

Alaska:

CRUISING THE LAST FRONTIER

By Iga Motylska

“Why did you choose Alaska?” is a question I get asked often. And it’s an easy one to answer because nothing compares to seeing a glacier or an iceberg for the first time, especially if you live in Africa.



Alaska – with its 664 glaciers that are large enough to be named – is an otherworldly snowscape experience where you can stand on the edge of frozen lakes, take a boat trip amid icebergs, and marvel at the dimension of North America’s largest tidewater glacier (Hubbard Glacier) from the deck of a Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) ship. And, if you’re really lucky, you might step foot on a glacier or witness it calving into icebergs, some of which may reach the dimensions of a ten-storey building.

From one tip to the other, Hubbard Glacier is over 122 km long – that’s roughly the distance from Sandton to Hartbeespoort and back again. It has a width of almost 10 km and stands at 107 m above the water’s surface, though most of it is found beneath the water. Its proportions are hard to conceive. But perhaps even more striking is its blue colour.

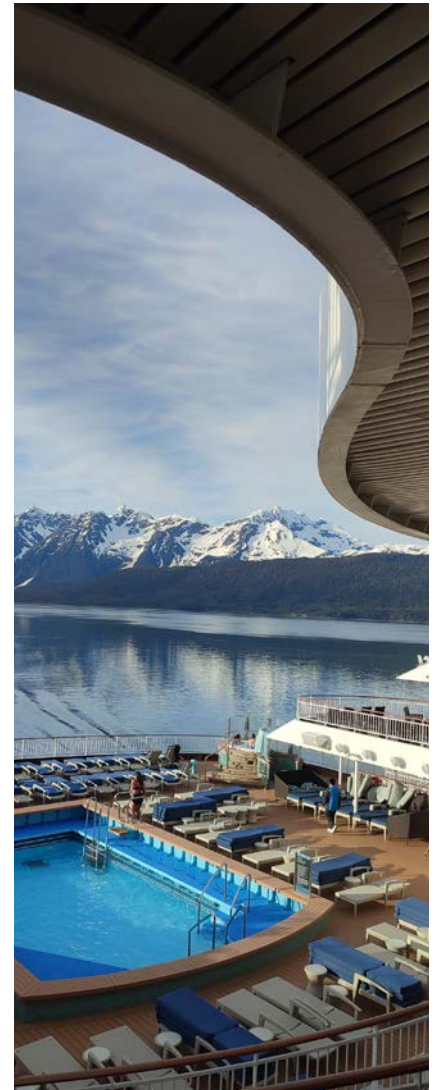
Glaciers often appear blue due to a phenomenon known as ‘Rayleigh scattering’. This is the same reason why the sky appears blue. The optical illusion relies on a number of factors from ice composition and glacier density to the absorption and scattering of different wavelengths of colour.



The thousands of tiny air bubbles in tightly compacted glaciers absorb red and orange light and scatter blues and violets (colours with shorter wavelengths). The reflected colours' intensity depend largely on the age and, hence, thickness of the glacier, and the lighting conditions. At 400-odd years old, Hubbard's icy façade has been carved by time, the tides, weather, climate, and the seasons.

The captain of our Norwegian Jade ship makes a loud speaker announcement as we approach the glacier, while floating through Disenchantment Bay. Some choose to marvel at Ol' Hubbard's immensity from the comfort of their balcony suites or the Spinnaker Lounge with its floor-to-ceiling glass façade. Others fill the deck as the ship does a 360-degree revolution for all to see.

In celebration of this sighting, which is a first for many, but mostly to keep us in a warm-hearted disposition – drinks trolleys wheel out to keep those on the deck company, with a selection of cocktails, champagne, and hot drinks spiked with tippie. After some time, passengers climb into the hot tubs on the 12th deck or make their way to the sauna and steam rooms at the Mandara Spa and Salon.



This leads me to the second question I get asked most often, “How cold was Alaska?”

As the saying goes, “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing”.

In the summer months (between mid-May and mid-September), cruises trace an itinerary along the southern coastlines and inland bays between Seattle or Vancouver and Seward, before heading onwards to Anchorage overland by train.

During this time, the weather is mild, with May being the driest month and June showing off with the longest and warmest days of the year. This is when northern sections of ‘the land of midnight sun’ bask in up to 22 hours of daylight. Alaska’s summer is somewhat comparable to winter conditions across most parts of South Africa, with temperatures averaging between 4 °C and 15 °C. Though it may be unpredictable at times, it is best to pack for any eventuality.

This is even more true if you will be spending time outside, partaking in some of the hundreds of on-shore excursions that are sold and organised by NCL or private outfitters on the ground at each port stop. I was determined to see and do as much as I could, especially as the average port stop is about 10 hours and the days are long.

The real challenge was choosing between helicopter flips over glaciers, dog sledding, salmon fishing, whale-watching excursions, and undertaking the White Pass and Yukon route in a vintage rail car, to gold panning and kayaking among otters. There are an equal number of free activities off the ship, from hiking national parks and waterfalls of melting ice to following totem pole trails, doing historic walking tours, and visiting fish hatcheries and public museums.

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Alaska is called ‘the last frontier’ for good reason. The 49th state is a land of contrasts like no other. So, my question to you is, “When are you going to Alaska?”



Planning your first cruise

What should first-time cruisers keep in mind?

The best time to book a cruise to take advantage of early-bird specials is between two years and nine months before travelling. For more favourable prices, buy any add-ons (open bar, specialty dining, Wi-Fi, spa entrance, shore excursion discounts, etc.) before you embark. Plan your cruise so you have minimal additional costs once you are onboard. NCL's 'free at sea' package, for example, includes additional services of your choice for reduced prices. Also, keep an eye out for discounts where third and fourth guests travel at reduced rates or for free.

What about motion sickness?

It takes a day to find your sea legs, especially if you are a first-time cruiser. If you experience motion sickness, ask for free medication at the registration desk, and spend some down time in your cabin or relaxing at the spa. Alaska's Inside Passage is sheltered from the open Pacific Ocean, which makes its calmer waters more suitable to first-time cruisers.

How to pick a cruise destination?

In general, choose a cruising destination that is difficult to explore independently or reach overland due to vast distances, lack of infrastructure, or costs. You may save on your overall trip costs to a pricey destination because a cruise already includes your accommodation, meals, entertainment, and most onboard activities.



Cruising Alaska



The best way to get to America's west coast?

Ask if your chosen cruise liner offers discounted travel packages that include discounts on flights. I flew to Vancouver on Delta Airlines from Cape Town via Washington, D.C. and Seattle. There is free Wi-Fi on board, and it is worth upgrading to Premium Economy for long-haul flights. Delta Airlines also flies via a hub in Frankfurt. www.delta.com

How to adjust to jet lag

Give yourself a day or two to rest between travel time and cruise embarkation. Eat at the meal times of your new destination, even if you are not hungry, to help reset your body clock.

What to pack for a summertime cruise to Alaska

The first thing I packed into my 75-litre Thule Subterra Wheeled Duffel was my Hi-Tec Altitude V Ultra waterproof hiking boots, as I planned to do lots of walking and hiking during my on-shore excursions and knew that there might be a chance of rain or walking through snow and ice. Because the bag conveniently opens from both sides it was easy to pack all of my outerwear clothing (jackets, raincoats, and waterproof trousers) on the one side and all my inner layers (thermal underwear, t-shirts, long-sleeve vests, and formal wear) on the other side, along with smaller items (gloves, beanie, scarf, mohair socks, and underwear) packed into a compression bag. My most versatile item of clothing was the Apex three-in-one jacket, which is ideal for colder conditions with its 3 000 mm waterproof outer shell and a warm fleece that can be worn together or separately. ● ●