

# Into the wilderness

Rainforests, glaciers and pretty towns come together in Alaska, finds **Laura French** on one of Princess Cruises' new round-trip voyages from Vancouver



**T**he engine purrs as we speed across the water. To my left, snow-topped mountains rise above a sea of skyscrapers, carpeted in olive-green trees; beneath us, the water gently ripples, glittering opal beneath a pool-blue sky. It sounds like your average boat trip – except we're about to take off from the water and soar over the harbour in a seaplane, Bond-style. Soon we're drifting up into the sky above a panorama of cascading mountains, forested islands and doll's-house neighbourhoods. Then an ocean of skyscrapers opens out like the pages of a pop-up book. We fly over this surreal scene for 20 minutes – tiny boats bobbing in the harbour, water sparkling under the glare of the sun – then bump back onto the surface with an almighty splash as the plane comes to a halt. It's a memorable welcome to Vancouver, and just the first of many memorable experiences.

## URBAN ADVENTURES

I'm in the city before heading out on an Alaska voyage with Princess Cruises. The line began offering round-trip sailings from Vancouver in May in response to demand, lowering airfares and giving guests more time to spend in the city (its previous Alaska cruises sailed from Vancouver to Seattle or Anchorage, or round-trip from San Francisco).

The seaplane experience is far from the only adventure I have in the city. The next day, we head out on an e-bike tour along the waterfront, following a serene, car-free cycle path that meanders peacefully along the seawall and around Stanley Park – a sprawling stretch of greenery that lays claim to being one of the largest urban parks in North America.

Later we stop by the Bloedel Conservatory, a tropical greenhouse where pastel-pink cockatoos and ruby-red parrots flit among tropical plants ➤

PICTURE: Princess Cruises



# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | ALASKA

### ONBOARD ACTIVITIES

Here's what clients can expect on their Princess Cruises ship, as part of the line's North to Alaska programme

#### 🌀 **Enrichment sessions:**

Clients can enjoy lectures from mountaineers, adventurers and acclaimed writers. Our cruise included a talk from dog musher Libby Riddles – the first woman to win the 1,100-mile Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race – and an intriguing session on life in the Alaskan wilderness by naturalist Michael Modzelewski.

#### 🌀 **Meet-and-greets:**

The line hosts various meet-and-greets, from park rangers and Alaskan lumberjacks to award-winning photographers, who'll share their first-hand tips and tricks.

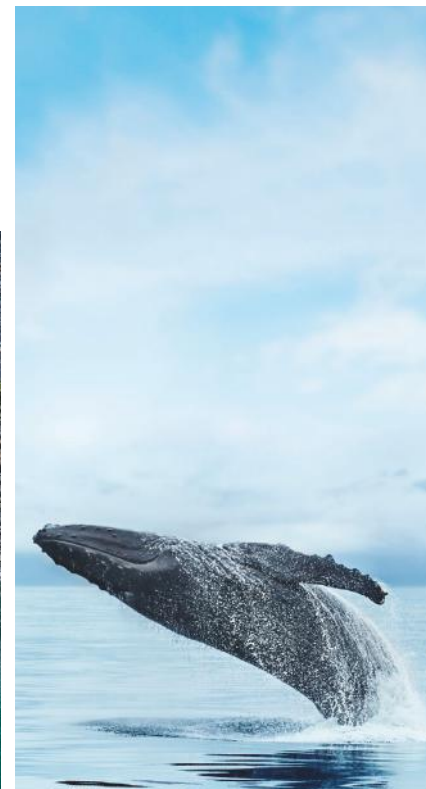
#### 🌀 **All-day entertainment:**

As with the line's other ships, *Royal Princess's* Princess Theater hosts regular shows (think Broadway-style productions, magicians and comedians) alongside a daily roster of activities, from ice-carving demonstrations to Zumba, craft activities, art auctions and more.

🌀 **Husky puppies:** On cruises that dock in Skagway, guests can meet husky puppies and their mushers (pictured).



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hubbard Glacier; humpback whale; grizzly bears in Disenchantment Bay PICTURES: Paul Nordmann; Marc Katzman; Shutterstock/John Chitty, Nicola Pulham



and palm trees. Then we visit the Capilano Suspension Bridge Park – a lush expanse of rainforest home to a series of swinging bridges, where Douglas fir trees tower overhead and grey granite cliffs plunge into a deep canyon, cut through by a rushing river.

### GLACIERS AND WHALES

It's a teasing glimpse into the nature-filled adventures to come when we board our ship the following day and head for the wilds of Alaska.

First up on our itinerary is Juneau, the state capital, reachable only by air or sea. Home to a population of 30,000, this small, laid-back city is the gateway to the Mendenhall Glacier, one of a string of glaciers that make up the Juneau Ice Field, which covers an impressive 1,500 square miles (guests on the cruise can choose to get up close to the glacier on an excursion).

It's also a hotspot for whale watching, so I opt for a boat trip in search of these elusive creatures. We're told around 600 humpbacks grace the shores from April to November, following their 3,000-mile journey from Hawaii; orcas are occasionally spotted too.

Guests are "almost guaranteed" to see humpbacks, according to our guide, and we aren't disappointed. After an hour of scanning the empty, lulling sea, we spot a dark, inky figure in the distance; then we watch

“We see glistening whales, honey-hued sea lions and white-faced bald eagles, and I'm in awe of everything around me

as a fountain of spray splutters into the air, before the glistening body disappears back into the ripples again.

A few minutes later, we get closer still and glimpse a heart-shaped tail dive into the water in an iconic, postcard moment. Returning to shore, we see honey-hued sea lions slumped on the cliffs and white-faced bald eagles flying overhead, and I'm left feeling thoroughly in awe of everything around me.

### REMOTE PORTS OF CALL

That's a feeling I grow used to over the next few days, as we sail across vast stretches of increasingly remote ocean.

Especially memorable is Sitka, a picture-perfect town set on its own island and sandwiched between layers of snow-dusted mountains. From here, we head out on an optional tour, 'Sitka's Great Adventure', drifting across a mirror-flat bay in a small fishing boat before embarking on a scenic hike in the Tongass National Forest – the biggest ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## CRUISE | ALASKA

### ASK THE expert

#### NICK HUGHES sales director UK & Ireland, Princess Cruises

“Our trade partners have been asking Princess Cruises for Alaska itineraries that sail round-trip from Vancouver, so we listened. Flight prices are more appealing as guests can fly round-trip, and the city is a fantastic destination with so much to offer – from cycling around Stanley Park to taking a seaplane over the harbour. The ships dock right in the waterfront, and there are plenty of great hotels close to the ship’s terminal; we recommend the Fairmont Waterfront, which is beautiful and only a stone’s throw away.

These new voyages allow guests to experience the beautiful city of Vancouver both pre and post-cruise, so they can truly make the most of their time there.”

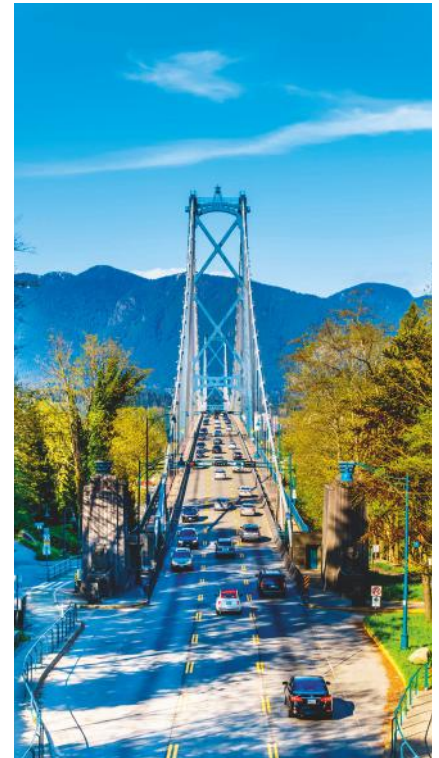


### BOOK IT

Princess Cruises’ eight-day Inside Passage (Roundtrip Vancouver) itinerary starts at \$599 (cruise-only) for a Standard Interior stateroom, departing April 30, 2024, on *Grand Princess*. For an extra £50 per person per day, guests can opt for an all-inclusive Princess Plus package, including select alcoholic drinks, unlimited juices and smoothies, two fitness classes and Wi-Fi. A Princess Premier package for an extra £65 per day includes two speciality meals, a wider selection of drinks, unlimited fitness classes and other additions. [princess.com](http://princess.com)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sitka; Lions Gate Bridge, Vancouver; stateroom, *Royal Princess*  
PICTURES: Shutterstock/Jniphotos, Harry Beugelink; Paul Nordmann



temperate rainforest in the world, covering most of southeast Alaska.

Spruce, cedar and hemlock trees surround us as we amble along a bed of squishy moss. We stop at a majestic waterfall – a plume of white water gleaming against the dusty green forest – then reach a lake so still and serene it’s hypnotic. I head out on a kayak across the lake, floating silently among the surroundings – all bushy fir trees mirrored in the water, and mountain silhouettes blanketed in forest – and leave feeling happily dazed.

Just as charming is Ketchikan, where I try an adventure karting

“The sight is quintessential Alaska – all pristine wilderness and silent bliss, where nature reigns supreme

excursion that has me bumping and lurching my way along a wilderness track in a hefty four-wheeled buggy. Deer dart in and out of the trees as we learn about the creatures that inhabit these picturesque landscapes, among them black bears, brown bears, moose and wolves. It’s an enthralling, memorable way to see the region.

### GLACIAL WATERS

But the ultimate highlight for me comes when we’re on the ship, sailing around the Hubbard Glacier – a long, narrow wall of jagged

ice that stretches 76 miles from the Yukon to the US. Monochrome mountains dressed in snow surround us at every turn as we approach this otherworldly spectacle, icebergs dotting the milky-teal water. As we get closer, chunks of bright aqua-blue and dazzling white come into view, rough and jagged like a row of giant teeth.

We linger here for the following hour or so as the captain turns the ship around for 360-degree views, postcard scenes all around. It’s an extraordinary sight, and the quintessential image of Alaska I’d long pictured – all pristine wilderness and silent, secluded bliss, where nature reigns supreme and humans are few and far between.

Its sheer emptiness feels a world away from the bustle of Vancouver, but there’s a reverence for nature that runs through both. For clients wanting to combine urban life with a remote wilderness escape that’s truly off the beaten track, you’d be hard-pressed to find better. **TW**