

Alaska: An Inside Look At Dog Sledding

by Jami Sales, PassPorter Guest Contributor

There are many reasons why Alaska cruises are so popular. The amazing scenery, awesome views of remote country and untouched wilderness, amazing centuries old glaciers calving off icebergs that float by with seals and other animals sometimes still on board ... Combine that with the naturalist lectures onboard, history-filled port stops, and the other fun times of a cruise, and you have a week that is hard to beat.

But wait! Who needs to stop at one week? There are cruise choices that go up to two leisurely weeks on small vessels that go into areas unreachable by the big cruise ships, and there is always the option of staying on land for a visit before or after your cruise.

We recently did just that: sailing northbound from Vancouver through the scenic inside passage, through Glacier Bay and College Fjord, and on across the Gulf of Alaska to the Anchorage area. We opted to do a custom land trip with a wonderful group of travelers to the Kenai Peninsula, Talkeetna, and Denali National Park.

This was a special trip for us: one celebrating the 20th anniversary of our travel agency. I'd offered Dave and Jennifer a little article on some portion of this great trip, and I was thinking about content as we traveled. Sure, the ports and scenery on this itinerary are fabulous, but that is widely covered. What we chose to share is a great experience for animal lovers.

Any dog fans out there? Have you ever followed the Iditarod race held every year in Alaska? It is one whopping race, and like they say in their advertising, "The Superbowl is for the sissies in the lower 48."

The teams consist of 12 to 16 dogs pulling a sled and driver, covering 1150 miles in 10 to 17 days, depending on the weather. The route covers terrain including snow, iced-over rivers, mountain passes, tundra, and dense forest.

The race is testimony to the famous relay organized by Alaskans nearly a hundred years ago, when a diphtheria epidemic threatened to kill everyone in Nome, Alaska. The mushers who had previously simply transported goods into the gold mining camps rallied to make a life or death run all the way out to Nome to save the folks... and deliver the serum they did. The trail was broken and the annual race soon followed.

Preparing for up to three weeks in sub-zero wilderness is a year 'round task, and each musher strategizes, trains, breeds their dogs and hones their skills the whole rest of the year. Dog lineage is carefully considered, tested and analyzed. Dogs are scrutinized for personality traits from birth. These dogs are loving and want nothing more than to be petted and praised--and please their master. Between us, folks in our group visited three Iditarod mushers, saw training camps, equipment barns, watched Iditarod movies and listened to strategy analysis talks. We saw puppies ranging from four weeks to nine months, and listened to the mushers' analysis on the potential of each of them. I got nearly knocked over by a wonderful eight year-old female who has run the race all but the first year of her life. She was big and strong, and was so affectionate that she threw herself into a "dog hug" (and lick) to greet me like I was her best pal. What a doll!

The dogs are a special mixture of breeds loosely called huskies, bred for their intelligence, strength, desire to please, and big feet to handle the snow. The wear protective booties of thin fabric which are changed every 6 hours or anytime they get wet during the race. Veterinarians are strategically placed along the route to be sure that the dogs are properly cared for, but with the devotion of these mushers to the animals, I can't imagine any of them ever being abused. They run because they love to - simple as that.

Tremendous differences exist in the needs of the differing positions on the dog team. Leaders must be fast, agile, quick to respond to verbal commands, and naturally inclined to develop a tight camaraderie with the musher. They strike a special bond, cooperating in the leadership of the team, which is not something every dog is right for. Good leaders are born, not a product of training. A team may rotate between a few leaders, and the musher may even give one of the dogs a rest on the sled so that they can come back energized and spark up the rest of the team if they are fatigued. Stories abound about courageous dogs who have led teams, saved lives, and are simply part of the family.

Traveling to Alaska? From many cruise ports or other towns you can arrange to visit dog training camps. Visits are available in snowy or dry areas all summer, where they train in the summer behind wheeled carts if there is no snow. You'll hear all about the training and racing, hold puppies, pet the team and be as wowed as all of us were. If you are interested in a ride behind a team, be sure that is offered on the tour you select.

For more Iditarod information, there are several great books out, and there is video, articles, and live coverage every March at www.iditarod.com. If you are a teacher, check out the special resources

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available and consider an interactive lesson during the weeks of the race!

About The Author: Jami Sales is the president of MouseEarVacations.com and Cruising Co. She makes her home in Hawaii yet still leaves home to go on vacation. Go figure!

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