



PICTURES LEFT AND ABOVE: UNCRUISE

## IN THE KNOW

UnCruise Adventures' 2019 season in Alaska runs from April to September. Itineraries differ, as does the fleet (six ships, ranging from 22 to 86 passengers), but all offer on and off-board activities and focus strongly on water, wildlife and wilderness experiences. Departure ports include Sitka, Juneau, Ketchikan and Petersburg. A seven-night Alaska's Glaciers & Whales itinerary from Juneau to Sitka aboard Safari Endeavour starts at \$US5395 (\$7375) a person twin-share; add port taxes; 14-night round-trip Alaska Glacier Cruise: Ultimate Expedition from Juneau starts at \$US9695.  
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## NATURAL SELECTIONS

All aboard a small ship into icy Alaska

KATE ARMSTRONG

It's as though someone has shrieked "Fire!" One minute, the 58 passengers aboard SS Legacy are enjoying their three-course lunch; the next, everyone, aged 11 to 83 years, is squeezing out the exit and onto the deck, grabbing for binoculars and exclaiming elatedly.

Why the exodus? Pre-empting the crew's calm intercom announcement of wildlife, an enthusiastic passenger has cried "Orca!" Like spotting Africa's Big Five, an orca sighting in Alaska is up there with humpback whales, puffins and glacial calving.

Several orcas are swimming close to the ship, their shiny, streamlined bodies rising and falling gracefully as they surface and retreat. In the background, snow-capped peaks flank the fjord, the 145km Lynn Canal.

It's a glorious sight and one of many extraordinary experiences with UnCruise Adventures on its eight-day Whales, Wildlife and Glaciers itinerary. We are heading from Sitka to Juneau, via Glacier Bay, through a remarkable network of channels and forested islands along Alaska's 1600km-long Inside Passage, and within one of the largest continuous preserves on the planet.

A replica of a historic steamer, SS Legacy is very comfortable. The public areas have a spacious lounge-cum-bar and a saloon, plus two hot tubs and gym equipment. Cabins are simple but pleasant with a small bathroom, desk and generous storage.

As we cruise through the water, I can almost see the wake of canoe strokes left by John Muir in the late 1800s when he explored this area. This 19th-century naturalist, glaciologist and so-called father of US national parks recorded his remarkable journeys and details of his friendships with the local Tlingit people who accompanied him. Incredibly, little has changed here since Muir paddled his way into history.

Hillsides are covered in evergreen Sitka spruce, Alaska yellow cedar and western hemlock. There are mountains with jagged snow caps, glaciers and waterfalls. It's what prompted Muir to record: "Day after day ... we seemed to float in true fairyland, each succeeding view seeming more and more beautiful, the one we chanced to have before



ALAMY

us the most surprisingly beautiful of all." New perspectives of Muir's paradise are revealed when I open the curtains each morning.

Captain Tim Voss moves the ship in the wee hours, skilfully squeezing it into inlets where larger cruise ships can't go. But UnCruise Adventures itineraries focus as much off the water as on it, so we can explore the forested wonderland on foot. Each evening over a cocktail, we sign up for the following day's activities. These range from difficult (bushwhacking through forest thicket) to gentle (skiff rides or shore wanders).

Sightings and conditions, too, determine the flexible schedule. But where to start when there's gliding through the waters in a kayak (a whale fluke in the distance); cruising along the shoreline in a skiff (a bear and its baby searching for crabs); or wandering through forests, breathing in the sweet-and-sour aroma of herbs.

It's as difficult as choosing from the daily menu. Atlantic salmon or tofu puttanesca? The kitchen team magically whips up gourmet meals in the ship's compact galley and caters for every dietary restriction and preference.

Our first day is spent exploring Magoun Islands State Marine Park. Keen to hit the water to "channel Muir", I join the morning kayaking group. We paddle slowly, surrounded by long strands of giant kelp, and pink lion

mane jellyfish that swirl below our blades. A sea lion pops its head up, disappears and re-emerges, seemingly teasing us.

That afternoon, I head to shore for a forest meander with fellow passengers. Our legs ensconced in rubber boots, we squelch our way slowly through the muskeg (bog), occasionally falling victim to BSM (a local term for boot-sucking mud). We elbow our way through the greenery, avoiding the dense, fine spines of the devil's club.

Megan, one of six passionate guides on-board, points out bog orchid, bog rosemary and the tiny flowers. Delighted by our green utopia, my 15-year-old walking buddy declares, "We've entered a portal into otherness!" She's spot on.

This uniqueness is even more striking on Chichagof Island where, the following day, we traipse across a small peninsula at Neka Bay. The island is believed to have the highest concentration of brown bears per square kilometre on Earth. Our entertaining guide, Hannah, leads us over logs, through thickets, and on animal tracks, constantly explaining our surroundings. We sing and call to alert any bears. It's exhilarating.

Thrilling, too, are the sightings, and the guides keep track on a whiteboard. Birds: Kittlitz's murrelets, arctic terns, bald eagles. Flowers: cow parsnip, chocolate lily and cotton-grass. Wildlife: humpbacks, porpoises

Clockwise from main: SS Legacy in Glacier Bay; orca sighting; up close with sea otters

and sea otters; brown bears, mountain goats and moose.

It's our turn to enter Glacier Bay, where cruise ship numbers are controlled. On waking, over the engine hum, I can hear a xylophone-like tinkle as small chunks of ice clink together. We're in front of a massive face of ice, Margerie Glacier. It's a kilometre away, but I feel like I could touch it. About 20 storeys high, it makes *The Wall* from *Game of Thrones* look flimsy. Dali-esque shaped icebergs float in front of it. When a chunk of the wall plunges into the sea, passengers roar with delight.

But for me, nothing compares to the next wonder, the views of Lamplugh Glacier from a parallel ridge that we access on foot. After alighting from the skiff, we make our way up the rocky ridge, passing by an oystercatcher and her chicks, until we reach a ridge covered in purple lupins.

Here, we turn to absorb the vista of the expansive glacier below. Grey hollows. White crests. Black moraine. And, most unexpected of all, spots of striking blue, like cellophane paper lit from behind.

By the end of the trip, I can't pinpoint my location; I've lost myself in Muir's fairyland. Much territory here is unexplored, many peaks are unnamed. To reorientate me, Hannah offers to outline our route on a map. She covers it with black-dotted lines and neat labels. She inscribes a quote by 20th-century American environmentalist Aldo Leopold, "To those devoid of imagination, a blank space on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part."

On my final morning, I tour the engine room with the cheerful chief engineer, Jack, who oversees the ship's engines. Plus, he points out, the ship's smaller appliances. "God help me if the espresso machine breaks!" he says. If that were to happen, I picture myself dashing for my once-a-day fix at the cry of "Coffee's back!"

Yet Alaska has changed me in ways big and small. If the espresso machine were suddenly back in action, I still wouldn't budge from the deck.

Kate Armstrong was a guest of UnCruise Adventures.