

CRUISE SECTION



FROM TOP: KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE; RALPH LEE HOPKINS; LINDBLAT EXPEDITIONS

Cruise passengers on Alaska's Yanert Glacier; an orca group off Vancouver Island, British Columbia; a 62-passenger ship navigates an Alaskan narrow.



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

On the Gulf of Oman, Muscat is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East, and was an outpost for the kings of Hormuz in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Cold passage

In outsize Alaska, smaller gets you closer

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SEATTLE — Witness a pod of orcas playing in a bay in the San Juan Islands. Trace Lewis and Clark's route along the Columbia River. Watch bald eagles soaring over a fiord where you spend the day paddling among icebergs, or relaxing on deck while your ship's naturalist tells tales of Alaska's Inside Passage.

Dozens of ships cruise the protected waterways of the Pacific Northwest each year, taking passengers into a region populated by old-growth forests, more bald eagles than seagulls (or so it seems), and some of North America's least tainted wilderness. A handful of cruises begin or end in San Francisco, but Seattle, Anchorage, and Vancouver, British Columbia, are the Northwest's main home ports.

"Ten years ago, we launched six ships out of Seattle," says Peter McGraw of the Port of Seattle. "This year, we're expecting 223 ships to begin their Alaskan journeys here."

Aboard a big ship with 1,500 to 3,000 passengers you typically have a wealth of dining choices; casinos, Broadway-style musicals, and other stage shows, and an extensive lineup of programs designed to keep your children entertained. Many cruise companies also offer discounted fares that may include free air fare.

Small to midsize ships, on the other hand, can get into smaller ports and inlets, provide more personalized service (one cruise line has a 1:2 crew-to-passenger ratio), and get close enough to see the eyes of a bird perched on an iceberg. And they often have the flexibility to linger in a spot to whale watch or view wildlife.

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Warm strait

Mideast culture amid modern ambitions

BY CLAUDIA CAPOS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PERSIAN GULF — Melodie O'Connell has spent much of her life sailing the high seas in search of adventure. In mid-January, the globetrotting grandmother from Fort Worth booked passage aboard Royal Caribbean's Brilliance of the Seas for its inaugural cruise of the Persian Gulf.

The weeklong voyage began and ended in Dubai, a city-state in the United Arab Emirates that has captured world attention with its lavish spending habits and boom-to-bust real estate market. The cruise around the southeastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula included four ports of call: Abu Dhabi and Fujairah, also city-states in the UAE; Muscat, Oman; and Mina Sulman (Mina Khalifa), Bahrain.

Although O'Connell's children initially scoffed at her plans to go to "that dangerous place," their fears were overblown. "When I return, I'll tell them that it's nothing like what we Americans picture it to be," O'Connell said.

"There is a high level of curiosity about these ports of call," said Gordon Whatman, the ship's cruise director. He said Royal Caribbean's decision to enter the region this year reflected the line's global expansion plans and desire to offer exciting new itineraries.

The Brilliance of the Seas remained moored in Dubai for the first and final nights of the cruise, serving as a floating luxury hotel and restaurant. Passengers disembarked to take bus tours of the city, sip afternoon tea with the glitterati at the seven-star Burj Al Arab hotel, or shop for fashions at the marble-bedecked Dubai

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EXPLORE NEW ENGLAND



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Antiques are a collective passion in tiny Woodbury, Conn. M5



MEG PIER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Cranberry bogs are a feast for the eyes at fall harvest. M5