

cover story

A *Guide*
to the **ALASKA
MARINE
HIGHWAY**



One of America's greatest scenic byways takes visitors beyond the tourist hubs

BY CHRISTOPHER BATIN



Kayakers on Ketchikan Creek, in the town's historic district



An Alaska Marine Highway ferry in port in Skagway

There's a question that many travel advisors know all too well. "I've already been on an Alaska cruise — why should I go back?" Sure, an agent can explain to a client that there is, undoubtedly, plenty to experience in a state that stretches over 663,268 square miles.

But the real way to answer the question is to share some of the stories of only-in-Alaska adventures. Whether that's surviving a "thar she blows" experience that includes wiping whale snot off your face; crossing a stream where hundreds of salmon bounce off your legs like pinballs; or surfing the white-capped barrel waves of Alaska's Lost Coast, there are some bragging-rights experiences that can only be had when visitors — and advisors — do a bit more legwork.

The system of coastal ferries that sail from town to town, known as the Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS), is the secret to discovering many of these travel gems. Plus, not only does the AMHS help clients enjoy amazing adventures and once-in-a-lifetime experiences, agents who book this kind of a unique Alaska trip can benefit from new sources of commission on long-range ferry passenger fees and vehicle charges. Even if clients travel the ferry system on foot, agents can still earn commissions on accommodations, rental vehicles, ATVs and more at many AMHS ports.

To get started, here are some notes on a two-month-long AMHS custom adventure I enjoyed last summer.

A Scenic Byway

The AMHS is a designated "All-American Road" and the only marine route recognized as a National Scenic Byway. It stretches for 3,500 miles along the southern Alaska coastline, starting in Bellingham, Wash., and ending at Dutch Harbor on the Aleutian Chain.

Danielle Doyle, marketing manager for the AMHS, says that only a few coastal communities served by the route are connected to a land-based highway system.

"In addition to providing necessary economic support to roadless communities, AMHS ferries offer rare and unique travel opportunities for thousands of Alaska visitors and residents each year," she said.

According to Doyle, the secret to a good itinerary is to pre-plan the amount of time a client should spend at each location. Also, it's wise to ask for assistance from AMHS agents to help plan your client's itinerary: AMHS personnel can help identify multiple-day and single-day routes; where the ferry departs for a port; and when it returns to the same home port each day. This is key to planning a comprehensive vacation that makes the most of what each port has to offer. The AMHS website offers a variety of out-of-the-way adventures to help agents start the planning process.

Cordova

Decades ago, on my first trip to Cordova, I borrowed a van from a local air taxi operator. When I was done, the operator told me to just leave the keys in the ignition.

"Don't worry about anyone stealing it," she said. "The road stretches dead ends in each direction. If someone steals it, where are they going to go?"

This anecdote conveys the vastness of the roadless areas surrounding Cordova — and the possibility for adventure in the area. Statistics show that in 2014, more than 24,000 Alaska ferry passengers and 10,000 vehicles embarked and/or disembarked in Cordova. About 80 percent of passenger embarkations at Cordova were by Alaska residents.

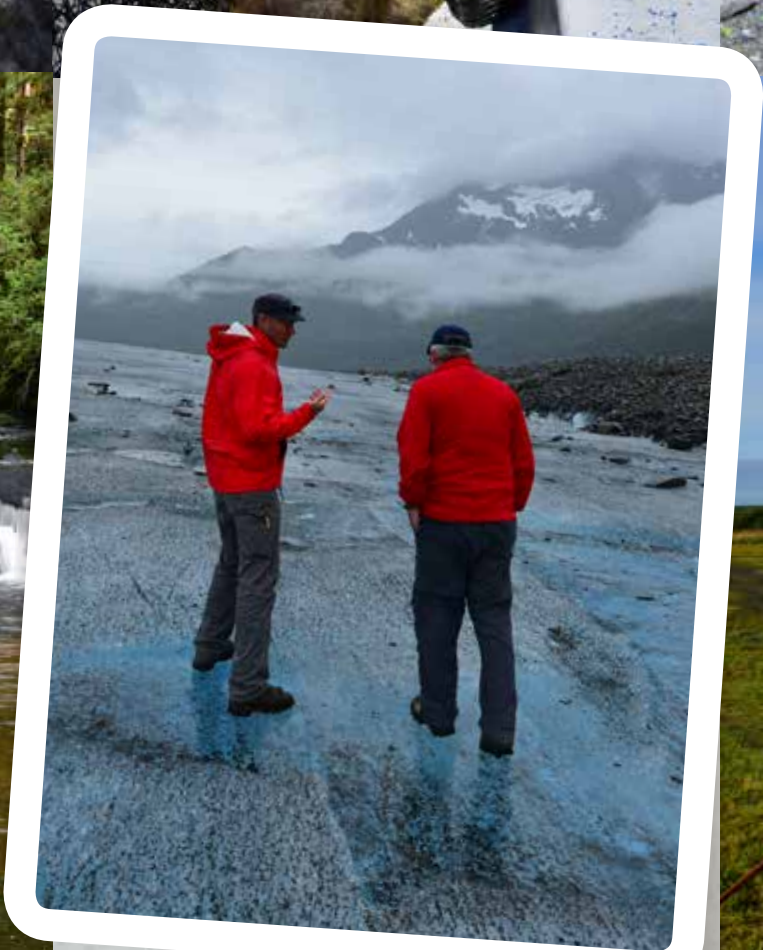
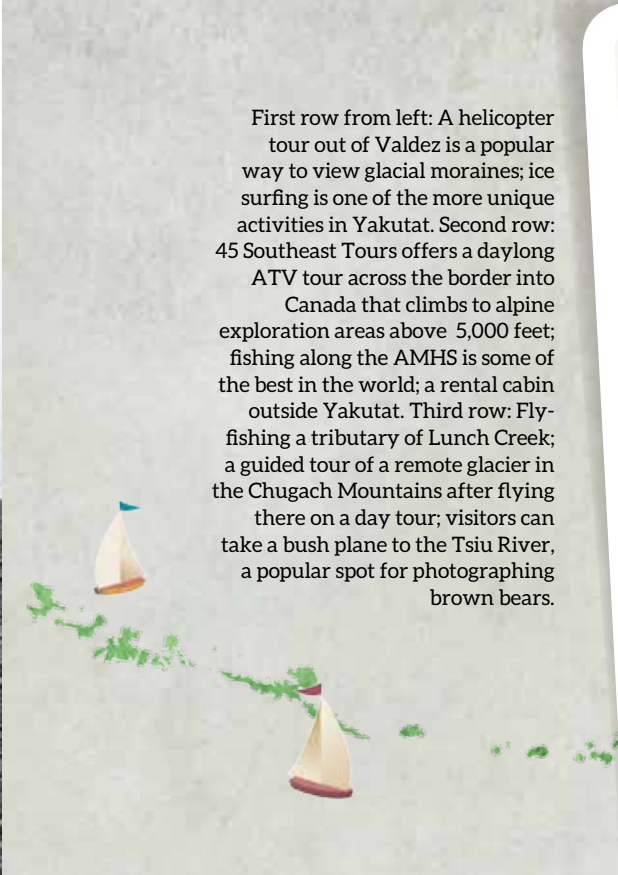
So, what do residents know about Cordova that visitors don't?

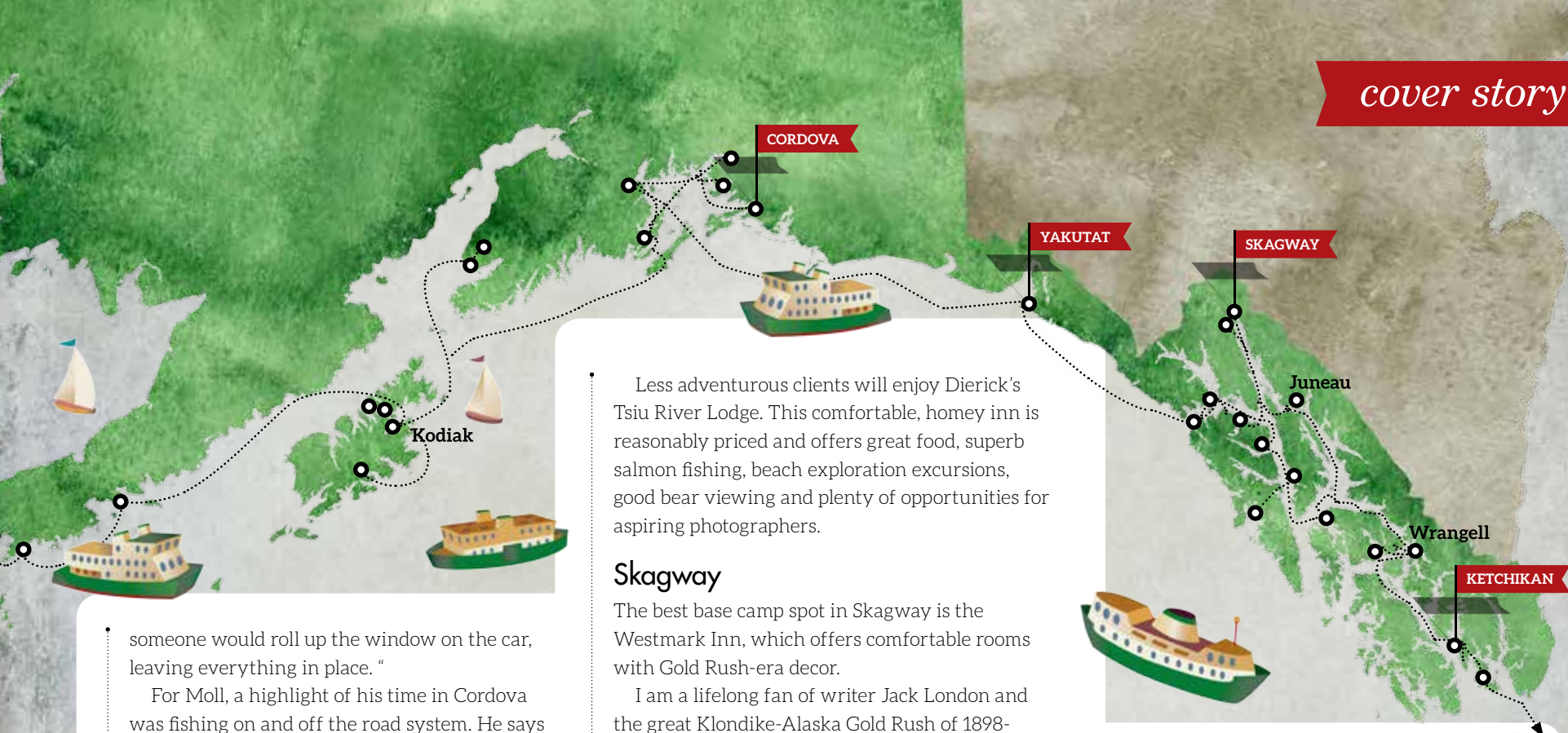
For expedition vets who put forth the effort, Cordova offers the stuff of dreams. Last year, Rodney Moll, a member of The Explorers Club and a veteran traveler to Alaska, rented a van in Anchorage and booked passage on the AMHS to Cordova. Once there, he spent 10 weeks exploring the Cordova maritime wilderness. He flew up friends and family from Southern California; hired charter boats for fishing and sightseeing; and reserved lodge accommodations and services. He fell in love with the solitude and myriad adventuring opportunities available in Cordova — opportunities that AMHS helped make possible, he says.

"I fell in love with the people there," Moll said. "I could put an expensive camera on the seat, leave the window open and walk away, and I'd bet that



First row from left: A helicopter tour out of Valdez is a popular way to view glacial moraines; ice surfing is one of the more unique activities in Yakutat. Second row: 45 Southeast Tours offers a daylong ATV tour across the border into Canada that climbs to alpine exploration areas above 5,000 feet; fishing along the AMHS is some of the best in the world; a rental cabin outside Yakutat. Third row: Fly-fishing a tributary of Lunch Creek; a guided tour of a remote glacier in the Chugach Mountains after flying there on a day tour; visitors can take a bush plane to the Tsiu River, a popular spot for photographing brown bears.





someone would roll up the window on the car, leaving everything in place.”

For Moll, a highlight of his time in Cordova was fishing on and off the road system. He says taking the ferry saved a lot of travel time for him around the region, especially when he visited Valdez, another port served by the AMHS.

Yakutat

Of all the cities in Southeast Alaska, Yakutat is the left-behind child of Alaska tourism. This is partly due to past decisions to refuse cruise-ship development, and partly because it's far off the path of most major cruise lines.

Yakutat doesn't have the brewpubs, gift shops and tours that larger cities offer, yet here you'll find Alaska in its purest form.

Rhonda Coston, Yakutat borough planner, wears many hats — one is tourism director, and the other is the “Alaska Angel” for travel agents.

“Yakutat welcomes visitors in small groups,” she said. “That's mainly because we don't have the infrastructure for large cruise ships.”

Yakutat tourism is quite possibly the next big thing in Alaska adventure tourism. *Outside* magazine even honored Yakutat as “one of the five best surf towns in America” (an activity that is often promoted as “surfing with sea otters.”)

Yakutat is home to Hubbard Glacier, North America's longest tidewater glacier. It's an ideal spot to explore via hiking trail, tour boat or kayak, as well as a great place for camping on the beach.

Even if clients don't fish, they should start a visit to Yakutat at Situk River Fly Shop. Owner Bob Miller is an excellent resource for all things Yakutat. He's also passionate about history — he's transforming a World War II hangar into an Alaska Warbirds Museum — and he has an archive of propaganda material from the war years that you won't see anywhere else.

On my visit to the area last summer, I spent the day with Mark Sappington of Yakutat Charter Boat Company, and we caught eight halibut weighing more than 100 pounds. The following day, Coston accompanied us on a three-day fly-out excursion following Alaska's “Lost Coast” to a remote cabin near the Tsiu River. There, we enjoyed some of the best silver salmon fly-fishing of my life.

Less adventurous clients will enjoy Dierick's Tsiu River Lodge. This comfortable, homey inn is reasonably priced and offers great food, superb salmon fishing, beach exploration excursions, good bear viewing and plenty of opportunities for aspiring photographers.

Skagway

The best base camp spot in Skagway is the Westmark Inn, which offers comfortable rooms with Gold Rush-era decor.

I am a lifelong fan of writer Jack London and the great Klondike-Alaska Gold Rush of 1898-1899, which funneled more than 100,000 people through Skagway to the gold fields of the north. But I knew I didn't allocate enough time on my trip to explore the area's famous Klondike Gold Rush International Historic Park. So, instead, I drove the Klondike Highway north, which parallels the park's Chilkoot Trail. The beauty and sheer ruggedness of this area is remarkable — it is, in my opinion, simply the most scenic stretch of highway in North America.

Luckily, I did have enough time in Skagway to enjoy an ATV adventure offered by Southeast Tours. For several hours, we explored the alpine glaciers, wildflower-filled meadows and cascading creeks of the area's high country.

Ketchikan

In Ketchikan, I spent several nights at Clover Pass Resort, where I mingled around a nightly campfire with other Alaska ferry passengers. I stayed in a guestroom, but some visitors chose to park an RV or motorhome at the resort — some for a week, others for the entire summer.

“RVers who spend time at Clover Pass can rent our boats, hire our guides and partake in our three-meals-a-day option,” said Michael Briggs, marketing manager for Clover Pass. “Or, they can use their own boats to explore the area's remote bays and inlets.”

Hotels abound in Ketchikan. One good option is My Place Hotel, which is strategically located across the street from the ferry terminal, while other top spots include The Landing Hotel and Bayside Hotel in downtown Ketchikan. Salmon Falls Resort is one the most luxurious resorts in the area; it features a picturesque waterfall, a cordial staff and superbly crafted log buildings. The picture windows in the property's huge restaurant allow guests to view bears, eagles and foxes fishing for the creek's migrating salmon.

When it comes to activities, Ketchikan is a manageable destination for visitors.

“Downtown Ketchikan is a walking-friendly town for both cruise ship and AMHS passengers,” said Patti Mackey, executive director of the

Ketchikan Visitor's Bureau. “We receive a lot of compliments from visitors who really like Ketchikan because of the walking, self-guided tour maps we hand out. The self-guided walking tour of town center is perhaps the most popular thing visitors do here.”

Mackey says a good way to start a visit is at the new “Ketchikan Is...” exhibit at Tongass Historical Museum. Through informative and entertaining vignettes, it examines the past and present of Ketchikan, including the area's frontier history and legendary brown bear lore, as well as provides a look into the lives and culture of Ketchikan residents.

“The entire culture in Ketchikan revolves around rain, more so than any other destination in Alaska,” said Anita Maxwell, the Ketchikan museums director for Tongass Historical Museum. “Visitors can learn about how we dress, how we work and even how we celebrate life in the rain. It sets the stage for their visit.”

After learning about the local history and culture, clients might want to sample some of the wilderness activities here. Sportfishing tours abound in Ketchikan, but one of the best is Baranof Fishing Excursions, which is owned and operated by Chuck and Greg Slagle. The daylong Alaska Fishing and Wilderness Dining excursion combines a day of fishing with an onshore lunch in a massive, Hobbit-style cubby surrounded by old-growth rainforest. There, a chef prepares a seasoned fish bouillabaisse that will have clients begging for the recipe.

The AMHS allows visitors to explore Southeast Alaska and celebrate the region's spirit in a new and unique way. While I might not be able to join the ranks of legendary world explorers, my trip along this one-of-a-kind American highway, gave me at least a fleeting feeling of being “back of beyond.” And, in this day and age, that opportunity is priceless. ●

The Details: Alaska Marine Highway System (www.ferryalaska.com)