

# Alaska: Breaking the ice

By [Jared Savage](#)

5:30 AM Tuesday Aug 30, 2011



**Mendenhall Glacier. Photo / Jared Savage**

**A cruise ship is the perfect way to see Alaska, much of which is inaccessible by land – but keep an eye out for falling ice from glaciers, writes Jared Savage.**

It's not every day you wake up, open your bedroom curtains and see chunks of ice drifting past the window. Just the odd piece at first, perhaps the size of a watermelon or basketball. Then more and more ice floats into view, until it seems we're bobbing in a frozen slushie.

Further out to sea there are icebergs as big as houses. Add a thick blanket of fog to the mix and the morning view from our cabin is surreal. It's hard not to invoke images of the Titanic.

Fortunately we're on the Celebrity Century making a seven-day cruise through the remote waters of Alaska, and the crew insist everything is fine. The captain does not take risks with 2000 passengers and 800 staff onboard. In fact, he's been known to refuse to navigate Yakutat Bay to get near the Hubbard Glacier if the conditions are unsafe.

And what a shame that would be because getting up close to the face of such an impressive – and intimidating – natural phenomenon is incredible.

The Hubbard Glacier is the largest tidewater glacier on the North American continent, with its source 3300m above sea level in the Canadian Yukon territory. It stretches 121km to the Gulf of Alaska, where the moving ice mass reaches the water in Disenchantment Bay. Its face, where it begins to break off into the sea, is nearly 10km long.

Such numbers do not do the reality of the Hubbard Glacier justice. Hundreds of passengers emerge on the decks to brave the freezing winds and rain – we're only 640km from the Arctic Circle after all – to see it with their own eyes.

The captain has managed to navigate the ice-drift to get us within a few hundred metres, then spin the vessel 360 degrees so everyone can have an uninterrupted view. Even on a cloudy day, Hubbard Glacier is a magnificent experience.

Every now and again, enough sunlight breaks through to refract on the glacial crystals as a radiant blue hue. The smaller chunks of ice cling to the ship's hull, clinking together like ice cubes in a glass, drowning out the dulcet tones of the onboard naturalist narrating the intricacies of how a glacier is born.

The ship stays at the glacier's icy edge for about an hour. Eventually most of us, even those wrapped in blankets and with hands wrapped around hot chocolate, head back inside to the warmth of the ship. But on this occasion, the hardy souls who stay are rewarded with a surprise.

Suddenly there's a crack and thunderous boom echo across the water. Plumes of ice and water billow up as entire shelves of ice shear off the face of the glacier and fall into the sea. Magic.

The trip to Hubbard Glacier was on the fourth day of our week-long voyage on Celebrity Century, which began in Vancouver, Canada. We travelled north for two days, through the scenic Queen Charlotte Sound, until reaching our first port-of-call, Icy Strait Point.

This gives passengers plenty of time to acquaint themselves with the ship. After hearing so many cruise ship horror stories, I was sceptical. After seven days on the Celebrity Century, I'm a cruising convert.

Despite being the oldest (16 years) and smallest (250m long) vessel in the Celebrity fleet, the Century is effectively a floating five-star hotel.

Food is a problem. As in, there's too much of it.

If you sleep in and miss breakfast at the Grand Restaurant (a two-storey fine dining experience with ocean views at the rear of the ship) never mind. That's because the all-you-can-eat buffet at Oceans Cafe is open. The choice is mindboggling. There are American, English and Asian breakfasts. But we're in Alaska, so it would be rude not to try American. Bacon, eggs (how you like them), sausage, tomato, hash brown, fresh pancakes and waffles.

Those wanting an ultra-healthy option can head to AquaSpa Cafe located by the gym for breakfast and lunch. Those who don't want to leave their deckchair by the pools can order hamburgers and hot dogs from the Poolside Grill. And of course, there are the four courses for dinner at the Grand Restaurant. There are two dinner times at seated table plans.

Each night, meals are shared with the same guests and same waiters. The service is exceptional and the cuisine as good as any found at Auckland's best restaurants. Smart casual dress is expected at the Grand Restaurant, except on formal nights at which men must wear suit and tie and women a cocktail dress or similar. It may sound like a drag on holiday but dressing up adds to the occasion. And if none of that sounds enticing, you can eat at the Murano specialty restaurant (but this one is not free).

If you lead a completely hermitic lifestyle (or just can't be bothered that night) complimentary room service is available 24/7. If this all sounds completely ridiculous, it is. Our waiter Jose told us that passengers gain an average of one pound (nearly half a kilo) per day.

There's plenty to do on the ship besides eating and drinking. First of all, there's a gym at the bow of the ship where you can burn off all the extra calories. With panoramic views from the front of the ship, you can easily forget you're stuck on a treadmill or in a pilates class. Here, the only New Zealand staff member can be found: personal trainer Erick Persson, born and bred in Mt Maunganui.

A workout can be followed by a massage or spa; or movies, Broadway-style theatre, magic and comedy shows: or you can enjoy the casino, library, trivia quizzes, live bands, DJ and dancing nights, art auctions, shopping or one of the many musical groups dotted around the ship.

There are also behind-the-scenes tours of the galley and bridge, as well as numerous tutorials where the professionals show you how to play poker, learn to dance or even fold a napkin for your dinner party. The

choice is endless. One of my favourite things to do was simply head to Hemispheres Lounge, at the bow of the ship on the top deck. Many hours were whittled away with a book in one hand and a coffee in the other, surrounded by water, tree-lined shores and snowcapped mountains.

But it's not all relaxation. There's also time for adventure and exploring. The superliner stops in three ports where passengers can disembark for the day: Icy Strait Point, Juneau and Ketchikan.

Visitors can simply wander around the tiny towns to shop (and some did) but it's better to make most of the chance to catch a glimpse of Alaska. It is a massive, remote and beautiful country – so you won't be able to see everything on a day trip – but the port excursions on offer are worth the tourist prices you pay.

There's a lot to choose from: nature walks to search for bears, zipline adventures, kayaking, rafting, lumberjack shows (very entertaining), cultural shows, dog-sledding ...

My first glimpse of Icy Strait Point is exactly what I'd always imagined Alaska to look like. Dark smooth waters lapping against a rocky shoreline, with a long pier leading to a fish cannery (now a museum), flanked by pine-covered mountains.

Icy Strait Point is on Chichagoff Island and close to Hoonah, the largest native Tlingit Indian settlement in Alaska. According to a Tlingit saying, "when the tide's out, the table is set" and the locals have a strong connection with the sea. They share the water with humpback whales, orca, dolphins, seals, otters, the massive halibut and five species of salmon.

There are three bears to every person in Chichagoff, but despite all the tales of close encounters, we were disappointed not to see any. There was more success fishing for halibut (basically a giant form of flounder which can be more than 2.4m long) or riding the world's largest zipline ride which is 1.6km long and reaches speeds of 95km/h.

After leaving Icy Strait, the next stop was Juneau. Nestled in the northern reaches of the Inside Passage, the Alaskan capital was founded during a gold rush in 1880. Vestiges of the Wild West remain – you can check out the Red Dog Saloon where a pair of Wyatt Earp's pistols were left behind – but tourism is now the main money-spinner.

Accessible only by air and sea, Juneau is surrounded by incredible scenery including the Mendenhall Glacier and the 6.9 million hectares of the Tongass National Park. And there are so many whales in Auke Bay that sightings are guaranteed.

Alaska is a bit like New Zealand on steroids: a lot of water, trees, mountains, rivers, glaciers, mist, rain and wildlife, rugged and remote, with even the main towns accessible only by plane or boat, so seeing it by ship makes sense.

But having had this taste of this magnificent part of North America I wish we'd had more time. I'd like to go back.

And of course, as former Governor Sarah Palin famously pointed out, you can see Russia from Alaska ... so maybe we could book a trip there too.

## **WORTH THE WET**

Ketchikan is a sleepy little town surrounded by vast wilderness and impassable mountains. Like Juneau, there are no roads in or out. And like Juneau, it rains a lot.

"We have a saying here in Ketchikan. It's not raining, unless it's raining sideways," a tour guide told us. "So it's not raining today," she said on what would be considered one of Auckland's worst winter days.

Ketchikan was the last stop on our cruise of Alaska, a final chance to see more of the country, so despite the weather we booked to go kayaking ... and there are no cancellations.

But it was worth the wet. Our group of eight were taken by a Zodiac inflatable to the Tatoosh Islands, a 15-minute trip skirting through the waves around the coastline before reaching the sheltered bay where the kayaks were kept. Even novices like ourselves felt safe with our guides from Southeast Exposure, who have lived on the water all their lives.

The two hours of paddling was an amazing experiencing, allowing us to get up close to the real Alaska, braving the waves beyond the rocky outcrops, before easing into calmer waters to soak in the tranquil surroundings.

Bald eagles nested in tall pines on the water's edge and we eagerly sought any signs of bears and whales, which are often seen on the trip, but were disappointed. Though not with our kayak experience which was probably the best value of any port excursion trip.

## **CHECKLIST**

[Celebrity Cruises](#) offers 7 to 14-night Alaska cruises between May and August, costing from \$2369 per person, for an interior cabin, including all taxes and gratuities.

During the Southern Hemisphere summer Celebrity Century will be based in Australia and New Zealand, performing a full circumnavigational sailing around Australia and New Zealand, arriving in Auckland on December 12.

## **Jared Savage travelled through Alaska as guest of the Celebrity Century**

By [Jared Savage](#) | [Email Jared](#)

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