An Alaskan cruise

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My extended family is spread out over 2,000 miles, so arranging a get together is a logistical challenge. Over the past few years, we have chosen to hold our reunions on cruises, which have a lot of advantages: meals are taken care of, and people can easily split their time between doing their own thing and hanging out with family members. And on most nights, we are all able to come together for dinner.

Our most recent cruise was to Alaska, and I think I have figured out how to make the most of this particular cruise. There are several things you will want to do. First, while on the cruise ship, take in the natural beauty that the ship sails by. The scenery is spectacular. While on the cruise ship we saw numerous glaciers, majestic mountains, and we even saw killer whales breaching.

Second, sign up for excursions. The excursions take you to places where you are likely to see impressive scenery and remarkable wildlife. Several of us went on a whale watching trip out of Juneau. We saw Humpback whales creating a bubble net. In other words, the whales got below a school of fish and circled around the fish blowing out bubbles. The whales made smaller and smaller circles around the fish, causing the fish to occupy a compressed area. Then, the whales opened their mouths, swam to the surface, and swallowed fish during their ascent. The whales even lifted their heads above the water in order to gulp up as many fish as possible.

Other people in our group had similarly worthwhile adventures. My brother kayaked to a glacier and got to see the blue tones of glacier ice up close. One of my daughters saw a moose and took a plane ride past the peak of Mt. McKinnley (called Mt. Denali by the locals). Another person I talked to went salmon fishing and caught a huge number of fish that he had packed with dry ice and shipped to his home.

So that is a lot of what you should do. Now let me tell you what to avoid. You can profitably explore Ketchikan but you should avoid spending time in the other ports of call. Ketchikan has a nice wood boardwalk that you can walk on and if you are there at the correct time of the year, you can watch the salmon swim upstream to their spawning ground. A river runs right through the town, and you can find several waterfalls where the salmon must jump in the air in order to get past those obstacles.

Why am I disparaging the other towns? Because the stores in these towns are set up to sell products to people they will never see again. These stores do not have to build a reputation for good service because so many of their customers will never come back, so the stores do not need to keep today's customers happy so those people will also be tomorrow's customers.

I was particularly shocked to see so many jewelry stores in Juneau. I remember thinking, who would possibly buy expensive jewelry in this town? The people from the cruise ship had no way to return the items they purchased if they had issues with it.

It was not long before I figured out why so many jewelry stores could stay in business. My wife went into a jewelry store to buy a drinking glass and another souvenir. The salesperson would not just accept her payment. Instead, he engaged in high pressure sales tactics to try to sell her blue diamonds. He would not take no for an answer. We ended up leaving the drinking glass and the other souvenir in the store and we bought nothing.

Alaskan cruises can be a wonderful experience. But to make the most of your cruise, make sure that you spend time viewing the scenery from the ship, that you sign up for excursions and that you avoid spending time in all of the towns not named Ketchikan.

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