

An 'uncruise' in Oregon and Washington

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I was a cruise virgin. Even though I am a seasoned travel writer, daunting tales of gargantuan ships, enormous buffets, windowless cabins and teeming crowds had put me off.

But then I was invited on an “Adventure Cruise,” on the Columbia and Snake rivers, by the UnCruise company, which promised smaller ships, (86 passengers max), cabins, not only with a window, but that opened onto a walkway with a railing and itineraries where only smaller ships could go.

The “adventures” included hiking, biking, kayaking, paddle-boarding, swimming, wine-tasting and even a day of river-rafting. I found myself thinking, wow, this could be my kind of cruise.

I'd never been to summer camp, but this sounded like a very cool summer camp for adults with cocktails. So I signed up for the seven-day cruise from Clarkston, Wash. to Portland, Ore.

From the moment I stepped onto the ship in Clarkston, the young, friendly crew made me feel welcome and kept us all up to date on our schedule and outing choices. Each morning, after an optional sunrise yoga class on the upper deck and a hearty breakfast in the dining room, (not a buffet) we headed out for the different adventures.

On a jet-boat tour of Hells Canyon, North America's deepest river gorge on a wild stretch of the Snake River, we spotted ospreys traveling to and from their large nests. Big horn sheep grazed on the hillside near 7,000-year-old petroglyphs and elegant blue herons took flight as we passed by.

Our hiking options included a challenging hike or an easy walk along the Palouse Canyon waterfall, the only remaining waterfall formed by the ice-age-era Missoula Floods. The dramatic falls and surrounding cliffs and wildflowers allowed us to feel the deep power of the landscape that the Native American tribes inhabited in centuries past.

Our biking excursions took us on designated bike paths along the Columbia River and the Columbia River Parkway. On our comfortable seven-speed cruisers, we pedaled as fast and as far as we wanted to go, feeling the breeze and enjoying sparkling views of the river along the way.

Lectures and activities showcased the particular culture, history, geology and wildlife of each region. We learned about the Overland Trail migration, which began in the 1840s and of course, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which literally put this area on the map in the early 1800s.

The dining room had open seating and our small group quickly bonded from sharing our various adventures. The servers offered delicious menu choices and were also open for requests. One passenger was gluten and dairy free and the chefs made her scrumptious looking versions of all the bread, entrees and desserts.

Passengers desiring a less active itinerary could choose to tour various museums, enjoy a skiff boat ride, take a tour of Bonneville Dam, take walks rather than hikes or just hang out on the deck with a good book.

The ship, the S.S. Legacy, carries 86 passengers and 35 crew members. A replica of an 1898 coastal gold rush steamer, built in 1983 and renovated in 2013, her Victorian style decor and antique whistle blended well with all the capabilities of a modern ship, including an elevator for those not wanting to take the stairs.

Forty feet wide and 192 feet long, she maneuvered into areas that larger ships cannot go, giving us rare and special moments with the river and the surrounding pristine landscape.

The quiet and peace of being on wild sections of the rivers felt like a balm. In some of the remote areas we visited, we had no WIFI or cell service, which gave us all a break from information overload. I'd forgotten how delightful it is to have a conversation with someone with no cell phones as a distraction.

I loved the feeling of the gentle flow of cruising along and being miles away from civilization. We experienced views of the landscape that could only be had from the river itself as we watched the sun set before dinner. With each state room opening to the walkway and railing, it was easy to step out and snap a photo or just breathe in the fresh air and gaze at a star-studded sky.

As we passed through locks and dams, we gathered on the deck to watch, a fascinating experience, as the ship was lowered more than 100 feet in some cases.

The high crew to passenger ratio made us feel like honored guests. The crew warned against, "FOMO," translated as "Fear of Missing Out," which could drive us to push ourselves to do every activity, even if we really wanted to soak in one of the two Jacuzzis on the upper deck, while sipping a glass of champagne.

"No shaming or guilt about what you did or didn't do. Give yourself permission to just relax," they said.

After our ship docked in Portland, we thanked the crew and said goodbye to all our ship mates, then headed to the airport and home. As I savored the memories and deep satisfaction of my fulfilling week of adventures I thought, yeah, this was definitely my kind of cruise.

Rates per person for the Columbia River Adventure Cruise begin at \$5,195. For the details on this and all other itineraries, visit uncruise.com or call 888-862-8881.

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