

Corporate Headquarters
Holland America
300 Elliott Ave. West
Seattle, WA 98119

ATTN: **Customer Service**

Cc: GrayLine of Alaska customer service
Automobile Association of America cruise line customer service

From: **Steven Misrack**
Subject: **Issues regarding our Alaskan vacation.**
Date: **Sunday, June 29, 2003**

I am writing to you to express our disappointment in the land portion of our Alaska cruise tour. First our particulars:

Name: **Steven Misrack & Angie Hoffman**
Booking Number: **4606746**
Cruise/Tour Number: **22**
Date: **17May03**

We understand that we took one of the first cruise/tours of the season and expected some small inconveniences. Neither of us could anticipate the poor service, planning, and organization of the Holland America land tour staff as well as the total lack of customer service at the McKinley Chalets.

First, let me relate the experience we had with Holland America and Gray line of Alaska before the trip even started.

Prior to our cruise/tour I attempted to book some pre-cruise tours via Holland America with my agent at AAA. She was told I would have to book the hotel as well if I wanted to book any of the tours. I already had a hotel booking, but was open to changing the reservation. I was then told the rate was \$120/pp (\$240 a night). The price quoted to me by the hotel was \$75/night. That was a mark up of \$165 a night!

After finally deciding not to book through Holland America, my travel agent with AAA then tried to book tours offered by Grayline of Alaska that I wanted. There were no listings in the system for two of these tours. In addition, it was not listed on your web site. The book in question is "Alaska and The Yukon 2003 Sightseeing." I called the toll free number on the back of the brochure (800) 544-2206 and the agents were unable to find the tours as well. They told me I was calling the wrong company, I insisted they were wrong and described the brochure I was looking at. After 2 calls and 3 people plus 1 supervisor, Bill finally found the brochure and tours. I was then told that on the other two tours I was unable to receive my AAA discount, as advertised in the AAA magazine and on your website over the phone and I would only be able to receive the discount directly from the Fairbanks office. This took three days for Bill to get back to my travel agent to give her this information. I believe this is not the way AAA discounts are supposed to work, but I figured I would just call the Fairbanks office and get them booked straight

away. Somehow in all of this mess, Earl at the gray line office in Seattle booked these tours when I specifically told him to cancel them as I wanted the AAA discount or would not be booking them. A copy of the tour booking was sent to my home and to my travel agents office.

For the next three weeks my agent and I tried to reach a human being that could book these tours. We were unable reach a ticket agent at the Fairbanks office. I left several voice mails and one message with an office assistant. My travel agent was never called back. The office assistant told me the person I needed to speak to was Jen and she would give her the message to call me that afternoon. Five more days went by and I heard nothing. I left a voice mail for Gordon Barr the Chairman of Gray Line Vancouver and he did not return my call. I finally called the Seattle office and spoke with a supervisor responsible for that office. The person I spoke with was Leslie. She told me she would have Jen call my agent back the next day. It took Jen five days before she called. She then stated that she did not know of the tour we wanted to book. In the meantime, we booked the other tours I wanted. Because of the time delay in this booking, the price for the tour went up from what was on the Grayline web site, and the AAA discount was dropped from % 15 to % 10. It makes me wonder if Jen's delay was intentional to wait for the new prices and drop in discount so she could make more money for her office. It is also possible the web site was just wrong, but with the rest of the problems we encountered, it makes me wonder. Also Jen kept insisting that the dinner cruise was raised in price from 2002 prices of \$59 to \$70 for 2003. This was not the case, as A) This was the first time Grayline had offered this dinner cruise and B) It was listed as \$59 in your printed 2003 brochure. When I had my travel agent push the issue and reference the page in the brochure she reduced the price back to what it should be.

Finally after three months of trying we had our three tours booked. It also appears that a special form had to be filled out with my credit card number and signature to book this tour. I have never had to do this with any other Grayline tour I have taken anywhere in the world. I found this strange and was told the Fairbanks office requested it.

It should also be noted that we planned to take two of the flight seeing tours that would have been meant an additional \$1652 in revenue that was lost to Grayline due to the fact that we were being forced to book the hotel through Holland America.

This covers the frustration and disorganization of Grayline prior to our departure. We had problems in almost every city we visited on the land portion of our trip.

The first city was Fairbanks. On the second day of our trip, the Holland America desk was finally staffed. The greeters did not seem to know the answers to any of our questions. In fact one person made a point of informing us that this was her first day of work. And it was her **first** day ever working. This was the first job she ever had. She was very friendly and helpful, but clearly not skilled enough to have been left alone on the first day of mass arrivals at the hotel. I asked if we needed to receive anything from them since we arrived a few days earlier. I was told no which I found out later was not true.

The night before the dinner-cruise I was told that the dinner cruise we worked so hard to book had been cancelled. I was furious after all the trouble my agent and I had gone through to get this tour booked. This also messed up our plans for that evening, as I no longer had my vehicle for transportation. We ended up not doing anything because of this. The excuse I received from Jen was that the ship had engine troubles. I later called the organization that ran this dinner-cruise and was told this was not the case. The real reason was my wife and I were the only people booked for the cruise and they had minimums that needed to be met. This I could understand and I explained to them that more than likely the reason why they didn't have anyone else scheduled was that Grayline was not able to book this tour, as it was not placed in their system, and only because I was persistent I was able to get it booked. This came as a surprise to the owner.

When we got back to our hotel the next day, I once again checked with the front desk about receiving anything for the cruise/tour. I was again told no. My wife had gone to the room and came back with two packets one with my name on it, the other with some other persons name on it. My wife's packet was given to the wrong guest. It took a while to straighten this out. It also appeared that we were missing boarding passes for the train. I was told to speak with Jen at the train station the next day. Nobody was empowered to solve the problem at the hotel.

I then asked about my refund for the dinner cruise. Nobody at the Holland America desk knew what to do. I was told to come back later when they were less busy. That was fine as it could wait and they were swamped with new arrivals. I came back a few hours later and they took my name and issue. They had to call the office. The office called me back and told me to go to the front desk and ask the Holland America person to process the credit. I did this, but the person was unfamiliar with what to do. I could tell she was getting very stressed, as this was the same girl that had just started working and had been left all alone. I suggested she call the office and ask them what to do. Once everyone was in the same room we were able to have the refund processed. She did make sure later that I had received everything I needed.

The next day before we boarded the train, Jen from Grayline did not acknowledge me or apologize for her lack of response to my agent or myself. She treated me like she didn't recognize who I was.

When we arrived in Denali the tour operators, hotel and Holland America staff could not tell us if our luggage was in the room yet. We had a short time to catch the tour bus and wanted to change if our luggage was in our room. The buses for the Denali park tour were not what we expected. There was no reference in the tour description that we would be riding in school buses. These buses were extremely hot, bumpy and being I am over six-foot two, very cramped. One person actually got motion sickness from riding in these buses for so long.

One of the hotel bus drivers I talked to could not tell me when the next shuttle bus left and stated that she was off duty now and was unwilling to go check. She then proceeded to chat with another hotel worker for 15 minutes in the lobby. We also had not received

luggage tags. The Holland America representative told us to get them at the front desk. We asked at the front desk and were given tags for Anchorage. Even though this was our next destination they were the wrong tags. The tags should have said Hilton. We were very lucky we figured out the mistake, or all of our luggage would have been sitting at the Anchorage airport. I pray that this did not happen to any of the guests.

Later that day, I asked the front desk staff about some of the tours. I wanted to know the times of the tours for the next day. They did not have a schedule at the desk and would not call the tour offices and find out. They gave **me** the number and told me to call. I chose not to book any tours through the hotel.

That evening we had several problems with the hotel restaurant. We ordered drinks and they did not all arrive. We had to ask the manager to check on our missing drinks. It turns out the bartender never made them. My wife ordered pork chops and they came out pink and bloody. While in some countries this is acceptable, the proper safe handling instructions for pork in the United States is to cook all pork until the pink is removed. Her food was sent back with a look from the waiter that made us think he didn't understand why it was being sent back, we then informed another manager to make sure the pork was cooked properly.

For dessert, the restaurant was out of all but two of the desserts. After being told three times that your restaurant was out of each successive request, we finally asked, "What do you have?" One of our guests at the table then ordered ice cream, he specifically asked for ice cream without any nuts. He was brought moose tracks ice cream, which as you know has peanut butter cups in them. Fortunately for him and your hotel, this was a personal taste issue and not one of being allergic to nuts. Your hotel could have had a serious problem. Afterwards, the manager came over and we had a long chat about the issues with our food, drink and dessert. While she made no excuses for the problem and stated she would make sure that the next day her staff was properly trained to address these issues and that enough desserts were available, she made no offer to compensate us. She didn't even take off the ice cream from the bill that was not eaten.

After dinner we went into the bar. We found that the bar was not fully stocked. They had no Frangelica. I asked the bartender if they would have some the next day, and he stated that if they did not receive any he would go out and get some. I also found out later the bar was out of cocktail napkins. The next evening in the bar, there was no Frangelica. I ordered a second drink for my wife, which never came.

The next day while waiting for the buses, I heard second hand of lots of problems with booked tours, not called in, not confirmed. There were also a lot of other issues with both of the restaurants.

In Anchorage we were told by the Holland America staff that we should bring our luggage downstairs to the waiting room the next morning. I did not think this was the case and the next morning, confirmed that we should indeed leave our luggage in our room. Several of the guests had already taken their luggage downstairs though.

In Alyeska we encountered the worst part of our trip. Your employee Rosemary is one of the worse employees I have ever seen. If this were my employee in a customer service business I would have removed her from this position.

We had just arrived after spending about six hours on a bus. We were starving and tired. She refused to hand out the room keys until she gave a ten-minute speech about the hotel. When she did start handing out the keys she stopped after two people and was answering questions about issues individual guests were having. Finally out of desperation several couples just grabbed the keys out of her hand and started passing them out.

After eating we came down to book a kayaking tour, Rosemary gave us attitude right away, telling anyone that she could how wonderful she was, and that "We were a way too stressed bunch." We explained defensively that this was due to the fact that in every city, the staff is not competent and explained the list of problems prior to arrival. Every city we arrived in had some problem. She claimed that she was the best employee with Holland America and we would not have these problems here. After being forced to listen to her self-promoting speech we booked our kayaking tour. We returned to our rooms and found our luggage sitting outside our rooms unsecured for anyone to take or rummage through.

The next morning we waited fifteen minutes for our shuttle to show up. It never arrived. Since it was 8am and Rosemary didn't start work until 11am the hotel staff was helpful in doing her job and found out who was the tour company. Grayline had never notified the hotel of the companies they were using so it took some time to call around. After finding the company, they informed me that Rosemary never called to confirm the tour. I was standing at the desk at booking time when she told me that she would call them back to confirm. Because of this incompetence we were unable to take this tour.

Later that day, when I asked for my refund, Rosemary never apologized and made several excuses. She said she never had to confirm before and that this was only the second time they used this company. I didn't want to hear her excuses; I wanted her to take responsibility for messing up the reservation. After explaining to her the previous day about the problems we have been having, I would have expected her to make sure that there were no problems and would have been there at 8am to make sure we got off ok.

It took me over fifteen minutes to get her to write me the credit voucher. She also refused to give me the bank copy of the credit card receipt, claiming she had entered it into her log and was required to put the paper work though even though the charge was never submitted to the bank. This has me worried that a charge will still show up. I could not get her to just stop talking and fill out the paperwork. She went on and on about how this has never happened to her before and continued to make excuses. Never once did she think it was her fault and take responsibility for her actions.

Later that day, she kept hounding me to ask, "Are you alright" in an almost patronizing tone/attitude. She was just making the problem worse. I finally had to raise my voice to

her and tell her to leave me alone. I also noticed that day she spent ten minutes gossiping with a hotel guest while another tour bus arrived. Not until another guest asked her if she should be outside greeting them did she jump up and run outside flustered.

The day we left Alyeska she again spent a good half hour chatting with guests, again claiming how wonderful she was and how she moved from Boston to become less stressed. I guess less stressed is less competent. Her ineptitude pretty much messed up our entire schedule for the rest of the land trip and several tours we wanted to take later in the trip could no longer be done. This due to the fact we had to re-arrange our schedule so we could kayak. In the end, we never did get to go kayaking. This is one of my great disappointments.

On a side note, a woman from another Holland America tour that was spending the day in Alyeska told us a story of a gentleman that had been looking forward for a very long time to a special day-long fishing trip in Anchorage. The short version of this story is that Holland America never called in the reservation and he was not able to go. I am sure he was crushed and very disappointed, as the only reason for this trip was to go on the fishing trip.

While waiting for our bus to leave Alyeska, I chatted with at least a dozen people who also had nothing nice to say about Rosemary. They all had the same opinion of her. She is incompetent, arrogant, and oblivious to her own ineptitude. She truly made for the low spot of our trip.

We also had luggage issues at this hotel. The night porter and desk staff told us to leave our luggage in the room, like we did at every other hotel. When I awoke and went down for breakfast, I noticed several rooms with luggage outside their door. When I returned from breakfast that luggage was gone and my luggage was still in my room. I called the front desk and was told that the luggage should be outside the room. They sent a porter back upstairs to get the forgotten luggage; several other rooms were in the same situation. I had a very long chat with the hotel manager about my problems and it was explained to me that they were going through some difficulties with Holland America and were working on correcting them. I was left with the impression that they had the same opinion of Rosemary as every person on cruise/tour 22 did.

There was only one issue from the cruise portion of this trip. This is not something that happened to me, but to another of our friends. Hopefully they have already written you a letter and you have addressed it. On page 87 of your 2003 tour book you will find the ship layout for the msRyndam. If you look at the red star under the "Public Room Names" entry, you will see the statement **"Concierge Lounge. In place of staterooms I-017, I-019, I-205 and I-207 on navigation deck, msRyndam and msStatendam feature concierge lounge for the exclusive use of suite guests."** I draw your attention to the use of the words "suite guests". Our traveling companions had made a special upgrade to A057 so that they could use the concierge lounge. This was one of the main reasons for the upgrade. When he arrived on the ship, he was told that he was not allowed to use the lounge, that only people in Deluxe Verandah Suites could use this. A Veranda

Suite is still a suite. Either your ship employee was mistaken in refusing access to a “**suite guest**” or your brochure is falsely advertising this service. During his stay, he felt humiliated at being told he was not welcome there. After talking to the manager on board the ship he was told there was nothing the manager could do and that it was an issue for the front office. I was shocked to hear that managers on your ship are not empowered to solve a customer’s problem. If this were my business and this was truly a service only to given to “**Deluxe Suite guests**” I would immediately have refunded his money between the Veranda Suite cabin category and the next one below that. This could have been done very quickly as a ship board credit and your guest would not leave the ship feeling humiliated, misled and under the impression they were ripped off.

It is really sad that our tour took us to one of the most beautiful places in the world and all the groups of travelers were talking about was how horrible the experience was at the McKinley Chalets and their encounter with Rosemary. I am sure I am not the only person on this tour that is sending you a letter.

I have just re-read my letter and am amazed that I have gone on now for seven pages. I do give the impression that this trip must have been all doom and gloom. I do not want you to have that impression. Both my wife and I had a wonderful time inspite of our problems. Our trip was amazing; we saw things that we could never have seen in other parts of the world. We met a lot of new and interesting people. Having never been on a cruise before, we had no idea what to expect and your staff made everyone feel welcome and at home. Please understand that I am writing you this letter for a number of reasons.

- 1) To inform you of the problems we encountered so that you may take action to remedy them for future guests.
- 2) To bring some closure to the issues we had.
- 3) To evaluate how Holland America and Grayline of Alaska respond to these issues, both in action and in writing me back with these resolutions.

This will weigh very heavily on how I bring closure to the stories I tell of my Alaskan adventure to my friends, family and travel agents, as well as if we choose to tour with Holland America again in the future.

In contrast to the few employees that are mentioned above, I also want to make a point of recognizing some employees that we met along the way. They worked very hard to make sure that our issues were resolved or that our stay was a pleasant one.

- 1) Angela in Fairbanks. This is the employee who was just starting her job. Although it was clear that she was very new to the workforce, she did make a point to make sure that our issues were resolved, even if she was not the one who solved them. She followed up with us to make sure we were taken care of. This was greatly appreciated and noted.
- 2) Peter in the Ocean Bar. He always greeted us no matter where he saw us on the ship. He remembered our names, and made a point to make us feel relaxed and welcome.
- 3) Mohamed our cabin steward. Even though we only met him once and waved hello in passing, he made a significant impact on our trip. It was amazing that whenever we left our cabin, he seemed to know when it was empty and came in to make up the bed, turn down the bed or bring us something we needed. It is important that we recognize the people who work behind the scenes but still make an impact on the quality of our stay.

If for any reason you would like to discuss this letter, I would be more than happy to. I can be reach in one of three ways.

- 1) email: steve@yourservice.com
- 2) phone: 858-627-9259
- 3) post: PO BOX 420015, San Diego, Ca 92142-0015

Also, I will be publishing a newsletter of our trip, both good and bad at <http://www.yourservice.com/steve/vacations> I would really like to have positive footnote to put on the site.

Thanks,

Steven Misrack