

## Pikes Peak River Runners

### **Leaping Whales, Calving Glaciers & Denali - The Great One July 2009**



*By Christina King*

*Photo Credits: Christina King*

**Trip Participants: Pete & Christina King**



The purpose of this trip was to deviate from our standard whitewater adventures and try something new. In addition, we wanted a reasonably inexpensive way to scout out future trips to Alaska. The struggling travel industry provided the perfect opportunity for us to snag a great deal and spend two weeks in Alaska. Our first week was spent on a Princess cruise ship and our second week was spent at Denali National Park. We have never been on a cruise before and had specific negative stereotypes ingrained in our brains about cruises, especially Alaska cruises. They all proved true BUT we also realized that despite these stereotypes we had a wonderful time. We would love to return to Alaska and spend more time in this amazing part of the country.

We choose to fly in and out of Seattle to start our Alaskan adventure. We have never visited Seattle and it was on our bucket list. The alternative was to go through Vancouver which we will save for a future trip. [Laurie Maxwell \(our travel agent\)](#) handled all the deals for us and provided great customer service for us. The trip ran like clockwork. Our first day in Seattle was spent at the downtown wharf area (we used the public bus transit system to get downtown). We made an obligatory stop at [Pike Fish Market](#) and enjoyed blackened salmon tacos for dinner downtown. The open fish market displayed every seafood item I could ever imagine. The flower market was brightly colored with stalls full of flower bouquets. Seattle was experiencing a heat wave and the weather warm and sunny. Brilliant blue skies and sun beat down on us while we enjoyed a clear view of snow-caked Mt. Rainer. Fortunately, the good weather continues for our entire Alaska adventure. We made it back to our hotel just in time for a mellow orange sunset from our hotel room.



## Day 1, Mon, Jul 27, 2009: Shipboard in Vancouver

We climb on our first bus (of many) to take us to Vancouver to board our [Coral Princess ship](#). We stand in the first of many lines and we immediately notice we are the youngest passengers on the bus. The “Q-tips” are out in full force. First Alaskan cruise stereotype is confirmed. Sixty is the new “20”. Princess Cruises are efficiently organized and superb at crowd control. There are no surprises, and the boarding process is quick and efficient. Everyone on the cruise becomes adept at standing in line, even if we do not know why we are standing in line. We are particularly good “sheep”.



My initial observations of our fellow passengers:

- They love to show each other their passports.
- They say “what” a lot.
- They love to talk to complete strangers while standing in line.
- They will tell you their life story and describe their entire family tree to strangers.
- They will offer to share their candy with everyone on the bus.
- Always wear “practical white tennis shoes”
- Enjoy wearing matching Hawaiian shirts.
- Will spontaneously break into song on a bus.
- Bob their heads along to elevator music
- Typical Age demographic onboard is 60-80
- Walkers and canes are not unusual.
- Very punctual
- #1 question, “Where are you from?”
- #2 question, “What do you do for a living?” Pete later comes up with a snappy answer for this question that typically shuts down most conversationalists.
- “I work for Homeland Security and I am not allowed to talk about it.”

Note: I do not want to sound “ageist” (is that a word?) but these were my personal perceptions within the first day. I notice by the end of our two weeks, that I pick up some of these quirky habits. I started a conversation with a stranger in line and Pete exclaimed “you are becoming one of them”! We are not that old (46 & 49) but outside the typical Alaskan cruise demographic. At one point, one older gentleman asks me if I

work for Princess Cruise lines. We are proud card carrying [AARP members](#) (have been for years but that is another story). Please do not take my observation list too seriously. We must really stick out. We are not particularly anti-social but even I (who am an extrovert) need some downtime during the trip. Our goal was to explore Alaska and NOT find future BINGO partners.

After boarding the ship, we enjoy a late lunch buffet and go up on the top deck to watch the ship pull away from Vancouver. I am amazed by the number of passengers on board. Fortunately, this is the only time during the entire cruise that we see so many passengers at the same place/same time on one deck. The ship has a mechanical delay, and we leave Vancouver four hours late. Not a problem as we enjoy a nice early evening on our room balcony and make up the delay overnight. I am delighted that we choose a balcony room as we use it daily throughout our cruise. Our evening was so nice that we left our balcony door open throughout the night and watched land roll by that evening. I think it got dark about 10 pm. I barely feel the ship move during the night but just in case I took a Dramamine pill after dinner. A quick dip in the pool and hot tub before going to bed closed out our first day on the ship. The warm air temperature begins to cool around midnight. I have a vivid dream about a Giant Squid climbing up over our balcony railing trying to get in our room during the night. I wake Pete up to warn him to watch out for the Giant Squid. I wonder if Dramamine causes crazy dreams. Our room, service, porter, and food are very decadent compared to most of our whitewater adventure trips. Before this trip, I heard everyone rave about cruise food. It is okay but not spectacular. They provide many choices and present the food well. Desserts look good but lack the exquisite taste of European desserts. They focus on beautiful presentation, but the quality does not match up. The taste is adequate but not over the top. I take advantage of salmon which is offered at every lunch and dinner and enjoy it thoroughly. I am convinced that my mercury levels rise on this trip due to my obsession with salmon but I still eat salmon at least twice a day. I cannot resist! It is only for one week. I cut back my salmon consumption once we leave the cruise.



## **Day 2, Tue, Jul 28: Day at Sea**

Booming foghorns wake us up this morning and we peer outside. It is foggy and much colder outside. I see islands and land glide by our open balcony door. By midday, the fog becomes dense, and the seas roll more severely. I feel fine. However, while we are eating lunch, Pete fills me in on a family event happening at the table next to us. A young teenager (with her grandmother) is chowing down on lunch. Suddenly, Pete notices she stops eating, leans over to tell her grandmother she is not feeling so good, and they hustle her out of the dining room. Glad I was oblivious but once Pete tells me the story he just observed, I decide I will take another Dramamine, just in case! We decide to do a 2 mile walk around the lower outdoor promenade deck

on the ship (3 times around = 1 mile) and meet only a handful of other passengers doing the same activity. The Coral Princess has about 1,500 passengers and 700 crew and yes, there is a stereotypical cruise director that announces the ships activities daily. We quickly find that if we do NOT obsess about food and participate in group activities, we ditch most of the ship's passengers. It is easy to get away from people and enjoy quiet time. I am pleasantly surprised. Shopping and food are the top two activities that most passengers spend a lot of time doing. I beat Pete at Putt-Putt golf (once) and gloat for at least an hour. We then move on to play Ping Pong (again no one else did this) but I draw the line at Shuffleboard, BINGO, shows and trivia



games. Our favorite restaurant table is at the very front of the ship with a 180 view of the ocean ahead. We eat here most days/evenings when we are on the ship. The [Coral Princess webcam](#) is on the bridge (just above our table). It provides a great view. The ship has a "formal" night where many passengers dress up in "prom-type" dresses and tuxedo suits. What do you think we do?... We choose casual dining for the duration of the trip. We never have to sit with strangers and make small talk. We thoroughly enjoy our dining choices and like the options available for us. By the end of the evening, the ship rolls are much less dramatic, and we go to sleep quickly.

### Day 3, Wed, Jul 29: Ketchikan Island

We arrive and dock in Ketchikan about 5 am. The weather is great; sunny and warm. I decide to take advantage of a sea kayaking trip. Pete walks around town and visits the Discovery Center museum while I spend the morning paddling around an inlet watching eagles, dodging fishing trawlers, and looking for salmon. The town of Ketchikan is the first of many similar Alaskan towns that are filled with tourists and trinket stores. We never buy anything and do not spend any time in these stores other than to pick up a few postcards. Our ship leaves port about 3 pm to sail to our next port by tomorrow morning. We see lots of Stellar Sea Lions this evening and get our first glimpse of Humpback whales. I can distinctly see the Humpback whale tail flukes, humped backs and blowholes spewing steam/mist on the ocean horizon.



**Day 4, Thurs, Jul 30: Juneau, capital of Alaska**

Pete and I sign up for a whale watching tour (on a small boat) and get the sightings of our life. Baby Humpback whale leaping completely out of the water, flapping their flippers, bubble fishing (rare communal fishing activity) by pods of whales. Even the boat captain grabs his personal camera to capture the whale activity on film. The onboard naturalist told us that Discovery Channel and National Geographic can wait an entire season for this type of whale activity. The boat captain was so excited that we stayed several extra hours to enjoy this sight. What a special treat! The weather is so nice I begin to worry that I might run out of sunscreen on our trip. The sun relentlessly beats down on us and all the crew and locals exclaim about the nice weather.





We spend the rest of the afternoon at Mendenhall Glacier and wish we had more time at this special stop. The Mendenhall glacier is amazing and the visitor center very educational. We ran out of time to do any hikes at Mendenhall but there was also a bear warning sighting sign on most of the trails so maybe we are better off to miss that today. We leave Juneau around 9 pm.





**Day 5, Fri, Jul 31: Skagway, Haines**

I sign up for another kayaking trip in Haines (very small town) on a glacial lake and get to see a bear fishing along shore. Our guide explains that it is a young (radio-collared) grizzly. It looks like a normal black bear to me. Pete and I are determined not to pay to go see Alaskan bears since we have our own personal Woodland Park, Colorado neighborhood bears patrolling our driveway/garage daily.



The trip to Haines involved a short ferry trip to the town of Haines with a bunch of “hippies” traveling to the SE Alaska State Fair starting tomorrow. I notice many of the young workers up in Alaska only spend summers up here, working and then moving on to the “next” service-oriented job. My initial observations seem that a lot of people in Alaska live on the “fringe” and do not fit in particularly well anywhere else. Everyone is excited about the good weather and a few young kids jump off a nearby pier until they get yelled at by the ferry staff. The kayaking company employees seem young (college age) and unprofessional and use the word “sweet” excessively. When I ask what they do in the winter only one guide goes to college, the rest travel from job to job in warmer climates.



*Note: [Five types of Alaskan Salmon](#) with many names (Chum, Sockeye, King, Silver and Pink).*

Pete and I meet back up for lunch and hike along a creek/pond trail watching salmon fishermen. In fact, we see several salmon counting cages and watch a fisherman land several enormous King salmon. I see more eagles and a sea otter hangs around our cruise ship. I do not think anyone even notices the sea otter – they are too busy shopping for trinkets!

Pete and I also check out the Alaskan Marine Highway Ferry station and all the logistics associated with traveling this way. Reservations must be made well in advance and you can camp onboard. We are used to traveling long distances in the western US but realize that Alaska is even bigger than we imagined, with less roads.



### **Day 6, Sat, Aug 1: Glacier Bay National Park**

WOW! This morning we picked up Glacier Bay National Park rangers from a pilot boat and they narrated our glacier experience while we slowly entered the bay. Glaciers surround us and I am amazed at both the visual immensity of the ice, color of the glaciers (ranging from dirt to deep blue) and the continuous groans and gunshot cannon shot sound that they emit! Our ship slowly glides closer and closer to the calving glacier face until we stop completely. Pete and I lazily hang out on our balcony with binoculars while the ship "twirls" in circles for most of the morning. The ranger's presentation is piped in through our television loudspeakers, so we keep the balcony door open and listen to him explain the nuances of what we are seeing and hearing. I am pleasantly surprised at how quiet our big cruise ship can be in this glacial bay and we are the only ship in the bay all morning! Harbor seals lounge on the "bergy bits" and we are thrilled with our day spent in Glacier Bay National Park. I see a lot of birds; kittiwakes, gulls, puffins, etc... along the cliffs. Binoculars are a must on this

trip, and we use them all day long. The scale and dimension of the landscape is hard to describe. Just when I think I have a handle on it, another fabulous sight amazes me. There is no other way to see the glaciers other than by ship and I notice that we only see fishing trawlers in these waters. Whales make an appearance again close to our ship this afternoon while we sail to our next glacier location (College Fjord). A Humpback mother/calf whale parallel us for quite a while breaching and flapping their fins on top of the water.



## Day 7, Sun, Aug 2: College Fjord

We enter College Fjord with another day of sunny and warm weather. Clear views of Mt. Fairweather (aptly named when you can see it) and yet again, more whales. Sea otters, seals, waterfalls and too many glaciers to count fill the day. Once again, we spend half the day "twirling" at the end of the fjord gazing at the glaciers sending thundering chunks of ice into the water. Pete and I warm up with hot mugs of tea on our balcony because despite the sunny skies the air temp is relatively cool. Today is our last day on the ship, tomorrow we disembark at Whittier station, get on a train for Denali.



## Day 8, Mon, Aug 3: Talkeetna and Mt. McKinley Wilderness Lodge



We leave the ship early and board a train that parallels the highway to Anchorage. Whittier is a very bleak area, and we are glad to leave it. We are grateful that we are never bothered by the Alaska state bird (mosquitoes) this entire trip. Our bug spray remains unused until we get home to Colorado. The train continues all the way to the small town of Talkeetna. Nice scenery along the railway (beluga whales in Turnagain Arm, Dall sheep, osprey and more eagles) but I do not get too excited about the actual train. We get off the train in the tiny town of Talkeetna and enjoy a cafe lunch. We walk down to the Talkeetna Three Rivers area (Talkeetna, Susitna & Chulitna) and hang

out on the shore watching river float trips takeout here. The river is filled with glacial silt (as are most Alaska rivers). It is apparent that during springtime runoff the river spreads out far and wide in this cobbled area. This is our first clear view of Denali (20,230 feet) and it is spectacular. Locals tell us that this is the third day they have seen Denali all summer. We see Denali clearly for the next couple of days. The snow slabs on the mountain sides look like thick cake frosting tilted at severe angles. Virtually no exposed rock is visible. We are LUCKY! The mountain climbing stats for this year are as follows:

- more than 1,100 climbers attempted to climb Denali.
- more than 600 successfully made it to the top.
- four deaths on the mountain this year
- Climbing season closes end of July due to unstable snow conditions.

It has taken us a while to realize Alaska's immense distances. There are few roads, and it is logistically challenging to get places (especially quickly). The Alaskan Marine Highway, Alaska Highway and small planes are the key transportation methods available to travelers. We particularly enjoy the town of Talkeetna. Late afternoon, we board a bus to [Mount McKinley Princess Lodge](#). The view from the expansive lodge deck is unparalleled. We hike on trails around the lodge keeping a sharp eye out for bear. One trail is roped off warning us that a bear sighting happened yesterday morning on that trail. The trees stretch forever, and the base of Denali is quite dramatic. Again... we are treated to rare blue skies. We stop to pick wild raspberries and blueberries, hmmm bear food, right? This evening we splurge on a fancy dinner in the Lodge restaurant overlooking a great view of Denali. This lodge is our favorite hotel.



## Day 9, Tue, Aug 4: Nenana River Trip

We take an early bus ride to "Glitter Gulch" [Princess Denali Wilderness Lodge](#) one mile outside of the Denali National Park. Our fancy hotel sits on a cliff above the Nenana River, but we do not appreciate the Glitter Gulch area. It is extremely touristy, and we cannot seem to escape the hordes of people in this general vicinity. I cannot even call it a town because it is so tacky. The hotel is monstrous. That afternoon I decide to sign up for a whitewater rafting trip on the [Nenana River Two Rocks Gorge \(Jonesville Bridge to Healy\)](#) and it was fun. The Nenana sports Class 3 rapids with one Class 4 rapid and the water was frigid. The company gave us dry suits which we gladly wore to protect against the barely melted glacial waters. It would not be fun to swim, but I do not think it is much colder than the Selway river in Idaho. The takeout was in Healy, Alaska and the river gorge was mostly isolated from the highway. In the winter, this river freezes solid, and they use it as a snowmobile road. The run was about 12 miles with rapids named Razorback, Royal Flush and Boxcar. We put in at 6 pm- took out about 9 pm (still light this far north). Flows range from a summer low of 6,000 cfs to a high of 25, 000 cfs. It is running about 9,000 today. I highly recommend taking this whitewater river trip if you visit Denali.





### **Day 10, Wed, Aug 5: Denali National Park**

Early morning start to take a bus into Denali National Park. The sky is obscured by smoke. There are lots of wildfires in this part of Alaska due to the warm and dry weather. No private cars are allowed in the park and we take an old school bus into the park. I am already disappointed. Traveling within the park is very restricted. The reason for these restrictions are because of congestion but I do not see a lot of people visiting. I must be whiney today or just fed up with riding on buses. The only highlight from our bus tour was a humorous presentation given by a Athabascan Native Interpreter. We try to find a trail to hike near the visitor center but fail. I am not particular interested in the park dog sledding demonstration (involves another bus ride). I would not do a park bus tour again but really need to figure out a better plan the next time we visit! In the late afternoon, we try to find a trail to hike. There must be scenic trails around our hotel, but we do not find them. We choose instead to hike down to the river put in and check out the rafting company boats. Pete spies an Avon Super Pro raft and sketches out his next frame set up.



### **Day 11, Thurs, Aug 6: Anchorage**

We get back on the Alaska Train for an ENDLESS (8 hour) train ride back to Anchorage. The weather finally turns to rain, but we spend the day on the train. We see one moose. We arrive in Anchorage and hop on a bus to our Captain Cook hotel. We are tired of train, buses, and people. Tomorrow morning, we fly back to Seattle.

### **Day 12, Fri, Aug 7: Seattle**

Our final day is spent in Seattle where we enjoy a nice afternoon/evening in the downtown wharf area. A delicious crab/seafood dinner at a pier restaurant rounds out a wonderful trip. We leave for home tomorrow and run out of time to visit the Boeing museum. I realize that we began this Alaska trip with negative stereotypes of cruising BUT we really had a fun time. We treated the cruise ship like our floating hotel. The activities we chose were enjoyed immensely. My favorite memories include the Humpback whales, glaciers and seeing Denali. I highly recommend this cruise to see Alaska's coast in an economical way. Our trip provided us a way to scout out what we want to do on a future Alaska trip.



### **Places I would like to spend more time:**

- Juneau
- Skagway
- Haines
- Fairbanks - did not get to visit here
- Talkeetna
- Denali National Park and surrounding area

### **Future Alaska Plans:**

I think we would like to plan a future leisurely trip (~2 months) that includes car camping our way through Alaska. We could swing up the coast of Oregon/Washington and board the Alaska Marine Highway in Prince Rupert, Canada (cheaper to board here rather than Bellingham, Washington). Travel by ferry up to Haines and/or Skagway, then onto Fairbanks (through Haines Junction). Finally, return home via the Alaskan (Alcan) Highway through Canada.

