

Snorkeling In Alaska? 2008 Alaska Cruise Season Is Full Of Surprises

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Whale watching and dog sledding in Alaska, yes, but rainforests and snorkeling? Aren't these activities for the tropics? Have the experts who plan innovative shore excursions in Alaska for member lines of Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) misread the map?

It turns out that North America's most majestic northern wilderness is only one great reason to cruise to Alaska. For thousands of vacationers, the biggest surprise may be how many different ways there are to experience that magnificent landscape, including underwater in a wetsuit.

In 2008, CLIA member lines will offer a wide variety of Alaska cruises - from small ships carrying nearly 200 passengers to the newest mega liners. There are seven-day roundtrips and 14-day one-way voyages with ports of embarkation all along the Pacific, from Los Angeles to Seward, with many from Vancouver, Seattle and Juneau. Each line offers its own distinctive character and all feature the immense natural treasures, such as Glacier Bay, that attract visitors from around the world. These sites are also highlighted through an amazing variety of shore excursions and land tours ranging from crab fishing and zip-lining to private whaling adventures and multi-day journeys throughout British Columbia.

Here is a sampling of 2008 Alaska cruises offered by member lines of CLIA:

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINES

Carnival's 2008 Alaska offerings consist of 16 seven-day Glacier Route cruises aboard the 2,124-passenger Carnival Spirit. The series of voyages, which begin on May 21, are one-way between Vancouver and Whittier/Anchorage and call on Skagway, Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka and cruise the College Fjord, the Island Passage and Prince William Sound. Three departures will be roundtrip from Vancouver, visiting Juneau, Skagway and Ketchikan.

CELEBRITY CRUISES

Celebrity Cruises' Celebrity Infinity, the latest Conde Nast Traveler Readers Poll's Top-Rated Large Ship, will be in Alaska this summer and passengers will have the option of a 'Frasier Discovery' tour featuring Calgary, Banff, Jasper, Quesnell, Whistler and Vancouver. Other Celebrity highlights in Alaska include an 'Alpine Zipline and Rainforest Eco-tour and a 'Golden Glassblowing Experience.'

HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

Holland America will have eight ships in Alaska, offering more than 250 varied shore excursions. In Haines, a new tour called 'Guides Choice Photo Discovery' focuses on photographing the wildlife and stunning scenery of the Chilkat Valley. And, in Sitka and Ketchikan guests will be able to don a wetsuit and explore the usually unseen underwater wilderness with snorkeling gear. Another new excursion is the 'Exclusive Mountaintop Flightseeing and Crab Feast.'

MAJESTIC AMERICA LINE

Majestic America Line, which offers coastal and river cruises in North America, features seven-night Juneau roundtrip sailings and 12-night one-way voyages between Seattle to Juneau. With just 112 staterooms and suites, most with private verandahs, Empress of the North's intimate, small ship experience provides unique access to the vast wilderness and waterways of Alaska's Inside Passage. Guests enjoy five-star comfort, luxurious amenities, enrichment programs, award-winning service and included shore excursions in selected ports.

PRINCESS CRUISES

Princess Cruises' 2008 Alaska season features eight ships, including five sailing the Gulf of Alaska. New for this year is the Tahitian Princess' 14-day Connoisseur itinerary featuring less visited ports such as Kodiak, Valdez and Seward. The line is also introducing 37 new tour options in its Adventures Ashore program, including private whale watching, zip-lining, a Bering Sea Crab Fisherman's tour, and an 'Alaskan Chef's Table.' Princess will carry more passengers to Glacier Bay than any other line this year.

NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

Three NCL Freestyle Cruising vessels will return to Alaska for the 2008 season. Norwegian Pearl and Norwegian Star will sail seven-day roundtrip cruises from Seattle while Norwegian Sun departs from Vancouver. Itineraries include the Inside Passage and feature either Glacier Bay or Sawyer Glacier, with calls in Juneau, Skagway, Ketchikan, Victoria and Prince Rupert Island. NCL offers more than 130 adventurous shore excursions, including gold mining, river rafting and whale watching. And as of June 1, Freestyle 2.0-NCL's enhanced guest experience initiative-will be implemented fleet-wide. Enhancements include a major investment in the total dining experience, upgraded stateroom amenities, and new, wide-ranging on-board activities for guests of all ages.

REGENT SEVEN SEAS CRUISES

Regent will feature numerous new tour programs on its Seven Seas Mariner cruises in Alaska this year. In Juneau, there is a 'Wild Coast Exploration' by catamaran along glacier-carved fjords and rugged stretches of coast. Guests may also opt for salmon fishing by traditional 14-foot rowboat on the Campbell River in British Columbia, a Ketchikan biking and zip-line combo and, in Sitka, an 'Advanced Volcano Hike' on the remote Kruzof Island. Along the way, whales, sea lions, sea otters and eagles provide outstanding photo opportunities.

ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL

Royal Caribbean will have three ships in Alaska in 2008, including Rhapsody of the Seas, Radiance of the Seas and Serenade of the Seas. The seven- to 14-night voyages feature more than 140 tours in the five southeast Alaska ports of Juneau, Ketchikan, Skagway, Sitka and Icy Strait Point. The tours include dog sledding, crab feeds and salmon bakes, canoeing and kayaking, hiking, semi-submersibles and snorkeling, whale watching and more.

SILVERSEA CRUISES

Silversea's all-suite, 382-guest Silver Shadow will be the only ultra-luxury ship sailing Alaskan waters this year, offering ten itineraries ranging from nine to 12 days. Several sailings feature convenient roundtrip departures from Vancouver, with open-jaw voyages also available from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seward. The Alaska voyages feature a diverse enrichment program, with such noted authorities as marine biologist John Palmisano, chef Anne Desjardins, wine expert John Shafer and author Sabin Robbins.

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