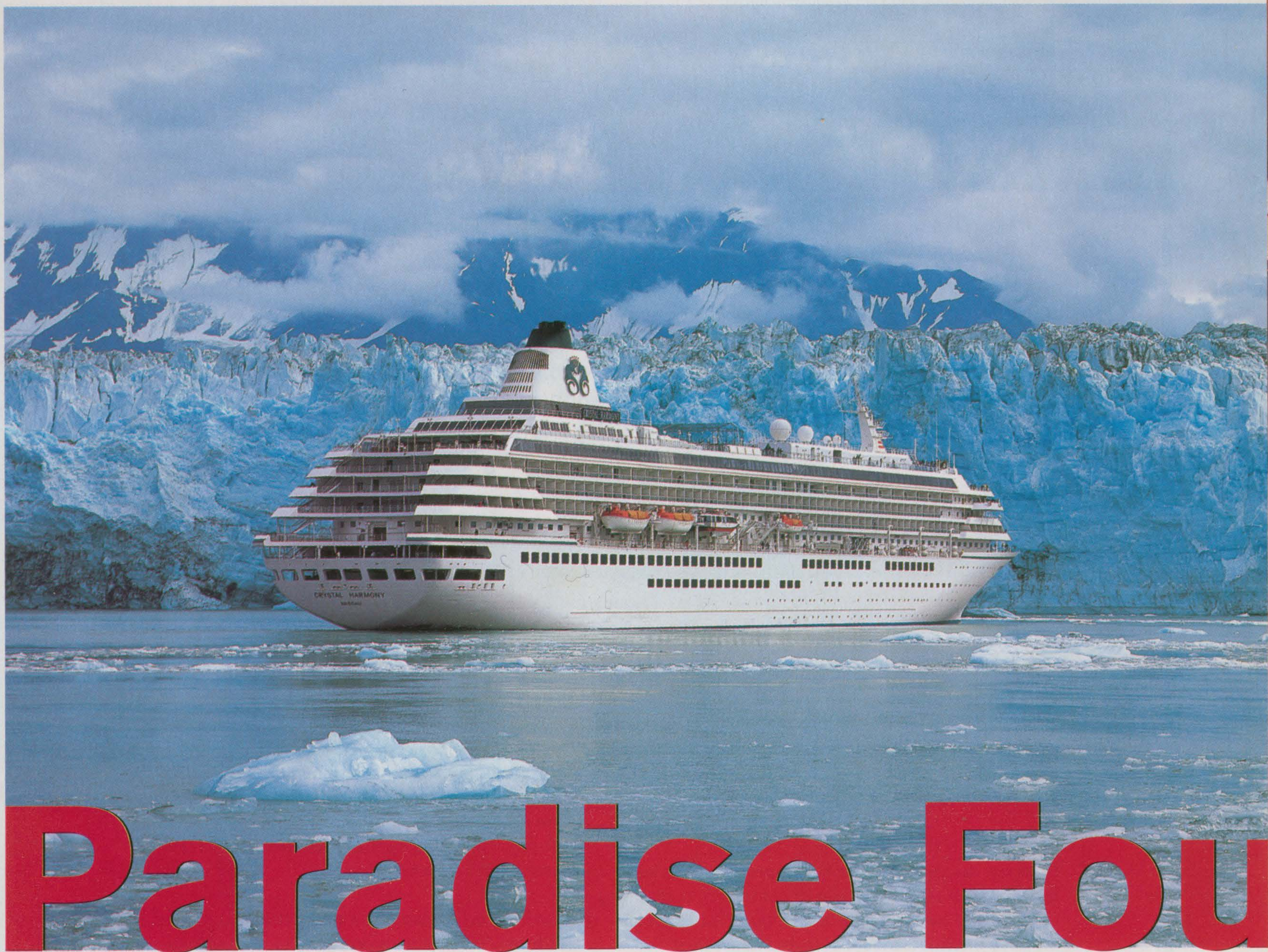




# Paradise Fou

A cruise to Alaska's wilderness delivers a bounty of unexpected delights.

**BY BARBARA PERKINS**

**F**rom its jagged mountain peaks to its shimmering ice blue glaciers, Alaska is a land of unimaginable beauty. In his writings, renowned conservationist John Muir had this to say about his trip there in 1879: "No excursion do I know of may be made into any other American wilderness where so marvelous an abundance of noble, new-born scenery is so charmingly brought into view." Never before, wrote Muir, had he been exposed to scenery so "hopelessly beyond description." More than a century later we traveled that same route and could not agree more with him.

Like Muir, we were spellbound by Alaska's beauty. But our voyage was made even more remarkable by the experience aboard the luxury cruise ship Crystal Harmony.

To start, what sets Crystal Harmony apart from other cruises is an Alaska itinerary that sails from San Francisco rather than the usual ports of Seattle or Vancouver. This

indulgence allows passengers to begin their adventure by spending two uninterrupted days of pampering at sea. Enough time for anyone to get their sea legs.

A hint of what was to come sat waiting in our stateroom: a bottle of chilled champagne, which is a staple for all penthouse passengers. We barely had time to take in the spacious cabin, its private veranda, well stocked mini-bar, television with DVD player, walk-in closet and marble bath with full-size Jacuzzi, when we were greeted by our smiling cabin stewardess who promptly introduced herself and her assistant. Together, she said, they would care for our quarters twice a day.

Over the years, Crystal Cruise Lines has earned its five-star reputation by among other things, providing impeccable service. Now — excuse the pun — that attribute became crystal clear to us the moment we met Cetin Comlekciogullari.

Cetin, we quickly learned, hailed from Turkey and as it turned out he was to be our butler.

We were initially daunted by the concept of a manservant, but rest assured within a day or two we had grown accustomed to our daily silver platter of caviar, fresh fruit or shrimp. Soon it became difficult to imagine life without the ability to leave wrinkled clothes lying about each evening only to have them picked up, pressed and returned to us on hangers the following day. Of the 480 staterooms, 265 have private verandas, 62 of which include the luxury of a butler. In our opinion, he was worth the additional fee.

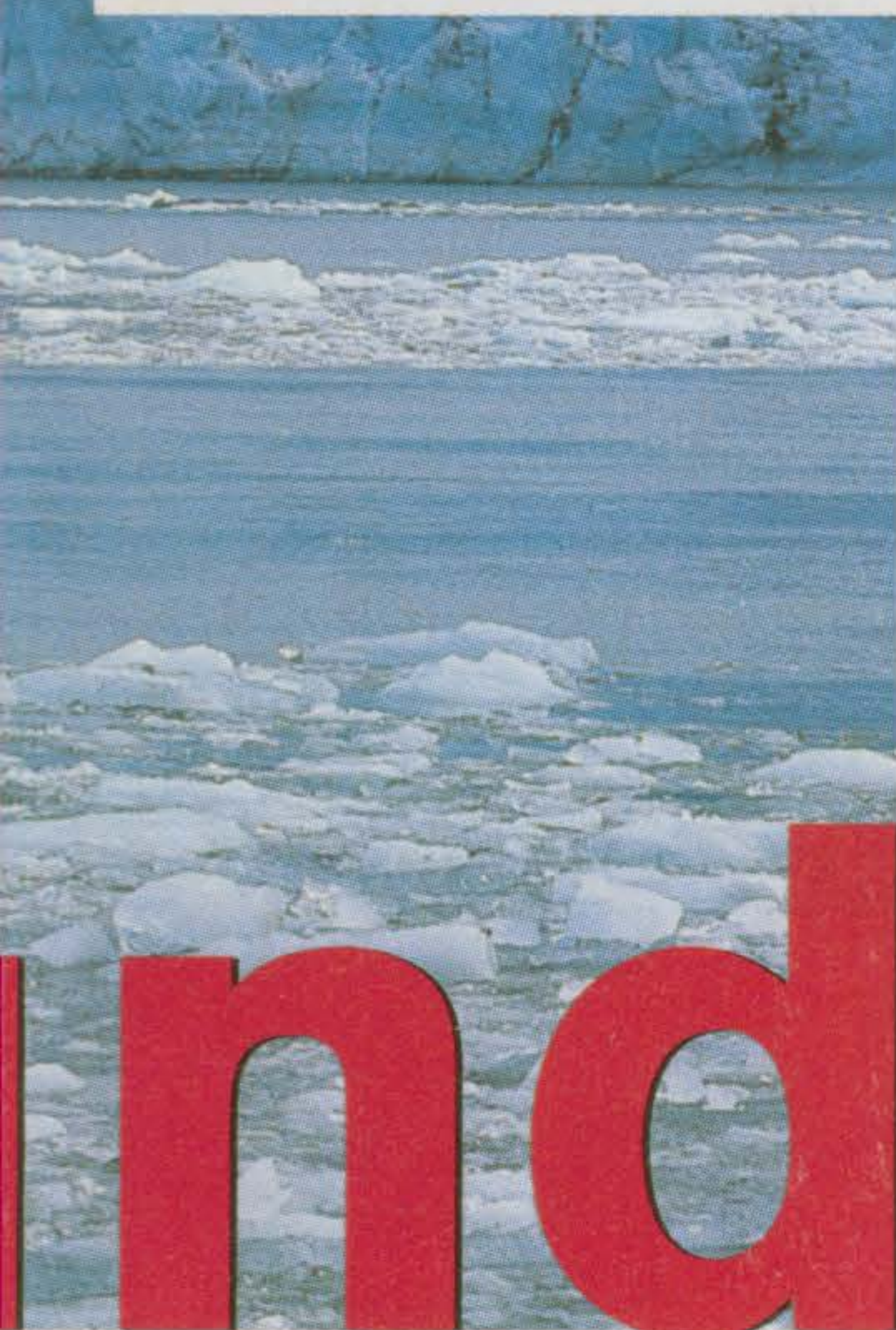
This was not the only service that impressed us. At 790 feet and 50,000 tons, the ship itself is grand, with a crew of 572 attending to the needs of the 827 guests. The well-maintained vessel offered a plethora of activities. When we were not

lounging around the cabin, popping red grapes and enjoying the view, we ventured out to the ship's casino, or its

We would be remiss if we did not mention the Berlitz language classes (conversational Russian for this cruise), paddle tennis or the first-rate musical and dance productions. Also on tap were complimentary golf lessons by a golf pro and an

by the ship. Later that day came whales, blowing plumes of vapor into the air as they danced through the water.

The sheer number of shore excursions offered onboard was staggering. In the town of Skagway, staging ground for the



two heated pools, library, movie theatre, putting green, specialty shops or well-equipped spa and fitness center. Each day, when we finished a treadmill workout or a Pilates class, a crewman would appear seemingly from nowhere bearing cold spring water and a fresh towel.

interesting lineup of enrichment lectures. Our favorite was Hollywood film star Gil Stratton, who shared stories of his escapades with legends of the big screen such as Marlon Brando and William Holden.

No experience on the ship prepared us for the day we spent cruising into Glacier Bay National Park, an area that did not even exist 200 years ago. The ship provided the perfect viewing platform to take in this breathtaking scenic inlet of the state's famed Inside Passage. At the entrance to the bay, rolling hills and lush vegetation cover the landscape, but as the ship sails farther up, the green is replaced by white ice and soaring glaciated mountains. Glaciers are formed when snowfall in the high mountains exceeds the snowmelt, turns into solid ice and flows downhill, creating what appear to be thick rivers of ice.

At Marjorie Glacier, not far from the Canadian border, the captain steered the ship perilously close to the icy blue cliffs and remained steady there, allowing us ample time to take in the pristine wonder. Only the occasional roar of an iceberg breaking off and crashing into the sea disrupted the near eerie silence of the inlet. This day, heavy jackets, hats and gloves were necessary, though we never left the outside decks. Our efforts were rewarded by the sight of an ice floe, colonized by a seal and her three small pups, which floated



Klondike Gold Rush, we chose to hop aboard the White Pass Scenic railway for a ride that traced the original prospectors' route. In Ketchikan we piled into a six-seat floatplane and soared over mountains and lakes to make our way to Traitor's Cove. After a smooth water landing, we hiked to a nearby salmon-choked river, where we were lucky enough to spot a black bear and her cubs fishing for lunch; the scraps of which were quickly scooped up by bald eagles. In Juneau we stayed far away from the store-lined main streets and opted instead for a helicopter tour that soared by 7,000-foot rocks and offered close-up views of massive ice fields, sparkling blue-water pools and shimmering spires. After touching down near the spectacular Mendenhall Glacier, we donned hiking boots and spent the afternoon skipping around the glacier and peering into its deep crevasses.

Were it not for these mind-blowing adventures, we would have been perfectly content to have never even left the ship.

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The workouts left us nearly guilt free to enjoy the ship's sensational dining. Bucking an industry trend, Harmony stays true to the longstanding tradition of assigned seating in the main dining room. We found it to be an effortless way to get to know our fellow passengers. Here, too, the service was unparalleled, with our waiter offering spot-on recommendations and our headwaiter firing up tableside delights such as cherries jubilee. There was always the option of 24-hour room service or dining (with no surcharge) from either the Japanese or Italian specialty restaurants, which were each superb.

Poolside, the Trident Bar & Grill was a favorite for burgers and such. We were flabbergasted when we ordered a steak sandwich and a 10-ounce sirloin steak arrived, served on fresh-baked sourdough bread. Do not miss the ice cream bar after the meal. Also poolside, this hotspot offered a smorgasbord of chilly delights, from thick chocolate milkshakes and banana splits to heaping scoops of maple walnut ice cream atop waffle cones that were made-to-order.