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April 18, 2025 · The Journal / Travel Inspiration

Insider's Guide to Alaska

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Alaska is where nature still feels raw and untamed — in the best possible way. Towering mountains, massive glaciers and roaming wildlife around every bend make it feel like another

world, yet it's surprisingly easy to explore. Whether by cruise, train or guided tour, the experiences are unforgettable.

This is a destination that works for all kinds of travelers. Multi-gen families bond over whale watching excursions and junior ranger programs, while thrill-seekers can chase backcountry adventures or helicopter to remote glaciers. The pace here respects your personal travel style.

There's more here than just the views — Alaska has a strong cultural heart. You'll find Indigenous heritage centers, historic gold rush towns and welcoming communities proud to share their stories.

Whether you're after outdoor adventure, cultural discovery or a bit of both, Alaska is one of those rare destinations that leaves a lasting impression. Read on to discover where to stay, cruise, eat and what to do across Alaska.

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Need to know



Image courtesy of Tutka Bay Lodge - Within The Wild

Alaska is best known for its rugged outdoor lifestyle. Whether you're heading out on a glacier hike or just exploring a scenic trail, it's important to come prepared — bring water, snacks, a map and a basic first-aid kit. Alaska takes its natural beauty seriously, so travelers are encouraged to tread lightly and respect the land. Staying eco-conscious isn't just appreciated here — it's expected.

Wildlife is one of the highlights here, but it's important to observe it safely. Keep a respectful distance, never approach or feed animals, and stay on marked trails. Move quietly, and remember — you're a visitor in their home. If you're hiking in bear country, carrying bear spray is a necessity.

Alaska is generally very safe, with good medical care in cities like Anchorage and Fairbanks. But rural areas can be remote, so travel insurance is highly recommended. Regional flights often involve small planes and long distances, so be prepared for that extra layer of adventure. And if you plan to fish, be sure to get your license in advance — it's easier and usually cheaper than buying on arrival.

It's also worth noting: popular hotels, cruises and tours book up fast (bookings are now open for 2026). Planning at least a year out can help lock in your top picks and avoid missing out. If your trip includes a cruise from Vancouver — or sometimes Seattle — you'll need a passport, so double-check those requirements early.

Airports: Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport (ANC) is the largest airport hub in Alaska. Though if you're staying in Fairbanks, you can opt for flying into Fairbanks International Airport (FAI). For those cruising into Alaska, port destinations include Seattle and Vancouver, making Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA) and Vancouver International Airport (YVR) additional options and most convenient for those opting for a cruise experience. There are many direct flight options to ANC, ranging from major US cities such as New York City, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles.

Best time to visit: Alaska shines from May to September, when the days are long, the weather is mild and wildlife is easy to spot. July and August are the busiest, with everything open and running, but May, June and early September offer fewer crowds and great conditions too. Want to see the northern lights? Head to Fairbanks between November and April. Winter, while brutally cold, adds its own level of charm, bringing snow, dog sledding and hot springs — but many tours and lodges are closed in the off-season.

Ideal length of stay: To get the full Alaskan experience, a stay of 7–10 days or more is ideal. With this much time, there's a relaxed pace and the opportunity to explore via guided tours or cruise options. And, if your itinerary allows, you can bookend your trip with a stop in Seattle or Vancouver based on your port destination of choice.

Signature dishes: king crab legs (sweet, tender and served simply with drawn butter or lemon), halibut cheeks (a local delicacy, often pan-seared and paired with seasonal vegetables), smoked salmon spread (creamy and rich, served with crackers on warm sourdough), reindeer sausage (smoky and savory, popular in everything from breakfast scrambles to street food), salmon banh mi (a fusion favorite in Anchorage, blending Alaska's signature fish with Vietnamese flavors), firewood honey and goat cheese (a uniquely Alaskan pairing that celebrates local flora and farms).

What to wear: Alaska's intense weather conditions call for functionality. Think weatherproof jackets, cozy knits and versatile base layers. In town, smart-casual wear such as jeans, sweaters

and comfortable boots work just as well. For nature excursions, don't forget your waterproof rain gear and good walking shoes.

Where to stay



Image courtesy of Stillpoint Lodge

Stillpoint Lodge: This peaceful, all-inclusive eco-lodge sits across the bay from Homer and offers a quiet escape into nature. Guests stay in cozy private cabins, enjoy chef-prepared meals and can spend their days kayaking, fishing or exploring nearby glaciers and national parks. Wellness is a big focus here too, with yoga, massage and forest trails right on site.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Tutka Bay Lodge – Within The Wild: A remote, family-run lodge that sits at the edge of Kachemak Bay and offers an intimate, off-the-grid experience. With just a few cabins, the vibe

is personal and peaceful — perfect for diving into Alaska's coastal wilderness without giving up comfort. Days can include kayaking, bear viewing or even foraging with the chef.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Alyeska Resort: Set in the mountain town of Girdwood, roughly an hour from Anchorage, this full-service resort is great for travelers looking for easy access to adventure with a touch of an upscale vibe. It's a year-round spot — great for skiing in winter or hiking and glacier tours in summer. Guests love the spacious rooms, saltwater pool and mountaintop dining options.

Sheldon Chalet – Matanuska-Susitna: Set on a remote glacier deep in Denali's backcountry, this five-room chalet is one of Alaska's most exclusive stays. It's equal parts adventure and luxury, offering front-row views of Denali, private glacier treks and even helicopter-accessed excursions. Despite the wild setting, the experience is fully hosted and beautifully curated, with cozy accommodations and incredible food.

The Hotel Captain Cook: This downtown Anchorage hotel offers a comfortable yet classic experience with great views of the mountains, inlet and city skyline. Locally owned, it features multiple dining spots, a full athletic club and an old-school vibe—all within walking distance of shops, trails and museums.

Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge: Set on a ridge just outside of town, this lodge offers stunning views of Denali and the Alaska Range. It's got that cozy log cabin feel with just the right amount of polish — think stone fireplaces, viewing decks and local dining options.

Cruises



Image courtesy of Holland America Line

Cruising is one of the more comfortable and scenic ways to explore Alaska's vast coastline and remote towns. With cruise-only or full cruise-tour options available, you'll glide past glaciers and rugged wilderness with the option to add inland adventures to places like Denali. It's a great fit for couples, families and groups who want to see a lot without the hassle. Departure points include Seattle or Vancouver, providing the opportunity to expand your trip beyond Alaska itself.

Holland America Line: A great choice for travelers seeking a classic and relaxing exploration of Alaska. Their Land+Sea Journeys combine coastal cruising with inland stays at properties such as The Hotel Captain Cook or Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge. Onboard, expect spacious ships, Glacier Bay access and enriching extras like talks from Park Rangers.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$100 onboard credit, complimentary Music of Denali dinner theatre if doing a land tour.

Princess Cruises: For travelers who want a classic, Alaska cruise experience with plenty of options, this is a good go-to. From cruise-only routes to full cruise tours that include stays near Denali or Fairbanks, it's easy to mix coast and backcountry. Thanks to its comfortable ships and polished service, it's a solid choice for couples, families and first-time Alaska cruisers alike.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$100 onboard credit.

Royal Caribbean: A great pick for travelers who want big adventure and bold amenities while exploring Alaska. Think sky-high glacier views from the North Star or chilling in the panoramic Two70 lounge between ports. It's fitting for families, groups or anyone who wants a modern, high-energy spin on the classic Alaska cruise.

- **Fora Perks** include complimentary specialty dining for 2 and spa treatment for 1.

Norwegian Cruise Line: For travelers who like to keep things flexible and fun while taking in Alaska's wild beauty, this is a great match. With freestyle dining, lively entertainment and plenty of big-ship perks, it's a relaxed way to experience the great outdoors without sacrificing comfort.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$300 onboard credit.

National Geographic x Lindblad: For a more immersive and educational take on Alaska, National Geographic X Lindblad offers small-ship expeditions focused on wildlife, photography and hands-on exploration. These sailings are ideal for curious travelers who want to get closer to nature with guidance from experts.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$200 onboard credit.

HX: Perfect for adventurous travelers who want to dig deeper into Alaska, such as nature lovers, photographers and couples. These small expedition ships get you closer to glaciers, remote islands and off-the-beaten-path towns like Wrangell and Petersburg. With onboard naturalists, guided hikes and kayak trips, it's all about education and exploration.

- **Fora Perks** include up to \$100 onboard credit.

Silversea: An upscale excursion in the wilds of Alaska, with all-suite accommodations, butler service and memorable dining experiences. These intimate voyages pair indulgence with enriching shore activities led by knowledgeable local guides.

Regent Seven Seas: A fully all-inclusive way to cruise Alaska, with spacious suites, gourmet dining and a long list of included shore excursions. It's a fun pick for travelers who want everything taken care of — from glacier adventures to evening cocktails — without lifting a finger.

Viking: For adults who want a quieter, more refined experience Viking is an ideal choice. Expect included excursions, thoughtful enrichment and all-veranda staterooms for those glacier views, without the crowds or kids.

History and culture



Image courtesy of Sheldon Chalet Matanuska-Susitna

Long before it became the 49th US state in 1959, Alaska was home to Indigenous peoples, including the Tlingit, Haida, Iñupiat and Yup'ik, whose traditions, spiritual beliefs and storytelling still shape the local life today. You'll also find echoes of the Gold Rush era, which took place from 1897 to 1907 — especially in towns like Skagway, where saloons and old wooden storefronts bring the wild frontier spirit to life.

Cultural rituals are woven into everyday life, from Native dance performances to totem carving in the Southeast region to blanket tosses and whaling festivals in the Arctic. Sacred landmarks like Totem Bight State Park in Ketchikan or the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage offer a window into the region's rich heritage and connection to the land. While it's no secret that Alaska is known for its landscapes, there's no doubt that its cultural story is just as rich and memorable.

Cultural celebrations & events

- **World Ice Art Championships – Fairbanks (late February to March):** Noted as one of the largest ice sculpting competitions in the world. Witness incredible artistry carved from massive blocks of ice. Pro-tip: Go at night to see the sculptures glow and come to life.
- **Midnight Sun Festival – Fairbanks (weekend closest to June 21):** Take advantage of the endless sunlight thanks to the Summer Solstice by celebrating with outdoor music, street food and various events lasting well into the early morning hours.
- **Golden Days Festival – Fairbanks (July):** To celebrate Alaska's Gold Rush history, witness parades, dress up in period costumes and partake in gold-panning competitions. This is particularly fun for families and history lovers.
- **Blueberry Festival – Ketchikan (August):** Relish in the sweetness of blueberry season by attending the Blueberry Festival. Live music, pie-eating contests and handmade crafts add to the "small-town charm" that is often found throughout Alaska.
- **National Park Ranger Programs – All Summer:** Though it's not a traditional festival or celebration, many national parks like Denali, Glacier Bay and Kenai Fjords offer seasonal, ranger-led hikes, talks and kids' activities. A great opportunity to safely embrace the local culture and incredible wildlife.

Activities/excursions



Alaska delivers the wow factor. You might kick off your morning spotting wildlife or hiking through wildflower-lined trails, then hop on a boat to cruise past towering glaciers or find a cozy spot by the water and soak in the views at your own leisure.

- **Anchorage Museum:** Located in downtown Anchorage, this museum combines art, history and science to give visitors a fun, modern take on Alaska's history.
- **Alaska Native Heritage Center:** Thoughtfully dive into Alaska's Indigenous cultures through storytelling, dance and hands-on exhibits—all in a beautiful lakeside setting.
- **Take a private heli tour:** Witness stunning glacier views from above by participating in a private helicopter tour in Southcentral Alaska, complete with a glacier landing and guided trek.
- **Parkrafting or kayaking:** Paddle at your own pace through the glacier lakes and fjords in the Kenai Peninsula or Prince William Sound.
- **Hike:** Channel your inner adventurer and hike through the tundra or boreal forests with a guide, discovering hidden trails in places like the Talkeetna Mountains or Hatcher Pass.
- **Photography:** Join a guide-led, photography-focused excursion, perfect for viewing the aurora borealis, spotting wildlife or capturing rugged landscapes.

- **Summer dog sledding:** Mash across the snow packed atop a glacier for scenic views. Nothing beats a helicopter ride that leads you to stunning views and furry friends.
- **Explore:** Soar above Denali or the Wrangell Mountains on a flightseeing tour for jaw-dropping views, then explore Alaska's rugged shorelines by beachcombing or tidepooling in spots like Kachemak Bay or Resurrection Bay.
- **Forage:** Go wild foraging with a naturalist guide to identify wild berries, mushrooms and plants scattered throughout wild forests or the tundra.
- **Northern Lights:** Best done in September through April, visitors can snag an unforgettable front-row seat to the Northern Lights. Make sure to venture outside of town to get lucky.

If not Alaska...



If you're looking for outdoor adventure, rugged beauty and striking landscapes but want an alternative to Alaska, here are a few options.

New Zealand: If wide open wilderness and dramatic views are your thing, New Zealand has it all with snowy peaks, lush trails and wild coastlines, plus a friendly vibe that makes exploring

easy.

Norway: If you're into fjords, mountain towns and the northern lights, Norway is a scenic stunner with deep cultural roots and postcard views around every bend.

Banff, Canada: Think of Banff as Alaska's cousin with majestic mountains, turquoise lakes and loads of wildlife, all wrapped up in a charming national park town.

Iceland: Glaciers, volcanoes and geothermal hot springs make Iceland a dream for off-the-beaten-path adventure with landscapes that are pure wow.

Patagonia (Argentina & Chile): For remote, rugged beauty on a grand scale, Patagonia delivers with windswept trails, ice peaks and wide open spaces that feel like the edge of the world.

Alaska

Anchorage

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