

Holland America Line - Alaska & the Yukon Land & Sea Journey

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Introduction

In August 2017 I was lucky enough to be a part of a Familiarisation trip to Alaska and the Yukon with Holland America Line. We did the Y4 Land and Sea Journey, which began with a 4-day cruise on the Nieuw Amsterdam from Vancouver and ended with an 8 day land journey through the Yukon Territory, Canada and Alaska, USA. This was my first ever cruise so it was a great eye opener and I am so pleased my first cruise was with Holland America Line! I had the absolute trip of a lifetime and loved every moment...

Day 1

My Holland America Line adventure started in Vancouver.



We arrived the day before our cruise after a long flight (2 hour layover in LAX). Our pre-cruise accommodation was at the Pinnacle Harbourfront Hotel, which was a nice 3-4 star property with views over the harbour and a very convenient location to the cruise terminal. The cruise departed around 4.30PM so

Beverley Mitchell (Reservations consultant from Francis Travel Marketing) and I caught a taxi from the hotel to the terminal around 12.30PM. This gave us plenty of time to check-in and go through US Customs. I definitely recommend giving yourself plenty of time, as the check-in process took about an hour as there were many queues and the Customs Check took another hour and a half.



The queue for the check-in was handled very well, there were seats and drinking water provided for everyone waiting. We got given our room cards to use onboard as well as a deck plan. We got on board around 3PM.

My first impression of the Nieuw Amsterdam was that she was extremely clean and had a classic, elegant and sophisticated feel about her. We boarded the ship and went into the lift to take us to our floor. There was a lovely man working in the lift who asked my name and said to not hesitate to ask him anything throughout my stay! The next morning he remembered my name and asked me how my evening was. I was so stunned by how brilliant the service was and how friendly the staff throughout the ship were!

Our room was a Verandah Stateroom (number 4189), the view from the verandah was fantastic!! We were overlooking the aft of the ship and almost had a 180 degree view! The room was very spacious; Bev and I both had room to fit our cases on the floor and still walk around comfortably.

The Verandah was also really spacious – it had enough room for two deck chairs and a small table. After just getting settled we had a knock on the door and one of our room attendants was there to introduce himself and ask if everything was okay with our room – again I was blown away by the great service!



After settling in nicely we were getting a bit hungry and went out to explore the ship! We went onto the 9th deck, which is the “Lido” deck – where the pools are as well as other outdoor seating areas and the Lido “buffet-style” restaurant. We had a walk around and decided on New York Pizza – which is a little place that serves freshly cooked pizza – we ordered our food and got given a buzzer to tell us when our food was ready. We sat down, ordered a drink with one of the waiters, and got our delicious pizza when it was ready!

On our first evening we had a cocktail party in the Piano Bar as part of the Famil Trip. We met all of the other agents onboard and the Australian Holland America Line team. After this Bev and I went to dinner at the Tamarind Restaurant – this was a highlight for me! The Tamarind was absolutely amazing!



We finished our evening with a drink in the Piano Bar, which was my favourite way to end an evening – singing along to great music with a glass of wine in hand!

Day 2

The second day was a day at sea. I started my day with breakfast in the Lido restaurant, where I got an omelette made to order! We sat watching the ocean with breakfast for a bit as we were getting into whale country, so we were definitely on the lookout for some whales! After breakfast we had a morning presentation by Helen, the BDM for Holland America Line in Australia with all the agents. It was very interesting to learn a bit more about the different ships and updates that are coming up! I then went for a run around Deck 3 where they have a walking/ running track, it was great to enjoy the scenery while going for a nice run!



For lunch Bev and I met up at the Dive In – which is an amazing burger bar! They had the most yummy burgers and probably the best fries I had on this trip (and I ate a lot of fries!).

The second night was Gala night – we got all dressed up and went for dinner and drinks in the Main Dining Room which was fabulous.



There was a big group of us, and although we hadn't booked, it only took 40 minutes to find us a table which I thought was good, and we were content waiting at the bar next door to the restaurant. The food was beautiful and the selection on the menu was great!

Day 3

On our third day we were cruising into the port of Juneau in the afternoon. I spent my morning with a coffee in the Explorers Cafe, which is part of the Crow's Nest – a bar with amazing 180 degree views on the 11th deck. This was one of my favourite spots to relax on board. Once we got to Juneau I got off the ship and had a walk around the town first.



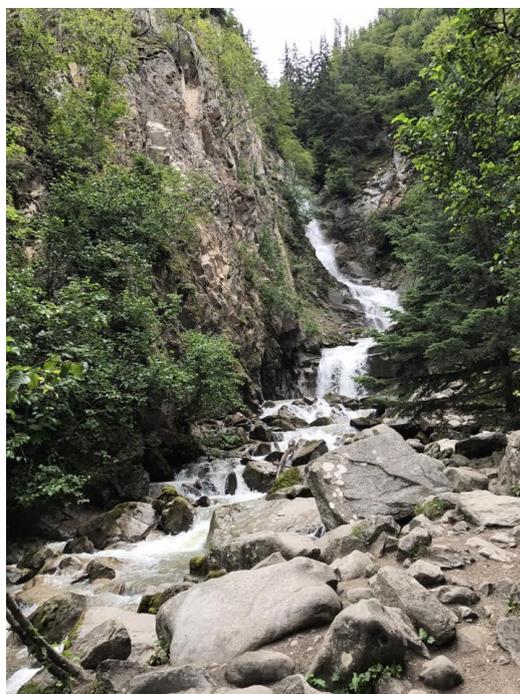
Juneau isn't very big so it didn't take me long to walk around, there are some nice gift shops and a very popular crab restaurant where I would have eaten if I had had the time! There are lots of different shore excursion options here – bear watching, whale watching, glacier visit, husky sledding, city tours etc. I opted for a glacier visit followed by whale watching -which was amazing! The Mendenhall glacier was great – I went on a 3km roundtrip walk right up to the glacier, which was situated right by a big waterfall so it was quite spectacular. You can see the glacier very well even if you don't go on the walk. The whale watching was a massive highlight for me! I saw so many humpback whales and we even got a couple of flukes on show.



We also saw some beautiful scenery and seals on this excursion. They provide you with hot drinks and donuts, as well as binoculars which were super helpful! Seeing whales up close was a brilliant experience and I would recommend this shore excursion to anyone! It was booked through Holland America Line on board.

Day 4

This was our first day of the land tour! We met in the Main Dining Room with all the other tour groups around breakfast time. We were given information on what there is to do in Skagway and met our tour director (we actually met a tour director who was going to hand us over to our actual tour director the next morning). The previous night, we were given a letter with our disembarkation information, so we knew exactly where to be and what to do. We disembarked and were met by a tour bus which took us on a Skagway City tour.



Because Skagway is very small it didn't take us long to drive through the actual town (which is very picturesque). After driving through the town the driver took us to a lookout point from where we got spectacular views overlooking the harbour and the town of Skagway! After this we went to the Gold Rush Cemetery just out of the town. This was really interesting to have a look around and read some of the stories of the people that lay there. There is also a short walk you can take to some incredible waterfalls!

We then went to the Westmark Hotel in Skagway, where we were to spend one night. The hotel was nice and clean and had a nice wee cafe that served Starbucks (coffee in the USA and Canada is not very good so Starbucks was a luxury...) and also a restaurant and comfortable lobby area.

Skagway is a place where I would definitely say a shore excursion should be booked. I didn't have a shore excursion booked and I was bored after about an hour once I'd walked through all the gift shops and had some lunch. I ended up going for a wee hike but there's not many great walking tracks... So if you are going to Skagway or have someone going there definitely recommend booking something! There are lots of great options here like dog mushing, glacier visits, helicopter flights etc.

In the evening we went to a local bar for some drinks where they serve a local beer – "Sprucetip beer", which comes from the Spruce tip trees and used to be drunk by the locals as the Spruce tip contains a lot of Vitamin C! It was a lively place and very popular with locals. Afterwards we went to a little Pizzeria for dinner which served lots of different dishes – the pizzas (and other food portions) were so big you could definitely share!

Day 5

This was the day where our land journey really got started! In the lobby and met our actual tour director Kelly Walker, she was absolutely incredible throughout the whole trip and couldn't do enough for everybody!



Our day began on the White Pass – Yukon Railroad train which was a 28 mile train ride to Fraser. Unfortunately for us the weather wasn't good on this day so we didn't get the most out of the views. Normally you can see for miles and get spectacular views of the surrounding mountains. The commentary was very good though and made us feel like we still got a great experience. Once off the train we met our coach driver Andy and Kelly. We then made our way on the road into the Yukon on our journey to Whitehorse. The Holland America Line Coach was very spacious and luxurious. I really enjoyed this coach journey as we passed some amazing sights and got to experience the vastness the Yukon has to offer.



We saw Tutshi and Tagish Lakes, went to a small town called Carcross, drove through Carcross Desert, passed Emerald Lake which is an amazing lake with lots of different colourations due to the sulphur content and even saw a black bear!! We drove a total of 90 road miles on this day and got to Whitehorse in the early afternoon.

Whitehorse is more of a stop-by town. It didn't have a lot to offer but we found a lovely Salmon and Rib BBQ restaurant where big group of us had a nice dinner and drinks! We stayed in the Westmark which was absolutely fine again.

Day 6

After grabbing a quick coffee and getting on the coach this morning, we made our way by road for the longest leg of the trip - 327 miles from Whitehorse to Dawson City. Yes, it was long. The scenery we saw, and the stops we took, made it worth it - it was a great day! First stop was at a little lodge called Braeburn lodge which had the BIGGEST Cinnamon Buns I've ever seen! And they tasted as good as they looked!



We then went on to the Five Finger Rapids on the Yukon River, which was a beautiful place. For lunch we stopped by a little place called Minto Resort, where Andy and Kelly served us a nice lunch and we had time to walk around and took a group photo! For afternoon tea we stopped at a cute little lodge called Moose Creek Lodge where they served beautiful baked goodies!



On our way to Dawson we were lucky enough to stop off at the Midnight Dome Scenic Outlook point, which is actually an excursion that can be done from Dawson City. It was brilliant because we got spectacular 360 degree views over Dawson City, Klondike and Yukon Rivers, Bonanza Creek Valley and some active mines!

We carried onto the Westmark Hotel in Dawson City which was very nice! The building itself is an attraction, as all the wings of the hotel are different pastel colours and it's stunning.



We went for dinner and then most of our whole group met at the Sourdough Bar in town where they have a rather strange tradition.... it's called the Sourtie Cocktail Club and people line up to take part! You buy a shot at the bar, line up and when it's your turn Toe Captain Sue Taylor puts a real old human toe (!!!) in your drink! You have to take your shot "you can drink it fast or slow but your lips must touch the toe!". I personally didn't join the Sourtie Cocktail Club but it was very interesting to watch nonetheless!

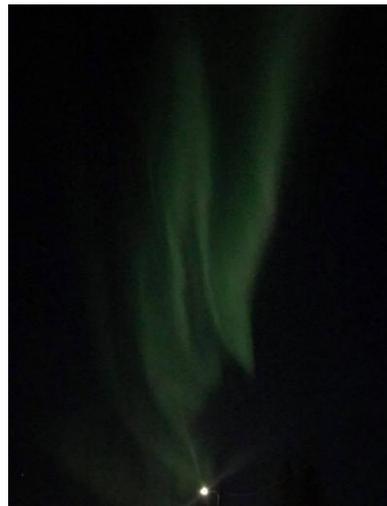
Day 7

Today we had a full day in Dawson City, mainly at our leisure. Dawson City is such a great place - there is so much to see and do! In the morning after breakfast I went on a little run/walk up a mountain close to the town. After this I explored the town as there are so many stunning, historic buildings to look at! There are also tours available to learn more about the history of the town through the information centre in town, which are free or very reasonable! In the afternoon we took a cruise on the Yukon River on a beautiful Paddlewheel Boat called the Klondike Spirit.



Onboard they were very good at explaining all the sights along the way and I learned a lot about life in Dawson City and in the Yukon Territory in general. This is something I would definitely recommend to anyone going to Dawson!

For dinner we went to a lovely little place called the Aurora Inn, one of the best meals I had while on this trip! Beautiful food and delicious wine! Afterwards we found our way back to the Sourdough Inn to watch more people do the “Sourtoe Cocktail”. In the middle of the night we got a wakeup call as our tour director Kelly saw the Northern Lights! We all went outside and spent some time admiring the amazing lights dancing across the clear sky! It was so fascinating to see such a phenomenon and I loved every minute of it!



All in all – Dawson City was a major highlight for me!



Day 8

This was the day we left Canada and the Yukon Territory and made our way to Alaska. Dawson City International Airport is the smallest airport I have ever seen! It was a gravel runway and the “security” was a table and a couple of guards looking through the bags!



We then flew on our chartered plane – Holland America Line are the only cruise line that offer the flight from Dawson City to Fairbanks. It is a one hour flight, otherwise to get to Fairbanks on your own it would be a 13 hour drive or a 18 hour flight (from Dawson City to Vancouver to Seattle to Anchorage to Fairbanks!). So I was very pleased we had a nice easy hour flight into Fairbanks... once there we went on a really great Riverboat Discovery cruise onboard a Sternwheeler! We cruised on the Chena River to an old native Alaskan village called the Chena Village. Here we learned a lot about the old Alaskan way of life – how they filleted and stored their salmon, made their houses and clothes, kept warm etc.

We also got to see a demonstration of Husky sledding and learn a lot about the Husky dogs and training they go through. There were also Reindeer in the village that we could see which was amazing. It was a great excursion and I would definitely recommend it (especially as there isn't that much else to do in Fairbanks).

We stayed in the Westmark Fairbanks which was in a great location and had nice, spacious rooms. They had a Starbucks Coffee shop in the lobby and the restaurant and bar were nice to have some food or a drink as well. In the evening a couple of the others in our group and I went to a Salmon Bake. This is quite touristy, it's basically a buffet with all you can eat Salmon, steak and salads. I personally thought it wasn't worth the money you paid for it as it was just a buffet , but the salmon did taste delicious!



Day 9

We started this day with a Gold Dredge 8 Tour! This was a spectacular excursion as we got to see the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and learn all about the Gold Rush and gold panning, we then got to pan for our own gold! Everyone got at least some gold to keep – some more than others. I only got about \$8.00 worth of gold but a woman in front of me got \$42.00 worth of gold by herself! You can then put the gold nuggets in a little charm or just take them home with you. It was a brilliant tour, one I would highly recommend.



After lunch in the town some of us went to a local bar to try a traditional Alaskan drink called a “Duck Fart” before making our way to Denali National Park! This was a 120 mile journey but we took plenty of stops again so it didn’t seem too long. As we got closer to the park you could really tell the change of scenery. It was really beautiful! We got to the McKinley Chalets in the late afternoon. The McKinley chalets are owned by Holland America Line. The whole resort is incredible! There are lots of different buildings with accommodation and a small village in the middle where there are shops, restaurants and a little area with seats and fire pits which is really cute, a guitarist plays there in the evenings.

A cocktail reception and Dinner Show was planned for the evening. The cocktail reception was great with nibbles and lovely drinks and the dinner show was very entertaining! The serving staff were all dressed up in costume and our dinner was Salmon and Vegetables with lots of other sides – it was delicious! Then they sung and danced and did a whole theatre performance for us. It was a story about climbing Mount Denali, they all sang along and everyone in the audience got involved as well!

Day 10

This was the day most of us were really looking forward to as we had the Tundra Wilderness Tour booked! This is where you go into the National Park!



Our tour started at 6am, the bus wasn't a coach but a school bus! There were little snack packs on our seat which contained nuts, crisps and water and also a lunch pack which we picked up before our tour (which we ordered the night before). I absolutely loved this tour as we went into the depths of the National Park and saw some incredible wildlife – Moose, Caribou, Mountain Sheep and Grizzly Bears. We saw a total of 13 Grizzly bears which was spectacular.

We saw two sets of Mum bears with their cubs which was so special. The tour is all in the bus so there is no walking/ hiking involved at all. There are toilet stops every hour and a half but nowhere to buy any other food or drink, however, the snacks and lunch were more than enough. I feel so lucky to have seen all those incredible animals!

In the evening I went on another excursion – the Husky Homestead Tour! Now this was a massive highlight for me as I am a big dog lover. We got picked up at the hotel and driven to the Homestead (about 15 minutes drive) where Jeff King has his dogs. Jeff King is an Iditarod champion and still competes now. The Iditarod is a husky race that goes from Anchorage to Nome every year (1,150 miles long!). Once we got to the Homestead the first thing that is handed to you is a puppy...



I was in heaven! After having so many puppy kisses and cuddles we sat down and learnt all about how the dogs train up to be in the Iditarod, how to pick which dog is the best to compete, learnt about the different litters and how they are bred. What I found especially interesting is that the Alaskan Huskies look completely different to the Siberian Husky that you see in all of the movies. This is because the Alaskan Huskies aren't bred for looks but for how fast they are, how big their appetite is etc. At the end we had some time with Jeff King himself who explained some of his experiences and stories while competing in the Iditarod which was very interesting! This was my favourite day of the entire trip!

Day 11

Our last day on the Holland America Line Land and Sea Journey! We got up and went to the train station to get on the McKinley Explorer Dome Railcar. This is a Holland America Line owned Train and it is absolutely stunning. Upstairs is where everyone sits and there is a restaurant downstairs which serves breakfast and lunch. The seats are very comfortable and because it is a Dome Train you get spectacular views!



Once seated, a few of us started our journey with some “Moose Mary’s” – their twist on a bloody Mary! The waiters on board were really great. They made sure everyone was always looked after and gave us great commentary on the way down to Anchorage. We saw lots of beautiful sights along the way as well as a couple of Moose running alongside the train! The lunch on board was beautiful. The menu was great with lots of choices and the staff were great. It was a really special experience being on the train!

Once we got to Anchorage we went to the Westmark in Anchorage. Again this was a lovely hotel in a great location with a cafe, bar and restaurant. We all decided to meet in the bar for some leaving drinks. It was really sad saying goodbye to everyone as we all got very close. It was an incredible group of people with a brilliant tour leader and I was so lucky I got to be a part of it!

Summary

For me, now that I have done the land portion of the trip, I would find it a bit of a shame to only do a cruise around Alaska and miss out on the land portion as I saw so many amazing places that wouldn't have been possible if we had only done the cruise. Holland America Line is the only cruise line who do Land and Sea Journeys that include the Yukon Territory – I thought the Yukon was spectacular. If you want vast landscapes, quirky towns, wildlife and to step foot somewhere that is still fairly untouched, then the Yukon is for you! Denali is a must, and I would say that you need at least 2 nights there as there is so much to do.

We did the cruise first which had its positives but I do think that having the cruise last would also be a great way to do it, as you will then have the most relaxing part of your trip at the end, and you would also know your tour group better so you can enjoy some more time with them on the ship!



Having done this, I would recommend a Holland America Line Land and Sea Journey in Alaska to anyone! It was one of the best trips I've been on with amazing people and I've made memories that will last a lifetime!