

Linda Cook

Are We Missing the Boat? Marketing Alaska's National Historic Landmarks



Russian Bishop's House NHL, Baranof Island, AK. This NHL is part of Sitka Historical Park. Photos courtesy NPS Cultural Resource Team, Alaska Support Office.

Southeast Alaska is a series of islands nestled in a long, narrow, mountainous, and heavily-forested panhandle. Cruise ships journey from Puget Sound up the Inside passage; after passing British Columbia, they make stops at various Alaskan ports. In two Alaska towns, nine National Historic Landmarks (NHLs) and two National Historical Parks form a cornerstone of the region's tourism. Visitation to Sitka and Skagway is seasonal and intense. With no roads to link the towns to the outside world, access is limited to cruise ships, the Alaska Marine Highway (ferry service), and occasional airline service. The vast majority of visitors come in spurts; hundreds or thousands at a time have only a few hours to visit and experience a town's attractions.

Tourism officials, in Southeast Alaska and elsewhere, are well aware that history can be big business. *The Travelometer*, a quarterly study on travel published by the Travel Industry Association, surveyed travelers in 1995 and concluded that visiting historical places and attending cultural events are two of their five most popular activities.

Visits to historic sites and cultural events ranked ahead of such activities as fishing, casino gambling, theme park and resort visitation, and cruise ship vacations.

Special problems, however, hinder Southeastern Alaska's ability to market its history. A 1994 Alaska Division of Tourism survey revealed that all cruise ship and ferry users visit Southeast Alaska; cruise ship passengers, however, stay for a shorter time than any other type of visitor. A visitor's first impression of an Alaska town often depends on the way the cruise ship line markets the town's historical and other places of interest. It is essential, therefore, that both towns and the cruise ship industry effectively market the history which NHLs can offer.

In Sitka, the capital of old Russian America, more than two-thirds of all visitors arrive by cruise

ship. In 1996, more than 320 cruise ships visited, bringing some 264,000 passengers. Many of those visitors toured the Russian Bishop's House NHL, a unit of Sitka National Historical Park; many others toured one or more of the six additional Sitka-area NHLs. Local tour companies sell tours on the ships which promote the history and diverse culture of the Sitka community. Passengers may reserve tours when booking the cruise or aboard ship. It is estimated that approximately 90% of the package tours are booked on board ship.

The cruise ship industry also serves Skagway, an 800-person town at the north end of the Inside Passage. Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park (KLGO), which is headquartered here, includes two NHLs: the Skagway Historic District and White Pass NHL and the Chilkoot Trail and Dyea Site NHL. In 1996, Skagway received 274 cruise ship dockings bringing 277,000 people. Out of a total of 136,710 visitors to the park in 1996, statistics reveal a low of 61 visitors in January to a peak of 37,312 in July. Approximately 25% of those view the park film, 20% go on the interpretive walk through the historic district, and 19% participate in the interpretive talk.

Most cruise ship passengers are unaware of the NPS units or the NHL status of the places they visit in Southeast Alaska. The cruise ship industry provides generic information about destinations. Tour operators provide enough information to sell tours. At least one local operator boards the ship two days prior to landing at Sitka to sell tours. At that time the tour directors will point out the historic points of interest.

As G. Donald Adams points out in *Museum News*, the notion of Cultural Tourism is not too far



St. Michael's Cathedral NHL, Sitka. St. Michael's is a tourist destination.

Coming ashore at Skagway a hundred years ago.



Cruise ships stacked at the dock in Skagway.

afield of what the noted Arthur Frommer thinks worthwhile travel should be based on in the first place—people, learning, and ideas. Adams goes on to paraphrase Frommer, stating that “travel should challenge our preconceptions and most cherished views, cause us to re-think our assumptions, shake us up a bit and make us more broad minded and understanding.”* These are some of the same hopes we share for NHLs.

Both Sitka and Skagway have been receiving visitors for 100 years or more, and cruise ships have long been a staple of the summertime economy. But at Unalaska, an island community of 4,000 people in the Aleutian Islands of southwestern Alaska, the cruise ship industry is just beginning to emerge. The economy is changing from primarily fish processing and shipping, and Unalaska has become a new destination, both for large international cruise ships between Russia and the United States and the smaller Explorer-style ships. A striking increase in the number of cruise ship dockings has occurred in the last year. In years past, only a few ships sought harbor at Unalaska in the summer months; only a few hundred of these passengers visited each year. In 1996, however, nine cruise ships docked carrying a total of some 4,500 passengers. In 1997 the number of visitors is expected to increase, with perhaps 15 ships planned to stop.

The community of Unalaska knows and plans for the arrival of each large ship—especially those carrying large numbers of passengers. The city’s three NHLs—Sitka Spruce Plantation, Dutch Harbor Naval Operating Base and US Army Defenses, and Holy Ascension Russian Orthodox Church—form the backdrop for local tour bus tours. The City hopes that the newly-designated Aleutian World War II National Historic Area will attract even more visitors.

The City of Unalaska, and its Visitor and Convention Bureau, are striving to reach new visitors that will stay longer than cruise ship passen-

gers. Sports fishermen, birders, the families of World War II veterans, and groups of ecotourists are high on the list of visitors the city would like to attract. To an ever-increasing degree, the community recognizes the need to draw a common thread among the history that links the three local NHLs, and those further out the chain of islands, in order for visitors to realize the magnitude of history around them.

In order to create those links, and to make that history more accessible, a Museum of the Aleutians is planned in Unalaska to address Aleut prehistory and culture. Working with the River and Trails Conservation Association, the city and the Ounalashka Native Corporation hope to interconnect landmark features, National Register properties, and natural history. Realizing that goal, however, will not happen overnight. The first-ever issue of the *Unalaska-Dutch Harbor Visitors Guide*—the mainstay of local visitor information—was published in 1996, and none of Unalaska’s NHLs were recognized as either being on the National Register or having any national designation.

Tourism related to Aleutian NHLs is also taking place on islands west of Unalaska. On Umnak Island, 65 miles west of Unalaska, a company called the Bering Sea Ranches has launched a tour operation that depends on the increase in cruise ship trade in the Aleutians. Hoping to attract visitors who wish to explore the World War II buildings at Fort Glenn National Historic Landmark at the base of Okmok Volcano, Bering Sea Ranches knows that aircraft service to the islands is too unpredictable. With the increase in ship traffic the Landmark’s resources, which include a USO theater where Bob Hope entertained troops, are accessible; consequently, they take on a new value to visitors and operators. The Ranch, however, still overlooks the obvious. The company’s 1997 advertising leaves out one of the most notable feature about the site—that it too is a National Historic Landmark.

As cultural resource managers, we are missing the boat. The cruise ship industry brings thousands of visitors to NHLs each year, both in Southeast Alaska and the Aleutians. Most visitors, however, do not know that NHLs are an important part of their itinerary. To alleviate the problem, information needs to be provided to information offices which are located on each ship. Additional information needs to be given to the private onshore tour operators so they can incorporate it into their group tours.

Cruise ship passenger demographics are in transition; families with children are, to an increasing degree, supplanting the financially-comfortable retired couples which have traditionally comprised

the passenger manifests. Families, in contrast to senior citizens, are more likely to take inexpensive, informal self-guided tours than to join group tours. Families, moreover, are also likely to go either to published standard guidebooks or cruise the Internet for specific information.

At present, a search of the Internet showed that only the Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau references NHLs. Even the NPS park web sites for SITK and KLGO, which do feature historic resources, do not inform the public about the NHL

status of these resources. Our ship—literally and figuratively—has come in. We must meet it with information in hand.

Note

* G. Donald Adams, "Cultural Tourism: The Arrival of the Intelligent Traveler," in *Museum News*, November/December 1995, Vol 74, No 6, p. 32.

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Landmark Makes Good The Aleutian Historic Area

Panoramic view of Unalaska and Dutch Harbor. Most of the significant World War II resources remain on the uplands. Development crowds the coastal areas. Courtesy NPS.

This is a place where so much of the history has involved the appropriation of Aleut land and waters and the submergence of Aleut culture beneath waves of European and American influence—economically, politically, and militarily.

—Ray Hudson, former teacher in Unalaska, local historian, and artist, letter dated 9/28/91.

The Aleutian Islands are a thin arc of rugged mountainous islands that cut across the Bering Sea. On a map the islands look like a child's game of "attach the dots." The chain of islands extends for over 1,000 miles from the edge of the Alaska mainland to within a couple hundred miles of the eastern Siberian coast of Russia. The Native Aleut¹ have occupied the islands for at least 10,000 years. For the last several hundred



years the islands have been the crossroads of Russian exploration and American enterprise. During the 1940s, the events of World War II transformed the Aleutians into a military theatre. Caught in the middle of the wartime build-up, the Aleut lost many of their traditional villages and churches and suffered immeasurable losses to their culture and heritage.

The Aleutian Campaign in the War in the Pacific during World War II—known as the Forgotten War—dramatically touched the lives of tens of thousands of American, Canadian, and Japanese military and civilians in the early 1940s. The bombing of Dutch Harbor on Unalaska in 1942, the Battle of Attu, and the invasion of Kiska Island in 1943 were the crucial events of the Campaign, an offshoot of the Battle of Midway and the larger War in the Pacific. During this Campaign, the Native village of Attu was captured and destroyed. These events forced the relocation and internment of over 800 Aleut for the duration of the war, leading to the death of nearly 80 Aleut leaders and elders. This unheralded loss devastated Aleut culture and demographics in the Aleutians for years following the war.

In 1969 Brian Garfield wrote in *The Thousand-Mile War*,

The Aleutians have not changed in the twenty-five years since their forgotten war was fought. Rusting relics of battle still litter Attu's mountainsides. Giant B-29 hangars

Alaska map courtesy Linda Cook.

