



The Bush

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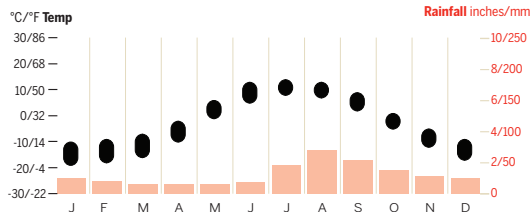
Why Go?

In a state where unbounded wilderness is the norm, the Bush is like the frontier on the frontier. Towns and townly comforts are few, roads are fewer, and most of the region is accessible only by flying, floating or walking in. Yes, it takes effort to reach the ends of the earth, but the rewards are equal to the task.

In western Alaska, you can head out on extended backpacks or wilderness paddles, swagger through Nome's gold-rush saloons or fly into isolated Native villages to meet the people who thrive year-round in this formidable landscape. In Arctic Alaska, explore the mythical vastness of preserves like Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Here the mandate is 'self-discovery,' which may be as much about teaching us our physical limits as about our puny insignificance in the grand scale of nature.

When to Go

Nome



Mar The Iditarod, the world's most famous dogsled race, concludes in Nome.

Jun Barrow Inupiat celebrate the Nalukataq Festival after the spring's whale harvest.

Jun-Aug Enjoy 24-hour sunlight above the Arctic Circle.

History

The history of the Bush is largely the history of Alaska Natives. By their own accounts, they've been here since the beginning. Archaeologists say it's not been as long as that: perhaps 6000 years for the ancestors of today's Athabascans, and about 3000 years for the Iñupiat, Yupiks and Aleuts. Either way, they've displayed remarkable ingenuity and endurance, thriving as fishers, hunters and gatherers in an environment few else could even survive in.

Europeans arrived in Alaska in the 1800s, with traders and missionaries setting up shop in numerous communities along the western coast. Whalers entered the Bering Sea around midcentury, and soon expanded into the Arctic Ocean. By 1912 they had virtually decimated the bowhead whale population.

The most climactic event in the Bush, however, was the gold rush at Nome, triggered in 1898 (just two years after the discovery of gold in the Klondike), by the 'Three Lucky Swedes' (p355). The stampede drew as many as 20,000 fortune chasers across to the Seward Peninsula, giving the region, ever so briefly, the most populous town in Alaska. Even today Nome remains the only significant non-Native community in the Bush.

Throughout the 20th century, progress in transportation, communications and social services transformed the remote region. 'Bush planes' made the area relatively accessible, and towns like Barrow, Kotzebue, Nome and Bethel became commercial hubs, in turn bringing services to the smaller villages in their orbit. Political and legal battles resulted in more schools and better health care, while the 1971 *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* turned villages into corporations and villagers into shareholders. Today, anywhere you go in the Bush you'll find residents engaged in a fine balancing act – coping with the challenges of the 21st century, while at the same time struggling to keep alive the values, practices and links to the land that they've passed down through countless generations and maintained for millennia.

i Getting There & Around

The Bush is, almost by definition, road-less. You can drive (or be driven) up the Dalton Hwy to Deadhorse, and around Nome on an insular road network reaching out to a few surrounding destinations. Everywhere else it's fly-in only.

Alaska Airlines and Era Alaska are the main carriers, with Nome, Kotzebue and Barrow

the main hubs. Regional airlines fly to smaller villages and provide air-taxi services into the wilderness.

WESTERN ALASKA

Western Alaska is home to Iñupiat, intrepid prospectors and some of the state's least-seen landscapes. Too far north (and too close to the Arctic Ocean and Bering Sea) for trees, the terrain is instead carpeted with coral-like tundra grasses and flowers, and patrolled by herds of caribou and musk ox. Highlights of the area include regional hubs like Nome and Kotzebue, and the vast tracks of little-explored wilderness in the Noatak and Bering Land Bridge National Preserves.

Nome

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Nome is, in so many ways, an Alaskan archetype: a rough-hewn, fun-loving, undying Wild West town, thriving at the utmost edge of the planet. During its gold-rush heyday, Wyatt Earp and some 20,000 stampedeers called the town home. Now with America's biggest concentration of non-Natives north of the treeline, and famed as the finishing line of that most Alaskan of races, the Iditarod, Nome is both comfortably familiar and spectacularly exotic.

Of the three major towns in the Bush – Nome, Kotzebue and Barrow – Nome is the most affordable and best set up for travelers. The streetscape is a compact, orderly, walkable grid, and most visitor-oriented businesses are concentrated on Front St, which overlooks the cold, gray Bering Sea. Nome is also among the most scenically situated of Alaska's Bush communities, and a highlight for most visitors is a road trip out to the stunning outlying coastal and interior regions.

While Nome is booked out for the Iditarod in March, the tourist season really begins in mid-May, when twitchers arrive looking for (among other species in this bird-rich environment) arctic tern, bristle-thighed curlew and Siberian bluethroat. Summer arrives very slowly, however, and if you want a chance to see green tundra and enjoy decent weather, come in late June or July. The road system outside Nome is closed from October or November to mid-May or early June.