

Alaska Unveiled

By Allan Fox, March 2006

The ice cracks like the sound of a gunshot. In slow motion a piece of ice the size of a small house slides into the water. Ice floes slam against each other and the waves crash. Then, as if it never happened, movement subsides and the incredible silence returns.

This is Alaska, one of the great wilderness destinations of the 21st Century and the most popular way to get there is by cruise ship.



In 2006 there will be 46 ships offering a range of experiences, from 14 shipping lines. This reflects the growing popularity of cruises, "more and more consumers are enjoying the pleasures of cruise vacationing" said Terry Dale, Cruise Line International Association (CLIA) President and CEO recently. 'The cruise lines report that Alaska bookings are coming in at a very brisk pace'.

Over 13.6 million people booked a cruise holiday in 2005
Ocean Shipping Consultants survey

Which is all very well, but as you sit in your CBD office you know your time is valuable. When you do get away you want to experience first class service and just a touch of decadence. Let's face it, your days of 'roughing it' are behind you and if you are going on a cruise it is important to know which lines will meet your criteria and which itinerary appeals.

There are 14 cruise companies offering trips but there are only two that offer a 6 Star Service, Silversea Cruises and Regent Seven Seas Cruises (formerly Radisson).

The **Silver Shadow** was recently rated 6th in the top 20 luxury cruise ships. In fact all four Silver Sea ships rated in the top 10. At 25,000grt she is the smallest of the big ships headed to Alaska this year [2006].



Lack of size does not however mean lack of space because she has a space ratio of 64, which in layman's terms (anything over 40 is very good) means that she has lots of space for her 400 passengers and you'll never feel crowded. The Silver Shadow does not offer a children's program.

When it comes to suites, 80% have balconies, whilst 100% come complete with robes, slippers and toiletries provided. And for that touch of decadence, individualised stationary for every guest.

Dining is open seating with two alternative venues available. Entertainment includes a two tier show lounge, casino, shops, bars, cigar lounge and spa.

Silver Shadow

Rating: 6 star
GRT: 25,000
Passengers: 400
Crew: 295
Space Ratio: 64
Built: 2000
Officers: Italian

Fares include daily replenishment of the in-suite bar, all beverages (Moet & Chandon is the house champagne), gratuities and they start at \$5700.00 per person, cruise only.

"Designed to provide a truly exceptional travel experience, our Silver Shadow is the perfect option for the discerning world traveller who wants to be pampered in luxury and comfort while exploring Alaska's spectacular scenery," said David Morris, Silversea's senior vice president of sales for North America. "There are a number of mainstream mega-ships calling in Alaska next year, but only Silversea offers an exclusive alternative for the affluent consumer seeking an award-winning, all-inclusive and intimate shipboard experience."

The **Seven Seas Mariner** is a larger ship and at 50,000grt she carries 700 passengers. In the same poll she was rated equal 13th in the top 20 luxury cruise ships in the world.

She has a passenger space ratio of 70, which again is excellent. For the family, Regent includes a children's program during the Alaska season, ensuring that everyone has a good time.



When the Seven Seas mariner was built in 2001 she was the first all-suite all-balcony ship to be built, including full bath and shower in each marble appointed bathroom.

Dining is open seating in each of her four restaurants. The specialty restaurant 'Signatures' offers dishes cooked in the style of the famous Le Cordon Blue cooking school in Paris. After dinner if you feel like dancing and need a partner? One of the gentlemen hosts is sure to be on hand to spin you around the floor.

Seven Seas Mariner
Rating: 6 star
GRT: 50,000
Passengers: 700
Crew: 440
Space Ratio: 70
Built: 2001
Officers: European

Fares include daily replenishment of the in-suite bar, wine with dinner, soft drinks and gratuities and start at \$3750.00 per person, cruise only

Since its inception in 1992, Regent Seven Seas has won acclaim in the luxury category as one of the "World's Best Cruise Lines." Having raised the bar on luxury through its ownership of the all-balcony suite concept, and partnerships with famed Le Cordon Bleu® and Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society, the re-branding from Radisson to Regent Seven Seas Cruises "keeps pace with valuable insights gained from guests, prospective affluent travelers and our extensive proprietary research," said Mark Conroy, president of Regent Seven Seas Cruises.

There are two basic **itineraries** that are offered by both Silversea and Regent:

The first is the Inside passage of Washington, British Columbia and Alaska; typically a 7-10 day round trip from Vancouver, Seattle or San Francisco that explores the 1,000 mile maze of bays, fjords and islands and visits such ports as Ketchikan, Sitka, Juneau and Skagway.

The second is the Gulf passage: typically a 7 day one-way voyage (either north or south) that includes the Inside passage as well as ports such as Seward and Whittier and the glacier rich waters of Prince William Sound. The Gulf passage offers opportunities for pre or post exploration of Alaska's Arctic Region.

There are three lines that offer a 5 Star Service, namely Holland America, Celebrity Cruise Lines and Princess Cruises. Holland America will lead the way with 8 ships positioned in Alaska in 2006, Princess with 7 ships in situ and Celebrity with 3 ships. However words of caution, not all ships of the fleet have the same star rating.

Of the **Holland America** ships only 5 are 5 stars, the Volendam, Zaandam, Ossterdam, Westerdam and the Zuiderdam.

Holland America has been sending ships to the 49th State since 1947 and has a modern fleet offering extensive facilities. A fleet wide upgrade 'Signature of Excellence' has been introduced which focuses on five areas central to the Holland America guest experience; spacious, elegant ships and accommodations; sophisticated five-star dining; gracious, unobtrusive service; extensive enrichment programs and activities, and compelling worldwide itineraries.

Suite prices start at \$2405.00 per person, cruise only.

Typical Seven Day Gulf Itinerary

Day 1: Vancouver, BC
Day 2: At sea
Day 3: Ketchikan, Alaska
Day 4: Juneau, Alaska
Day 5: Skagway, Alaska
Day 6: Glacier Bay, cruising
Day 7: College Fjord, cruising
Day 8: Anchorage, Alaska

Meanwhile **Princess** has 4 of their 5 star ships positioned for Alaska, namely the Coral Princess, Island Princess, Diamond Princess and Sapphire Princess.

Princess Cruises have a significant commitment to Arctic Alaska. In addition to the ships they own five deluxe riverside and wilderness lodges, and their own rail cars for the popular Anchorage - Denali Park – Fairbanks rail journey that departs from the quay.

Suite prices start at \$1839.00 per person, cruise only.

All of the **Celebrity** vessels, the Mercury, Infinity and Summit are 5 star vessels.

Celebrity Cruises have recently introduced Concierge Class staterooms offering daily fruit and hors d' oeuvres, double-thick Frette bathrobes, Hansgrohe® showerhead, VIP invitations to events, early embarkation and debarkation and more.

Suite prices start at \$2065.00 per person, cruise only.

One final word, when booking a cruise always book with an agent that specialises in cruising. If in doubt, check with the International Cruise Council of Australia to find your local representative at <http://www.cruising.org.au/> and happy cruising.