minute trip).

What to do: Haines is home to the American Bald Eagle Foundation; the Sheldon Museum, which features Tlingit artifacts; and Alaskas famous Hammer Museum, with about 1,200 different hammers on display. Passengers can shop and eat in downtown Haines (shuttle service is provided) and in Fort Seward, just across the pier.

Shore excursion: For \$115, a drive up the Takshanuk Trail on a Kawasaki Mule utility vehicle, best described as a heavy-duty golf cart that drives no faster than 3 mph on the trail, says Holland America in its brochure.

Petersburg

Who calls there: Cruise West, American Safari Cruises, Glacier Bay Cruiseline.

Claim to fame: Petersburg, founded by Norwegians, celebrates its heritage in its architecture, festivals and food. Like many towns in Alaska, it also has a strong fishing culture, so theres plenty of fresh fish and seafood on hand.

A small-ship haven: Petersburg is slightly off the beaten path, but we think youll find it well worth the effort to get here, says a note on the citys chamber of commerce Web site at www.petersburg.org.

We are really embraced by the local community, said Leigh Strinsky, manager of product development for Cruise West.

Shore excursion: One of the optional trips that I think is one of the most interesting is the Patti Wagon, Strinsky said. This is a trip with Patti, the owner of a local cannery. Patti ... takes our guests through the cannery and then out to her house. They sit on her deck and she serves shrimp cocktails and talks about what its like to live in Petersburg.

Wrangell

Who calls there: American West Steamboat Co., Cruise West, Glacier Bay Cruise Line, Norwegian Cruise Line.

The city improved its cruise dock last year in hopes of attracting more cruise companies.

Claim to fame: Wrangell has the only golf course in southeast Alaska thats rated by the U.S. Golf Association.

New for 2005: Wrangell recently completed several tourism-related projects, and others are scheduled to be finished this summer.

The city opened its James and Elsie Nolan Civic Center, which houses the Wrangell Museum and the visitor center. The museum features a timeline of town history, which encompasses the history of the Tlingit and Haida people and Russian and Hudson Bay Co. settlements.

Improvements to the Mount Dewey Trail also are in the works. Once the work is done this spring, passengers will be able to make a 400-foot climb to the top for views of Wrangell.

Other attractions: The Anan Bear and Wildlife Observatory, where passengers can spot brown and black bears.

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Shore excursion: Passengers on American West Steamboats Empress of the North tour visit nearby Chief Shakes Island to see totem displays and a replica of a Native American tribal house and visit Petroglyph Beach State Park to see 8,000-year-old petroglyphs.

To contact reporter Rebecca Tobin, send e-mail to rtobin@travelweekly.com.

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