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Northern exposure

Alaskan cruises offer spectacular scenery - and prices. But take a ferry instead and you'll not only save money but get to know the locals, too. Diane Selkirk sets sail

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Passengers take in the view of the Coast Mountains in Alaska from a ferry. Photograph: Rich Reid/National Geographic/Getty

I stood on the deck and watched the scene unfold. Green-velvet mountains rose straight from the sea, while in the distance a group of whales surfaced. Beside me, I heard a woman gasp: "What are those?" The answer - "Humpbacks" chorused three fellow passengers. "See the small dorsal?" one voice added. "Watch for the breach."

The moment was typical of any cruise to Alaska - but the ship was different. Sure, we had a cabin, and even deckchairs, but we'd intentionally skipped the fancy cruise ship (and the fancy price) and were making our way north by ferry.

The journey, through northern British Columbia and southern Alaska, winds over 805 miles, past thousands of islands, inlets and fjords, and has become famous for its rich marine life and glacier-capped mountains.

The number of cruise ships plying this route has surged in the past 20 years - they now carry more than one million tourists a year through the protected waters of the Inside Passage. But when I was growing up on Vancouver Island in the 1970s and 80s, pretty much the only people who headed north were on their way to logging camps and fishing villages, and the ferries carrying these rural migrants were far from luxurious.

It could be because I was raised as an islander and many of my earliest (and best) memories are of trips on some of BC Ferries' 25 routes, but when I decided to take a break from our Vancouver life and visit the north with my husband, my daughter Maia and two friends, it had to be by ferry.

As the popularity of cruising has grown, BC Ferries and Alaska State Ferries have realised that not all of the 250,000 people who ride the northern routes each year want, or can afford, to do so on a luxury cruise ship. So both companies now offer a variety of

fares and flexible route options.

It was an early June morning, and not yet light, when we drove on to the BC Ferries' M/V Northern Adventure. We boarded in Port Hardy, at the northern end of Vancouver Island and were bound for Prince Rupert, 315 miles north. Despite the hour I was excited. "Just be aware, it's not a cruise ship," I warned my brood, remembering the utilitarian styling of the ferries of my childhood.

But this was a posh vessel with a variety of lounges (some with movies), multiple restaurants (serving everything from grilled salmon to Thai curries), a children's play area and an impressive gift shop, and it caught me off guard. As quickly as I could, I had headed out on deck.

"Humpback? Is that the same as a killer whale?" the woman asked. I moved away as answers came from knowledgeable local voices and wondered when tourists had begun to outnumber the hunters, loggers and fishermen who rode these waters when I was a kid.

Countless glacier-fed waterfalls tumbled down from the mountains. At times the channel between an island and the mainland would narrow and we drew so close to the falls we could feel the spray. Then the channel would widen, we'd round the next bend, and a tiny village or an abandoned logging camp would appear, clinging to a rocky shore and overshadowed by mountains dark green with fir, pine and spruce.

Fifteen hours and several whale and dolphin sightings later, we saw the twinkling lights of civilization, and soon the ferry was threading its way into the busy fishing harbour of Prince Rupert, a town of 14,600 people on BC's north coast 40km from the Alaskan border. Here we drove ashore (our ship was returning south) and headed to the Prince Rupert RV Campsite, where we set up our tent trailer for two days' stay.

The Tsimshian First Nations people have inhabited the region around Prince Rupert for over 10,000 years. Despite its history, Prince Rupert, with its harbour full of fishing boats and bars full of loggers, always struck me as one of those ports you visit on your way to somewhere more remarkable. I assumed the only reason it was inhabited was because it's on one of the rare flat sections on the north coast. It also rains so much that Environment Canada ranks Prince Rupert as the soggiest city in Canada.

During our stay it rained so hard that the rivers outside town overflowed and it looked as though we might be cut off. But the townsfolk continued as before, seemingly oblivious to their plight. And we were surprised to find the place still had bags of charm.

This is the supply hub for the region, and providing stores and services for northerners is a priority. But Cow Bay, with its pretty collection of shops and restaurants that overlook the harbour, is a favourite with tourists. Nearby, the Museum of Northern BC occupies a modern version of a traditional longhouse and gives an excellent regional overview. Beginning with the ice age, we explored a time line that emphasised First Nations' culture.

Next we headed out of town to the North Pacific Historic Fishing Village (portedward.ca), a national historic site and the oldest intact salmon cannery on North America's west coast. Built on pilings that cling to the mountainous edge of the Skeena river, the 1889 buildings once housed fishermen, boat-builders, shopkeepers and schoolteachers. The village was typical of the hundreds of canneries that once dominated every coastal town in BC. Today you can stay in the original bunkhouse from \$39-\$45 per night.

Despite the fact that 65 cruise ships disembark more than 100,000 passengers at Prince Rupert during the May-September season, on non-cruise days, the cannery curator told

us, "regular folk have their run of the place".

Early the next morning we headed north into the misty fjords that make up the Khutzeymateen/K'tzim-a-Deen grizzly sanctuary with Prince Rupert Adventure Tours. Our boat driver, Owen Green, said he'd seen half a dozen bears the previous day, but it took some searching before we saw our first, munching on high-protein sedge grass. Owen turned off the motor so we could watch in silence. Our guide Hilary told us that juveniles are fuzzy, with too-big paws, while the older bears, like older people, are more ragged. We decided our bear was a male, and around six years old. Green said not many of the younger cubs had returned from hibernation yet. He hoped they would soon, but the diminished salmon population, coupled with a long winter, had him worried.

As I watched the grizzly quietly feeding on the water's edge with the mountains behind him, it was hard not to feel awed, and a bit ashamed that we have put such an elemental act - a bear coming out of hibernation and feeding - at risk. Despite its size, the Khutzeymateen is only thought to protect a dwindling population of about 50 animals.

The next day we boarded the Alaskan State Ferry M/V Taku for the 30-hour trip to Juneau. In the stairwell we were reminded by a sign to "wear no sheath knives aboard". In the outdated lounge, loggers, fishermen and hunters ordered discount beers at the faux-leather padded bar. Despite our stuffy cabin's bunk beds and tiny bathroom and the need to step over the occasional sleeping backpacker in the heated solarium, there was something charming about the old boat.

There are more towns and villages in Alaska than in Northern BC, and the ferry stopped at several. In Kake, a small settlement of 700 or so that boasts the world's tallest totem pole (132ft), we were told we could again get off the boat and explore. As we passed a group of teens, who were engulfed by families welcoming them home from school, I asked for advice on where to go. "I've always liked the view from that hill," one girl said, pointing up the forested road. At the top of the hill I looked out and saw a tiny burial island, the crosses white against the lush foliage, and beyond that, low green islands and then the mountains.

As we continued north, glacier-rounded mountains gave way to jagged, snowy peaks. Unlike the Northern Adventure, the Taku only had one restaurant. Dinner consisted of old-tasting salmon and "freedom fries", and I started to miss our previous ferry's menu.

Like BC Ferries, Alaska also offer interpretive talks describing the landscape and the cultural history. While the park ranger spoke about First Nations' history, a Tlingit woman passenger sat quietly weaving a flared, cedar-bark hat. "We harvest the bark from a living tree, then pound it until it's soft for weaving," she told me.

It was early evening on the second day when we sighted Juneau, a colourful town perched on the shore. A large white church dominated the town, but even that was dwarfed by the Mendenhall Glacier, a slab of ice and snow that blanketed the town's mountain backdrop.

Driving off the ferry we headed to the camp ground. For \$10 a night we set up home on the edge of a glacial lake and sipped beer in the late evening sun while icebergs floated by. Maia fished for a chunk of ice and eventually caught one with a long stick. Then we took it in turns to hold it, letting the ancient glacier melt in our hands.

After a day's hike on a lush rocky trail to get a closer look at the ice field, we boarded our final ferry north to Skagway. This time we were on a modern fast vessel, and the six-hour trip, to the port where gold-rushers once set off along the Chilkoot Pass trail for the Klondike, seemed to fly by. The mountains looked higher and starker as they merged with gathering storm clouds and the channel narrowed. With rain threatening I settled in the lounge with Maia, who made friends with the children of a local

schoolteacher, while other passengers pulled out their guitars and harmonicas and began to play.

Way to go

Getting there

Air Canada (0871 220 1111, aircanada.com) flies Heathrow-Vancouver from £785 rtn inc tax.

Ferries

BC Ferries (001 250 386-3431, bcferries.com) and Alaska State Ferries (+907 465 3941, dot.state.ak.us/amhs) offer a wide range of schedules. BC Ferries' 15-hour Port Hardy-Prince Rupert Inside Passage trip costs CA\$150pp one way (children CA\$75) and CA\$350 per vehicle. Alaska State Ferries' 30-hour Prince Rupert-Juneau trip costs from CA\$179pp one way (children CA\$90) and CA\$179 per vehicle; two-berth cabins from CA\$102, fourberth from CA\$172. It is more economical to rent a car in each port of call. Frontier Travel (020-8776 8709, frontier-canada.co.uk) tailormakes itineraries. A two-week trip including return flights from London to Vancouver and on to Port Hardy, hotels in and ferries (including cabins) between Vancouver, Port Hardy, Prince Rupert, Juneau, Sitka and Skagway, plus excursions to Glacier Bay and Admiralty Island, to see the bears, and a trip on the White Pass & Yukon Railway to Whitehorse, from £2,999pp.

Further information:

£1 = 1.73 Canadian dollars

Five more scenic ferry rides

Argentina to Chile

Two countries, three lakes and one digital memory card overflowing with scenic snaps; this crossing links Bariloche in Argentina to Puerto Varas in Chile, spawning one of the continent's most memorable trips. Dissecting a rare gap in the Andes, it passes towering rock faces, snowlicked peaks and clusters of monkey puzzle trees. Made up of four bus rides and three ferry trips, this will be 12 of the more epic hours of your life.

- 020-8747 8315, journeylatinamerica.co.uk. £188 with lake and hotel transfers.

Cornwall to the Scilly Isles

It's a rare sea journey that boasts views of a theatre hewn into the cliff top, but Minack's alfresco stage is just one of many landmarks en route to the Scillies. The two-hour, 40-minute crossing from Penzance also passes Mousehole and Wolf Rock lighthouse, before reaching the quaint island of St Mary's. Go up on the top deck in early summer and you may see dolphins, seals and basking shark.

- 0845 7105555, ios-travel.co.uk. Day returns £35.

Isle of Mull to Iona

Short but very sweet, the 10-minute passage across the Sound of Iona delivers stonking scenery, as well as seals, alongside the Caledonian MacBrane ferry. After leaving Fionnphort, look back to the red granite of Mull, north to the mountains of Skye and Rhum, and forward to the white sand and clear briny of historic Iona.

- 01631 566688, calmac.co.uk. £4.10 return.

Split to Vis, Croatia

Slap on your factor 30, stretch out and prepare to tan and sightsee on the twice-daily

ferry (not the high-speed catamaran) to the western edge of Croatia's archipelago. Departure gives views of Split's Diocletian Palace and central Dalmatia's coastal mountains, before you pass between the islands of Solta, Brac and party central, Hvar, reaching the dramatic circular harbour of Vis, with its monastery on Prirovo peninsula, in just over two hours.

- jadrolinija.hr. £5.50 single.

Stromstad to South Koster, Sweden

The startlingly clear light of west Sweden's archipelago has extra lustre when you catch the ferry to Langegarde in the Koster Islands – officially the country's sunniest spot. The regular ferry takes 75 minutes to pass through the generous sprinkle of lush green islands dotted with rust red fishing huts. The waters are rich in wildlife – from September this will be Sweden's first marine national park – so expect to be accompanied by seals and flocks of seabirds.

- 0046 771 41 4300, vasttrafik.se, vastsverige.com. £10 return.

Ian Belcher