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ON OUR COVER Hike to the Park Butte fire lookout in Washington's North Cascades National Park for spectacular views, p.44

Cruise BC's Inside Passage

with Marine Link Tours

BY ALLEN COX





smiling, casually dressed gentleman greeted me as I approached a receiving line of crew members. “Welcome aboard the Aurora Explorer.” This welcome, spoken with a French accent, came from Captain Philippe Menetrier, a veteran landing craft operator.

With its long cargo deck and aft four-deck bridge castle, mv Aurora Explorer is not a vessel you’d expect would take passengers, which accounts for much of its appeal.

Yes, the food is plentiful and fabulous. Yes, the wine flows freely in the evening. Yes, there are shore excursions. Yes, the staff is responsive to every passenger need. But, instead of a show lounge, dancing and gambling for onboard entertainment, the spectacular scenery of British Columbia’s Inside Passage provides a perpetual week-long show.

Aurora Explorer is a working freight vessel. The freight deck where I and 10 other passengers met captain and crew was already loaded with a well-organized collection of heavy cargo. Crew members escorted us to our cabins on the second deck to settle in while they resumed their duties to get us underway.

After a safety and evacuation briefing at the muster station, the rumble of engines signaled our departure from the Marine Link Tours dock at Menzies Bay near Campbell River on Vancouver Island. We were instructed to stay off the freight deck during loading and unloading. The promenades on the dining and bridge decks provided ample vantage points to take in the passing scenery.

The route on our five-day journey would take us around the Discovery Islands, through Desolation Sound and to the end of 50-mile-long Bute Inlet—together comprising a remote, sparsely populated maze of waterways between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Here, animals—sea lions, otters, an occasional whale, bears foraging on shore—far outnumber people, and passenger eyes constantly scanned our surroundings for wildlife.

The stops along the route depended on the cargo delivery and pick-up schedule, the cargo consisting of earth-moving equipment, vehicles, logging camp supplies and crates of seedlings for reforestation. Ports of call were tiny island villages, a sprawling private estate and working logging camps. (Marine Link Tours alternately offers cruises farther north to the Broughton Archipelago).

mv Aurora Explorer

Category: Landing craft

Length: 135 feet

Passenger capacity: 12

Crew capacity: 6

History: Built in 1972. The latest upgrade, 2012-2013, expanded passenger quarters to accommodate 12 people.



I quickly learned that life on board was a leisurely affair. No activities director dominated our days with clipboard and schedule. Time seemed marked by meals, not a bad thing at all.

The daily routine consisted of rising to the smell of coffee wafting from the dining room above the passenger cabin deck and sitting down to a hearty breakfast complete with freshly baked breads and pastries. Morning activities consisted of sightseeing, snapping photos, reading, chatting with new friends or watching Captain Menetrier on the bridge as he steered us safely through what would at times be turbulent tides forced through narrow channels.

Lunch next, often a beach walk on an isolated channel surrounded by stark mountain peaks. The afternoon passed very much like the morning, with the addition of freshly baked cookies tempting us from the goody basket and often a nap. Finally, wine and appetizers in the evening, followed by a skillfully prepared three-course dinner. Then, more chatting, maybe a parlor game and off to bed.

One afternoon, after the crew scoured the beach and bordering woods for bears, followed by our release onto the beach for a walk, Aurora Explorer paused in the channel so the crew could drop shrimp traps. It was the season for spot prawns, a prized delicacy in these waters. After making a delivery of seedlings for reforestation at a logging camp, we swung by to lift the traps and found a few hundred spot prawns, plenty for a delectable, fresh appetizer for passengers and

When You Go

Booking your cruise: Marine Link Tours operates from April through October. Visit their website to book your cruise: marinelinktours.com. Campbell River, B.C., is located on the east side of Vancouver Island, just over three hours from Victoria. You can get to Campbell River by air service, motorcoach or car. For transportation options and lodging, visit campbellrivertourism.com. For information about getting to Victoria and lodging there, visit tourismvictoria.com.





crew. A crisp pinot gris from B.C.'s Okanagan Valley wine region paired beautifully with the poached prawns.

The next afternoon, the captain took advantage of an opportunity. Freight decks tend to accumulate grime after a few days of hard work, and there's no better way to power wash it than with the help of Mother Nature. We were between pick-ups and deliveries, and the deck was free of cargo. Captain Menetrier skillfully steered the bow under a waterfall for a powerful shower. For us passengers, this was high entertainment packed with drama, spectacle and photo ops.

The final afternoon meal was a celebration and a sort of farewell. The galley crew prepared a classic picnic—complete with salads, sandwich fixings, desserts, beer and all the trimmings—carried it ashore and set up a buffet on a picturesque point shaded by Arbutus trees. The scene was magical. It was a moment I wanted to last, and I could tell the other passengers shared my feeling.

The next morning after breakfast, we pulled up to the dock at Menzies Bay and our exceptional, slow journey on the hard-working Aurora Explorer came to an end.

I basked in my post-cruise state of relaxation, while the tireless Aurora Explorer geared up to take cargo, plus another round of lucky passengers, to points north along Broughton Archipelago the next day. 🌊

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