

Alaska's Best Hikes & Paddles

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Hiking & Paddling in Alaska

Much of Alaska's wilderness is hard to reach for visitors with limited time or small budgets. The lack of specialized equipment, the complicated logistics of reaching remote areas and lack of backcountry knowledge keeps many out of the state's great wilderness tracts such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). To experience such a remote and pristine place you may need to turn to a guiding company and pay a premium price.

But that doesn't mean you can't sneak off on your own for a trek into the mountains or a paddle down an icy fjord. There are so many possible adventures in Alaska that even the most budget-conscious traveler can take time to explore what lies beyond the pavement. Do it yourself and save.

The best way to enter the state's wilderness is to begin with a day hike the minute you step off the ferry or depart from the Alcan. After the initial taste of the woods, many travelers forgo the cities and spend the rest of their trip on multiday adventures into the backcountry to enjoy Alaska's immense surroundings.

There are also a range of paddling opportunities, from calm rivers and chains of lakes for novice canoeists to remote fjords and coastlines whose rugged shorelines and tidal fluctuations are an attraction for more experienced open-water paddlers. Alaska is an icy paradise for kayakers. Double-bladed paddlers can easily escape into a watery wilderness, away from motorboats and cruise ships, and enjoy the unusual experience of gazing at glaciers or watching seal pups snuggle on icebergs from sea level.

This chapter covers 14 popular wilderness excursions. They are either maintained trails or natural paddling routes that backpackers can embark on as unguided journeys provided they have the proper equipment and sufficient outdoor experience.

Tours

If you lack the expertise to head outdoors on your own – or the logistics of visiting remote wilderness, such as the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge, are too daunting – guiding companies will help you get there. Whether you want to climb Mt McKinley, kayak Glacier Bay or pedal from Anchorage to Fairbanks, there's an outfitter willing to put an itinerary together, supply the equipment and lead the way. Guide companies are also listed in regional chapters.

ABEC's Alaska Adventures (☎877-424-8907; www.abecalaska.com) Rafting and backpacking the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Gates of the Arctic National Park.

Alaska Mountain Guides (☎800-766-3396; www.alaskamountainguides.com) Week-long kayaking trips in Glacier Bay and mountaineering schools in Haines.

Alaskabike.com (☎245-2175, 866-683-2453; www.alaskabike.com) Fully supported cycle tours along the George Parks, Richardson and Glenn Hwys.

Arctic Treks (☎455-6502; www.arctictreksadventures.com) Treks and rafting in the Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Arctic Wild (☎888-577-8203; www.arcticwild.com) Floats and treks in the Brooks Range and Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

CampAlaska (☎800-376-9438; www.campalaska.com) Camping tours with hiking, rafting and other activities.

Mt Sobek (☎888-831-7526; www.mtsobek.com) Kayaking Glacier Bay, bear viewing at Pack Creek and raft trips on the spectacular Tatchashini River.

St Elias Alpine Guides (☎345-9048, 888-933-5427; www.steliassguides.com) Mountaineering, rafting, trekking and glacier-skiing at Wrangell-St Elias National Park.

Tongass Kayak Adventures (☎772-4600; www.tongasskayak.com) Kayaking LeConte Glacier and Tebenkof Bay Wilderness in Southeast.

Useful Websites

Alaska Hike Search (www.alaskahikesearch.com) Includes details on almost 100 trails around Anchorage and Southcentral Alaska.

Alaska Department of Natural Resources (www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/aktrails) Has details on trails in every corner of the state.

RECOMMENDED READS

» *Denali National Park Guide to Hiking, Photography & Camping* (2005) – Longtime Alaskan Ike Waits has produced the most comprehensive guide to Alaska's best-known national park.

» *Klondike Trail: the Complete Hiking and Paddling Guide* (2001) – From the legendary Chilkoot Trail to a paddle down the Yukon River, this book by Jennifer Voss will lead you on an adventure of a lifetime.

» *55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska* (1994) – Check out this book by Helen Nienhueser and John Wolfe for trails around the Kenai Peninsula, the Anchorage area and from Palmer to Valdez.

» *50 Hikes in Alaska's Chugach State Park* (2001) – Shane Shepherd and Owen Wozniak cover the state park's best trails and routes near Anchorage.

» *Hiking with Grizzlies* (2006) – Former Denali National Park bear observer Tim Rubbert tells you how to travel into grizzly country to make sure you come back out.

» *Hiking Alaska's Wrangell-St Elias National Park* (2008) – Greg Fensterman will keep you from getting lost on 50 hikes and backpacking treks in this book, which includes GPS waypoints.

» *The Alaska River Guide* (2008) – Karen Jettmar provides the complete river guide for Alaska, covering 100 trips, from the Chilkat in the Southeast to Colville on the Arctic slope.

» *The Kenai Canoe Trails* (1995) – Daniel L Quick's guide to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's Swan Lake and Swanson River canoe routes, with maps, fishing information and photos.

Alaska Department of Fish & Game Wildlife Notebook (www.adfg.state.ak.us/pubs/notebook/notehome.php) The excellent Wildlife Notebook covers all the state's major species of animals and birds that you may encounter on the trail or while paddling.

Knik Canoers & Kayakers (www.kck.org) With its tips, safety advice and contacts, this website is a great start for anybody thinking about a paddling adventure in Alaska.