

Chapter 15

Side Trips from Anchorage

In This Chapter

- ▶ Enjoying the vertical landscape of the Seward Highway
- ▶ Taking in some winter (and summer) activities in Girdwood
- ▶ Cruising Prince William Sound
- ▶ Breaking away in the Mat-Su Valley

A base in Anchorage puts you close enough to some of Alaska's most appealing destinations for you to experience them as day trips. Few days that you spend in town can compare with what you'll see on some of the outings discussed in this chapter.

Driving between Mountain and Sea on the Seward Highway

One of the world's great drives starts in Anchorage and leads roughly 50 miles south on the Seward Highway to Portage Glacier. The journey, not the destination, is what makes the drive worthwhile. The two-lane highway is chipped from the foot of the rocky Chugach Mountains along the waters of Turnagain Arm, providing a platform to see a magnificent, ever-changing, mostly untouched landscape full of wildlife.

I list the sights in the style of a highway log because you'll find interesting stops all along the road. This route also leads to several other great places: Girdwood's ski slopes, Whittier and Prince William Sound (covered later in this chapter), and the Kenai Peninsula (in Chapter 16).

Getting there

Getting lost on the Seward Highway is hard to do. It leaves downtown Anchorage under the name Gambell Street, becomes a limited-access freeway through the rest of the city, and then narrows to two lanes at Potter Marsh as it leaves the developed part of Anchorage (even though you remain within the enormous city limits almost all the way on this drive). From the marsh, the highway traces the edge of Turnagain Arm.

Taking a tour

If you don't want to drive, a number of bus tours follow this route and visit Portage Glacier. **Gray Line of Alaska** (☎ 800-544-2206 or 907-277-5581; www.graylineofalaska.com) offers a seven-hour trip that includes a stop in Girdwood and a boat ride on Portage Lake for \$65 adults, \$33 ages 2 through 11.



A sightseeing drive takes at least half a day round-trip, and you can find plenty to do if you want to make it an all-day excursion. Use your headlights for safety even during daylight and be patient whenever you get stuck behind a summertime line of cars. If you pass, you'll soon come up behind another line ahead once again. You simply can't make good time when the roads are full of summer travelers—and, with the scenery, there's little reason to try.



If you're taking the train to Seward or driving elsewhere on the Kenai Peninsula later in your trip, don't take this day trip, because you'll be covering the same ground.

Seeing the sights

The sights described in the following list are in order of the highway mileage markers that you'll encounter on the way from Anchorage:

- **Potter Marsh (Mile 117):** Heading south from Anchorage, the Seward Highway descends a bluff to cross a broad marsh formed by water impounded behind the tracks of the Alaska Railroad. Beside the marsh is a boardwalk from which you can watch a huge variety of birds. Salad-green grasses grow from sparkling, pond-green water.
- **Potter Section House (Mile 115):** At the south end of Potter Marsh, the section house was an early maintenance station for the Alaska Railroad. Today it contains offices of Chugach State Park, open during normal business hours, and outside features a few old train cars and interpretive displays. Across the road is the trailhead for the **Turnagain Arm Trail**, a mostly level path running down the arm well above the highway with great views breaking now and then through the trees. You can follow the trail for 9 miles to Windy Corner, or break off where it meets the McHugh Creek picnic area and trailhead, about 4 miles out. Of course, to hike one way you'll need a ride back from the other end.
- **McHugh Creek (Mile 111):** Four miles south of Potter is an excellent state park picnic area and a challenging day hike with a 3,000-foot elevation gain to **Rabbit Lake**, which sits in a tundra mountain bowl, or a 4,301-foot ascent to the top of **McHugh Peak**. You don't

have to climb all the way; spectacular views are to be had within an hour of the road.



From this point onward, most of the sights are on the right or ocean side of the road: Plan your stops for the outbound trip, not on the return when you would have to make left turns across traffic.



- ✓ **Beluga Point (Mile 110):** The state highway department didn't really need to put up scenic overlook signs at this spectacular pull-out, 1½ miles south of McHugh Creek, because you'd probably have figured it out on your own. The terrain is simply awesome, as the highway traces the edge of Turnagain Arm below the towering cliffs of the Chugach Mountains. If the tide and salmon runs are right, you may see beluga whales, which chase the fish toward fresh water. Sometimes they overextend their pursuit, stranding themselves by the dozens in the receding tide, but they usually aren't harmed. The pull-out has spotting scopes to improve the viewing. The right-hand pull-outs for the next few miles ahead have interpretive signs about the 1895 gold rush in this area and other topics.



- ✓ **Windy Point (Mile 106):** Windy Point is a prime spot, but you have a good chance of seeing Dall sheep virtually anywhere on this stretch of road. Look for them picking their way along the cliffs on the mountain side of the road. The sheep get much closer to people here than is usual in the wild, presumably because they know they're safe. Whenever cars are stopped, it's usually for sheep viewing. If you stop, get well off the road and pay attention to traffic, which still will be passing at high speeds.
- ✓ **Bird Ridge Trail (Mile 102):** This trail is a lung-busting climb of 3,000 feet in a little more than a mile. It starts as an easy, accessible trail but then rises steeply to views that start at impressive and become even more amazing as you climb.
- ✓ **Bird Creek (Mile 100):** New parking and pathways will be finished while this book is on the shelves to provide safe access to the creek, a popular silver and pink salmon stream (for details, see Chapter 14). Non-anglers can enjoy a short trail, interpretive signs, and an overlook.
- ✓ **Bird Point (Mile 96):** The remarkable wayside here is not to be missed. A paved pathway rises up to a bedrock outcropping with a simply wonderful view — all the severity of the Turnagain Arm, but framed by the soft green of a freshwater wetland with a beaver lodge. Take a look at the fascinating interpretive signs on many subjects. Bike trails that parallel the highway are accessed here, too. Bring out a bike from Anchorage for a scenic ride.
- ✓ **The flats (Miles 96–90):** After Bird Point the highway descends from mountainside to mudflats. Pull-outs on the right side of the highway have interpretive signs. At low tide, the entire Arm narrows to a thin, winding channel through the mud. Since the 1964 Good Friday earthquake, the Arm hasn't been navigable; before the

earthquake, no one ever had much reason to navigate it. The first to try was Captain James Cook in 1778, when he was searching for the Northwest Passage on his final, fatal voyage of discovery (he was killed by Hawaiians later that year). He named this branch of Cook Inlet Turnagain Arm because the strength of the currents and shoals forced his boat to keep turning around.

- ✔ **Turnoff to Girdwood (Mile 90):** The attractions of Girdwood, which I cover later in this chapter (see “Enjoying the Slopes of Girdwood”), are worth a visit, but the shopping center here at the intersection is not chief among them. Stop for a simple meal, a restroom break, or to fill your gas tank for the last time for many a mile.
- ✔ **Old Portage (Mile 80):** All along the flats at the head of Turnagain Arm are large marshes full of what looks like standing driftwood. These are the remnants of trees killed by salt water that flowed in when the 1964 quake lowered the land by as much as 10 feet. On the right, 9 miles beyond the turnoff for Girdwood and across from the rail depot, a few ruins of the abandoned town of Portage still are visible almost 40 years after the great earthquake.

The turnouts offer good bird-watching spots, but venturing out on Turnagain Arm’s tidal mud carries the real risk of getting stuck in quicksand-like mud and drowning in the tide.



- ✔ **Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (Mile 79):** Originally conceived as a tourist attraction (formerly it was called “Big Game Alaska”), the center has become a non-profit organization giving homes to injured and orphaned deer, moose, owls, elk, bison, musk ox, bears, foxes, and caribou (☎ 907-783-2025). Visitors can drive a short course on the 140-acre compound to see the animals in fenced enclosures as large as 18 acres — at times, some animals are hidden among the natural vegetation. You can usually get closer to the animals at the Alaska Zoo and see a larger variety (see Chapter 14), but these large enclosures are more natural. A large log gift shop and outdoor snack bar are at the end of the tour. Admission is \$7.50 for adults; \$5 for military, seniors, and children 4 to 12, with a maximum of \$25 per vehicle. In summer, it’s open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.; in winter, daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- ✔ **Portage Glacier (take the 5.5-mile spur road at Mile 78):** The named attraction has largely melted, receding out of sight of the visitor center. (The glacier that you can see is Burns Glacier.) When the center was built in 1985, Portage Glacier was predicted to keep floating on its 800-foot-deep lake until the year 2020. Instead, it withdrew to the far edge of the lake in 1995. Today, the exhibits in the lakeside **Begich, Boggs Visitor Center** focus on the Chugach National Forest as a whole, rather than just the glacier; the exhibits are well worth an hour or two to become oriented to the area’s nature, history, and lifestyles.

Several short trails start near the center. Rangers lead nature walks on the ¼-mile, paved Moraine Trail up to six times a day. Another

trail leads less than a mile to Byron Glacier, in case you're interested in getting up close to some ice. Always dress warmly, because cold winds are the rule in this funnel-like valley.

A **day boat** operated by **Gray Line of Alaska** (☎ 800-478-6388 or 907-277-5581 for reservations, or 907-783-2983 at the lake; www.graylineofalaska.com) traverses the lake to get right up to Portage Glacier on hour-long tours, ice conditions permitting. It costs \$25 adults, \$12.50 ages 2 to 12, and operates five times daily in summer, every 90 minutes starting at 10:30 a.m. If this is your only chance to see a glacier in Alaska, the tour is probably worth your time, but if your itinerary includes any of the great glaciers in Prince William Sound, Kenai Fjords National Park, or the like, you won't be as impressed by Portage.

Enjoying the Slopes of Girdwood

Girdwood, 37 miles south of Anchorage, is proof that a charming little town can coexist with a major ski resort, as long as the resort goes undiscovered by the world's skiers. Girdwood still has a sleepy, offbeat character. Retired hippies, ski bums, a U.S. senator, and a few old-timers live in the houses and cabins among the big spruce trees in the valley below the Mount Alyeska lifts. They all expected a development explosion to follow the construction of an international resort here a few years ago, but it hasn't happened. Although that may not be good news for the investors in the resort, it's great for skiers and other visitors who discover this paradise. They find varied, uncrowded skiing through long winters, superb accommodations, and an authentically funky community.

The primary summer attractions are the hiking trails, the tram to the top of **Mount Alyeska**, and the **Crow Creek Mine**, described later in this chapter. In winter, it's skiing. Mount Alyeska isn't as big as some of the famous resorts in the Rockies, but it's large and steep enough. Better still, it isn't crowded, half the mountain is above the tree line, and the snow lasts a long time. Olympian Tommy Moe trained here, and the Alpine national championships raced down these slopes in 2004. Skiers used to tamer, busier slopes rave about the skiing here, with long, challenging downhill, no lift lines, and stunning views of the Chugach Mountains above and glistening Turnagain Arm below.

Getting there

A **rental car** is the most practical way to reach Girdwood. The preceding section gives directions for driving from Anchorage to Girdwood. In summer, you can come down for the sights and hikes; in winter, you can make it a day trip for winter sports. If you plan to stay at the resort for skiing, however, you may not need a car. Call the **Alyeska Resort** (see the Alyeska Prince Hotel in "Where to stay," later in this chapter) to find out whether shuttle service is available.

Seeing the sights

Here I cover sights and activities specific to Girdwood, but you can also use Girdwood as a base for a large area south of Anchorage, including the wildlife cruises and sea kayaking from Whittier (covered in the next section), and the river rafting and snowmobiling farther down the highway (see Chapter 14).

Crow Creek Mine **Girdwood**

This mine, opened in 1898, is still operated in a small way by the Toohey family, but mostly they use the paths and eight small original buildings as a charming tourist attraction. You can see the frontier lifestyle and watch rabbits and ducks wandering around. A bag of dirt, guaranteed to have some gold in it, is provided for gold panning, and you can dig and pan for more if you have the patience for it. Crow Creek Road, off the Alyeska Highway, is quite rough and muddy in the spring.

Crow Creek Road (off the Alyeska Highway), Girdwood, AK 99587. ☎ 907-278-8060. Open: May 15–Sept 15 daily 9 a.m.–6 p.m. Admission: \$3 adults, free for children 11 and younger. Gold panning: \$5 adults, \$4 children.

Mount Alyeska Tram **Girdwood**

The tram isn't cheap, but it's worth the price if you otherwise may not make it to high alpine tundra during an Alaska trip. (In winter, ride on your lift ticket; in summer, ride free while taking in a meal at the Seven Glaciers Restaurant at the top — covered later in this chapter.) The tram takes seven minutes in summer to rise to the 2,300-foot level, where it stops at a station with an attractive cafeteria with a limited selection. The tram presents an opportunity for everyone, no matter how young, old, or infirm, to experience the pure light, limitless views, and crystalline quiet of an Alaska mountaintop. Take the opportunity to walk around and enjoy it. Dress very warmly.

At the Alyeska Prince Hotel (see "Where to stay," later in this chapter). Open: Summer daily 10 a.m.–9:30 p.m.; winter, when lifts operate (call as hours vary). \$16 adults (\$13 Alaska residents), \$15 ages 55 and older, \$12 ages 8–17, \$7 ages 7 and younger.

Getting outdoors in Girdwood

For additional information about activities in this area, contact the **Alyeska Resort**.

Skiing

Mount Alyeska, at 3,939 feet, has 1,000 acres of skiing, operated by Alyeska Resort (☎ 907-754-2285; www.alyeskaresort.com), beginning from a base elevation of only 250 feet and rising 2,500 feet. The normal

season is early November to April, though skiing often lasts through Memorial Day weekend. Winters without plenty of snow are rare. The average yearly snowfall is 721 inches, or 61 feet. Because it's near the water, the weather is rarely very cold. Light is more of an issue, with the short days in midwinter. There are 27 lighted trails covering 2,000 vertical feet on Friday and Saturday evenings from mid-December to mid-March, but the best Alaska skiing is when the days get longer and warmer in the spring. Besides, the lighted trails are only for more-accomplished skiers.



Alyeska has nine lifts, including the tram. Two chairs serve beginners, with a vertical drop of around 300 feet. The other 89 percent of the mountain is geared to intermediate to expert skiers. The biggest drawback for less experienced skiers is a lack of runs in the low to intermediate ability range. After graduating from the primary beginners' lift, Chair 3, skiers must jump to significantly more challenging slopes. That explains the long lines in busy periods on Chair 3 (it's the only lift on the mountain with any lines). More-confident skiers like the mountain best. Most of it is steep and the expert slopes are extreme. Helicopter skiing goes right from the resort's hotel as well.

An all-day lift ticket costs \$48 for adults (\$42 for Alaska resident, \$38 for hotel guests), \$32 for ages 14 to 17, \$24 for those 8 to 13 or 60 to 69, and \$10 for ages 7 and younger or older than 70. Discounts are available for families or for skiing the beginner lifts only. Private and group instruction are available; you can save a lot by buying your lessons, lift ticket, and equipment rental at the same time. The day lodge rents basic gear and the hotel rents high-performance gear. A basic rental package costs \$24 a day for adults, \$13 for ages 13 and under or over 60; high-performance gear costs \$29 for adults and \$21 for ages 13 and under or over 60.

The resort also has groomed **cross-country trails** and gear for rent, but the best Nordic skiing is in Anchorage (see Chapter 14).

The utilitarian **day lodge** with snack and rental counters is located at the front of the mountain, as is the **Sitzmark Bar**, a more comfortable place for a meal (burgers are about \$8). The hotel is on the other side of the mountain, connected to the front by the tram to the top and beginner-level Chair 7 (you can ski right from the door). The hotel is a quieter and more genteel starting point for day-trippers and guests, because it has its own rental counter (with higher rates) and day lockers. The hotel has several dining choices, two at the top of the tram (see "Where to dine," later in this chapter).

A center operated by **Challenge Alaska** (☎ 907-783-2925 or 907-344-7399) enables skiers with disabilities to use the mountain, skiing down to the lift to start and back to the center at day's end.

Hiking

A couple of great hiking trails begin in Girdwood. The **Winner Creek Trail** runs 5 miles through forest from behind the Alyeska Prince Hotel

to a roaring gorge where Winner Creek and Glacier Creek meet; it's muddy and snowy in the spring. The **Crow Pass Trail** rises into the mountains and passes all the way over to Eagle River, after a 26-mile hike that you can do in a couple of days. But you can make a long day hike of it to the pass and see the glaciers, wildflower meadows, and old mining equipment. The trailhead is up Crow Creek Road, off the Alyeska Highway.

Where to stay

Besides the resort hotel, plenty of condos and B&Bs are in town. **Alyeska Accommodations**, on Olympic Circle (☎ 888-783-2001 or 907-783-2000; www.alyeskaaccommodations.com), offers condos, cabins, and luxurious houses.



Alyeska Prince Hotel **\$\$\$\$\$ Girdwood**

The Alyeska Resort's hotel is among Alaska's best. The beauty of the building alone separates it from the competition, as does its location in an unspoiled mountain valley among huge spruce trees. Studded with dormers and turrets, it's an impressive sight. Inside, sumptuous cherrywood and rich colors unite the welcoming common rooms and elegant guest rooms. Although not large, rooms have every convenience, and the maintenance and housekeeping are exceptional. The saltwater swimming pool is magnificent, with a cathedral ceiling and windows by the spa overlooking the mountain. A few days spent here skiing and swimming can make daily reality seem drab.



Now for the bad news: On weekends and school holidays in the winter, the hotel is overrun by partying families from Anchorage who overtax the facilities and destroy the peaceful ambience. Children run wild, the pool becomes impossibly crowded, and service deteriorates to an unacceptable level. If you're coming for a skiing vacation, avoid these times.

Four restaurants vie for attention. **The Seven Glaciers**, 2,300 feet above the lobby by tram on Mount Alyeska, serves trendy and beautifully presented dinners in a sumptuous dining room floating above the clouds. Service is warm and highly professional. Meals are expensive, especially since the small servings make it necessary to order several courses. The restaurant is open all summer, but only on the weekends in the winter. A **mountaintop cafeteria** is right next door (great views, limited choices). At the base level, the Japanese cuisine at the **Katsura Teppanyaki** has developed a good reputation. **The Pond Cafe** is good when not jammed on the weekends and has a nice view.

1000 Arlberg Ave. (P.O. Box 249), Girdwood, AK 99587. ☎ 800-880-3880 or 907-754-1111. Fax: 907-754-2200. www.alyeskaresort.com. Rack rates: Summer and Christmas \$195–\$375 double, \$750–\$1,500 suite; winter \$145–\$280 double, \$600–\$1,200 suite; extra adult \$25; children stay free in parents' room. AE, DC, MC, V.

Where to dine

The four restaurants at the Alyeska Prince Hotel are described in the preceding section. Two excellent independent restaurants follow.



Chair 5

\$\$ Girdwood Seafood/Burgers/Pizza

This is where Girdwood locals meet their friends and take their families for dinner, and it's one of our favorites after skiing. One afternoon, Bob Dylan music accompanied a friendly game of pool while men with pony-tails and beards sipped microbrews. Another evening, a guy in the entry-way entertained the children with magic tricks, and a waitress asked them to draw pictures to enter into a contest. The menu offers choices pleasing to all, including pizza, burgers, fresh fish, and steaks.

5 Linblad St., in the New Girdwood Town Square. ☎ **907-783-2500**. www.chairfive.com. All meals: \$8–\$20; large pizza: \$16–\$20. AE, MC, V. Open: Daily 11 a.m.–11 p.m.

Double Musky Inn

\$\$\$\$ Girdwood Cajun

The ski-bum-casual atmosphere and rambling, cluttered dining room among the trees match the wonderful Cajun and New Orleans food in a way that couldn't have been contrived — it's at once too improbable and too authentic. Service is relaxed to a fault, and food takes a long time to arrive, but when it does it's flawless. However, the place isn't to everyone's liking. Your senses can feel raw after the noise, highly spiced food, and crowds, and parking can be difficult. Loud groups will enjoy it more than couples, and families don't really fit. They have a full bar.

Mile 3, Crow Creek Rd., Girdwood. ☎ **907-783-2822**. www.doublemuskyinn.com. Main courses: \$18–\$37. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Open: Tues–Thurs 5–10 p.m., Fri–Sun 4:30–10 p.m. Closed Nov.

Embarking on Prince William Sound from Whittier

Almost all of Prince William Sound is in Chugach National Forest, the nation's second largest. The sound is a world to itself, one largely free of people, with 3,500 miles of shoreline enfolded within its islands and deeply penetrating fjords and passages. Glaciers loom on the mountains at the northwestern part of the sound, and on the way to see them it's commonplace to encounter humpback and orca whales, dolphins, seals, otters, and a variety of birds.

Whittier is Anchorage's portal to this vast wildness. Although Anchorage itself is on Upper Cook Inlet, that muddy, fast-moving waterway is little used for recreational boating. Whittier, on the other hand, stands on the edge of a long fjord in the northwest corner of the sound, where clear waters are full of salmon, orcas, and otters, and bounded by rocky shores, rain forests, and glaciers. The water also is calmer here than on excursions to Kenai Fjords National Park (covered in Chapter 16), so seasickness is rare and the glaciers are more numerous.

Getting there

If you plan to take a day trip on the sound from a base in Anchorage — the way most people use Whittier — you can leave the car behind and take a train or bus all the way. Tour-boat operators (listed in “Getting out on the sound” below) will book the transportation from Anchorage for you, greatly simplifying the process and assuring that you’ll be on time for the boat. On the other hand, if you have more than two in your group, a car may save you money and give you flexibility to make other stops on the way. Likewise, drive if you plan to continue through the sound by ferry or to make Whittier a stop on the way down the Kenai Peninsula to Seward or Homer.



If you plan to drive, carefully read “By car,” a few sections down, to find out about the unusual process of getting through the tunnel to Whittier.

By bus

Tour-boat operators put visitors on buses and vans from Anchorage that are less expensive than riding the train. The bus ride is included in the cost of the tour-boat ticket, adding around \$40 per person to the fare.



Passing through Whittier

Whittier makes a fine day trip for boating, but there is little reason to spend the night. I don’t recommend a visit other than to go on to Prince William Sound — unless you’re on a quest to find the oddest towns in America. Most of the 182 townspeople live in a single 14-story concrete building with dark, narrow hallways. The grocery store is on the first floor and the medical clinic on the third. The Begich Towers, as the dominant structure is called, was built during the 1940s, when Whittier’s strategic location on the Alaska Railroad and at the head of a deep Prince William Sound fjord made it a key port in the defense of Alaska. Today, with its barren gravel ground and ramshackle warehouses and boat sheds, the town has a stark military-industrial character. Perhaps the next edition of *Alaska For Dummies* will have different advice on Whittier — the townspeople are working hard to improve the place. For now, however, I regard it as merely a dock on the sound.

By train

The **Alaska Railroad** (☎ 800-544-0552 or 907-265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) runs a daily train timed to match the schedules of Prince William Sound tour boats. The large tour operators will book it for you when you buy your boat ticket. The round-trip fare is \$59, one-way \$49, half-price ages 2 to 11. The train ride is scenic and fun, but if two or more people are in your group, a rental car will save you money.

By car

Take the Seward Highway, as described in “Driving between Mountain and Sea on the Seward Highway,” earlier in this chapter, to the Portage Glacier Road, at Mile 78 (48 miles from Anchorage). Allow at least an hour from Anchorage without stops. The road through the 2.8-mile-long World War II-era rail tunnel to Whittier is only one lane that also is used to accommodate trains, so you may have to wait your turn. Get the schedule through the tunnel’s Web site (go to www.dot.state.ak.us and click “Travel Information”), through its phone recording (☎ 877-611-2586 or 907-566-2244), or by tuning your radio to 1610AM in Portage or 530AM in Whittier. Checking the schedule can help you avoid a wait of an hour or more caused by missing the opening for your particular direction of travel.

In summer, the first opening from Whittier is at 6 a.m. and the last to Whittier is at 10:30 p.m. Winter hours are shorter and changeable, so check ahead. The toll — \$12 for cars; \$20 for RVs, cars with trailers, or large vans — is charged only for travel toward Whittier. Special permits are required for really huge vehicles (over 14 ft. high or 10 ft. wide). Parking in Whittier is \$5 a day.

By ferry

Ferries of the **Alaska Marine Highway System** (☎ 800-642-0066, or 800-764-3779 TDD; www.ferryalaska.com) connect Whittier to the other two towns in Prince William Sound, Cordova and Valdez. From Valdez, you can drive north on the beautiful Richardson Highway, making a complete circle back to Anchorage in two days or more. That’s covered in Chapter 18.

Getting out on the sound



Whittier is the entrance to western Prince William Sound, at the end of one of many long, deep fjords where marine mammals and eagles are common. You can ride one of the tour boats that cruise these waters from Whittier, viewing glaciers at the heads of many of the fjords.

Large tour boats

Several companies with offices in Anchorage compete for your business, offering day-trip tours to the sound’s western glaciers. Besides having incredible scenery, the water is calm, making seasickness unlikely — for

the queasy, this is a much better choice than Kenai Fjords National Park. Each operator times departures to coordinate with the daily Alaska Railroad train from Anchorage, described in the “Getting there” section, earlier in this chapter. That means they have up to six hours for the trip. Some tour companies try to show you as much as possible in that time, while others take it more slowly so you can savor the scenery and wildlife. Between train and boat fares, expect to spend \$190 per person for a day’s outing, leaving Anchorage at 10 a.m. and returning at 9:30 p.m.



You can save \$10 to \$15 a person and up to three hours by taking a bus that the tour-boat company arranges instead of the train. With two or more people, you can save by renting a car and driving. Some boats provide meals, while others sell them to passengers onboard.

Phillips’ Cruises and Tours

The 26-glacier cruise travels the sound on a fast three-deck catamaran, counting the glaciers as it goes. The boat ride is four and a half hours, so if you use their bus, your total time from Anchorage is less than eight and a half hours. As a pioneer of these tours, Phillips has many years of experience and does a professional job. The boat has a snack bar, and lunch is included in the fare.

519 W. Fourth Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ☎ 800-544-0529 or 907-276-8023. www.26glaciers.com. Price: \$129 adults, \$69 children younger than 12.

Major Marine Tours

This company operates a smaller, 149-passenger vessel at a slower pace than Phillips — they visit a mere ten glaciers, but spend more time waiting for ice to fall from glaciers. The route goes up Blackstone Bay. The boat is comfortable, with reserved table seating. They emphasize their food, which costs extra; the salmon and prime rib buffet is \$12 for adults, \$6 for children. It’s quite good. Time on the water is five hours.

411 W. Fourth Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ☎ 800-764-7300 or 907-274-7300. www.majormarine.com. Price: \$99 adults, \$49 children ages 11 and under.

Small tour boats

Instead of getting on a giant tour boat with a mob of people, you can go on a small boat with a local whom you’ll get to know as he shows off favorite places and lands on beaches for picnics and walks. If you see a whale or other point of interest, you can stay as long as you like, and in a small boat you can get closer. What you give up are the comforts of a larger, tour-bus-like vessel, and most small boats have a four-person minimum.

Honey Charters

Family-run Honey Charters has three sturdy aluminum boats built for these waters, specializing in personal tours, water transportation, and kayaker drop-offs. They operate with a minimum of four passengers; by

paying the four-person minimum, you can have a boat to yourself. For larger groups, their *Qayaq Chief* can carry 18 kayakers or 22 passengers on a sightseeing cruise. Bring your own food.

On the Whittier waterfront (P.O. Box 708), Whittier, AK 99693. ☎ 888-477-2493 or 907-472-2493. www.honeycharters.com. Price: 3-hour cruise \$89 per person, 6-hour cruise \$139 per person, 11-hour cruise \$189 per person.

Sound Eco Adventures

Gerry Sanger is a retired wildlife biologist who spent years researching the waterfowl and ecology of Prince William Sound. Now he carries up to six passengers at a time on wildlife, whale, and glacier tours and does kayak drop-offs from his 30-foot aluminum boat, which has a landing-craft-like ramp perfect for pulling up on gravel beaches, and suitable for wheelchairs. Finding whales in the sound takes skill and requires covering a lot of water; Gerry's success rate is better than 90 percent since 1999, and he has gone years without missing once. Prices listed are approximate: You can customize and arrange discounts in certain circumstances. Fares include lunch and snacks.

P.O. Box 707, Whittier, AK 99693. ☎ 888-471-2312 or 907-472-2312. www.soundeco.adventure.com. Price: Eight-hour whale and wildlife cruise \$200 per person; eight-hour sightseeing \$170; or charter the whole boat for \$125–\$145 per hour.

Fishing

More than a dozen charter fishing boats operate out of Whittier, the closest saltwater fishing to Anchorage. Most target halibut but some also hook salmon at times. The Whittier Harbormaster can give you a list of operators (☎ 907-472-2337, extension 110 or 115). **Bread N Butter Charters** (☎ 888-472-2396 or 907-472-2396) has been around for a while. They charge \$195 per person for a day of halibut fishing and have an office on the waterfront. Honey Charters, listed earlier in this chapter under “Small tour boats,” has a similar service.

Sea-kayaking

Whittier is a popular starting point for kayak trips to beautiful and protected western Prince William Sound. Day trips for beginners paddle along the shore near Whittier, often visiting a bird rookery, or you can take a boat 5 miles from the harbor to Shotgun Cove and paddle back. Longer multiday trips go by boat to even more interesting waters, where you can visit glaciated fjords and paddle narrow passages. Here are a couple kayaking businesses competing in Whittier:

- ✓ **Alaska Sea-Kayakers** (☎ 877-472-2534 or 907-472-2534; www.alaskaseakayakers.com) offers three- and five-hour day trips for \$79 and \$175, respectively. Its paddles at Blackstone Glacier, which begin with a charter-boat ride, cost \$300. Experienced self-guided kayakers can rent equipment at the Whittier office.

- ✓ The **Prince William Sound Kayak Center** (☎ 877-472-2452 or 907-472-2452; www.pwskayakcenter.com) offers guided half-day trips starting at \$55, as well as full days and other options; it also rents kayaks. It's been in business since 1981.

Where to dine

You can get a meal from various simple restaurants in the triangle at the east end of the harbor, including a good Chinese place, the Korean-owned **China Sea** (☎ 907-472-2222). Lunch there is \$8 or \$9, dinner \$12 to \$19, and in the summer they serve specials such as kung pao halibut. Hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily.

Taking a Side Trip to the Mat-Su Area

Here are some highlights of the **Matanuska and Susitna valleys**, the suburbs to the north of Anchorage commonly referred to as Mat-Su. You may want to spend a night there, but, more than likely, you'll pass through on a drive north, perhaps taking advantage of some of the area's attractions for a break along the way. Reached by the Glenn Highway about 40 miles from Anchorage, the Mat-Su area is both a bedroom community for the city and a former frontier-farming region with its own quirky identity.

In this summary, I discuss a few highlights in the central area of the valley. Other places of interest in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, which covers an area the size of West Virginia, are elsewhere in the book where they fit better with the itineraries I recommend: Talkeetna, in the northern Susitna Valley along the Parks Highway, is grouped with Denali National Park in Chapter 19; rafting the Matanuska River, a good Anchorage day activity, is included in Chapter 14; and the skiing and mountain lodges near the Matanuska Glacier on the Glenn Highway are covered in Chapter 18.

Seeing the valley's highlights

The only way to travel the Mat-Su area is by car. Here are some stops to make if you're passing through or exploring the area.

Hatcher Pass



Heading north to Denali National Park or Fairbanks, the rough, winding gravel road through Hatcher Pass to Willow makes a glorious alpine detour around what otherwise would be the least attractive part of your drive. Past the mine and skiing area, the road is open only in summer and is not suitable for large RVs. Just after the Parks Highway branches from the Glenn Highway, exit to the right on the Trunk Road and keep going north on Fishhook Road. From the Glenn Highway near Palmer, take Fishhook just north of town. Check with the **Alaska Department of Transportation** for road conditions before you leave (☎ 511; <http://511.alaska.gov>).

Even when you're not headed farther north, a trip to Hatcher Pass combines one of the area's most beautiful drives, access to great hiking or Nordic skiing, and interesting old buildings. The **Independence Mine State Historical Park** (☎ 907-745-2827 or 907-745-3975; www.alaskastateparks.org, click on the "Individual Parks" link) takes in the remains of a hard-rock gold-mine operation that closed down in 1951. Some buildings have been restored, including an assay office that's a museum and the manager's house that's a welcoming visitor center, while a big old mill, towering on the hillside, sags and leans picturesquely. A visit using the interpretive panels and map on a self-guided tour is interesting even if you don't go inside. The setting, in a bowl of rock and alpine tundra, is spectacular. The day-use fee is \$5 per vehicle. A guided tour is an additional \$5 per person (\$2 seniors, free under 10) and leaves at 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. weekdays, plus 4:30 p.m. weekends. The visitor center is open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily in the summer, closed in the off season.

The valley high in the **Talkeetna Mountains** that the site occupies is ideal for a summer ramble in the heather or for Nordic or telemark skiing in winter, with several kilometers of groomed trails for cross-country skis and limitless alpine terrain for exploration on your backcountry skis. Four hiking trails and two mountain-biking routes are in the area — ask for directions at the visitor center. One great hike is the 8-mile **Gold Mint Trail**, which starts across the road from the Motherlode Lodge on Fishhook Road and ends at the Mint Glacier, where you have to turn around to hike back.

Along the Parks Highway



Driving north on the Parks Highway from Anchorage to Denali National Park or Fairbanks takes you through the populated central part of the valley. The area is not attractive — it looks like an unplanned highway development anywhere — but among some of the good stops to make, if you're of a mind, is **The Museum of Alaska Transportation and Industry**, off the Parks Highway at Mile 47, west of Wasilla (☎ 907-376-1211; www.alaska.net/~rmorris/matil.htm). Volunteers have gathered every conceivable machine and conveyance — 13 fire trucks, 7 locomotives, and 2 steam cranes, for example — and fixed up as many as they could to running condition. An indoor museum displays the finished masterpieces, while the 20 acres outside are crammed with future projects — trains, aircraft, tractors, fishing boats, and mining equipment — all grist for memories and imagination. The museum is open May 1 through September 30 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily; October through April Saturday only 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., or by appointment. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$5 for students and seniors, \$18 for families.

Along the Glenn Highway

The Glenn Highway, north of the Parks Highway intersection and onward north of Palmer, is one of Alaska's prettiest drives. The road traces the edge of a rugged canyon over the Matanuska River and glacier (more

about that in Chapter 18). Nearer Anchorage, the main attraction is the **Alaska State Fair** in Palmer, which takes place the week before Labor Day (see Chapter 2 for details).

Where to stay and dine

The two lodgings I mention here have good restaurants where you can stop on your way through the valley. Here are two more: **Evangelo's Restaurant**, at Mile 40 of the Parks Highway as you pass through town (☎ 907-376-1212), a big, free-standing building that's quiet and comfortable and serves familiar Italian food; and **Valley Bistro**, at 405 E. Herning Ave., near the intersection of the Parks Highway and Main Street in Wasilla (☎ 907-357-5633), which occupies the town's primary historic building, the old Teeland's country store.

Best Western Lake Lucille Inn

\$\$\$ Wasilla

Just off the Parks Highway, this well-run, attractive lakeside hotel in Wasilla has the best standard hotel rooms in the valley. They're large and well appointed, and those facing the lake have balconies and a grand, peaceful view. Flightseeing trips take off right from the dock below the lawn. The restaurant is one of the best in the area, with a light, quiet dining room looking out on the water. It's open for dinner only, with the beef and seafood dinner menu ranging from \$15 to \$38.

1300 W. Lucille Dr., Wasilla, AK 99654. ☎ 800-897-1776 for reservations, or 907-373-1776. Fax 907-376-6199. www.bestwestern.com/lakelucilleinn. Rack rate: High season \$149 double, \$219 suite; low season \$89 double, \$175 suite; extra person \$10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.



Hatcher Pass Lodge

\$\$ Hatcher Pass

A charming family presides at this tiny mountain lodge in the treeless alpine bowl with beautiful views of the Independence Mine State Historic Park. Out on the open snowfield in winter, or the heather in summer, the nine cabins and A-frame lodge seem far more remote than they really are, just 90 minutes from Anchorage. There is a phone in the main lodge for emergencies but no TV. Our family stayed here for a glorious skiing vacation, and all 12 of us, ages 2 through 75, had a great time. A place with nothing to divert you but snow, a warm cabin, and good meals brings a family closer. The cabins are clean and nicely set up, with no rustic edge except chemical toilets and the lack of running water. Showers and meals come from the main lodge restaurant and bar, where the family produces surprisingly professional food in a warm, cozy environment. Stay in summer for a taste of the real Alaska, with doorstep access to wonderful alpine hiking.

P.O. Box 763, Palmer, AK 99645. ☎ 907-745-5897. www.hatcherpasslodge.com. Rack rates: \$95–\$125 cabin for two, extra person \$15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V.

