

# Old and new, luxurious and mysterious

## ► PERSIAN GULF

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Mall and Mall of the Emirates.

Leaving Dubai, the ship sailed through the Strait of Hormuz into the Gulf of Oman to reach its first port of call, Muscat, on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula. Two Portuguese fortresses, Jelali and Merani, flank the rocky coves around the capital city, lending a medieval aura. Nearby, a supersized white frankincense burner stands atop a flat promontory like a Martian spacecraft. White sugar-cube buildings cling at the water's edge, dwarfed by chiseled purple mountains in the distance.

At the pier, drummers and bagpipers welcomed us to one of the Middle East's oldest cities. Muscat gained prominence during the 14th and 15th centuries as an outpost for the powerful kings of Hormuz. It was conquered in the 16th century by the Portuguese, who were pushed out of their stronghold two centuries later by the expanding British Empire, which signed a treaty of friendship with the Omanis.

A tour bus carried us through the exclusive Shati Al Qurum residential neighborhood. In the distance, the gleaming white onion-shaped domes of the Grand Mosque, commissioned by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, loomed through the trees. Non-Muslims in conservative attire are allowed to tour the mosque during special visiting hours. Stepping through the heavily guarded main gate, we followed marble-paved walkways to the main prayer room, where all eyes were riveted on the immense gold dome and eight-ton gold and Swarovski crystal chandelier. Massive archways cast shadows on the intricately hand-knotted Iranian prayer mat and mihrab, or prayer niche, framed by a border of Koranic verses.

At the Mutrah souk, once a big trading center for camel caravans traveling to Oman, shopkeepers hawked Persian rugs, Pashmina scarves, Arabian perfume, and gold and silver jewelry from the doorways of their honeycomb shops. Afterward, a stroll through the private Bait Al Zubair museum to admire ornate



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Sunset over the mountainous interior of Fujairah, one of the seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates.

## ► PORTS OF CALL

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Omani swords and khanjars, or daggers, and a photo stop at the Al Alam Palace, the sultan's official residence, rounded out our introduction to Oman.

The next day, the ship docked at Fujairah, the youngest and most geographically rugged of the seven emirates in the UAE. Sandwiched between the stark Hajar Mountains and the coast, Fujairah is a natural jumping-off spot for safaris in the desert, mountains, and valleys, as well as a popular recreational area for snorkeling, swimming, cruises, and beach activities. It is also famous for its Friday afternoon bull-butting competition, a throwback to the 16th-century Portuguese who brought the sport from Europe.

Local tours of Fujairah's east coast and mountainous interior transported passengers back into history, with stops at the 15th-century Bidya Mosque, one of the emirates' oldest mosques, and the serene 250-year-old Al Hayl castle, once the palace of the Al

Sharqiyyin ruling family. We caught a local taxi into the bustling city center and bargained for 22-karat gold bangles at the small gold souk.

The ship retraced its route through the strait and sailed south in the Persian Gulf to reach Abu Dhabi, the UAE's capital, where morning sunshine glistened off construction cranes poised above skeletal downtown skyscrapers. On the quayside, a greeting party of men in ankle-length gray garments called kandouras twirled thin switch sticks and beckoned passengers to join them in traditional dancing. Others displayed prized peregrine falcons on outstretched gloved arms; women cloaked in black abayas painted lacy henna designs on female passengers' hands.

Abu Dhabi's reputation as the "Manhattan of the Gulf" reflects its island setting, gleaming skyscrapers, and financial and political prominence. The oil-rich city-state also showcases considerable Western-style opulence, including the Yas Marina Circuit Formula 1 race course, the Abu Dhabi Golf Club, with its 27-hole

championship course and falcon-shaped clubhouse, and the exquisite 400-room Emirates Palace Hotel, where a "Gold to Go" machine dispenses small gold bars or coins with custom designs.

The Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque is among Abu Dhabi's crown jewels. More than 80 Moroccan-style white marble-clad domes and four gold-tipped minarets embellish the \$500 million complex, which spans five football fields. As we walked through the landscaped grounds to admire the mosque's grandeur, we heard Friday prayers echoing within the cavernous halls. Afterward, we stopped at the Heritage Village, a replica of a Bedouin encampment, to watch artisans at work.

The following day, massive container ships glided by the Brilliance of the Seas as the ship neared the sliver of shoreline demarcating the island kingdom of Bahrain, a strategic trade center that has been conquered and controlled by numerous empires over the centuries. It is now a hereditary constitutional monarchy ruled by the Al Khalifa royal family.

A tour bus took us from the terminal at Mina Khalifa, one of the Middle East's newest and largest ports, over the Sheikh Khalifa Bin Salman causeway to the capital city of Manama. During the ride, Louise and Gary Thompson, of Stevens Point, Wis., recounted their first few days aboard the Brilliance of the Seas, which sailed from Barcelona to Dubai one week before the start of the gulf cruise. This repositioning voyage routed the ship through the Suez Canal and Red Sea into the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean before it reached the Strait of Hormuz and finally docked in Dubai.

"We went through the corridor [the Gulf of Aden] with helicopters flying overhead," said the Thompsons, both retired educators. "A military patrol intercepted a pirate boat with six men aboard who were trying to commandeer a freighter right behind us." It ended uneventfully for the cruise ship, but it was a highlight of this first Persian Gulf sailing.

Bahrain, once a pearl-diving center, struck oil in June 1932. At the Jabal Ad Dukhan No. 1 oil well, now marked by a commem-

## If you go . . .

Royal Caribbean's seven-night cruise aboard the **Brilliance of the Seas** sails round-trip from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and features **ports of call** in Muscat, Oman; Fujairah, UAE; Abu Dhabi, UAE; and Mina Sulman, Bahrain. Cruises **run from** Jan. 24-March 21, 2011; and from Nov. 21, 2011, through March 19, 2012. Per person prices range from \$689 for an **inside cabin** to \$1,499 for a **junior suite** to \$8,205 for a **royal suite**, but may vary according to **cruise date**. For details, go to [www.royalcaribbean.com](http://www.royalcaribbean.com).

orative plaque, we peered into a deep trench bristling with pipes before visiting the adjacent Dar An Naft Oil Museum. There, photos and scale-model exhibits portray the story of the country's early oil exploration. Nearby, a legion of writhing steel oil pipelines crisscrossed the barren, rocky desert where residents had erected Bedouin-style tents for weekend retreats.

Our next stop, the Bahrain International Circuit, is well known to fans worldwide who attend the annual Bahrain Grand Prix, Australian V8 Supercar races, national and international drag racing, and other events. From the Sakhir Tower's rooftop terrace, the BIC's eight tracks curled like ribbon candy around futuristic grandstands. Bahrain's other favorite pastime, camel racing, warranted a brief stop at a sheikh's camel farm.

A shroud of haze partially obscured the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper (2,716.5 feet), as the Brilliance of the Seas returned to Dubai and reclaimed its berth at Port Rashid. During an evening gathering, the ship's captain, Herman Zini, an Argentina-born navigator, commented on the significance of the inaugural voyage. "You are making history with us."

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# Big or small, views and activities, from yoga to kayaking

## ► ALASKA

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Many of the cruise lines, regardless of size, offer "cruise-tours," ship and shore combos that provide a more affordable way to tour the cities where you embark or disembark, and to explore the Northwest's great interior. In Alaska, you'll be transported through the wilderness by bus or glass-domed train.

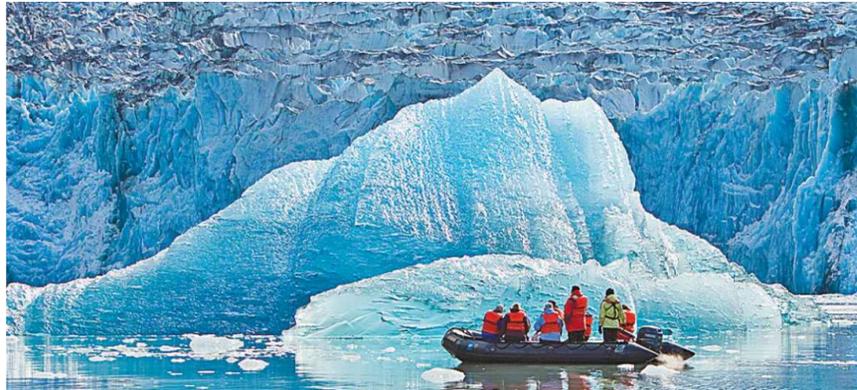
Here's a look at what's new or unique for Pacific Northwest cruises in 2011.

**Disney Cruise Line** will offer its first-ever sailings to Alaska next year. Departing out of Vancouver, the 2,700-passenger Disney Wonder will make 18 seven-night voyages to Tracy Arm Fjord, Skagway, Juneau, and Ketchikan. The ship's new Outlook Cafe has floor-to-ceiling, curved-glass windows.

**Oceania Cruises**, which offers five-star gourmet cuisine and a country-club feel, will also run its first Alaska cruises, with 10- to 14-day sailings from San Francisco and Vancouver. The 684-passenger Regatta will also stop at less-visited outposts, such as Kodiak, where you can paddle within eyeshot of sea lions and humpbacks while circling an island, and Homer, a village on the Kenai Peninsula near Alaska's first state park, at Kachemak Bay.

Oceania's sister brand, the ultra-luxury **Regent Seven Seas Cruises**, will operate two new 12-day cruises between San Francisco and Seward aboard the 490-passenger Seven Seas Navigator. Highlights include a "chef's table" in Ketchikan, when you'll enjoy a five-course meal created by your own personal chef at a private club overlooking the harbor, and a chance to explore old-growth forest on a remote island in Tongass National Forest. Regent offers unlimited free shore excursions at each port of call.

**Carnival Cruise Lines** will run seven-day round-trip voyages from Seattle aboard the 2,124-passenger Carnival Spirit, stopping at Skagway, Juneau, Ketchikan, Victoria (British Columbia's capital), and Tracy Arm Fjord. Shore excursions include heli-



MICHAEL S. NOLAN

Lindblad Expeditions ship passengers explore Alaska's Tracy Arm wilderness area in a Zodiac.

copter flight-seeing, rain forest canopy tours, and alpine snorkeling, when you immerse yourself in the salty waters near Ketchikan and snorkel over kelp forests.

Despite the name, **Royal Caribbean International** will run 34 Alaskan voyages, including seven-night, one-way journeys between Vancouver and Seward via the Inside Passage and Hubbard Glacier, and seven-night round-trip cruises from Seattle with stops in Juneau, Skagway, and Victoria, and a visit to Tracy Arm Fjord. Royal Caribbean's 2,500-passenger ships have rock-climbing walls, self-leveling pool tables, and mini-golf courses.

**Princess Cruises** will offer 104 Alaskan sailings aboard ships carrying from 1,970 to 2,670 passengers. Choose from three itineraries: the seven-day Voyage of the Glaciers route between Vancouver and Whittier (near Anchorage) via the Gulf of Alaska; a seven-day journey up the Inside Passage from Seattle; and a 10-day round-trip Inside Passage journey from San Francisco. A new shore excursion offers the opportunity to join a scientific expedition, and a new on-your-own option lets you create a personalized land itinerary at discounted rates.

**Norwegian Cruise Line's** 2,300-passenger ships run seven-day round-trip cruises from Seattle via Glacier Bay or the Inside Passage; five- and seven-day reposi-

tioning voyages between Los Angeles and Vancouver via the Inside Passage; and seven-day cruises between Vancouver and Seattle via Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, and Prince Rupert, B.C. The ship's 6,700-square-foot, three-bedroom villas have private gardens, hot tubs, balconies, and living areas.

**Silversea Cruises'** 382-passenger luxury ship, Silver Shadow, offers seven- to 10-day voyages between Vancouver and Seward or Anchorage. All of the ship's spacious suites come with ocean views, a choice of nine types of pillows, and handmade chocolates and chilled champagne as standard offerings; most suites also have verandas. New land tours include a chance to meet Martin Buser, who holds the record for the fastest time in the 1,049-mile Iditarod dogsled race.

**Lindblad Expeditions**, known for its small-ship, luxury expeditions, offers 12-day, one-way cruises from Seattle to Sitka, exploring the San Juan Islands, the Inside Passage, and fjords and glaciers along the way. The 62-passenger expedition ships also run eight-day one-way sailings from Juneau to Sitka, cruising Tracy Arm Fjord en route. All voyages in May will have a National Geographic photographer on board, who will offer tips.

**InnerSea Discoveries**, a new cruise operator, launches its adventure trips in May, offering

one- to two-week voyages between Juneau and Ketchikan or Seattle that avoid traditional ports of call in favor of true wilderness exploration. Go spelunking in the largest mapped cave in North America, trek six hours (round trip) to a waterfall and alpine lake, or camp on a wilderness island. Geared to active travelers, these 49-passenger cruises also offer stand-up paddleboarding and other activities as soft or hard-core as you like.

InnerSea Discoveries' sister company, **American Safari Cruises**, has 12- to 36-passenger luxury yachts that run eight-day round-trip cruises from Juneau via Glacier Bay National Park, where you'll be the only cruise-based kayakers paddling these icy waters. It also runs an eight-day one-way journey up the Columbia and Snake rivers, stopping for private wine tours and tastings along the way.

A small operator, **Fantasy Cruises** takes a maximum of 650 passengers cruising the entire season. It runs nine-day trips between Sitka and Petersburg, a small Norwegian fishing village just north of Ketchikan, from May through August, and eight- or nine-day trips to the San Juan Islands or Columbia River in September and October. The 32-passenger ship has 17 staterooms, including two for single travelers, and stays put at night.

"We carry 8,000 pounds of

## If you go . . .

Per person, based on double occupancy, to Alaska.

### American Safari Cruises

888-862-8881

[americansafaricruises.com](http://americansafaricruises.com)

Rates start at \$4,895 for 8-day round-trip Juneau cruises, and \$4,295 for the 8-day Columbia and Snake river cruises.

### Carnival Cruise Lines

800-227-6482

[www.carnival.com](http://www.carnival.com)

Round-trip cruises from Seattle start at \$709.

### Crystal Cruises

888-799-4625

[www.crystalcruises.com](http://www.crystalcruises.com)

Promotional two-for-one cruise fares start at \$2,695 and include \$500 shipboard spending credits. Book by Sept. 30 and get free air fare from Boston.

### Disney Cruise Line

888-325-2500

[www.disneycruise.com](http://www.disneycruise.com)

Rates for the 7-night Alaskan itinerary start at \$939.

### Fantasy Cruises

800-234-3861

[www.smallalaskaship.com](http://www.smallalaskaship.com)

Rates for 9-day Alaskan cruises start at \$4,495; 15-day Seattle to Sitka at \$5,995; 9-day Columbia River, 8-day San Juan Islands, at \$2,995, including taxes, food, drink, excursions.

### InnerSea Discoveries

877-901-1009

[www.innerseadiscoveries.com](http://www.innerseadiscoveries.com)

Rates for 8-day/15-day cruises start at \$1,795/\$2,995.

### Lindblad Expeditions

800-397-3348

batteries on board," says Jeff Behrens, owner of Fantasy Cruises and the ship's captain. "At 9 or 9:30 p.m., we turn off the generators and run on batteries. It's like dragging a really peaceful B&B out onto the water."

By day, you may visit a remote lighthouse just north of Petersburg, or stop at Tenakee Springs,

[www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com)

Rates for 12-day Seattle-Sitka cruise start at \$7,690, 8-day Juneau-Sitka at \$5,990.

### Norwegian Cruise Lines

888-625-2784

[www.ncl.com](http://www.ncl.com)

Rates for 7-day round-trip Seattle cruises start at \$639; 7-day Seattle-Vancouver route, \$569; and 5- to 7-day LA-Vancouver route, \$389 and \$409.

### Oceania Cruises

800-531-5658

[www.oceaniacruises.com](http://www.oceaniacruises.com)

Offers two-for-one fares and free air fare from Boston; rates for 10-day cruises start at \$3,499.

### Princess

800-774-6237

[www.princess.com](http://www.princess.com)

Gulf of Alaska and Inside Passage cruises begin at \$649; cruise tours start at \$948.

### Regent Seven Seas Cruises

800-285-1835

[www.rssc.com](http://www.rssc.com)

Offers two-for-one fares starting at \$4,599, early booking savings of up to \$3,000, complimentary excursions, and free round-trip flights from Boston.

### Royal Caribbean International

888-307-8401

[www.royalcaribbean.com](http://www.royalcaribbean.com)

Rates for 7-night Vancouver-Seward cruise and Seattle round-trip route start at \$649.

### Silversea Cruises

877-760-9052

[www.silversea.com](http://www.silversea.com)

Rates for 7-day voyages start at \$3,558 and include free round-trip economy-class air fare from Boston, based on availability.

a village with natural mineral springs and a population of 95.

"It's real Alaska," says Behrens. "It gets some float planes, but not many people go there. The bakery opens just for us when we visit."

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