

ADVENTURE



TRY THIS



Jump Ship

Add a land tour to your cruise itinerary

BY MICHELLE THEALL

[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT] Landing on Ruth Glacier; Nagley's in Talkeetna; moose calf in Denali; a view of The Great One from a highway rest stop.

DENALI LOOMS OUT THE WINDOW of our motor coach on the windy road to Talkeetna. It's a welcome sight after driving through the haze and hot spots of the Sockeye Fire in Willow. We pull over at a rest stop to take photos of the peak while a local cross country ski team trains up and down the steep bike path using rollerskis and poles in the 80-degree heat. My 10-year old son has come with me on this trip, a seven-day Voyage of the Glaciers Princess cruise combined with their Denali Explorer land tour. Like most kids his age, Logan bores

easily, and a little ADHD doesn't help. The last time I was on a large cruise ship (somewhere in the Caribbean), I was his age. I don't remember much about where we docked or what we did off the boat, but I loved the ship: It was massive and self-contained all at the same time. But the inside of a cruise ship, no matter how many amenities it offers, can't compete with everything Alaska has to offer. You can't experience Alaska without disembarking. Period. Which is likely why many cruise companies offer adjunct land tours, like the one we took to Denali. Denali can't be accessed by boat, and coming to Alaska without seeing Denali National Park would be a huge missed opportunity—especially when the cruise lines make it easy.

Letting your cruise line handle your

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Climbers below us look like chocolate sprinkles on the biggest vanilla ice cream cone ever.”

land package alleviates surprises and makes the trip turnkey. Quite simply: They get you where you need to go and have all the local tour companies on notice to provide excellence. After all, if Princess, Carnival or Holland America is your main client, you're likely set for the season. In addition, Princess operates two lodges in the Denali area: the Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge and the Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge. In Talkeetna, we wander through town on the Talkeetna Spur Road onto Main Street, a four-block stretch with outfitters, Denali Brewing Co., several galleries and gift shops and Nagley's General Store, where the mayor of Talkeetna, a cat, lives. A beach caps the end of Main Street at the confluence of the Talkeetna, Susitna and Chulitna rivers. Logan tosses rocks into the water, while I snap photos of the south side of Denali, which is only 40 miles from here, and why most climbers gear up and hang out in Talkeetna for flights out to ascend the mountain.

In Talkeetna, Logan and I take our first land excursion to Sun Dog Kennels to meet Iditarod musher Jerry Sousa and his team of Alaska sled dogs. His staff hitches up 12 dogs to a motorized vehicle seating six of us. I watch the speedometer as they run. It hits 10 mph, and Jerry tells me that the dogs come close to averaging that speed for all 1,000-plus miles of the Iditarod. We learn about the gear and the racecourse, and get to ogle the finisher's trophies, but Logan's favorite part comes at the end. The kennel has one-week old puppies, and we cradle them to our chins and chests as they mewl with closed eyes against us.

The Mt. McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge was built on land that was procured by its owners before the area was designated Denali State Park. Thus, it



[TOP] Tracks from climbers en route to the summit of Denali. [BOTTOM] A week-old pup at Sun Dog Kennel.

offers exceptional views of the Alaska Range and Denali, without the obstructions of commercial development. Huge and plentiful windows and extensive decking make the most of the location. After dinner at the lodge's Mountain View restaurant, where we dine on Copper River salmon, we retire for the night. In the morning, we take a shuttle out to K2 Aviation for our glacier-landing flight. Logan has never been on a plane this small. He puts on the headphones and startles at the voice of the pilot, before realizing that his own microphone works, and asking questions and repeating the phrase, "Coming in hot, Goose!" from the movie "Top Gun." Our de Havilland Otter heads toward Denali. For over an hour, we soar over the Alaska Range, over Mt. Foraker and Denali. Climbers below us look like chocolate sprinkles on the

biggest vanilla ice cream cone ever. Clean, smooth air affords astonishing views and provides a soft landing on the "runway" of Ruth Glacier. I wear the gaitered snow boots they provide. Even though I'm in shorts, I'm comfortable enough, barely, standing in an icy cathedral with 5,000-foot granite cliffs. Logan pelts me with snowballs, and his playfulness in this wild place warms me up just a little bit more.

We start the following day in Denali National Park and Preserve at the Wilderness Access Center, where a mama moose and her twin calves sidle up alongside the deck. From there, we begin a natural history tour of the park, including a special presentation by Carol Reid, an Athabascan from Minto, Alaska in the Interior. She stands atop a rock at Inspiration Point and tells us about her family, the four generations who have lived on this land, and Denali gleams just behind her. Later, Logan rides co-pilot in a helicopter as we take another glacier tour, this time on the north side of Denali, approaching from the entrance of the national park. Our pilot, Eric,

sports a tattoo bearing the stars of the Alaska state flag, and he flies with the kind of confidence that says he's earned it. We hover over lush tundra through boreal forests, black and white spruce and undulating birch and willows. We steal glimpses of Mt. Deborah through a narrow canyon before descending onto ice next to a clear blue pool. Eric takes a Nalgene bottle and fills it from the water, and Logan takes a long drink of it.

The next day, we ride the Princess Rail to catch the Star Princess vessel in Whittier. We cross the mudflats of Turnagain Arm, and the train slows to give us time to watch a moose and her week-old calf make their way through a field of high grass with glaciers behind them. I stop only briefly to have some award-winning reindeer chili, before resuming my post on the outdoor platform. We reach our ship, and the theme song from "The Love Boat" accompanies us off the train and onto our next adventure. 🐾