

EXPLORING ALASKA ON THE OOSTERDAM

By: DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE



A wild salmon cookout

JUNEAU, Alaska---Here are a few cruise tips nobody wants to talk about: That part about the captain going down with his ship--- pure hogwash.

If you miss the boat and are left on pier, tough luck. Get a little too rambunctious and you'll be thrown in the brig. Care to walk the gangplank to shore? Just skip the mandatory emergency drill.

We got this inside info during a candid chat with the ship's captain, Arjen C. van der Loo, aboard the Holland America Line's MS Oosterdam during an Alaskan Explorer cruise.

"Look," Capt. van der Loo said, "there never has been a law that says a captain has to go down with his ship. When push comes to shove, no one knows what they would do in an extreme emergency situation.

"Besides," he added with a smile, "if there was such a law, no one would sell us insurance, now would they?"

Despite those frank remarks, or perhaps because of them, the captain gave me the impression that he was exactly the man I would like to have in charge if the emergency horn sounded.

We got two first-hand experiences of someone missing the boat---



Bears cleaning up salmon BBQ remains

Cooking crepes with the captain



both amazingly by the same man, who missed the departure in Seattle, rejoined us in Juneau, Alaska, and then missed the boat again at our third port call in Ketchikan, Alaska. (He probably can get a book out of this).

The shipboard rumor was the man stepped off in Seattle to do a little shopping, didn't get back in time and his wife was waving goodbye to him on deck as he was stranded on pier with his packages.

He managed to fly from Seattle to Juneau to rejoin his wife and the cruise (on his own dime), but in Ketchikan he went on another shopping binge (fueled with a few Alaskan ales) and was left ashore again.

This time, again according to the cruise rumor mills, his wife was informed that he was AWOL while she was having lunch, shook her head, and continued with her meal.

“It’s unfortunate, but these things happen from time to time,” the captain said. “We really have no alternatives. There are just so many berths for the cruise ships and schedules to meet so we can wait just so long before we have to leave.

“We do whatever we can for those left behind.” In this case, the man’s passport was delivered to him by a small cruise boat. The last we heard, he was flying back to Seattle (again on his own dime) to rejoin his wife at the end of the cruise.

As for being tossed in the brig (yes, even cruise ships have

them), well, you’d have to do quite a bit more than put a lampshade over your head and sing off key.

“If someone gets a little out of hand, first we’d pull them aside and try some gentle persuasion,” Capt. van der Loo said. “If that didn’t work we might take them to the infirmary for observation.

“Only in extreme situations when a person becomes dangerous would we put him in the brig. And in these rare cases it’s usually someone with a mental disorder who has gone off their medications for one reason or another.”



On the Oosterdam, the brig is not some cell with bars, but actually a few separated and guarded staterooms, not so nicely furnished as the usual ones, and definitely with no room service.

Being ushered off ship down the gangplank is also rarely enforced. "I've never personally had to do it so far, but I can order someone off ship for missing an emergency drill," the captain told me. "We take these safety measures very seriously."

The outspoken but congenial Arjen van der Loo became a captain with Holland America Line



(HAL) in 2003 after serving in one capacity or another on all 15 HAL



cruise ships. An avid cook, his specialty is crepes, Dutch style, and he gave hands-on instructions during cooking classes on our 7-day journey.

But enough of the rumors and off-the-record stuff, now let's cut to the cruise.

For the first two days at sea we saw and heard little else than fog and foghorns. But fortunately, on large cruise ships like the Oosterdam, there were plenty of scheduled activities from dawn to midnight to keep the 2,000 passengers occupied---starting with the casino on the 1st Deck to

the exercise classes on the top 10th Deck.

We participated in the morning Tai Chi exercises and classes in photo shop and cooking, including the captain's signature crepes.

At our first port, the Alaskan capital of Juneau, the sun majestically broke through almost on cue. We boarded a 10-seat seaplane and cruised just above the five glaciers in the Juneau icefield. The tops of the glaciers resembled frosting twirls on a cake.

After a 50-minute flight, the



Glacier in Tracey Arm, Alaska



Juneau glacier field from seaplane

seaplane landed in the Taku River port and we walked a short distance to the Taku Glacier Lodge, where we would enjoy a wild salmon barbecue. Later, during a briefing in the lodge, we observed three wild bears “crashing” the barbecue pit and licking off the remains. Two security guards led us out to a safe distance for photos.

A seaplane practically hugging the glacier fields and wild bears at a barbecue---how does one follow

an opening act like that?

While Juneau is landlocked, the only way in or out is by air or sea, and has a population of just over 30,000, the actual Borough of Juneau spans 7,800 square kilometers---roughly three times the size of Rhode Island.

The next day we docked at Sitka, often described as “Alaska’s Little Russia.” We stopped at St. Michael’s Cathedral where brightly

costumed performers were greeting tourists with traditional Russian folk dances.

The cathedral, built in 1844, is filled with antique relics, including a collection of priceless Russian icons that ranks among the finest in the world. Most of the icons were saved by Sitka residents during a devastating 1966 fire, and the restored church is now on the National Historic Landmark registry.

Our next port was Ketchikan, population about 15,000. We attended a lumberjack show---log rolling, wood chopping, pole climbing and corny jokes---then took a slow walk through the tiny town ending in the historic Creek Street district.

Well, historic might be a little tame, because back in 1903 this was Alaska's unofficial red light district with more than 30 bordellos within a 20-minute walk. The city



Log rolling demo in Ketchikan

Wild brown bear at salmon BBQ pit



fathers at the time ordered all bordellos to move from the townsite across the creek.

During Prohibition, some bordellos became speakeasies, with rowboats slipping in on nighttime high tides and liquor rising through trap doors.

Today, Creek Street is a bustling commercial area filled with tourist shops and restaurants. The Star Building at No. 5 Creek St., once a rowdy dance hall, is also on the National Historic Landmark

Registry, right alongside St. Michael's Cathedral.

In Alaska, you take the good with the bad.

(For more information on the Oosterdam and Alaskan Explorer Cruise, go to hollandamerica.com and follow the links)

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