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James Ross



The thinking of Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours is that scientific discovery and luxury are not mutually exclusive, writes James Ross. PHOTOS: JAMES ROSS

ON A SLOW BOAT SOUTH

Luxury cruising along the rugged West Coast of North America

JAMES ROSS

We were enjoying a morning coffee out on the spacious balcony of our suite when my wife jumped up to the rail with a cry that we were under attack. Indeed, more than 40 dolphins were skimming along the Scenic Eclipse's side wake and jumping through the surf like torpedoes. We were cruising south from San Francisco to Santa Barbara when the playful sea creatures decided to follow our course, entertaining passengers on both sides of the vessel for more than an hour.

Only the day before, as I sat in the ship's beautiful and expansive lounge, enjoying a dram from its equally expansive single malt selection, Capt. Erwan Le Rouzic announced over the intercom that a number of humpback whales were frolicking along the ship's port side. As passengers scrambled to take in the show, I was thankful for the ship's high-tech, oversized stabilizers. Whales, sea lions, seals and sea birds highlighted our voyage along the rugged western coastline, our impressive discovery yacht seeming to draw interest from wildlife and bystanders alike.

THE WILD WEST COAST PORTS OF CALL

My wife and I had boarded the Scenic Eclipse in Vancouver, on what was essentially a repositioning voyage, as the Polar Class 6 vessel sailed slowly south from Arctic to Antarctic waters, where it would be put to the test in more hard-core expedition itineraries. Our voyage would be more relaxing, but certainly spectacular and engaging in its own way. We would visit Vancouver Island, before cruising southward along the western seaboard of the U.S., encountering wildlife and charming seaside towns on the way.

Our ports of call included Victoria and a whale-watching outing where we were entertained by a number of showboating humpback whales. After returning to the harbour, and with the afternoon free, we decided to take a couple of the ship's electric bikes for a tour of Seattle, we ventured downtown. In Victoria, we chatted up the Space Needle and toured the amazing Chihuly Glass Museum and the

bustling Pike's Place Market. On board the Scenic Eclipse are two state-of-the-art Airbus H 130-T2 helicopters designed for flight-seeing excursions, and I took advantage to get a bird's-eye view of Seattle and the San Juan Islands, landing back on the yacht as it headed out to sea.

Astoria, Ore., introduced us to the history of the Lewis and Clark expedition and their Fort Clatsop, built near the mouth of the Columbia River after their cross-country trek. In Eureka in Northern California, we hiked a portion of the Coastal Trail in a heavy morning fog common to this section of the West Coast. When the fog lifted mid-morning and the sun peaked through, we were afforded splendid views of the coastline's rugged cliffs, and dozens of seals playing in the bays. There was also the opportunity to venture out on the Redwood Skywalk, a treetop suspended walkway that gives a whole new appreciation for these mighty trees.

Passengers were up early for arrival in San Francisco, as the Scenic Eclipse cruised majestically beneath the iconic Golden Gate Bridge and past the eerie, rugged rock island of Alcatraz. With two nights in this eclectic, laid-back metropolis, we toured the famous jail on Alcatraz and then escaped, to walk along the city's vibrant waterfront to Fisherman's Wharf, the bustling seaside market where we were entertained by buskers and vendors, and sea lions sunning themselves on the dock. We explored the streets of San Francisco aboard its famous cable cars, click-clacking past vibrant Victorian homes on the city's steep hills.

The beautiful September weather got even warmer as the Eclipse continued southward alongside the cliffs and beaches of Southern California, to Santa Barbara and its picturesque setting with the Santa Ynez mountains creating a stunning backdrop. Colonial buildings with a Spanish influence give this "American Riviera" a Mediterranean feel. Here, we took kayaks around the protected harbour and the city's famous pier, to get up close to northern fur seals huddled on the marker buoys, and California brown pelicans and cormorants resting on the pilings. At this port, we shuttled to shore in



Alcatraz Island sits hauntingly in the middle of San Francisco Bay. You can get to the "Rock" for a tour by ferry.



A number of tour options are available in each port the Scenic Eclipse visits. In Victoria, cruisers can go whale watching in search of the massive and entertaining humpbacks.



Passengers gather at daybreak as the Scenic Eclipse cruises majestically under the Golden Gate Bridge on its way into San Francisco, where you can explore the steep streets of the city from its famous cable cars.



tenders, while the Eclipse waited outside the protected bay. Its innovative GPS positioning system holds the vessel in position, negating the need to drop anchor, thus protecting sensitive sea beds.

Every port offered several tour options, from craft beer tastings to wine sipping in the Napa and Sonoma Valleys, from ziplining to colourful gardens, and from energetic hikes and cycling excursions to educational museum tours. One

can also choose to stay on board and enjoy all the amenities there.

SCENIC ECLIPSE IS THE STAR OF OUR ADVENTURE

The thinking of Scenic Luxury Cruises & Tours is that scientific discovery and luxury are not mutually exclusive. Their 168-metre Scenic Eclipse attempts to wed the two, and this is small-ship cruising at its best, the yacht carries 228 guests in 114 suites (under 200 on

its polar itineraries). The yacht boasts 10 restaurants, a cooking classroom, a theatre for films and lectures, and the 5,920-square-foot Senses Spa. Besides its helicopters, the cutting-edge boat features a Neptune six-seater submarine, a fleet of Zodiacs, tandem kayaks and paddleboards, and, depending on the yacht's locale, snowshoes or snorkels.

For a list of Scenic Eclipse itineraries, visit www.scenic.ca.