



agent, so the indigenous Tlingit people would use these guys if they had a toothache.”

We run our tongues around our mouths experimentally, and Adrian says, “Let me try it again,” exhibiting true dedication to the scientific experience. “Yep, it’s numb,” he says, after a more thorough taste. The slug returns to the forest floor, and we tramp off in search of insect-eating sundew plants, red-breasted sapsuckers and tidepool-dwelling sea cucumbers.

Later, examining the viridian kerchiefs of lungwort, Addison explains how lichens got their name by relating an amusing story about the romance between Fred, the fungus, and Alice, the algae. The story culminates with the couple’s decision to live together after Alice’s house burns down: “I’ve taken a likin’ to you, Alice,” Fred says.

I’m aboard the 90-passenger *Legacy*, a sturdy but compact vessel operated by UnCruise, the Seattle company that specializes in small-ship adventure excursions in destinations including Alaska, Central America, Hawai`i and Baja California. Our itinerary is called “Whales, Wildlife and Glaciers,” which describes the eight-day voyage precisely, but insufficiently. We’ve sailed remote bays and inlets and watched glaciers shed ice into the ocean. We see whales (humpback and fin), orcas, bears, eagles, dolphins and dozens more wild creatures ranging from banana slugs to sea cucumbers, from mermaids to Daffy Duck. OK, maybe the last two were fictitiously added to the wildlife sighting chalkboard by mischievous kids.

The fiction epitomizes the family-friendly nature of the trip. The wonder of this North Pacific journey revolves around what we do as much as what we see. Rather than “What did you see?,” dinnertime chatter starts with “What did you do?” Hiking, kayaking, rafting, biking, paddleboarding and more are all on offer.

UnCruise shore excursions, or “bushwhacks,” are unscripted treks across the coastal wilderness. When you go on one, expect to follow no trail and see no signposts, while you are bending past bristly devil’s club, under yellow-cedar limbs and across the pillowy hummocks of mossy muskegs.

In the first such walk, one day after departing Sitka, we encounter the premier kids-will-remember-this-forever experience: banana slugs. These 6-inch natives of the temperate rainforest look like spotted-skin bananas, and are equally innocuous. But a true adventurer must do more than look at it, or even hold it in hand.

“OK, who’ll be first?” Addison asks while she retrieves a specimen from beneath a snowberry bramble. Adrian, a 16-year-old nature enthusiast from Maryland, puts his hand up, and Addison holds out the slug. Adrian licks it. So do I. We are joined, in short order, by 12-year-old Sally, 14-year-old Jules and 8-year-old Elizabeth. Notice a pattern? For the adults, the appeal of licking a banana slug is, well ... not so much. But the kids apparently love it.

“Anybody notice anything after you licked it?” Addison asks. “Supposedly, the slug slime contains a mild numbing

Cruising Alaska is one of the most famous ocean journeys in the world. But while more than 1 million travelers reach the Inside Passage on cruise ships each year, the vast majority are aboard much bigger vessels than the *Legacy*. A small-ship cruise offers a different, typically more intimate, experience. In addition to the opportunity to hear silly algae fables or lick a slug, you can reach narrow passages and gentle coves that are inaccessible by larger ships. And while the ship doesn’t have a swimming pool, you may have interesting conversations with the captain or dance on the moonlit deck.

Early afternoon during our day in Glacier Bay, after an hour watching the Margerie Glacier calve (shed ice into the sea), the captain parks just offshore the Johns Hopkins Glacier and announces it is swimsuit time “for all those brave enough.”

This episode has been obliquely alluded to for days, and the hype accelerates through the morning. “Water temperature is about 42 degrees,” announces the first mate to passengers who gather to watch the swim deck be positioned aft. A few minutes later, an evidentiary conflict rears its head when a guide makes a remark including the phrase “32 degrees.”



SLUG: CHRISTINA KENNEDY / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; SERVER: COURTESY OF UNCruise ADVENTURES



KAYAKING IN GLACIER BAY, LEGACY

Ten minutes on, at the official start of the “polar plunge,” about a dozen crew members with rescue gear are on hand, and a skiff is positioned about 10 yards away. The captain declares the ocean’s temperature at 47 degrees, and while he’s soliciting volunteers, I march to the verge and dive in. The water is a slate bluegreen, and being in it is what I’d imagine being encased in tourmaline is like. The sun is filtering through marine haze, glinting off the nearby glacier. Below water, I barely can hear the cheers, hoots and whistles. After I haul out, invigorated as if by a gentle slap, a parade of 30 passengers piles in—some twice, including Adrian—followed by the captain.

“Look at all these adventurous souls. Guess I have to, too,” the captain says, and in he goes with a mighty splash. That afternoon, making our way back down Glacier Bay, we admire Steller sea lions, Dall’s porpoises, mountain goats, black oystercatchers and sprightly puffins.

At 192 feet, the *Legacy* holds 45 cabins, a capacious dining room and about three dozen crew members; at 40 feet wide, it wends its way through narrow channels, which Alaska’s many bigger cruise ships cannot manage. With brass fittings, wood paneling and a gently curvaceous deck line, the *Legacy* blends comfort and elegance with modern elements, such as the upper-deck space devoted to morning yoga.

Not one, but two, hot tubs on the same upper deck enable an almost ludicrous indulgence after Glacier Bay. I’m soaking in the hot water, easing hike-sore joints, all by myself while almost everyone else on the boat is on the lower

decks watching for orcas. We’ve cruised right near a pod moving through Lynn Canal, on the way to Haines, and when I tire of relaxing in the hot water and filtered sunlight, I can sit up tall and spy the whales arcing through the ocean 250 yards east of the ship.

The show goes on for two or three hours, and then it’s time for dinner. Each night the servers and chefs aboard the *Legacy* prove exceptionally able to meet the disparate gastronomic desires and dietary needs of their guests. For instance, my fiancée Nicole is allergic to salmon, onions and garlic, but that is no problem. The conversation is as energetic as the day’s activities.

“What did you do?” someone asks me. I smile. “Twenty laps in the hot tub. Orca watching.” On this cruise, adventure comes in many shapes.

For 2019, the *Legacy* will serve UnCruise sailings on the Alaska Glacier Country route, while the *Safari Endeavour*, a sleek, modern, 232-foot vessel with 44 cabins, will serve the Whales, Wildlife and Glaciers itinerary. 📍

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