

Alaska Cruise 2014

A land of infinite beauty, the last frontier, home of magnificent eagles and wildlife, majestic glaciers. There are many ways one can describe Alaska but for our group of 40 on our recent cruise to the Inside Passage, it is best described as a study in relationships and unconditional acceptance. You see, we are all members of a very unique club comprised of people living with limb loss, other disabling conditions, spouses, friends and those who work to insure better services for the rest of us. It is this common denominator that fosters the bonding that occurs almost instantly when we meet. The result? New friendships based on mutual respect, understanding and admiration for what each of us endures on a daily basis paired with laughter, tears, new experiences and a feeling of incredible empowerment to go forward with new found confidence.

Travel is the ultimate tool for learning about the world we live in and for learning about ourselves. It is also an excellent tool for persons with special needs to get comfortable with having others assist them in difficult situations, to learn how to ask for help when needed and to be pro-active. Most importantly, travel teaches us to be comfortable in our own skin, to try new things and to explore new destinations. Traveling as a participant in one of our groups adds an extra layer of confidence and safety and often provides a much easier adventure especially for the novice traveler.

Forty travelers enjoyed our recent Amputee Coalition Travel Adventures Cruise through Alaska's Inside Passage. We had many amputees as well as people with other mobility limiting conditions with various levels of ability. Fifteen of us had rented scooters from Special Needs at Sea, two rented power chairs and three others used manual chairs. The majority arrived a day early in Seattle and stayed at the Seattle Airport Marriott. The Marriott had a lift equipped shuttle that not only provided complimentary airport pick-up but also shuttled us back and forth time to 13 Coins where we came together for a fun "meet and greet" dinner. I was thrilled to observe a room full of conversation and interest in one another. We were off to a good start!



Everyone met the next morning after a delicious included breakfast buffet ready for their Alaskan adventure to begin. We had many first time cruisers and the enthusiasm was palpable. I had arranged for a local medical transportation company to do our hotel to pier transfer. With a total of 25 needing a transfer including 6 who were non-ambulatory, Seattle Cabulance managed to deliver us all to the pier safe and sound and

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all at the same time. Boarding was handled efficiently as we waited in the special assistance section for our names to be called. Once on board we immediately fell into cruise mode which meant we were looking for the buffet in the Windjammer. I sought out the Park Cafe which I so enjoyed on the Oasis of the Seas. The Rhapsody had a much smaller version at the back of the solarium. While nice, it lost something in the transition from its location in Central Park on Oasis of the Seas. Then it was on to explore the ship, meet with our group coordinator and unpack. I had sailed on Rhapsody back in 1999 and noticed many changes and upgrades. Personally, I'm a fan of the bigger ships!



We all came together at dinner, 4 tables of 10 by the windows and easy to get to in our scooters and wheelchairs. This was a lively group and everyone was anxious to get to know each other. We certainly had interesting stories and histories to share. I got to meet some clients I had worked with but never met so that was very exciting. First time cruisers were quite impressed with all the menu choices and the service and Steve (my #1 gopher) was giving lessons on how to order multiple choices. Day two was spent at sea heading north to Alaska and we did experience a little "motion on the ocean". We enjoyed a private Welcome Aboard cocktail party in the signature Viking Crown Lounge before our first of two formal dinners. We were looking forward to Juneau, our first port of call.

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We docked in Juneau after lunch on day three. Twenty seven members of our group signed up for our fully accessible shore excursion which included a visit to Mendenhall Glacier and Visitor Center followed by whale watching on our "private catamaran". The crew was fantastic assisting wheelchair users down the ramp and rolling them right on to the boat where there was plenty of room to maneuver and get around. Our friendly hostesses served snacks and hot drinks, explained what we were seeing and answered our questions. Everyone was busy taking pictures. Then they appeared....those magnificent humpback whales began to surface near our vessel and we collectively held our breath waiting for the whales to breach and rise out of the water. And then we were treated to the highlight of the day, a demonstration of Bubble Netting by a group of whales. Like a band of brothers, humpback whales are so close they hunt in near-perfect unison. By cleverly blowing bubbles at depths of 600 feet, they create a bubble net that traps their prey near the surface. Then with the grace of synchronized swimmers, the 35 ton giants break the waves at just the right moment to devour the fish. With whales needing to consume around 3,000 pounds of food a day, it is essential they work as a team to corral as many fish as possible.

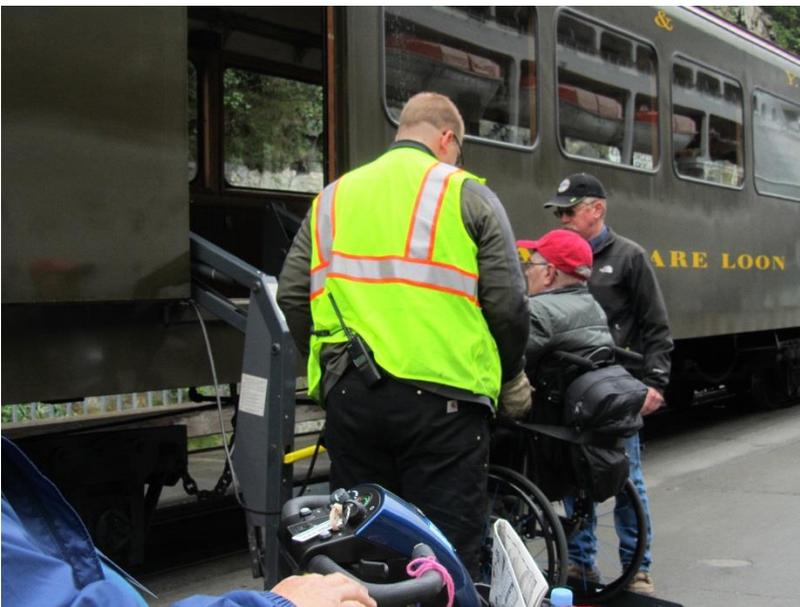


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A great time was had by all and we headed back to the ship in our lift equipped vehicle tired and hungry. It was 8:30 at night so many headed to the buffet for a quick dinner. Steve and I went to Chops Grille for a special dinner to celebrate our 11th anniversary. I think we were both too tired from the long day to fully appreciate the culinary efforts of the staff but did enjoy the outstanding cuisine nonetheless.

Our late day in Juneau was followed by an early morning call in Skagway with a full day ahead of us. I love docking in Skagway where the ship is positioned directly in front of the famous White Pass & Yukon Railway. One of the most popular excursions in Alaska, 37 members of our group lined up to board the train via lifts on the fully accessible rail cars complete with accessible bathroom. We were divided into three cars and the ride in the narrow gauge train over trestle bridges and through tunnels was thoroughly enjoyed by all. Every railroad has its own colorful beginnings. For the White Pass & Yukon route, it was gold discovered in 1896. The few flakes originally found were sparse but enough to trigger an incredible stampede for riches: the Klondike Gold Rush.



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We returned back to the dock and promptly boarded our waiting motor coach to head to Liarsville Gold Rush Trail Camp and Salmon Bake, so named for the journalists dispatched to Skagway during the Klondike Gold Rush who fabricated tall tales from this very location. We feasted on an all-you-can-eat Salmon Bake with abundant side dishes followed by a comedic melodrama featuring dance hall girls and other characters. Afterwards we were invited to try our luck at gold panning and find our fortune! As we headed back to the ship, some of us opted to be dropped off in town so we could search out souvenirs.



The next day provided us with a chance to relax as it was spent at sea. However, most of us were awake and either on our balconies (those that were lucky enough to have one of these) or out on deck very early in the morning as we sailed slowly through Tracy Arm Fjord and Sawyer Glacier. This is why so many people cruise to Alaska, to see the majestic glaciers and floating chunks of ice. The captain did an incredible job navigating through the floating ice in the narrow passageway. Everyone was in awe of mother-nature's handiwork. We also enjoyed very good weather on this day and most of the trip.



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The next day was also a day at sea and we enjoyed a mini-education day in the morning presented by Dan Ignaszewski who is responsible for government relations and development with the Amputee Coalition. He led a very informative discussion on advocacy which all of us could relate to whether we were an amputee or were living with another type of disability. It's what I refer to as being pro-active; learning to take control of our situation and take responsibility for achieving results. Dan had so much excellent information to share including where to look on the Amputee Coalition's website for sample letters to give our physicians and state representatives. Dan and his wife Alice also served as co-group leaders and were a definite asset to the success of our group. Everyone enjoyed spending time with both of them. Dan even treated us to a singing performance with the piano player in the Schooner Bar and participated in a group Karaoke event!



We had our second formal night that evening and the lobster tails at dinner took center stage as the main event! Once again, Steve made sure that everyone knew they could order seconds (or thirds!). After dinner many of us enjoyed an excellent production show featuring the music of Billy Joel, Elton John, Stevie Wonder and Barry Manilow.

We were now facing the last day of our incredible adventure and woke up in the beautiful city of Victoria, British Columbia. One of my favorite places, I was eagerly looking forward to our accessible shore excursion to Butchart Gardens, one of the most beautiful gardens in the world. Twenty two of us once again boarded our lift equipped coaches and headed out to the gardens. Our bus driver shared lots of good information with us about Victoria on the way. The weather was glorious, shining sun and temperature about 70 degrees. We had a personal guide escort us through the various sections of the garden. Our scooter and wheelchair parade did very well navigating the paved paths as we breathed in the aromatic air and our vision exploded with the glorious blooms. It was certainly an adventure of sensory delights. On the way back to

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the ship, we were treated to a tour of downtown Victoria and saw the famous Empress Hotel and the lovely harbor as well as Victoria's famous China Town with its beautiful arched entrance.



Not wanting our Alaska Cruise to come to an end, many stayed up quite late listening to music in the different venues around the ship and even did some dancing!

Everyone enjoyed the ship including the food and entertainment, the service was impeccable, the shore excursions and the scenery filled us with wonder. But what was the best part of the trip? Ask anyone in our group and you will get the same answer. The people. It was the coming together of a group of strangers that had a common bond and formed an immediate connection. Our group transformed instantly from strangers to friends regardless of our life style or where we came from. We shared a common denominator. All of us had survived enormous challenges in our lives and had made the choice to enjoy life as best we could. We didn't complain about minor inconveniences, we were appreciative, kind and accepting of one another. I am so fortunate to have the opportunity to organize these trips and to become friends with the people who participate. I am so grateful to Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines for their unwavering commitment to the disabled community and their goal to insure that all enjoy their cruise experience to the fullest.

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