

THE INSIDE TRACK

IF EVER YOU'RE IN SEARCH OF A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME ADVENTURE, THIS IS THE TRIP TO BOOK.

WORDS KATE ARMSTRONG

"I feel so small," says 12-year-old Katy. She's not talking about her size, nor her age among the 10 or so children on the trip. Rather, she is in awe of the Alaskan wilderness that lies before her: vast mountains with jagged snow caps, glaciers and waterfalls, forests covered in evergreen Sitka spruce, yellow-cedar and western hemlock.

I'm on a cruise with UnCruise Adventures, heading from Sitka to Juneau through a network of channels and forested islands along Alaska's 1600km-long Inside Passage. And, thanks to the friendly children onboard who bonded early in the trip, I've become an honorary kid.

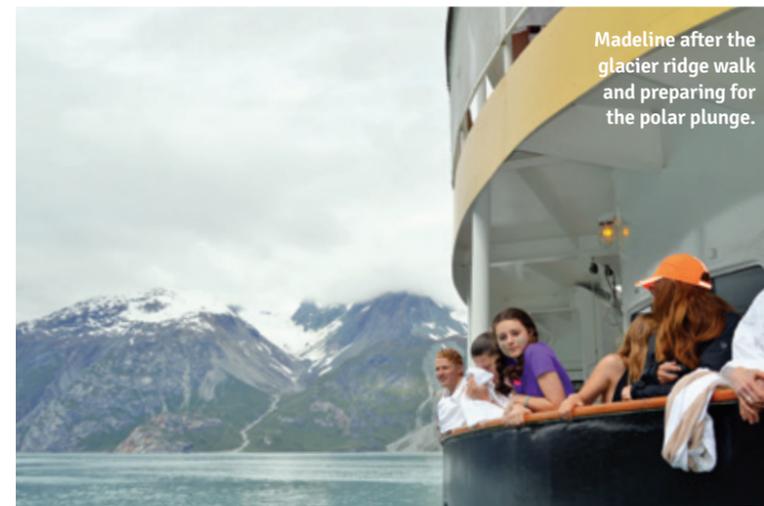
Our home for eight days is the *SS Legacy*, a replica of a historic steamer that's comfortable and easy for children to navigate. The public areas have a spacious lounge-cum-bar and a saloon, plus two hot tubs and gym equipment. Cabins are simple yet pleasant, with a small bathroom and beds for two. Sleep comes easily – the constant activities (mainly off board) assure solid slumbers.

My trip is not one of UnCruise Adventures' special 'kids and family' itineraries (one or two of which are offered each season), but, thanks to careful – though flexible – orchestration and a fabulous kid-friendly routine, the regular cruise suits children aged 8 upwards. The ship moves overnight, so every day we wake up to new scenery. Two daily activities take place off the boat; these range from easy to difficult and focus on wilderness and wildlife.

Erin Kirkland, the company's guest Youth Adventurist who participates in the special 'kids and family' trips, explains the itinerary's appeal: "Families who want to bring kids to Alaska want them to experience another nature, want them to experience the grandeur of what they have heard about. But there's more to the experience than seeing it – they become part of where they are."

We – kids and adults – become more curious than Alice in Wonderland herself. We taste and touch, listen and marvel, ogle and cry at everything from chunks of ice breaking off the edge of the extraordinary Margerie Glacier in Glacier Bay to pods of killer whales that swim past the ship – and it doesn't stop there. From the sturdy watersports platform attached to the ship's stern, we climb aboard skiffs and race off in search of eagles, otters and even bears that sometimes forage on the shoreline. We paddle along the Alaskan waters in kayaks, exclaiming excitedly when a sea lion pops up unexpectedly. We head off on shore walks to explore life beneath the beach rocks, which welcomes sea snails, baby barnacles, sea cucumbers and anemones.

By the second day, the kids have settled into a routine – they are unstoppable. They drop into icy waters during the celebratory 'polar plunge' activity, and on one of the walks they even kiss ▶



Madeline after the glacier ridge walk and preparing for the polar plunge.



Madeline and Katy admiring Lamplugh Glacier.



images

Left to right: Owen inspecting a channel; Elizabeth (left) with daughter Katy and Madeline (right), resting at the top of the glacier ridge walk; bushwhacking with guide Meg, Madeline, Katy and another guest; the view from the ridge over Glacier Bay.

a banana slug. (This rite of passage of UnCruise Adventurers is among the kids' favourite activities; they are the first of *SS Legacy's* slug club inductees).

Each afternoon, back on board, the children race to the hot tub on the compact top deck before gathering in the lounge room to play word games, watch kid-friendly movies or curl up with a nature book from the ship's small library.

While the wildlife and activities are wonderful, the captain and guides are exemplary. Their connection is real, their friendships genuine. They remind us that no question is silly, and the kids fire away enthusiastically.

But by far the younger passengers' favourite activity is the bushwhacking adventure – an open-ended journey into the unknown. In reality, the guides have plugged coordinates into a GPS, carry bear spray and two-way radios, and are fully versed on emergency procedures. When guide Hannah announces "We're going where no one has been before", the kids respond "Wow!" and "Really cool!".

The kids invite me to join them, and together we follow the guides in Pied Piper fashion. We slowly make our way through thick forest on Chichagof Island, part of the Tongass National Forest. Hannah asks "What is Chichagof Island's claim to fame?". 11-year-old Owen nails it: "It has the highest number of brown bears in the world."

"Right on!" we cry, and whoop with excitement. To ward off any potentially inquisitive bears, the guides chat loudly while the kids join in the chorus of "He-ey, bear!" before falling into moments of contented silence.

For the next three hours, we crawl under logs, slide down small embankments and sniff flowers, identifying their aromas. "The chocolate lily smells like wet laundry!" Katy exclaims.

The next day, I join the kids on a trek through muskeg bog. Guide Meg points out a large cushion-like mass of tiny and exquisite mosses

and lichens. When 15-year-old Gabby announces "I kind of want to do a belly flop on this!", Meg enthusiastically responds "You can totally do a belly flop!" Giggling madly, we throw ourselves on nature's delightful squishy pillow.

The mosses are not the only sponges – by now, the kids can identify many plants: bog cranberry, crowberry and bog rosemary, to name a few. On making our way back to the skiff, we laugh at the squelching sounds; we're all victims of BSM (boot-sucking mud).

Back onboard, we head to the attractive dining room where meals are served. Though kids' options are available, most children choose from the daily gourmet menu, and the chef happily caters to all preferences and allergies. By now the young group is sitting together for at least one meal per day.

After lunch there are more activities. My favourite is the hike along the ridge of Lamplugh Glacier; light refractions render it an amazing turquoise blue. Along the way, the kids hang off Hannah's every word.

"Alaska is made out of big chunks of land called terrains. These have been carried in by plate tectonics real slowly and have rubbed off along the coast of Alaska, kind of like when you take an Oreo cookie and rub the cream off. A lot of people ▶

13-YEAR-OLD MADELINE'S TIPS FOR KIDS WHO CRUISE

- 01 Form a kids' table early on – don't leave it until the last day.
- 02 Don't miss the polar plunge.
- 03 BYO rubber boots – you'll definitely need them and the vessels don't carry kid-size boots or rain gear.
- 04 Pack an extra pair of gloves.
- 05 Take naps when you can between activities.



Images: Kate Armstrong

Precious land
Alaska is home to the two largest national forests in the US: Tongass and Chugach.

Defying the norm
Margerie Glacier has been growing about 9m per year for the past few decades.

Alaska

Symbols at Sitka
The totem pole collection at Sitka National Historical Park have been standing strong since 1906.

There's a bear in there...
Grizzly bears love the dense rainforests of Chichagof Island.



Image: Kate Armstrong

NEED TO KNOW



GETTING THERE

Qantas flies to Seattle, where you can connect with Alaska Airlines to either Juneau or Sitka (depending where the cruise starts).



WHEN TO GO

UnCruise Adventures' season in Alaska runs from April to September with departure ports in Sitka, Juneau, Ketchikan and Petersburg. It offers cruises to other locations (including Hawai'i and Mexico) throughout the year. uncruise.com



BEST FOR KIDS AGED

Kids aged from 8 can travel on any UnCruise Adventures trip. Travel during US school holidays to find families onboard. The Family Discoveries program, for kids up to 13, offers a reduced cruise fare. Each year (specific dates only), there are 'kids and family' cruises, on which an UnCruise Youth Adventurist leads kids' groups in activities and adventures.



Go to familytravel.com.au for travel inspiration, ideas and tips to turn your travel dreams into reality. Be sure to sign up to the e-newsletter to receive the best family content direct to your inbox.



Image: ©Disney

NOT JUST A ONE-HIT WONDER

Think your young ones may need a little more convincing about a cruise through the blustery cold? Book a trip with Disney Cruise Line and let them know they can warm up onboard after big adventures with their favourite characters.

Disney Cruise Line sailings to Alaska combine the natural splendor and adventurous spirit of Alaska with Disney's world-class service and accommodations. Departing from Vancouver, Canada, *Disney Wonder* sails five-, seven- and nine-night cruises to Alaska that feature fun and adventure onboard and in each destination – from majestic wildlife and stunning scenery to one-of-a-kind port adventures and special Disney touches for everyone in the family to enjoy.

Many shore excursions include distinctly Disney touches, beloved characters and rich storytelling to help bring local culture and customs to life. Some of the incredible adventures include:

GOLD-PANNING IN SKAGWAY

Explore Liarsville Gold Rush Trail, a camp nestled beside a waterfall where live music, puppetry and panning for gold with classic Disney characters allow guests to be part of the gold rush era.

MUSH WITH DOGS IN JUNEAU

Be transported by helicopter over the massive Juneau Icefield, then help feed and harness the dogs before embarking on an unforgettable day of mushing across the pristine snow-capped glacier.

ADMIRE THE BERING SEA IN KETCHIKAN

Look on as professional fishermen haul in the catch of the day in 700-pound king crab pots. After a behind-the-scenes tour of the ship, Disney Cruise Line guests have an exclusive opportunity to dine with the crew and listen to stories about life on the Bering Sea over freshly caught king crab and dungeness crab.

While every port offers excursions for families to enjoy together, many tours integrate separate activities for children and adults. So while kids are engaged in age-appropriate activities with youth counsellors, parents can have time on their own.

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