

Ship to Shore

Smaller boats offer unique adventures | By Erin Kirkland

I had just ducked back indoors out of the Southeast Alaska mist when a cacophony of excited voices reached my ears.

“It’s a bear, a black bear; standing right over there!”

Almost instantly, a platoon of footsteps clattered overhead as ship passengers lined fore and aft deck rails to indeed view a portly bruin scraping, then eating, barnacles from boulders along the shoreline. Barely glancing at the nearby humans cooing over his (or her) appearance, the bear sat down with a grunt on the nearest rock, close enough for us to hear the crunching noises as its alfresco dinner was consumed right in front of us.

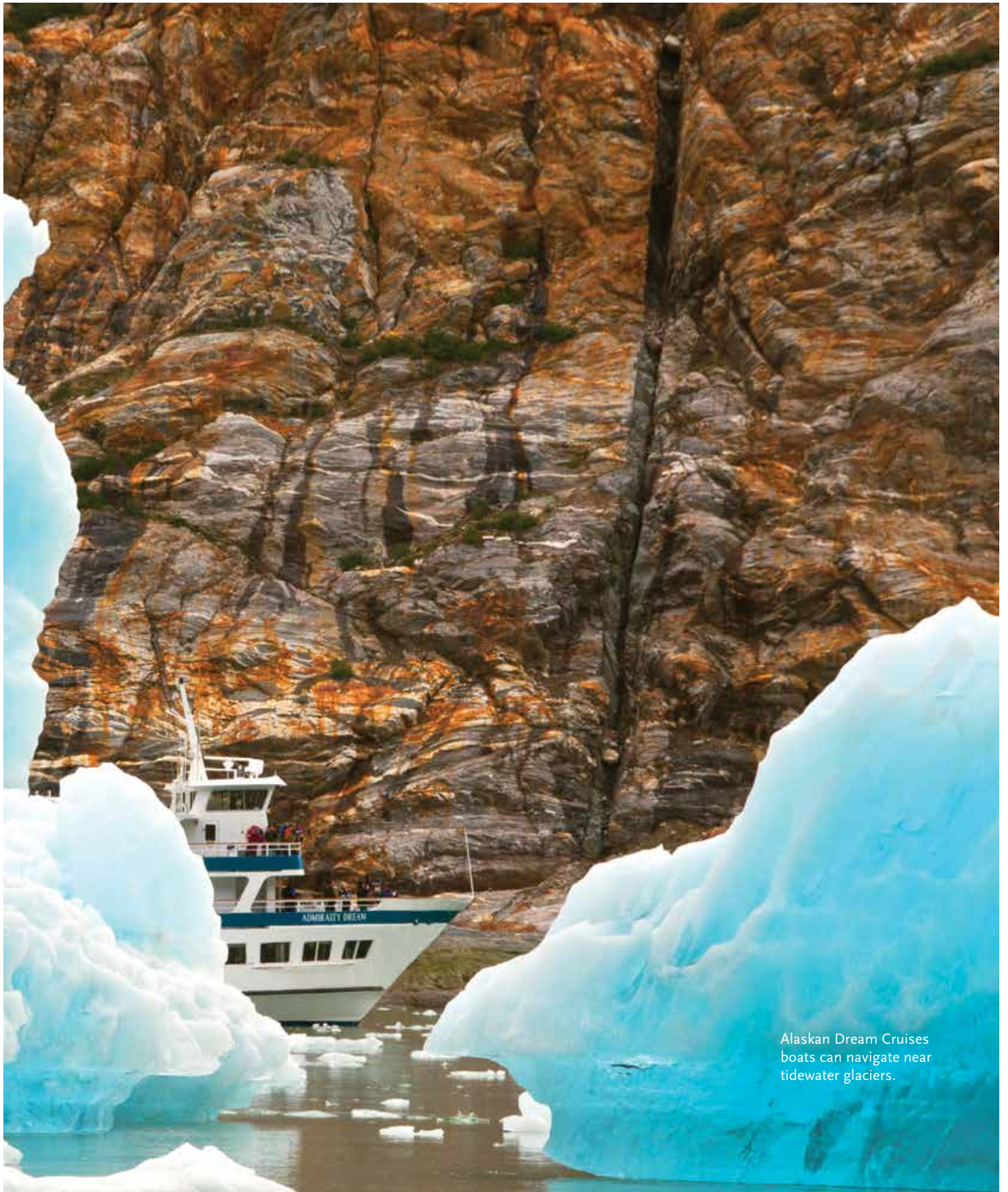
“Well done,” I thought, patting myself on the back for making the choice to show up here.

“Here” was aboard the MV *Alaskan Dream*, a 40-passenger catamaran owned by Alaskan Dream Cruises that weaves its way among the inlets, bays and islands of Southeast Alaska’s Inside Passage. Outfitted with a cache of floating recreation toys and a nature-knowledgeable crew, this 104-foot ship not only brought us close to Alaska’s wildlife and glaciers amid stunning scenery, it filled a delicious space between being a tourist and experiencing local life.

Ships like those operated by Alaskan Dream Cruises, a Sitka-based, family-owned company with five vessels billeting between 10 and 74 passengers each, are becoming ever more popular in waters up and down the West Coast and around Hawai’i. Offer-



ALASKAN DREAM CRUISES



Alaskan Dream Cruises
boats can navigate near
tidewater glaciers.

ing guests the opportunity to combine activities such as kayaking, paddleboarding, hiking and snorkeling in nature's quieter nooks and crannies, small-ship cruising translates into big returns for vacationers. Following routes made famous by 19th century cruising pioneers in Alaska, small-ship cruises are reviving an era of quiet reflection combined with low-key adventure.

The Concept

In the mid-19th century, tourism was largely reserved for people wealthy enough to afford passage on railroad cars or aboard ocean-worthy ships sailing the Atlantic. The late-1800s gold rushes provided further inspiration for this worldly demographic as newspaper headlines touted the successes of miners and businessmen between California and the territory of Alaska. Writers such as Jack London and John Muir became famous for romantic prose dashed with a bit of danger. This, people thought, was the way to go, and smaller ships provided the answer to the essential question of "How do we get there?"

Propelled by engines that burned 10 tons of coal a day, steamships made their entrance into the West Coast tourism and transportation industry in the mid- to late 1800s, initially delivering supplies and mail up and down the coastline between San Francisco and the Alaska panhandle, where few roads existed and rail lines didn't connect the dots between communities.

Seizing an opportunity to make extra cash while transporting goods, the steamship companies began ferrying eager adventure-seekers along on trips, especially those heading up the Columbia River or into a still-mysterious Alaska wilderness. The Pacific Coast Steamship Company offered excursion trips to Alaska in 1884 for \$130 from San Francisco (\$3,250

in today's dollars) or \$98 from Seattle, with passage fees, accommodations and meals included for the seven-day journey. The trip was hardly luxurious; lady passengers were advised to wear shorter skirts that wouldn't drag on wet decks, and all guests were encouraged to purchase spiked shoes in case they felt the need to "run across a glacier."

Steamers continued to sail until the gold ran out and world wars necessitated the use of ships and their fuel for other purposes. As late 20th-century tourism evolved, with stronger economies and even more options for vacation transportation, the "journey as destination" concept returned for busy working families looking for the trip of a lifetime. People sought intimate experiences to connect them with

Guides lead passengers on hikes to wilderness waterfalls during shore excursions on Un-Cruise Hawai'i itineraries. Left: Alaskan Dream Cruises naturalists help kids understand and appreciate the wild environment they explore along the Inside Passage.



GLEN PETRE / UN-CRUISE ADVENTURES



ALASKAN DREAM CRUISES



their location, and unique opportunities to explore places they had only read about.

Russell Dick, CEO of Alaskan Dream Cruises, says those intimate experiences coupled with authentic cultural opportunities are what people seek in a



small-ship cruise vacation. Alaskan Dream Cruises offers eight-, nine- or 11-day sailings from Sitka or Juneau along the rugged coastlines of Southeast Alaska's rich rain forests, stopping in small communities along the way.

"The combination of wilderness adventures and unique destinations offers guests a comprehensive look at everything Southeast has to offer—abundant wildlife, pristine environment and cultural immersion," Dick explains. "We're actively connecting guests to sights and people in a very personal way."

Nimble, shallow-draft ships are able to nose into tidal bays and coves and drop anchor for several hours, or all day, allowing passengers to relax and get to know a place through activities both onshore and in the water. Remote and peaceful save for the sound of lapping waves against a kayak or occasional calls from eagles perched atop a tree, these stops balance daily doses of serenity with adventure.

For Lyn Schnug of Seattle, a health scare led her to sail the Inside Passage aboard an Un-Cruise Adventures ship with her wife, Robin, to satisfy a longtime dream to see the Last Frontier and take a chance to "live in the moment." Seattle-based Un-Cruise offers dozens of Inside Passage sailings aboard ships ranging in capacity from 22 to 84 passengers; the company also sails Hawaiian, Mexican, Northwest and Central American waters, but began its business with Southeast Alaska itineraries.

"Standing atop a glacier knowing that the snow fell a hundred years ago helped me realize that it would be OK, no matter what," Schnug recalls. "There would come a day that I could no longer kayak or hike, but today isn't that day."

The Ships

A distinguishing quality of smaller cruise ships is a communal style of travel purposefully designed to encourage interaction among guests and crew members. There isn't much private space onboard when a vessel is less than 200 feet in length. Cabins with queen or twin beds and private baths are designed

Top: Un-Cruise passengers depart their ship in a sightseeing skiff that allows them to tour very small inlets and bays rarely seen by Alaska visitors.

Left: Close encounters with humpback whales are frequent experiences on Alaskan Dream Cruises trips.



ALASKAN DREAM CRUISES

Alaskan Dream Cruises passengers savor local salmon at the remote Orca Point Lodge northwest of Juneau.

for a restful experience, to be sure, but it's the common areas that shine aboard a small ship, and are a big reason why many people choose a smaller vessel. Open and inviting, these spaces invoke an atmosphere of comfort and conversation, particularly enjoyable after a long day exploring the outdoors.

Most evenings find passengers sipping wine and signature cocktails during happy hour in a cozy lounge before migrating to the equally intimate dining room for a dinner featuring local ingredients and tailored to special dietary concerns, a plus for many families.

Alaska passengers will experience the rich sockeye or king salmon for which the state is famous, grilled to perfection and served in a fresh spinach salad or atop creamy risotto. Guests aboard tropical itineraries in Hawai'i enjoy a bounty of traditional

fruits, vegetables and seafood—including poi, colorful sweet potatoes, pineapple, and many varieties of *poke* (marinated ahi sashimi). Headed to Mexico? Savor a lunch of cilantro and lime-infused rice with grilled chicken, wrapped up in a warm tortilla and served with an icy mango margarita.

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Onboard libraries and lounges are stocked with local guidebooks, maps and diaries of authors whose footsteps echo upon much of the land guests have walked that day. For Schnug, the concept of a vessel small enough to not get lost, but big enough to still find quiet places, was an important factor.

"For us, this completed the entire package with Un-Cruise," she said. Guests read, strum a guitar (many ships have crew members skilled with instruments), or share photos as golden sunsets send waves of light across the room. Gloomy weather? No problem; these ships offer cozy places to watch raindrops splatter against large windows with a hot chocolate or cup of espresso in hand.

Last spring I sampled this coziness in tropical fashion, sailing with Un-Cruise between the Big Island of Hawai'i and the smaller, rural island of Moloka'i. My pale skin turned several shades of brown as I floated the warm waters, clad in snorkel gear, at least once a day and sometimes twice, depending upon my mood. I saw manta rays, a



ALASKAN DREAM CRUISES

Hiking on remote islands is a popular excursion.

shark, and even a curious sea turtle while casually exploring the underwater world of this island chain. Un-Cruise Adventures offers seven-night Hawaiian itineraries during the winter months, and I welcomed the opportunity to infuse some sunshine into

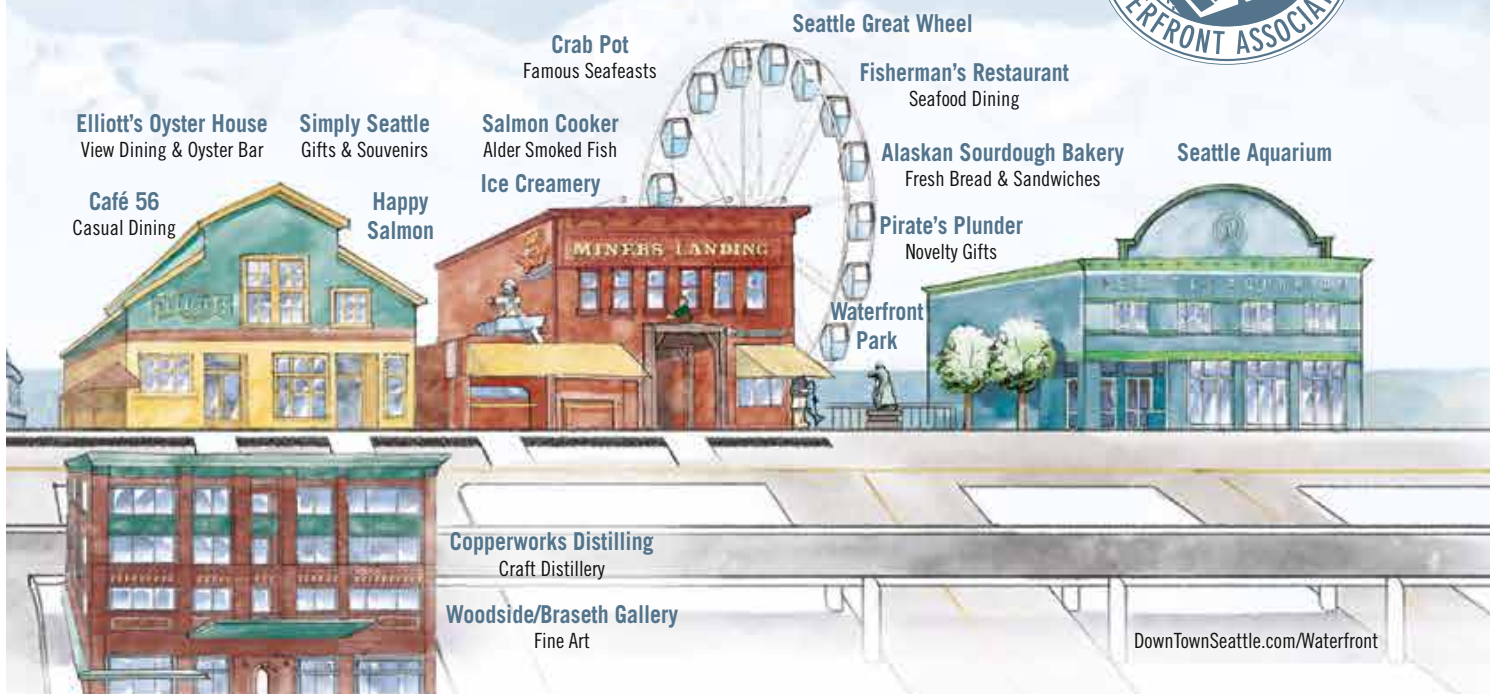
IF YOU GO

Alaska Airlines serves most major cruise ports in North America, including those in Alaska, Hawai'i, Washington, Oregon, California and Mexico; and Gulf of Mexico and East Coast ports such as New Orleans, Houston, Charleston, New York and Boston. Alaska Inside Passage small-ship cruises generally sail from or to Juneau, Sitka or Ketchikan; Hawai'i ports include Kona and Moloka'i. It's best to arrive at an embarkation port at least a day prior to sailing.

For flight information, visit alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR. For cruise information, visit un-cruise.com; alaskan-dreamcruises.com; or americancruiselines.com.

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my frozen core. My fellow passengers and I savored time for swimming, kayaking, even a bit of backcountry hiking through the tropical forests of Moloka'i's Hālawā Valley, and attended a *pā'ina* (feast) prepared by members of the island's historical society.

Un-Cruise and Alaskan Dream Cruises both like to operate with a spirit of spontaneity; Un-Cruise calls it "whim, weather and wildlife," meaning that if a group of whales happens to appear, water is smooth as glass a few miles away, or captains receive a hot tip on a secluded bay, the ships can go there.

This is the essence of such travel, no matter the destinations or routes of arrival, and small-ship cruising is hot right now, whether one chooses to bask in Hawaiian or Mexican sunshine or bushwhack through mossy Southeast Alaska bog. Since the goal of small-ship cruise companies is to emphasize local adventure, culture and cuisine, choosing both a destination and an itinerary to fit everyone's needs is key. Our family, year-round Alaskans, favors spring break getaways that don't involve snow or mittens. That, plus a desire to unplug from the bustle of everyday life and engage our son, 11, in unique activities and new people he isn't likely to meet at home.



PETER WEST CAREY PHOTOGRAPHY / UN-CRUISE ADVENTURES

Watching whales is one of the exceptional experiences available on Un-Cruise's winter trips in Baja California waters.

The Experiences

Our first warm-weather cruise sailed the pristine waters of Baja California Sur's Sea of Cortés on a seven-day trip that introduced us to a Mexico we had never seen. Evening anchorages in bays with names such as Ensenada Grande led to morning hikes among red, scaly rocks and cacti overlooking a turquoise ocean. Frigate birds swooped between us and the foaming waves, and dolphins frequently played near the bow of our ship. One day we drove two hours from Puerto Escondido in rented vans, bound for Magdalena Bay and the famous "nursery" area for gray whale cows and calves that spend the winter months in these sheltered waters before returning to sub-Arctic waters. For my son, an opportunity to close the migration loop with these gentle giants was a highlight; several times he reflected that the whale babies we admired here would soon be making the remarkable 6,000-mile journey north to their summer feeding grounds near where we live.

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ROLLIN' ON THE RIVER

The fastest-growing segment of the cruise industry the past few years has been river cruising. Long popular on Europe's Rhine and Danube rivers, it is picking up steam in the United States as well. "Several American river cruise companies are among our most popular searches," reports Heidi Allison-Shane, president of CruiseCompete, an industry trends tracker and cruise-finding service. CruiseCompete named river cruising its top trend in 2014 and again this year, and Allison-Shane says interest continues to grow. "For one thing, river cruises are mostly all-inclusive," she points out.

Several companies, including Un-Cruise and American Cruise Lines, offer sailings on the Columbia River; popular themes include wine and Northwest history. Mississippi River cruises include trips on the replica steamboat *American Queen* (above); popular themes include Southern culture and autumn color.

And in Alaska, harking back to the independent spirit of those first visitors of the 1800s, small-ship cruisers who make their way up, down and around Alaska's scenic Inside Passage come away fulfilled, and filled, with nature's bountiful presence. It's everywhere: in the dark, brooding forests of Sitka spruce and yellow-cedar, in the splash of a creek teeming with salmon, the occasional bear sighting on a remote beach. Un-Cruise Adventures CEO Captain Dan Blanchard reinforces the intrinsic value of Alaska itineraries as a chance to savor every moment in this wild, largely unsettled part of the United States.

"These are the types of trips where travelers make memories for a lifetime, based on these eye-opening, exhilarating moments," he says.

Our family's most memorable moment came during an Un-Cruise

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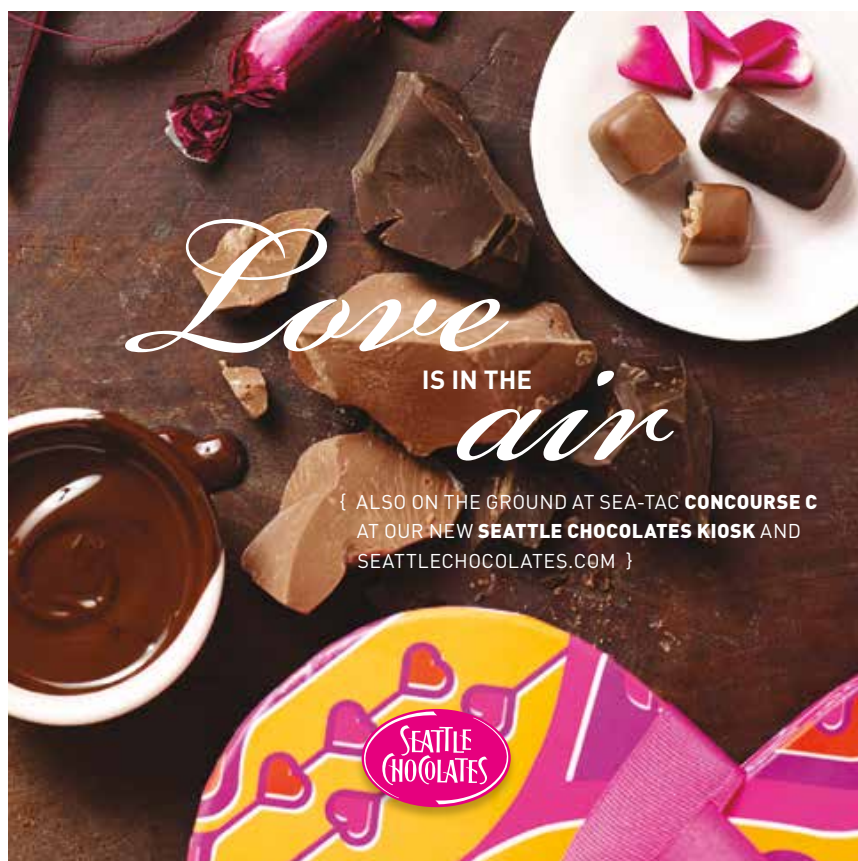
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My son's eyes met mine, large and luminous with the enormity of what he had just seen.

Adventures "Eastern Coves" itinerary, somewhere near Frederick Sound, a gathering spot for humpback whales that spend the summer months looking for krill and herring in these food-rich waters. Only 6 at the time, our independent son had spent hours on the bridge of the *MV Wilderness Adventurer*, binoculars at the ready as our captain, an expert on humpback research and habitat, explained the whales' eating habits.

Two, then three, then five whales swam and dove in arcs of grace that belied their 40-ton weight, closer and closer to each other.

"Quick," the captain whispered to the kids clustered around him. "Climb up here." Soon, small bodies, all clasping binoculars, lined the bridge's dashboard as the multiple-whale circle tightened, then disappeared underwater.

"Watch," our captain said. "Right there." He pointed to the slightest hint of bubbles rising to the now-glassy surface.

With a rush of foamy green water, enormous gaping mouths stormed to the surface, tiny silver fish flipping and flopping to get out of the way, as sustenance and survival met in dramatic harmony. My son's eyes met mine, large and luminous with the enormity of what he had just seen—the legendary humpback bubble-net feeding—and would continue to see for hours as previous plans were scrapped in deference to this wild miracle of planet Earth.

This was why we had come. ▲

Writer Erin Kirkland lives in Anchorage. Her freelance work has included occasional tours as a "kid wrangler" on *Un-Cruise*.






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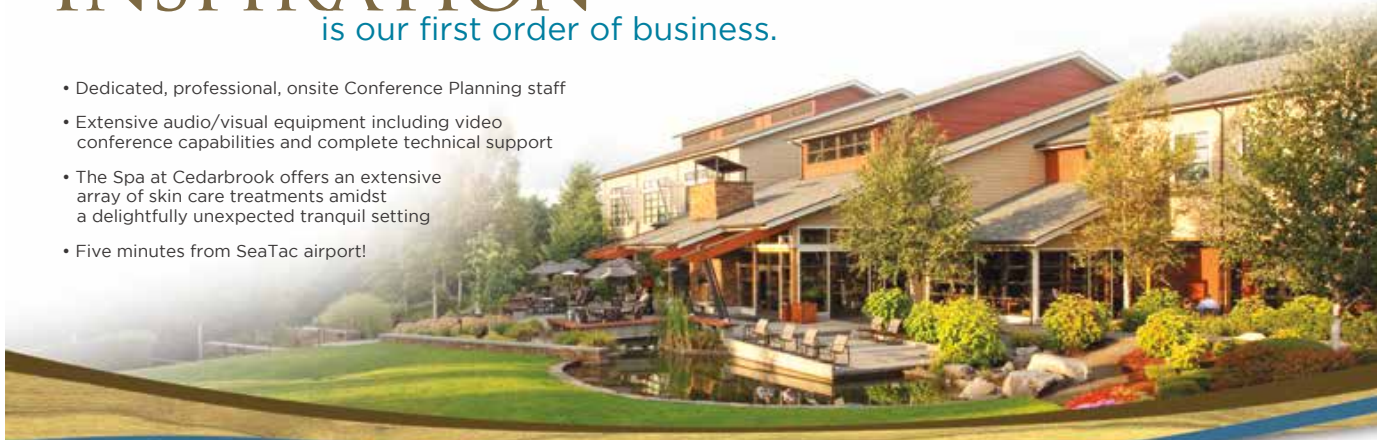
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