

# Destination Alaska

*The seven kayakers following the Savonoski Loop in Katmai National Park were settled in for the evening, sipping mugs of hot tea, when across the Grosvenor River a brown bear appeared. It was a young male, maybe 200lb, 300lb tops. He followed the bank for a short spell and then splashed across the river and came within 30yd of their four Kleppers, folding kayaks composed of a light wooden frame and a rubberized canvas hull that a brown bear, even a small one, could mangle in minutes. The kayakers stood in unison, grabbed pots and pans and banged them while chanting 'hey bear, whoa bear!' For a brief moment everybody stared nervously at each other, acknowledging the other's existence, then the young bear decided that whatever the kayakers were selling, he didn't want and scrambled off into the woods.*

## FAST FACTS

Population: 676,987

Gross domestic product:  
\$43.8 billion

Highest point: Mt  
McKinley (20,320ft)

Land mass: 586,400  
sq miles

Number of Rhode Islands  
that could fit into Alaska:  
425

Proportion of Alaska that  
lies within the Arctic  
Circle: 30%

Wild salmon harvested  
in Alaska: 137 million  
pounds or 90% of the  
USA's total

Most cruise ship pas-  
sengers: Juneau (985,000  
annually)

Days without the sun in  
Barrow: 84

Distance from Russia:  
55 miles

Alaska is where human beings stand on an equal footing with nature. Nowhere else in the USA is there such an undeveloped, unpopulated and untrampled place.

Tourists who make the long journey north solely to discover the unspoiled character of this 'final frontier' are still often stunned by the grandeur of what they see. There are mountains, glaciers and rivers in other parts of North America, but few are on the same scale as those in Alaska. This state has the third longest river in the USA, 17 of the country's 20 highest peaks and 5000 glaciers, including one larger than Switzerland. The Arctic winters are one long night and Arctic summers one long day. In Alaska, there are king crabs that measure 3ft from claw to claw, brown bears that stand over 12ft tall, farmers who grow 90lb cabbages and glaciers that discharge icebergs the size of small houses.

In other states protests are staged to save a wetland or a woodlot or a park. In Alaska the battleground is an entire ecosystem. At almost 20 million acres, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) is the size of South Carolina, encompassing 18 major rivers and the greatest variety of plant and animal life – including 36 species of land mammals – of any conservation area in the circumpolar north.

The battle over drilling for oil in the ANWR has been raging since the 1980s, but has intensified with the recent price surge at the pump. With gas breaking \$4 a gallon at one point in 2008, the ANWR again took center stage as one of the most contentious issues hovering over Alaska. The question of drilling not only pits environmentalists against free-market conservatives but Alaskans against Outsiders and even Native tribes against each other. The sudden rise in the price of other resources – copper, gold, zinc and silver to name but a few – has had a similar effect, with a marked increase of mining projects around the state delving into nature in an effort to retrieve what is needed elsewhere.

Many Alaskans moved here, or simply stayed here at the end of their trip, because of Alaska's overwhelming beauty. But in choosing to reside here they have to make a living in a place where there is little farming and even less industrial manufacturing. Hovering near 7%, Alaska's unemployment rate is one of the highest in the country. This is why the vast majority of Alaskans are in favor of opening the ANWR to the oil industry and building a natural gas pipeline across the state, running south from the vast deposits in the North Slope. Both schemes represent jobs, an economic boom, and a new source of revenue in a place where oil royalties account for more than 80% of the state treasury.

The burden of unemployment also accounts for why the majority of Alaskans are in favor of their beleaguered 'bridges to nowhere' – huge, costly spans across the Knik Arm north of Anchorage and from Ketchikan to the lightly populated Gravina Island in the Southeast. To the rest of the country these projects represent pork-barrel politicking (spending designed to win votes) at its worst, but to locals they are avenues to expansion, offering flat land on which to farm, develop light industries and build affordable housing.

New road construction is also a contentious issue within the state, particularly the ongoing saga of building a 51-mile road north from Juneau to Skagway, where roads connect to Canada and eventually to the Alaska Hwy. The price tag stands at \$400 million – a small price to pay, say many Alaskans, to help an isolated city where declines in logging and fishing have driven workers away and where the proposal to move the state capital to a more central location is almost constantly under consideration. But moving the capital is not the heart of the issue – it's really about expansion and confronting nature in a state where less than 1% of the land is developed. It's about making a year-round living, even when the cruise ships aren't in port.

Alaskans are acutely aware of the issues, both local and global, that they face. They are aware that their state is at a historic crossroad. Few question global warming in Alaska. Melting glaciers, grasshoppers in the Mat-Su Valley and Native villages slipping into the sea because of the disappearance of Arctic ice quickly ends any debate about climate change in the Far North. Alaska is known for its abundance of wildlife, yet in 2008 the polar bear was listed as a threatened species by the US Department of the Interior. The numbers of Cook Inlet beluga whales have decreased so dramatically in recent years that they are being considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act, and the king salmon run was so weak up the Yukon River in 2008 that even residents with subsistence rights were restricted from filling their quotas.

Alaskans also realize they face a changing of the guard in Washington DC. They may have disdain for the nation's capital, seeing it as an Outsider intruder, but the reality is they have reaped the benefits of pork-barrel funding thanks to their elder statesmen, Congressman Don Young and former US Senator Ted Stevens. Stevens is already gone, voted out in late 2008, and Young is also climbing in age. Stevens was found guilty of political misdeeds and Young is also under federal investigation. It's obvious in Alaska that new faces are just around the corner and when they arrive the state's time at the funding trough may be sharply limited.

In the end, however, Alaskans will prevail. They are a hardworking breed, ingenious at surviving in one of the harshest climates in the world. Rugged and individual, they can endure the coldest winters, the worst earthquakes and even summers when the rivers aren't choking with salmon. They will prevail because, like every tourist who steps off the boat, they also have been overwhelmed by the nature they've witnessed and, affected strongly by this incredible land, they have chosen to stay.

# Getting Started

You can't see all of Alaska in a summer and you can't plan an Alaskan trip in a week. This is no quickie getaway. For most travelers the 49th state is a big land that's far away. Its size means visitors need to focus on the regions that interest them the most, while its short, but busy, summer season almost demands advance planning. The less time and the tighter the budget you have, the more you'll want to plan the trip and have reservations in place when you arrive. It's easy to travel in Alaska but not at the last minute.

## WHEN TO GO

The traditional season for heading to Alaska is June through August when the weather is at its best, the days are long and everybody – tourists and locals alike – are outside playing. Summers in Alaska are a beautiful mixture of long days and short nights, climaxing on summer solstice (June 21) when Anchorage enjoys more than 19 hours of sunlight and Fairbanks almost 22 hours. Along with the sunshine, the average summer temperatures in the Interior range from 55°F to 75°F, with a brief period in July to August when they top 80°F or even 90°F. Anchorage averages 60°F to 70°F in the summer while the Southeast and Prince William Sound are cooler and wetter. The Bush, north of the Arctic Circle, is cool for most of the summer, with temperatures around 45°F.

See climate charts (p423) for more information.

July and August are also the period of high prices, 'No Vacancy' signs and a Disneyland-like atmosphere at the entrance of Denali National Park. Consider beginning or ending your trip during the shoulder seasons of May or September. Alpine trails are still snow-covered in May and the Southeast can be a rainy place in late September, but the demand for lodging is down, most outdoor activities are still possible and prices are easier to stomach.

Arriving in Alaska in April is possible in the Southeast and the Kenai Peninsula, but much of the state will be enduring spring breakup – when warm weather 'breaks up' ice – a time of slush and mud. Stay during October and you're guaranteed rain most of the time in the Southeast and Southcentral regions and snow in the Interior and Fairbanks. Arriving in Alaska during the winter and traveling outside the major cities is possible but requires special planning as many of the accommodations, forms of transportation and attractions will either be closed or greatly reduced. For information on what is open during the winter months see the **Alaska Travel Industry Association** ([www.winterinalaska.com](http://www.winterinalaska.com)).

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Protection – a hat, a fleece and rain gear – against Alaska's climate (p423).
- Cell phone – network coverage is amazing, even in the remote corners of Alaska (p430).
- Hiking equipment – a pack, boots, water bottle, etc. Avoid having to purchase this equipment at exorbitant Alaskan prices.
- Checking the visa situation, as US entrance requirements have changed dramatically in recent years (p431).
- Casual clothes – the number of upscale restaurants with a dress code is limited to a handful in Anchorage. Leave the black tie at home.
- Extra cash and time to enjoy a great outdoor adventure.

## COSTS & MONEY

Alaska is traditionally known for having the highest cost of living in the country due in the most part to the high cost of fuel needed to transport everything long distances north and the high cost of labor. It's one thing to live in Alaska – it's another to travel there. Because tourism in Alaska is basically a three-month season, the summer prices are inflated to cover the other nine months when many restaurants and motels are barely scraping by.

There is nothing you can do about the cost of fuel, so if you're on a tight budget, try to avoid the labor cost. Use public transport, stay in campgrounds or hostels and enjoy your favorite brew around a campfire at night. Restaurants, bars, hotels and taxi companies, with their inflated peak-season prices, will quickly drain your funds. A rule of thumb for Alaskan prices is that they're most affordable in Anchorage and Fairbanks, and increase the further you are from these cities. The Southeast is generally cheaper than the Interior, and places like Haines are a bargain in terms of Alaskan tourism. When traveling in the Bush be prepared for anything, even \$200-a-night rooms with paper-thin walls and cigarette burns in the carpet.

A budget traveler who camps and stays in hostels, cooks two meals a day and participates in low-cost activities such as hiking can travel in Alaska for \$60 to \$70 a day. A family of four, staying in motels, eating twice a day in restaurants and renting a car, should expect daily expenses of \$300 or higher. Because they provide your transportation, lodging and food, large cruise ships are often a bargain in Alaskan travel, particularly for families. For more money-saving tips with the kids see the Alaska for Families chapter (p39). At the other end of the travel spectrum are upscale lodges and remote wilderness camps (p24) where daily expenses could be \$400 to \$500 per person for accommodations, meals and activities.

## TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

The Alaskan environment is delicate and to protect it we as tourists need to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy this incredible land without adversely impacting its natural wonders or Native culture. Global warming in particular has affected Alaska greater than any other region of the USA, so reducing your carbon footprint is critical to this state and the Arctic as a whole. This includes bypassing a rental vehicle when there is public transportation, not always an easy thing to do in Alaska. In roadless areas like the Southeast, travel on the Alaska Marine Hwy leaves a far smaller footprint than if two or three people charter a bush plane to the same destination.

In many secluded communities trash is a costly concern and a major headache, so it's imperative that travelers try to reduce their own. Avoid buying bottled water if at all possible, simply refill at the tap, and say no to plastic bags at supermarkets as they often end up in the trees on the edge of town. In parks and campgrounds take your trash out with you, even if there's a litter barrel nearby.

Be conscious of the wilderness and wildlife. Practice low-impact camping and hiking, and when traveling beyond the road do so in small numbers. Choose outfitters and guides that do the same, particularly those specializing in bear watching. Mobs of people watching bears at close range is never a healthy thing for the bruins.

Support Native culture and the arts. Avoid purchasing illegal ivory or other crafts by always looking for the Silver Hand symbol for authenticity (p429). Patronize the lodges, tours and other businesses that are eco-friendly, of which many are highlighted in the regional chapters. Organizations to help you travel responsibly include:

### HIGH COST OF FUEL

The spiraling cost of oil in 2008 had a profound effect on Alaskan tourism. Many tour operators had already set their ticket prices when oil broke \$140 a barrel and were expected to be forced to raise them considerably in 2009 to make up for the losses. Also be prepared for fuel surcharges, an additional fee to the published fare. In 2008 some were as high as 41%.

### HOW MUCH?

Mountain bike rental  
\$25-35 per day

Two-hour raft trip \$70-80

One-hour flightseeing  
tour \$200

1lb of king crab \$15-20

Whale watching cruise  
\$130

# TOP PICKS



## Wildlife Viewing Spots

For many, the highlight of a trip to Alaska is the wildlife. Here are the best places to see something wild.

- Brooks Falls (Katmai National Park, p312) Bears, bears and more brown bears!
- Denali Park Rd (Denali National Park, p334) Mountain sheep, moose, caribou and brown bears
- St Paul Island (Pribilof Islands, p322) Seabirds and fur seals
- Kenai Fjords National Park (Seward, p266) Whales, sea lions and seals
- Expedition Park (Dutch Harbor, p319) Bald eagles
- Fish Creek Bridge (Hyder, p133) Black and brown bears
- Arctic Ocean (Barrow, p419) Polar bears
- Stephens Passage (Juneau, p166) Hump-back whales
- Fort Abercrombie State Historical Park (Kodiak, p304) Tidal pool marine life
- Ship Creek (Anchorage p202, or practically any stream in July) Salmon

## Only in Alaska

Welcome to Alaska! Only in this unusual state can you...

- Pan for gold on a beach (Nome, p405)
- Walk on a glacier without first climbing a mountain (Matanuska Glacier, p367)
- Zipline down a mountain to a creek full of bears feasting on salmon (Ketchikan, p126)
- Play golf at 2am (Fairbanks, p386)
- Hook a 200lb halibut (Homer, p285)
- Take a sled-dog ride across an ice field (Juneau, p167)
- See a radish the size of a softball (Palmer, p228)
- Tan in the midnight sun (Barrow, p417)

## Best Eco-Friendly Wilderness Lodges

These remote resorts are not cheap but their settings are truly on the edge of the wilderness.

- Sadie Cove Wilderness Lodge – kayaks and hot tubs in Kachemak Bay (p294)
- Camp Denali – at the end of the road in Denali National Park (p341)
- Hallo Bay Bear Camp – watching bears on the Katmai coast (p313)
- Island Lodge – an island retreat in the middle of Lake Clark National Park (p315)
- Tolovana Hot Springs – rustic cabins and hot springs reached by an 11-mile hike (p397)

**Alaska BnBscape** ([www.bnbscape.com/alaska/alaska.htm](http://www.bnbscape.com/alaska/alaska.htm)) An online guide to eco-friendly B&Bs and inns.

**Alaska Conservation Solutions** ([www.alaskaconservationsolutions.com](http://www.alaskaconservationsolutions.com)) Dedicated to drawing attention to the devastating consequences of global warming in Alaska, this site includes tips on being an 'Alaska Carbon Reducer' when traveling.

**Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism Association** ([www.awrta.org](http://www.awrta.org)) Tour companies and outfitters committed to responsible tourism and minimizing visitor impact.

**Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) Has an 'eco-directory' that lets you search for green lodges and tour operators in Alaska as well as around the world.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Alaska's wild nature has inspired a lot of authors throughout the years, both homegrown and international.

*Coming into the Country* (1977) by John McPhee is arguably the best portrait of Alaska ever written. McPhee shifts from wilderness settings to the urban environment, from Eagle to Juneau, as he follows Alaska's emergence into statehood during the 1970s. A timeless classic.

A National Book Award winner, *Arctic Dreams* (2001) is a compelling look at the Far North and author Barry Lopez' personal journey to a land of stunted trees and endless days.

Jon Krakauer's bestseller *Into the Wild* (1997) recounts why a young man from a well-to-do family abandons civilization and walks alone into the Denali wilderness. The book is as much about what he was seeking as it is about why he died, and you might as well read it – now that the movie is out, everybody else is!

*One Man's Wilderness: An Alaskan Odyssey* (1999) by Sam Keith chronicles Dick Proenneke's dream of building a cabin in the wilderness near Lake Clark in 1968 and why he stayed there to become a self-sufficient hermit for 31 years. Alaskans consider this a far more interesting read than Krakauer's tale.

*Ordinary Wolves* (2005) is the critically acclaimed novel by Seth Kantner. Born and raised in Alaska's Interior, Kantner draws on personal experience to weave a tale about a boy growing up white in Bush Alaska and his struggle to be accepted by the village Iñupiat. As true an account of village life as there is.

Spike Walker details the rich rewards – a deckhand could earn \$100,000 in four months – and high risks of king crabbing in the Bering Sea during the boom years of the 1980s in *Working on the Edge* (1993).

From Tlingit myths and Robert Service poetry to Art Davison's account of climbing Mt McKinley in the winter, *The Last New Land: Stories of Alaska Past and Present* (1996) is a comprehensive anthology of writings on the Far North.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Highly computer literate and extremely remote, Alaska was made for the internet.

**Alaska Magazine** ([www.alaskamagazine.com](http://www.alaskamagazine.com)) The online edition of this statewide magazine is loaded with articles on Alaska and links for travelers.

**Alaska Public Lands Information Centers** ([www.nps.gov/aplic/center](http://www.nps.gov/aplic/center)) Before you hit the trail, head here for information on national parks, state parks and other public land.

**Alaska Travel Industry Association** ([www.travelalaska.com](http://www.travelalaska.com)) The official tourism marketing arm for the state has its vacation planner online along with listings of B&Bs, motels, tours and more.

**Explore North** ([www.explorenorth.com](http://www.explorenorth.com)) A site dedicated to Alaska and the circumpolar north with articles, travel tips and links to lodges and operators.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Travel news and summaries, the Thorn Tree bulletin board and links to more web resources.

# Events Calendar

Alaskan summers are short so locals pack them with festivals and celebrations. Two of the liveliest are Independence Day and summer solstice. Stop in the small towns (Skagway, McCarthy, Eagle) on July 4 for the best festivals and head as far north as you can on June 21 to celebrate the longest day of the year.

## APRIL & MAY

**GARNET FESTIVAL** late Apr  
Celebrate the arrival of spring in Wrangell with the largest springtime concentration of bald eagles in North America ([www.wrangellchamber.org](http://www.wrangellchamber.org); p141).

**ALASKA FOLK FESTIVAL** mid-Apr  
Musicians from across Alaska and the Yukon descend on Juneau for a week of music and dancing. Who cares if it rains every day? ([www.akfolkfest.org](http://www.akfolkfest.org); p168)

**COPPER RIVER DELTA SHOREBIRD FESTIVAL** early May  
Birds and birders invade Cordova for some of the greatest migrations in Alaska ([www.cordovachamber.com](http://www.cordovachamber.com)).

**KACHEMAK BAY SHOREBIRD FESTIVAL** early May  
If the birders aren't gathering in Cordova then they're nesting in Homer, enjoying workshops, field trips and birding presentations ([www.homer.alaska.org](http://www.homer.alaska.org)).

**LITTLE NORWAY FESTIVAL** mid-May  
Be a Viking for a day in Petersburg and feast on seafood at night at one of Southeast Alaska's oldest festivals ([www.petersburg.org](http://www.petersburg.org); p147).

**JUNEAU JAZZ & CLASSICS** mid-May  
Jazz and blues fills the air for 10 days in Alaska's beautiful capital city ([www.jazzandclassics.org](http://www.jazzandclassics.org); p168).

**KODIAK CRAB FESTIVAL** late May  
Cheer on the survival-suit racers then grab a plate and dig into all the king crab you can eat ([www.kodiak.org](http://www.kodiak.org); p306).

## JUNE

**SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL** throughout Jun  
Chamber music, concerts and lots of culture by the sea in beautiful Sitka. Book tickets in advance ([www.sitkamusicfestival.org](http://www.sitkamusicfestival.org); p155).

**COLONY DAYS** mid-Jun  
A parade and other activities, including a bed race down Main St, in honor of the first farmers arriving in Palmer ([www.palmerchamber.org](http://www.palmerchamber.org)).

**MOOSE PASS SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL** near Jun 21  
Small-town fun and games, not to mention a short parade, in the Kenai Peninsula ([www.moosepass.net](http://www.moosepass.net); p258).

**MIDNIGHT SUN FESTIVAL** Jun 21  
Celebrate summer solstice in Fairbanks with music from 40 bands on three stages, the Yukon 800 Power Boat Races and a baseball game that starts at midnight but doesn't need any lights ([www.explorefairbanks.com](http://www.explorefairbanks.com)).

**MAYOR'S MIDNIGHT SUN MARATHON** Jun 21  
On the longest day of the year there's more than enough time to join 3500 other runners for a 26.2-mile race in and around Anchorage ([www.mayorsmarathon.com](http://www.mayorsmarathon.com)).

**MIDNIGHT SUN FESTIVAL** near Jun 21  
With 22-hour days, this Nome festival can pack a lot in: a parade, street dance, BBQ chicken feed, softball tournament and Folk Fest, among other activities ([www.nomealaska.org](http://www.nomealaska.org)).

**NALUKATAQ (WHALING FESTIVAL)** late Jun  
Join Barrow residents to celebrate another successful whaling season with dancing, blanket tosses and a taste of *muktuk* (whale blubber) ([www.cityofbarrow.org](http://www.cityofbarrow.org); p419).

**POLAR BEAR SWIM** late Jun  
The water's fine in Nome if the frozen Bering Sea ice has broken up by then! Submersion of the entire body earns you a certificate you can hang on the wall ([www.nomealaska.org](http://www.nomealaska.org)).

**GOLD RUSH DAYS** late Jun

A family affair with logging events, mining competition and a whole lot food vendors ([www.traveljuneau.com](http://www.traveljuneau.com); p168).

**JULY****INDEPENDENCE DAY PARADE** Jul 4

Soapy Smith, Alaska's most lovable scoundrel, rode at the head of Skagway's first parade in 1898, and this small town has been staging a great one ever since ([www.skagway.com](http://www.skagway.com); p193).

**MT MARATHON RACE** Jul 4

An exhausting 3.1-mile run up a 3022ft-high peak. The record is around 43 minutes (p264).

**NENANA RIVER WILDWATER FESTIVAL** mid-Jul

Two days of kayak and raft races through the whitewater that flows past Denali National Park ([www.nenanawildwater.org](http://www.nenanawildwater.org)).

**BEAR PAW FESTIVAL** mid-Jul

Home of the Slippery Salmon Olympics, where teams of two race with a dead fish through Eagle River ([www.cer.org](http://www.cer.org)).

**GOLDEN DAYS** mid-Jul

A midsummer festival when Fairbanks cheers on the hairiest legs and the biggest moustaches in town ([www.explorefairbanks.com](http://www.explorefairbanks.com); p386).

**MOOSE DROPPING FESTIVAL** mid-Jul

Talkeetna is invaded by Mountain Mothers to the delight of men everywhere and everybody takes a turn tossing a moose nugget ([www.talkeetna-chamber.org](http://www.talkeetna-chamber.org)).

**SOUTHEAST ALASKA STATE FAIR** late Jul

The Fiddler Contest is lively and the Most Lovable Dog Competition is cute but by all means don't miss the pig races ([www.seakfair.org](http://www.seakfair.org); p184).

**AUGUST****BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL** early Aug

A celebration of art, food, songs and foot races of Ketchikan's favorite wild berry ([www.visit-ketchikan.com](http://www.visit-ketchikan.com); p127).

**TALKEETNA BLUEGRASS & MUSIC FESTIVAL** early Aug

The best campout music festival in Alaska, when more than 30 bluegrass bands jam for 20 hours ([www.talkeetnabluegrass.com](http://www.talkeetnabluegrass.com)).

**TANANA VALLEY FAIR** early Aug

Nine days of big veggies, midway rides and a truck mud bog competition in Fairbanks ([www.tananavalleyfair.org](http://www.tananavalleyfair.org)).

**FIRE TIRE FESTIVAL** early Aug

Grab your mountain bike and ride the road to McCarthy. Lots of families ride the scenic, 60-mile route ([www.artcticbike.org](http://www.artcticbike.org)).

**GOLD RUSH DAYS** early Aug

Five days of bed races, dances and fish feeds in Valdez. Oh, and a little gold rush history, too ([www.valdezalaska.org](http://www.valdezalaska.org)).

**ALASKA STATE FAIR** late Aug

Palmer's Showcase for 100lb cabbages and the best Spam recipes in the state ([www.alaskastatefair.org](http://www.alaskastatefair.org); p228).

**SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER****KODIAK STATE FAIR & RODEO** Labor Day

Breakin' broncos and wrestling steers in Kodiak. For the noncowboys there are pie-eating and halibut-cleaning contests ([www.kodiak.org](http://www.kodiak.org); p306).

**SEWARD MUSIC & ARTS FESTIVAL** late Sep

Artists and more than 20 musical acts and theatrical companies gather on the shores of Resurrection Bay in Seward ([www.sewardak.org](http://www.sewardak.org); p264).

**BLUEBERRY BASH** late Sep

Alaska's largest wild blueberries are found in Unalaska, which is why this bake-off and festival sends everybody home with blue teeth and purple tongues ([www.unalaska.info](http://www.unalaska.info)).

**GREAT ALASKA BEER TRAIN** early Oct

All aboard! The *Microbrew Express* is a special run of the Alaska Railroad from Anchorage to Portage loaded with happy passengers sipping the best beer made in Alaska ([www.alaskarailroad.com](http://www.alaskarailroad.com)).

**ALASKA DAY CELEBRATION** mid-Oct

Sitka dresses the part in celebrating the actual transfer ceremony when the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867 ([www.sitka.org](http://www.sitka.org); p155).

**NOVEMBER****WHALEFEST!** early Nov

Whales galore in Sitka, so many you don't even need a boat to view them ([www.sitkawhalefest.org](http://www.sitkawhalefest.org); p155).

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE GREAT ALCAN

One to Two Months

The Alcan is the wilderness version of Route 66, a classic American road trip. Mile 1 of the Alaska Hwy is Dawson Creek and it's a 1390-mile, five-day drive to **Delta Junction** (p358). Collect your certificate for having survived the Alcan and push on to **Fairbanks** (p378). Recover with a soak in **Chena Hot Springs** (p393).

Follow the George Parks Hwy south for wildlife watching at **Denali National Park** (p327), and a day at Talkeetna for a flightseeing tour of **Mt McKinley** (p348). Treat yourself to a fine meal in **Anchorage** (p211) and check out the **Anchorage Museum of History & Art** (p202).

Go to Whittier to board the **Alaska Marine Highway ferry** (p36) for a two-day cruise to **Juneau** (p160). See salmon and bears at **Mendenhall Glacier** (p174) and climb **Mt Roberts** (p165). Jump back on the ferry to reach beautiful **Sitka** (p149) and then on to Ketchikan for a boat tour of the stunning **Misty Fiords National Monument** (p107). Finally head to Bellingham, WA, to end an odyssey that involved 2000 miles on the road and seven days on the ferry.

The great wilderness road trip since the 1950s: driving to Alaska. It's almost 2000 miles on the road beginning with the Alcan in Canada and then seven days on the Alaska Marine Highway ferry. In between lies a whole lot of spectacular scenery.



## CRUISING SOUTHEAST ALASKA

Two Weeks

This is an easy-to-plan trip to a scenic region of Alaska, although you should reserve space on the **Alaska Marine Highway ferry** (p36) if you want a cabin. Board the ferry in Bellingham, WA, and enjoy the coastal scenery for a couple of days before disembarking for two days at **Ketchikan** (p121). If it's not raining spend a day climbing **Deer Mountain** (p125) and enjoy lunch on the peak with panoramic views of the Inside Passage. Head out to **Totem Bight State Park** (p131) to see totems and a colorful community house.

Catch the ferry to **Wrangell** (p137) and take a wild jet-boat tour up the **Stikine River** (p140), North America's fastest navigable river. Continue to Sitka on the ferry for an afternoon at **Sitka National Historical Park** (p152) and another on a **whale watching cruise** (p154).

Head to Juneau and sign up for a walk across the beautiful ice of **Mendenhall Glacier** (p174). Top that off the next day by climbing Mt Roberts and then having a beer (or two) before taking the **Mt Roberts tramway** (p163) back to the city. In the evening enjoy one of the city's **salmon bakes** (p169).

Climb aboard the high-speed catamaran, **MV Fairweather** (p173), for two days in Skagway, the historic start of the Klondike Gold Rush. Board the **White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad** (p192) for a day trip to Lake Bennett and in the evening catch the rollicking **Days of '98 Show** (p195). Backtrack to Juneau and spend your final day flying through the rainforest like an eagle on one of the city's two **ziplines** (p167). Fly home from Juneau or extend your trip and take the state ferry back.



Spent too much time behind the wheel? Hop on a ferry in Bellingham and cruise through the most interesting slice of Alaska, the practically road-less Southeast. A vehicle is not needed, but boots are a necessity as there are great trails at every port.

## AN ALASKAN FAMILY ADVENTURE

**Two Weeks**

Cruising can be an affordable way for a family to see a watery chunk of Alaska. Combine shipboard life with an overland extension that you've plotted yourself and the trip is even more satisfying, as every day isn't spent with the cruise-ship group.

Fly to Fairbanks from Anchorage and take in some great family sights such as **Pioneer Park** (p382).

Hop on the **Alaska Railroad** (p441), because kids love trains, the following morning for Denali National Park and visit the **Murie Science & Learning Center** (p331) at the park entrance. Put aside another day to take the **shuttle bus** (p332) to look for wildlife along Park Rd. Hop back on the Alaska Railroad for Anchorage and spend a day in Alaska's largest city at the **Alaska Zoo** (p207) or hiking **Flattop Mountain** (p206).

Jump on the Alaska Railroad one last time and head for Whittier. Book a seven-day **cruise** (p35) that begins in Whittier and ends in Vancouver or Seattle. Depending when the ship departs, you might have time for a half-day trip with **Prince William Sound Cruises & Tour** (p251) to see marine wildlife and watch Surprise Glacier discharging huge icebergs.

Board your cruise ship for Southeast Alaska. The ports of call differ slightly from one vessel to the next, but almost all of them stop at Skagway, Juneau and Ketchikan. In Skagway your kids will enjoy a trip to **Liarsville Gold Rush Trail Camp** (p193), where they can try their hands at panning for gold. In Juneau head to **Macaulay Salmon Hatchery** (p167) for seawater aquariums, touch tanks and viewing windows that allow visitors to see thousands of salmon spawning. In Ketchikan, splurge on the **Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour** (p127) to watch a commercial fishing crew catch giant king crabs.

Take your family on a wild Alaskan adventure by combining the Alaska Railroad with a cruise-ship jaunt. Stop at Denali National Park and hike Flattop Mountain. On the cruise, check out the gold rush days in Skagway and spawning salmon in Juneau.



## RV SOUTHCENTRAL

10 Days

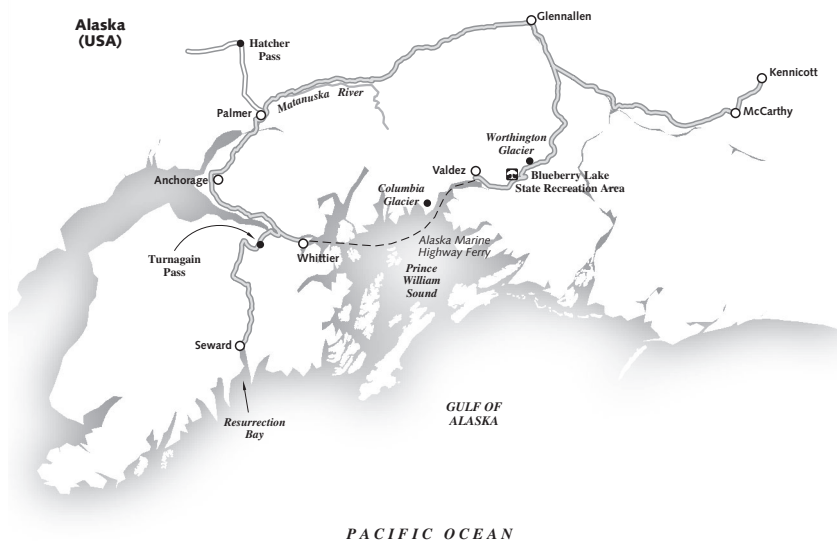
This trip could easily be done in a rental vehicle but Alaska is the dream of every RVer and you can be a road hog even if you don't own one. Fly into **Anchorage** (p198) and rent a recreation vehicle (RV) for 10 days (make sure you book well in advance). Stop at one of the city's large supermarkets, pack your RV with groceries and the local brew and then beat it out of town.

Head 45 miles north and spend the afternoon exploring **Hatcher Pass** (p230) and pitch camp in **Palmer** (p226). Follow the Glenn Hwy east, stopping to go on a wild raft trip down the **Matanuska River** (p367) complete with Class IV rapids. Spend the night at the first state campground that appeals to you before reaching **Glennallen** (p365).

Travel south on the Richardson Hwy and follow the McCarthy Rd east to the Kennicott River, 127 miles from Glennallen. Spend the next day exploring the quaint village of McCarthy and the amazing mining ruins at **Kennicott** (p371). Return to Richardson Hwy and head south. Check out **Worthington Glacier** (p374) and then spend the night camping in the alps at **Blueberry Lake State Recreation Site** (p375).

Continue west into Valdez and stay an extra day to splurge on a **Columbia Glacier cruise** (p238). Load your RV on the **Alaska Marine Highway ferry** (reserve this in advance; p240) and sail across Prince William Sound to **Whittier** (p247). On the same day drive 90 miles south to Seward, passing through scenic Turnagain Pass. Perhaps stay two days in **Seward** (p259); book a halibut charter or kayak in Resurrection Bay, but on the afternoon of the second day hightail it back to **Anchorage** (127 miles; p198) to turn in the RV before the dealer closes.

**Be a road hog!**  
Rent an RV in Anchorage and tackle this 650-mile drive in 10 days. Along the way explore the alpine mining ruins in Hatcher Pass, cruise past Columbia Glacier on a state ferry and hook a halibut in Seward.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### ALASKA RAILROADING

Alaska doesn't have a lot of railroads, but those it does have pass through some of the most amazing scenery in the country. For history buffs, the **White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad** (p192) is a must on any itinerary. The narrow-gauge line was built in 1900 during the height of the Klondike Gold Rush, putting the Chilkoot Trail out of business. From Skagway the train climbs steeply to 2885ft through the mountains until it reaches White Pass and then chugs along to serene Lake Bennett.

The most popular ticket is the Alaska Railroad's **Denali Star Train** (p441) from Anchorage to Fairbanks, stopping at Denali National Park along the way. But board the **Coastal Classic Train** (p441) for the most scenic rail route – the 114-mile run from Anchorage to Seward. The train ride begins by skirting Turnagain Arm and then climbs an alpine pass and comes within view of three glaciers before reaching Seward on Resurrection Bay.

For a uniquely Alaskan experience, join the locals on the Alaska Railroad's Hurricane Turn in **Talkeetna** (p350). This small train offers one of the country's last flag-stop services as it journeys through the Susitna River wilderness to Hurricane. Or hop on the **Great Alaska Beer Train** (p27) in early October for a special one-day run from Anchorage to Portage that is loaded with Alaskan microbrews and happy passengers.



### GOLD FEVER

Alaska is nothing if not wild-eyed miners bent over an icy stream desperately swirling a large pan in search of instant wealth. And you can join in.

The best place to catch gold fever is on Nome's **Golden Sands Beach** (p405). It's open to recreational mining and every summer dozens of miners set up camp and use sluice boxes and pans to pull gold flakes from the sand. You can stroll the beach, talk to them and see their vials of dust. Nearby is one of the many dredges in the area.

There are also areas designated for recreational mining adjacent to the north end of the **Resurrection Trail** (p256) in the Kenai Peninsula and **Fairbanks** (p385). To inspect gold nuggets firsthand, head to the Gallery of Alaska at Fairbanks' **University of Alaska Museum** (p383). To feel the pain that prospectors endured to find gold, hike the **Chilkoot Trail** (p91) from Skagway, the first step for thousands in 1898 during the Klondike Gold Rush.

For a lesson on panning techniques visit the **Indian Valley Mine** (p218) near Anchorage, **Klondike Gold Dredge Tours** (p192) at Skagway, or Juneau's **Last Chance Mining Museum** (p163). And finally, if you want to purchase a gold pan, well, just stop at almost any hardware store in Alaska.

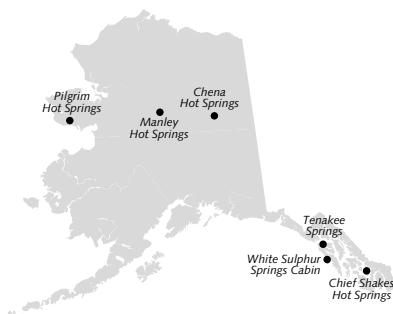


## HOT SPRINGS

Even if it's not winter, hot springs can offer welcome relief after a long day on the road. Fairbanks is the access point for several that are reached by road, one – **Chena Hot Springs** (p393) – even by a paved road. These springs are by far the most developed in the area and include a bar that serves cold beer for when you're done soaking in the 110°F hot tub. The more intrepid follow the Elliot Hwy 152 miles to **Manley Hot Springs** (p397), where bathing takes place in a huge, thermal-heated greenhouse that's a veritable Babylonian garden of grapes, Asian pears and hibiscus flowers.

One of the most remote springs in Alaska is **Pilgrim Hot Springs** (p409), a 50-mile road trip from Nome.

In Southeast Alaska, the public bathhouse at tiny **Tenakee Springs** (p158), where the water bubbles out of the ground at 108°F, is the best-known hot springs but it's hardly the only one. Boat tours up the Stikine River out of Wrangell often stop for a soak at the two bathhouses at **Chief Shakes Hot Springs** (p140). The most adventurous soak is at **White Sulphur Springs Cabin** (p155), which most people access from Sitka via a floatplane. Reserve this USFS cabin, pack in a good bottle of wine and in the evening you'll be sipping and soaking.

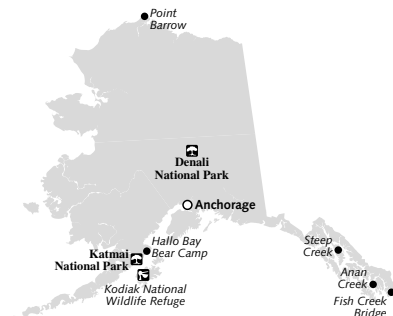


## LOOKING FOR BEARS

One of the fastest growing activities in Alaska is bear watching. There are no shortages of bears in the 49th State, nor tourists wanting to see one – preferably catching and devouring a salmon. Two of the most famous bear viewing sites are Brooks Falls in **Katmai National Park** (p312) and on the shuttle buses in **Denali National Park** (p332). To see the largest brown bears, bruins that often tip the scales at 1000lb or more, you need to visit **Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge** (p310). To spend a week viewing bears, book a cot at **Hallo Bay Bear Camp** (p313) on a remote stretch of coast along the Alaska Peninsula.

The most affordable bear watching is found in Southeast Alaska. Hyder may be hard to reach but once there, it is free to spend an afternoon at **Fish Creek Bridge** (p133) watching brown bears. It's even easier and cheaper to see the brown and black bears feasting on salmon at Juneau's **Steep Creek** (p174) near the Mendenhall Glacier. At **Anan Creek** (p139) near Wrangell you can rent a USFS cabin for \$35 a night that comes with four bear-watching permits to the stream where brown and black bears come in July and August.

To see a polar bear head either to **Point Barrow** (p418) at the top of the world...or to the **Alaska Zoo** (p207).



## FERRIES, TRAILS & CABINS

The **Alaska Marine Hwy** (p36) snakes through the channels and passages of Southeast Alaska, providing transport to thousands of tourists every summer, many of whom like to hike. With advance planning you could easily put together a trip in which at every port you could hike to a free-use shelter or a US Forest Service cabin that rents for \$35 to \$45 a night.

Begin in Ketchikan and head downtown to pick up the **Deer Mountain Trail** (p102). This 3-mile hike leads you to the summit and a free-use shelter above the treeline nearby. Just to the north is Petersburg, where you can jump off the ferry and tackle the 4-mile **Raven Trail** (p145), reaching the USFS Raven Roost Cabin by nightfall.

Juneau has five hike-in USFS cabins. North of the ferry terminal is the **Amalga Trail** (p166), a 7.5-mile hike that ends at Eagle Glacier Cabin near the glacier itself. For the best alpine cabin head downtown and hike the **Dan Moller Trail** (p165) 3 miles to the Dan Moller Cabin.

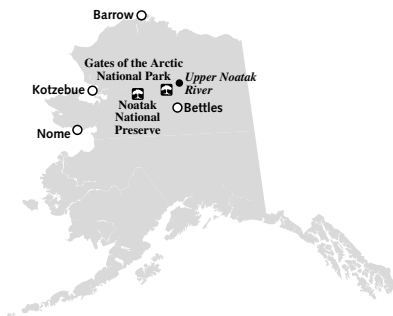
One of the most unusual cabin hikes in Southeast is Sitka's **Mt Edgumbe Trail** (p153). After arriving, you'll need to arrange a water taxi to Kruzof Island where the 6.7-mile route to the top of the extinct volcano is located. At the start of the trail is a USFS cabin and halfway up is a free-use shelter. How convenient!



## THE ULTIMATE BUSH EXPLORER

While it isn't cheap, exploring Alaska's mythic Bush is well worth the hefty price tag. Start your Bush adventure with a flight to **Bettles** (p417). You'll probably end up spending a day or so in this friendly community before taking another flight out to your 'drop spot.' One of the best river trips is along the **Upper Noatak River** (p416). This five- to seven-day journey takes you from Portage Creek to a riverside lake near Kacachurak Creek. You'll need to fly back from there, or you can continue the trip for another two weeks down

through the **Gates of the Arctic National Park** (p415) and the **Noatak National Preserve** (p401) to the indigenous stronghold of **Kotzebue** (p410). Ultimate Bush explorers could then fly from Kotzebue to **Nome** (p401). This remote town definitely warrants around three days of exploration, one for each of its amazing roads, which take you to hot springs, small Bush communities or ruined gold rush areas. Big spenders could also pony up for a flight from Anchorage to **Barrow** (p417), where you'll get a chance to spot polar bears and some 185 species of migrating birds. But the real exploration begins when you put the guidebook aside (p420) and head into the vast wilderness that defines this frontier state.



# The Authors



## JIM DUFRESNE

**Coordinating author, Southeast Alaska,  
Southwest Alaska**

Jim has lived, worked and wandered across Alaska and even cashed a Permanent Fund Dividend check. As the sports and outdoors editor of the *Juneau Empire*, he was the first Alaskan sportswriter to win a national award from Associated Press. As a guide for Alaska Discovery he has witnessed Hubbard Glacier shed icebergs the size of pick-up trucks off its 8-mile-wide face. Jim now lives in Michigan but is constantly returning to the Far North to write books on Alaska including Lonely Planet's *Hiking in Alaska*.



## GREG BENCHWICK

**Cruising in Alaska, Denali & the Interior,  
Fairbanks & Around, The Bush**

Greg has rumbled in the jungles of South America, walked across Spain and challenged the peaks of Alaska. He specializes in adventure and sustainable travel, and has written more than a dozen guidebooks. Greg first came to Alaska in 1996, when he dirt-bagged it at the Dagnet parking lot in Kenai and worked in a remote cannery on Bristol Bay. He has since hitchhiked from Girdwood to Haines, picked fights in Ketchikan (and lost) and, for this edition, traveled through Alaska's Bush and Interior. When he's not on the road, Greg develops his new-media company [www.monjomed.com](http://www.monjomed.com).



## CATHERINE BODRY

**Anchorage & Around, Prince William Sound,  
Kenai Peninsula**

Catherine has spent most of her adult life rebelling against her suburban upbringing. As soon as she finished college in Washington, she headed north to wilder lands, and after a few stints of summer work in Anchorage, she decided to brave an Alaskan winter. It turned out she liked it just fine, and after she completed a master's degree in English she headed to tiny Seward, where she feels right at home in hiking boots. When she's not daydreaming about traveling, Catherine is usually out on the trails. She even competed in her first Mt Marathon race while researching this book.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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