



From the bow of our small ship, we watched dolphins leaping alongside, escorting us into the Hawaiian waters ahead.

Passport Newsletter

Yachting around Hawaii

When was the last time anyone you know jumped off the back of a cruise ship for a swim, or helped themselves to a cocktail from its bar without summoning the attendant?

Spontaneous, indulgent sorts of pleasures are what separate small cruise vessels, with their relatively few passengers, from modern mega-liners and their partying throngs. These were among our reasons for seeking out a smaller operator recently to cruise the Hawaiian Islands. In the end, we chose a week-long trip with American Safari Cruises.

We've never heard a satisfactory, definitive explanation of the difference between "small ship" and "large yacht"; nonetheless, we knew the spirit of our trip was in the yachting category. It's not long before everything feels like part of an extended family, or *ohana*, in the case of our Hawaii itinerary, which the company introduced about 18 months ago.

Best known for getting passengers up-close to wildlife in

Alaska, the Seattle-based, niche line took a cue from the humpback whales they often spot, following them to the islands for the winter. Week-long trips aboard the 36-passenger **Safari Explorer** sail between the Big Island of Hawaii and Maui, with stops at Moloka'i and Lana'i.

The voyage focuses on water sports, marine life and Hawaiian culture. Two onboard naturalists act as guides, and all equipment and excursions are included in the fare. Safari Explorer carries 15 kayaks, four stand-up paddle boards and one sail boat. Two motorized skiffs take guests close to spinner dolphins, green sea turtles and humpback whales (hundreds gather here from mid-December through March). Snorkel gear and a selection of shorty wetsuits are supplied, as are rain jackets and hiking sticks. This makes pack-

ing light a breeze, especially as the daytime casual dress allows for a lot of swimsuits, shorts and sandals.

Flexibility is key to enjoying small-ship cruising. Intriguing excursions are planned, but may be rescheduled, altered or cancelled as conditions dictate. Go with the flow and expect the posted daily itinerary to change. Some of the most memorable events — seeing breaching whales, swimming with dolphins, rescuing a hooked shark — are totally unscheduled.

Highlights among Safari Explorer's planned activities include a nighttime snorkel with enormous manta rays off the coast of Hawaii. Off Maui, we sailed around in a traditional double-hulled war canoe. On Moloka'i, the primary cultural stop, Lawrence Aki, whose Hawaiian lineage predates written history, accompanies guests on a walk through the pristine Halawa Valley.

Opportunities for kayaking and snorkeling happen almost daily. It's worth checking out the various locations, as fish populations and coral formations differ greatly. We even spotted a rare Hawaiian monk seal, America's most endangered

marine species.

Safari Explorer's staterooms are small, yet comfortably furnished with Tempur-Pedic mattresses on twin or queen beds. There is an iPod docking station, but no phone or Internet. A flat screen TV is for DVD viewing. Unless you're traveling solo, opt for the Commander category or larger, rather than the tight Master staterooms. Two suites behind the bridge each feature a separate sitting area, balcony, Jacuzzi tub and shower. There are no keys or exterior cabin locks.

With just three decks, the yacht is quite intimate. The open air portion of the top deck (beyond the suites) has several exercise bikes, a dry sauna and lounge chairs. The hot tub, we were surprised to learn, is not used in Hawaii due to splashing.

The middle deck is devoted to cabins and a massage room where each guest receives one complimentary massage.

The dining room, lounge and bar are on the lower deck. All guests dine together. There are no written menus. The chef appears at breakfast to announce the day's dishes. Two dinner entrées are offered, and one is always fresh fish delivered directly to the yacht. We



Taking time for golf at the remote Challenge at Manele course on Lana'i.

particularly enjoyed the daily cocktail hour and excellent hors d'oeuvres. Beverages are included, from microbrews to mai tais to a first-rate selection of west coast wines. These are served by the young, all-American crew.

Safari Explorer cruises in Hawaii from November through mid-May. Seven-night fares start at \$4,995 per person, double occupancy. The price is all-inclusive except for optional scuba or golf, tips and airfare. Tel: 888-862-8881. www.innorseadiscoveries.com.

Our yachting days ended in Maui where we chose to continue the cultural theme by staying at "Hawaii's most Hawaiian hotel." **Kā'anapali Beach Hotel** is a 1960s-era property set on its namesake golden sand beach.

Never mind that the buildings have a rather institutional appearance. Rooms are nicely if not finely furnished, and the lanais offer spectacular ocean views. A staff specifically trained in the aloha attitude generates a welcome feel and organizes complimentary daily classes in hula dancing, lei making and Hawaiian language. Daily sunset dinners on the outdoor Tiki Terrace are accompanied by live music and hula, a 25-year-old tradition. For Hawaii, rates are quite inexpensive, so expect a lot of children. Tel: 800-262-8450. www.kbhmaui.com. (If this isn't your thing, then we're always confident recommending the more luxurious Four Seasons or Ritz-Carlton; each outstanding, both on Maui.) 