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SE Alaska
Cruise





A James Beard CULINARY CRUISE

BY ALLEN COX

The buzz among passengers onboard the Star Legend is palpable as I and my fellow passengers wait for the 5:00 p.m. departure to arrive. My traveling companion Robert and I are among the capacity—and rather eclectic—collection of 212 passengers, a miniscule number compared to the crowds that swarm the mega-cruise liners. We have boarded, checked in, been ushered to our suites and are now mingling at the top deck's Star Bar, glass of wine in hand. The elegant sail-like roofline of Vancouver's Canada Place decorates the cityscape that rises above the ship. Sunlight breaks through piles of cumulus clouds and glistens on the harbor, making me wonder what the skies will bring over the next 12 days. It's early June. Summer has not officially arrived, and Southeast Alaska is known for rain.

Although rain is likely, the itinerary is promising: seven ports, two days at sea (including British Columbia's Inside Passage) and three full days of adventure in the pristine Alaskan wilderness. Star Legend crew includes a team of naturalists and experienced outdoor guides, putting the emphasis on adventure for those of us wanting to gear up and get outdoors. I'm determined to do exactly that—rain or shine.

The evening departure across Georgia Strait brings a hush over the passengers. Cameras and mobile phones click away as Vancouver's high-rises, awash in a pink sunset glow, slowly vanish. It's astounding how quickly civilization retreats after traveling only a few miles in British Columbia. Deeply forested peninsulas and islands play hide-and-seek as we pass the coves and inlets of the Inside Passage. Glimmering snowcapped peaks of the Coast Range break through charcoal clouds. It's hard to pull ourselves away for dinner in the ship's stylish AmphorA Restaurant.

A meal aboard the Star Legend is not to be missed. Windstar Cruises has a partnership with the James Beard Foundation, an organization that recognizes the best culinary talent in the country. Think of it as the Oscars of the food world. Selected James Beard-awarded chefs make guest appearances on some of Windstar's cruises, elevating the culinary experience. Recipes from those star chefs remain behind for the fleet's culinary teams to recreate to the delight of diners every evening.

Besides AmphorA Restaurant, the 440-foot ship of only six passenger decks sports a second restaurant, a gym, spa, an outdoor bar and two indoor lounges, a roomy view lounge called the Yacht Club, a library, screening room, two hot tubs and a small pool

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(which no one seems to be interested in, given the late spring temperatures). Despite the Star Legend's intimate layout, the passenger cabins are spacious. We have been assigned a spacious Ocean View Suite, the most modest cabin style on board, and besides a roomy sleeping area, it comes with a separate lounge with sofa and chairs, a walk-in closet and a full bath with tub and shower. Nothing feels cramped, and there's plenty of space to stash everything away.

After three courses paired with a sommelier's wine suggestions, we are pleasantly full and settled in for the night (or so I imagine). But a lively beat from

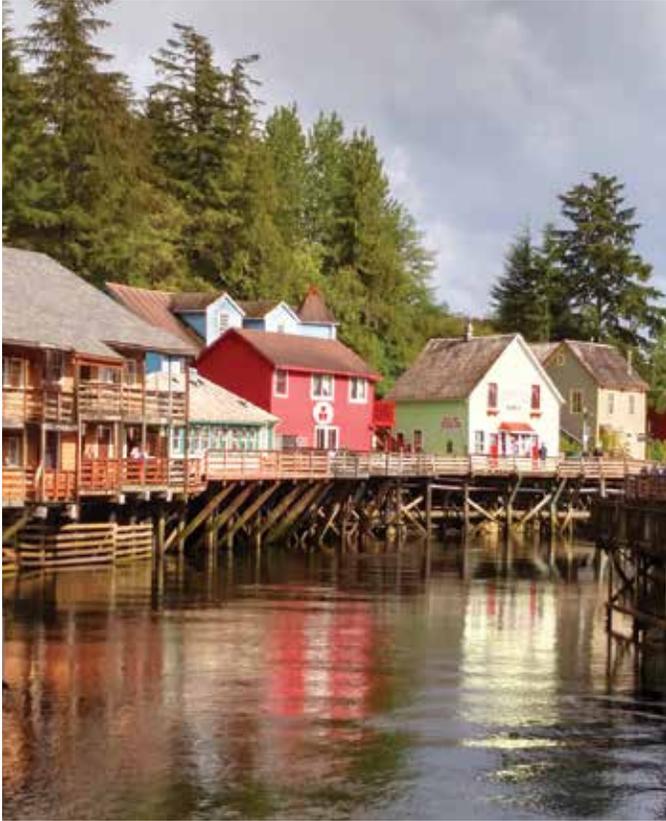
the Compass Rose beckons. Live music, dancing and drinks are on hand every night for those who aren't concerned about rising early. It's easy to meet other passengers on the Star Legend, and my typically hedonistic friend Robert follows the beat to the Compass Rose with some new Australian friends. Me? I'm more interested in catching the last bit of twilight that's quickly retreating from the dark hills and inlets we pass and in consulting my GPS to figure out where we are and how far we must sail to reach our first port, Ketchikan.

Have you ever had a vacation you never want to end? Well, this is mine. And I am not the only one. It seems Windstar Cruises earns a cult following—I meet a couple on board who tell me they are on their twentieth Windstar cruise, this being their first to Alaska.

Much can happen in 12 short days. I meet Tlingit elders and listen to stories about their history and culture (a tribal elder even comes on board in Ketchikan and gives us an engaging presentation about Tlingit life). I view countless totems, some new and some ancient. I spot wild bears foraging on shore, and I even visit a sanctuary for bears that can't be

A Culinary Cedar Plank Salmon





returned to the wild. I witness the rare phenomenon of a dozen humpback whales bubble feeding, a remarkably organized group behavior. Rafts of otters, calving glaciers, countless bald eagles and harbor seals nurturing their pups on icebergs fill the days in which Nature presides larger than life. The Star Legend is capable of navigating deep into Alaskan fjords, allowing us close access to these wild places without having to be shuttled in by float plane or tour boat.

Back on board, after each day's excursions, we relax, indulge in amazing food, meet new friends, laugh and learn—all while watching the boundless Alaskan wilderness pass by. A few full days at sea—one navigating the coast of British Columbia and one crossing the vast Gulf of Alaska—afford respites when naps, board games and spa treatments seem to be the most popular activities.

Twelve days later, we approach Seward, where we disembark and catch a motor coach transfer to Anchorage, a drive that is no less scenic than every day aboard the Star Legend had been. Create your own Alaska experience by booking a cruise with Windstar Cruises (windstarcruises.com). 🌊

A TASTE OF SE ALASKA

Check out these cruise highlights to help you get the most out of your Alaskan experience on the Star Legend.

KETCHIKAN

In this important hub of Tlingit culture, stroll downtown's historic Creek Street, browse downtown art galleries highlighting Alaskan artists and tour the amazing Totem Heritage Center for a view of ancient totems and contemporary Alaska Native art. visit-ketchikan.com

MISTY FJORDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Sign up on the Star Legend for a guided kayaking tour.

WRANGELL

Walk to Petroglyph Beach State Historic Site to view mysterious ancient stone carvings and visit the Wrangell Museum's impressive collection of Alaska Native art and artifacts. wrangellalaska.org

SITKA

In this historic Russian capital, visit St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, take a guided tour of the Russian Bishop's House at the Sitka National Historical Park, and sign up (on the Star Legend) for a wildlife cruise for a chance to spot a variety of marine mammals. visitsitka.org

ICY STRAIT POINT

Zipline down a mountain (sign up on the ship) and then take the shuttle into the village of Hoonah and stop by the carving studio outside the Hoonah Indian Association.

JUNEAU

Here, you'll have a busy day in Alaska's capital. Catch a cab, take a bus or rent a car and visit Glacier Gardens Rainforest Adventures (this is a little-known gem) on the way to Mendenhall Glacier. While you're out there, visit Mendenhall Glacier, too. On the way back, stop in for a tasting flight at Alaskan Brewing Company's tasting room; back downtown enjoy king crab at Tracy's Crab Shack and ride the Mt. Roberts Tram. traveljuneau.com

HAINES

Here, you're deep in the rugged Alaskan wilderness. In summer months, brown bears gorge on salmon in the Chilkoot River. If you do nothing else, rent a car in Haines and head to the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage & Bald Eagle Preserve Visitor Center, 22 miles from town, and take the guided tour to view some significant and priceless Chilkat artifacts (it's worth the effort). Back in Haines, visit The Hammer Museum for a quirky and historic survey of hammers throughout history. visithaines.com

TRACY ARM/ENDICOTT ARM AND KENAI FJORDS NATIONAL PARK

Sign up on the Star Legend for guided Zodiac tours in these pristine and majestic ecosystems.