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Take a break from 'combat tourism'

New tours offer options for the crowd-averse



Alaska Railroad

By Rob Lovitt

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updated 11:26 a.m. AKT, Fri., June 6, 2008

The fleet is on the move.

As I write this, at least 10 big cruise ships are on their way to Alaska. Their mission: thread their way up the Inside Passage, reach their targets before dawn and unleash waves of tourists in an onslaught of shopping, sightseeing and scenic excursions.

Maybe that's why local Alaskans refer to the seasonal frenzy as "combat tourism." You don't need a weapon or body armor, but stamina, quick reflexes and a pair of sharp elbows can come in mighty handy.

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Alaska Railroad's new luxury dome cars roll along in this publicity shot. The Alaska Railroad is offering several new options this summer ranging from daily whistle-stop service between Anchorage and Seward to 12-day tours from the Arctic Circle to the Gulf of Alaska.

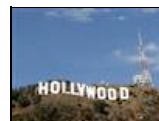
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Or you could skip the blitz and take one of the many new trips and tours that Alaska outfitters are offering this summer. Some take a smaller-scale approach to popular destinations; others venture so far off the beaten path, you can be among the first to experience them. Either way, you'll experience less shock, more awe and the Alaska that waits beyond the cruise ship pier.

Here are some options:

Long known for its small-ship style, **Cruise West** has added a new ship to its Alaska fleet. The Spirit of Glacier Bay, formerly known as the Spirit of Nantucket, has been repositioned to Juneau where it will offer three- and four-night cruises to Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve.

The ship spends two days in the park, surrounded by icebergs, glaciers and towering peaks. There's no casino or karaoke bar on board, but with a stem-to-stern length of 207 feet and room for just 102 guests, she can go where the big ships can't. Three-night cruises start at \$1,799 per person; four-night trips (with a port call in Haines) are \$2,349 and up.

Just south of Glacier Bay, the Tlingit village of Hoonah is home to **Icy Strait Point**, a former salmon cannery that reopened as a cruise port/cultural center/tourist attraction in 2004. Previously open only to cruise-ship passengers, it's now welcoming independent travelers on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and select Saturdays throughout the summer.

The Native-owned facility (accessed via scheduled air service from Juneau) features several shops and restaurants, along with a museum, nature trails and the world's longest zipline. A full slate of excursions and adventures, including kayak tours (\$97), whale-watching cruises

(\$135) and sportfishing trips (\$199), can also be booked on site.

Prefer rolling stock to rolling decks? If so, the **Alaska Railroad** is offering several new options this summer ranging from daily whistle-stop service between Anchorage and Seward to 12-day tours from the Arctic Circle to the Gulf of Alaska.

Run in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the whistle-stop service allows passengers to disembark at several backcountry stations in the Chugach National Forest. (The first stop, at Spencer Glacier, is currently open.) Visitors can hike with a Forest Service ranger, take a raft or canoe trip with a local outfitter or delve further into the Chugach on their own. Fares from Anchorage are \$95 with motorcoach return.

For those who like their backcountry with a bit of luxury, the 12-day Alaska Indulgence tour runs from Fairbanks to Seward and includes flightseeing excursions, overnights at wilderness lodges and visits to Denali and Kenai Fiords national parks. Trips start at \$4,478 and can be customized with a variety of add-on adventures.

Just outside Denali National Park, the Stampede Trail is perhaps best

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known as the route Chris McCandless took on his ill-fated adventure "into the wild." This summer, visitors can safely travel the same route (although not to the infamous bus), driving all-terrain vehicles with [Denali ATV Adventures](#).

The four-hour evening tours wind through forests of aspen and birch and include a campfire meal, guided narration and views of Mt. McKinley, 90 miles away. Guests can choose from one- and two-passenger ATVs; fees are \$165 for drivers, \$65 for passengers.

For true solitude, however, you may want to head even farther to Southwest Alaska. Fans of avian wildlife, in particular, will appreciate a pair of new "exploratory" tours developed by [Wilderness Birding Adventures](#) in Chevak (outside Bethel) and Adak in the Aleutian Islands.

The former (June 10–13, \$3,500) offers opportunities to see spectacled eiders, emperor geese and other nesting birds from a remote camp on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta. The latter (September 11–18, \$4,200) is based at the World War II-era military base and timed to catch the migration of Asiatic birds from Russia, Japan and beyond.

Finally, wherever you head, keep in mind that this summer represents the run-up to the 50th anniversary of Alaska's entry into the Union. (On May 28, 1958, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Alaska Statehood Act, which President Eisenhower signed into law on July 7.) As a result, you may run into the occasional crowd over the next few months, but fear not, cruise-ship ports of call aside, things tend to quiet down again quickly.

ROB LOVITT ON TRAVEL

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