

Cruising Alaska with a Toddler

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

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While sitting on the balcony drinking wine and floating past glaciers, I realized my parents were right. It *is* possible to have an adventurous and somewhat relaxing trip with a toddler in tow.

To celebrate my parents' 40th wedding anniversary, my husband Mark, 15 month-old daughter Dori and I joined them, along with my sister and her husband, for an eight day cruise from Vancouver, B.C. to Seward, Alaska.

As an active family, I feared Mark and I would be stuck in the ports' tourist shops for lack of anything better to do with a toddler. I was wrong. We paddled, hiked, biked, rode in helicopters and sea planes, and visited glaciers in port, though we had to split up to do so.

Ketchikan:

Our first port day was gloriously sunny and warm, a coup since Ketchikan averages more than 13 feet of rain a year and is the wettest place in the United States after Kauai. While Mark and Dori slept in, I took a sea plane over the Misty Fjords National Monument. I met them on the dock after, with plans for the family to cycle to Saxman Totem Park three miles out of town. Neither of Ketchikan's two bike rental shops had seats for kids, so Dori and I took to town while Mark and my parents biked to Saxman.

Dori and I got a free historical walking map at the dock's visitor center, and spent a few leisurely hours covering the "Downtown" and "Heritage" tours. The beautiful walk, mostly stroller-accessible, led us by the small boat harbor, Ketchikan Creek and the fish ladder, where we watched the salmon swim, and Creek Street, the red light district until 1953. If we had more time we might have visited the Deer Mountain Tribal Hatchery and Eagle Center, which raises and releases salmon and trout and cares for injured bald eagles, and the Totem Heritage Center, with the largest collection of unaltered totem poles in Alaska. We passed both places on the walking tour, but had to embark by 1:30 p.m.

Skagway:

With babysitting for much of the day, Mark and I canoed around icebergs at the Davidson glacier. Late afternoon we took Dori for a quick stroll into Skagway, a restored gold rush town. We enjoyed the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park Visitor Center, with interesting displays, ranger talks and a 30 minute movie. The rangers also lead several walking tours a day.

If we didn't canoe, we might have taken Dori for a three hour trip on the Yukon railroad to White Pass Summit. During the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush, this was the fastest way for prospectors to reach the Yukon gold. The railway shows off the spectacular scenery on the 2865 foot climb. Another option is whale watching. Though most boat trips exclude

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kids, the ship offered an excursion which included children. Given that we saw two whales after canoeing, this would have been worthwhile.

Juneau:

While I zipped over glaciers on a helicopter tour, Mark and Dori spent the morning touring Juneau. As a history buff, Mark enjoyed the free half hour tour of the Alaska capitol building, one of two non-domed capitol ceilings in the U.S. (the other being Albany, NY). Then it was on to St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, built in 1894. This is the oldest original Russian Orthodox church in Alaska, serving Native Alaskans. Fortunately it lacked tourists during most of their visit, making it easy for Dori to crawl around while Mark watched the video on the church and religion's history. We met for lunch and a quick visit to the Alaska State Museum, with an interesting collection of native and Russian artifacts. We would have enjoyed it more had Dori napped.

As Mark set off for his afternoon kayaking trip, my dad, Dori and I took the Mendenhall Glacier Transport bus (\$10 roundtrip) from the dock, 13 miles to the Mendenhall Glacier. Several viewing areas along the half-mile paved loop path provide unobstructed glacier, lake and waterfall views. A large visitor center contains exhibits, an observatory and a theater. The ranger was kind enough to store our stroller, and with Dori in a backpack, we joined him for naturalist hike along the half-mile Trail of Time. There were several longer trails we could have hiked, with more time.

With clear skies, a tram trip with Dori up Mt. Roberts from the cruise dock would be fun. We were also tempted by the Alaskan Brewing Company, which offers several tours a day and free beer at the end. And for fish lovers, the Macaulay Salmon Hatchery is a few miles from the cruise dock, with aquariums, bear and eagle exhibits as well as a hatchery tour.

Onboard

Not all ships accept children; those that do often have no programs for kids under age three. Our Celebrity Summit ship provided the essentials: a portable crib and baby food and formula if needed. Off duty housekeepers offer babysitting at a reasonable \$8 an hour, useful since Dori was too young for the ship's playroom and organized programs.

For days we were at sea, Mark and I often took turns with Dori. While she napped, I read in my parents' adjoining room, and Mark soaked in the adults-only thalassotherapy pool, a warm salt-water pool with jet massage. When I exercised in the gym, Mark played bridge in the card room, Dori crawling around the tables, playing with the jokers. The nights we didn't have babysitting, the rest of the family alternated babysitting, so we could see a show and dust off our dancing shoes.

But the wonderful thing about an Alaskan cruise is that you don't have to leave the boat, or even your cabin to admire the surroundings. From the dining room we watched porpoises swimming in the boat's wake. Dori napped in the sling while we were on deck, watching the Hubbard Glacier calve. From the deck we also spotted bald eagles, whales,

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brown bears and harbor seals. We observed sea otters in front of the College Fjord, while Dori crawled around the cabin and we stood on our balcony

The Alaskan cruise was a great way to combine family, sights and excursions. It was not, however, totally relaxing. Mealtimes were chaotic. Naps were difficult. And with so few hours of nighttime, sleep was disrupted. At times it felt like we were on separate vacations, since Mark and I split up for most excursions and even for leisure time on the ship. But we took care of Dori and saw more of Alaska than the stores. Even with some paid and family babysitting, it was still a lot of work, and we returned home exhausted.

Mark and I are looking forward to our next vacation, when we leave Dori with her grandparents.

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Planning to Cruise with a Toddler

By Deborah Abrams Kaplan

You've decided to take a cruise, and now need to plan it. Here are some things to consider.

Not all ships allow kids. For kids over age two or three, many ships offer organized activities and bright indoor playrooms for a fee (check for toilet training requirements).

Costs vary for toddlers. Some ships allow infants and toddlers on for no charge, however the Celebrity rate was about one quarter of the adult rate, plus "suggested" tipping at half the adult rate.

Book excursions online prior to sailing. Booking online meant we could reserve spots on the popular kayaking, seaplane and helicopter tours at separate times, so one of us could always be with our daughter. Tours could be cancelled on board with no penalty, with 24 hours notice. Of the port days, my husband and I only planned one excursion together, presuming babysitting would be available.

Get a stateroom with a balcony. If finances allow it, a balcony makes a big difference in enjoyment of the scenery. Your child can sleep or play inside the room while you admire the view.

Sleeping. The ship provided a portable crib. With sunset as late as 11 p.m., and sunrise around 4:30 a.m., it was like having a newborn again. Dori didn't want to fall asleep at night, and she woke up screaming at dawn. Naps were difficult, especially on port days, when we were sightseeing all day.

Eating. Though we didn't need formula or baby food, we were told they were available. For breakfast and lunch, use the buffet. While the food may not be as good, you can get in and out faster than with a sit-down meal. Go at off times to avoid the crowd. Consider getting room service, which offers the same food as the dining room with no fee. For dinner, request an early seating. It's less crowded and you can get your child to bed earlier.

Babyproofing. The Celebrity Summit cabins were safer for a baby than our home, with no floor level outlets or loose cords. The mini bar could be locked or used as a refrigerator, and even the room's balcony was safe. A door between our room and my parents' was a bonus, giving us a place to relax when Dori napped. It also meant we didn't need a baby monitor - the walls with the adjoining door were thin enough to hear through.

Watching your toddler onboard. Many facilities onboard do not allow children, such as the gym, the indoor swimming area and the casino. Without paying for babysitting, you may want to take turns with your child. The card room and the deck were favorite places

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of ours, when they were less crowded. The children’s play area was, unfortunately, only available to toilet-trained children.

Babysitting. The ship may require 24 hours advance notice for in-cabin babysitting, if the ship offers it. Call as soon as you board the ship to arrange for babysitting. When booking the cruise, Celebrity told us several times there would be “no problem” accommodating babysitting requests. While we ultimately got babysitting at the requested times, it was done “under the table” by sitters not officially allowed by the cruise line. The authorized sitters were not available when we wanted. The \$8 an hour fee is billed to your room if using the ship’s sitters.

Check on babysitter qualifications prior to sailing. Celebrity’s authorized babysitters are off-duty housekeepers, who we were told had no training or CPR certification.

Excursions. Bring a stroller and a carrier (i.e. backpack, sling, front-carrier) for excursions. We had no problem finding interesting sights without having to get a babysitter.

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