

TRAVEL

Confessions of a virgin cruiser

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INTO THE WILD: Silky sea and grand mountain vistas form a backdrop for wildlife encounters in a small-group cruise up the Alaskan coast.

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"Good morning Safari Endeavor. There are some humpback whales on the port side of the boat."

Normally if someone woke me on the first day of my holiday at 7am, they would be on my list. However, the voice speaking me over an Alaskan cruise ship intercom had quite a different effect. Rather than rolling over grumpily and covering my head, I was on my feet and out the cabin door in seconds.

The excitement was just the start of a week-long cruise that would give me a close-up look at some of the most inaccessible parts of Alaska.

As the snow and icebergs started to melt in mid-July, I - and 33 other passengers - set off from Juneau for a round-trip adventure cruise. Unlike many other cruises in the area, American Safari Cruises' ship Safari Endeavor does not make the usual stops at Alaskan towns. The cruise is for people looking to experience the Alaskan outdoors and scenery, and not for those wanting to shop.

With extremely limited cellphone and internet reception, passengers need to prepare to step away from work and fully embrace holiday mode. From day one, the captain and crew emphasised that flexibility was the key to the trip; destinations would be dependent on the weather, and where animals were spotted.

They didn't know where we were going, but they knew it would be good, they said. And they were right.

From the moment we left port, the trip was chock full of wildlife. Along with many more whales we came across bears,

moose, seals, sea lions, eagles, puffins, sea otters, mountain goats, and deer.

Glacier Bay, Alaska's National Park, was our first stop and an amazing introduction to the area. Park rules limit the number of boats, so the wilderness atmosphere is maintained.

The land seems untouched, and the crispness of the air was unlike anything I'd experienced, even in 100 per cent pure New Zealand.

Adventure arrived in the form of hiking and kayaking each day. I also tried paddle-boarding, though I wasn't as daring as a fellow passenger who used the opportunity to have a dip in the icy waters. The swim was probably not by choice. I have visited beautiful lakes and rivers before, but kayaking among icebergs and glaciers was unique.

For many passengers, Alaska was a bucket list item. When they disembarked many said the cruise went far beyond their expectations. Can you put the same thing on your bucket list twice?

Each day ends with an Alaskan sunset (at midnight) and begins with snow-capped mountains. There were times when I could just stand alone on deck watching the empty landscape, and an hour would pass without my noticing. The state is frequented by huge numbers of cruise ships, some hosting thousands of passengers, however, Safari Endeavor sleeps, at most, 86 and the chances are your fellow passengers will be like-minded.

As well as the viewing decks, there is an open bar in the lounge, a dining room, hot tubs and a sauna, a sundeck, exercise equipment and a library with DVDs to play in your room. There is a wellness programme with yoga and walks around the deck. Without doubt, the exercise is necessary, because the buffet breakfast, three-course lunch and dinners can't be avoided and the choices are too good. The baking constantly available at the bar and pre-dinner appetisers like battered bread and salmon dip on crostini, are also irresistible.

With invisible cleaning fairies constantly at work returning to my room at night to find my bathroom clean, my bed made and a chocolate on my pillow added to the hotel quality comfort and care.

My big concern was that I would be surrounded by only elderly people, but the passengers ranged in age from 17 to 76. I also thought that I might feel trapped with nothing to do - that scenario did not eventuate either.

The cruise company, Inner Sea Discoveries, markets these smaller trips as 'Un-cruises' - a slice of adventure amid luxurious surroundings. For anyone wanting to try out their cruising legs and see Alaska, this trip is without a doubt the way to go.

Amelia Romanos sailed courtesy of Inner Sea Discoveries. Follow her blog [All These Places](#)

What are your biggest worries about cruising? Comment below.

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