



Kodiak, Katmai & Southwest Alaska

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Why Go?

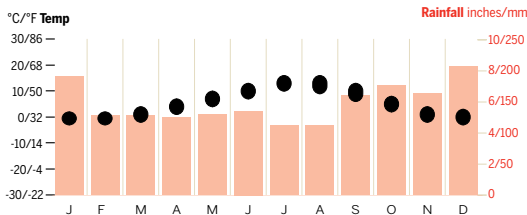
The elongated Alaska Peninsula marks the extreme western extension of the North American continent. Tapering out into the Bering Sea like a curled crocodile's tail, it's a jumble of treeless emerald hills, precipitous cliffs and conical snow-capped peaks heavy with reminders of an erstwhile Russian culture and a still surviving Aleut one.

In the east sit Kodiak Island and Katmai National Park, where you can indulge in what are, arguably, the best salmon fishing and brown-bear viewing opportunities on the planet.

Equally special are the surreal landscapes of the lower peninsula and the nebulous Aleutian islands that lie beyond. The MV *Tustumena*, an economical ferry, weaves its way twice monthly between Kodiak and Dutch Harbor, stopping at half a dozen pin-prick sized, off-the-grid communities along the way. Replete with breaching whales, smoking volcanoes and poignant WWII sites, this could well be the best water-based excursion in the state.

When to Go

Kodiak



Jun Decent bear viewing and salmon fishing but with fewer crowds at the hot spots.

Jul Salmon are running, bears are fishing and humans are hoping to glimpse them both.

May-Sep The MV *Tustumena* ferry runs to the Lower Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Islands.

History

Of all the state's regions, Southwest Alaska has had the most turbulent history, marked by massacres, violent eruptions and WWII bombings.

When Stepan Glotov and his Russian fur-trading party landed at present-day Dutch Harbor in 1759, there were more than 30,000 Aleuts living on Unalaska and Amaknak Islands. After the Aleuts destroyed four ships and killed 175 fur hunters in 1763, the Russians returned and began a systematic elimination of Aleuts, massacring or enslaving them. It's estimated that by 1830 only 200 to 400 Aleuts were living on Unalaska.

The Russians first landed on Kodiak Island in 1763 and returned 20 years later when Siberian fur trader Grigori Shelikof established a settlement at Three Saints Bay. Shelikof's attempts to 'subdue' the indigenous people resulted in another bloodbath where more than 1000 Alutiiqs were massacred, or drowned during their efforts to escape.

The czar recalled Shelikof and in 1791 sent Aleksandr Baranov to manage the Russian-American Company. After an earthquake nearly destroyed the settlement at Three Saints Bay, Baranov moved his operations to more stable ground at present-day Kodiak. It became a bustling port and was the capital of Russian America until 1804, when Baranov moved again, this time to Sitka.

Some violence in Southwest Alaska was caused by nature. In 1912 Mt Katmai on the nearby Alaska Peninsula erupted, blotting out the sun for three days and blanketing Kodiak with 18in of ash. Kodiak's 400 residents escaped to sea on a ship, but soon returned to find buildings collapsed, ash drifts several feet high and spawning salmon choking in ash-filled streams.

The town was a struggling fishing port until WWII, when it became the major staging area for operations in the North Pacific. At one point Kodiak's population topped 25,000, with a submarine base at Women's Bay, an army outpost at Buskin River and gun emplacements protecting Fort Abercrombie.

Kodiak was spared from attack during WWII, but the Japanese bombed Unalaska only six months after bombing Pearl Harbor, and then invaded Attu and Kiska Islands. More hardship followed: the Good Friday

Earthquake of 1964 leveled downtown Kodiak and wiped out its fishing fleet; the king-crab fishery crashed in the early 1980s; and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill soiled the coastline at the end of that decade. But this region rebounded after each disaster, and today Unalaska and Kodiak are among the top three fishing ports in the country.

Getting There & Away

Alaska Airlines (☎ 800-252-7522; www.alaskaair.com) and **PenAir** (☎ 800-448-4226; www.penair.com) service the region and one or the other provides daily flights to Kodiak, King Salmon, Unalaska, Dillingham and Bethel. Ravn Alaska (p417) also flies to Kodiak from a number of destinations throughout Alaska, including Anchorage.

The most affordable way to reach the region is via the **Alaska Marine Highway ferry** (☎ 800-642-0066; www.ferryalaska.com), which has stops at Kodiak, Unalaska and a handful of small communities in between.

KODIAK ISLAND

Kodiak is the island of plenty. Consider its famous brown bears, the largest ursine creatures in the world. Thanks to an unblemished ecosystem and an unlimited diet of rich salmon that spawn in its lakes and rivers, adult male bears can weigh up to 1400lb.

Part of the wider Kodiak archipelago and the second largest island in the US after Hawaii's Big Island, Kodiak acts as a kind of ecological halfway house between the forested Alaskan panhandle and the treeless Aleutian Islands. Its velvety green mountains and sheltered ice-free bays were the site of the earliest Russian settlement in Alaska and are still home to one of the US's most important fishing fleets.

Largely off the big cruise-ship circuit, the island's main attraction – beyond the obvious lure of its bears – is its quiet Alaskan authenticity. Only a small northeastern section of Kodiak is populated. The rest is roadless wilderness protected in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge.

Elsewhere, Kodiak harbors one of the largest coast-guard stations in the US, hides smatterings of abandoned WWII defenses and retains some genuine Russian colonial heritage. On a (rare) sunny day it's a sublime place to be.