

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Alaska

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the best spots to see glaciers and bears
 - ▶ Exploring indigenous Alaskan culture and gold rush history
 - ▶ Hiking Alaska's most beautiful day trails
 - ▶ Checking out Alaska's top one-of-a-kind lodgings
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Satellite photographs taken at night show much of the populated world as a thick network of lights. Cities and highways stand out clearly. The same view of Alaska, however, reveals just a couple of bright spots; the rest of the land appears as a vast, velvety blackness. It's as though this great subcontinent were an undiscovered country that extends beyond the web of civilization. Indeed, although Alaska has been completely mapped, immense areas are still unexplored. Not only do thousands of mountains remain unclimbed, most have never even been named. Just to give you an idea of the scope, Alaska has 100,000 glaciers and 10 million lakes.

So this chapter's goal is to pick out the best of all that? Uh-oh.



A trip to Alaska should not be like one to Paris or the San Diego Zoo. Don't come to see certain sites or objects. It's silly to focus on a particular mountain or glacier when a practically infinite number are available. You never know when you may encounter wildlife — these meetings can't be scheduled. Moreover, each of the regions you're likely to visit boasts fabulous mountains, glaciers, wildlife, hikes, boating, rafting, sea kayaking — all of it.

As a travel writer, I've visited a majority of the nation's great, crowded national parks, yet every summer in Alaska I see vistas as impressive, or even grander, that have no special designation. After a lifetime of such travels, I'm not even close to exhausting this wonder of discovery. I don't think I ever will be. Those are my "bests."

Although this chapter can provide reference points, stepping-off places from which you can get your bearings, don't get too caught up in ticking

off a list of “the best.” Instead, focus on the experience. Launch your own exploration and open yourself to discovery. Get out into all that vastness on foot, in a boat or kayak, in a small aircraft, or in a car. Do whatever you can to experience Alaska’s unlimited expanse for yourself, and in doing so you’ll find your own, unique “best,” that belongs to no one else.



I discuss each of the places and experiences described in this chapter in detail later in this book. You can find them in their indicated chapter, marked with — what else? — a Best of the Best icon.

The Best Big Ice

A glacier is a strange and unfamiliar thing. It looks like land, but it flows like water. Glaciers can be larger than a city or even a state, and yet they move constantly, sometimes suddenly, and they can bulldoze straight through mountains. Nothing else looks like a glacier. They’re white, gray, and fluorescent blue. They drape gracefully through the mountains, but they also crack in enormous shards.

- ✓ **Prince William Sound Glaciers (Whittier):** Less than two hours from Anchorage, the port town of Whittier provides access to northwestern Prince William Sound, one of Alaska’s most beautiful and heavily glaciated waterways. Day cruises from Whittier, easy to do as a day trip from Anchorage, compete on price, food service on board, and number of glaciers you see in a few hours (up to two dozen). See Chapter 15.
- ✓ **Kenai Fjords National Park (Seward):** Here you’ll find Exit Glacier (one of the few glaciers you can walk right up to) and the magnificent glaciers still carving the fjords, reached only by boats from Seward. This forbidding and untouched area, where mountains shoot a mile high straight out of the sea, is also among the best for seeing marine mammals and birds. See Chapter 16.
- ✓ **Ruth Glacier (Denali National Park):** Forget the traditional image of glacier ice falling into the ocean — this is a chance to land on one of Mount McKinley’s glaciers in a ski plane, get out, and look around. These flights, mostly going from Talkeetna, are among the most spectacular experiences a visitor to Alaska can have. See Chapter 19.
- ✓ **Juneau Ice Field (Juneau):** Helicopters from Juneau fly over the immense ice field that lies beyond the mountains bordering the town. Visitors can just look, or join guided hikes on the ice, or even get in a dog sled and go mushing on the glaciers. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Glacier Bay National Park (Juneau):** This park encompasses fjords released from the grip of ice over the last century. Passengers on cruise ships and tour boats going to the head of the bay often see humpback whales before arriving at huge walls of ice. Sea kayakers get a much closer and more intimate view of the land and wildlife. See Chapter 20.

The Best Bear Viewing



Bears can turn up almost anywhere in Alaska — even in a city park. Kincaid Park in Anchorage has signs that warn “You Are Entering Bear Country,” because of the joggers and bicyclists who have run into black bears. Alaska’s thriving populations of black, brown (or grizzly), and polar bears are seen frequently when the season is right. See Chapter 9 for more details.

- ✔ **Homer:** The salmon-filled rivers in this part of Alaska, south of Anchorage, attract fish-loving brown bears through much of the summer. Homer is among the best places to board a float plane to head out into that wilderness to see them. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Denali National Park:** Even more remarkable than the scenery is Denali’s status as the site of one of the greatest and least expensive wildlife safaris you can experience. Thanks to the limited-access bus system that is the only motorized way into the park, every shuttle passenger has an excellent chance of seeing brown bears. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Pack Creek (near Juneau):** For decades, the brown bears of Admiralty Island that converge here to feed on the salmon have nonchalantly allowed humans to watch them from nearby platforms. It’s a short flight from Juneau, but a different world. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Kodiak Island and Katmai National Park:** These remote lands host some of the biggest salmon runs and, therefore, the biggest and most plentiful brown bear population anywhere on earth. Catch the season right, and you could see large groups of enormous bears fishing and feeding. See Chapter 24.
- ✔ **Barrow:** Point Barrow, the farthest north you can go in the United States, is the best place to see polar bears in the country; bears congregate here to feed on waste from Eskimo whale hunting. However, this choice is an adventurous one: Tours in four-wheel-drive vehicles, offered casually by locals, don’t always see bears; indeed, they don’t always operate. See Chapter 23.

The Best Places to Encounter Indigenous Culture

Alaska is home to many distinct peoples. The cultural heritage and ways of life of Alaska’s indigenous people remain largely intact in many areas of the state, and Alaskan Natives are often interested in sharing their traditions with visitors who bring needed economic support to their communities.

- ✓ **Alaska Native Heritage Center (Anchorage):** Native peoples from all over Alaska joined together to create this magnificent cultural center and living museum. Here you can taste many cultures at once, see live performances and exhibits, meet artisans, and walk through traditional dwellings. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Sitka:** Tlingit people who made Alaska's great totem poles and clan houses present their own culture at three venues in Sitka (see Chapter 22):
 - The **Sitka National Historic Park**, where you can see extraordinary historic totem poles and meet today's carvers
 - The **Sheldon Jackson Museum**, with a unique collection of Alaska Native art
 - Sitka Tribe's magnificent **community hall**, where authentic dance performances take place in the summer
- ✓ **Iñupiat Heritage Center (Barrow):** Eskimo culture is alive and well, and in Barrow you can often see subsistence hunters preparing or returning from hunts for whale, caribou, or polar bear. At the town's fascinating cultural center and living museum, you can also see exhibits and dance performances and meet craftsmen selling authentic Iñupiat artwork. See Chapter 23.

The Best Gold Rush Towns

The Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, when the non-Native population arrived all at once in search of riches, is the biggest event in Alaska's short history. Many towns owe their existence to it, and some have made that lineage a major attraction (see Chapter 16).

- ✓ **Fairbanks:** These days Fairbanks is a city, but it still acts like a town, with lots of fun and corny activities for visitors (and one of the state's best museums, at the University of Alaska Fairbanks). Gold mining goes on today, and you can see it demonstrated and tour historic gold mining museums. See Chapter 17.
- ✓ **Juneau:** The gold discoveries in Juneau predated the Klondike Gold Rush, and led to the construction of massive hard-rock mining works. Check out the remains on outdoor trails, at indoor museums, and even on a tunnel tour at an old mine. See Chapter 20.
- ✓ **Skagway:** This may be America's best preserved gold rush boomtown, the scene of legendary Wild West times when Klondike stampedes got off the boat here bound for the gold fields. Although overrun with cruise-ship visitors, the town is well preserved by the National Park Service. See Chapter 21.
- ✓ **Nome:** Nome's gold rush stories top all. Although most of the historic structures are gone, the town retains a free-wheeling frontier

spirit, making it feel more like a gold rush boomtown than other more tourist-oriented places. Small-time prospectors are still at work here, too. See Chapter 23.

The Best Day Hikes

Every town in Alaska is surrounded by wilderness, even Anchorage. That means every town in Alaska has routes into beautiful, wild places. Go a little farther — in the national parks, or along hundreds of miles of remote highways — and you can hike in some of the biggest open country in the world. For more walking ideas, see Chapter 25.

- ✔ **Glen Alps Trailhead (Anchorage):** Drive above Anchorage into the rocky Chugach Mountains, and park your car well above the tree-line, where views extend far beyond the city, over the ocean waters of Cook Inlet, and to the mountain ranges beyond. From this point, a wide choice of trails leads up mountains or across valleys; or you can take off on your own over open tundra. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Caines Head (Seward):** Hike all the way from town or take a water taxi partway to a boulder-strewn beach, and from there climb gradually through the woods to the ruins of a mountaintop World War II artillery fort with weird underground corridors and stupendous views across Resurrection Bay and beyond. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Granite Tors (near Fairbanks):** This challenging hike east of Fairbanks leads beyond the forest to the broad, tundra-clad Plain of Monuments, where strange natural towers of solid granite poke the sky at apparently random spots, defying the eye to determine their size in the absence of scale or reference points. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Toklat River (Denali National Park):** In the heart of Denali National Park, few trails exist; the best of the park is discovered beyond trail's end. You'll find easy walking along the braided river channels, including the Toklat, where you can go far without struggling over tundra and see more wildlife than people. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Perseverance Trail (Juneau):** Hard-rock gold mining built Juneau in the 1880s; at one time, it was among of the most industrially advanced cities on the West Coast. Although that's no longer the case, this historic mountain trail goes back in time to the Silverbow Basin, where much of it happened. Across from the trailhead is a fascinating gold rush museum. See Chapter 20.

The Best One-of-a-Kind Lodgings

When I travel, I want to feel as though I've gone somewhere. I try to eat with the locals and stay in lodgings with local character. In Alaska, I've sought out these authentic places for visitors. This list includes some of the best (and most unique).

- ✔ **Oscar Gill House (Anchorage):** It's not grand, but this is the oldest house in Anchorage. In fact, it predates the city — it was moved here by one of the early mayors. Lovingly restored, yet retaining a homey, lived-in feel, the house now offers bargain bed-and-breakfast accommodations. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Alyeska Prince Hotel (Girdwood):** Alaska's grandest luxury hotel, an hour from Anchorage, has a one-of-a-kind location, in an unspoiled mountain valley among huge spruce trees. Skiers can go right from the door to Alaska's best slopes, and in the summer the aerial tram is an easy way for anyone to experience the crisp air and magnificent views of an Alaska mountaintop. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Land's End Resort (Homer):** The hotel is charming, but the location is what makes it unique. Land's End Resort sits at the very end of a 5-mile-long point of land into Kachemak Bay, one of Alaska's most beautiful and ecologically productive bodies of water. You can walk from your room to fish for salmon, or sit back and watch sea otters swim by. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Aurora Express Bed and Breakfast (Fairbanks):** A family hauled a collection of railroad cars — plus a locomotive and caboose — up a mountain south of Fairbanks and remodeled the interior into a collection of accommodations, some too cute for words, others heavily nostalgic for those who remember the golden age of rail. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Pearson's Pond Luxury Inn and Adventure Spa (Juneau):** This remarkable inn, tucked away in a residential subdivision near the Mendenhall Glacier, is so full of amenities and attractions it would take pages to describe it all. But the essence of it is simple: a sensual retreat for romantic stays when your goal is to be utterly pampered. See Chapter 20.