

Arctic North America Travel Routes



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Witnessing the migration of the largest caribou herd in the world at Alaska's **Arctic National Wildlife Refuge** (p254)
- Flying over Alaska's bizarre **Great Kobuk Sand Dunes** (p262)
- Watching a carver conjure spirits out of soapstone in the Inuit art capital, Canada's **Cape Dorset** (p249)
- Beating a path to the top of the world and marvelling at the pristine wonders of Canada's **Quttinirpaaq National Park** (p247)
- Hiking past a kilometre-high cliff and across the Arctic Circle on Canada's **Akshayuk Pass** (p249).



Big skies, big vistas, big game, big rewards – everything in Arctic North America seems to have succumbed to that supersize effect. In the vast wilderness of the untouched north, wild animals far outnumber people, jagged mountain peaks give way to immense sweeps of desolate tundra, and tiny isolated villages carry on with life through winter's cruel temperatures and perpetual night. It's an area of incredible beauty, engulfing silence and constant awe.

The far north is alien to most North Americans, and although Alaska conjures up an image of year-round ice and snow, most of the state remains firmly below the Arctic Circle. Even the Arctic gateway towns of Fairbanks, Dawson and Iqaluit, isolated frontier towns of the imagination for most southerners, linger well below the 66th parallel. To the tiny population who make their home in the fly-in villages far to the north, the gateway towns are southern cities full of glittering lights, shopping malls, cafés and the cosmopolitan treats of a trip 'out'.

The isolated northern communities range from rough-and-tumble backwaters to tiny traditional villages where the native people still live mainly off the land. Neither will hold your attention for too long, but leaving the settlements behind and making your way into the bush or onto the tundra will leave you smitten by the vast world and hidden drama that lie beyond. It's one of the greatest wilderness experiences on earth.

As you'd expect with all that space and isolation, tourism in Arctic North America isn't especially straightforward. Only two roads cross the Arctic Circle on this vast continent, and travellers will need plenty of time and especially money for their Arctic adventure. Choosing one route, one activity or one area and exploring it properly will vastly improve your experience. Take one trip, though, and we guarantee you'll be back.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Much of the far north of Alaska and Canada is accessible by air only, and many of the most interesting communities are fly-in. Return flights are generally much better value than one-way, and you'll save a bundle with a 14-day advance purchase.

ALASKA

Alaska Airlines (www.alaskaair.com) runs scheduled flights to Fairbanks, Kotzebue and Barrow, and **Air North** (www.flyairnorth.com) flies from Anchorage and Fairbanks to the Yukon, the Northwest Territories (NWT) and British Columbia.

In addition, many smaller regional carriers operate flights to isolated communities, while a large number of charter operators provide 'bush flights' into off-runway locations: river sandbars, wilderness lakes, gla-

ciers and open tundra. Many of these carry outside boat-racks for hauling canoes and kayaks.

Hourly rates for charter services can range from US\$300 all the way up to US\$1000 per hour. You'll have to pay for the flight time to your destination and the return flight to the plane's home base. If you're not at the designated spot at the designated pick-up time, you'll still have to pay for the flight. If bad weather prevents a pick-up, the pilot will arrive as soon as it's safe to fly in – but be sure you have sufficient supplies to ride out a bad spell of at least several days.

Reliable operators:

Brooks Range Aviation (www.brooksrange.com)

Circle Air (www.circlear.com)

Frontier Flying Service (www.frontierflying.com)

Larry's Flying Service (www.larrysflying.com)

Yukon Air Service (www.yukonair.com)