We know where the wild things are, and we'll take you there.
www.wilddepartures.com

Alaska Travel Guide



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

You've dreamed about traveling to Alaska. Or, perhaps you've been before, but you only saw a tiny portion and yearned for more. As an editor at Alaska magazine for more than a decade, our Wild Departures' founder has had the privilege of exploring the Great Land from end to end, seeing the best the state has to offer, leading her to take small groups to some of her favorite spots through Wild Departures. Her tours are frequently sold out, but this guide is intended to be a **general reference** for anyone planning or *thinking* about planning a visit. It's organized by **activity and interest**, while providing details about the region and/or major ports or cities nearby (a map at the end is provided as a reference). We've included helpful links to guide you to more information (all unpaid and unsponsored to maintain our credibility), as well as a few links to some of the trips we offer through Wild Departures when they are applicable. Remember that **Alaska is HUGE**, and this is by no means a comprehensive guide. But it is a **carefully curated** one. Enjoy!



CRUISES

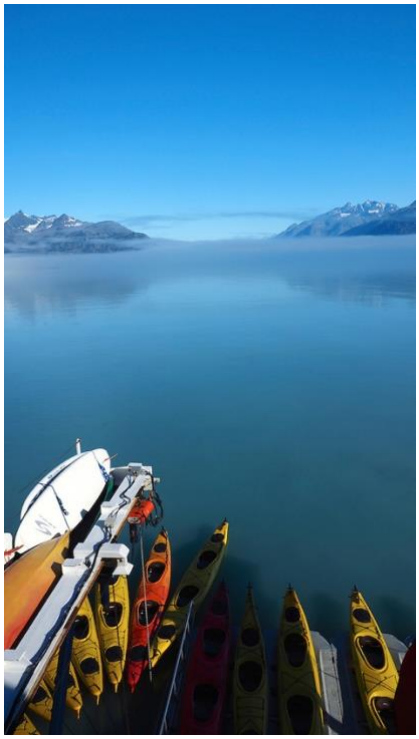
There are big ships and small ships and even smaller boats and catamarans. Most of these operate tours around southeast Alaska and the Inside Passage. The big ships (major cruise liners) are best suited for **multi-generational families**, **large groups with diverse interests and levels of mobility**, and **parents with small children**. Mega-ships offer a wide variety of activities on board to satisfy most ages and interests, keeping everyone busy and happy. For those groups, a large cruise might make sense.





However, the main star of a mega-ship excursion is the ship itself, with Alaska taking a supporting role. You'll see a few things from the ship, but they will often be far away and fleeting. You'll also be limited to pre-scheduled stops at ports, mostly located in southeast Alaska, which isn't a necessarily a bad thing, because Southeast and the Inside Passage are stunning. However, large ships can't adjust their schedules for weather or sightings. So, if you do decide to travel via large cruise liner, you'll want to take advantage of some of their optional land tours at each port—or land packages or extensions offered by the cruise company elsewhere in the state (which happen before or after your cruise). These might include taking a train to Denali or a whale watching tour or a sport fishing excursion or a bear-viewing flyout. They typically cost extra, but truly offer the only way to see and experience Alaska.

Small boat cruises (50 cabins or less) provide another option for travelers. While some stop at ports, others create their own itinerary on the fly, based upon weather and wildlife sightings. Small boats have a few other distinct advantages. Because of their size, they're able to get closer to the action, whether that's a pod of orcas, a calving glacier, or bears on a nearby shore. Flexibility also means that each day offers something new—an unscheduled stop or the ability to linger. Also, many of these smaller vessels have the ability to deploy zodiacs, paddle boards, and kayaks for daily exploration in small, isolated bays and coves, which might include tide pooling and hiking opportunities. So, while there's less to do on the boat itself, you're enveloped by your natural surroundings from start to finish. Another perk: you won't be traveling with thousands of strangers. A couple providers we'll mention here: UnCruise and Alaskan Dream Cruises.



GLACIERS

There are several different kinds of glaciers: Tidewater, valley, hanging, and cirque. Seeing any of them is a thrill, but you might have a specific experience in mind, and will want to plan accordingly.



Tidewater

Ah, so you want to hear the “white thunder” as a wall of ice cracks and crashes into a turquoise fjord while seals bob on top of ice floes in its wake. For many folks, seeing a calving glacier is a bucket-list item—and we think it should be—especially since so many are rapidly retreating. Tidewater glaciers terminate into the ocean, and when large chunks break off, the sound, splash, and collapse leaves viewers in awe. No doubt, you’ve seen photos and videos. Yet, it’s simply impossible to grasp the immensity and sheer grandeur of a glacier without observing one first-hand. Doing so will leave you breathless. Of course, we have a few favorites. They are:

Kenai Fjords National Park
Aialik and Holgate glaciers
These are fairly accessible to independent travelers by driving a few scenic hours from Anchorage to Seward and then hopping on a Major Marine Tours or Kenai Fjords Tours full day or half day excursion by catamaran.



Prince William Sound
Harvard Glacier
Drive 1.5 hours from Anchorage to Whittier and book a tour. This glacier in College Fjord calves all the time, so your odds are very good if you want to see and hear the action.

Glacier Bay National Park
Margerie and Lamplugh (also John Hopkins) glaciers
Small and large cruise ships alike contain this stop on their itineraries. It's a bit more difficult for independent travelers, but you can book flights from Juneau to Gustavus and make arrangements there to get to Bartlett Cove.



Tracy Arm-Fords Terror Wilderness
South Sawyer and North Sawyer glaciers
Cruises offer this itinerary, but you can also book a day trip from Juneau to see them. This is a fantastic "pupping" area where seals are safe from predators.

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park
Hubbard Glacier
The largest tidewater glacier in North America. Many Southeast cruise itineraries include a route to view this monster, which is 76 miles long, 7 miles wide, and 600 feet tall.

Other Glaciers

Beyond the calving tidewater glaciers, there are several other types of glaciers worth seeing. We'll list some of the more accessible ones here:

Anchorage / Girdwood
Portage Glacier
This is one of the most accessible mountain glaciers, because it's just an hour drive from Anchorage. From there, you can park and book a 1-hour boat ride up to the face of the glacier. Bonus points: it does still calve every now and again, though the activity isn't as dramatic as the tidewater glaciers.

Anchorage
Matanuska Glacier
This valley glacier can be reached off the Glenn Highway at mile 102, where you can park and enjoy a 15–20-minute hike to the face of this 4-mile-wide tower of ice.



Juneau
Mendenhall Glacier
You can see the glacier from the parking lot or the visitor center or hike an easy trail 1.5 miles to the beach area in front of the glacier where the dramatic Nugget Falls sprays from the rocks. Just a short, 12-mile drive from Juneau. The only glacier in Southeast Alaska that's accessible by road, Mendenhall is rapidly receding, but still utterly jaw-dropping in scale, with a face that regularly calves.



Seward

Exit Glacier

Just a short drive (8.4 miles) from the lovely and picturesque town of Seward (2.5 hours from Anchorage), you'll find the parking lot for trails leading to views of Exit Glacier flowing from the massive Harding Ice Field. This valley glacier is part of Kenai Fjords National Park, but can be accessed by foot from this location, rather than by boat, making it easy to see and enjoy. On the trails, you'll pass markers that have dates stamped onto them. These show the recession of the glacier's terminus over the decades.



BEARS (brown bears, black bears, and polar bears)

Bear-viewing is “a thing” in Alaska—certainly one of our favorite things. At Wild Departures, we offer up-close-and-personal bear-viewing and photo excursions (kind of what we’re known for). You’ll see bears fishing, nursing cubs, sparring and fighting and clamming. All that and more. But, if you can’t go with us or we’re booked or the timing isn’t right, there are several ways (and places) to see them.



Katmai National Park and Preserve

Brooks Falls

This is the famous spot where coastal brown bears stand atop a picturesque waterfall catching le aping salmon into their open jaws. You can see **10 to 30 bears** on any given day from July through September at this special place. There are day trips you can take from Anchorage on KatmaiAir that allow you several hours on the ground, unguided. It’s pricey for the amount of time you get there (right now $1350 per passenger), but it’s a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle that happens no place else on Earth—and you’re **99.9% guaranteed to see bear**s (and a whole lot of tourists). The other option is to fly to King Salmon and stay there, taking day trips to and from King Salmon by plane or water taxi. A third option is to apply for the lottery (katmailand.com) for camping or lodging at Brooks Falls Camp, which happens a year in advance and has a waitlist reaching into the thousands.



Katmai Coast (Hallo Bay, Geographic Harbor)

From Homer or Kodiak, you can take day-trip flyouts to coastal Katmai and land on the beaches to go bear viewing for a half or full day. Often times, the pilot will know where the bears are and can land in an area where they are grazing or fishing. You'll have a knowledgeable guide with you, but you'll likely need to do a fair amount of walking. The setting is spectacular.



Lake Clark National Park

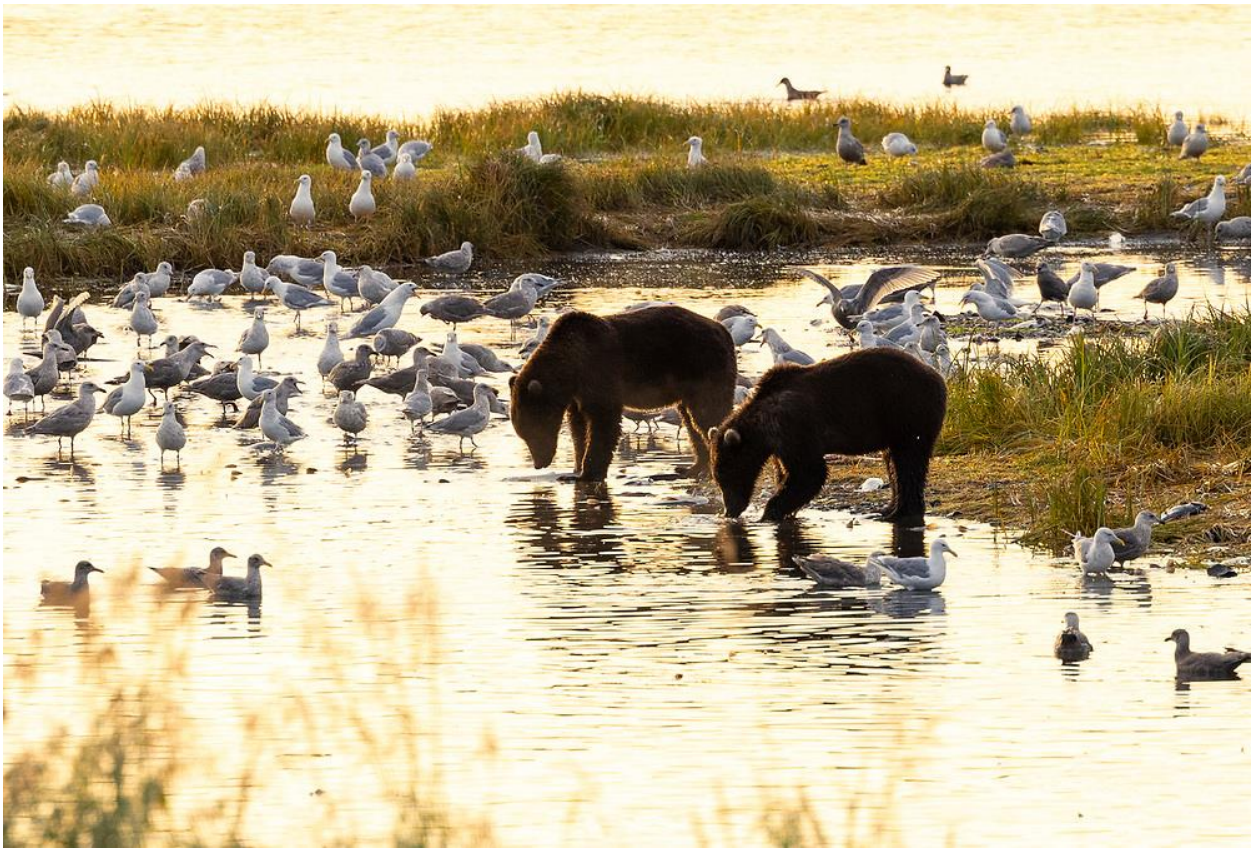
Silver Salmon Area

You can take flyout day trips from Anchorage and spend some time on the ground with the bruins (costs around $1,000 per person). Or you can stay at one of the lodges or camps for several days, which affords the best way to spend time watching bear behavior and enjoying other wildlife.



Kodiak

Home of the famed Kodiak Brown Bear and less touristy than the other spots, Kodiak is a scenic, authentic, commercial fishing community, which also happens to have bears! Most of the tours for bears here actually take you away from Kodiak to Katmai on fly-out tours, but a few stay in town for guided viewing. Wild Departures' founder and the editor of Alaska magazine, Michelle Theall, chose Kodiak to build a home where the bears roam and enjoys showing off this special place to her clients and friends.





Wrangell / Ketchikan

Anan Creek

Black and brown bears fish at this unique spot which is regulated by 60 permits that are issued each day. You'll see plenty of action from the platform and photo blind in the months of July and August. It's extremely unusual to see these two species of bears together, so this is definitely worth a look. You can take a 45-minute boat ride there from Wrangell or a float plane or get there by plane from Ketchikan.

Admiralty Island

Pack Creek

Pack Creek also runs on a permit system with 24 passes issued daily. The Pack Creek Wilderness Area is also called “Fortress of the Bears” and is home to 1,500 brown bears, which also can be seen on kayaking excursions. Get there by booking a 30-minute float plane ride from Juneau.

Juneau

Mendenhall Glacier (Steep Creek)

Black bears at Steep Creek are drawn to spawning sockeye and coho salmon in the summer months and can be viewed from elevated boardwalks that are right next to the parking lot. For anyone with mobility issues, this location provides easy access. And while sightings can be hit or miss, there’s nothing stopping you from hanging out or looking for them for several days in a row. While you’re waiting, the main attraction for most folks, the Mendenhall Glacier itself, is in full view for your enjoyment. The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center is just 12 miles from Juneau and can be reached by bus, taxi, tour bus, or rental car.

North Slope

Kaktovik and Utqiagvik

Yes, Alaska has **polar bears**, but seeing them here is unlikely since Covid restrictions all but shut down Kaktovik to tourism (ongoing), and Utqiagvik, while less regulated, doesn’t provide much commercial viewing and the bears are more spread-out making sightings sporadic and unpredictable at best. In the meantime, folks take cruises to Svalbard, Norway to see the bears, which can certainly provide sightings, but it’s a long way to go for distant views and no guarantees. Some cruisers see the bears, but many return disappointed. The best place to see



polar bears is in Churchill, Manitoba, and the best way to see them, along with a resident wolf pack and dark skies for northern lights, is on the Wild Departures Polar Bear Tour.



Our tours provide isolated enjoyment of these majestic animals, away from the tourists, with lodging that's far and away the best accommodations you'll find after leaving Winnipeg. Other options: Van tours from town offer a less expensive way to see the bears, but the bears are frequently run out of the area (along with bear viewers) to keep the bruins away from town, where they can get into trouble. Cracker shells are used to scare them away. Day trips to the tundra are available on tundra buggies, but you'll spend hours riding on the slow-moving vehicles to get into polar bear habitat before having to return to town. Another option is to say on a tundra lodge for several days, which allows you to remain in bear territory for a few days.



However, the accommodations on the tundra lodges are rustic, providing a twin bunk and bathrooms and showers shared with 16-32 other passengers. Plus, your views will always be from above the bears. In summary, of course we're biased because we've done extensive research, but the best way to see polar bears is with us at Wild Departures—where they often come right up to our remote lodge. They visit us, along with wolves and auroras. You might only do this type of trip once, so it's worth every penny to do it the right way.

WHALE WATCHING

So many whales to see in Alaska, so little time. There are seven species of whales plying the waters off Alaska's coast. These include the blue, beluga, bowhead, humpback, fin, minke, and gray whales. Add in killer whales / orcas, which are not technically whales but members of the dolphin species, and you've got eight! You can take a commercially run whale-watching tour just about anywhere in Southeast (Sitka, Juneau, Glacier Bay) or Southcentral (Kenai Fjords, Kachemak Bay, Prince William Sound). Beluga whales are most easily seen from the air (flying above Cook Inlet) or at Beluga Point driving along the Turnagain Arm just outside of Anchorage.



Whale behaviors include breaching, spy-hopping, fluking (tail view), finning (slapping a fin), and bubblenet feeding (a coordinated group trapping of krill that's impressive to see).



A few of our favorite spots to see whales are:

Icy Strait / Hoonah
Frederick Sound
Kenai Fjords National Park (Seward)
Kachemak Bay (Homer)
Prince William Sound (Valdez or Whittier)
Sitka
Kodiak



Michelle Theall, owner of Wild Departures, specializes in whale photography and gives a few tips to make sure you nail the shot from a moving boat on a rocky sea. Click here for her article in Alaska Magazine.

NORTHERN LIGHTS



First, we'll get a few facts out of the way. Unfortunately, you can't see the northern lights, also called the aurora borealis, in the **summer months** in Alaska. And in the **winter months**, even if it's dark at night…and you get an app that tells you that the solar activity is "high" on a particular forecast, you still won't see them if it's snowy, cloudy or foggy. If the forecast is snow…don't bother getting up at 2am for a look around. That said: Winter months on clear nights with high levels of activity provide the ideal conditions for catching lady aurora dancing overhead. Seeing the aurora borealis is a bucket-list item for many people, and there has never been a better time to see them than now through winter 2025. Why? Because we're reaching an 11-year peak cycle for solar activity. This window of opportunity is coming to a close, so put on your parka (or rent one) and head north this winter to experience this phenomenon first-hand. There's nothing like it. We promise. And, if you want to photograph them (which is tricky at best), join one of our Wild Departures tours, and you'll come home with gallery-worth images. A few of our "go-to" places are:

Kodiak
Fairbanks (Chena Hotsprings, Creamer's Field)
Wiseman / Coldfoot

And a bit out of Alaska in 2024 ONLY, Wild Departures offers the chance the Northern Lights, Polar Bears, and Wolves in the snow and ice in Manitoba—all three in a single trip—without light pollution (includes parkas, arctic boots, and snowpants!). Check out our trip HERE.

NATIONAL PARKS

There are eight national parks in Alaska, and if you **added up all the acreage of the Lower 48 national parks and multiplied by two**, you still would have fewer square miles of protected lands than those eight in Alaska. Crazy to think about! And that doesn't include all the state parks, national monuments, national forests, refuges, and wild and scenic rivers. Below, you'll find a list of the eight national parks. Each of them is unique and magnificent, and all are worth exploring. The good news is, it's possible to see Denali, Kenai Fjords, Katmai, and Lake Clark in a single well-planned and executed vacation, using Anchorage as your home base.



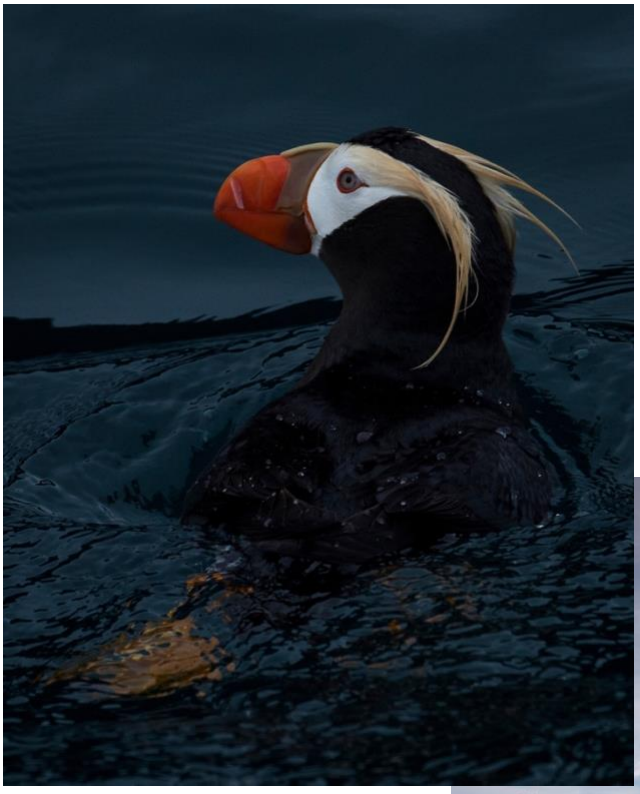
Denali

Only 1/3 of the people who come to Denali National Park actually get a clear view of "The High One." The highest peak in North America, Mount Denali, is 20,310 feet with a vertical relief that's greater than that of Everest. But because it's so tall, the mountain is often obscured by its own weather system. If seeing the mountain is your main goal, give yourself better odds by allocating a few days in the park—or watch the forecast and pay up for a flight-seeing excursion that will take you around the mountain and land on one of the glaciers. You can also get breathtaking views of Mount Denali from Talkeetna (not in the park itself) and book similar flight-seeing excursions from there. If you're just going to the park to enjoy its sheer grandeur and wildlife (or check off a box for another National Park visit), a day-trip or overnight can suffice. You can drive to the park from Fairbanks (2.5 hours) or Anchorage (4.5 hours) and use your own vehicle until you reach mile 15. If you want to go farther, a shuttle bus can take you to mile 43, where the park road is closed to further traffic until landslide mitigation is complete (date still TBD). You can also take the Alaska Railroad for a uniquely Alaskan type of tour including the park. One other exciting way to truly experience the park during these closures is to book lodging at the end of the park road in Kantishna and enjoy a flight-seeing trip over the park and around Mount Denali as part of your stay enroute to the lodge. The only way to access this part of the park is by air until the road closures are lifted, meaning very few tourists and an intimate wilderness experience all your own. Kantishna Roadhouse, Denali Backcountry Lodge, and Camp Denali offer great ways to enjoy the end of the road, including Ansel Adams' famous Reflection Pond and Wonder Lake.



Kenai Fjords

Kenai Fjords National Park starts on the Kenai Peninsula and is easily accessed from Seward, a town that's a stunning 126 miles south of Anchorage down the Seward Highway (2.5 hours), which is also a National Scenic Byway. If you don't want to do the driving, you can also take the Alaska Railroad from Anchorage to Seward. Once you get there, the best way to see this massive ice and mountain water park is to book a cruise through Major Marine Tours, whose dock is right at the Harbor 360 Hotel overlooking the harbor and Resurrection Bay. On a tour, you'll likely see orcas, humpbacks, puffins, sea otters, and the calving of one or two of the 40 glaciers flowing form the Harding Ice Field.





Lake Clark

Most visitors to Lake Clark's 4-million acres on the Alaska Peninsula will only see a fraction of the park because large portions of it are so remote that no one goes there. Flights over to Lake Clark are half the fun (they depart from Anchorage or Homer). Numerous snow-capped, active volcanoes rise from glaciated wilderness, yielding to aquamarine rivers surrounded by lush green landscapes.



In short, the place is as postcard beautiful as it gets. As Lake Clark is so isolated, you'll want to book any tours through a tour company, lodge, or air service to ensure access to amenities. Inland Lake Clark includes Port Alsworth departures to Lake Clark itself or local hikes to fly-fish at Tanalian Falls, as well as fly-out camping and backpacking to Twin Lakes. On the coastal part of the park on the west side of Cook Inlet, you can do day-trips to hike, fish, and bear-view, or stay in one place on a bear and puffin tour with Wild Departures for several days including posh amenities and gourmet meals, daily bear-viewing and photography instruction, a trip to see hundreds of horned and tufted puffins and puffin island, and the opportunity for northern lights as fall returns.





Katmai

Katmai National Park on the Alaska Peninsula is best known for Fat Bear Week and the bears at Brooks Falls. But there's so much more to it than that, and it's quite easy to get to via flights from Homer, Anchorage, Kodiak, or King Salmon. Beyond epic bear-viewing opportunities at Brooks Falls and on the coast (mentioned in the BEAR section), visitors can enjoy a tour of Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, epic sport fishing, boating, and day trips to scenic beaches that (if you're lucky) sometimes have bears and wolves fishing together. If bear-viewing is your goal, ensure that you hire a reputable guide or tour company, because Katmai is also the place where the Grizzly Man, Timothy Treadwell, met his fateful end. That said, Wild Departures frequently offers trips to areas in the park known for their safety and habituated bears that are used to tourists with large lenses hanging around.

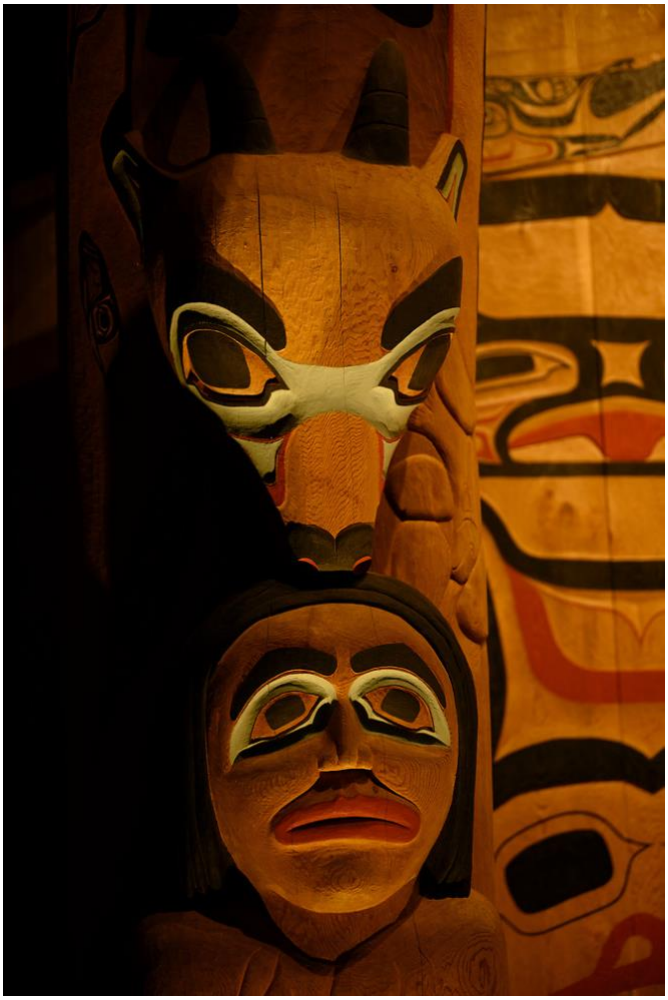


Wrangell-St. Elias

At more than 13 million acres, this national park is the largest and most isolated in the United States (it's the equivalent of six Yellowstones). Other than the Kennicott / McCarthy area, you could truly get lost here among unnamed mountain peaks, glaciers, and rivers…some still without a human footprint. One of the best and most adventurous ways to experience the park is by booking through the Ultima Thule Lodge. Every day, you'll be flown out to different parts of the park for different adventures customized for you and your group, returning to rest at a cozy lodge off the river with all the amenities you need, even though it's more than 100 miles from the nearest road. Or, if that's a bit too "out there" in terms of remoteness and price, you can opt for a stay in McCarthy (which you can even drive to from Anchorage if you have a good spare tire). It's a tiny, mining town that leads into the park where you can tour Kennecott Mine and hike on Ruth Glacier.

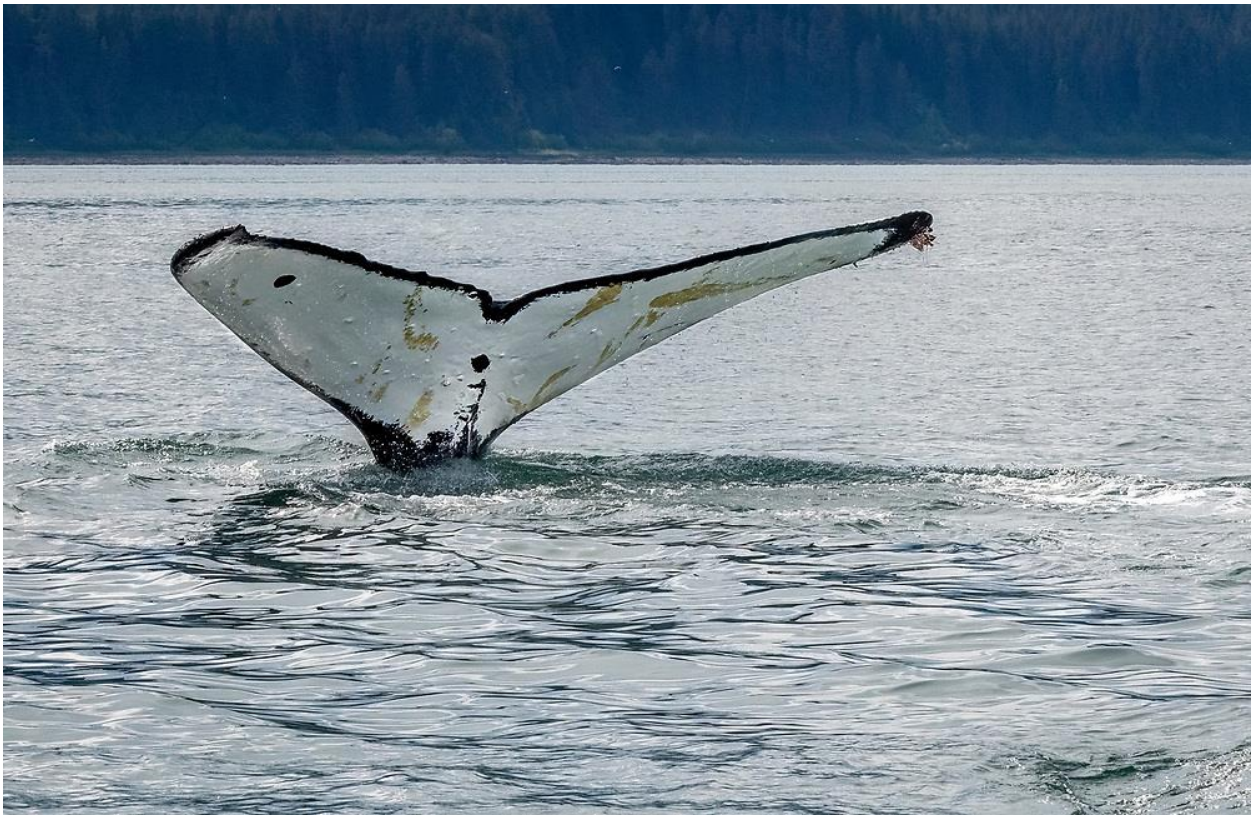






Glacier Bay

Glacier Bay National Park is the absolute gem of the Southeast (see our section on Glaciers), which might be one of the reasons that the 3.3-million-acre park is part of a 25-million-acre World Heritage Site. Likely the best way to enjoy the park is via small cruise ship or catamaran, departing from Juneau or Sitka and including the famed Inside Passage. The Fairweather Range provides an impressive backdrop of multiple peaks towering at heights of more than 10,000 feet behind the bay and its glaciers. Entering the area, you'll find a noisy sea lion haul out at South Marble Island with mountain goats scaling the nearby cliffs dropping into the bay. Whales fluke and breach and glaciers calve with waterfalls cascading down hillsides. It's possible to stay at Bartlett Cove at Glacier Bay Lodge, which has trails leading to the Huna Tribal House to give voice to the Alaska Native culture imbued in the land and its history.





Gates of the Arctic

Gates for the Arctic National Park is 8-million acres of roadless and trailless wilderness comprised of difficult terrain, embodied by the towering granite spires and cliffs of the Brooks Range and Arrigetch Peaks and six National Wild and Scenic Rivers. Wolves, bears, muskox, and caribou abound in this isolated area. Ideally, the park engages climbers, backpackers, and packrafters who have excellent primitive wilderness survival skills or those who have engaged reputable outfitters to host them on these activities. If this isn't you, then the quickest way to step foot into the park is to drive the Dalton Highway which parallels the eastern boundary of the park and start hiking into it from there after overnighting in Wiseman (again, no trails and some river crossings). Or perhaps the easier choice: you can catch a flight from Fairbanks to Anaktuvuk Pass, a small Nunamuit village, with a few amenities as well as a museum that's definitely worth a look. You can walk into the park from the airstrip.



Kobuk Valley

Thousands of caribou migrate seasonally across the Kobuk River and over the sand dunes in this park above the Arctic Circle. There are zero developed facilities in the park, and the only way to get there is by a reputable tour company who will arrange flights into Kotzebue or Bettles, leading to other drop-offs into the backcountry. Rafting the Kobuk River, joining a photo, fishing, or backpacking excursion are two popular ways to enjoy the park. While this might be the last National Park you have left to check off or your list, please do it safely.





Even though Alaska is HUGE, you can enjoy a robust road system that will take you to some fantastic hot spots for wildlife viewing, fishing, state parks, rafting, camping, and more. The absolute "must-have" resource for driving in the Great Land is our The MILEPOST. It is the definitive driving guide, complete mile-by-mile log of Alaska's highways and byways and all stops in between. It might be old-school but having a copy of this bad boy (which includes maps) in your car is the only way to travel—especially if you hit spots without cell service or wi-fi. That said, if you just want a quick primer, here are a six roadtrips you can do in a weekend!

Kenai Peninsula

Welcome to the popular playground of southcentral Alaska. Easy access from Anchorage along with a bevy of activities make the Kenai a hot spot for local road-trippers and out-of-towners alike. Two highways lead to different endpoints of the peninsula with equally worthwhile destinations: Seward and Homer. You'll do a little backtracking to hit both towns, but rest assured, the drive is never the same twice, and along the way are opportunities for hiking, fishing, rafting, dining, and even gold-panning.



Seward: 127 miles from Anchorage

While it might technically be possible to do this route in under three hours, why rush it? Leaving Anchorage, you'll encounter Potter Marsh, an excellent 564-acre birding spot with boardwalks for viewing and photography. Entering the first section of the Kenai along Turnagain Arm, you'll escape into an otherworldly milieu and perhaps start to feel that true vacation vibe. Thankfully, the road engineers constructed multiple pullouts along the route, so drivers don't get so distracted that they end up in the estuary. Turnagain Arm churns with waves and tidal bores fit for wind and kite surfers, as well as Beluga whales, whose ghostly forms can be seen with the naked eye or through telescopes installed at Beluga Point. On the opposite side of the highway, the rocky cliffs of the Chugach provide footing for nimble, gravity-defying Dall sheep, and human rock climbers seeking adventure. Small and scenic towns and attractions deserve a detour, like Girdwood, the eclectic enclave of Alyeska Resort; Portage Glacier for cruising to the

toe of the ice; the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, delighting kids with close encounters with muskox, bears, elk, wolves, and raptors; and Hope, a charming mountain community steeped in mining history.



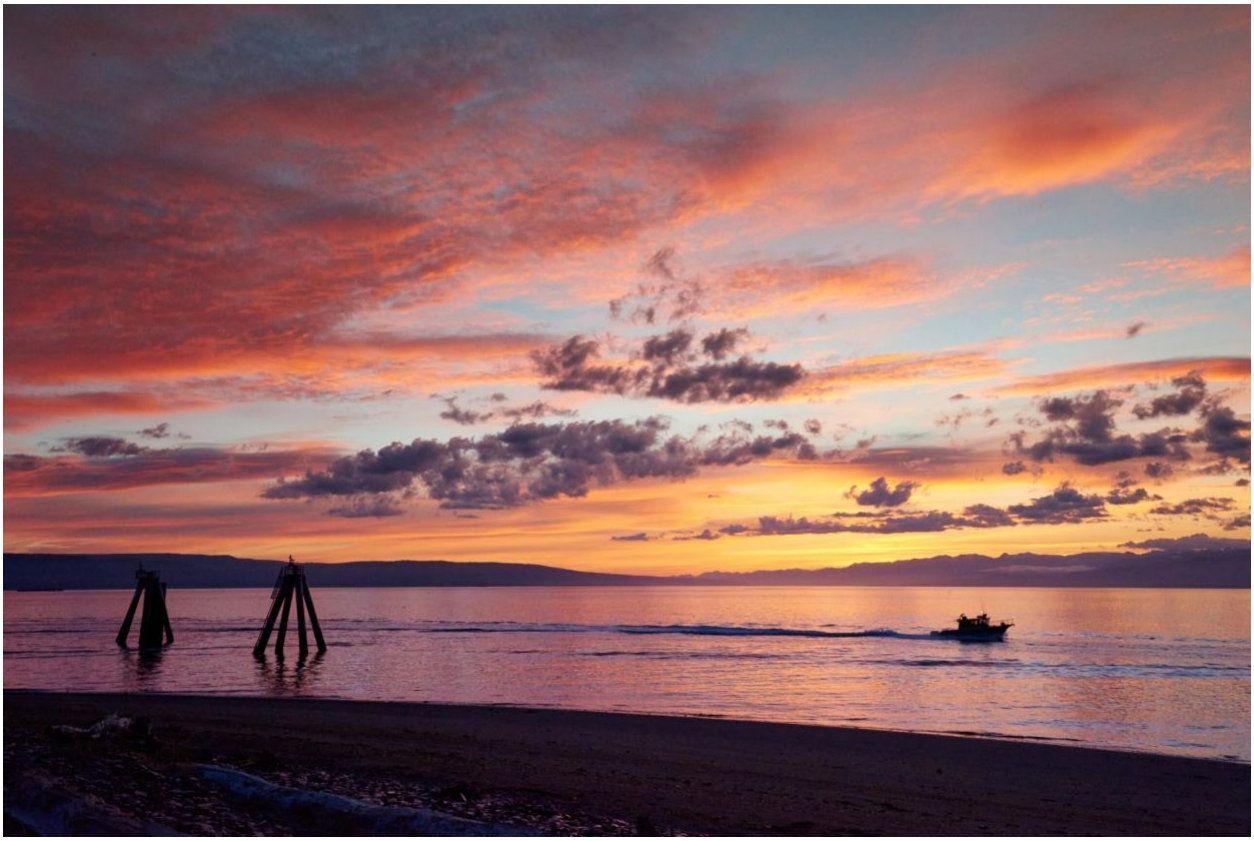
Mid-summer, expansive swaths of neon fuchsia fireweed blooms demand attention, and the Lower Summit Lake parking area provides time and space for proper admiration. From there, you'll traverse Moose Pass and drop down into Seward, known as the Gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park, a national gem that can be explored by land or water from the town. Boat tours depart daily from the Seward Boat Harbor in Resurrection Bay to expose visitors to a small portion of the park's nearly 700,000 acres. The small-vessel cruises afford sightings of whales, sea otters, puffins, Steller sea lions, and harbor seals, as well as a crash-course in ice calving in front of Holgate or Aialik glaciers. The other way to access the park is to drive to Exit Glacier, just a few miles from downtown. Gentle walking paths ascend through forested terrain to open vistas of the frozen jagged terminus of the Harding Ice Field. Along the trail, markers denote the timeline of Exit Glacier's melting retreat over decades and miles.

While in Seward, enjoy shoreline walks or paddle Resurrection Bay; visit the Alaska SeaLife Center; try dogsledding at Ididaride Kennels (Seavey-family owned); get coffee at Resurrect Art Coffee House, lunch at Zudy's Café, and dinner at Chinooks.

After saying goodbye to Seward, backtrack on the Seward Highway until you reach the cutoff for the Sterling Highway to Homer. There are some amazing places to stop along the Sterling, and you can—and should—spend days wandering the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, fishing on the Russian River, visiting the Russian Orthodox churches in Kenai and Ninilchik, and bird watching at Anchor Point. That said, it's the view that takes a starring role on this drive as you near Homer—which makes a person grateful for the midnight sun so you don't miss it. Photo ops abound from pullouts overlooking the blustery waters of Cook Inlet with Mount Iliamna

and Mount Redoubt, active snowcapped volcanoes, towering more than 10,000-feet above sea level. Cue the awe and wonder—better than any July 4th fireworks.

Homer: 179 miles from Seward
Homer is the big sister of Seward, a bit more spread out and populated, with more amenities and activities for throngs of tourists. Sportfishing and whale-watching charters abound, taking anglers and cetacean-lovers on water-borne adventures in Kachemak Bay. Everywhere you look, whether in a boat or on land in and around Homer, you'll find a big, jaw-dropping, cliché of a view. The best one, the 360-degree mother-of-all vistas can be found at the end of the Homer Spit, on the deck of The Chart Room Restaurant at Land's End Resort. The spit juts out into the bay, where sea otters, bald eagles, and spouting whales cruise on by. On the spit and in town, shops, galleries, bars, attractions, and eateries fill every inch of space. A few favorites: Salty Dawg Saloon, Seafarer's Memorial, Fat Olives, Two Sisters Bakery, Alaska Salt Co., Salmon Sisters Fish Shop and Flagship Shop, and La Baleine Café. Homer is also a jumping off point for day trips to coastal Katmai bear viewing.



Gulf of Alaska
While the Kodiak Island Archipelago lies smack dab in the Gulf of Alaska, you can still take an epic road trip there. After all, it's the second largest U.S. island next to Hawaii's Big Island. Alaska Airlines flies to Kodiak from Anchorage three times daily, and a handful of rental car companies offer vehicles to explore the roughly 90 miles of pavement. (You also can bring your own vehicle from Homer on a nine-hour ferry.)

Kodiak: 90 miles of road system

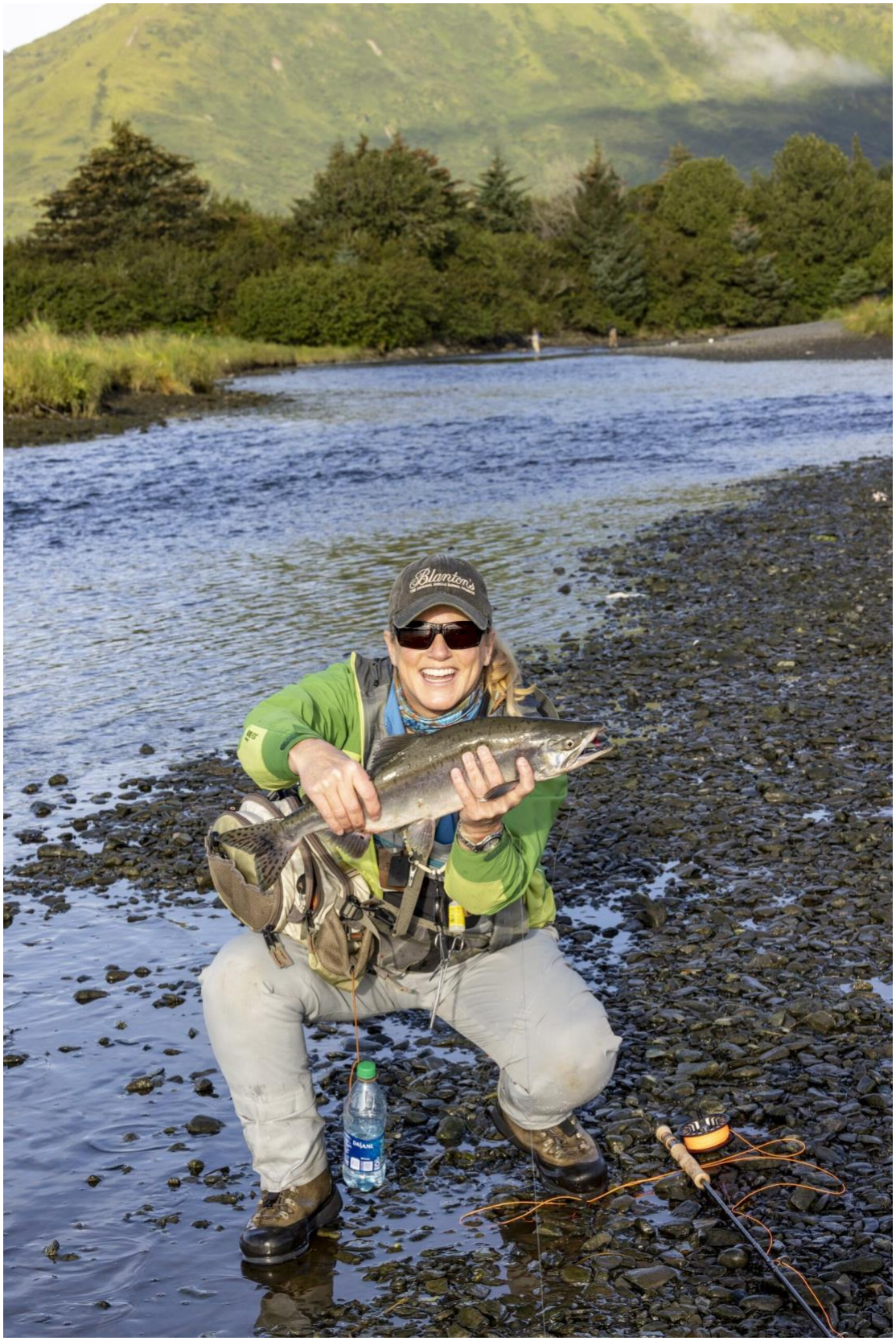
The nice thing about downtown Kodiak is that it doesn't feel like a tourist trap. One reason for this is that Kodiak reverberates with Alutiiq culture, making a stop at the Alutiiq Museum a must. The museum cares for more than 250,000 items dating back thousands of years providing visitors a glimpse into the rich Indigenous history of the land, language, archeology, and art of its people. In the downtown area, you'll also find the boat harbor with its resident sea lions, otters, and the occasional orca whale pod, along with a brewery, cidery, a handful of restaurants and a couple hotels, a convention center, bookstore, and the amenities necessary for 5,500 people living on an island (grocery stores, car repair shops, home furnishings, hardware store, hospital, schools).



Getting out of downtown heading north on Monashka Bay Road leads to Fort Abercrombie State Historical Park, an abandoned WWII coastal defense post that never saw enemy fire and provides exceptional whale viewing into the Pacific from the tops of the rugged cliffs at Miller Point. Puffins and bald eagles use the area for fishing and several gentle trails lead through lush green Sitka spruce forests heavy with moss and lichen. Driving farther north, spectacular rolling verdant mountains rise from glacier-blue waters until the road ends at White Sands Beach in Monashka Bay. The white sand here, fine, soft, and pure, is actually petrified ash from Katmai's Novarupta volcano eruption of 1912. Stroll the beach or picnic, but also watch for Kodiak brown bears, known to frequent the area.

South of downtown Kodiak, take the cutoff road to Anton Larsen Bay. Several salmon streams rife with fish await anglers and much of the trip is above tree line with dramatic, panoramic photo opportunities and hiking trails. The road ends at Anton Larson Bay, a perfect destination for sea kayaking, beachcombing, tide pooling, and fishing. Hikes lead to white granite cliffs, a beaver pond, and a cascading waterfall.

Back on the main road, another turn-off leads to Buskin River State Recreation area. Though it's next to the airport, the Buskin River is one of the hottest spots for sockeye, pink, and coho fishing, as well as bear viewing off the road system. Bald eagles nest and ermine dart in and out of rock outcroppings. Campsites and two picnic shelters invite folks to stay awhile.



After the Buskin and continuing south on Chiniak Highway, you'll find yourself stopping just to take in the scenery. There's a reason the place is called the Emerald Isle because it's got 20 shades of green on display, courtesy of a lot of precipitation and a maritime environment. Kodiak doesn't have a ton of road signs or designated parking, which means take care when the sight of a fox or bear stops you in your tracks. Watch for "no parking" or "private road" or "no trespassing signs." If you see a pullout that's not marked with a warning, you're probably safe to park and gawk at the flora, fauna, and all things fur, fin, and feathered—or wet your line at Russian Creek, Salonie Creek, or American River. A great lunch spot for clam chowder or a beer, if it's open, is The Rendezvous. Continuing out the road, it forks: Left goes to a tiny community with access to stunning beaches and sea birds galore: Chiniak. The right fork leads to Pasagshak State Recreation Area, with perfect silver salmon conditions and farther on, a chance to witness an Alaskan rarity, surfing. Just past Surfer's Beach, there's fossil beach, and an odd rocket launch facility. The main thing to know about Kodiak: it is as picturesque as it gets with surprises around every turn.

Southeast

While Alaska's "panhandle" might seem remote because much of it lies off the road system, it's not to be missed. Southeast's larger communities are easily accessible and offer connecting flights and ferries to outlying destinations.

Juneau to Haines

Okay, we're cheating a little on this one because the route includes jumping on the Alaska Marine Highway, but since it's called a highway, we figured, why not? Fly into Juneau, the capital of Alaska, and rent a car. This allows you to explore the 40 miles of road system in and around Juneau at your leisure.



Downtown, you'll find the Alaska State Museum with fine art and historic exhibits that rival that of any major metropolitan city, and the Sealaska Heritage Institute allowing an in-depth look at the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures. A quick walk around town and along the marina gives you ample opportunities to grab a bite to eat (Tracy's King Crab Shack, Sandpiper Café, The Rookery), shop, or imbibe at a saloon. It's absolutely worthwhile, one might even say required, to take the Goldbelt Tram from the cruise ship dock up 1,800 feet toward the top of Mount Roberts, where adventurous souls can continue onward and upward on trails leading to the summit. Without hiking, soul-arresting views of the area reward tram riders, and even a few steps onto the trails allow access to the Tongass National Forest, the largest intact temperate rainforest in the world. Another fun way to access the forest is to take a Rainforest Adventure Tour with Glacier Gardens.

After leaving downtown, the next mandatory stop is Mendenhall Glacier, a 13-mile river of ice terminating at Mendenhall Lake. Adjacent to the parking lot, you'll find a small bridge overlooking Steep Creek, a salmon-filled buffet frequented by black bears. A short walk leads to the visitor center where you can learn more about the retreating glacier before hiking the two-mile roundtrip trail to stand beneath the spray of Nugget Falls.

Returning to the main road northwest a few miles, you'll find the holy and peaceful haven of the National Shrine of St. Therese. The grounds allow for silent reflection among the beauty of the rosary trail, stone chapel, circular labyrinth made of flowering plants and boulders, and a causeway opening to Lynn Canal with the Chilkat Mountains in the distance.

In the morning, motor onto the ferry for a 4.5-hour cruise up the famed Inside Passage. Whales, waterfalls, lighthouses, and deep water make time pass quickly—especially when the boat is doing the driving for you. In downtown Haines, park the car and take a walking tour of the town, exploring the nooks and crannies of this quirky, fairytale hamlet. A few stops of note: Haines Sheldon Museum, The American Bald Eagle Foundation headquarters, Fort William H. Seward and Alaska Indian Arts, The Hammer Museum, The Rusty Compass, Haines Brewing Company, Port Chilkoot Distillery, Fireweed Restaurant, Mountain Market, and on Saturdays in summer months the Haines Farmers Market.



Back in the car, you can take short drives south to Chilkat State Park, which offers a series of exceptional hikes and views of a hanging glacier with twin waterfalls, then double back and split off to Battery Point Trail along the Lynn Canal coast to look for whales, seals, and sea lions. The opposite direction, north of town on Lutak Road, find a place to park near the ADF&G salmon-counting fish weir on Chilkoot River for bear viewing and photography. Doubling back again, catch the Haines Highway west and north for jaw-dropping (braided rivers, cathedral-spired peaks) natural beauty in the 48,000-acre Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. You can raft the preserve in the summer, but the late fall months bring thousands of eagles soaring and fighting over the last of the chum run before freeze-up. The Haines Highway continues north where you can stop for a bite at 33-Mile Roadhouse before continuing onto the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center, dedicated to preserving the Tlingit culture with state-of-the-art exhibits and collections. A side trip to the Kroschel Wildlife Center offers a unique opportunity to learn about and view orphaned and rescued wildlife at Steve Kroschel's animal sanctuary. If you want to keep driving, you can go into Canada. Just have your passport ready.

North of Anchorage
Landlubbers will love heading away from the coast to explore the varied ecosystems, scenery, and adventure possibilities along the Parks Highway.

Talkeetna: 113 miles from Anchorage
If seeing the High One ranks high on your bucket list, you don't necessarily have to drive all the way to Denali National Park, especially since ongoing landslide road reconstruction has limited access to the park beyond Mile 43. That said, on a clear day, Denali overlooks Talkeetna, a small community with a summer mountaineering vibe that's actually closer to North America's highest peak than the park entrance. On the 2.5-hour drive to Talkeetna, we recommend a few detours. The first: the Musk Ox Farm in Palmer because there's truly nothing cuter



than a baby muskox or softer than the qiviut undercoat of the magnificent creatures. The second: Hatcher Pass with its historic Independence Mine State Historical Park and abundant berries and wildflowers. Back on the Parks Highway, keep an eye out for moose, bears,

porcupine, fox, and other critters. Talkeetna Spur Road off the Parks Highway leads to the town where you can take a flight-seeing plane or helicopter tour to get close views of Denali and land on a glacier. Mushing tours, fishing, rafting, and one of the state's best breweries (Denali Brewing Company) are here, along with the historic Talkeetna Roadhouse and the iconic Nagley's Store, founded in 1921. Considering that Talkeetna consists of a handful of streets, the place packs in a plethora of galleries, restaurants, lodges, music, and enough outfitters and tour operators to keep you on bikes, hiking trails, ATVs, jet boats, skis, snowmachines, kayaks, pack rafts, boat charters, and ziplines. But you came to see Denali, and if you didn't spot her on the drive up, you won't find a better setting than the edge of town with the Alaska Range and the High One towering over the confluence of the Susitna and Talkeetna rivers.

Wrangell Mountains
Head out the Glenn Highway, then south on the Richardson Highway and beyond for a taste of rugged mountains, no crowds, and unparalleled natural beauty. This is the place to get lost, in a good way.



Kennicott and McCarthy: 314 miles from Anchorage
Mining culture abounds in McCarthy, as well as scenic wonder. The drive to McCarthy isn't for the faint-hearted, because a good chunk of the drive slows drivers to five or 10 miles per hour with sharp rocks and narrow sections and wheel-gripping roller-coaster curves. The Glenn Highway runs into the Richardson Highway and the trans-Alaska pipeline. Go south on the Richardson past Copper Center and stop at the Alyeska Pipeline Interpretive Area across from Willow Lake. Hop out of your vehicle to marvel at a feat of engineering—800-miles of pipeline carrying crude oil from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. At the viewpoint, you can stand beside and

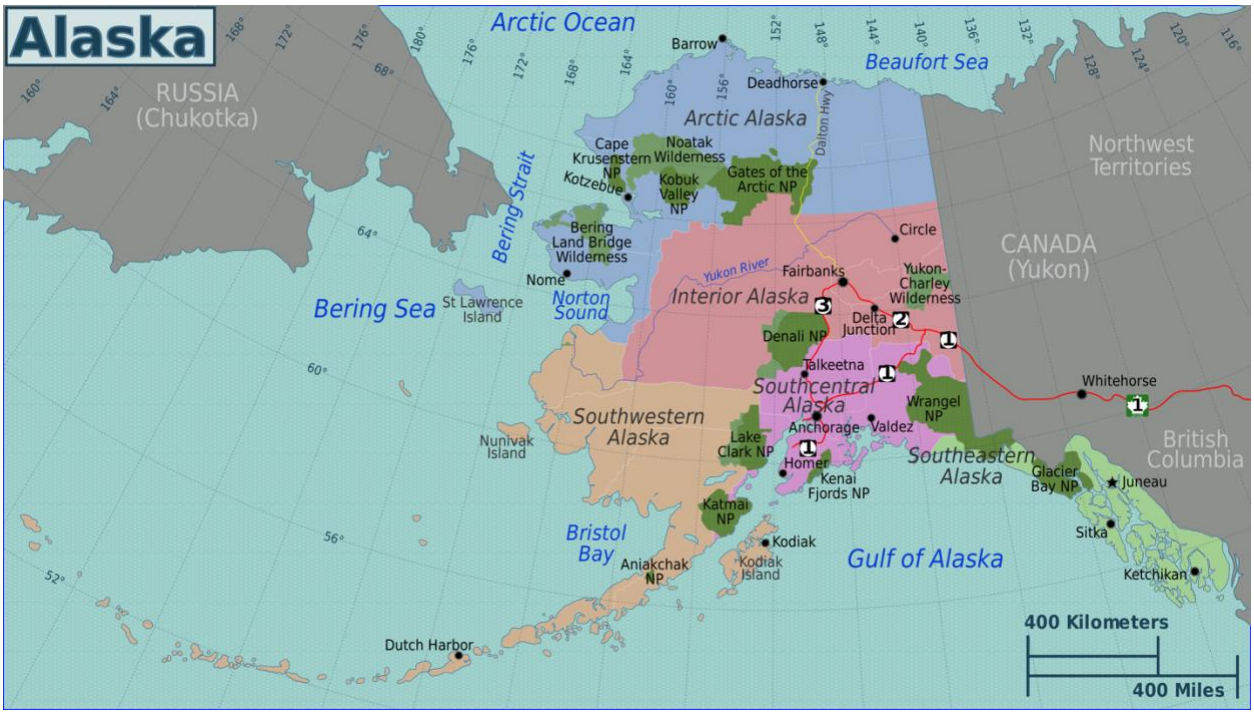
beneath the elevated, eight-foot-diameter metal tube while oil flows over your head in real time.

After gawking at one of the state's major industrial accomplishments, take the Edgerton Highway to the rough-shod McCarthy Road until it dead ends at a pedestrian bridge. You'll park and walk .6 miles to McCarthy where you'll step back into pioneer times with a restored boarding house, saloon, and general store. McCarthy sprung up after copper was discovered in 1900 to house and appease miners with a proclivity toward strong drink, gambling, pool halls, and visits to the red-light district. Many of the buildings are still in use, though they tend to cater to adventurers and history and geology buffs and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Up the road, you enter Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and encounter astounding views of Root and Kennicott glaciers and the preserved mining buildings of Kennecott Mine, which operated from 1911-1938 and made more than $200 million. The mining buildings appear to teeter off Bonanza ridge as if they're considering a dip into the icy moraine-created rivers below. Building tours of this national historic landmark give visitors a glimpse into 1900s ore extraction and the difficulty of transporting riches from a remote and harsh landscape to the civilized world. After working up a sweat touring the facilities, take in a meal and the views of 14 of the highest peaks (16,000-feet-plus) on the continent from the deck of the Kennicott Glacier Lodge. Before leaving the area, book a tour for glacier hiking or ice climbing on Root Glacier, an unforgettable experience in one of the most spectacular areas of Alaska.

MAP



A few more resources or articles of interest regarding travel in Alaska:

37 Places to Indulge Your Travel Dreams (round-up by interests)

Hidden Destinations (a few off-the-beaten path)

Image Galleries: See the images included in this document as well as others, all available for purchase.

Wild Departures: Find out more about our trips and tours to Alaska and beyond. We know where the wild things are, and we'll take you there.