

Juneau & the Southeast

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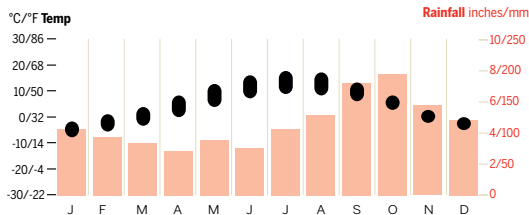
Why Go?

Southeast Alaska is so *unAlaska*. While much of the state is a treeless expanse of land with a layer of permafrost, the Southern Panhandle is a slender, long rainforest that stretches 540 miles from Icy Bay south to Portland Canal and is filled with ice-blue glaciers, rugged snowcapped mountains, towering Sitka spruce and a thousand islands known as the Alexander Archipelago.

Before WWII, the Southeast was Alaska's heart and soul, and Juneau was not only the capital but the state's largest city. Today the region 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 and see a dozen glaciers near Juneau. Each town is unique and none of them is connected to another by road. Jump on the state ferry or book a cruise and discover the Southeast.

When to Go

Juneau



May The sunniest month in this rainy region, with better prices than a month later.

Aug Alpine trails are snow-free; bears are at salmon streams everywhere.

Sep A bit rainy, but the crowds and high prices are gone.

History

Petroglyphs along the shoreline in Wrangell, Petersburg and other locations indicate that human habitation in Southeast Alaska dates back 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 – in terms of food gathering, art and the construction of large clan houses – of any Alaska Native group. 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, burned it to the ground and killed most of its inhabitants.

Baranov returned in 1804, this time with an imperial Russian warship and, after destroying the Tlingit fort, established the headquarters of the Russian-American Company at the present site of Sitka. Originally called New Archangel, Sitka flourished both economically and culturally on the strength of the fur trade and in its golden era was known as the 'Paris of the Pacific.'

In an effort to strengthen their grip on the region and protect their fur-trading interests, the Russians built a stockade near the mouth of the Stikine River in 1834, but in 1840 the political winds shifted and the Russians leased the entire Southeast coastline to the British. After purchasing Alaska from the Russians, the Americans formally took control of the territory in Sitka in 1867.

In 1880, at the insistence of a Tlingit chief, Joe Juneau and Dick Harris went to Gastineau Channel to try their luck and prospect for gold. They hacked their way through the thick forest to the head of Gold Creek, and there they found, in the words of Harris, 'little lumps as large as peas and beans.' The news spurred the state's first major gold strike, and within a year a small town named Juneau appeared, the first to be founded after Alaska's purchase from the Russians. After the decline in the whaling and fur trades reduced Sitka's importance, the Alaskan capital was moved to Juneau in 1906.

The main gold rush, the turning point in Alaska's history, occurred in Skagway when more than 40,000 gold-rush stampedeers descended on the town at the turn of the century as part of the fabled Klondike Gold Rush. Most made their way to the Yukon gold fields by way of the Chilkoot Trail until the White Pass & Yukon Route Railroad was completed in 1900.

In 1887 the population of Skagway was two; 10 years later, it was 20,000; the gold-rush town was Alaska's largest. A center for saloons, hotels and brothels, Skagway became infamous for its lawlessness. For a time, the town was held under the tight control of crime boss Jefferson Randolph 'Soapy' Smith and his gang, who conned and swindled naive newcomers out of their money and stampedeers out of their gold dust. In a gunfight between Smith and city engineer Frank Reid, both men died, ending Smith's reign as the 'uncrowned prince of Skagway' after only nine months.

At the time, Wrangell was also booming as the supply point for prospectors heading up the Stikine River to the Cassiar Gold District of British Columbia in 1861 and 1874, and then using the river again to reach the Klondike fields in 1897. Wrangell was as ruthless and lawless as Skagway. With miners holding their own court, it was said 'that a man would be tried at 9am, found guilty of murder at 11:30am and hung by 2pm.'

Just as gold fever was dying out, the salmon industry was taking hold. One of the first canneries in Alaska was built in Klawock on Prince of Wales Island in 1878. Ketchikan was begun in 1885 as a cannery, and in 1897 Peter Buschmann arrived from Norway and established Petersburg as a cannery site because of the fine harbor and a ready supply of ice from nearby LeConte Glacier.

After WWII, with the construction of the Alcan (Alaska Hwy) and large military bases around Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska's sphere of influence shifted from the Southeast to the mainland further north. In 1974 Alaskans voted to move the state capital again, this time to the small town of Willow, an hour's drive from Anchorage. The so-called 'capital move' issue hung over Juneau like a dark cloud, threatening to turn the place into a ghost town. The issue became a political tug-of-war between Anchorage and the Southeast, until voters, faced with a billion-dollar price tag to construct a new capital, defeated the funding in 1982.