

## Sitkans Tour Cruise Ship, Get Inside View

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At 936 feet, the MS Westerdam is as long as three football fields. And with about 2,000 guests and 800 crew on board, the Holland America Line ship has a floating population roughly the size of Petersburg's. Giant cruise ships anchored in Sitka Sound are a common sight during the summer months. They bring upwards of 200,000 visitors to this port each year, and they spend an estimated \$20 million in local stores. But how many Sitkans have ever visited the engine room of a cruise ship, or seen where the towels and sheets guests use each day are cleaned? And where does the food waste go from the 9,000 meals served daily on the ship? And what happens when those 2,800 people flush the toilets?

The answer to some of those questions came Thursday for about 25 city officials and community leaders who, along with a Sentinel reporter, boarded a lightering boat for the quick run out to the Westerdam for a tour of the ship as it lay at anchor.

Accompanied by officials of the Alaska Cruise Association, the Sitkans got to see the inner workings of the ship and enjoy a lunch of tomato basil soup, steak or salmon, a choice of red or white wine, and tiramisu for dessert.

In the face of new taxes and environmental protections aimed at the industry, ACA formed a year ago to advocate for the nine cruise lines that do business in Alaska.

The goal of Thursday's program was to give community leaders an understanding of the efforts the cruise industry has made to be "better environmental stewards."

As the Sitka group was eating dessert Thursday, ACA President John Binkley said he hoped the tour had provided valuable information about the ship, particularly the wastewater treatment systems on board.

"We want to have a group of people who have first-hand knowledge," Binkley told the Sentinel after the tour. "There's a lot of misinformation out there."

Binkley, who ran against Sarah Palin in the 2006 Republican gubernatorial primary, said the cruise association is conducting a total of 14 onboard tours for locals in Alaskan ports this summer. Tours have already been held in Juneau and Ketchikan.

The public relations effort comes as the cruise association is preparing to ask the Alaska Legislature to alter a 2006 voter initiative that imposed new taxes and environmental standards on the industry. The cruise ship initiative also required the cruise lines to have state-hired marine engineers -- "ocean rangers" -- onboard cruise vessels to monitor environmental practices.

A recent report by the head of the Ocean Ranger program accused Holland America and the Princess lines of failing to comply with the law by not giving the monitors access to certain areas of their ships and to log books. The report cited violations on at least nine of the 28 cruise ships that do business in Alaska, and has led to the threat of legal action (against both the state and the cruise industry) by the same groups that drafted and advocated for the 2006 initiative.

Among the Sitka guests Thursday were Mayor Marko Dapevich, Assembly member Jack Ozment, City Engineer Dan Jones, a representative of the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, members of the city's tourism commission and others.

They were introduced to the Westerdam's ocean ranger at the start of their tour.

Under state law, two years must pass before the Legislature may amend a law passed by voter initiative.

Binkley said the cruise association will ask the Legislature next January to allow the state Department of Environmental Conservation to revise water quality standards imposed on cruise ships by the voter initiative.

The law passed by voters in 2006 said water discharged by cruise ships cannot contain more than 3.1 parts per billion of copper, a standard that is based on the conditions in which sensitive marine life can survive. The law also set standards for other metals, but Binkley said the copper threshold is of particular concern.

"We can't point to any technology that would allow us to get there," he said.

Binkley wants DEC to examine the issue and set a new threshold. He also is concerned that the copper reading will be taken directly from the ship's discharge pipe, rather than in a "zone of dilution," otherwise known as a mixing zone.

"If they look at it and come back with 3.1, that's what we'll do. But we want DEC to make the call based on science," he said.

The City and Borough of Sitka is permitted to discharge water from its municipal wastewater plant with up to 354 parts per billion of copper, Binkley said.

After boarding the Westerdam the tour group was taken to the Queens Lounge, a nightclub-type space with a bar, dance floor and high-backed booths. The Sitkans sat in orange leather chairs to watch a 30-minute DVD

presentation outlining the steps Holland America line has taken to improve its environmental standards.

Complete with scenic shots of the various locales around the world where Holland America travels, the DVD said the cruise line had spent \$40 million on environmental upgrades to its fleet.

The changes began after the Alaska Legislature passed strict environmental standards for cruise ships in 2002, Binkley said. He added later the wastewater treatment systems on the boat are better than those employed by any municipality in Alaska.

"The best water treatment systems in the state are on board this ship," Binkley said.

He explained that the ship treats black water (from toilets) and gray water (from sinks and shower drains) before discharging it into seawater.

After the DVD had finished, the Sitkans were divided into two groups -- one set out for the kitchen and laundry area, while the other, led by the ship's environmental safety officer Kiernon Connelly, ventured to the engine room.

The vessel's bowels are a tangle of steel and high-tech monitoring equipment. Some of the more remote areas were reached by steep staircases and guests were advised to wear ear plugs. Sitkans got an up-close look at the ship's engines and the wastewater treatment system. They were also taken through the solid waste area, where the cardboard, bottles, cans and other refuse produced by the ship's passengers and crew are dealt with.

Holland America touted its recycling efforts throughout the tour.

In the kitchen, the evening meal -- including chocolate totem poles for dessert -- was being prepared.

Some on the tour noted the congeniality of the staff, which warmly greeted the visiting Sitkans each step of the way.

The splendor of the ship was on full display as the Sitka group traversed what is essentially a floating luxury hotel.

After the second leg of the tour it was time for lunch at the Pinnacle Grill, a three-course affair with wine and filet mignon.

After a quick trip to the vessel's bridge, where kayaks and fishing boats could be seen in surrounding waters through the windows as well as on the radar, it was time for the lighter trip to town.

Gershon Cohen, the Haines scientist who helped draft the 2006 cruise ship initiative, has followed the industry's town-by-town public relations campaign in Southeast Alaska.

Cohen called the tours a "dog and pony show," that he said is part of an elaborate lobbying effort to undercut the law passed by voters in 2006.

The industry has until 2010 to comply with discharge standards in the initiative, and Cohen wondered aloud why the industry is working to change the law, rather than making an effort to comply with it.

"They're not even trying," he said. "It's a slap in the face to the state."

Cohen said he wrote his graduate dissertation on effluent mixing zones, and rejected the notion that his initiative was not based on science.

"It's not like we drew this up over a beer and a shot of bourbon," he said. There are strong scientific arguments why cruise ships should not be issued the same "zone of dilutions" as cities, he said.

Cohen said he believes all mixing zones are illegal, but that when it comes to a municipal outfall, the pipe is stationary -- fishermen know where it is and can stay away from it.

But cruise ships move around, creating what he called a "mobile mixing zone."

He noted that different ships may tend to discharge water in the same spot, perhaps at the same time of day, creating periodically concentrated areas of pollution without the knowledge of the fishing fleet.

"It's problematic to say the least," Cohen said. "The arguments for taking the reading at the pipe are not arbitrary."

Mostly, Cohen said he was concerned that the cruise ship industry was preparing to "usurp" the will of the voters by seeking relief from the Legislature.

"They ran a \$2 million campaign to defeat the initiative and the people voted for the initiative," he said. "They know it's easier for them to buy the Legislature than it was to buy the public."