

DESTINATION REPORT

YOUR TRAVEL SPECIALIST

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Alaska, United States

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Alaska, United States - Overview	Page 3
Alaska, United States - See & Do: Sightseeing	Page 6
Alaska, United States - See & Do: Recreation	Page 7
Alaska, United States - See & Do: Shopping	Page 10
Alaska, United States - Dining	Page 11
Alaska, United States - Security	Page 12
Alaska, United States - Facts	Page 14

INTRODUCTION

The Aleut people called it *Alyeska*, the great land. Alaska is one of the world's special places, full of exotic wildlife, magnificent mountains, glacier-carved valleys and steep, rocky coastlines.

Alaska is bigger than life, its sheer mass hard to comprehend. The distance from Barrow, on the northern coast, to Ketchikan, at the southern edge, is more than 1,350 mi/2,174 km—about the same as New York City to Miami. Alaska has six distinct climatic regions, the tallest mountains, the biggest glaciers, the most plentiful fishing and the wildest nature preserves on the North American continent.

Visitors go to Alaska for the fishing, hiking, hunting or camping—Denali National Park is a big attraction. Some go for the northern lights, or to whale-watch while cruising the Inside Passage. Some even go to Alaska for the Iditarod dogsled race.

Even as Alaska vacations become more accessible, distance creates costs. Per-day expenses in remote parts of the state are comparable with those in major urban centers. The abundance of spectacular scenery and wildlife, however, should more than compensate.

GEOGRAPHY

Alaska borders the northwest edge of Canada and is actually closer to Russia (just 39 mi/62 km by air across the Bering Strait) than it is 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 temperate rain forest (Tongass), and in the north is Arctic desert.

The state is traversed by nine major mountain ranges, encompassing 17 of the highest peaks in the U.S., including North America's highest mountain, Mount McKinley, as well as most of the country's active volcanoes. It has more coastline than all of the other states combined. The geography ranges from endless miles/kilometers of tundra to sheer mountain walls, from the densely forested temperate coasts of the Inside Passage to the permafrost of the treeless Arctic Circle.

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: Whale- and seal-hunting Inupiat and Yupik peoples inhabited the treeless tundra along the Arctic Ocean, Chukchi and Bering sea coasts, and nomadic Athabascan caribou hunters roamed the forested interior along the Yukon River. Alaska's panhandle was home to members of the Tlingit, Tsimshian 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 the U.S. purchased the area in 1867 for cents an acre/hectare, the region remained largely unexplored.

As was often the case elsewhere 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 Dawson, Skagway, Valdez and other towns.

Alaska was made a U.S. territory in 1912, but statehood wasn't granted until 1959. Then the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay in 1968 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 cruise-ship travel and other tourist activity, especially in southeastern Alaska.

SNAPSHOT

Alaska's main attractions include spectacular scenery, wildlife viewing, camping, skiing, the northern lights, volcanoes, Inside Passage cruises, hiking, riverboat rides, fishing, canoeing, river and sea kayaking, friendly people, Alaska Native and Russian cultures, totem poles, glaciers and dogsled rides.

Most people will like Alaska, but the state has special appeal for nature lovers and the adventurous. Those on a strict budget may opt to tour the coasts via Alaska's Marine Highway ferries rather than by cruise ships. Motor homes, recreational vehicles and camper vans are available to rent for those who want to explore the state's interior highways or drive the Alaska Highway through Canada.

POTPOURRI

Alaska is from an Aleut word meaning "great country" or "what the sea breaks against."

The state of Alaska has 33,904 mi/54,585 km of coastline, more than the rest of the U.S. combined.

All Alaskans (who apply and qualify for it) receive an annual Permanent Fund Dividend check that averages around US\$850 per person (including children). The dividend is funded by North Slope oil taxes and profits from investments.

In the unique history of Alaska, the male-to-female ratio across the state has often been quite imbalanced. As a result, a saying began among Alaskan women that in Alaska "the odds are good, but the goods are odd." This joke has failed to wither with time or the balancing of the odds.

Juneau is the only U.S. state capital that cannot be reached by highway. It is located 573 mi/916 km by air from Anchorage, the state's largest city and populated area. With as many roads as a New England state but a landmass triple the size of Texas (only 12 major highways are open year-round), Alaska is a place where flight is commonplace and pilots are many.

Geologically, Alaska is an amazingly active location. 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. In addition, 80% of the active volcanoes in the U.S. are in Alaska, and major eruptions in the Aleutian Islands occur almost every year.

Dog mushing is the official state sport of Alaska.

Former Secretary of State William H. Seward bought Alaska from Russia for US\$7.2 million in 1867. At approximately US\$0.02 per acre/half-hectare, it was a bargain that some called Seward's Folly.

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 and camera capacity) like few other places on Earth. In fact, with so much to choose from there, it's easy to become overwhelmed. A cruise simplifies some of the decision-making.

Ship lines offer a wide variety of Alaska cruises, so there's an itinerary to satisfy almost everyone. You can ride on a megaship with more than 2,000 passengers and all the comforts of home, and then some, as you visit the state's main ports. Or you can cruise aboard an exploration ship (with 100 other people) that can slip into the

narrowest of fjords and get close enough to watch a brown bear snatch a salmon out of the water.

The big cruise lines usually offer a choice of two routes, both of which take you through the Inside Passage, the protected waterway between the mainland and the coastal islands. The emphasis is different, however. The trips known as Inside Passage cruises usually begin in Vancouver, British Columbia, include stops at such southeast Alaska ports as Ketchikan and Juneau, turn around in Glacier Bay and return to Vancouver. Gulf of Alaska cruises (sometimes called Glacier Route cruises) usually run between Vancouver and Seward, with connections through Anchorage so you can add excursions into the interior of the state.

Both routes often include stops at Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway—one of the most visited ports along the Inside Passage and the main jumping-off point for tours into the Yukon Gold Rush area. Small ships combine the best of both routes, offering stops in smaller ports, visits to hard-to-reach landmarks and more personal attention. Of course, their prices are usually higher, too.

SIGHTSEEING

Visitors can choose from a variety of ways to see Alaska. Water lovers should take a cruise through Glacier Bay and the College Fjords glaciers, fish for salmon and halibut or go whale-watching. Adventurous types can combine a helicopter flight with dog sledding on a glacier or participate in a blanket toss in Barrow. Some hike the historic Chilkoot Trail or hop on the Alaska Railroad. There's so much to see and do in Alaska that it may take several trips to experience it all.

Alaska's museums are vital parts of many Alaska communities, and are as diverse as the state they chronicle. They celebrate the state's gold rushes, wildlife, geography, pioneers, aviation, fishing and Alaska Native heritage. Be sure to visit Anchorage's Alaska Native Heritage Center, the Anchorage Museum and the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks, Juneau's Alaska State Museum, Skagway's Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, and the Sheldon and Hammer museums in Haines. The Alaska Zoo in Anchorage gets sightseers close to any animals they may have missed during their travels.

Be sure to sip an internationally acclaimed beer from one of Alaska's excellent breweries. Choose from the Moose's Tooth, Sleeping Lady or Midnight Sun brewing companies in Anchorage; Silver Gulch in Fairbanks; and Alaskan Brewing and Bottling Company in Juneau. Kodiak Island, Skagway, Kenai, Homer, Seward, Soldotna and Haines all have their own brews, as well.

RECREATION

Alaskans are outdoor people. In summer, they are on the trails or on the water. This is the time for fishing, boating, biking, hiking and playing outside.

In winter, Alaskans fire up snow machines, ski, go ice fishing or mush their sled dogs. People who live in Alaska say there's no bad weather, just bad clothes.

FISHING

So many Alaskans fish in the summer that it's hard to think of it as recreation, especially because the fish that are caught are an important food source in the winter. Sport fishers also have a variety of world-class fishing options.

All five species of salmon are plentiful in the salt waters of southeast Alaska in the summer (king and coho are the most treasured), although the biggest kings (up to 90 pounds) usually are caught on the Kenai River south of Anchorage. The Kenai is also where the term "combat fishing" was coined: Anglers stand literally elbow to elbow on the river in July and are more likely to hook each other before they hook a monster king.

For many saltwater enthusiasts, catching a halibut—a bottom fish that can weigh up to 400 pounds—is an unforgettable experience. The best halibut fishing is around Homer and the lower Kenai Peninsula, but they are common around most of Alaska's coastal communities.

For freshwater enthusiasts, just about every variety of trout is plentiful in most Alaskan lakes. Fly fishers particularly enjoy battling the steelhead runs in the coastal streams of Alaska from south of Ketchikan to Cold Bay on the Alaska Peninsula. Fly fishing Alaska-style often combines a float plane flight with fishing in a remote lake or stream. Just remember to get your fishing license before wading into the water. Alaskans take their laws seriously, and the fines for fishing out of season or without a license are significant.

HIKING & WALKING

Virtually every Alaskan community offers a variety of hiking experiences, from short hikes to viewpoints to longer day trips to overnight wilderness adventures. As such, the trails range from clearly marked and well-maintained to nearly impossible to follow, particularly in the dense underbrush of the Tongass and Chugach national forests.

It's best to hike longer trails with a guide or someone who knows the area. Wear layered clothing, including a waterproof—or at least water-resistant—hooded jacket or a hat, and take insect repellent and a head net for hikes in the interior of the state.

Unfortunately, the numerous hiking opportunities also lead to trouble for the unwary or inexperienced. People do get lost and people do die every year in the Alaskan outdoors. It is crucial to stay on the established trails and to use up-to-date maps when going cross country. Most communities have U.S. Forest Service offices. Contact them before heading "into the country."

SCUBA & SNORKELING

Diving and snorkeling are both gaining popularity, particularly in southeast Alaska where, despite the 40-50 degrees F/4-10 degrees C summer waters, wall diving, sea life and a large number of shipwreck sites are attracting more visitors.

Contact local dive shops for up-to-date information on dive sites, conditions and cold-water diving gear. The outer coast has the best visibility.

SKIING

Alaska's got snow and mountains, so it's no surprise that the state has skiing, both downhill and cross-country. Most of Alaska's downhill ski resorts are convenient to major metropolitan areas, but there is limitless skiing and snowboarding on remote slopes that can be reached only by helicopter.

Alyeska, the largest alpine ski area, is only about 40 mi/65 km southeast of downtown Anchorage. Located in Girdwood, the 4,000-ft/1,220-m mountain provides a challenge to all levels of skiers and snowboarders. More than 70 trails wind through tree-lined slopes and open bowls, and nearly half of the trails are for advanced skiers. Because of the warm currents of the nearby Pacific, temperatures are surprisingly moderate and can lead to icy snowpack.

Two ski and snowboard areas are on the outskirts of Anchorage: Hilltop Ski Area and Alpenglow at Arctic Valley. Both areas are quite small, but their proximity to Anchorage makes them popular, especially with beginners and families. There is also world-class cross-country skiing at Anchorage's Kincaid and Hillside parks.

Only 20 minutes from Juneau, Eaglecrest Ski Area offers the opportunity to ski with bald eagles soaring overhead. Eaglecrest is relatively small with just 36 trails, but the skiing is superb for all skill levels, and the mountain, glacier and ocean views are spectacular. Tubing and cross-country skiing are also popular there. Lodging is available in Juneau. A special skiers' shuttle bus departs regularly from the city.

Farther north, near the Arctic Circle, check out the small alpine ski area Mount Aurora Skiland, offering beginner to advanced skiing and rentals on-site. It is located 20 mi/32 km north of Fairbanks on the Steese Highway; turn off on Skiland Road. Another fine alpine ski area is Moose Mountain, 15 mi/24 km northwest of Fairbanks on Sheep Creek Road. Cross-country skiing, however, is far more popular in this area. There are excellent trails at Birch Hill, Chena Hot Springs Resort, Chena Lake, Chatanika and the University of Alaska at Fairbanks campus.

The Hatcher Pass area near Palmer, a 90-minute drive from Anchorage, offers abundant backcountry skiing and snowboarding opportunities. Expert skiers seeking real adventure might want to try helicopter skiing in the coastal and Chilkat mountains based out of Juneau and Haines. Heli-skiing is also available in Girdwood, 40 mi/64 km south of Anchorage.

In Alaska, miles/kilometers of untouched powder are just waiting to be explored. We do not, however, recommend this activity for the novice skier, as powder skiing is much more difficult than downhill cruising on a groomed trail. Check with the various experienced helicopter-tour companies in Anchorage, Juneau or Valdez for information.

SURFING

Although Alaska is not known for its "killer surf," there are more than a few locations where the North Pacific pounds ashore on wide, sandy beaches. The somewhat isolated native village of Yakutat—between southeast Alaska and Prince William Sound—actually has a local surf shop because of the number of visitors who want to surf its spectacular waves.

OTHER OPTIONS

Dogsledding is still an important way to get around northern Alaska in the winter, and most northern communities offer wheeled sledding during the summer season. Combined dogsledding and helicopter glacier tours are available in Juneau, Skagway and on the Kenai Peninsula. These popular tours are pricey but memorable.

Alaska is a birder's paradise. From St. Paul on the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea to the Copper River delta and the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve in Haines, birds abound in the numerous lakes, streams and coastal estuaries of Alaska. Bird-watchers will enjoy the activity at Nome, Wrangell, Barrow, Potter's Marsh in Anchorage, Creamer's

See & Do: Recreation

Field in Fairbanks and the Mendenhall Wetlands in Juneau, among other sites statewide.

SHOPPING

Shop for mukluks (Inuit boots made from sealskin and reindeer hide), smoked salmon, beadwork, basketry, gold and jade jewelry, silver bracelets with totemic designs, bark baskets, ivory and whalebone carvings, knitted clothing (especially qiviut wool combed from the musk ox) and other representative examples of Alaska Native arts and crafts. Many travelers also buy an ulu, the curved knives traditionally used by Alaska Native women to prepare hides, cut up and clean fish, and prepare everyday meals. Carved Alaska Native masks, totem poles and ceremonial paddles are also popular. Unique but expensive baleen baskets are fashioned from the filters inside a whale's mouth.

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 that an item was crafted specifically by Alaska Natives.

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 Alaska Natives 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\$100) 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.

Shopping Hours: Generally Monday-Saturday 9 or 10 am-5 or 6 pm and on Sunday when cruise ships are in port.

DINING OVERVIEW

In major Alaskan towns, food is similar to what is available elsewhere in the U.S. Anchorage offers the greatest diversity, particularly when it comes to international restaurants: You'll find Greek, Mexican, South Korean, Filipino, Thai, East Indian and many other specialties. Coffee aficionados will discover espresso shops in all the larger towns and most of the small ones, too—Anchorage has dozens of them.

In the restaurant scene, however, the general rule of thumb is that the farther away from Anchorage, Juneau and Fairbanks you go, the less fussy the restaurant decor will be. There are plenty of dining treasures to be found wherever you travel, so don't be fooled by the lack of pretension or a bland exterior. For example, a tiny shack in Barrow happens to house a charming Japanese restaurant with numerous delicious sushi options.

Alaska's justly famous seafood includes crab, shrimp, scallops, salmon, cod, steamer clams, oysters and halibut. Few people who live in the Lower 48 have ever tasted truly fresh Alaskan king crab—it's a delicacy not to be missed. The same is true for fresh or smoked Alaskan salmon and halibut. Alaskan salmon—unlike salmon from Norway, Chile and many other areas—are almost entirely wild fish, not farmed in pens. The flavor of the fish is noticeably better and the flesh is firmer. Often your server will be able to tell you where the fish were caught and the name of the fishing vessel, too, if you ask.

Traditional Inuit foods such as muktuk, which is whale blubber and skin, are rarely found outside small Alaska Native villages, and then only when they have had a recent and successful whale hunt. Travelers often have an opportunity to taste reindeer sausage, caribou, smoked salmon jerky and lox, which are available commercially throughout the state.

If you are a microbrewery fan, Alaska is the place to go. Anchorage is home to half a dozen award-winning breweries and brewpubs. Several of them also happen to be best-loved restaurants of Alaskans. You can also find internationally known microbreweries in Skagway, Juneau, Haines, Homer, Kenai, Ketchikan and Fairbanks.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Alaska is a warm and welcoming state composed predominantly of immigrants and their children. It is rare to meet someone who was born and raised there, or whose parents were born and raised there, who is not from an Alaska Native tribe or had pioneering grandparents. The memory of immigration remains with locals, and their welcome to visitors is as warm as the welcome they received when they arrived. Friendships are established quickly and easily, and you are quite likely to meet someone with whom you will discover a connection from back home.

Still, Alaska, like all places, has circumstances to beware: Be particularly cautious whenever you see wildlife, especially moose and bears. The many photogenic and fascinating species can cause enthusiastic tourists to get carried away and put themselves in danger. Please read and pay attention to any cautions offered at parks and visitor areas.

Another note of caution: Under no circumstances should you walk out on the mudflats that extend out from the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail in Anchorage, to the water's edge of Cook Inlet. Take binoculars if you want to bird-watch or look for belugas, but do not step out onto this benign-looking surface. The Cook Inlet (and down into Turnagain Arm) is composed almost entirely of glacial silt, which behaves very much like quicksand. This terrain has taken the lives of many who have ventured onto it.

As a whole, however, Alaska is a safe and friendly environment for tourists and locals alike. Keep valuables out of sight as in any location while traveling, and don't drink excessively and then wander the streets at night. You are much more likely to meet good Samaritans than someone looking for trouble, but use common sense.

HEALTH

Alaska's wildlife is wild, so be wary. Moose in downtown Anchorage are unpredictable and quite cantankerous if you get between a moose cow and her calf. The same is true for bears. Even though bear cubs might look cuddly, mama bear is undoubtedly nearby and won't tolerate people getting up close and personal with her cubs.

Alaska has a wide range of health-care options, ranging from world-class hospitals to one-room clinics. It has some of the finest trauma doctors in the world because so many people work in dangerous occupations (fishing, logging, oil).

If you are going into the bush, take whatever medications you'll need. Know where the nearest help is located and how to contact it before leaving civilization.

DOS & DON'TS

Do book at least six months to a year in advance for Inside Passage cruises during the peak summer months. You may be able to join one on shorter notice, particularly in the spring or fall, but the exact ship and date you want may not be available. Be sure to make advance reservations for the Alaska Marine Highway ferries, too. Even the short ferry trip from Valdez to Whittier requires advance booking, especially if you are taking aboard a car or recreational vehicle.

Do look for a commercial operation when you go fishing 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 consider taking an overnight or extended tour of an Alaska Native village if you don't mind roughing it a bit. As a rule, these smaller areas don't have luxurious accommodations.

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, when a bear is surprised and feels threatened, or when campers fail to properly store their food and garbage. Never keep food in a tent overnight (not even toothpaste or bug spray), 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. The Alaska Salmonberry is particularly delicious and remarkably identifiable. Look for a large, golden-hued berry resembling a blackberry. These are typically found in southeast Alaska along the coast. A terrific field guide to take hiking with you is *Alaska's Wild Berries* by Verna Pratt.

Do expect to pay dearly for most things in Alaska. The state ranks as the most expensive place to travel in the U.S. This is not without reason: Most everything has to be shipped tremendous distances.

Do take along (or plan to buy) insect repellent if you're going during the summer—you won't find ticks or fleas, but hardy breeds of mosquitoes and blackflies survive in Alaska, and they'll make your life miserable if you're not prepared.

Do pick up a copy of *The Milepost* if you'll be driving outside of Anchorage. Available at most bookstores and groceries for a reasonable price, it has the lowdown on gas stops and scenic views. It even recommends fishing locations.

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: All U.S. citizens must have a passport when traveling by air to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Mexico. Citizens of Canada, Mexico and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda also must have a passport or other designated secure document to enter the U.S. Passports are required for land crossings at the Canadian and Mexican borders with the U.S. and for cruise passengers returning to the U.S. from Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada or Bermuda.

Reconfirm travel-document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

Population: 732,847.

Languages: Primarily English. Some 20 Alaska Native languages and dialects are spoken in the villages. The Kenai Peninsula has a large number of "Old Believers" who speak Russian.

Predominant Religions: Christianity (Protestant and Roman Catholic), though every major religion is represented.

Time Zone: 9-10 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-9 and -10 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is observed from the second Sunday in March to the first Sunday in November.

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts.

Telephone Codes: 907,

Currency Exchange

Banks will exchange currency in most of Alaska's tourist areas. The nontourist areas are less equipped. If you are heading into the bush, take cash—theft is pretty rare in those areas, and credit cards are not always accepted.

You can count on ATMs in cities with more than 3,000 people. Areas far from the metropolitan areas of Anchorage or Fairbanks are much less likely to have 24-hour cash access. Banking hours are generally Monday-Friday 10 am-5 pm.

Taxes

There are no state sales or hotel taxes, but most communities have local taxes on both.

Tipping

Generally tip 15%-20% depending on the service. Alaskans tend to tip higher than people in other areas. A good way to show that you are an outsider is to undertip.

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 unbearably cold and miserable year-round as a lot of people believe. There are actually six different climates:

The interior region (Fairbanks area) has a wide temperature range, with summers in the 70s-90s F/20-32 C 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 32 F/0 C.

Southeast Alaska (Juneau and the Inside Passage) has summers in the 50s-60s F/10-20 C with mild winters that hover around 32 F/0 C.

The southwest is generally in the 50s F/10-15 C during the summer and below 32 F/0 C 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 -21 F/-29 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), with frequent high winds sweeping across the treeless Arctic coastal plains and Arctic foothills.

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. The old cliché applies: If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes and maybe then it will suit you.

From mid-May to early August, many Alaskans live in nearly 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 and Aleutians) 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 or business casual is the order of the day. Dress appropriately for the weather and you'll be welcomed 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 with a hood (Gore-Tex is ideal). Add comfortable shoes or boots that can withstand a soaking.

Telephone

With the increase in cell phones, pay phones are going the way of the dinosaurs in Alaska's larger cities. They are still available in smaller communities, however. Most have been converted to take credit cards, but don't assume that is always the case.

Cell phone coverage is good in Alaska's larger communities but spotty or nonexistent in outlying areas. Roaming charges apply for calls to Canada, but Alaska is part of the nationwide service so there's no need for a local SIM card.

Internet Access

Internet service is expanding rapidly across the state with most communities providing some form of it. Most communities also have Internet cafes or other public Internet locations, but many of the Internet cafes go out of business or change locations frequently. Your best bet is to contact the local libraries, most of which have free public Internet terminals, as do most of the larger hotels, coffeehouses and some restaurants.

Because of distances between locations in the state, Alaskans are Internet savvy and do a lot of their shopping and business online.

Mail & Package Services

Mail service is reliable in the larger Alaskan cities, but if you have special shipping needs you can always use UPS, FedEx or DHL. In the smaller communities, mail flights depend on the weather. If something needs to be sent within a certain time frame, you must plan ahead.

Newspapers & Magazines

Alaska's major newspapers are the *Anchorage Daily News*, the *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*, the *Juneau Empire* and the *Ketchikan Daily News*. Most smaller communities have weekly or monthly newspapers along with some daily papers, including the *Daily Sitka Sentinel* and the *Kodiak Daily Mirror*.

Many communities provide visitors' guides, which are available at visitor kiosks and visitor information sites. Each guide has sections on entertainment, tourist hot spots, dining and nightlife. Most of these guides are available online or at the Alaska Travel Industry Association website. <http://www.travelalaska.com>.

Transportation

We recommend that first-time visitors use a combination of cruise ships and escorted tours to see the state.

Air

Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport (ANC) is 5 mi/8 km southwest of downtown. Many small local airlines connect major areas within the state, and small-plane charters (including floatplane service) are available to the bush. Alaska Airlines also provides daily jet flights from Seattle to Ketchikan, Sitka, Fairbanks, Juneau and other communities.

Juneau International Airport (JNU), 9 mi/14.5 km northwest of downtown, has undergone a runway safety area extension and terminal renovation.

Bus

Greyhound Canada offers scheduled bus service from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. From there, Alaska Direct Bus Lines operates year-round to Anchorage and Fairbanks, passing through Tok. Plan on five days from Vancouver to Anchorage. Greyhound has regularly scheduled routes from Seattle to Vancouver, B.C.

Municipal bus lines operate year-round in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Juneau.

Ferry

The Alaska Marine Highway ferries visit many of the larger towns along the Inside Passage in southeast Alaska and also serve towns in the south-central part of the state and the Aleutian Islands. The ferries are a more affordable, though less comfortable and convenient, alternative to the cruise ships that sail the Alaska coast.

It's possible to catch the Alaska Marine Highway ferries in Bellingham, Washington, and sail north to Alaska—you can disembark and explore coastal communities, then continue your journey on the next available ferry. Another alternative is to take the boats of the B.C. Ferries line along the British Columbia coast and link with the Alaska Marine Highway ferries in Prince Rupert, B.C.

Ship

Cruise ships offer a variety of itineraries of varying length and comfort.

Train

The Alaska Railroad between Anchorage and Fairbanks via Denali is highly recommended, as is the shorter Anchorage to Seward route. The railroad operates renovated superdome cars that hark back to the golden days of rail travel, as well as several deluxe, customized double-decker rail cars.

For More Information

Tourist Office

Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), 2600 Cordova St., Suite 201, Anchorage, AK 99503. Phone 907-929-2200. Toll-free 800-667-8489. <http://www.travelalaska.com>.

Recommended Guidebooks

The Alaska Almanac: Facts About Alaska edited by Nancy Gates (Alaska Northwest Books).

The Milepost edited by Kris Valencia (Morris Communications Co.). This guide is essential for people traveling along the Alaska Highway and other state roads—you can pick one up in bookstores and groceries.

Additional Reading

Coming Into the Country by John McPhee (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

The Last New Land: Stories of Alaska, Past and Present edited by Wayne Mergler (Alaska Northwest Books).

Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape by Barry Lopez (Bantam). Based on the author's travels in Greenland, Canada and Alaska.

One Man's Wilderness: An Alaskan Odyssey by Sam Keith and Richard Proenneke (Alaska Northwest Books).

The Last Light Breaking: Living Among Alaska's Inupiat Eskimos by Nick Jans (Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company).

Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer (Anchor).

Ordinary Wolves by Seth Kantner (Milkweed Editions).

travel42 Tipster. Travel42 editor Christine Barrett outlines an Alaska itinerary perfect for seeing the state's natural wonders. <http://www.travel-42.com/tipster/post/2013/06/10/Discover-the-natural-beauty-of-Alaska.aspx>.