

CRUISE WEST'S PACIFIC NORTHWEST ADVENTURE

by Don & Bonnie Woodland

The view as the Spirit of Endeavor makes her way through the Jervis Inlet, in British Columbia

Lots of Cape Codders have taken Alaska Cruises. Yet an equally impressive cruise, in terms of majestic scenery in the Pacific Northwest, is Cruise West's "Coastal Wilderness Cruise." This adventure leaves from Seattle, Washington, and is an eight-day cruise through the Strait of Georgia.

The clientele on this cruise has an average age of around 68. (However, this is not indicative of all Cruise West cruises.) Guests on the Coastal Wilderness Cruise prefer cruising without the gambling and the Vegas-style shows found on the big cruises. They enjoy the hands-on approach of a small-ship cruise that can get into the little bays and inlets that bigger boats can't navigate. And they like the intimacy of traveling with only a hundred passengers, instead of 2,000 or 3,000.

The coastal Wilderness Cruise is centered around "soft adventure" and information--not sizzle and glitz. There are on-board talks regarding flora and fauna that passengers may see along the way. And sightings of water animals like whales, sea lions and seals, are a frequent experience along the way.

One thing everyone appreciates about Cruise West is that they don't nickel-and-dime guests with excursions. While a couple of "extra charge" ones are offered, the several that are included in the price of the cruise seem to satisfy nearly everyone.

The dress on-board is utterly casual. There are no "formal nights." The focus for Cruise West has been to make the week about the *experience and nature*. And for that reason, the informality makes sense.

The food on board is superb for a small-ship cruise. And there are usually four or five entrees to choose from on the dinner menu--a remarkable selection. The food is well-presented. The breads are outstanding; each dinner features hearty bread baked fresh that day.

Like all cruise lines, Cruise West charges for alcoholic drinks. But thankfully, someone isn't always trying to sell you a drink, as they often do on some Caribbean cruises. And Cruise West does not charge for soft drinks. This fact, and the no-tipping policy Cruise West has gone to, are utterly

refreshing.

The cruise is also not one for gluttons. You get three great meals a day, which are scheduled (including one dinner seating). But delightfully, there's no 24-hour foodfest here. The portions are perfectly adequate, but more European in size. It is quite refreshing and very sensible. Of course, if you want seconds, they are happy to bring them to you. Table service was consistently good. The all-American crew was very cheerful--a fact that was great to see, considering their no-tipping policy.

One doesn't appreciate how anxious tipping on cruises makes guests feel, until it isn't there. Its absence was something everyone found to be a relief--like an oppressive weight had been lifted off everyone's shoulders. Gone was the obsessing about "have I left this or that crew member enough." Some chose to tip individual crew members, but it was not out of a sense of obligation.

Cruise West's small-ship approach also makes it so much easier to meet new people on-board. Even with the ship's

unassigned dinner seating, you'll find you get to know many guests by name, and many more by face.

Cruise West's Coastal Wilderness Cruise is aboard the Spirit of Endeavor, which is the line's fastest cruise ship--going up to 13 knots. The 23-year-old vessel has four decks. It is clean, well-maintained, 217 feet long, and holds 102 passengers. The ship decor is sleek and stylish. The Explorer Lounge offers expansive picture windows, a video and lending library and ample seating to get to know your fellow passengers. Each stateroom features a wide picture window or porthole, with private showers that work well. You can get adjacent rooms with private connecting doors. And there is a single share program.

What speaks volumes about Cruise West is the sheer number of repeat customers it has, and the praise they give the line. Probably 50% of those on the Coastal Wilderness Cruise with us had cruised with Cruise West a number of times before.

Crewperson Meriweather Gill--an "Exploration Leader" who has been with the ship 4 years--describes the clientele as retired, "well-educated and traveled--with a zest for learning." Referring to the versatility of the small cruise ship, she said, "Our guests like to do and see things that few are able to do," adding, "The casualness, along with the up-close and personal approach of the cruises is a major attraction. "When people come, they really feel they haven't just been to a destination, but that they've also gained an understanding of it through the talks."

Katherine and Marvin Conlon had cruised on Cruise West four times. The reason why? Marvin says, "It's just like we're at home! There's a real comfort zone here."

Bill and Nancy Zarkis of New Baltimore, Michigan was on their first cruise with Cruise West, which was their second small-boat cruise. They liked it, they said, because "they had never seen the Pacific Northwest, and this was a way to do it without having to pack and repack."

Bill and Kay Marsh of Poulsbo, Washington had done four Cruise West cruises. They couldn't believe the time they'd left their keys on board upon disembarking, and "the Cruise West people dispatched a guy who drove 45 minutes to return them."

Richard and Bonnie Wilsey of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin told us, "If you want to see a destination and learn something about it, you go Cruise West. If you want to do a casino and see Vegas-style entertainment, you take one of the big cruise ships."

Tony and Irene Nicklin of Garden Grove, California commented about the friendly employees aboard the Spirit of Endeavor. Also, that it was easy to understand what's going on. They liked that you didn't have to sign up for excursions to get off the boat. "The stuff that was included was wonderful," they said. "And



Brave souls take on the Capilano Suspension Bridge near Vancouver, B.C.

only these small ships can go to these destinations."

Phyllis Klein of Denver, Colorado, said, "I've never had such intimate education or memorable experiences."

Also heard from was said Nikki Davis of Benicia, Ca., who told us, "I loved pulling the boat up to the wild life on shore and seeing it close up."

DAY 1

While most cruises begin at a wharf, Cruise West's Coastal Wilderness Cruise starts in a hospitality suite at Seattle's Westin Hotel--a very classy touch. Upon arriving at the Westin on departure day, you drop your bags at the Cruise West stand on the ground-level curb at the Westin, and you can use their Hospitality Suite on the 39th floor, which affords an amazing view of Puget Sound. Guests can go back outside and take in downtown Seattle. This is most pleasurable, as downtown Seattle



The Spirit of Endeavor anchored outside the Princess Louisa Inlet



Getting off the double-decker to tour Victoria



Chief Mate Deanna Stewart piloting the ship

is very clean, and not at all intimidating. The population of the city is only 563,000. Also, the Westlake Shopping area is right next to the Westin, if you choose to support the local economy. The Mall's Food Court on the 3rd floor is remarkable; it reflects the diversity of the local population and is a great place to grab a bite.

At 5:00pm guests meet at the hotel and board a motorcoach to be taken to Pier 91 for boarding. The ship takes a sightseeing cruise of Puget Sound and the Seattle waterfront, which is very impressive. After dinner, local expert Vickie Jensen gives a talk on native American history along the route--what they refer to in the



The magnificent Sunken Garden at Butchart Gardens, near Victoria, on Vancouver Island, B.C.

Northwest as First Nations history. (www.westcoastwords.com)

DAY 2

Vancouver is Canada's largest harbor and third largest city, with a city population of 580,000. Passengers disembark from Canada Place early to take in Capilano Suspension Bridge and Park, home of an amazing pedestrian suspension bridge that is 450 feet long and hangs 230 feet over the Capilano river. Those who cross this cable-suspended bridge are given a certificate that reads, "I Made It! ...In due respect for this act of daring bravado, the proprietors... hereby grant the bearer bragging rights for the period of two years." (www.capbridge.com)

From the park, the motorcoach returns across Lion's Gate Bridge to tour the city, including a drive through the magnificent Stanley Park. At over 1,000 acres, the park is one of the largest urban parks in North America.

In the afternoon, guests set out on their own to take in city attractions like Granville Island, which is a marvelously

diverse and sprawling food market. There's also Gastown, which is the original downtown of Vancouver, and Chinatown. Plus, there's shopping and sensational restaurants on Robson Street. Other attractions include: the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Vancouver Aquarium. After a full day ashore, guests return and the ship leaves Vancouver passing under Lion's Gate Bridge, and cruising Howe Sound. Along the way, you pass West Vancouver, which has the highest per capita income in Canada.

DAY 3

Jervis Inlet is one of the principle inlets of British Columbia, and spans 45 miles. Along the way is Freil Lake Falls, a 1400-foot waterfall.

But it was seeing Princess Louisa Inlet that became the highlight of this cruise. We'd heard that it was known as a "Yosemite at sea level." But we were not prepared to see how accurate that assessment was; Princess Louisa Inlet is truly one of the most beautiful spots in the world. About it, Erle Stanley Gardner

said, "*Perhaps an atheist could view it and remain an atheist, but I doubt it.*" Because Princess Louisa Inlet begins at a narrows off the Jervis Inlet (at Malibu Rapids), it was accessible only by DIBs (Demaree Inflatable Boats), which are like Zodiacs--and carry about 14 to a boat. These crafts also allowed us to motor up to where the trees descend to the water's edge--where huge Okra starfish can be seen on the submerged granite. These starfish are 6 to 8 inches in diameter and vary in color. It was a wonderful experience--one indicative of the hands-on experiences a cruise like this can offer.

From the Inlet, it's on up the Strait of Georgia to Nanaimo on Vancouver Island.

DAY 4

Vancouver Island was recently ranked by *Travel and Leisure* as "North America's Top Island Destination." Nanaimo is located midway up Vancouver Island and has come a long way from its coal mining beginnings. A guided walking tour of the downtown is included, and is capped off at the city's historic Bastion, where every



The Seattle Space Needle, as seen from the Spirit of Endeavor

guest gets to sample some of the town's now-famous Nanaimo Bars, a confection that's absolutely loved by anyone who tries it. (www.nanaimodowntown.com)

Leaving Nanaimo, the ship cruises the sparsely populated Gulf Islands (the Canadian portion of the San Juan Islands). Here the crew is quick to point out bald eagles, herons, kingfishers and harbor seals.

DAY 5

The cruise into Victoria's inner harbor is impressive, and everyone is on deck to see it, even though it's only dawn. Victoria is the capital of British Columbia, with a city population of 450,000.

From the Victoria Harbor, passengers



"Yosemite at sea level" is how one person described the Princess Louisa Inlet

climb aboard a double-decker bus to travel 30 minutes to Butchart Gardens. This 50-acre estate was created from an abandoned limestone quarry in 1904 by Mrs. Jennie Butchart. Today, it is world-famous, and has defied description for most of its 102-year history. Today it employs 50 full-time gardeners and receives over two million paid admissions a year. It is open year round. (www.butchartgardens.com)

An included bus tour of Victoria immediately follows, and in the afternoon some enjoy the optional "tea" at the Empress Hotel. In the afternoon also, and continuing into the evening, guests are free to take in this most European-looking city. It's hard to beat an evening in Victoria; it has EVERYTHING! The local information booth overlooks the wharf, so be sure to pick their brains for options, once you come off the ship.

DAY 6

There are 760 islands in the San Juan Islands at low tide and 460 at high tide. 170 San Juan Islands are named and appear at high tide. The San Juan Wildlife Refuge includes 83 islands, and some 90 Orca

whales make these waters their home. There's a myriad of wildlife on the less-inhabited islands, which can be seen from the ship.

In the afternoon, you visit Friday Harbor on San Juan Island, home to 7,000 year round residents. An included bus tour spans the whole island, and there's a photo stop at the beautiful Roche Harbor overlook. The bus also passes the Duck Soup Inn, reputed as one of the best restaurants in the Northwest. Guests shop the remainder of the afternoon in Friday Harbor.

After dinner onboard, guests take another DIB ride...this time to Rossario's Resort (originally the Moran mansion) on Orca Island. In the century-old main mansion (now the main building of the Rossario resort), a concert is performed for ship guests featuring Christopher Peacock-organist and pianist. The century old massive pipe organ in the Moran mansion is original, and Peacock has designed a multimedia slide-and-organ show that tells the history of Orca Island. He's performed at Rosario's for 26 years now, and his performance marks an unforgettable



The Endeavor noses right up to shore in Queens Reach (Jervis Inlet) as Exploration Leader Meriwether Gill gathers "old man's beard" and western hemlock for passengers to see



Vancouver's Gaslight district (the original Vancouver), is famous for its steam-powered clock.

evening. (www.rosarioresort.com)

DAY 7

Washington's second oldest city is the most surprising "find" on this cruise...Port Townsend. The town, with its year round population of 8500, has been federally designated an "Historic Seaport" (along with only two others in America: Cape May, NJ, and Galveston, Texas).

Originally a town "built on lumber and whiskey," Port Townsend was a brawling city, where innocents would be slipped a "Mickey Finn" and shanghaied aboard ships.

In the 60's, the hippies discovered this northwest corner of the Olympic peninsula. Who would have guessed their legacy to us



Guests head ashore at San Juan Island's Friday Harbor

would be such a vibrant, edgy place today--one filled with great art studios, restaurants and unique shops.

It's also the B&B capital of the Pacific Northwest. It's own *James Bed and Breakfast* was the very first B&B on the entire West Coast.

The city won the Great American Main Street award in the year 2000. And parts of the movie "An Officer and A Gentleman" were filmed here.



Beautiful Roche Harbor on San Juan Island

"Downtown" is near the wharf. "Uptown" is literally up...as in stairs...lots of them--and is located directly behind downtown, up a considerable steep hill. However, the good news is there's a shuttle bus every 20 minutes that takes you there. (You'll thank us for telling you.) (www.enjoypt.com)

DAY 8

Disembarkation in Seattle is early, around 8:30 am after breakfast. But that's not early enough to catch Alaska Air's nifty non-stop, direct flight back to Boston. (With connections, all the other flights offered to Seattle take about 3-5 hours longer. Alaska Air is the only non-stop, direct in either direction. And there's only one of those every day). So take an overnight in Seattle and enjoy the city. There's a lot more here than Starbuck's.

One thing you shouldn't miss in Seattle is Bill Speidel's Underground Tour. 200,000 take the tour every year. The Tour's presentation is extremely funny, and you'll learn more about the city than you imagine, given the title.

One fact we learned was that the original "Skid Row" was in Seattle, and referred to a hill that they'd slide logs down to the water. (The bad connotation came later.) For information on the Underground Tour, phone: 206-682-4646. There are no reservations.

Also there's the Pike Place Market on 1st Avenue. This is Seattle's answer to Vancouver's Granville Island. Amazing variety of food and related items..

Tips:



The Empress Hotel in Victoria B.C. has an incredibly European look

You'll need a passport; Seattle is considered a point of entry. Also, try to go with the flow with Customs. Some of the new requirements are a little hinky...like having to show your American passport to AMERICAN Customs before you pass into Canada.

The cruise is "soft adventure." This means there's nothing particularly physically difficult about it (except for those stairs in Port Townsend). However, those confined to wheel chairs would not be able to do this cruise.



The ride up the magnificent Jervis Inlet

There's unpredictability to the weather in this neck of the woods. So pack layers. Also, make sure you have good rain gear and walking shoes.

As already mentioned, try to book on Alaska Air's non-stop, direct flights. They aren't any more expensive, and it's much easier without the extra stops and plane changes. Also, Alaska Air Freq. Flyer miles can be used on TEN other airlines who partner with Alaska Air, including Northwest and Continental.

- Ask for a stateroom that has a window, not a porthole, especially if you are claustrophobic. It's a bit more money, but well worth the difference.

- Dietary restrictions aren't a problem even if you forget to inform them ahead. There are so many menu options that you'll have no problem working around diet restrictions. If you wish to mention it, these people are heaven to deal with, on this or any problem you may have.

- Don't be confused by the term "Reach" when you travel through Jervis Inlet. (We'd never heard of it either.) The inlet is made up of four "reaches." These are just the different successive sections of the inlet.

- Communication onboard is not a

problem. Email via satellite is available on-board. And cell phones will work on all but one or two days of the cruise.

- As previously mentioned, tipping is neither expected nor required for the Cruise West staff. Individual tips are at your discretion and you should deal with the individual(s) directly.

- Staterooms have regular power outlets, so all your hair dryers and cell phone rechargers should work nicely.

- Each stateroom has binoculars provided. And you'll find yourself using

them constantly.

- Travel insurance is highly recommended.

This cruise is growing in popularity, as more and more people learn how beautiful the Pacific Northwest waterways are in southern British Columbia. In that regard, it's very telling what that the Harbormaster at Orca Island had to say. He told us that in all the years he worked for United Airlines...traveling most places in the world, and sailing in each one on his personal time--that upon retiring from the Airline, he chose to live in the San Juan Islands because, as he told us, "For a sailor, these waters are literally the most beautiful place in the world."

Cruise West offers other cruises as well, including destinations like: Alaska, Columbia and Snake Rivers (people rave about that one), Mexico's Sea of Cortes, Costa Rica & Panama, South Atlantic Coast, Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway, The Northeast, California Wine Country, Japan, South Pacific, Ring of Fire, Vietnam, the Orient, and the Caribbean. For more information about Cruise West, call 888-362-2834, or go to www.cruisewest.com.

And thanks for traveling!