

North to Alaska Insider Tips

As of 1/14/17

This is a collection from many years and many miles traveling the Great Land myself. Costs and website addresses may have changed. These are suggestions, not paid endorsements. Thoroughly check maps before planning your driving destinations. In Alaska, you sometimes “can’t drive there from here”.

May your journey be healthy, happy, and wondrous! Melonie

GENERAL

1. My favorite time to visit Alaska is mid to late-August through mid-September. As was said to me, *“Take the colors of New England and spread them at your feet. Let them flow up into fresh-snow clad mountains. Now dot bears eating berries throughout.”* Add to that; the cruise ship crowds are smaller, the nights may be filled with Northern Lights, the moose and caribou are in full breeding dress and fireweed fills every field with magenta blooms. –May/June, young animals
2. If you are only making one trip-you have our sympathy. Spend at least two weeks; include a sea portion, land portion, and air portion. It is impossible to get a full appreciation of the enormity and diversity of Alaska landscapes if all you do is see it from a huge cruise ship. Every person who I have talked to that did a cruise said they would have felt cheated if they had not also done a multi-day land portion. See “South of Anchorage” section: Whittier for an excellent sea-option for those that may not be comfortable on big water.
3. Sea travel-or how not to turn that lovely shade of green:
Waters are always dangerously cold and inconsistent.. Dress in layers then add a layer. Hats, jackets, and light gloves are a must most days. Bring sunscreen, sunglasses, binoculars (colorful seabirds and whales always a possibility), and a camera. Bring non-fatty or spicy food, and water. Ginger in any form is nature’s answer to “rock and roll” in the waves-Ginger Snaps, candied ginger, ginger ale. I use acupuncture bands successfully.
4. Packing list:
 - ✓ Camera
 - ✓ Film -400 ASA minimum or anti-blur set on your digital- moving platforms (boats, trains, Denali NP school buses), animals in motion, low light angles from deep vegetation and terrain blocking
 - ✓ Binoculars-don't try to share a pair when the whale breaches. We hate to have visitors choke each other.
 - ✓ Stocking cap
Hat with visor or sunglasses
 - ✓ Light gloves-water travel
 - ✓ Wind/ rain jacket- cool evenings
 - ✓ Medium jacket – boat travel and Northern Light viewing
 - ✓ Sturdy walking shoes
 - ✓ Passport/birth certificate to drive through Canada
 - ✓ Pet health certificate to drive through Canada
 - ✓ No “nice clothes” needed for eating out
 - ✓ Medications-pack in carry-on luggage
 - ✓ Travel alarm-for getting up and checking the northern lights, catching fish moving up river
 - ✓ Ear plugs- helpful for red-eye flight sleeping on planes, on boats, etc.
 - ✓ Eye shield-helpful for some people to sleep given going to sleep when the sun is still out
 - ✓ Dramamine with melcazine, if you are prone to vertigo re red-eye flights

- ✓ Layers, layers, layers-I take a pair of pants and a main layer top for every three days, in this case then 4 pants and main tops-keeping in mind to try to keep one set in good shape for eating out and wearing on the plane on the way back☺. Put a layer on when you first start to get chilled, take a layer off when you first start to get too warm.
- ✓ Outfitters will supply all your fishing tackle, kayaking equipment, etc.

5. Daylight – in Homer, in August, there is four hours of darkness after 11:00 p.m. and before 5:00 a.m.

6. Scheduling

- Ferries do not run every day to every location.
- Many places are open only seasonally or change hours.
- Book 3-6 months in advance: Denali lodging, Denali bus tours, Ferry staterooms (sleeping on deck and other areas is allowed)
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7. Come with ample funds, not because Alaska ultra-expensive (traveling here inexpensively is much of what follows), but because you do not want to miss out on a once-in-a-lifetime experience due to limited funds. For example, when it is a gorgeous day and you are near Denali go straight to Talkeetna and take a flight seeing trip with Doug Geeting to Denali. You will get memories for a lifetime for about \$225.00 each.

-groceries 10-15% higher, the further out or away from road system the higher
 -gas, August 2016: \$2.05/gal.MN \$2.35/ gal Anchorage \$2.65/gal Homer

8. Wildlife...of the animal kind...General rule, if the animal is eating and stops to look up you are stressing them

- Here -Moosie, Moosie: Beware of cow moose with young
Peak times are August –May-rutting and snow pushes them down the mountains- Good locations
Earthquake Park in Anchorage, Denali, between Kenai and Homer
- Dall Sheep-only close, easy viewing is along Sterling Highway, just south of Anchorage-mid September. You will see them in Denali; they will be the oval, little white dots on the highest elevations. (Mountain goats are square little white dots at high elevations☺)
- Black Bear-Skilak Lake Road on Kenai Peninsula
- Brown and Grizzly bears-Best place to see is Denali NP on a long bus trip into the park. Bear viewing to Katmai runs about \$500 per person. Unless you are hiking backcountry for a long time (and I know people who have done so for six years and have not), you will not see one by going to Kodiak (unless you are there at peak salmon run near the Coast Guard base in June. Do not walk in tall grass, walk with a group, make yourself large, no high-pitched sounds, make noise. If bear sees you, back up quietly and quickly, do not run. Night time is bear time on the rivers

Other tools to assure up close and personal bear viewing-wear clothes you had on around the camp fire you cooked over the night before, wear perfume/after shave (mosquitoes appreciate this, too), eat smoked salmon, make no noise, and hike alone or with companions who are faster than you.

- Bald Eagles-summer time Haines Chilkat River, Homer Spit-Nov. through April, Melonie’s house
- Whales-Humpbacks: enroute to Kodiak on the ferry (humpbacks, fin, minke), Kachemak Bay outside of Homer (minke, chance of humpbacks), Seward (resident pod of orcas), Sitka 1st weekend in November

Whalefest (orcas and humpbacks), Kodiak in late April (only place in the world you can look down as migrating gray whales go through a narrow passage)

- Sea Otters – males out of Seward harbor, females with pups out of Homer harbor
 - Sea lions, seals- Homer Spit
9. Northern Lights-Best viewing Sept. to March, midnight typically brightest time, seen throughout the state, Fairbanks is considered best viewing as only city in the world directly under belt of peak activity

10. Information resources:

- Alaska State Vacation Planner www.travelalaska.com
- THE MILEPOST-a Must if driving. 800-726-4707, www.themilepost.com, new issues come out in March, \$25.00, 766 pages of mile-by-mile information on gas stops, lodging, licenses, unique road sightings, road work, etc.

11. Unique gifts/purchases: -Ulu knife set, birch syrup or caramels, wild berry chocolates, Tundra cartoon books (Alaska's version of Far Side), reindeer sausage, quiviut –authentic Made in Alaska symbols



12. Internet service – Can be iffy (trade off of being surrounded by gorgeous mountains), GCI Alaska and Verizon best carriers

13. Fishing-five species of salmon: 1. dog/chum/**keta** 2. pink/humpy 3. silver/coho 4. red/sockeye 5. king/chinook-think ahead on how to ship home as can be costly or carry with you (fish box) baggage costs- **pinks run on even years, great time to take kids**-special salmon rig for lining/snagging in the head, once they enter fresh water they are not eating-can rent fishing equipment from many locations on Kenai peninsula and other areas -halibut best eating up to 60 pounds

14. Tide tables-help with clamming, fishing, tide pooling

LOCATIONS

Inside Passage

Cruise ship or state ferry

The Inside Passage is 10,000 miles of majestic coastline which is best known as the territory of the cruise ships. However, this is also the Alaska Marine Highway System (www.amhs.com), a.k.a. the state ferry. Here is what you will experience on the ferry instead of a cruise ship:

- Reduced costs
- Separate pricing for stateroom, travel, meals, and car on board
- Small passenger load-300 tops v. thousands on cruise ships = smaller ships which get closer to the wildlife, shores, etc. =less time with travelers disembarking/loading
- Staterooms are small, usually bunks with shower and sink
- Meals good, not fancy, can bring your own food and drink onboard
- Naturalists programs 2-3 times a day and on deck providing lookout descriptions
- Other passengers, crew, and naturalists are real Alaskans:-)
- Can debark at any port, may catch next ferry (will need to rebook passage and stateroom on new ferry which must be done in advance)

-Ferries make same ports-of-call as cruise ships, two to three times/week-e.g. You fall in love with Sitka and decide to leave the ferry and stay overnight-GREAT! You will need to book room and passage on one of the next ferries leaving Sitka, which may not be for another three days.

-Ports-of-call are based on resident needs, not tourist schedules. A cruise ship will take seven days to cover same distance as ferry which will take four days because the cruise ship will time its stops during business hours. The ferry may stop in Sitka at 2:00 a.m. and leave at 5:00 a.m.; a bummer if you really wanted to see Sitka. Decide which ports you want to spend time in and check what time the ferry is EXPECTED to make port. The ferry schedule is less precise than a cruise ship because the ferry exists to serve the communities which sometimes means taking more time for special freight or passengers...such as a circus traveling from Homer to Kodiak..

-Shuttle vans will pick you up at each community and give you a tour of town and return in time for ferry departure. This supports the local economy and your guides real Alaskans.

Sitka-great boardwalks trails through the rainforest within easy walking distance of the ferry dock

Skagway-colorful and unique architecture and history well-maintained

- White Pass-Yukon Railroad 1(800) 343-7373 -DO IT! -Easy travel with a few harrowing curves
- Hiking: Historic cemetery

Haines-Beautiful place-Our second choice for locating in Alaska!

- Sheldon Museum and Cultural Center
- Chilkat River rafting to the Valley of the Eagles
 - Fort Seward-center for some great hiking
 - Dining Hotel Halingsgard-WOW! Voted the best in the state by our travel team

North of Anchorage

Palmer-Musk Ox Farm-convenient, one-hour tour about an animal unique to this part of the world-State Fair at end of August

Wasila-

- Iditarod headquarters museum
- Lodging-Alaska Kozy Cabins (907) 376-3190 akc@matnet.com Wonderful, peaceful, convenient to Highway, bargain for the cleanliness, location, and amenities
- Happy Dog Trail Kennels –Martin Buser, five-time Iditarod champion and recognized for quality dog care, welcoming, warm, engaging, charismatic

Eklutna-Native-Russian Orthodox spirit houses

Talkeetna-This is the town the TV show “Northern Exposure” was based on. Departure point for Denali climbers and flight-seeing “The Mountain”, Climbers’ museum and cemetery

- Unique store even for Alaska, Talkeetna Gifts and Collectables, with large inventory at good prices and good service
- Flight seeing with Doug Geeting aviation 800-770-2366 or 907-733-2366 www.alaksa.net/~airtours/- Unforgettable, we have paid, flown, landed and said we were ready to immediately go up again! Helicopters are more stable, fit fewer people, get closer than fixed wing. Important to put video camera down occasionally, if filming, or motion sickness WILL happen.

Denali National Park-Athabaskan Indian for “the Great One”, once you see The Mountain you will know why. It is said, only 30% of visitors see Denali because it is often shrouded in weather of its own making. Increase your odds by spending more than one day in the park and taking the longest possible bus.

- Railroad travel trade-offs: Cruise ship domed cars-Sit around horseshoe shaped table on a 12-inch plus high platform for entire trip, dome lets in a lot of light = heat, you look to sides not straight up to view wildlife, much more expensive, no easy place to stretch your legs during the six plus hours to Denali
- Alaska Railroad pulls the cruise ship railroad cars so you are on the same schedule, same destinations except for lower fares, much easier to move around in the car and on the outside platforms, excellent Alaskan naturalists provide interpretation throughout the trip.
- General-There is an 81-mile long road into the park that goes to the town of Kantishna. The park was formed around the town. You can drive into the 21st mile marker. The wilderness area starts at the 36-mile marker = most of the wildlife is seen after mile 36. 1.
- Wonder Lake bus trip-Run by Park Service 800-622-7275 or 907-272-7275-worth the nine hours if you really want to see wildlife and the mountain, do no less than Eilsen Visitor Center
- Nenana River Run 800-276-7234. They provide all the gear and momentum, awesome ride.
- Hiking: close to entrance
 - Horseshoe Lake trail-moderate, some climb-active beavers, moose, and snowshoe hare
 - Dog sled kennels
- Park dog sled kennel programs –DO IT!
- Lodging: Grizzly Bear Cabins located six miles outside park entrance-Clean, peaceful, sleep listening to the Nenana River rumble below your deck, great place to see the Northern Lights, across the road you can catch shuttle service
- Cabin Nite Dinner theatre – good food, good company, professional musical about history of area
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Fairbanks-*Make sure you want to see one of these attractions before making the long trek north. In winter this is one of the top locations, in the world, to see the Northern Lights since it is the only major city directly under the optimal latitude (Arctic Circle in this case).*

- The Alaska Heritage House B&B, www.alaskaheritagehouse.com, 907-388-9595 –walking distance to downtown- excellent, flexible- hour breakfast, snacks, information
- Hampton’s Tours and Transport, www.HamptonSandt.com, 907-371-7101 –much more than a taxi service at about 20% of the cost, in and out of the city, easy alternative to renting a car
- The Crepery –great food, downtown, reasonable prices, fun to watch, lots of options, authentic
- Arctic Traveler’s gift shop- excellent collection of authentic Native crafts and variety of souvenirs, www.arctictravelersgiftshop.com, downtown
- Aurora Ice Museum at Chena Hot Springs-year round, developed by 16 time world-champion ice artists,
- Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center (and Fairbanks tourist information center)-great gift shop, focus on Athabaskan culture
- Alaska_pipeline-viewable from many locations
- State Museum of Alaska three to four hours (good overview of entire state cultures, natural history, etc.
- Sternwheeler “Discovery”-six hour trip-Each deck has multiple video monitors you can easily see and hear the person speaking from the shore. Stops at replica village sites exhibiting lodging, transport, crafts, etc. The tour leaders are all Alaska Native students.
- Multiple Yukon Quest/Iditarod musher kennels offering programs-Comeback Kennels, Lance Mackey
- Nearby- town of Esther, gold mining history
- World Eskimo –Indian Olympics July20-23, www.weio.org

Anchorage – *Some say it is just like any other city. Right! Any city that has a mountain range in its yard, live moose meeting you at the airport, Native and Russian history, the most well-known dog sled race in the world leaving from downtown, world’s largest float plane base, etc.*

- Saturday market during the summer; great produce, unique Alaskan crafts and foods, easy to spend three hours
- Earthquake Park –history, walking, watch out for moose
- Title Wave book store-great buys on Alaskan new and used books
- Native Cultural Center –**MUST SEE**
- Native Medical Center, near downtown, gift shop open limited hours, place to buy authentic Native Alaskan crafts at reduced prices
- Lodging: Puffin Inn \$85.00 night, incredible service during the 9/11/01 crisis, great muffins and coffee, easy airport access and shuttle, consistent quality in 25 years of multiple stays each year
- Alaska Wild Berry Chocolates- as “touristy” as Alaska gets but a good place to pick up some unique Alaska items
- WWII Museum

South from Anchorage

Potter’s Marsh –boardwalks for easy, abundant bird viewing

Girdwood -Easy walk about town

- The Jade Shop
- The Bake Shop- in town, not on the highway Fabulous, nutritious cinnamon rolls, omelets, etc for very reasonable prices. Avoid meal hours, as it is a small place we all know and love.

Alaska Conservation Center- outdoor wildlife enclosures of Alaska animals, Great way to see many species in one area, especially good for families.

Whittier-Stan Stephens 26 glacier cruise-catamaran makes for very comfortable travel, male sea otters, great glacier viewing without the time and expense of Glacier Bay (800)-544-0529 or (907)-276-8023
www.phillips@alaskanet.com- My 85- year old mother, terrified of water but lover of sea otters was completely comfortable and delighted by seeing too many sea otters to count. BEST option to see glaciers up-close and seals.

Portage Glacier-Begich-Boggs Visitor Center

Hope – consistent place to fish for pink salmon with children ANY year

Tern Lake –highway splits to Seward or to Homer, large lake, great picnic, Arctic terns

East on the Kenai (Keen –Eye) Peninsula

Seward

- Alaska Sea Life Center 800-224-2525 or 907-224-3080, underwater viewing of seabirds, sea lions, and seals,
- Major Marine Tours-800-764-7300 ore 907-274-7300 www.majormarine.com, No substitutions, this is the only one with a Park Ranger naturalist- male sea otters, seals, seabirds and sea lions if take the longer trip- rougher waters as day progresses
- World’s best ice cream! Umquat at ice cream shop across from the harbor

West on the Kenai Peninsula:

Cooper Landing- Kenai River Natural History float-by Alaska Wildlands 800-478-4100, great lunch, special river, watch the combat fishing. Salmon Run Lodge. Sackett’s Grill. Gwennies restaurant is Alaska institution.

Soldotna-Fred Meyers-Good restroom stop about 75 miles from Homer

Ninilchik-on highway, beautiful Russian church

Anchor Point -Norman Lowells’ Art Gallery. The building and gardens are worth the stop alone.

Homer-*This is where Alaskans tell you they would live, in the state, if they could make a living here! On the drive down from Anchorage you have a strong potential to see 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 volcanoes. At the top of the hill, you will see Kachemak Bay, Cook Inlet, the Spit, and five glaciers.*

- Alaska Islands and Ocean Visitor Center – my former office! Excellent information on natural history, ocean studies, Aleutian Islands, tidal programs
- Center for Alaska Coastal Studies for tidal life programs
- Wynn Nature Center-great wildflowers, easy hiking on top of the bluff
- Pratt Museum-unique exhibits on oil spill, local critters, local natives, spruce bark beetle (Re: "Why are all the evergreens brown?")
- Hiking-Homestead Trail, Kachemak Bay State Park (across the Bay 80 miles of trails-Watch out for the big brown ones...)
- Intertidal Life-Arrange it be there during a negative 2.0 or better low tide. Across the Bay is the second best, as designated by naturalists, tidepooling in the world and the Homer side is nearly as awesome. Best bet: Book, in advance, to go out with Center for Alaska Coastal Studies, to their field site across the bay and/or go kayaking with an outfitter and/or to out with Islands and Ocean on the Homer side
 - Visit one of seven art galleries
 - Stop by the library-National award winner for unique architecture, programming, etc. says a proud member of the planning committee
 - Homer Book store –large collection, excellent service, Homer is home to several nationally-recognized writers

Dining:

- Cosmic Kitchen-always excellent, It's where the locals know to go!
- Two-Sisters Bakery-great coffee and pastries, outdoor deck area, on the walk between Alaska Islands and Ocean Visitor Center and Bishop's Beach

Lodging: Ocean Shores Motel-on the water and above Bishop's Beach, same water as Land's End but less pricey

Fishing—"Halibut fishing capitol of the world." _Have been happy with Rainbow Charters and Homer Ocean Charters used in the past. More often than not, we have seen whales while on a halibut charter. There are many half-day halibut charters which in Alaska means six hours.

Wildlife – moose frequently sighted, seals and otters likely in harbor, eagles abound, shorebirds and duck species abundant variety in May

Other

Glacier Bay-Incredible place if you are okay with small planes flying in over glaciers. Big cruise ships just don't get in close enough. Wonderful whale watching potential. Great alternative: 26-glacier cruise out of Whittier (on the road system).

Kodiak Island-challenging to get to –Most accessible place to get a full flavor of Russian history in Alaska

The Alaska State Highway Ferry is best transport over as you get strong possibility of seeing sea otters, whales, seabirds, USFWS naturalist 9 hours one-way, runs once a week for three of four weeks per month-Best idea is to go over on Sunday, sleepover return on Tuesday night.

Kodiak Alutiq dancers, Baronoff Museum, Alutiq Museum, St. Hermanns' Seminary and church
Fort Abercrombie-WWII outpost, great hiking trails (easy)

