

Alaskan cruise offers "unmatched scenic grandeur"

What can explain the burgeoning popularity of the cruise ships that sail up and down the coast of British Columbia and Alaska? This season

more than 350,000 passengers will embark on about 300 sailings of 19 cruise ships, mostly from Vancouver.

One obvious reason is the unmatched scenic grandeur of the northwestern extremities of our continent. No other readily accessible coastal region in the world offers such magnificent vistas of snow-capped mountain ranges.

(There are impressive coastal mountain ranges in Greenland and Antarctica, but the sight of them is reserved for the truly serious explorer.)

Some small, colorful communities dot the northern British Columbia and Alaska coasts, but hour after hour goes by on a cruise ship without a sign of human life anywhere except on the ship itself - hours spent in awe-struck contemplation of eternally snowy mountains, of constantly shifting glaciers, and of broad expanses of sea.

THE LOVE BOAT

But there's another reason, possibly more prosaic: The popular TV series called Love Boat, which began filming 10 years ago this month, is credited with greatly in-



Travel

VINCENT EGAN

Thomson News Service

creasing the public interest in the general concept of cruising, and in the particular destinations that were featured in various episodes.

(The series, now being repeated in local syndication, focused each week on the lives of a small group of personnel on a cruise ship.)

One New Zealander, Mary Keaney, was so impressed with the episode in which the Love Boat sailed from Vancouver to Alaska that she planned for several years and, finally, last month flew to Vancouver and boarded Royal Princess to experience the adventure at first hand - and to preserve it on her video camera.

Martin Reed is deputy captain of the gleaming white Royal Princess -

TV's Love Boat during the final years of the series, and flagship of the London-based P and O/Princess Cruises.

Ten years ago, he was a senior officer aboard Pacific Princess when that ship served as the sea-going set of the Love Boat series, and still remembers vividly the impact that the show and its stars had upon viewers.

"Not only did the show attract many first-time passengers, but a substantial proportion of them would insist that they be booked on the specific sailings on which filming would take place," Reed says, adding that many passengers would then make heroic efforts to appear in crowd scenes.

BOOKED SOLID

The Love Boat series may no longer be in production but the demand for space still grows, and many of the ships that cruise between Vancouver and Alaska are fully booked for the remainder of the 1988 season, which in most cases ends in September.

Another senior officer of the three-year-old Royal Princess, Purser Paul Brougham, notes that first-time passengers are generally interested in visiting the maximum number of ports on a cruise. In the case of his ship, the itinerary includes such colorful gold-rush towns as Juneau (near the famous Mendenhall Glacier) and Ketchikan, as well as the pipeline-terminal city of Valdez and the port of Seward, jumping-off point for Anchorage, the state's biggest city.

Usually, however, the more seasoned cruise-line passengers put convenience at the top of their priority lists, Brougham says. Unpacking and packing are required only once, there's easy access to fine food and glamorous entertainment, and passengers can choose to enjoy blessed isolation from the stresses of every-day life while contemplating some of Nature's most stirring and beautiful wonders.

INSIDE PASSAGE

By common consent, these are the highlights of the typical Vancouver-to-Alaska cruise:

-The Inside Passage, a sheltered waterway stretching from Puget Sound all the way north to Skagway, Alaska, passing countless islands, dark forests and mountains plunging into the sea.

-Glacier Bay, about 140 km northwest of Juneau, a collection of more than 20 tidewater glaciers that constitute one of the little-known wonders of the world. You will see jagged icebergs, humpback whales, seals, eagles and falcons.

-Columbia Glacier, 65 km long and 6 km wide, is one of the largest tidewater glaciers on the Alaska coast. Among the other 15 active glaciers of College Fjord (all named for U.S. universities that supported exploratory expeditions 99 years ago), the most accessible is Harvard Glacier. It presents a spectacular show of "calving", with sheets of ice crashing into the fjord's waters from the face of the glacier every few minutes.

A CHECKLIST

As you might expect, in view of all that ice - and the fact that there are always chill winds at sea - some warm clothing is a necessity. Alaskans put on a show of annoyance at outsiders' misconceptions about their weather, but the fact remains that summer weather there can vary from hot to quite cold. Be prepared.

Another precaution is to book well in advance if you prefer certain sailing dates and certain types of accommodation. (Highest-priced cabins tend to be snapped up more quickly than the cheapest.) It isn't too early to book for the 1989 cruising season.

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