



Alaska Cruise via Un-Cruise

A LUXURY ADVENTURE

by MARLA CIMINI

At 10 p.m. the sun was still shining brightly. Our small yacht was full of enthusiastic travelers relaxing in the lounge, sipping after-dinner cocktails and peering through binoculars at the glowing sky with the hope of spotting more humpback whales against the backdrop of the Alaskan glaciers.

Although our ship was guiding us through the calm waters of Juneau's Inner passage, this trip did not involve a massive cruise liner...this was an 'Un-Cruise', an ocean adventure with a company created for those who wish to avoid traditional cruises that specialize in line dancing, all-day buffets and late night disco parties with rowdy partiers. Our ship, the newly-refurbished 232-foot Safari Endeavor, featured 43 decently-

sized staterooms and suites for just 86 passengers, designed to comfortably accommodate couples, families and friends.

As an action-oriented cruise, fun outdoor activities are planned and encouraged, and passengers have the opportunity to participate in many levels of adventure as the boat winds its way from Juneau toward Glacier Bay National Park and then back up the coast. My friend and I had the unique experience of kayaking nearly every day, exploring the calm waters and lush natural landscape up close, both with small groups and on our own. As we were pushed off the ship's state-of-the-art kayak launching dock, we were instructed to stay in view of the Endeavor, and we felt very safe – so even when our rudder unexpectedly broke, the ship's crew quickly came to

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our rescue and we paddled back to the boat without another mishap.

Specializing in intimate, off-the-beaten-path adventures, the Un-Cruise featured daily small boat tours for those who wished to have a leisurely afternoon, as well as super intense hikes, such as bushwhacks and glacial assaults for the brave-hearted. Still, for cruisers seeking a lackadaisical afternoon, it was just fine to stay aboard and relax with a massage, a soak in one of two hot tubs – or just enjoy wildlife-spotting from the deck... and without judgments from the rest of the passengers, either.

Sailing past the enormous glaciers is just part of the stunning scenery on this journey; breathtaking does not begin to describe this exploration. Experiencing a monstrous glacier from so close was not only intimidating, but also inspiring, and we were well aware what an amazing journey this was. So just when you think you are close enough to a glacier, the Un-Cruise gets you even closer, and we literally reached out and touched the foot-ball-sized mini icebergs floating past our skiffs and kayaks. One day, sea lions were nearly everywhere – perched atop some of the larger chunks, staring curiously at our amazed group as we made our way through the chilly waters and sat silently transfixed at the icy masses that completely dwarfed our craft.

An extra-added bonus to this cruise involved an air of spontaneity. I happened to be in the bridge the sunny afternoon that a bear and her cubs were spotted on a mountainside. The

captain and crew were just as excited as the rest of us, and the ship suddenly slowed down and veered toward land, giving everyone the chance to get a glimpse at the wildlife, snap photos or just silently gaze through binoculars.

On our trip, Mother Nature accommodated us as well, offering other unexpected surprises, such as clear, sunny, warm weather (which is almost unheard of for southern Alaska in June, as rain is considered the norm) and the brilliantly gorgeous super moon that rose above the glaciers (that is, when the sun finally when down) in the evening.

Meals were certainly a cut above average cruise fare, too. One of the best crowd-pleasing dinners involved our plates being piled high with fresh, steamed Alaskan King Crabs that the boat picked up while we were anchored in Glacier Bay National Park. (Worth the trip in and of itself). We were even oh-so-spoiled with our own pastry chef on board, who did not disappoint with the wonderful

traveling with a very international group, and sharing our cruise with other passengers from around the world – hailing from a variety of US states and as far away as South Africa and New Zealand. Although we did not have the option of attending big Broadway-style stage shows in the evening, we did partake in lively conversations with our new friends – people



Kayakers on Glacier Bay Park Ranger



Drinks at the bar on board



Bear with cubs

array of delights she baked each day... from scones to croissants, we were powerless to her spell. (And we convinced ourselves that aggressive kayak paddling would burn off those calories.)

For those who desire pure luxury and real Alaskan exploration, this upscale sailing vessel feels private, yet casual, too. Fortunately, we were

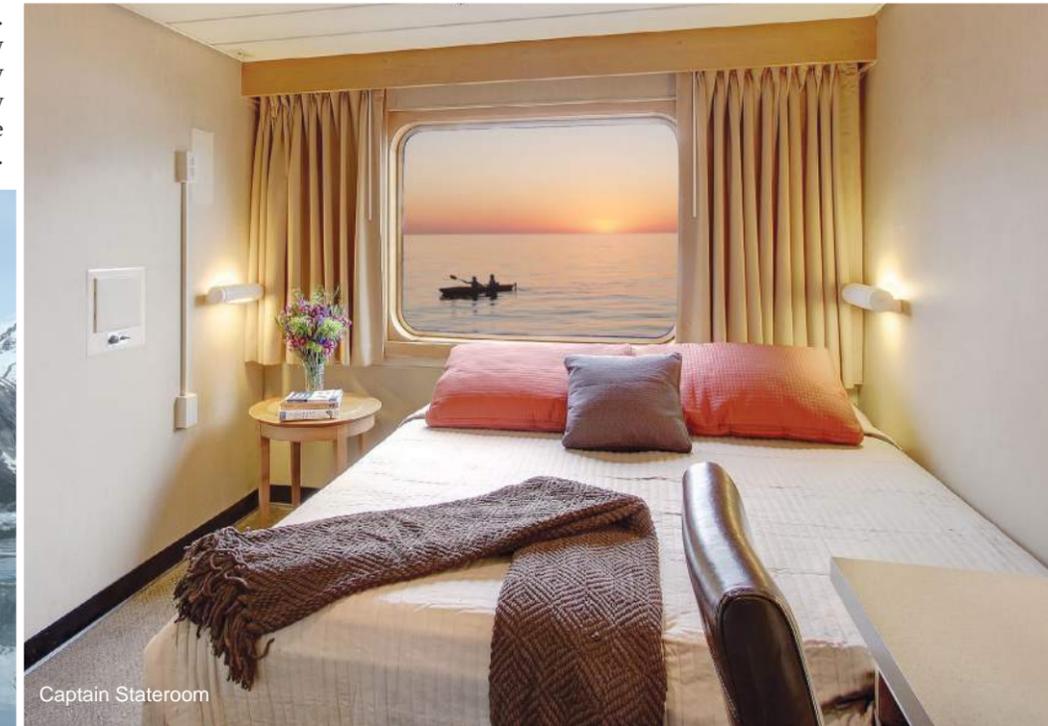
who enjoy nature, traveling and exploring new corners of the globe.

Interesting and informative talks by experts are also a big part of this voyage, and passengers learn a lot of fascinating information along the way – from the Alaskan giant starfish that live in the Icy Straight to the habits of brown bears and mountain goats. On-board and off, we were treated to experiencing Alaska with a highly-skilled staff with years of expertise

attained by trekking the Alaskan landscape. Some even had backgrounds in biology and geology, and were happy to share their extensive knowledge with us along the way. Their passion is undeniable; the staff obviously loves their jobs as much as they adore the rugged Alaskan wilderness, and are more than thrilled to share their excitement with the passengers on board.

To round out this luxurious trip, the crew members were extremely attentive, friendly and gracious, making it a point to learn every passenger's name and do their best to provide a personal experience for everyone on board.

Un-Cruise offers a fleet of ships with various destinations, flexible itineraries and diverse styles, ranging from active to luxury. In addition to the Alaskan destination, this new cruise line offers small boat adventures in Mexico and Hawaii, and are available for charters as well.



Captain Stateroom

The ship's captain even invited everyone to the bridge during the trip for a rare look at the navigational system.

And for those who enjoy a few cocktails in the evening: No worries! The cruise's lounge comes complete with a fully-stocked open bar – 24 hours a day with, yes, premium liquor. Our friendly bartender created a new specialty cocktail every night at happy hour (and I even had a surprise drink named for me on my birthday – made with tequila, amaretto and lime juice).

The Un-Cruise concept was created especially for those who wish to completely unplug, unwind and truly explore rugged nature at its best. Despite all the hiking, kayaking and slogging through the mud, I think the most challenging part of the trip was coming to grips with the fact that cell phone and WiFi availability would be nonexistent for nearly a week. Although I tried my best to embrace it as a refreshing change of pace, this was the only trip I have taken in years where everyone was completely disconnected for the entire time (which can really take some getting used to – for those of us who rely so much on our tech devices).

And speaking of impulsive and unplanned... during the trip, my friend convinced the captain and cruise director to have a group polar bear dip on the last day of the cruise. Obviously not a scheduled activity, or mandatory, thankfully, it was a fun event with even the some of the crew participating with gusto. By then, we had made friends with most of our fellow cruisers, and a fair number were keen to give it a try.

All in all, this unusually unique cruise through some of the most magnificent passages of the Alaskan territory left us in awe of the natural beauty, wildlife and landscapes for the entire duration of the voyage. Fortunately, we realized that we were enjoying a special, once-in-a-lifetime trip and did our best to soak in every moment.

While there is something to be said about the ice skating extravaganzas and aerial shows aboard the floating cities that represent one of the cruising spectrums, Un-Cruise fills a niche for a more simplistic approach. By providing an intimate, one-of-a-kind adventure to places and experiences wonderfully off-the-beaten track, our crew of the Safari Endeavor magically reminded its passengers that sometimes less is more... much more, indeed. ■



Viewing an iceberg from a skiff