

Ketchikan Creek Street

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN THOMSON

North to Alaska

The view from the top of Mount Roberts is outstanding. To the south, Alaska's inside passage and to the north, the tip of the Mendenhall Glacier. It was hard to believe we had boarded the *MS Amsterdam* a scant two days ago.

The seven-day cruise from Vancouver to Alaska is a popular adventure – lots of people do it – but until we took the plunge last fall, my wife and I were cruiser newbies, unfamiliar with anything larger than the *Queen of Nanaimo*. We feared the worst: small staterooms, forced conversation around the dinner table, amateur entertainment; you get the idea. Besides why would we want to go to Alaska when we live in supernatural BC? Surely, the scenery couldn't be any more spectacular.

Happily, curiosity trumped trepidation and the trip not only dispelled our preconceptions but made us Alaska fans as well.

We visited three coastal communities on our tour, each one distinct from the other but tied together by a common history, the Klondike Gold Rush.

First stop, Juneau, the state capital. Juneau is notable for its many jewelry shops – today, tanzanite, not gold, is the favoured mineral – the Juneau Ice Field and a gondola ride to hiking trails

atop Mount Roberts. Helicopters carry tourists to nearby Mendenhall glacier. They'll even touch down for a brisk walkabout, if you want. We cooled our heels at the local coffee shop.

"It gets pretty quiet around here in the off-season," said our barista, underscoring the importance of the tourist trade upon the area.

Nowhere was that more apparent than in Skagway, our second stop. One-hundred-and-twenty years ago, Skagway was an important transit point for thousands of prospectors on their way to the Yukon gold fields. Skagway led to the infamous Chilkoot Trail, a dangerous ice path over the Chilkoot Pass and onto Lake Bennett on the other side. Scores of prospectors didn't make it.

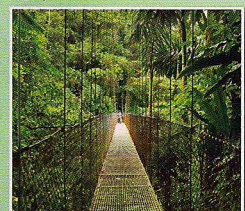
Skagway wears its heritage proudly. The main street is comprised of original frontier buildings preserved and refurbished to create an 1890s ambience. We listened to the colourful story of "Soapy" Smith, a flamboyant Skagway con man who was ultimately gunned down by the townsfolk he fleeced. And in keeping with the era, the historic White Pass and Yukon Railroad took us, by diesel and not steam locomotive, up and about the nearby mountains. Just like the old days.

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After Skagway, we had another full day at sea. No problem. We were getting our sea legs by now and there was no shortage of things to do. Cooking demos, wine tasting, and free movies were some of the choices. A Windows tutorial on photo editing was well attended. Standing room only. We were surprised to see a lot of families on board; Mom, Dad and the kids with grandparents in tow. We had previously thought everybody on board must be elderly and retired. Not so.

Meals were included, but liquor and soft drinks were add-ons. However, upon purchasing our tickets, we learned our credit card would be debited an extra \$US48 a day as part of a shipboard allowance to cover onboard purchases. Whatever we didn't spend was refunded after returning to Vancouver. Meals, by the way, were better than we expected and although we had the option to dine alone, we ate as a group, striking up conversations with other cruisers. And no, it wasn't hard to engage in real conversation.

Five days out of Vancouver and we were sailing up a fiord called Tracy Arm on our way to the Sawyer Glacier. As we got closer, the captain opened the fore-castle doors to the ship's bow and we streamed forward to get a better view. Chunks of ice, initially small but getting progressively larger, floated by. Veteran cruisers told us this was the highlight of the trip. And then we heard it, a loud retching as the glacier calved and a huge chunk of ice and snow crashed into the sea.

The event was celebrated by a Polar Bear Dip, an onboard tradition. Eight hardy youngsters, nobody over the age of 25, I noticed, plunged into the ship's pool – hey, no problem, it didn't look that cold – only to be doused with buckets of ice water when they emerged on the other side. Ouch!

Our last port of call was Ketchikan, or as one teenaged passenger called it, Kitschy-kan, referring no doubt to the many touristy sights and sounds. Creek Street was the main tourist draw, a collection of refurbished shops and eateries interconnected by a boardwalk.

We wandered off on our own to get a sense of the place. We saw local youth jumping off a cross-town bridge, clothes

and all, into the harbour below and fishermen gutting salmon at the marina. Venturing even further afield, we stumbled into an out-of-the-way watering hole, the First City Saloon. As is the custom in American bars, the local barfly struck up a conversation.

"I'm from Oregon but I moved here six months ago," said Steve, the fisherman. Steve also subjected us to a lengthy and unsolicited primer on seine fishing but Carrie, the owner and bartender, went one better. She told us the saloon she purchased in 1991 used to be a brothel before "the town cleaned itself up" and that a local councilman was murdered on these very premises in 1919. "Got caught with his pants down," she said gleefully. His ghost, Carrie insisted, still haunted the premises.

"I've felt his presence and have seen the tables move," she told us breathlessly. Whether a well-rehearsed tidbit for her customers or an urban tale, I believed her; she was that good a storyteller.

We liked Ketchikan and its quirks. It was interesting, historic and, to us, a more

substantial community than the others. Touristy, yes, but a working community too thanks to the commercial fishery. Calling it kitschy, I thought, was unkind.

We returned to Vancouver as old salts, wise in the ways of cruising. Our cabin was a decent size; the on-board entertainment – a resident troupe of six singers and dancers – was excellent. Onboard activities were well organized yet, at no time, did we feel compelled to join the crowd. Ditto for shore excursions. Organized tours were available for those who wanted them but there was enough time, usually about nine hours per port, to wander off on your own. Seeing the Yukon's history come alive, albeit through American eyes, was exhilarating too.

Best of all, we were no longer cruising newbies. Our onboard experience whetted our appetite and we decided we would gladly cruise again, BC Ferries notwithstanding.

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