

Working as a SE Alaska Pilot Frequently Asked Questions

What is Southeast Alaska Pilot's Association (SEAPA)?

The Southeast Alaska Pilots' Association (SEAPA) is a group of 50 + professional mariners who provide safe and efficient year-round pilotage service within Southeast Alaskan waters. Our Pilots are licensed by the State of Alaska to carry out its shared mission to assure the protection of shipping, the safety of human life and property, and the protection of the marine environment. Our Marine Pilots have the additional responsibility to report violations of state and federal pilotage laws. SEAPA is accountable to provide an efficient dispatch of pilots and implementing a comprehensive training program that maintains a sufficient pool of state licensed marine pilots to meet the demands of shipping in our region.

What area does Southeast Alaska Pilot Association cover?

SEAPA provides a reliable system of pilotage in Region 1 which consists of the waters from Dixon Entrance at the Southern border of Alaska, to Cape Spencer and all waters inland and its headlands, including Yakutat Bay and Yakutat. Essentially SEAPA covers Alaska's Panhandle which is the northern 500 miles of the Inside Passage. To put this in perspective - this is over 11,000 nautical miles of shoreline!

What is the main traffic in Southeast Alaska?

95% of our traffic is seasonal Cruise Ships, which ply our waters from April through October. SE Alaska also sees cargo ships year-round (1-2 per month) (typically small break-bulk log and ore ships.) We also see quite a bit of yacht traffic in the summer.

What is the pay?

Compensation is very competitive with most U.S. pilot associations. When the training program is complete and a new pilot is licensed, there is no buy in. Each pilot acts as an independent contractor and is in control of their own retirement, health care, etc.

What type of schedule does a SEAPA pilot work?

Because our main traffic is cruise ships, our main work season is May through September. SEAPA Pilots work May 15-Sept 15, then can decide if they want to work an extended shoulder season in the spring and fall, and an optional 3-6 weeks during the winter season. The total number of dispatch days per month in the summer varies by the number of ships, number of Pilots, etc. Historically this has been 24-28 days per month. It can be a tough, long summer, but then the Pilot will have up to 8 months off if they only work the main summer season.

Do all SEAPA pilots live in AK in the summer?

SEAPA Pilots dispatch out of either Juneau or Ketchikan during the Summer season. Many pilots live in Alaska year-round, but many live elsewhere in the off season (and some even live out of the country.)

What does a typical dispatch look like?

During the summer, two Pilots are typically dispatched to a cruise ship and are typically onboard an average of 3-11 days.

A typical 4 day itinerary for a cruise ship might look like this:

Ketchikan- Tracy Arm Fjord- Juneau-Skagway-Glacier Bay

Their work schedule and dispatch might look like this:

Day 1: Pilot 1 gets on the pilot boat early in the morning and transits to a Pilot Station south of Ketchikan where they board the ship. Pilot 1 then brings the ship into the dock at Ketchikan for a 0700 alongside time. Pilot 2 will join the vessel in Ketchikan and will have the conn for the 1600 departure. The two Pilots will then split the watches up the Inside Passage to Tracy Arm (a Fjord that leads to a Sawyer Glacier,) and then onto Juneau.

Day 2: Pilot 1 brings the ship into Juneau at 0600. Pilot 2 will take the ship out of Juneau at 2000. The Pilots will split the two watches up to Skagway.

Day 3: Pilot 1 brings the ship into Skagway at 0530 and Pilot 2 will take the ship out of Skagway at 2000. The night and next day watches are split by the Pilots

Day 4: The ship arrives into Glacier Bay at 1000, and generally will be in the National Park for 9 hours. At 1800, the vessel departs Glacier Bay and proceeds to Cape

Spencer pilot station where both pilots will disembark via pilot boat at 2000. Both pilots will stay the night at Elfin Cove and then fly via float plane back to their dispatch port (Juneau or Ketchikan).

What are the biggest challenges?

There are many shiphandling challenges: narrow passages, intense wind and weather, and ice navigation. Also, the busy summer schedule definitely mimics a sailing schedule as you are underway most days of the week.

However, it is important to remember that while the schedule is very busy, when the ship is alongside at the dock the Pilot's time is their own to sleep, eat (lots of nice food onboard cruise ships), and enjoy the beautiful outdoors of SE Alaska!