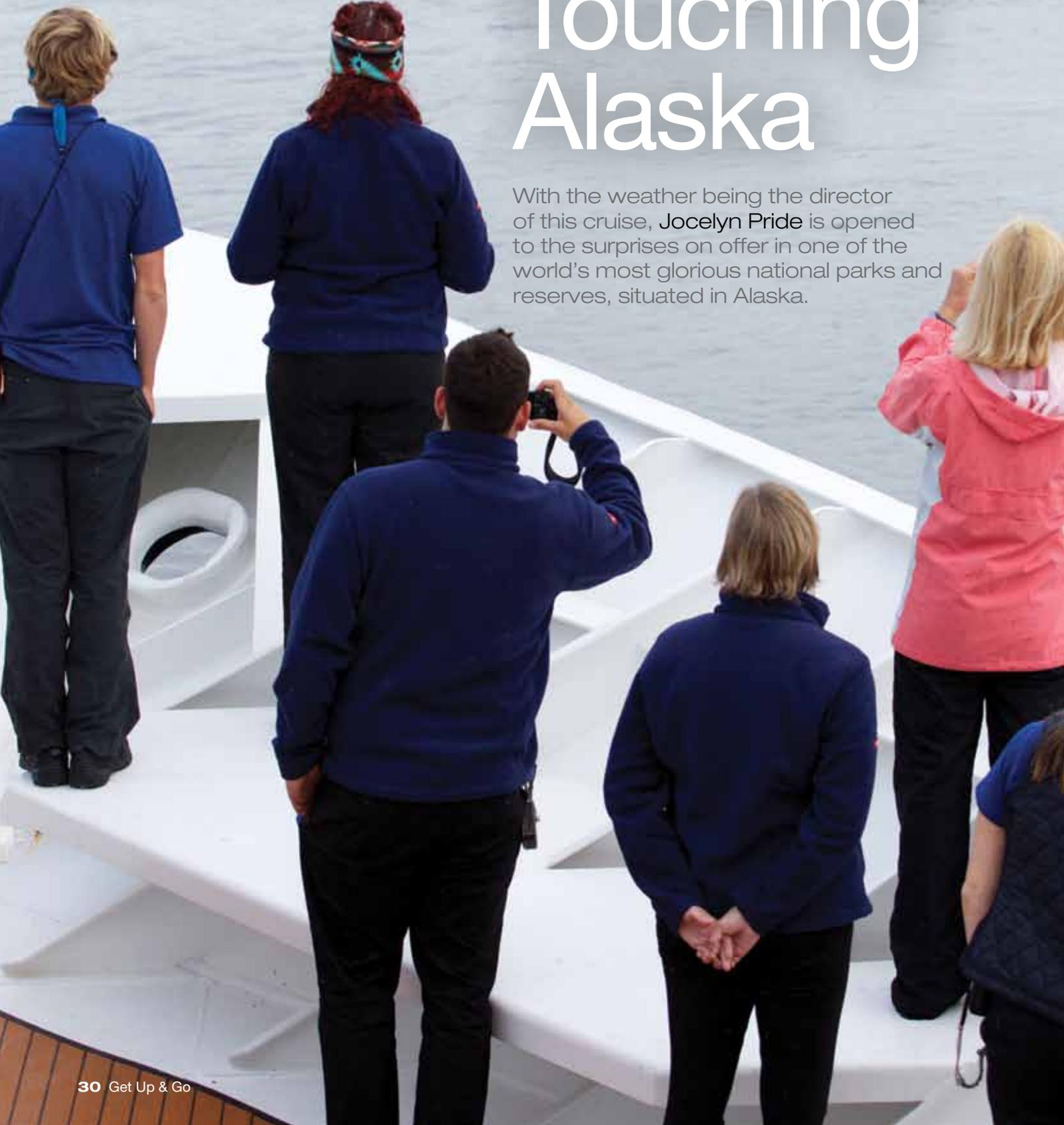




# Touching Alaska

With the weather being the director of this cruise, **Jocelyn Pride** is opened to the surprises on offer in one of the world's most glorious national parks and reserves, situated in Alaska.





The itinerary is the fact there isn't an itinerary," says Captain Jill proudly as the *Safari Endeavour* glides past the last signs of civilisation and into the Alaskan wilderness. "I have an idea where we'll anchor each night but nature will guide us until we return to Juneau this time next week."

Standing on the deck, I am drinking in more than the champagne cocktail. Millions of hectares of pristine rainforest, glassy water teeming with sea life, jagged snow-capped mountains, towering glaciers, all waiting to be explored by foot, kayak, paddleboards and skiffs. I am here to touch Alaska, not simply see it.

More than 400,000 people visit Glacier Bay every year. We're in the five per cent who step ashore and walk on the spongy forest floor amongst the towering Sitka spruces and hemlocks dripping with moss. Wildflowers dot the shoreline, bright red, blue, yellow, white and – my favourite – a delicate creation of nature, aptly named the chocolate lily.

Due to the small size of the *Safari Endeavour* we are permitted to spend two days exploring this 25 million acre World Heritage Site with Kevin Richards, a Glacier Bay park ranger. Kevin lives and breathes the area and passion ignites his every word.

"Wrap yourself around Glacier Bay.

Whatever nature gives you, embrace it."

It's 5.30am and we're in our pyjamas cheering for a seal that has found refuge from a pod of orcas by slipping under the boat. Rolling, twisting and turning, the whales manoeuvre their giant bodies defying gravity. I look straight into a blowhole and as the whale exhales, the fine mist mixes with the tears rolling down my cheeks. Mark, the expedition leader explains there are two types of orcas – 'resident' that are fish eaters and 'transient' that eat seals.

Eventually losing interest in the seal (there must be a good hiding spot under the boat) the transients look elsewhere for their breakfast.

### Activities are flexible

Viewing wildlife from the deck is incredible, but where our ship excels is in the water and land-based activities. All the adventure essentials are provided – kayaks, paddleboards, skiffs plus personal items – waterproof pants, jackets, gumboots, dry-bags, hiking-poles (they've thought of everything).

Led by qualified naturalists, the activities are flexible and designed to cater for everyone. Do as much or as little as you like – hike in an old growth forest, ride the skiff in search of bears and other wildlife, meander along the shore listening to the birdsong, paddle a kayak to the face of a glacier. The

**LEFT:** An unexpected photo opportunity  
**ABOVE:** A gentle kayak glides by *Safari Endeavour*.

custom-built deck at the stern is a dry dock and regardless of age, size, shape or mobility, the crew launch and retrieve the kayaks into the water with slick precision.

"Well they've got me in, but by jingoos good luck getting me out," jokes Gus, an 80-year-old kayaking for the first time.

A complimentary massage soothes the muscles after a day on the water and diehards brave the elements on the back deck for the daily yoga classes. The bridge, bar and hot tubs are always open and the range of nationalities, ages and backgrounds makes for lively conversation. A hotly contested game of Monopoly is as close as we get to a casino and you can't beat a grizzly bear foraging along the foreshore for entertainment.

At times I feel sorry for Chef Brian Hanson. A juvenile humpback breaches eight times in a row outside the dining room window and the mass exodus leaves his exquisite King salmon with lemon olive oil sabayon waiting in the galley.

"Working around the unexpected is one of the challenges of the job," says Brian. ▶

Although Juneau emerges out of the mist all too soon (Captain Jill was true to her word), I will only ever have to close my eyes to visualise a whale in full breach metres away from the skiff, hear the crash of an electric blue iceberg as it calves off a glacier, see the softness in the eyes of a harbour seal popping up in front of my kayak, or feel the breeze from the wings of a bald eagle overhead.

I touched Alaska and Alaska touched me. •

*Jocelyn Pride was a guest of American Safari Cruises.*

## TRAVEL FACTS

Affectionately called un-cruising, American Safari Cruises offers guests an all-inclusive activity based experience aboard small vessels that range from 22 to 86 guests.



### Bookings

American Safari Cruises and sister brand InnerSea Discoveries operate a fleet of six vessels in Alaska from May to September. Prices for the Safari Endeavour's Glacier Country Juneau round trip for the 2013 season start at US\$5295pp. All onboard meals, premium spirits, wine, beer, transfers, baggage handling, entry fees to national parks, adventure activities and equipment, hot tubs, sauna, yoga classes, complimentary massage are included.

In August 2013, American Safari Cruises will launch *Safari Legacy*. This replica Victorian steamer will offer a Heritage Adventure reliving the Alaskan 1890's gold rush.

Visit [\[@\]](#)

[www.innerseadiscoveries.com](http://www.innerseadiscoveries.com)



### Getting there

Qantas flies to Los Angeles from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Alaskan Airlines is the major carrier for connections from Los Angeles to Alaska. Flights to Juneau go via Seattle. Alaskan Airlines offers paid upgrades to First Class at the gate if available (\$100 LAX to JUN).

[\[@\]](#) [www.alaskaair.com](http://www.alaskaair.com)



The 'star' of Glacier Bay.



Sea kayaks, beneath Ford's Terror waterfall.



Hiking through old-growth forest.