

Southeast Alaska



Windswept. Treeless. Permanently frozen. Not Southeast Alaska. This lush, green and wet region of Alaska, clinging by a thread to the rest of the state, stretches 540 miles from Icy Bay south to Portland Canal but only is 140 miles across at its widest point. The Panhandle is a slender piece of land, a rain forest, filled with glaciers, mountains and a thousand islands known as the Alexander Archipelago.

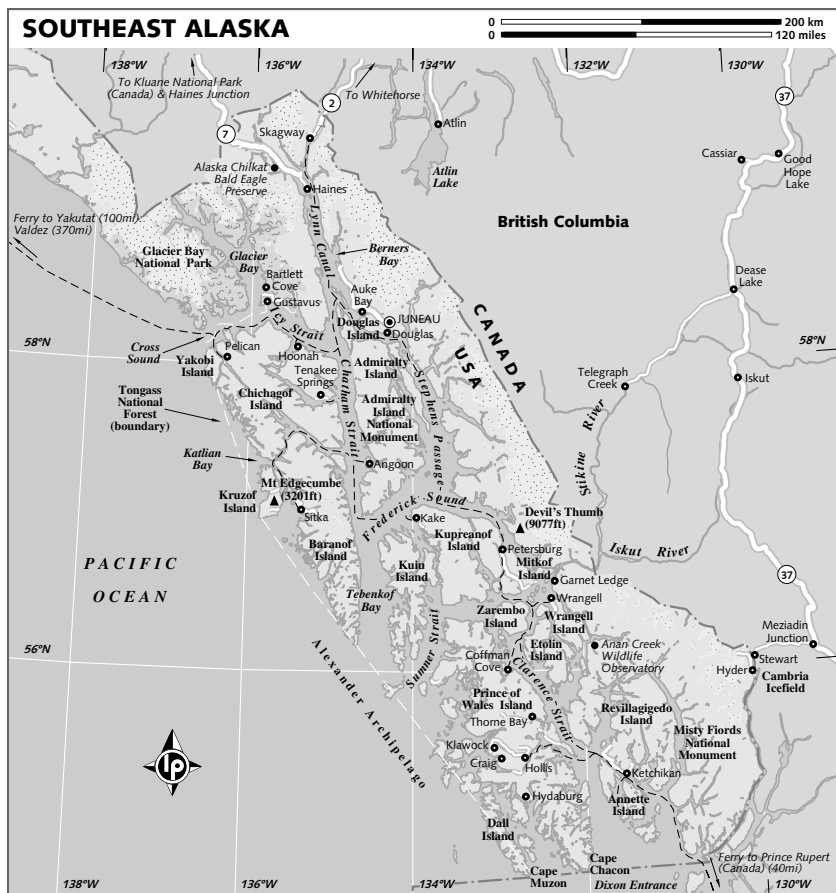
On public ferries or cruise ships you sail past rugged snowcapped mountains that rise steeply from the water to form sheersided fjords embellished by cascading waterfalls. Ice-blue glaciers descend from the highest peaks and fan out into valleys of dark green Sitka spruce before melting into waters filled with whales, sea lions, harbor seals and salmon.

The Southeast was once Alaska's heart and soul, and Juneau was not only the capital but the state's largest city. But WWII and the Alcan (Alaska Hwy) turned Anchorage and Fairbanks into the economic focal points of Alaska. Today Southeast is characterized by big trees and small towns. Each community here has its own history and character: from Norwegian-influenced Petersburg to Russian-tinted Sitka. You can feel the gold fever in Skagway, see almost a dozen glaciers near Juneau or go to the harbor in Haines and find a fishing boat selling live Dungeness crabs. Each town is unique and none of them should be bypassed.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Easiest bear watching** (p125) – after zipping down a mountain, check out the bears at Ketchikan's Herring Creek
- **Best small museum** (p138) – two presidents, Hollywood and Wyatt Earp – find out who else passed through town at the Wrangell Museum
- **Best community bath** (p158) – meet everybody in Tenakee Springs at the community hot springs bathhouse
- **Most fun on ice** (p174) – strap on the crampons and take a hike across Juneau's Mendenhall Glacier
- **Best USFS Cabin** (p191) – the Laughton Glacier Cabin, near Skagway, is simple and small, the glacier around the corner is anything but





Climate

The Southeast has Alaska's most mild climate. Greatly affected by warm ocean currents, the region offers warm summer temperatures averaging 69°F, with an occasional heat wave that sends temperatures to 80°F. The winters are equally mild, and subzero days are rare. Residents, who have learned to live with an annual rainfall of 60in to 200in, call the frequent rain 'liquid sunshine.' The heavy precipitation creates the dense, lush rain forests and numerous waterfalls most travelers come to cherish.

History

Petroglyphs lying along the shoreline in Wrangell, Petersburg and other locations indicate human habitation in Southeast Alaska

dates back to at least 8000 to 10,000 years. The Russians arrived in 1741, entered Sitka Sound and sent two longboats ashore in search of fresh water. The boats never returned, and the Russians wisely departed.

What the unfortunate shore party encountered were members of Tlingit tribes, who over time had developed the most advanced culture of any group of Alaska Natives. The Tlingits were still there in 1799 when the Russians returned and established the Southeast's first nonindigenous settlement. Aleksandr Baranov built a Russian fort near the present ferry terminal to continue the rich sea-otter fur trade. He was in Kodiak three years later when Tlingits, armed with guns from British and American traders, overwhelmed the fort,