

North America:

- **Rockies Odyssey & Alaska Cruise (APT)**
- **Canada & New England Discovery Cruise (Holland America)**
- **Montreal to New York**

Ken Gill

Type of tour

This tour involved travel by coach, train and cruise ship with transfers by plane, train and bus. The land tour group size was about 40 people.

Brief outline of tour

Our trip covered a total of 50 days in May/June 2017 and represented a combination of three major travel destinations that my wife and I had long dreamed of visiting. Each individual destination would provide a wonderful separate trip on its own, but we had decided to construct a tour that would take us to all three.

The first component of our journey was a 22-day APT Rockies Odyssey and Alaska Cruise. This fully guided tour began in Victoria, Vancouver Island and our subsequent coach trip took us to Whistler, Sun Peaks, Jasper, Lake Louise and Banff. From Banff, we joined the Rocky Mountaineer train for a 2-day return journey to Vancouver via Kamloops.

The 7-day Holland America cruise (MS Volendam) of the Inside Passage departed from Vancouver and the round trip included visits to Juneau, Skagway, Glacier Bay and Ketchikan.

The cost of this 22-day trip was \$12,995 per person and we also paid the APT “deal price” of \$995 per person for return air flights Sydney-Vancouver-Sydney. Optional shore excursions were at extra cost.

At the conclusion of our APT tour we flew to Boston for three nights before joining the 7-day Holland America Canada & New England Discovery Cruise (MS Maasdam). Destinations included Bar Harbor, Halifax, Sydney, Charlottetown (Prince Edward Island), Gulf of Saint Lawrence, Quebec City and finally Montreal. The cost of this cruise (ocean view cabin) was \$1,953 per person. Optional shore excursions were again at extra cost.

After three nights in Montreal, we travelled by train to Toronto, also spending three nights there. A Greyhound bus then took us to Niagara Falls for a 2-night stay.

We used a private taxi to take us to Buffalo Airport and flew from there to New York for a 6-night stay.

Our APT “return flights deal” (Air Canada) dictated that we had to begin and end in Vancouver, so we flew back to Vancouver from New York and stayed there for an extra three nights before returning home.

Major Highlights of the tour

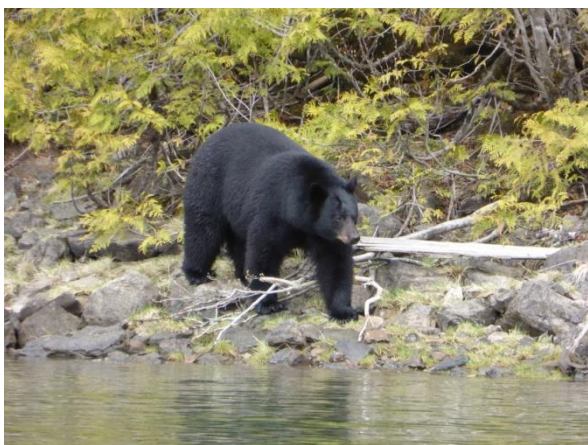
Continued next page ...

22-DAY APT ROCKIES ODYSSEY AND ALASKA CRUISE



Butchart Gardens: These magnificent gardens outside Victoria provided a wonderful highlight in the early part of our trip. Features included the Sunken Garden where the main quarry used to be located, the beautiful Rose Garden, Japanese Garden, Star Pond, Italian Garden, Piazza and Mediterranean Garden.

Cultural awareness: Although the snow and mountains are major features in places like **Whistler**, it was pleasing to visit venues like the **Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre** where our local tour guides provided valuable information about the First Nations people of the area.



Blue River, Jasper: There is no doubt that a major highlight of the entire trip was to see the amazing landscapes unique to the **Rocky Mountains**, as well as the wonderful wildlife that is found there. At Blue River, we joined the **River Safari Bear Watching** jet boat cruise and were thrilled to see black bears close up on the shore in their natural habitat.

Athabasca Glacier, Columbia Icefield: How amazing it was to travel by special vehicle and actually stand on a glacier with snow falling all around us! Breathtaking!



Lake Louise (photo left): This is a picture-postcard destination. Whether you visit when the open lake is a stunning deep blue or when it is fully covered in ice (as with our visit), this is a truly beautiful location. A lake-view room in the Fairmont is highly recommended, looking straight out at the distant Victoria Glacier.

Rocky Mountaineer train: The journey from **Banff to Vancouver** was about 900km aboard this luxurious train. Two long days of travel (about 11 hours each day) were broken by an overnight stay in a hotel at **Kamloops**. Our APT tour included Gold Leaf seating in the glass-ceilinged upper level of our carriage and the views, food and drink and service were exceptional. Descending from Banff (about 4500 feet elevation), we were treated to sensational views of mountains, rivers, tunnels, glaciers, ranchlands, rocky slopes, water rapids and fertile fields.



Inside Passage: It is difficult to summarise all the highlights of these seven days. Certainly we would mention the (optional) whale-watching excursion out of **Juneau**. Then, out of **Skagway**, we boarded another train (optional) – this time, a return journey to the **White Pass Summit**, at the border between the US and Canada and at the gateway to the Yukon. How different

this was to the Rocky Mountaineer, being an old and rickety heritage train, yet in many ways it was thrillingly unique as it traced the tracks of the Klondike gold rush days. The interesting aspects of the history and the magical scenery were all amazing.



Without a doubt, the jewel of this cruise was the visit to **Glacier Bay** (*photo left*) – a United Nations biosphere reserve and a world heritage site. Just 250 years ago, Glacier Bay was all glacier and no bay. Today, the glacier is gone, having retreated north. Less than a dozen smaller tidewater glaciers remain. Our major destination was the **Margerie Glacier** alongside the **Grand Pacific Glacier**. Remaining there for a full hour, the view from our cruise ship was awesome. At a distance were sea otters, mountain goats and bears and some ice clumps breaking away from the glacier – just amazing.

BOSTON

This is a great place for walking, and we did a lot. We recommend walking the **Freedom Trail**, starting from the **Bunker Hill Monument** and following the easy-to-track double brick paving which guides you through the city. There is plenty to see, including the City Square, Old North Church, Kings Chapel, Old State House and the Boston Common.

7-DAY HOLLAND AMERICA CANADA & NEW ENGLAND DISCOVERY CRUISE



Yet again, there is too much to mention! In **Bar Harbor**, Maine, the view from **Cadillac Mountain**, the highest point on the Northern Atlantic seaboard, was sensational. We found **Halifax** very interesting, learning that it was the nearest assistance port to the tragedy when the Titanic went down in 1912. **Sydney** in Nova Scotia provided an exciting optional excursion, **The Bird Islands of Cape Breton**, where we were able to see our first puffins in the wild and many other unique birds. Arrival at **Prince Edward Island** (being greeted by Anne at the dock) meant a must-do excursion to the house of **Green Gables**. A 3-hour guided walk through **Old Quebec** and UNESCO World Heritage sites was also

enjoyable. We found **Montreal** to be a crazy and vibrant city, possibly enhanced by the fact that the Grand Prix was on and everyone was in party mode. Further encouraging the walking theme, we would recommend the climb up and over **Mount Royal**, providing a great view over the city.

TORONTO

To satisfy one of the basic needs, we would highly recommend a visit to the **St Lawrence Market** where we found very good coffee and pastries to fuel up our energies for the day. The **Old Distillery** area was well worth a good exploration on foot and we also found the **Royal Ontario Museum** fascinating, with a wonderful feature exhibition on the blue whale.

NIAGARA FALLS

A falls-view room at the Sheraton (Canada side of the falls) provided one of those “Oh my Gosh” moments as you looked out at the amazing American, Bridal and Horseshoe Falls. This was a totally amazing sight.



You simply must do one of the exhilarating cruises below and alongside the falls and our 30-minute Hornblower boat cruise was sensational. The main commercial area of Niagara Falls (up Clifton Hill Street) is more like a “Luna Park” amusement centre and might best suit if you have young ones with you. As an attractive and pleasant alternative, we would recommend a visit to the township of **Niagara on the Lake** which was a 20km drive from Niagara Falls and located on the shores of Lake Ontario. The flower-filled and tree-lined Queen Street was a great place for a relaxing walk (all the way to the lake’s edge) and a good lunch and refreshment.

NEW YORK



New York provided everything we expected of it – so much to recommend – just mind blowing! Firstly, the subway system was terrific and we used it extensively. Next, we had pre-ordered a 3-day **New York Pass** and got more than our ticket value by visiting a number of included major attractions and also using the included Hop-On-Hop-Off Bus (whose three distinct lines cover much of New York) and the Hudson River cruise which travelled past the **Statue of Liberty**. A major highlight was the impressive **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, but also great were the **American Museum of Natural History**, **Empire State Building**, **9/11 Memorial and Museum** and the **Guggenheim Museum**.



Again, New York is a wonderful place for those who enjoy the benefits of walking. **Central Park** is an obvious and beautiful destination. The **High Line Walk** from 34th Street Hudson Yards was also an enjoyable walk adjacent to the Hudson River. We also caught the subway to High Street Station in Brooklyn (over the East River) and then had a great walk back over the **Brooklyn Bridge Walkway** and then continued our sightseeing up **Broadway** towards **Times Square** (which proved to be the central hub from which we undertook daily excursions). There is just so much to see. Broadway was also our return destination that night for a must do show – in our case the Carole King musical *Beautiful*.

VANCOUVER

The **Waterfront** area has much to offer in the way of good food and refreshment. We also enjoyed a visit to the extensive **Stanley Park** and the markets on **Granville Island** were terrific. If you like views from up high then the **Vancouver Lookout** at the top of the Harbour Centre Building is recommended. A chance discovery was the **Dr Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden** in Chinatown. An exceptional guide introduced us to the beauty and significance of these beautiful gardens.



A major highlight was the **Capilano Suspension Bridge** in North Vancouver, which is serviced by a free shuttle bus. We recommend an early morning visit to beat the crowds and then enjoy walking over the bridge, the treetops adventure, rainforest walk and cliff walk which are well suited to all levels of fitness.

Our final Vancouver highlight was the **Bloedel Conservatory** – a short train ride (along the airport line) to Oakridge, 41st Avenue and then a pleasant 20-minute walk through Queen Elizabeth Park. This dome-shaped building featured an open environment with beautiful plants, exotic birds and fish. It was surrounded by lovely gardens and panoramic views back to Vancouver.

Other comments

Acknowledging that many people are comfortable organising their own travel arrangements, I would comment that my wife and I have always preferred to work through a trusted **travel agent**. This was especially the case with this trip as there were a number of things to be considered in sewing together the three major components (destinations) of our holiday.

Also of personal preference would be the company that you choose to travel with. We were extremely pleased with APT, yet note that many people have been similarly impressed with Scenic. Both companies provide comparable itineraries, experiences and services (as on our journey, we often crossed paths with other happy tour groups).



Sharing a coach (for the land journey) with a dedicated tour guide and a group size of 40 was enjoyable, as the tour activities provided plenty of opportunities to meet as many new people as you liked. Once onboard the cruise ship, our APT group was looked after by a new guide. For the Inside Passage cruise there were 1,400 passengers on the ship. Later, on the New England cruise, there were 1,250 passengers. On these, and also on larger ships, we have never felt overcrowded or frustrated by long lines or struggling for choice of activities.

Contributor details

Ken Gill (email Ken.Gill@optusnet.com.au) 1/11/17



Ken was Principal of Richmond High School (1992-2004) and Macarthur Girls High School (2005-2010). In retirement he enjoys the challenges of golf, the discoveries of travel and the wonders of watching grandchildren growing up.