

Wild Alaska up close

Experience a national forest's
unspoiled beauty in a
one-of-a-kind expedition

By **CLAUDIA ALARCÓN**
Special Contributor

I'm not a fan of organized tours or pre-scripted travel, usually preferring to draft my own chart. Nevertheless, I recently found the road less traveled — aboard a cruise ship.

This was no ordinary cruise; it was a Lindblad/National Geographic Expedition to Southeast Alaska aboard the National Geographic Sea Lion.

For eight days, 62 like-minded guests, from preteens to octogenarians, traded the trite entertainment of cruise ships for excursions, sea kayaking and forest hikes along the spectacular fjords surrounding the Tongass National Forest.

Lindblad holds a Forest Service special use permit that grants access to remote protected areas. Guests are guided by a team of experts in biology, botany, ecology, geology, photography and wellness.

A recently added underwater specialist program sends divers 40 to 80 feet below the icy emerald water; they return

with video footage of the otherworldly creatures lurking beneath.

With a ratio of one crew member for every 10 guests, we were able to ask questions. Thanks to the patient guidance of the resident photography expert, my photographic skills improved exponentially.

Every evening, we gathered in the lounge for cocktails and a recap of the day, followed by dinner and presentations from the naturalists on topics such as glacier formation and marine mammal ecology.

Lindblad's environmental commitment extends to the kitchen, which serves fresh, local ingredients and sustainably caught seafood. On the day we docked at Petersburg,

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one of Alaska's most important fishing towns, fishermen delivered fresh Dungeness crab, Alaskan black cod and sockeye salmon.

Lindblad enforces a fleet-wide no-shrimp policy, at least until they find a responsible fishing source that doesn't damage the ecosystem.

We spent hours on deck as we traveled, catching glimpses of humpback whales, bald eagles, sea otters, bears, mountain goats and sea birds.

While cruising in Zodiacs — heavy-duty inflatable boats — along the Inian Islands, we were surrounded by curious Steller sea lions.

At Glacier Bay National Park, a park ranger and a Tlingit cultural interpreter came onboard to shed light on the natural and cultural history of the area, and we cheered when Margerie Glacier thunderously shed massive chunks into the ocean.

The next morning we woke up, thrilled, amid a pod of orca. Scratch all that off the bucket list.

With my expectations more than exceeded, the hard part will be deciding on my next Lindblad adventure.

Claudia Alarcón is an Austin freelance writer.

When you go

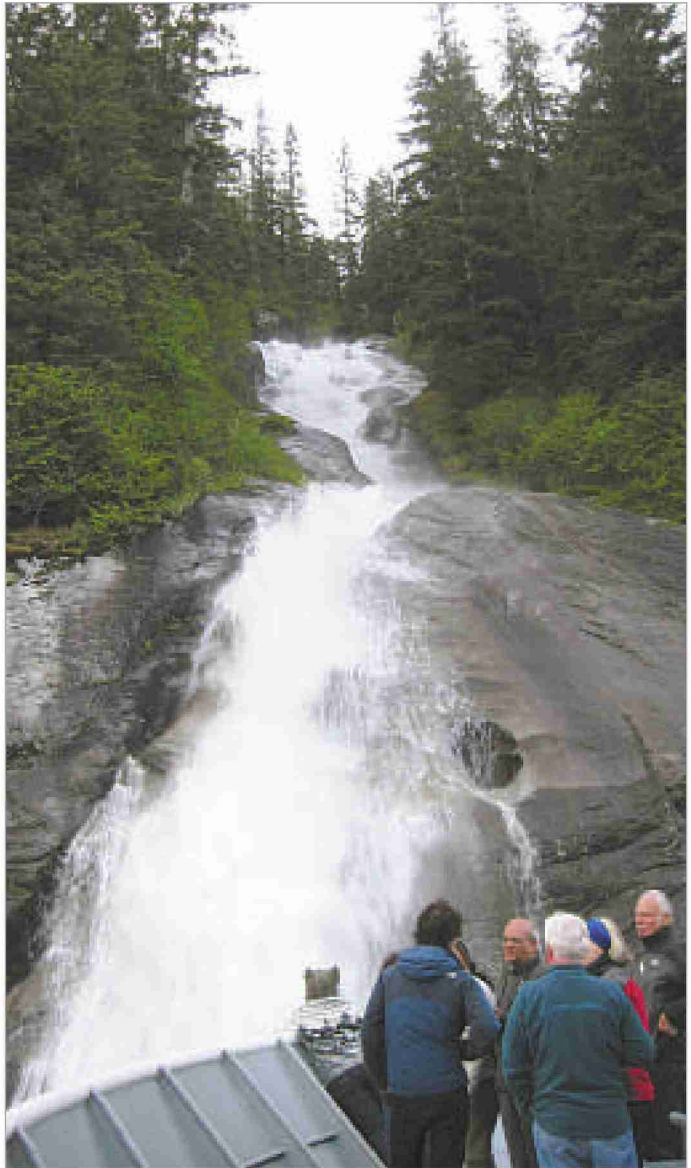
Lindblad

Expeditions/National Geographic's Exploring Alaska's Coastal Wilderness

trips depart May to August from Juneau or Sitka, depending on dates. Cabins are comfortable but small, so pack lightly and dress in layers.

Binoculars, a rain jacket and pants, and knee-high rubber boots with nonslip soles are indispensable. Bring plenty of extra batteries or a charger and additional memory cards if you are an avid photographer.

Call 1-800-397-3348 to inquire about special rates. expeditions.com



Guests and naturalists mingle on the deck for a close look at the Hole in the Wall waterfall, in Tracy Arm.

Passengers return to the National Geographic Sea Lion after an expedition around Hanus Bay on a smaller Zodiac boat.



Photos by Claudia Alarcón/Special Contributor



Naturalist Berit Solstad leads a group of hikers through the moss-covered forest on Lake Eva Trail, on the northeast coast of Baranof Island.



A group encounters a brown bear up close and personal on the shore of Fox Island.



Naturalist Lee Moll (standing) leads a Zodiac group to the face of South Sawyer Glacier.