



M.S. *Windward*

# PORTS OF CALL

———— MERRIL LILLEY

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Our cruise ship, the Norwegian Line's MS *Windward*, is approaching Juneau, the capital of Alaska. Having left Vancouver at 5 pm on Monday, and cruising through the Inside Passage, she will have been 42 hours at sea when she reaches Juneau at 1 pm on Wednesday and the passengers are looking forward to their first trip ashore.

The *Windward* will be in port from 1 pm until 11 pm. Most passengers, having had more than a day to consider their options, have been to the Shore Excursion Desk and booked a trip of some kind. The variety is bewildering and the choice difficult. There are twelve different excursions to choose from, excluding the more adventurous hiking, biking and kayaking tours planned by the "Dive-into-Adventure" sports section of the staff. The most expensive tour, costing 168 American dollars (£112), is a trip in a seaplane over the ice fields to the Taku river valley and includes a salmon bake at the exclusive Taku Lodge. The cheapest trip costs 31 dollars (£20.50) and is a tour of the city, taking in the civic buildings, the state

museum, salmon hatchery and the nearest glacier. Other tours on offer include panning for gold, river rafting, whale watching, wild life spotting and helicopter flights. How does one choose?

Most passengers have, on this day, chosen one of these tours from the Tours Ashore order form which has been available since the first evening on board. With this form all tours can be booked in advance and some people make all their choices on the first day and book ahead for every shore stop.

On the cruise of the Inside Passage the *Windward* will make four stops, at Juneau, Skagway, Haines and Ketchikan.

After the day at Juneau there is no rest. The ship docks at Skagway at 7 am on Thursday

and is due to leave again at 5 pm. From Skagway she sails to Haines, only an hour away by sea, docking at 6.15 and leaving again at 11 pm. This seems an odd arrangement until one reads the brochure and discovers that the most adventurous tours start at Skagway and finish in Haines. One of them involves a helicopter trip over the glacier, followed by a float trip on the Chilkat River into Haines. It costs 194 dollars (nearly £130). A small number of passengers opt for this trip, but most choose one tour in Skagway and spend half the day exploring the town on foot.

The most popular tour is a journey on the White Pass Scenic Railway, a narrow gauge line, following the route the prospectors took to the Yukon gold fields. This costs 77 dollars (£51) and takes 3 hours. This leaves ample time to explore the little town of Skagway with its boardwalks, shops and bars, restored as near as possible, to the last decade of the last century. The Heritage Centre advises, gives out maps, organises guided walks, offers videos and slide shows. Old-style buses take short tours to the Gold Rush Trail camp and the Gold Rush Cemetery. For the more energetic the cemetery is within walking distance, about a mile-and-a-half out of town in a desolate location among trees. The souvenir shops do a roaring trade in Alaskan jewellery, tee-shirts, soft toys and leather goods. Bars and restaurants do not reap the same benefit. Passengers are fed too well on board ship and, as it is moored in the town, can even pop back on board for lunch.

We wondered how many people would venture ashore in Haines as the ship was there for an evening stop. Normal dining times were abandoned and there was open sitting at all three restaurants from 5.30 pm to 8 pm to enable passengers to visit the town if they wished to do so. At an estimate, about one quarter of the passengers (about 300 people) went ashore after dinner. Those who chose to do so found free coaches lining up to take them into the town centre, just over a mile away, and drop them outside the Heritage Centre. In this small town of 2,500 inhabitants every shop was open.

There was a cruise ship in town! It was almost the end of September. One more week and then Haines would see no more cruise ships until the following June.

The *Windward* set sail for Glacier Bay, the highlight of the voyage. Much of Friday was spent on deck, marvelling at the wonder of the scenery. When the ship stopped in the bay voices were hushed, as fifteen hundred people held their breath and listened for the awesome creaking of great glaciers and the occasional thunderous roar when a splinter broke off and joined the floating myriads of mini-icebergs. As the *Windward* started south again the afternoon afforded ample opportunities for spotting whales, dolphins and seals.

To arrive at Ketchikan, the fourth largest town in Alaska, population 8,000, the following morning was almost an anti-climax. This was to be our last stop. Only seven tours to choose from this time. We chose the cheapest, 31 dollars for a general sight seeing tour, including the Totem Bight State Park, world's largest pulp mill, Heritage Centre and "infamous" Creek Street.

We could have gone to a native village, or fishing on a lake, or to Misty Fjords by helicopter or on a Jet Boat adventure. But time was limited. The *Windward* was leaving at 3 pm. We had enough time to walk around the town, watch the salmon leaping and visit the brand-new, very-expensive, impressive Tongass Historical Society Museum, right near the waterfront, convenient for the cruise liner terminal. This had been built, with State assistance, no doubt with the growing tourist industry in mind.

On the seventh day we were back in Vancouver, docking at Canada Place, which must be one of the most spectacular cruise terminals in the world, with a roof fashioned like sails, wide public walkways at different levels flanked with hotels and restaurants with magnificent views.

After a week on the cruise and four shore visits in Alaska we felt we had glimpsed only a small fraction of the sights to be seen, experiencing, as it were, only "the tip of the iceberg". I think cruising is like this. I just



### *Vancouver Cruise Terminal*

whets the appetite and gives one enough of an impression of a place to enable one to decide whether or not one would like to return at some later date.

In speaking to other passengers we found a wide variety of experiences in sampling the tours available at the ports of call. Some people had booked up for tours at every stop, even two tours at some of them. Some younger, more energetic and, possibly more affluent, holiday-makers had chosen all the adventurous activities, river-rafting, kayaking, whale-spotting. Some people had booked no expensive trips at all, preferring to explore towns on foot and find their own way with the aid of excellent guide books and maps or perhaps undertake some of the easier guided hikes organised by the sports staff.

A comparison of port stops on this holiday showed that the number of tours offered depended on the location of the port and the accessibility of local places to visit.

For example, on a Mediterranean cruise a stop at Alexandria offered two choices, a trip to see three different pyramid sites or a trip to Cairo, visiting the pyramids, the Sphinx and

museum. A stop at Ashdod could offer only Jerusalem and Bethlehem -but then everyone wanted to go only there! A stop at a remote town, Pilos, gave the choice of exploring the small town and harbour or visiting some ruins and a small museum. In Sorrento one could only walk up to the town. In Naples, of course, Pompeii was the obvious choice for those who had never been there. So this cruise offered a limited choice and the obvious tours which everyone was likely to want.

Another cruise from San Diego to Fort Lauderdale included three stops in Mexico, one in Costa Rica, one at Panama, one in Colombia and two in the Caribbean. In each case, due to the nature of the port of call there was never a choice of more than two tours.

The first stop, at Cabo San Lucas offered a trip on a glass-bottomed boat and a ride to the headland in battered taxi cabs. In Costa Rica, arriving at a remote port, miles from anywhere, the choice was between a tour to San Jose, the capital, or one to a small village in the mountains in the coffee-growing area. We chose the latter and were treated to

elevenes of home-grown coffee and local fruit in abundance. We were also given free samples of coffee beans.

In a town of any size many passengers decide that the easiest way to see the it and learn something of its history in the limited time available is to take a town tour with a guide. This applied to both Acapulco and Cartagena. In each case it was the only tour offered.

At Panama there was an evening stop, before a day spent in passage through the canal, and

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treatment with a band playing to virtually nothing. In small towns it seemed that all the available coaches and taxis that the town could muster were ready for the passengers to disembark and in some cases, for instance in Juneau, Alaska, there were not enough to fulfil the demand.

Some towns, like Haines, Alaska, depending on the tourist trade, did everything possible to attract the disembarking hordes. Many towns had discount vouchers for shops and restaurants, sometimes included in the



CARTEGENA, COLUMBIA. Coaches waiting for shore excursions

here passengers merely walked down the gangway to buy souvenirs from local Indians who had set up stalls along the quay side.

At Grand Cayman Island there were two tours of the island, one with an additional boat trip to Stingray City for an underwater view of the stingrays. On that day, at Grand Cayman, there were three cruise ships all in together and the town was crowded with tourists, too many for comfort.

On this voyage there were always other cruise ships to be seen, following a similar route to our own, and at the larger ports there were often two or three cruise ships in one day.

The reception a ship received on entering a port varied considerably, from "red-carpet"

ship's magazine, available before the ship arrived in port. Many towns had people to meet the ships and hand out leaflets describing the local attractions and places of interest. Some towns, like Skagway, had heritage centres which offered all kinds of services, including maps, guided walks, videos and slide shows. In all these respects we found North America better than Europe.

**J** Dover is soon to be a PORT OF CALL for perhaps one hundred cruise ships every year. Can we really anticipate what this will mean for the town? Are we ready to roll out the red carpet?