



Denali & the Interior

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Best Frontier Towns

- ➔ Chicken (p310)
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- ➔ McCarthy (p322)
- ➔ Manley Hot Springs (305)

Why Go?

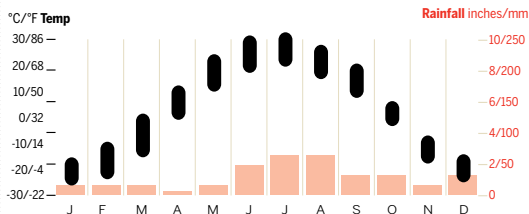
Adventures are served up raw in this part of the state, or barbecued with a pint of handcrafted beer. It's your choice. The best of the Interior can be found by forging a trail alone down a braided riverbed, but once-in-a-lifetime encounters with natural wonders can also be had from the seat of a rumbling park bus.

The big name in this region is Denali National Park, blessed with the continent's mightiest mountain, abundant megafauna and easy access. But don't miss the small towns, with their clapboard facades, quirky museums and tales from the days of working some of the biggest mineral finds in history.

Compared to most places in the developed world, the Interior is a trackless hinterland. For Alaska, however, it's got roads galore. With most routes so scenic they've become destinations in themselves, it's best to have an open schedule when you head out.

When to Go

Fairbanks



May The best month to visit Denali National Park for clear views of Mt McKinley.

Jun The tundra comes alive with millions of migratory birds.

Sep High probability of seeing the northern lights in Fairbanks.

History

If archaeologists are correct, Interior Alaska was the corridor through which the rest of the continent was peopled, as waves of hunter-gatherers migrated across the Bering land bridge to points south. Ancestors of the region's present Alaska Native group, the Athabascans, are thought to have been here at least 6000 years.

It wasn't until the 1800s that the first white people began to trickle in. The newcomers were mainly traders: Russians, who established posts along the lower Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers; and Britons, who began trading at Fort Yukon, on the upper Yukon River, in the 1840s. Later came prospectors, whose discoveries transformed this region, beginning with the first major gold rush in the Fortymile district in the 1880s. Similar rushes, for gold and also copper, subsequently gave rise to many Interior communities.

Transportation projects brought the next wave of growth. In 1914 Congress agreed to fund the building of the USA's northernmost railroad, from Seward to Fairbanks. At the peak of construction, 4500 workers labored along the route, and their base camps became boom towns.

Three decades later, during WWII, the building of the Alcan had the same effect on the eastern Interior. Tok and Delta Junction got their starts as highway construction camps, while Fairbanks saw a second boom in its economy and population. Another three decades after that came the biggest undertaking the Interior has ever seen: the laying of the \$8 billion Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which transects Alaska, running from Valdez to the Arctic Ocean at Prudhoe Bay.

Dangers & Annoyances

Getting lost in the backcountry is a real possibility, as national and state parks, national forest and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) areas have few marked trails. Come prepared with a compass, topographic map, GPS (optional), enough food and water to get you by for a few extra days and, most importantly, the skills to use your equipment properly. Long sleeves and light pants will help fend off mosquitoes, while our bear tips (p410) should prevent any unpleasant encounters with these creatures. Glacier travel and mountaineering are dangerous endeavors. If you don't know how to self-arrest and perform a crevasse rescue (or don't know what these things are), you should go with a qualified guide.

Getting There & Around

With scenic highways such as the George Parks, Alcan, Richardson, Glenn, Denali and Taylor criss-crossing this region, consider renting a vehicle if you want to get around at your own pace.

However, most places can – surprisingly – be reached by bus. Interior Alaska Bus Line (p419) travels the Glenn Hwy, Tok Cutoff and bits of the Alcan and Richardson Hwys. Soaring Eagle Transit (p419) plies the Glenn Hwy from Anchorage to Glennallen and the Richardson Hwy from Glennallen down to Valdez. **Alaska/Yukon Trails** (☎ 800-770-7275; www.alaskashuttle.com) covers the George Parks and Taylor Hwys, and the Alcan Hwy into Canada. Both Denali and Wrangell-St Elias National Parks are penetrable by summer shuttles.

Alaska Railroad (☎ 907-265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) runs daily between Anchorage and Fairbanks. The train is a mellow, scenic alternative to driving, with depots at two of the Interior's most-visited destinations: Talkeetna and Denali National Park.

For much of Alaska's heartland, bush plane is the only way to get around. Even small Interior villages usually have airstrips and scheduled flights.

DENALI NATIONAL PARK

For many travelers, **Denali National Park & Preserve** (☎ 907-683-2294; www.nps.gov/dena) is the beginning and end of their Alaskan adventure. And why shouldn't it be? Here is probably your best chance in the Interior (if not in the entire state) of seeing a grizzly bear, moose or caribou, and maybe even a fox or wolf. And unlike most wilderness areas in the country, you don't have to be a hiker to view this wildlife. The window of the park bus will do just fine for a close look at these magnificent creatures roaming free in their natural habitat.

For those with a bit more time and the desire to get further into the wild, there are vast expanses of untracked country to explore – more than 6 million acres of it, to be exact. That's more landmass than the US state of Massachusetts. At the center of it all is the icy behemoth of Mt McKinley, known to most Alaskans as Denali and to native Athabascans as the Great One. This is North America's highest peak and rightly celebrated as an icon of all that is awesome and wild in the state.

There's only one road through the park: the 92-mile unpaved Park Rd, which is closed to private vehicles after Mile 14. The