

Victoria, British Columbia

The stop nobody books the cruise for, and the one the cruise legally cannot happen without.

THE SHORT ANSWER

Alaska cruises from Seattle call at Victoria, British Columbia because of the Passenger Vessel Services Act, 46 U.S.C. section 55103, which bars foreign-flagged ships from transporting passengers between US ports. The penalty is \$798 per passenger and falls on the carrier. Ogden Point has four deep-sea berths and the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority puts the city centre approximately 2.4 km, or 1.49 miles, away.

Facts checked against official sources on 24 September 2026

THE STOP I NEARLY SLEPT THROUGH

By day seven of an Alaska cruise you are full. Full of glaciers, full of mountains, full of getting up early. And then the ship pulls into Canada at bedtime and you think, do I really want to?

Go out anyway, even if it is only to stand on the deck and watch the city come up in the dark, which is what I did and it was lovely.

But understand what this stop is. Victoria is not on your itinerary because someone thought you would enjoy it. It is there because without it, your cruise would be illegal. I find that genuinely interesting and nobody ever explains it, so I am going to.

Getting ashore	Ships dock at Ogden Point : four deep-sea berths across two piers. Pier A is 1,100 feet and 800 feet; Pier B is two berths of 1,040 feet each.
Into town	The Harbour Authority states: " <i>The city centre is approximately 2.4 km (1.49 miles) away.</i> "
Country	Canada. This is a foreign port and the rules change.
How busy	The Harbour Authority calls Ogden Point " <i>the busiest cruise ship port-of-call in Canada</i> " — 311 calls in 2025
2026 season	10 April to 13 October 2026
Terminal	Open 24 hours, year round, with customs and immigration facilities on site

Why you stop here at all: a law from 1886

The Passenger Vessel Services Act, now **46 U.S.C. § 55103**. Customs and Border Protection quotes it like this:

"No vessel may transport passengers between ports or places in the United States to which the coastwise laws apply, either directly or via a foreign port, unless the vessel is: (1) wholly owned by U.S. citizens and (2) has a certificate of documentation with a coastwise endorsement..."

Almost every large cruise ship is foreign-flagged and foreign-built. Seattle is a US port. Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway are US ports. So the voyage has to touch a foreign one.

There is a wrinkle worth knowing, and CBP publishes it: foreign ports are sorted into **nearby** and **distant**. Nearby covers North and Central America, Bermuda and the West Indies. Canada is nearby. CBP states that transportation via a nearby foreign port between two US points **still violates** the Act — which is why the Victoria call works for a round trip that starts and ends in Seattle, and why a genuine one-way Seattle-to-Alaska passenger voyage is a different legal animal altogether.

The penalty is **\$798 per passenger** for anyone transported and landed in violation after 2 November 2015. It falls on the carrier, not on you.

Where we stop. CBP's publication gives the statute, the nearby-versus-distant rule and the penalty. It does not spell out, in the text we could retrieve, the exact mechanics of why a round trip returning to the same port is permissible with only a nearby foreign call. We have given you the law and the rule. We are not going to fill the gap with our own reasoning and present it as fact.

Documents: the part that actually matters

Two different agencies, two different lists, and you need to satisfy both.

Going into Canada — CBSA

For US citizens, the Canada Border Services Agency accepts a birth certificate, a certificate of citizenship or naturalization, a certificate of Indian status with photo ID, or a US enhanced driver's licence. Whatever you carry must collectively show **full name, date of birth and citizenship**.

CBSA's own recommendation, regardless of age, is a valid passport — it calls the passport "*the only reliable and universally accepted travel and ID document*."

Coming back into the US — CBP

Under the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, US citizens arriving by sea may present a US passport, passport card, enhanced driver's licence, a Trusted Traveler card such as NEXUS or SENTRI, a US military ID with orders, or an American Indian Card.

And the one most Alaska cruisers actually rely on: "*U.S. citizens on closed-loop cruises (cruises that begin and end at the same U.S. port) are able to enter the United States with a birth certificate and government-issued photo ID.*" **Children under 16** need only proof of citizenship, and CBP says the birth certificate "*can be original, photocopy, or certified copy.*"

The gap that catches people. The birth-certificate route gets you home. It does not necessarily get you off the ship in a foreign port, and your cruise line may require a passport book even when neither government does. State Department guidance adds the one that really hurts: if you cannot return on the ship and have to fly home, **you will need a passport book**. Ours stay in the safe and we have never regretted carrying them.

How the ship itself is cleared

Worth knowing so the process makes sense: cruise ships are **fully cleared at their first port of arrival** in Canada, after which the ship can move freely between Canadian ports without reporting again. Manifests go to CBSA at least **96 hours** ahead. You may be asked to complete a Form E311 declaration. Currency or monetary instruments of **CAD \$10,000 or more** must be declared. Undeclared food, plants or animals draw penalties of **\$500 to \$1,300**. And CBSA says plainly: "*Each time you leave the ship you are subject to examination.*"

On a Seattle round trip, Victoria is usually the ship's only Canadian port, which makes it the first port of arrival.

Accessibility at Ogden Point

Victoria publishes more than most, which we appreciate:

- **Wheelchairs are available at the terminal.**
- There are **pet relief areas for service animals at each pier.**
- The facility "*complies with Canada's Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations.*"
- The Breakwater walk is described as **barrier-free.**
- Accessibility enquiries go to the terminal operator, SSA Marine: ogdenpoint@ssamarine.ca or 250.386.1321.
- A 2022 Harbour Authority document states all shuttle buses must be wheelchair accessible and operators must keep 10% of the fleet wheelchair accessible. That document may have been superseded.

Butchart Gardens, and the timing trap

The Gardens are at 800 Benvenuto Ave, Brentwood Bay — **about 22 km, 13.5 miles, from Ogden Point.** The Gardens' own cruise page says it will take **approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes to reach them from the time your ship docks.**

Do that arithmetic against a call that starts at 8pm and ends just before midnight, and you will see why many people simply do not go. On a longer daytime call it is a different proposition.

MY VERDICT

If you get a long daytime call, Victoria is a genuinely lovely town and worth a proper day.

If you get the classic short evening call, my honest advice is to lower your ambitions and enjoy it anyway. Walk the Breakwater, look at the city lit up across the water, and be back aboard without stress. Do not book a 13.5-mile garden run against a four-hour window.

And carry the passport. Please carry the passport.

Questions people ask about Victoria

Why do Alaska cruises from Seattle stop in Victoria?

Because of the Passenger Vessel Services Act, 46 U.S.C. § 55103. Foreign-flagged ships may not transport passengers between US ports, and Seattle, Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway

are all US ports, so the voyage must call at a foreign port. Victoria is the nearest one. The penalty for violating the Act is \$798 per passenger, and it falls on the carrier.

Do I need a passport for Victoria, BC?

Not strictly, on a closed-loop cruise. CBP allows US citizens on cruises that begin and end at the same US port to re-enter with a birth certificate and government-issued photo ID, and CBSA accepts a birth certificate or enhanced driver's licence for entry to Canada. Both agencies recommend a passport, your cruise line may require one, and you would need a passport book to fly home if you missed the ship.

How far is downtown Victoria from the cruise terminal?

The Greater Victoria Harbour Authority states the city centre is approximately 2.4 km, or 1.49 miles, from Ogden Point. No official walking time is published.

Can I visit Butchart Gardens on a short Victoria call?

It is about 22 km — 13.5 miles — from Ogden Point, and the Gardens themselves say to allow approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes from the time your ship docks. On a short evening call that leaves very little time, so check your all-aboard before you book.

Is the Victoria cruise terminal accessible?

The Greater Victoria Harbour Authority publishes that wheelchairs are available at the terminal, that there are pet relief areas for service animals at each pier, and that the facility complies with Canada's Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations. The Breakwater walk is described as barrier-free.

Where these facts come from

- Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, terminal information (<https://gvha.ca/deep-water-terminal/terminal-information/>)
- Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, cruise operations (<https://gvha.ca/cruise-landing-page/cruise-operations/>)
- Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, 2026 cruise schedule (PDF) (https://gvha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2026_Vic_Cruise_Sched_01.07.pdf)
- US Customs and Border Protection, Passenger Vessel Services Act informed compliance publication (PDF) (<https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Sep/PVSA-ICP.pdf>)
- US Customs and Border Protection, Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (<https://www.cbp.gov/travel/us-citizens/western-hemisphere-travel-initiative>)
- Canada Border Services Agency, acceptable travel documents (<https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/travel-voyage/td-dv-eng.html>)
- Canada Border Services Agency, cruise ship passengers (<https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/travel-voyage/cscp-pdnc-eng.html>)
- US State Department, cruise ship passengers (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/before-you-go/travelers-with-special-considerations/cruise-ship-passengers.html>)
- The Butchart Gardens, cruise passenger information (<https://butchartgardens.com/cruise-passenger-information/>)

Ports change their rules and their prices. Check the official pages above before you sail.

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