

MS AMERICA® GETS HER SEA LEGS

By: Susan Jeske, Reigning Ms. America ®

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As the reigning Ms America, it was my pleasure to be invited by Celebrity Cruises to join them on a seven-day sea tour of Alaska aboard the MV Mercury. I've had many exciting new opportunities since becoming Ms America but this one turned out to be a greater adventure than I could have ever expected. In the itinerary it said I was to fly to Vancouver, and then board the MV Mercury. We would call at the ports of Ketchikan, Skagway, Juneau, Valdez, and end up in Fairbanks where I would fly home. According to the information in the itinerary, Alaska is subject to variable weather, changing quickly from warm and sunny to chilly and wet. There would also be two formal, two informal and three casual nights onboard the vessel. Fortunately, I realized that because I travel ten to fifteen thousand miles per-month as the reigning Ms America, packing was a breeze! Upon discovering that I was going on an Alaskan Cruise, the only thing I knew about cruise ships was what I had learned from the film "Titanic", suffice it to say... not a very inspiring beginning. In addition to that the only knowledge I had of Alaska were preconceived notions of igloos and cold, wet weather and icebergs, Huskies and sleds. Boy was I wrong! Instead my cruise was a rewarding, wondrous adventure, which with every day and every mile exceeded my expectations.

Celebrity Cruises is the highest rated premium cruise line in the world. Since the lines first sailing in 1990, Celebrity has been recognized for elevating the art of fine dining. They have won multiple awards for outstanding cuisine and service under the direction of world-renowned master chef Michel Roux. Celebrity Cruises offers a premium cruise experience that appeals to couples, families, honeymooners and singles. I found that Celebrity Cruises attracts a balanced mixed of both new and experienced cruisers; people who are sophisticated and appreciate the fact that Celebrity provides a quality, five-star vacation at an intelligent price.

My first glimpse of the MV Mercury was on the dock in Vancouver, Canada on a warm sunny day just before boarding. I was amazed at just how big and spotless this floating palace was. Remembering the movie "Titanic" I immediately started counting the lifeboats but I soon figured out there was more than enough and felt safe to board the ship. Upon setting foot on the MV Mercury, I was greeted by the first of many wonderful hotel staff and

shown to my cabin (which also had a private veranda) by an obliging steward. The cabin was roomy enough and was designed with a lot of storage space. Shortly thereafter, I met the second member of the staff when the room's butler, Steve, arrived at my door with the beginning of many hor'derves. After attending the bon voyage party I went on my own private tour of the ship. I was amazed to discover that the ship had a full-size Aqua Spa on board complete with a Thalassotherapy pool, beauty salon, professional masseuses, workout facility, private work out trainers and a licensed Reflexologist. While I was signing up for some of the facial treatments, I heard over the loud speaker that everyone aboard was to return immediately to their cabins for a mandatory lifeboat drill. So that in case there was an emergency we would all know what to do and where to go. So began my first day aboard the MV Mercury.

After a relaxing day cruising the scenic Inside Passage and being pampered at the aqua spa the journey continued on into Ketchikan –which means “Thundering Wings of an Eagle.” I didn't spend a lot of time in Ketchikan that morning because I was off to the Misty Fjords National Monument. This boat tour was set up as a mystical journey in which tourists were able to see cliffs that tower thousands of feet above and resemble huge stone carved idols from some ancient pagan religion. The waters cascaded into the placid lake below and created swirling angel-like mists. The emerald water was so calm that it looked like we were gliding on a sheet of glass, and the crystalline water so clear I was able to see the sea life below me. New Eddystone, a volcanic plug, looked like a mysterious castle rising a couple of hundred feet out of the water. A colony of seals were bathing in the sun, some were posing for pictures while others were frolicking in the sea. We spotted Guillemonts and other varieties of wildlife everywhere and to our excitement; saw six huggable wild black bears scavenging on a whale carcass. Our boat tour came to an end in a secluded cove surrounded by lush mountains where we then had a rendezvous with a Twin-Otter seaplane. Soaring like an eagle, I was able to appreciate the magnitude of this national treasure while flying over Rudyerd Bay, Alaska's most spectacular fjord. What a wonderful, spiritual rejuvenation!

The ship had entertainment available to its passengers everywhere I looked. String quartets, piano players, accappella singers, rock band, big band, comedians and magicians were there to satisfy every age group and mood.

My personal favorite was the Celebrity Theater where every night there was a different theme show featuring celebrity dancers, singers and orchestra. I especially enjoyed the "Back to Broadway" show. It occurred on a night where the sea was unusually rough; it was funny when the boat started rocking back and forth, as if on cue, while the singer and cast started dancing to "Hello Dolly" they were singing, "I feel the room swaying...!" and the curtain is swaying back and forth. It was very impressive because they were performing difficult dance numbers on stage, in three-inch high heels, and the boat rocking without missing a step. I was honored when the Cruise Director, Scott Peterson, asked me to take part in the entertainment and do an interview for the ships TV network. Initially he only planned on the interview being a couple of minutes, but it ended up lasting a half hour. Because of the positive response from the passengers, he asked me to sing the National Anthem at their Bon Voyage show. I was flattered, and felt it a privilege to take part in such a wonderful show.

Of all the ports we sailed into, historic Skagway still retains its Klondike atmosphere, where the colorful downtown historical district has false-fronted buildings that line the streets and boardwalks dating back to the gold rush times. The entire morning was spent wandering shop-to-shop purchasing gifts, while at the same time retracting the steps of the earnest Stampeders as they outfitted for the Klondike. The Skagway Historical Museum was the most interesting building, with its unique pattern made out of sticks. I was amazed to learn that they still use the Rotary Snow Plow No. 1 to clear the snow on the pass, and was impressed with the pictures of this snow hungry machine clearing away snowdrifts of up to 12 feet during the winter. In the afternoon, I took a ride on one of the last remaining narrow-gauge trains, the White Pass and Yukon Route & Scenic Railroad of the World. Completed in 1900, the railroad provided an easier route to the Klondike and caused the largest gold rush the world has ever known. The vintage cars are perfectly restored and I was transported back in time as a hopeful prospector with golden dreams. As the train chugged along the shoulders of sheer Granite Mountains and whistled over the chasms of deep gorges, I thought about the famous and foolhardy that made this trip on foot, and thanked my good fortune for the comfortable seat on the train. Along with the historical background of the railroad, there is also the beautiful, scenic route in which it travels on, with breathtaking views of soaring glacier-cloaked peaks, countless waterfalls and pristine alpine lakes.

On our fifth day at sea we entered Yakutat Bay, and sailed right up to the edge of Hubbard Glacier. Our ship cruised along the six-mile glacier while the passengers enjoyed the fantastic views of the blue-white glacier. There was silence as the glacier talked to us in a thundering voice as mountains of ice plunged to the water and created thousands of icebergs that looked like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It was in this stunning background that I made my debut aboard ship as Ms America in my crown and banner. The ships photographers made arrangements so everyone had a chance to get a picture with the glacier and me if they so desired.

Valdez waited as the next port of call. The Columbia Glacier Helicopter Flight Seeing Tour was well worth the trip. The helicopter lifts off and flies over "Old Town", the original town site that was destroyed in the 1964 earthquake. We followed the terrain through the passes and over the sharp craggy mountains and flew over herds of Dahl Sheep grazing on mountainsides, and bears hunting for food to fatten themselves up for the hard winter. Soaring over the Chugach Mountains, I was awed by the impressive views of the Columbia Glacier with its steep vertical face of ice rising from the waters of Columbia Bay. We landed at the face of Shoup Glacier where we could explore the beach, and take pictures on an iceberg.

Of all the different spa treatments that I had on the ship the Reflexology was my favorite. It was different because the therapist came to my room. The session took place while we sailed up College Fjord. The Fjord contains 26 glaciers, and has one of the highest concentrations of glaciers in Alaska. The fjord gets its name from the fact that each of the glaciers is named for a university or college in the eastern United States. Each glacier was different and looked like forever changing paintings. One looked like millions of blue and white Popsicles ready to eat, while another gave the impression of white icing with chocolate chips swirling down a chocolate cake. My favorite was the Harvard glacier that looked like a ski slope with a "Brigadoon" village below. This tour was a wonderful way to end the last day of the cruise.

The main dining area on the Mercury was located at the stern of the ship. Tall 30-foot windows gave everyone a bird's eye view of the changing scenery of the full-moon rising and its beam dancing on the waters. During one of the luncheons, we were entertained by a pod of whales following the ship. The abundance of food was overwhelming and I was able to satisfy any craving I might have, starting at 6:30 am and ending at 1:15 am. If one happened to miss a meal in the main dining room, there was always the

buffet. Variety extended to the menu as well, and all were served with European flair. Every meal looked like a work of art, even the diet plates! Le Grand Buffet was one of the best dining events available; It was so beautiful that they first let us in just to look at it. Guests were to enter from the top of a long staircase where they were able to view the rows of art that was entirely made out of food. This included white chocolate swans, large flower arrangements made out of vegetables, intricate fruit carvings and my favorite, a picture of an Indian made out of slivers of different kinds of fruit. After the viewing session was over the passengers sat down and had a great feast!

Being a first time cruiser, the Alaskan Celebrity Cruise exceeded my expectations with its beautiful ship. The weather couldn't be better with the sun shining throughout the entire time in Alaska. The service of the ships staff and crew was incomparable. The staff was wonderful at remembering people's names, and always greeted passengers with a good morning or evening. They paid great attention to detail and remembered what I liked to drink, that my dressing has to be served on the side, and the preferred hors d'oeuvre was chocolate covered strawberries. My room and the entire ship were always spotless. Food and dazzling entertainment was everywhere. Alaska is a wonderful state with its wildlife, wilderness, and wondrous sights along the coast. It truly is the country's last great frontier. Because of this wonderful experience I look forward to many other Celebrity Cruising experiences.