



All Your Questions About Taking a Child on an Alaska Cruise,
Answered

NO, YOU'LL NEVER BE BORED.

By J U D Y K O U T S K Y

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As the third most popular cruise destination, **Alaska is on a lot of families' travel wish lists**. I toyed with the idea of bringing my son on one, because the data was so convincing: According to the **recent cruise travel trends report** by the Cruise Line International Association (CLIA), the world's largest cruise trade association, families that cruised with kids under the age of 18 reported a 9 out of 10 satisfaction rate, and **travel agents** are reporting an increase in requests for adventure travel cruises. But the question remains: Does the reality match the data?

When it came time to pick a ship, I had to decide between big and small. Most of the smaller ships are quite active and while that appeals to me, I knew my son Matthew, who is eight, was more into the bells and whistles—he'd want lots of options for excursions, a good kid's club, endless ice cream and pizza, and many pools and hot tubs. Bigger ships, simply due to their size, also have the greater chance of having more kids on board, and I knew that would make him happy.

We opted for a seven-day Alaska sailing with **Princess Cruises**, on the **Ruby Princess**, making stops in Skagway, Juneau, and Ketchikan. Princess is known for being family-friendly—and once on-board, it showed in their activities, kid-friendly services, and array of shore excursions. But I didn't know that before the trip. Like many parents, I had some reservations. Here's what they were—and how everything turned out.

Is Alaska a cruise destination for kids?

Yes! What's especially nice about an Alaska cruise is that there's so much to see—whales! orcas! glaciers!—and it's only accessible by ship or boat. So families get the comfort of only unpacking once (anyone **traveling with kids** knows what a pain changing hotels can be when it comes to packing and unpacking suitcases), but seeing a completely different landscape each day. Unlike staying at one resort for a week, every day offers new scenery.

Will being in a cabin with my child feel claustrophobic?

According to CLIA, suites and **balconies** are the most important amenity for cruisers, and that definitely holds true for families. I love my son, but sometimes a little break is desperately needed. Having some extra space was very much appreciated (and I would go so far as to say necessary). Sometimes I was reading on the balcony while he was taking a nap indoors, or sometime he was on the balcony taking in the view while I was getting things together for the next excursion. Either way, having that separation was key. The good news is that there are 682 cabins with balconies aboard the Ruby Princess. Each one has a table, two chairs, and floor-to-ceiling sliding glass

doors that immediately make the room feel bigger. Families looking for even more space can book one of the mini-suites (there are 178, and they're about 300 square feet in size) or, for the ultimate in space, there's are full suites (of which there are 28, which range from 460 to 932 square feet, including balcony).

While some parents worry that being on a ship in general will feel claustrophobic, a ship this size—with 3,080 passengers—feels like a small town. There are **many places to explore**, and we never felt claustrophobic on our week-long journey.

Is the weather going to be a downer?

The weather in Alaska can be unpredictable and if you go early (or late) in the season, it can be a bit chilly. But kids being kids, they will still go into the Jacuzzi and the pool (even the unheated one). As the old adage goes, there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing. We were fortunate in that it didn't rain at all on our cruise, but **packing in layers** alleviates the bad weather dilemma.

Judy Koutsky

Are excursions too intense for a child?

On a big ship, there are **dozens of options in each port** (well over a hundred excursion options for the length of the cruise), so you can narrow down choices based on price, activity level, and interest. Smaller ships have fewer options, but that's the benefit of the big ship—lots and lots of choices. In Juneau, for instance, tours range from the \$99 land tour that includes the Mendenhall Glacier in **Tongass National Forest** to the \$490 dog sledding on the Mendenhall Glacier by helicopter (the latter was one of my son's favorite excursions). Some excursions are all day, while others are under two hours, so you can really pick them based on your child's attention span.

Matthew picked the Lumberjack Show in Ketchikan, the Orca Whale tour in Victoria, and the dog sledding helicopter ride in Juneau—all three held his attention for the duration and he would gladly have done them again. Each excursion lists the length, the activity level required, the child's price (along with the adult price), and the highlights, so you can see if it's a good fit. The guides on the excursions usually take a special interest in kids and engage them during the tour. Since many of the popular excursions fill up quickly, it's best to reserve them when you book your cruise. Helicopter tours and dog sledding are some of the most popular ones. Of course, for those last-minute families, you can always book excursions on the ship, too.

Isn't cruising for an older crowd?

This ship in particular really appeals to families—it had a strong **multigenerational aspect** with many grandparents, parents, and kids traveling together. During sea days, many families we spoke to broke into smaller groups (kids going to camp, adults reading or playing cards, grandparents attending lectures) and then joined up again at dinner. For traditional dining—where passengers were assigned a table and had the same one at the same time for the duration of their cruise—the pre-set times were 5 p.m. and 7:15 p.m., which lent itself to the family atmosphere. The anytime dining (which means guests could eat whenever they want between the hours of 5 p.m. and 10 p.m.) was good for those families who wanted flexibility.

Some parents worry that their kids won't like the idea of cruising. CLIA notes that not only are cruises the

preferred vacation choice for many families, but that kids are more involved in the decision-making process for cruises versus land-based trips.

Lastly, some picture cruises being stuffy, with everyone dressing formally each night for dinner. That's not the case with Princess Cruises (although other cruise lines take their dress code seriously). The dress range was wide, and most people were on the more casual side. Even for formal night, many kids wore a polo shirt and khakis, but there were also kids in shorts and a stain-free top. When it comes to clothing choice, anything goes, which is a good thing when traveling with kids.

Judy Koutsky

Will there be enough to entertain both parent and child?

The big trend in cruising is having enough to do for kids and parents separately, as well as together. There were family activities such as backstage tours to see how production shows are created aboard the ship. There was also a sports court for basketball, and a nine-hole miniature putting course and a golf simulator. Between the excursions, the onboard activities, the kid's camp, and playing cards on the balcony, we weren't wanting for entertainment. But of course, there was plenty more available: The "Discovery at Sea" program, for example, was a nice way for Matthew and I to learn about the stars during the stargazing program, and we also got to meet Alaskan puppies in the atrium when we attended the Iditarod-themed meet-and-greet. "Movies Under the Stars" happened each night and even though the weather could be a bit cold, Matthew and I huddled under a blanket (the ship provides them, along with free popcorn). Or, we jumped in the hot tub and watched from there.

Is the kids' camp going to be boring?

CLIA notes that 44 percent of people booking cruises say that **child-based activities like kid's club and babysitting** are reasons to book. Yet many parents are unsure of what to expect in kids' camp, and worry their little ones will be bored. But Matthew loved the camp so much, he begged to go back every day. He loved the LEGO contests, the dance parties, the talent shows—and most of all the friends he made there (that's another great thing about traveling with kids, they make instant, intense friendships and can't stand to be away from their newly formed best friends). The Ruby Princess kids camp is free and open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. most days (babysitting is available after 10 p.m. for \$5 per hour) and has three groups sorted by age. The Treehouse children's center (for 3- to 7-year-olds) kept kids busy with coloring projects, toys, books, dance parties, and sing-alongs. The Lodge Tween Center (for 8- to 12-year-olds) does treasure hunts, rocket-building, and board games. The Beach House teen center (for 13- to 17-year-olds) has video game tournaments, air hockey, foosball and ping-pong games, and movie nights.

Is cruising good for picky eaters?

Not only do the traditional dining venues have ample choices (half a dozen choices for each category—appetizer, entrée, and dessert), plus a children's menu, but there's also about a dozen places on board to eat. There's the buffet—fruit, vegetables, breads, sweets, hot food, and cold cuts—at the Horizon Court on deck 15. The Slice Pizzeria, located next to the pool, was a huge hit (and not only for kids); the "Glacier Bay" pizza—which had four different cheeses—was especially popular. Then there's the ice cream station, which was always bustling. Add to

that **specialty restaurants**, and there were plenty of dining options.

Will cruising allow for any spontaneity?

Yes, the **cruise schedule is set ahead of time**, so to some degree the vacation also is set. That doesn't mean there isn't plenty of room for impromptu fun, though. For many travelers cruising to Alaska, the highlight is Glacier Bay, where the ship gets close to two glaciers. Ships tend to stay an hour at each one so people can see the glacier calving (when chunks of ice fall off the glacier into the water below). I knew that the attention span of my son would not last two hours, so we got pizza, ice cream, and hot chocolate (his three favorite snacks), grabbed Uno cards from the ship's library, and grabbed a window table. In between Draw 4s and bites of pepperoni pie, we listened to the tell-tale sound of the glacier calving (a big crushing sound) and took in the view. It was one of the highlights of the trip.

There will always be concerns before taking your family anywhere, and I wouldn't know as much as I do about Alaska with children if I hadn't decided to go on the trip and bring Matthew along. Our biggest takeaway? The Alaskan excursions and the kids' camp were incredible—but the tiny moments, like Uno on the balcony, were just as unforgettable. ✦

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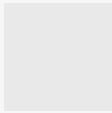
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