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DESTINATION FEATURES

Cruise passengers warm to Icy Strait Point excursions

By: Johanna Jainchill
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Icy Strait Point claims that spotting local wildlife, such as bears, is almost certain on its tours.

After a 20-minute flight in a prop plane through wind and rain from Juneau to the island of Icy Strait Point, the mile-long plunge on the ZipRider, the world's longest zipline, was not as harrowing as it might normally be.

The thrilling ride is the most well-known activity at Icy Strait Point, but Alaska's newest cruise port turns out to be a one-stop shop for many of the things people go to Alaska to see.

Icy Strait opened in 2004, when a restored salmon cannery became the newest cruise destination in the Inside Passage.

Located on the same island as Hoonah, Alaska's largest Huna Tlingit village, Icy Strait opened to noncruisers on day trips from Juneau in 2008, but the vast majority of its visitors come on cruise ships; 64 will call in 2010, down from 69 this year. Visiting Icy Strait independently requires a 20-minute, \$70 flight each way from Juneau.

Icy Strait's management said that on its wildlife tours, seeing animals is almost certain. Whale-watching tours have had sightings 100% of the time so far, and on wildlife-viewing trips last season, bears were spotted 85% of the time.

On that cool June day, one without cruise ships, I jumped into a pickup truck with Tyler Hickman, Icy Strait's vice president, to check out the wilderness-viewing area.

Before we'd even gotten to where the tour would take us, we stopped to watch an adolescent bald eagle snack on a salmon along the shore, while his parents guarded from a perch above. Shortly after that, we spent 20 minutes pulled off to the side of the road to gaze at a grizzly bear mother and her cub lounging in the trees.

Native and local

What also sets Icy Strait apart is that it is owned and run by locals and indigenous Alaskans.

In a state where many of the hotels and tours recruit manpower from the Lower 48 every summer, Icy Strait Point's employees, 90% local and 85% indigenous Alaskan, are truly invested in making the port work.

According to port officials, 95% of visitors rank being "satisfied" or "very satisfied," and 99% found the staff to be very friendly.

Icy Strait is not only about wildlife. Its tribal dance show is highly rated by visitors, the port says. Since this is the site of a former fish cannery, its sportfishing trips take aspiring fishers to some of the best spots in southeast Alaska.

A cozy museum occupies the cannery that once sent salmon to all parts of the U.S. Guests can walk around a restored canning line and learn about the history of commercial fishing in southeast Alaska as well as about Alaskan history and native culture.

In a refreshing change, this is not a port with seven identical-looking watch and jewelry shops lining the main street. There is no main street, in fact. There are shops set in the restored cannery that sell everything from salmon jerky to locally made crafts, but no two stores offer the same products.

Another nice feature is the fact that passengers here can walk right off the dock and onto a pristine nature trail, unlike many other cruise ports where it's necessary to rent a taxi or take a boat to get out of the main town. Also right off the dock is an eternal flame where passengers can listen to an elder Tlingit talk about Tlingit traditions, such as why it's good luck to throw the cedar wood chip given to every Icy Strait Point visitor into the fire.

Visit www.icystraitpoint.com (<http://www.icystraitpoint.com>).



A nature walk is a highlight of a visit to Icy Strait Point.

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