

Alaska, United States, North America

OVERVIEW

Introduction

To the Aleut peoples, Alaska was "Alyeska," meaning the great land. Visitors today are likely to agree: Alaska is truly one of the world's special places. Those who visit can't help marveling at the exotic wildlife, magnificent mountains, glacier-carved valleys and steep, rocky coastline. And after they spend several days encountering one wonder after another, they marvel at just how much of this special place there is to see.

The sheer size of Alaska is hard to imagine: The town of Barrow is more than 1,600 mi/2,575 km north of Ketchikan, while Attu (at the end of the Aleutian chain) lies almost 2,000 mi/3,220 km west of Anchorage. Acreage aside, Alaska is large in lots of other ways: It has the tallest mountains, biggest glaciers, best fishing and wildest wilderness on the continent.



Ice Floes in the Bay.

With such abundance, it's no wonder that more and more travelers visit Alaska each year, particularly aboard cruise ships. Because of this heavy traffic, some towns in southeastern Alaska and such attractions as Denali National Park and Portage Glacier can seem a bit overrun at times. It must also be noted that Alaska isn't cheap: Per-day expenses in remote parts of the state are comparable with those in New York City or London. Nonetheless, we think the cost is well worth it—a bargain, in fact—given all that you're going to see.

History

The first settlers in Alaska arrived at least 20,000 years ago, when hunters from Asia followed large game over the Bering Strait land bridge into North America. By the time the first Europeans arrived, in the mid 1700s, they found several diverse cultures living in Alaska: Whalers inhabited the treeless tundra along the coast, and nomadic caribou hunters roamed the forested interior along the Yukon River. Alaska's panhandle was home to members of the Tlingit and Haida groups, who lived in a lush coastal environment.

Even though Russian explorers had seen the Alaskan coast as early as 1741, Europeans didn't venture into the territory's immense interior until well into the 1800s. Even after its purchase by the United States in 1867, the region remained largely unexplored. As was so often the case in the opening of the American frontier, it took the discovery of gold (in Juneau in 1880) to get folks headed for Alaska. During the famous Klondike Gold Rush of 1898-99, thousands of rowdy, ambitious, and gutsy prospectors and speculators flooded into Skagway, Valdez, and other new towns.

Alaska was made a territory of the United States in 1912, but statehood wasn't granted until 1959. Then, in 1968, the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay sparked a new rush to Alaska. The construction of the Alaska Pipeline from the Beaufort Sea to the Gulf of Alaska in the 1970s brought new wealth, new jobs and new environmental concerns. Even now, the debate continues as to how much of Alaska's pristine wilderness should be developed. Most recently, the focus has been on oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, declining populations of marine mammals in the Bering Sea and the impact from a massive increase in cruise-ship travel and other tourist activity, especially in southeastern Alaska.

Geography

Alaska borders the northwest edge of Canada and is closer to Russia (just a short hop across the Bering Strait) than to the rest of the U.S. The landscape is dramatic and, because it covers such a huge territory, quite varied. In the south is rain forest (Tongass), and in the north is Arctic desert. The state is traversed by several mountain ranges and encompasses North America's highest mountain (Mt. McKinley) and 16 of the highest peaks in the U.S., as well as most of the active volcanoes in the country. It has more coastline than all of the other U.S. states combined. The geography ranges from tundra to sheer mountain wall, from the densely forested, relatively temperate coasts of the Inside Passage to the permafrost of Barrow.

Snapshot

Spectacular scenery, wildlife viewing, camping, skiing, the Northern Lights, volcanoes, Inside Passage cruises, hiking, riverboat rides, fishing, canoeing, river and sea kayaking, friendly people, Native American and Russian culture, totem poles, glaciers and dogsled rides are Alaska's main attractions.

Port Information

Location

There's nothing quite like experiencing the Last Frontier from a cruise ship: Icebergs and rugged islands glide by, porpoises play in the ship's wake and whales breach off the side. In Alaskan towns along the way, you can shake a gold pan in a rushing stream and watch Native carvers at work on a new totem pole. You can raft down whitewater streams and fly to (and land on) glaciers.

The state is so big, its extremes of climate and geology so great and its wildlife and history so fascinating that Alaska delights (and uses up film) like few other places on Earth. In fact, with so much Alaska to choose from, it's easy to become overwhelmed. A cruise simplifies some of the decision making.

Potpourri

All Alaskans receive an annual Permanent Fund Dividend check that typically averages more than US\$1,000 per person (including children). The dividend is funded by North Slope oil taxes and profits from investments.

In March 1998, two Russians skied across the semifrozen sea of the Bering Strait, crossing between the continents of North America and Asia.

"Outside" is a term Alaskans use to refer to any part of the U.S. that is not in Alaska. People new to the state (defined as those who have yet to weather an Alaska winter) are called "cheechakos." "Sourdoughs," on the other hand, have been around awhile.

Because the state is vast and has a limited road network, Alaska has six times as many pilots per capita as any other U.S. state.

If the Japanese hadn't occupied the Aleutian Islands in World War II, the Alaska Highway probably wouldn't have been built at such an incredible rate: It took less than 12 months to cut through some of the most rugged terrain in North America. Japanese broadcast propagandists taunted the road's builders by saying the road would just make an invasion of North America that much easier.

Alaska's record low temperature is -80 F/-62 C in 1971 at Prospect Creek Camp north of Fairbanks. The high is 100 F/38 C, recorded in 1915 at Fort Yukon in the interior.

Juneau is the only U.S. state capital that cannot be reached by highway.

Eighty percent of the active volcanoes in the U.S. are in Alaska, with eruptions in the Aleutian Islands occurring almost every year.

Small earthquakes are common in many parts of Alaska, and mid-sized ones frequently shake the thinly populated Aleutian Islands. The devastating 1964 Good Friday Earthquake registered 9.2 on the Richter scale, making it the most powerful temblor ever recorded in North America.

Alaska is actually the closest state to Europe. Its northeast corner is nearer to Norway than any east coast state is to Ireland, and Nome is closer to Russia than to any "Lower 48" state.

SEE AND DO

Destinations in Alaska

Alaska At Sea

What sets Alaska cruises apart from other cruises is what you can see from the ship's rail: the state's geological wonders. They're just as much a part of the Alaska cruise experience as stops in port. Here are some of the sights you may be sailing past.

Hubbard Glacier

Its vastness may be hard to perceive from the deck of a ship, but trust us: Hubbard Glacier west of Skagway is a whopping 76 mi/122 km long, with a cliff face 6 mi/9 km wide. It's the longest tidewater glacier in North America.

It's also one of the fastest. While most glaciers are very slow moving (a rate of 3 ft/1 m per day is considered normal cruising speed), some, like Hubbard, possess qualities that propel them in occasional bursts, traveling at up to 200 ft/60 m per day. What causes some glaciers to engage in this uncharacteristic behavior is a combination of glacial plumbing and other environmental factors not completely understood.

Hubbard's last great show of speed was in 1986, when it galloped downhill and blocked off Russell Fjord. As water flowing from the mountains backed up behind this icy dam, there was concern about where the water would go when it eventually broke free. The nearby Situk River could have been completely scoured by the flood, destroying this very productive salmon and steelhead spawning stream. But instead of flooding the Situk, the mountain water—3.5 million cubic feet of it—poured into Disenchantment Bay (at the head of Yakutat Bay).

Inside Passage

This protected seaway stretches for more than 1,000 mi/1,600 km between the coast of Southeast Alaska and a narrow string of islands to the west. It ends in Skagway, about 90 mi/145 km north of Juneau. The waterway has long been the favored sea route between Anchorage and the cities of Seattle and Vancouver because it's much calmer than the Pacific Ocean. It is also much shorter and easier than going overland via the Alaska Highway. The Inside Passage is the only link—other than by air—to such cities as Juneau, Ketchikan and Sitka.

No visit to Alaska is complete without at least a four-day cruise or ferry ride along the Inside Passage. There are a number of ways to see this spectacular seaway. At the lower end of the cost scale are the Alaska Marine Highway ferries, which make runs of two, three or four days, stopping at Ketchikan, Petersburg, Sitka, Juneau, Wrangell, Skagway and Haines, among other towns. You usually board the ferries in Bellingham, Washington, or in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. (Another option would be to take the BC Ferry from Port Hardy on Vancouver Island to Prince Rupert and connect there with an Alaska Marine Highway ferry.)

On the upscale side, numerous cruise lines run more than 30 ships in Alaskan waters, most of them through the Inside Passage. Those known as Inside Passage cruises usually begin in Vancouver, British Columbia (though some ships begin in Seattle and as far south as San Francisco), and include stops at such Southeast Alaska ports as Ketchikan, Skagway, Sitka and Juneau. The ships turn around in Glacier Bay and then return to their point of origin. Gulf of Alaska cruises (sometimes called Glacier Route cruises) usually run between Vancouver and Seward, with connections through Anchorage so you can add land excursions into the interior of the state.

The vessels range from big luxury ships carrying more than 2,000 passengers to smaller (but well-equipped) yachts that hold up to 100 people. The smaller boats are more expensive, but they're capable of getting closer to the glaciers and to the wildlife on shore. No matter which kind of vessel you choose, make your reservations six months to a year in advance—bookings for the spring and summer fill up quickly.

As you sail along the rugged coast, passing the magnificent Alexander Archipelago, you'll see some of the most beautiful scenery in the world: cloud-shrouded mountains, glaciers, fjords, islands covered with coniferous rain forest, Native American villages, eagles, seals, whales, bears, moose and other animals.

If your journey includes Tracy Arm, you may see orca and humpback whales swim in one of the world's most dramatic, picturesque locales during the summer (it's included on many cruises, or you can visit as a side trip from Juneau). Another highlight is Glacier Bay, in Glacier Bay National Park. Some cruise ships continue on across the Gulf of Alaska to Hubbard Glacier, Malaspina Glacier, Prince William Sound, Columbia Glacier and end at Seward (this route is the northern part of the "Gulf of Alaska" cruises).

At Skagway, the northern end of the Inside Passage, ferry or cruise-ship passengers can book a train and motorcoach trip to Whitehorse, Yukon, going over the historic White Pass (motorcoach-only trips are also available). If you want to spend a day or two in the wilderness, take a floatplane out to a cabin in the Tongass National Forest, which includes most of Southeast Alaska.

Juneau

Nestled in a narrow fjord with Mt. Juneau and Mt. Roberts towering above it, Juneau (pop. 31,000) enjoys an absolutely majestic setting. To the east is the vast expanse of glacial ice known as the Juneau Icefield, and to the west are the wilderness islands of the Inside Passage. Because of the natural beauty that surrounds the city—as well as its gold-rush buildings and many shops—this state capital is a popular tourist destination. In fact, Juneau is visited by more cruise ships than any other port in Southeast Alaska.

Gold brought the first big influx of people, who built Juneau on crushed rock hauled out of the mines in the 1880s. The city quickly replaced Sitka both in importance and as Alaska's capital—a title it has had to struggle to maintain in recent years.

Ketchikan

The site of an ancient Tlingit fish camp, Ketchikan (pop. edging toward 15,000) is about 3 mi/5 km long but only a couple of blocks deep, as it wraps around the foot of Deer Mountain. Known as the rain capital of North America, the town gets up to 160 in/406 cm of the wet stuff annually. But don't let the liquid sunshine (as residents prefer to call it) keep you inside—Ketchikan is worth exploring in any kind of weather. A two-day stay wouldn't be too long.

Sitka

Sitka's setting, in a tranquil bay on Baranof Island, is nothing short of spectacular. Tiny islands dense with evergreen trees dot the blue-green water, which is crisscrossed by dozens of fishing boats. Looming over the town and waterfront is Mt. Edgecumbe, a Mt. Fuji look-alike located on a nearby island.

Sitka also has a rich legacy of artifacts and traditions from the Native American, Russian and early-U.S. eras. The town of 9,000 people has 19 listings on the National Register of Historic Places. But don't spend all your time touring historic buildings—Sitka also has an abundance of wildlife. Humpback whales frolic in the bay. Massive brown bears and Sitka black-tailed deer roam through nearby forests of Sitka spruce and hemlock. Thousands of seabirds, including the rare rhinoceros auklet and tufted puffin, flock to St. Lazaria National Wildlife Refuge at the mouth of Sitka Sound.

Sitka is the ancestral home of the Tlingit people. In the 1800s, before Alaska was sold to the U.S., the town was a major Russian port and headquarters of the Russian-American Co.

SHOPPING

Shop for *mukluks* (Inuit boots made from sealskin and reindeer hide), smoked salmon, beadwork, basketry, jewelry of gold and jade, ivory and whalebone carvings, knitted clothing (especially qiviut wool from the musk ox) and other representative examples of Native American arts and crafts. Many travelers also buy *ulu*, the curved knives traditionally used by Native American women to prepare hides.

Be sure to look for the Made in Alaska logo, which indicates that an item is an authentic Alaskan artifact. Another logo, the Silver Hand, indicates an item was crafted specifically by Native Americans.

As for crafts made from walrus ivory, the only products that can be legally marketed in Alaska are items in which the ivory used is the byproduct of subsistence hunting. Only Native Americans are allowed to process unworked ivory (unless it's fossilized), and gift shops will include a certificate indicating that the item is Alaskan ivory from nonendangered species. (Though all walrus populations appear to be declining.) Be aware that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requires a special permit (US\$25) to export walrus ivory outside the U.S. This applies to visitors who will be traveling through Canada after leaving Alaska, even if their final destination is the U.S. We suggest you avoid any confusion at the Canadian border by mailing the items home—with the certificate—before you leave Alaska. (Many shops will be happy to handle the mailing for you.)

SECURITY

Dos and Don'ts

No matter where you go fishing, do look for a commercial operation nearby that will clean, freeze or smoke your catch and ship it home for you. Some restaurants will even cook your catch for your lunch or dinner.

Do follow rangers' instructions if you see a bear in the wild. Bear attacks usually occur when unwary hikers step between a mother bear and her cub or when campers fail to properly store their food and garbage. Never keep food in a tent overnight, and don't camp along animal paths, especially near a lake or river: Bears use these trails.

Do try the local berries, but avoid the poisonous baneberry (it looks like a red black-eyed pea when ripe). Also avoid devil's club, a plant with large leaves, red berries and thousands of sharp spines.

Do take along insect repellent if you're going during the summer—hardy breeds of mosquitoes and blackflies survive in Alaska, and they'll make your life miserable if you're not prepared.

Weather

Generally, mid May to mid September is the preferred time to visit (with June-August being the best), but not all of the state is as unbearable, cold and miserable year-round as a lot of people believe. There are actually five or six different climates. The interior region (Fairbanks area) has a wide range, with summers in the 70s-80s F/20-31 C or higher and winters far below 0 F/-18 C. The south-central (Anchorage) region has summers in the range of 55-65 F/13-18 C and winters well below freezing. Southeast Alaska (Juneau and the Inside Passage) has summers in the 50s-60s F/10-20 C with mild winters that hover around the freezing mark. The southwest is generally in the 50s F/10-15 C during the summer and below freezing in winter, coupled with lots of wind, snow, sleet and rain. In eastern Alaska (along the border with Canada's Yukon), temperatures average about 60 F/15 C in the summer and about 10 to 14 F/-11 to -9 C in winter. Northern Alaska is cool to cold year round, with summer highs generally in the 40s-50s F/5-14 C and winter temperatures well below 0 F/-18 C (similar to winter in Fairbanks).

And just to confuse things, it can drizzle, fog over, gust mightily or chill out even during the peak of summer throughout the state. Hawaii it isn't, but the climate is part of what makes Alaska such a magnificent place to visit.

No matter when you go, sweaters, warm clothing and rain gear will be useful. From mid May to 1 August, many Alaskans live in near constant daylight. This phenomenon, known as the Midnight Sun, reaches as far south as Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Note: Alaska's coasts and islands (especially the Pribilofs) can be quite windy. High winds can cause travel delays by boat or plane and, in colder seasons, can increase the danger of frostbite and hypothermia at low temperatures.

What to Wear

Alaskans are aggressively informal, and opportunities for the most basic dress-up apparel are rare. In Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau, even the priciest of restaurants avoid dress codes, knowing that requiring coats and ties would keep most Alaskans away. Functional clothing is the order of the day. Dress appropriately for the weather and you'll be welcome almost everywhere. (If you prepare for cool, moist weather, you'll seldom be caught off guard.) Layer your clothing so you can adapt quickly to changes, with a comfortable shirt, a warm jacket and a waterproof, breathable coat or parka (Gore-Tex is ideal). Add comfortable shoes or boots that can withstand a soaking.

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Port Information

Location

Cruise ships dock at one of three locations: the Alaska Steamship Dock at Marine Park, the Cruise Ship Terminal or Franklin Dock, all of which are at the southeast end of town on S. Franklin Street. If more than three ships are in port—as is often the case in midsummer—some ships anchor in the channel and tender passengers in smaller craft to the terminals. As many as seven ships have been in port at one time, depositing throngs of visitors on the city. Downtown Juneau is within easy walking distance, but you'll need transportation to reach outlying attractions.

SEE AND DO

Sightseeing

Landmarks and Historic Sites

One of the first things you'll notice in Juneau is the contrast between the gold rush-era buildings and modern high-rises—and, on the street, between the rubber-booted fishermen and the suit-and-tie government employees.

Before you make your way through the streets, you may want to get the big picture by taking the Mt. Roberts Tramway, which is located next to the cruise-ship docks. A ride to the top of the mountain provides panoramic views of downtown, Gastineau Channel, Douglas Island (across the bridge) and the Chilkat Mountain Range. At the top, you'll find the Chilkat Theater, Timberline Bar and Grill, Mountain Station Observatory, Raven Eagle Gift Shop and alpine hiking trails. US\$20 adults round trip. Phone 907-463-3412.

Historic downtown can be easily explored on foot with the help of a walking-tour map (they're available at the visitor information kiosks near the cruise-ship docks or the Centennial Hall Visitors Center at the corner of Egan and Willoughby). From the docks, head north along S. Franklin Street, the city's former red-light district, to the Seawalk and Marine Park. Monuments located along the wharf include a community sun dial near the ship terminal and a sculpture of Patsy Ann, a deaf dog that met steamships in days past. There are also memorials to the *USS Juneau* and to area fishermen. A mural atop the Juneau Library and the municipal parking garage depicts the Tlingit Native American legend of creation. Floatplanes and enormous ships crowd the harbor.

Throughout downtown, steep, narrow lanes wind past art galleries, gift shops, restaurants and Victorian homes, some accessible only by staircase. Both the hills and the architecture were the inspiration for Juneau's nickname: "Little San Francisco of the North." The wooden buildings have colorful facades, and streets are decorated with banners and baskets of flowers.

Honky-tonk music blares out of the swinging doors of the Red Dog Saloon, luring visitors inside for a taste of Juneau's bawdy pioneer days (and some microbrewed beer). Be prepared for sawdust floors, stuffed grizzly bears, Wyatt Earp's gun and Alaskana galore. Nearby is the Emporium Mall whose hallways are decorated with historical photos of the city's colorful past.

The State Capitol, at Fourth and Main Streets, offers 30-minute tours. *The Windfall Fisherman*, a life-size bronze bear sculpture, is nearby, as is the Scottish Rite Temple, built in 1928. The State Office Building (Juneauites irreverently call it the S.O.B.) has an 8th-floor balcony where you can photograph Juneau's lovely waterfront. A free pipe-organ concert takes place in the atrium at noon on Friday.

Also on Fourth and Main is the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, where you can see a video about Juneau as well as interpretive displays about gold mining and Juneau history. Open daily. Phone 907-586-3572. The Governor's House, a stately columned New England-style building with a totem pole out front, is two blocks uphill from the city museum. Tours are available with advance reservations. Phone 907-465-3500.

St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, at 326 5th St., was built in Siberia in 1894, disassembled, shipped to Juneau and then reassembled. This octagonal structure with an onion dome is said to be the oldest original Russian Orthodox church in Alaska. It's filled with Russian icons and religious relics. On Sunday, the divine liturgy is sung in three languages: English, Slavonic and Tlingit.

The House of Wickersham, at 213 7th St., is the former home of Judge Wickersham, who proposed the first Alaska statehood bill in 1916. The house is open for tours in the summer by appointment. Phone 907-586-9001.

Museums

The best museum in the city—if not the state—is the Alaska State Museum, north of the cruise terminals. You can sit in a replica of a Tlingit clan house and examine Native American clothing fashioned from walrus skin. The museum also has exhibits about gold mining and the Russian period. The highlight for us, however, was the eagle's nest (uninhabited) atop a two-story tree—a circular staircase around it allows you to see it from all angles. This museum is definitely a must-see. Open daily. US\$5. 395 Whittier. Phone 907-465-2901.

Last Chance Mining Museum, located at the end of Basin Road and a short stroll across Gold Creek, has mining memorabilia from Juneau's gold-rush days. US\$3. Phone 907-586-5338.

Nature

The mighty Mendenhall Glacier is the area's most famous natural landmark and a must-see. The state's only "drive-up glacier," Mendenhall is a 1.5-mi/2.5-km-wide river of ice emanating from the Juneau Icefield, which is larger than the U.S. state of Rhode Island. It's also 12 mi/19 km long and 300 ft/93 m deep. If the sky is overcast when you're there, consider yourself lucky: The glacier's blue ice is more spectacular than.

Any visit to the glacier, which is 13 mi/21 km northwest of town, should include a stop at the visitors center. A large map of the entire icefield and a telescope provide you with a close-up view of Mendenhall. There's also a short video and interactive exhibits. U.S. Park Service rangers lead nature hikes around the glacier—there's a photo loop trail that's handicap-accessible. The visitors center is open daily 8 am-6:30 pm. US\$3 adults, free for children younger than age 12. Phone 907-789-0097. To get to Mendenhall, you could take a city bus to within a mile of the visitors center, but several groups offer tours for about US\$15 (check with the Davis Log Cabin Visitor Center for information). Most flightseeing and helicopter tours also fly over the glacier.

In addition to the trails around the Mendenhall Glacier there are more than 100 hiking spots in the area. Pick up a copy of *Juneau Trails* (US\$4) at the Centennial Hall visitors center. The center has a direct line to the U.S. Forest Service, which has maps and other information.

The Macaulay Salmon Hatchery on Gastineau Channel is about 3 mi/5 km north of town. You can feed salmon smolts in May and June and watch the salmon swim up ladders the rest of the year. Saltwater aquariums and a gift shop are inside. There's also a gigantic brown bear who'll pose for pictures with you (he has no choice—he's stuffed). The Gastineau Channel, by the way, is an excellent place to fish. The hatchery is open daily. US\$3 adults. 2697 Channel Dr. Phone 907-463-4810.

The Pack Creek Bear Preserve on Admiralty Island, about 15 mi/24 km south of Juneau, is a good place to view bears in the wild. The preserve is home to the world's largest (and most accessible, particularly June-August) brown bear population. (The Tlingit called the island *Kootznoowoo*, which means "Fortress of the Bears.") The best way to see the bears is by air. Several firms offer bear-viewing flights, including Ward Air, phone 907-789-9150; Tal Air, phone 907-789-6968; and Alaska Seaplane Service, phone 907-789-3331. Expect to pay US\$150-\$260 per person round trip (depending on whether or not the plane is full). You can also arrange a guided fly fishing and bear viewing trip with Alaska Fly-N-Fish, phone 907-790-2120, and Bear Creek Outfitters, phone 907-789-3914. US\$300-\$400 for a half-day trip.

Recreation

Opportunities to hike, bike and paddle around Juneau are abundant. You can strike off on your own with a walking trail map from the visitors center or rent a bike or a kayak and explore the area independently. If time is short, however, consider taking a tour. Juneau has dozens of firms offering every possible recreational option—from fishing for salmon to bear-watching by float plane.

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Port Information

Location

Ketchikan is a popular first or last stop on many Alaskan cruises. As a result, as many as four cruise ships can dock in Ketchikan. If more are in port, your ship may anchor offshore and take passengers in smaller craft to the cruise-ship dock, which is on the western edge of town. Most of the visitor attractions are within walking distance of the dock.

Ketchikan's visitors center is on the dock and has walking-tour maps, brochures and tour-reservation booths. Public phones and rest rooms are also available there. The center is open daily 8 am-5 pm and whenever ships are in port. 131 Front St. Phone 907-225-6166. <http://www.visit-ketchikan.com>.

SEE AND DO

Sightseeing

Landmarks and Historic Sites

Stop by the visitors center first to pick up a map and guide to area attractions. The 2-mi/3-km walking tour is an excellent way to see most of the sights. You don't have to follow the map, however: With only one stoplight, the town isn't big enough to get lost in. You might also want to drop by the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center on Main Street, one block inland from the cruise docks. It has lots of information about hiking in the area, as well as several good exhibits about Native American traditions and local ecosystems. Phone 907-228-6214.

Then head to Ketchikan Creek, the heart of town and its reason for being. When the first intrepid travelers to Alaska discovered its abundant salmon, they parked their boats and opened salmon canneries. (At one time there were 12 canneries in town, shipping two million pounds of salmon a year.)

Along with the prosperity brought by salmon came a red-light district built on the pilings above the creek. The community had as many as 30 bordellos on Creek Street before prostitution became illegal in 1954. All the women moved on except Dolly Arthur. After she died, Dolly's House became a museum (billed as the place "where men and salmon came upstream to spawn"). Hours vary according to the cruise ship schedule, usually daily 8:30 am-5:30 pm in summer—check with the visitors center.

Strolling along Creek Street, poking your head in the various shops, is great fun. There are also a few cafes where you can eat outside if the weather is nice. Or, just hang over the railings and watch the fish and kayakers go by. While you're on Creek Street, catch the tram up to the West Coast Cape Fox Lodge. From there you'll be treated to one of the best views of Ketchikan.

Museums

The Tongass Historical Museum is worth a visit to learn more about the town's fishing heritage. The museum is in the Centennial Building, next to the library near the intersection of Park Avenue and Dock Street.

Ketchikan has one of the world's largest collections of totem poles. You'll find them in city parks and on street corners. The largest single collection is less than a mile east of town at the Totem Heritage Center, a museum that preserves totems retrieved from abandoned Native villages. The center contains 33 poles and pole fragments, many of which are more than 100 years old. There are guides on duty and a 15-minute tour is available May-September. Phone 907-225-5900.

There also are two places outside of town that have large collections of totem poles: Saxman Village, a Native American community about 2.5 mi/4 km south of town, and Totem Bight State Park, about 12 mi/19 km north of town.

Saxman Village's collection of 24 totems is planted in the ground. Although most were brought from their original sites in the 1930s, others have been added since. Our favorite is a replica of the Lincoln Totem, which was carved from a picture of the president given to the indigenous people by the first white men to stop at the village. The carving of Lincoln is a remarkable likeness, top hat and all, except that he looks too short—the carvers had only a mug shot to work from. In addition to the poles, there's a cedar replica of the Beaver Clan House and a carving shed (Native American artists were working on a canoe and a totem when we were there). Open weekdays only. Tours take place every 45 minutes and cost US\$30 adults. They include a performance by the Cape Fox Dancers and a play based on a historical legend. If you just want to walk around and see the totem poles (no tour, demonstrations or performances), admission is free.

Totem Bight State Park has 14 poles, most of which are more than 50 years old. A Tlingit clan house can also be visited. To get to the site, you'll walk along a path through the rain forest to a clearing abloom with wildflowers. The totems and the scenery are truly spectacular—if you really want to appreciate the view, take along a picnic lunch and spend an hour or more there. Kiosks near poles interpret the carvings. Although there's no admission charge, you'll see a box for donations at the park-service office.

Nature

Ketchikan has plenty to offer those who want to do more than sightsee: There are lots of opportunities for hiking in the surrounding Tongass National Forest, but most trails are not accessible from downtown. The exception is the 3-mi/5-km Deer Mountain Trail, which begins at the base of Deer Mountain, southeast of the cruise-ship dock. The trail is for moderately experienced hikers—in other words, it's steep, so wear your hiking boots and take water with you. The first overlook is about a mile up—you can always turn around there after you're done gazing at the incredible views.

Most other trails require transportation and/or a guide, so check the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center on Main Street for a map and the names of tour guides. Phone 907-228-6220.

Also within the boundaries of Tongass National Forest is Misty Fjords National Monument. The sheer rock walls, towering above coves, are overwhelming. Visitors can opt for either a flightseeing day trip over Misty Fjords or boat tours of various lengths. During these tours, you may see bald eagles in the air, brown and black bears on the ground and whales and sea lions in the ocean.

The Deer Mountain Tribal Hatchery and Eagle Center is just east of town, on the banks of beautiful Ketchikan Creek. It offers the opportunity to see and photograph eagles up close and to feed the fish. Sample Alaska smoked salmon in the Interpretive Center. Phone 907-225-5158.

Farther afield is Prince of Wales Island, the third largest island in the United States. You can get there via a 25-45 minute flight, or a three-hour ferry ride. The island has small fishing villages, logging camps and Native-American communities. Evidence suggests that the island has been inhabited for a very long time: Human bones have been found there dating back more than 9,000 years. Today, it offers access to world-class fishing and hunting areas and has several totem parks. El Capitan cave is another highlight, part of the island's massive karst (eroded limestone) cave system. Don't expect pristine beauty, however: The island has been heavily logged, and massive clearcuts border the roads. For more information, contact the Prince of Wales Chamber of Commerce. Phone 907-826-3870. <http://www.powcc@aptalaska.net>.

Recreation

Fishing

Ketchikan bills itself as the "salmon capital of the world," and exploring the waters around the town while casting for fish is an exhilarating experience. Several charter firms offer trips. (Some guarantee you'll catch fish or you don't pay!) The visitors center has a complete list of operators. Expect to pay about US\$85 for a half-day trip. Fishing licenses are extra.

Sitka, Alaska, United States, North America

OVERVIEW

Introduction

Sitka's setting, in a tranquil bay on Baranof Island, is nothing short of spectacular. Tiny islands dense with evergreen trees dot the blue-green water, which is crisscrossed by dozens of fishing boats. Looming over the town and waterfront is Mt. Edgecumbe, a Mt. Fuji look-alike located on a nearby island.

Sitka also has a rich legacy of artifacts and traditions from the Native American, Russian and early-U.S. eras. The town of 9,000 people has 19 listings on the National Register of Historic Places. But don't spend all your time touring historic buildings—Sitka also has an abundance of wildlife. Humpback whales frolic in the bay. Massive brown bears and Sitka black-tailed deer roam through nearby forests of Sitka spruce and hemlock. Thousands of seabirds, including the rare rhinoceros auklet and tufted puffin, flock to St. Lazaria National Wildlife Refuge at the mouth of Sitka Sound.

Sitka is the ancestral home of the Tlingit people. In the 1800s, before Alaska was sold to the U.S., the town was a major Russian port and headquarters of the Russian-American Co.

Port Information

Location

Plan to be on deck when your ship sails into Sitka Sound, particularly if it's a sunny day: The views of the town from the ship are beautiful.

Cruise ships anchor in the sound, which is protected from the rough seas of the Pacific. Passengers are tendered to the visitors pier near Crescent Harbor or to O'Connell Bridge. It's an easy walk to town and most sites, including the Sitka National Historic Park. Visitor information can be obtained from the visitors desk at Harrigan Centennial Hall, near the pier at O'Connell Bridge, or at the Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau, 303 Lincoln St. Open Monday-Friday 8 am-5 pm. Phone 907-747-5940. <http://www.sitka.org>.

SEE AND DO

Sightseeing

Landmarks and Historic Sites

Start your tour with a stroll around downtown Sitka. A walking-tour map is available at the Harrigan Centennial Hall visitors center.

In the heart of town is St. Michael's Cathedral, whose onion dome and cross-topped steeple symbolize Sitka's Russian history. Though the original building, built in the 1840s, burned in 1966, it was rebuilt according to the original designs. The interior is dark and sparsely furnished (churchgoers stand during the service), but it contains several treasures, including a tabernacle made by Faberge and icons painted by Russian artists. Open daily 7:30 am-5:30 pm, unless a service is being held; it stays open later when cruise ships are in port. US\$1 donation requested.

Nearby are two other sites that are probably of most interest to serious students of Russian history: the Russian Blockhouse, a replica of the one that separated the Russian and Tlingit sections of town in the early 1800s, and the Russian Cemetery, which contains the grave of Princess Maksoutoff, the wife of Alaska's last Russian governor. Both sites are located on Katlian Street, behind the Pioneers Home (a big red-roofed building that has a lovely garden and a gift shop).

Across from the home is Totem Square, which contains an old Russian cannon and a totem pole with a double-headed eagle, symbolizing Sitka's Russian heritage, that was carved by a local artist. If it's a clear day, walk to the top of Castle Hill, a state park near Totem Square. The hilltop was the home of the first Russian governor. It's also the site where Alaska was officially transferred from Russia to the U.S. in 1867. The sweeping views of the sound make climbing all those steps (100, we think) more than worth it. (There's also a wheelchair ramp that begins at the bridge.)

East of town is the Russian Bishop's House, the town's oldest Russian building. Painted mustard yellow, the two-story house is one of the few log buildings still standing—it was built in 1843 as a residence for the bishop of the Orthodox Church. Now a museum, it houses artifacts from the Russian colonial period, including a priest's robe and an antique samovar. Open daily.

Sitka National Historical Park, east of town, reveals another side of the area's heritage. Stop first at the park's visitors center, where there are displays of Russian and Native American artifacts and demonstrations of native crafts—when we were there, a silversmith was etching an eagle on a bracelet and wood carvers were working on totem poles. A short slide show on the Battle of Sitka is informative. Open daily in the summer.

A 1-mi/1.6-km trail winds through the park's dense second-growth spruce forest along the sound. Part of the trail is dotted with totem poles, many of which are replicas of poles collected for the 1904 celebration of the Louisiana Purchase. (Ask park rangers to lend you a copy of the booklet *Carved History*. It explains the various carvings.) Don't rush through the park—you'll want to spend time contemplating the intricately carved poles.

The trail also takes you past the site of the Battle of Sitka between the Russians and Tlingits in 1804 (the Russians won). You'll also cross a bridge over the Indian River, which was teeming with spawning salmon when we visited. A connecting trail takes you to a memorial to the Russians who died in the battle.

The remnants of a more recent war can be seen south of town. Japonski Island was the headquarters for U.S. military forces based in Sitka during World War II. The ruins of bunkers and gunning sites can be visited.

Museums

The Isabel Miller Museum in Centennial Hall contains a scale model of Sitka as it looked in 1867, when the U.S. bought Alaska from Russia. The New Archangel Dancers (Russian folk dancers) perform regularly in the building (check with the visitors center for times). There are exhibits on Tlingit culture and a gift shop. Open daily. Outside, you can admire a hand-carved 50-ft/15-m canoe—a replica of the ones used by the Tlingits for special ceremonies.

East of town, on the way to the Sitka National Historical Park, is the Sheldon Jackson Museum. The oldest museum in Alaska, it has one of the state's best collections of Native American artifacts. The items, many of which belonged to Sheldon Jackson, a missionary in the late 1800s, include dogsleds and umiaks (Inuit boats) as well as Native American carvings and clothing. Open daily.

Nature

For a look at some of the great winged creatures that live in Alaska, visit the Raptor Center, just a short walk from Sitka National Historical Park (a trail joins the two). At the center, dedicated volunteers and veterinarians nurse injured or sick birds of prey back to health so they can be returned to the wild. Birds that don't fully recover are kept at the center and can be seen on your own or as part of a tour. Open daily in the summer. Guided tours available.

Ambitious hikers with some time to spare may want to try one of Sitka's challenging mountain trails. The U.S. Forest Service Ranger District office north of town sells a guide called *Sitka Trails* for US\$1. The visitors centers also have recreational guides and maps.

The waters around Sitka are also wonderful for viewing wildlife. If you don't take an organized wildlife tour, you may still be able to find someone to take you on a boat ride around the area. Sea otters are abundant, and you can sometimes see humpback whales. If you'd rather stay on land, head for Whale Park, about 6 mi/10 km south of downtown. It's one of the best places to view the giants of the sea from shore, though they're only present in the spring and fall.

SHOPPING

For such a small town, Sitka has plenty of interesting shops. What sets this town apart from the rest in Southeast Alaska are its Russian items—lacquer boxes, paintings, icons and nesting dolls. Contemporary Alaskan art and sculpture are available, too, as are quality traditional goods made by the Tlingits (including silver jewelry, totem poles, carvings and woven baskets).

For Russian items, try the Log Cache and the Russian American Co. Both are on Lincoln Street—the Russian American Co. is in MacDonald's Bayview Trading Co., which also includes a clothing store. Baranov's, also on Lincoln Street, sells Russian fine art and folk art as well as unusual Russian-made gifts.

We found the most distinctive Native American goods in the museum gift shops, so be sure to visit the ones in the Sheldon Jackson Museum and the Isabel Miller Museum. Though neither shop has a large selection, we were impressed with the quality of the artists' work. (We found one of our favorite gifts—a medallion with the Russian Imperial Crest—in the Miller Museum's gift shop.)

The Sitka Rose Gallery on Lincoln Street carries local Alaskan art—sculpture, paintings, baskets, pottery and jewelry. Located in a Victorian house with bright pink Sitka roses cascading from a fence, the gallery makes a colorful backdrop for a picture. Sitka's Artist Cove Gallery, also on Lincoln Street, has a large selection of local sculpture, painting and other works of art.

Fairweather Prints has hand-painted clothing, including T-shirts and sweatshirts, as well as scarves, dresses and jewelry. Other favorite art galleries and gift shops: Impressions, Robertson's and Kay McCarty's Art Gallery (all on Lincoln Street).

For campy Alaska souvenirs to take home to the kids, there are plenty of shops near the pier that sell gold nuggets, totem-pole key chains and T-shirts. You can also buy smoked salmon (by the can and the slab). Try the New Archangel Trading Co. on Harbor Drive.
