

The Best of Alaska

As a child, when my family traveled outside Alaska for vacations, I often met other children who asked, “Wow, you live in Alaska? What’s it like?” I never did well with that question. To me, the place I was visiting was far simpler and easier to describe than the one I was from. The Lower 48 seemed a fairly homogeneous land of freeways and fast food, a well-mapped network of established places. Alaska, on the other hand, wasn’t even completely explored. Natural forces of vast scale and subtlety were still shaping the land in their own way, inscribing a different story on each of an infinite number of unexpected places. Each region, whether populated or not, was unique far beyond my ability to explain. Alaska was so large and new, so unconquered and exquisitely real, as to defy summation.

In contrast to many places you might choose to visit, it’s Alaska’s unformed newness that makes it so interesting and fun. Despite the best efforts of tour planners, the most memorable parts of a visit are unpredictable and often unexpected: a humpback whale leaping clear of the water, the face of a glacier releasing huge ice chunks, a bear feasting on salmon in a river, a huge salmon chomping onto your line. You can look at totem poles and see Alaska Native cultural demonstrations, and you can also get to know indigenous people who still live by traditional ways. And sometimes grand, quiet moments come, and those are the ones that endure most deeply.

As the writer of this guidebook, I aim to help you get to places where you may encounter what’s new, real, and unexpected. Opening yourself to those experiences is your job, but it’s an effort that’s likely to pay off. Although I have lived here all my life, I often envy the stories visitors tell me about the Alaskan places they have gone to and what happened there. No one owns Alaska, and most of us are newcomers here. In all this immensity, a visitor fresh off the boat is just as likely as a lifelong resident to see or do something amazing.

1 The Best Views

- **A First Sight of Alaska:** Flying north from Seattle, you’re in clouds, so you concentrate on a book. When you look up, the light from the window has changed. Down below, the clouds are gone, and under the wing, where you’re used to seeing roads, cities, and farms on most flights, you see instead only high, snowy mountain peaks, without the slightest mark of human presence, stretching as far as the horizon. Welcome to Alaska.
- **Punchbowl Cove** (Misty Fjords National Monument): A sheer granite cliff rises smooth and implacable 3,150 feet straight up from the water. A pair of bald eagles wheels and soars across its face, providing the only sense of scale. They look the size of gnats. See p. 116

- **From the Chugach Mountains over Anchorage, at Sunset:** The city sparkles below, on the edge of an orange-reflecting Cook Inlet, far below the mountainside where you stand. Beyond the pink and purple silhouettes of mountains on the other side of the inlet, the sun is spraying warm, dying light into puffs of clouds. And yet it's midnight. See "Getting Outside" in chapter 6.
- **Mount McKinley from the Air** (Denali National Park): Your Bush pilot guides his plane up from the flatlands of Talkeetna into a realm of eternal white, where a profusion of insanely rugged peaks rises in higher relief than any other spot on Earth. After circling a 3-mile-high wall and

slipping through a mile-deep canyon, you land on a glacier, get out of the plane, and for the first time realize the overwhelming scale of it all. See "Attractions & Activities outside the Park" and "Talkeetna: Back Door to Denali" in chapter 8.

- **The Northern Lights** (Alaska's Interior): Blue, purple, green, and red lines spin from the center of the sky, draping long tendrils of slow-moving light. Bright, flashing, sky-covering waves wash across the dome of stars like ripples driven by a gust of wind on a pond. Looking around, you see that your companions' faces are rosy in a silver, snowy night, all gazing straight up with their mouths open. See p. 391.

2 The Best Alaska Cruises

Cruises provide comfortable, leisurely access to the Inside Passage and the Gulf of Alaska. Here are some of the best bets. See chapter 4 for details.

- **Best Up-Close Alaska Experience:** Lindblad Expeditions is an expert at soft adventure cruising, and its Alaska cruises are no exception. The *Sea Bird* and *Sea Lion* each carry only 62 passengers and offer routes where the focus is clearly on wildlife viewing and exploring the wilderness, with no less than the National Geographic Society providing the expedition leaders.
- **Most Comfortable Small Ships:** Cruise West's *Spirit of Oceanis* offers a higher level of comfort than the other small ships in Alaska while still giving you an intimate, casual, up-close small-ship experience. And the yachts of American Safari Cruises are clearly in the high-end luxury category.
- **Most Luxurious Big Ships:** If you want a more casual kind of luxury, Radisson Seven Seas' *Seven Seas Mariner* offers just that. Meanwhile, Silversea Cruises' *Silver Shadow* offers

pure luxury with an Italian edge. Among the mainstream cruise ships, Celebrity's *Infinity* and *Millennium* are the big winners, offering cutting-edge modern ships with great service, dining, and design. Also impressive are Princess' newest and biggest vessels in Alaska, the *Sapphire Princess* and *Diamond Princess*.

- **Best Cruise Tours:** Holland America Line and Princess are the leaders in linking cruises with land tours into the Interior, either before or after your cruise. They own their own hotels, deluxe motorcoaches, and railcars, and after many years in the business, they both really know what they're doing. Princess concentrates more on the Denali/Fairbanks and Kenai Peninsula routes, while Holland America has many itineraries that get you to the Yukon Territory. Royal Caribbean (which owns Royal Caribbean and Celebrity Cruises) has also made strides as the number three Alaska player, operating its own trains and motor coaches.

3 The Best Glaciers

More of Alaska—over 100 times more—is covered by glacier ice than is settled by human beings.

- **Grand Pacific Glacier** (Glacier Bay National Park): Two vast glaciers of deep blue meet at the top of an utterly barren fjord. They rubbed and creased the gray rock below for thousands of years before just recently releasing it to the air again. Three intimidating walls of ice surround boats that pull close to the glaciers. See “Glacier Bay National Park” in chapter 5.
- **Childs Glacier** (Cordova): Out the Copper River Highway from Cordova, this is a participatory glacier-viewing experience. The glacier is cut by the Copper River, which is ¼-mile broad; standing on the opposite shore (unless you’re up in the viewing tower), you have to be ready to run like hell when the creaking, popping ice gives way and a huge berg falls

into the river, potentially swamping the picnic area. Even when the glacier isn’t calving, you can feel the ice groaning in your gut. See “Cordova: Hidden Treasure” in chapter 7.

- **Exit Glacier** (Seward): You can drive near the glacier and walk the rest of the way on a gravel path. It towers above like a huge blue sculpture, the spires of broken ice close enough to breathe a freezer-door chill down on watchers. See “Exit Glacier” in section 6 of chapter 7.
- **Western Prince William Sound:** On a boat from Whittier, you can see a couple dozen glaciers in a day. Some of these are the amazing tidewater glaciers that dump huge, office-building-size spires of ice into the ocean, each setting off a terrific splash and outward-radiating sea wave. See “Whittier: Dock on the Sound” in chapter 7.

4 The Most Beautiful Drives & Train Rides

You’ll find a description of each road in “Alaska’s Highways a la Carte” on p. 382. Here are some highlights:

- **White Pass and Yukon Route Railway** (Skagway to Summit): The narrow-gauge excursion train climbs a steep grade that was chiseled into the granite mountains by stampeder to the Klondike gold rush. The train is a sort of mechanical mountain goat, balancing on trestles and steep rock walls far above deep gorges. See p. 204.
- **Seward Highway/Alaska Railroad** (Anchorage to Seward): Just south of Anchorage, the highway and rail line have been chipped into the side of the Chugach Mountains over the surging gray water of Turnagain Arm.

Above, Dall sheep and mountain goats pick their way along the cliffs, within easy sight. Below, white beluga whales chase salmon through the turbid water. Farther south, the route splits and climbs through the mountain passes of the Kenai Peninsula. See “Out from Anchorage: Turnagain Arm & Portage Glacier” in chapter 6 and “The Seward Highway: A Road Guide” in chapter 7 for information on the highway, and p. 251 for information on this Alaska Railroad route.

- **Denali Highway:** Leading east-west through the Alaska Range, the highway crosses terrain that could be another Denali National Park, full of wildlife and with views so huge and grand they seem impossible. See p. 346.

- **Richardson Highway:** Just out of Valdez heading north, the Richardson Highway rises quickly from sea level to more than 2,600 feet, switching back and forth on the side of a mountain. With each turn, the drop down the impassable slope becomes more amazing. North of Glennallen, the highway rises again, bursting through the tree line between a series of mountains and tracing the edges of long alpine lakes, before descending, parallel with the silver skein of the Alaska pipeline, to Delta Junction. See “The Richardson Highway & Copper Center,” in chapter 9.
- **The Roads Around Nome:** You can’t drive to Nome, but 250 miles of gravel roads radiate from the Arctic community into tundra that’s populated only by musk oxen, bears, reindeer, birds, and other wildlife. See p. 456.
- **The Dalton Highway:** When you’re ready for an expedition—a real wilderness trip by road—the Dalton Highway leads from Fairbanks across northern Alaska to the Arctic Ocean, a mind-blowing drive through 500 miles of spectacular virgin country. See “The Dalton Highway” in chapter 9.

5 The Best Fishing

The quality of salmon fishing in Alaska isn’t so much a function of place as of time. See p. 33 for information on how to find the fish when you arrive.

- **Bristol Bay:** This is the world’s richest salmon fishery; lodges on the remote rivers of the region are an angler’s paradise. See p. 436.
- **Copper River Delta, Cordova:** The Copper itself is silty with glacial runoff, but feeder streams and rivers are rich with trout, Dolly Varden, and salmon, with few other anglers in evidence. See p. 335.
- **The Kenai River:** The biggest king salmon—up to 98 pounds—come from the swift Kenai River. Big fish are so common in the second run of
- kings that there’s a special, higher standard for what makes a trophy. Silvers and reds add to a mad, summer-long fishing frenzy. See p. 297.
- **Homer:** Alaska’s largest charter-fishing fleet goes for halibut ranging into the hundreds of pounds. See p. 314.
- **Unalaska:** Beyond the road system, Unalaska has the biggest halibut. See p. 449.
- **Kodiak Island:** The bears are so big here because they live on an island that’s crammed with spawning salmon in the summer. Kodiak has the best roadside salmon fishing in Alaska, and the remote fishing, at lodges or fly-in stream banks, is legendary. See p. 441.

6 The Best Tips for Cooking Salmon

Now that you’ve caught a Pacific salmon, you need to know how to cook it—or order it in a restaurant—to avoid spoiling the rich flavor.

- **Freeze as Little as Possible:** It’s a sad fact that salmon loses some of its richness and gets more “fishy” as soon as it’s frozen. Eat as much as you can

fresh because it’ll never be better. Ask if the salmon is fresh when you order it in a restaurant. Don’t overlook smoking, the traditional Native way of preserving fish for the winter. See p. 315 for information on getting your salmon frozen and smoked.

- **Choose the Best Fish:** The best restaurants advertise where their salmon comes from on the menu. In early summer, Copper River kings and reds are the richest in flavor; later in the summer, Yukon River salmon are best. The oil in the salmon gives it the rich, meaty flavor; the fish from the Copper and Yukon are high in oil content because the rivers are long and the fish need a lot of stored energy to swim upstream to spawn. King, red, and silver salmon are the only species you should find in a restaurant. Avoid farm-reared salmon, which is mushy and flavorless compared with wild Alaska salmon.
- **Keep It Simple:** When ordering salmon or halibut in a restaurant, avoid anything with cheese or heavy sauces. When salmon is fresh, it's best with light seasoning, perhaps just a little lemon, dill weed, and pepper and salt, or basted with soy sauce; or without anything on it at all, grilled over alder coals.
- **Don't Overcook It:** Salmon should be cooked just until the moment the meat changes color and becomes flaky through to the bone, or slightly before. A minute more, and some of the texture and flavor are lost. That's why those huge barbecue salmon bakes often are not as good as they should be—it's too hard to cook hundreds of pieces of fish just right and serve them all hot.
- **Fillet, Not Steaks:** Salmon is cut two ways in Alaska: lengthwise fillets or crosswise steaks. The fillet is cut with the grain of the flesh, keeping the oil and moisture in the fish. Do not remove the skin before cooking—it holds in the oils and will fall off easily when the fish is done. If you have a large group, consider cooking the salmon bone-in (sometimes called a roast), stuffing seasonings in the body cavity. When it's done, the skin easily peels off and, after eating the first side, you can effortlessly lift out the skeleton.

7 The Best Bear Viewing

There are many places to see bears in Alaska, but if your goal is to make *sure* you see a bear—and potentially lots of bears—these are the best places:

- **Anan Wildlife Observatory:** When the fish are running, you can see many dozens of black bears feeding in a salmon stream from close at hand. Access is easiest from Wrangell. See p. 126.
- **Pack Creek** (Admiralty Island): The brown bears of the island, which is more thickly populated with them than anywhere else on Earth, have learned to ignore the daily visitors who stand on the platforms at Pack Creek. Access is by air from Juneau. See p. 172.
- **Katmai National Park:** During the July and September salmon runs, dozens of giant brown bears congregate around Brooks Camp, where, from wooden platforms a few yards away, you can watch the full range of their behaviors. Flight services from Kodiak also bring guests at any time of the summer to see bears dig clams on the park's eastern seashore. See "Katmai National Park" and "Kodiak: Wild Island" in chapter 10.
- **Kodiak Island:** The island's incredible salmon runs nourish the world's largest bears, Kodiak brown bears; pilots know where to find them week to week, landing floatplanes as near as possible. See p. 437.

- **Denali National Park:** The park offers the best and least expensive wildlife-viewing safari in the state.

Passengers on the buses that drive the park road as far as mile 63 usually see at least some grizzlies. See chapter 8.

8 The Best Marine Mammal Viewing

You've got a good chance of seeing marine mammals almost anywhere you go boating in Alaska, but in some places it's almost guaranteed.

- **Frederick Sound** (Petersburg): A humpback jumped right into the boat with whale-watchers here in 1995. The whales show up reliably for feeding each summer. Small boats from Petersburg have no trouble finding them and watching in intimate circumstances. See p. 136.
- **Icy Strait** (Gustavus) and **Bartlett Cove** (Glacier Bay National Park): Humpback whales show up and often orcas are present off Point Adolphus, in Icy Strait, just a few miles from little Gustavus, a town of luxurious country inns, and in Bartlett Cove within Glacier Bay National Park. See "Glacier Bay National Park" and "Gustavus: Country Inns & Quiet" in chapter 5.

- **Sitka Sound:** Lots of otters and humpback whales show up in the waters near Sitka. In fall, when the town holds its Whale Fest, you can spot them from a city park built for the purpose. See "Sitka: Rich Prize of Russian Conquest" in chapter 5.
- **Kenai Fjords National Park** (near Seward): You don't have to go all the way into the park—you're pretty well assured of sea otters and sea lions in Resurrection Bay, near Seward, and humpbacks and killer whales are often seen in the summer, too. See "Kenai Fjords National Park" in chapter 7.
- **Prince William Sound:** Otters, seals, and sea lions are easy—you'll see them on most trips out of Valdez, Whittier, or Cordova—but you also have a chance of spotting both humpback and killer whales in the Sound. See chapter 7.

9 The Best Encounters with Native Culture

- **Ketchikan Totem Poles:** This Tlingit homeland has three unique places to see totem poles: historic poles indoors at the Totem Heritage Center, faithful reproductions outdoors in a natural setting at Totem Bight State Park, and brand-new poles as they are created in a workshop at the Saxman Native Village Totem Pole Park. See p. 109.
- **Sitka:** The Tlingits remain strong where they met Russian invaders in fierce battles 2 centuries ago. The totem poles and ancient Native art you can see here are second to none,

and the setting makes them only more impressive. See section 5 of chapter 5.

- **Alaska Native Heritage Center** (Anchorage): All of Alaska's Native groups joined together to build this grand living museum and gathering place, where dance and music performances, storytelling, art and craft demonstrations, and simple meetings of people happen every day. See p. 238.
- **Iñupiat Heritage Center** (Barrow): A living museum, this is a place to meet and enjoy performances by the

Native people who built it, and to see extraordinary artifacts they have

made and recovered from digs in frozen ground. See p. 461.

10 The Best Museums & Historic Sites

- **Sitka National Historical Park:** The historic park, its buildings, and other structures in Sitka keep alive an alternate stream in history: one in which a Russian czar ruled Alaska and this little town was one of the most important on the west coast of North America. See p. 144.
- **The Alaska State Museum** (Juneau): This richly endowed museum doesn't just show off its wealth of objects—it also uses them to teach about the state. A visit will put Alaska's Native cultures and pioneer history in context. See p. 159.
- **Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center:** Alaska's largest museum has the room and expertise to tell the

story of Native and white history in Alaska, and to showcase contemporary Alaskan art and culture. See p. 237.

- **The Pratt Museum** (Homer): The Pratt explains natural history (especially the life of the ocean) in a clear and intimate way you'll find nowhere else in Alaska. See p. 309.
- **UA Museum of the North** (Fairbanks): The spectacular renovation of this university museum includes a swooping new gallery to present Alaska's art. Its older gallery contains an extraordinary natural history collection, presented with the help of some of the world's top scientists on Alaskan subjects. See p. 392.

11 The Best Winter Destinations

- **Anchorage:** Anyone can enjoy the Fur Rendezvous and Iditarod sled dog races, which keep a winter-carnival atmosphere going through much of February and March, but winter sports enthusiasts get the most out of winter here. The city has some of the best Nordic skiing anywhere, close access to three downhill skiing areas, dog mushing, and groomed lake skating. See chapter 6.
- **Alyeska Resort** (Girdwood): Alaska's premier downhill skiing area has lots of snow over a long season, fantastic views, few lift lines, and a luxurious hotel. See "The Best Hotels," below, and p. 256.
- **Chena Hot Springs Resort:** A 90-minute ride from Fairbanks, and you're out in the country, where the northern lights are clear on a starry winter afternoon and night. The

resort has lots of activities to get you out into the snowy countryside, or you can just relax in the hot mineral springs. See p. 410.

- **Homer:** In March, you can fish for king salmon in the morning and cross-country ski over a high ridge with limitless ocean views in the afternoon. In the evening, check out Alaska's best art galleries and eat in its best restaurants. See chapter 7, section 10.
- **Barrow:** Go to the shore of the frozen Arctic Ocean, and you have a chance to experience the most extreme winter conditions in the world. It's dark for 65 days except for the aurora blasting across the sky. There's not much to do, but you could run into a polar bear in the street. See "Barrow: Way North" in chapter 10.

12 The Strangest Community Events

- **Cordova Ice Worm Festival** (Cordova): The truth is, ice worms do exist. Really. This winter carnival celebrates them in February. The highlight is the traditional annual march of the ice worm (a costume with dozens of feet sticking out) down the main street. See p. 333.
- **Midnight Sun Baseball Game** (Fairbanks): For more than 100 years they have played a baseball game without lights that doesn't begin until 10:30pm on the longest day of the year. See p. 389.
- **Bering Sea Ice Golf Classic** (Nome): The greens are AstroTurf, as the sea ice won't support a decent lawn in mid-March. Hook a drive and you could end up spending hours wandering among the pressure ridges, but you must play the ball as it lies. See p. 455.
- **Polar Bear Swim** (Nome): This swim in the frigid Bering Sea takes place in late June, but only if the sea ice has opened up sufficiently to provide enough liquid water. See p. 455.
- **Piuraagiaqt** (Barrow): This spring festival, in April, includes lots of strange contests, such as the tea making race—contestants start with solid ice—and the white men versus Eskimo women tug-of-war contest, which the white men have yet to win after many years of trying. Or the community may have come up with some other silly contest this year. See p. 461.
- **Mountain Mother Contest** (Talkeetna): In this event in the July Moose Dropping Festival, mothers compete in a test of Bush skills, including splitting wood, carrying water, and diapering a baby. See p. 377.
- **Wild Cow Milking Contest** (Kodiak): The Labor Day Kodiak State Fair and Rodeo includes an event in which pairs of amateur cowboys and cowgirls pulled from the audience chase down and milk small cows unleashed in a ring. See p. 439.

13 The Best Hotels

- **Hotel Captain Cook** (Anchorage; ☎ 800/843-1950): This is the grand old hotel of downtown Anchorage, with a heavy nautical theme, teak paneling, several terrific restaurants, and every possible amenity. It remains the state's standard of service and luxury. See p. 218.
- **Hotel Alyeska** (Girdwood; ☎ 800/880-3880): The first sight of this ski resort hotel—designed in a château style and standing in an undeveloped mountain valley—will make you catch your breath. Wait till you get inside and see the starscape and polar bear diorama in the lobby atrium, or the saltwater swimming pool, with its high-beamed ceiling and windows, looking out on the mountain. A tram carries skiers and diners to the mountaintop. See p. 258.
- **Land's End Resort** (Homer; ☎ 800/478-0400): It's the location: right on the end of Homer Spit, 5 miles out in the middle of Kachemak Bay, where you can fish for salmon from the beach right in front of your room, or watch otters drifting by. The hotel itself is excellent, too, with a tremendous variety of rooms, some extraordinarily luxurious, and a complete spa. See p. 316.

- **Westmark Fairbanks Hotel & Conference Center** (Fairbanks; ☎ 800/544-0970): A tower rises over the flat river city of Fairbanks, a stylish and charming new wing of the city's oldest

modern hotel. The owners, the Holland America Line, demolished much of the original building, leaping decades from the past to just a little into the future. See p. 401.

14 The Best Websites

Many useful websites are listed throughout the book; some of the best are under "Visitor Information" near the beginning of each town section.

- **www.trollart.com.** Ketchikan artist Ray Troll has created a website that carries you deep into his mind, which is full of odd and resonant humor about the evolution of fish, man, and our common relations. His vibrantly colored art makes it an aesthetic journey.
- **www.adfg.state.ak.us.** The Alaska Department of Fish & Game posts valuable information for anyone interested in fishing, hunting, wildlife watching, or just learning about creatures. Everyone from children to wildlife biologists will find something at their level. Try **www.wildlife.alaska.gov** for information about where to go and how to see Alaska's wild animals.
- **www.awrta.org.** The Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association unites hundreds of small eco-tourism operators. Authentic local guides and lodges can be hard to find, but they are listed here on a comprehensive and easy-to-use site.

- **www.gi.alaska.edu.** The Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks maintains a fascinating and cool site filled with real-time earth science information about Alaska, such as aurora predictions, volcano watches, earthquake and tsunami updates, rocketry, and space science.
- **www.wohlforth.net.** A bit of self-promotion here, but readers can get something out of it. I've answered scores of reader questions, and supply links to many of the establishments listed in this book and some of my other writings on Alaska and other subjects. Other travelers have run into the same puzzles you have, and you'll find my advice here.
- **Favorite Small-Town Sites:** Small-town Alaska newspapers, and people in communities too small to have a newspaper, communicate through the Internet; visitors to these sites can vicariously experience the pleasures and pitfalls of remote living, which can be touching and hilarious. The best I've found are Seldovia's **www.seldovia.com**, Nome's **www.nome.nugget.com**, and Kotzebue's **www.cityofkotzebue.com**.