

# ABAC Goes To Alaska

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Unspoiled wilderness stretching as far as the eye can see. A majestic eagle in flight framed by a snow-capped mountain peak. This is Alaska.

My wife and I traveled to America's largest state in June on the trip sponsored by the Public Service and Business Outreach Center at Abraham Baldwin College. PSBOC Director Diane Kilgore led a group of 48 on a journey that offered breathtaking views, fascinating narratives, and a ship that features more glass than any other in the Royal Caribbean cruise line.

These ABAC trips are open to anyone who likes to travel. Next year's agenda promises to be something really special as ABAC goes to Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji.

But that's next year. Here's a day-by-day narrative of our Alaska trip and many adventures along the way.

Day 1: We have found that most people love to travel by motor coach to Atlanta instead of driving to the world's busiest airport and leaving their vehicles. We left Tifton on a scorcher of a Friday afternoon and stopped for a delicious meal at the Willow on Fifth in Macon. On to the airport for overnight accommodations at a local hotel.

Day 2: The reason we overnighted was because we had to be up and at the Atlanta airport at 6 a.m. Stopped in Salt Lake City for a change of planes. What a gorgeous view of the Rockies! Having a passport proved handy because we flew from Salt Lake to Vancouver, Canada to board the ship.

And oh, what a marvelous sailing vessel, The Radiance of the Seas holds 2,500 guests and 900 crew members. We picked one of the 813 ocean view staterooms with a huge porthole which proved to be a great whale-watching spot. Other members of our group went with one of the 577 balcony staterooms, which looked really cool.

The 13-deck, 90,000 ton ship steers with a joystick and employs 96 cooks. On a typical one-week cruise, these cooks serve up 549 pounds of lobster, 18,450 fresh eggs, 5,350 pounds of beef, and 31,345 pounds of chicken. If you have ever been on a cruise, you know the food is incredible, and The Radiance topped them all. The average person gains five pounds on a cruise. That would be me.

Bon voyage party on deck at 5 p.m. and then off to Juneau, Alaska to begin our 2,000 mile journey.

Day 3: We spend the day at sea but there's so much to do. Wonderful breakfast with eggs cooked to order. Visit the rock-climbing wall, the ping pong tables, the gift shops, the movie theater, the putt-putt golf course, the billiard tables with automatic stabilizers, the spa, the exercise room, the auditorium which featured terrific stage shows every night, the library, the art auction, the hot tub, the heated pool inside the solarium, the pool on deck, the game room, the casino, the darts room, and the art gallery. Hey, isn't it about time for lunch on the deck?

As you can see, there's a lot to do at all times of the day or night on the ship. Or you can relax as I did for many hours with a good book in a nice chair overlooking the sea and the rugged landscape.

We're sailing Alaska's Inside Passage so the Pacific is not choppy at all. More like boating on a lake or a huge river. The Radiance is so smooth, sailing along at 50 feet per gallon of fuel. Mountains rise up on either side of the ship. Look for the telltale spout of water which is the first sign of a whale.

Great show that night with the music of Billy Joel called "Piano Man." We're talking about a lavish Las Vegas type production. It was fantastic. Before the show, we attended the Captain's Reception and couldn't help but notice how young Captain Darin Bowland looked. Steak on the menu for formal dinner night.

Day 4: Sun rises at 3:51 a.m. Sets at 10:08 p.m. It's about 62 degrees as we arrive in Juneau, the capital city of the 49<sup>th</sup> state. Only 30,000 people live here. City gets 100 inches of rain and 100 inches of snow each year. Can be accessed only by plane and boat. No highways lead to Juneau. State lawmakers meet here in the winter. Tourists meet here in the summer.

Ship pulls up to dock no more than 100 yards from downtown. No little tender boats. We walk right off the ship into all three of our ports of call.

The people are very friendly but why not, Alaska is the only state where not only do the citizens not pay a state income tax, they actually receive money back from the state government through the Alaska Permanent Fund. Last year, the average payout was \$919 per person.

Blue sky is a rarity during the week but we get just a taste in downtown Juneau, which is bustling with cruise ship tourists anxious to part with some cash from the lower 48. My wife and I can't resist the picturesque Red Dog Saloon, where a country music crooner gets the crowd to join in the Johnny Horton classic, "North To Alaska." I know all the words. This is great.

Dog sledding on the Mendenhall Glacier was on our itinerary but as we stood just 20 yards away from the helicopter to take off, the rain and fog rolled in, and our trip

evaporated. We took the tram to the top of the mountain instead and saw a stately-looking eagle in captivity.

It was the first of many eagles we saw in Alaska. This is hard to believe, but eagles are as common in this state as buzzards in south Georgia. They are certainly more fun to watch.

Day 5: Sailed all night to reach Skagway, a town of 10,000 people during the summer and 700 people in the winter. The park ranger said she could walk down Main Street in the middle of the day in the winter and see not a single person or vehicle.

I love this little Gold Rush town with its wooden sidewalks and Chilkat Mountains backdrop. It's also home to the famous Red Onion Saloon. Second floor of the Red Onion is a museum which used to house Ladies of the Evening. We take the \$5 tour, and it's hilarious. Those prospectors were quite a rowdy bunch.

Twice we are denied the dog sled adventure on this day because it's too foggy for the helicopters to fly over the mountain where the sleds, dogs, and snow are located. We take the historic White Pass railroad which is an incredible feat of engineering carved right through the middle of the mountains.

Views out the side of the train are of the knock-your-socks-off variety. Everywhere you look is a picture post card. A rushing river gurgling with rapids. Crystal clear mountain lakes. Snow-capped mountains with a sliver of a frozen stream down the side.

Can't resist buying a grizzly bear hat which attracts some quizzical looks on the way back to the ship. Magician performs for a packed crowd in the theater after a crusted filet of mountain trout for dinner.

Day 6: We start watching out our porthole for whales at 6 a.m. It's not long before we spot a giant fantail slowly settling back down into the water. These whales are not Shamu. They don't dance on top of the waves. You have to look quick.

Get out the camera for the longest river of ice in North America, the Hubbard Glacier. Our ship approaches slowly with icebergs everywhere in the water. Dishwater gray sky proves perfect for glacier watching as the 450-foot tall wall of ice grows larger in the viewfinder.

Everyone crowds to the deck as a huge roar envelops the ship. It's not thunder but a gigantic part of the glacier "calving" into the water. We come to expect this every five minutes or so as we stare transfixed at a six-mile wide ice cliff face in front of us. The Hubbard Glacier contains 1,350 square miles of blue ice.

The Radiance dispenses a small boat which picks up a bergy, a small iceberg and brings it back to the ship where it slowly melts by the pool. My wife spots a seal frolicking on a floating bergy.

Temperature drops to maybe 45 degrees. Words do not describe my first view of this icy spectacle. For many people, it's the highlight of the week.

One of our travelers wears a tuxedo on the final formal night of the cruise. Royal Caribbean singers and dancers present a colorfully costumed stage show titled "Welcome to Our World" to close out the day.

Day 7: We were told that Ketchikan was one of the rainiest spots on the globe with an average of 300 days of rain per year. They were right. It's a heavy drizzle as we pull into port. Rain never stops on our day in the "Salmon Capital of the World."

My wife and I had booked a floatplane adventure a month ago but on this day, no floatplanes are flying because of the rain and fog. Guides sympathize but their response is always the same, "this is Alaska."

We spend the day dodging raindrops, shopping, visiting a totem pole exhibition, and taking in the famous lumberjack show. You have probably seen these guys on ESPN with their broad shoulders and big axes participating in tree-cutting, pole-climbing, log-rolling, and more. It was an entertaining hour despite the rain.

It's the last chance for Alaskan souvenirs so all our cruisers reach for the plastic. Many clerks behind the counters are college students who spend their summers in Alaska. Some of the stores have apartments over their businesses for these students. We even talked to some students who spent the summer living in campgrounds.

Lobster is on the menu for dinner. We're sailing back to Vancouver tonight. Check out the ship photographer's wall of prints where we find some delightful pictures of our ABAC cruisers.

Day 8: It's a full day at sea. We see lots of dolphins who actually seem to be leaping out of the water in tandem with the ship. We also catch sight of some killer whales as opposed to the humpback whales we had seen earlier in the trip.

Great day for a book and a comfortable chair on the deck. My wife plays bingo and comes within one number of a \$6,000 jackpot. Listen to an all-female jazz combo playing in main lobby. Lots of musicians on various places on the ship at all times of the day and night.

Take pictures of a radiant Alaskan sunset. Pack the bags to set outside the door. We will not see them again until Atlanta.

Day 9: Radiance of the Seas glides into Vancouver right on time. We disembark early. Short wait in airport and then a direct flight back to Atlanta. Bus is waiting to carry us back to Tifton.

What a week! The food, the scenery, the shows, the frontier and a 16,000 year-old glacier. We have seen Alaska up close and personal.

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