

BEAUTY & THE BEASTS

The icy Alaskan waters and its wildlife provide sharp contrast to the onboard luxury and warmth of Silversea's Silver Shadow.

Words by **Pamela Wade** Photography by **Pamela & Roy Wade**

Alarmed, the seal slid from the iceberg into the water as we approached, turning to urge her pup to follow her. The shadow of our ship's bow crept across the thick icy slush, towards the small harbour seal, reluctant to enter the frigid sea, lingering on the berg. The mother swirled in agitated circles, the shadow loomed closer, and still closer – “Hot chocolate?” asked the barman, appearing with a tray. “Mulled wine?”

Everyone turned with a pleased murmur and the moment of drama passed, the pup slipping unseen into the water and powering away to safety. Though we were in one of the planet's most inhospitable places, an elemental landscape composed of rock, ice and ocean where whales breached, bears roamed the shore and seals gave birth on ice floes calved from immense glaciers, we were in our own little bubble of civilised comfort.

On Silversea's *Silver Shadow*, we luxuriated in butler-serviced suites, gourmet meals, professional entertainment, original Picasso and Dali artworks on the walls and steaming spa pools on the deck. It was the perfect combination: every desire met against a background of rawest nature. Sailing from the small port of Seward in Alaska down through the Inside Passage to Vancouver brought seven days of spectacular mountain peaks, endless pine forest, rocky islets, magnificent glaciers and small, isolated towns of colourful buildings with even more colourful histories.

LOCAL WILDLIFE

And there were animals, so many animals. Most of them, it seemed at first, were dead. The foyer at the Hotel Seward was a vivid introduction to the local huntin', shootin', fishin' lifestyle, its walls bristling with mounted heads including a moose with antlers over two metres wide and the front half of a golden grizzly bear. The floor space crowded with a fully-grown musk ox, wolverine and several deer.

“People give them to us to display,” the receptionist said mildly as I gaped, not realising it was to become a theme. Fortunately, the excellent Alaska SeaLife Center, housed in a modern building funded by Exxon's settlement after the 1989 oil spill – was full of living creatures, from tiny shrimp to a vast Steller sea lion called Woody, all 450 kilograms of him. Best of all, there were puffins, “northern hemisphere penguins,” according to Andrea at my behind-the-scenes encounter. Polite and dainty, they made the feeding session a delight, taking the fish and krill from my fingers without squabbling. But it was Clingy, the little rhinoceros auklet, who stole the show, nibbling at my shoelace.

Sailing on the *Silver Shadow* that night, the focus swapped to mountains, snow and sea outside and a pillow menu, cocktails and white-uniformed staff inside. It was both bizarre and fun to sit on our private balcony with a nightcap at 10pm in broad daylight, the sun still well above the horizon; though at bedtime, we were glad of the suite's thick curtains.

The *Silver Shadow* is smaller than most cruise ships, with a maximum of just 382 passengers, and so was able to approach the huge Hubbard Glacier the next day. Gliding slowly across Disenchantment Bay through broken ice that clinked against the sides, we were diverted by the seals until the ship stopped and we gazed in wonderment at the wall of ice ahead. It was still a couple of kilometres away, but our perceptions were distorted simply because the scale is so huge: the snout of the glacier is around 11 kilometres wide and 40 storeys high. Even from that distance I could hear the growling and creaking of the ice, an eerie and unsettling sound in that empty landscape.

In the shops at Sitka the next day it was back to the animal theme: reindeer hides for US\$250 (\$272), a wolf skin complete with snarling head US\$400 (\$435). But balance was restored when a catamaran took us from this busy fishing port into the inlet on a wildlife quest. Within minutes we had found a pair of humpback whales resting, then diving, and the captain was delighted to see that well-known local loner Domino had at last found



BEAR FACTS



Black bears are more common than grizzlies along Alaska's coast, and are most frequently seen during the salmon run which begins around mid-June, when they gorge on the high fat fish to gain the weight needed to carry them through the long winter. They also eat grass, clover and leaves, and feast on berries in season.

Black bears prefer to keep their distance from people, but their fondness for the high-calorie food scraps dropped as litter can get them into trouble, and bear-aware programmes are taught in schools.

Hunting leaves cubs orphaned every year and rehabilitation centres such as the one at the town of Sitka aim to re-home bears where possible.



Clockwise from top left: Sea otters happily drifting by are a highlight for passengers who happen to be on deck; Alex Calkins, naturalist on the Tracy Arm excursion, holds an iceberg he has netted from the fjord. He explains that its clarity is caused by extreme compression; passengers enjoy the novelty of lying on the sundeck next to the pool as the *Silver Shadow* glides through the thick, icy slush near the tongue of the majestic Hubbard Glacier; a landscape of ice and snow; seals provide comic relief; the *Silver Shadow* makes for an impressive sight.



FACT FILE



The cruise: The 382-guest *Silver Shadow's* 2014 Alaska season will run from May to September. The *Silver Shadow's* small-ship agility allows it greater access to secluded waterways and Alaska's spectacular landscapes. A seven-day cruise between Vancouver and Seward, calling at Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, Sitka and Hubbard Glacier is priced from US\$3450.

Silversea's fares include all-suite accommodation with butler service; gourmet meals; complimentary wines, champagne and spirits served throughout the ship; and all gratuities. Silversea guests can take part in pre- and post-cruise land adventures including a trip to Denali National Park, a floatplane ride to bear country and a tour of the Canadian Rockies.

For more information contact Silversea Cruises on 1300 306 872 or visit silversea.com.

Before and after: The Hotel Seward is friendly and comfortable, if you can get past the stuffed menagerie in the foyer: hotelsewardalaska.com.

In Vancouver, Fairmont has three luxurious and central hotels, two of them close to the cruise ship terminal. See fairmont.com/destinations/vancouver-hotels.

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a friend. There was no doubt though that the high point for everyone else was finding a raft of female sea otters floating in a bed of kelp, their pups riding safe and dry on their chests. Further along the pewter waters, under the classic volcanic cone of Mount Edgumbe, there was another cluster of otters, males this time and bolder, lifting their heads to eye us as they too floated on their backs, their bare paws out of the water for warmth.

As the salmon run was yet to start there were no bears to be seen, but we fixed that with a visit to a rehabilitation centre just outside town where five rescued black bears lived, happily it seemed, inside huge concrete tanks. At each port we had a wide choice of excursions, ranging from taking a helicopter flight onto a glacier for a spin in a dog-sled to watching a lumberjack show. For me, the best part came after sailing through the night, when we were met next morning by a local boat for a trip along Tracy Arm fjord to the two Sawyer Glaciers.

The mighty Hubbard had been impressive, but these were utterly beautiful. Passing more seals lolling on icebergs, we crept close enough to appreciate the fabulous deep sapphire blue of the ice against the milky turquoise of the sea. Pieces calved off in apparent slow motion, the "white thunder" echoing off the bare cliffs in the deep silence of the valley. "We could surf a small tsunami," assured Alex, the knowledgeable onboard naturalist. "But if a really big chunk broke off, we'd high-tail it right out of here." That wasn't the only danger. "Have you heard about shooters?" he asked. "They're pieces that break off underneath and suddenly erupt from the water. Not good if you're kayaking in the wrong place."

We were astonished at the variety of icebergs: some white and sculpted into bizarre shapes, some an unearthly blue, others transparent. Alex netted a small one of these for us to inspect. We stroked its smooth surface and looked at the air bubbles trapped inside. "Could be 500 years old, that air, could be 10,000," he said, slinging it carelessly back over the side.

There were two black bears on the way back, one of them cinnamon-coloured, busily scraping mussels off the rocks below the high-tide mark. We saw waterfalls both frozen and flowing, round bare domes poking through the spruce and hemlock trees, perfect reflections of snowy peaks in the still water. It was almost a disappointment to return to civilisation at Juneau, even though it's hardly a metropolis.

CHARMING CAPITAL

The state capital Juneau is inaccessible by road and, despite the cruise ships in the harbour and throngs of tourists along the streets, it still has a frontier feel. At the foot of a mountain riddled with gold-mining tunnels, it's seen some action in its time, which continues at the Red Dog Saloon with its batwing doors, sawdust floor, bartender in braces and a stuffed bear among many other animals on its walls. But their beer is good, especially the Alaskan White Ale.

The next day brought 30,000 horses – or their memory, at least. The White Pass and Yukon Railroad from Skagway to Yukon follows the trail of the "stampede" full of gold lust who in 1897 toiled 800 unforgiving kilometres through the mountains to the Klondike goldfields. A half-day trip from the ship took us by steam train along a spectacular piece of hands-on engineering; the railway that replaced the steep and muddy track where so many horses fell, exhausted, that it became known as Dead Horse Trail. Though their story was sad, the bridges and tunnels and dizzying drops made this an unforgettable excursion.

At pretty, colourful Ketchikan there was excitement of a different sort: eight ziplines through the treetops, the longest 260 metres of squealing fun, 40 metres above the ground. "There are more black bears on this island than people," someone commented as we stood at eye-level with an eagle's nest, looking down to where bears sometimes grazed in a meadow. There were none to be seen, but back in town there was a stuffed one rearing in the furrier's, where a woman dithered over which thick beaver pelt to buy for her new pair of moccasins. Stroking the soft furs hanging from the rails – mink, fox, rabbit, wolf, lynx – I could see the attraction, though personally I'd rather the animals were still inside them.

One more night's sail brought us, reluctantly, to Vancouver. The *Silver Shadow* slipped under the Lions Gate Bridge as I lay in my soft bed for the last time, breathing in the lavender scent of my silken pillow. It had been a wonderful cruise, as much due to the ship itself, and its friendly crew, as for the dazzling scenery and storybook history of the places we visited. I would do it all again in a moment.



Clockwise from top left: Returning to Skagway from White Pass, the 1947 steam engine chugs beneath peaks in the Coast Mountain range; in Juneau a salmon weather vane reflects the importance of the fish in local life; Ketchikan's Creek Street has a colourful history, known in the past as the place "where men, as well as salmon, come to spawn"; Native American culture is represented by totem poles like this one in Ketchikan's Whale Park; Ketchikan is notable for its sea plane traffic; the longest zipline in Ketchikan runs for 260 metres.

