

Alaska

Great Land adventures come in all sizes BY ERIC LUCAS

Everyone knows Alaska is huge—bigger than California, Montana and Texas combined. Equally huge is the 49th state's remarkable diversity in climate, geography, cuisine, culture, history, demographics and more. Yes, the popular images of the Great Land are true—massive creatures such as bears wander tundra slopes beneath snowy summits, glaciers tumble into azure waters that are humpback whale homelands, and hardy residents ride rugged dog sleds through snowy forests.

But there's so much more, so many half-hidden, microcosmic marvels. And thus, this August morning in the Tangle Lakes valley southeast of Fairbanks, the balmy weather, sunny skies and amber water call me to an activity I've loved since boyhood. My friend Amy and I have rented a canoe from a nearby lodge and are paddling on a serene lake, admiring gardens of aquatic flowers, and we've been greeted by a young river otter, kitten-size, gamboling in the shallows. The scene looks invitingly grand, all of it, so we tie up the canoe on shore, and I plunge in.

The sun is high and strong. Birdsongs sift through the breeze.

The water is actually rather cool, and the "beach" more pebbly





Portage Pass Trail hikers admire Portage Glacier, about 60 miles from Anchorage.



Brown bears fish for salmon near the U.S. Forest Service's Anan Creek Wildlife Viewing Site.

than plush. But this interlude along the Denali Highway epitomizes Alaska's unexpected pleasures and how easy they are to find: moments that are memorably intimate, warm and low-key. We'd left Fairbanks to go for a two-day exploration along the Denali Highway, and the journey's small-scale delights were buttressed by the usual magnificent sights: ivory pinnacles on the horizon—including Denali, North America's tallest mountain—eagles and caribou by the road, the vast distances bracketed by hillsides of fuchsia fireweed.

Both types of experiences are common anywhere in Alaska. But each region holds its own distinctive wonders. Here's a sampling from around the Great Land.

Southeast Alaska

The hungry black bear is just yards below a small group of wildlife fans—but no one's alarmed. We're at the U.S. Forest Service's Anan Creek Wildlife Viewing Site in Southeast Alaska, standing on a

sturdy observation deck (*very sturdy, thankfully*) atop a bluff overlooking the creek, and the young black bear has just been chased off the creek's salmon run by a larger brown bear.

"Oohs" and "aahs" are plentiful. Not only have most of these visitors never been this close to a wild bear, most have never seen one at all. But here are ursids in profusion. Anan Creek is about a 45-minute floatplane flight from Ketchikan or Wrangell, followed by a short hike (escorted by guides) along the creek to the viewing area. Once here, marvels abound: tumbling pools teeming with pink salmon; eagles patrolling gravel banks; the rondo of raven calls in the woods.

Southeast, as Alaskans call it, offers several of the world's best bear-viewing venues. Among the most visited is a creekside platform at the U.S. Forest Service's Mendenhall Glacier, about 12 miles northwest of Juneau. Here, black bears throng in summer to fish glacier-fed streams.

A 30-minute floatplane trip south of Juneau takes you to the U.S. Forest Service's Pack Creek, where visitors stand on a small rise to watch brown bears that are sometimes just a few yards away along a salmon stream. No platform here—guides guard visitors, and bears that are busy fishing pay the humans no mind.

All that salmon has also given rise to a regional seafood cookery that's second to none. Two Juneau chefs have won the annual Great American Seafood Cook-Off in the past three years: Lionel Uddipa—whose Salt restaurant is an exceptional fine dining emporium just a block from the state capitol—was the 2017 winner. A half-block from Salt (one need not travel far between gourmet repasts here), The Rookery Cafe is Beau Schooler's bistro for genius dishes such as sockeye fillet poached in duck fat. Schooler won the national seafood cook-off in 2015 and was a finalist for the James Beard Award for Rising Star of the Year in 2015 and 2016.

Just a few blocks from these restau-

rants, the Alaska State Museum provides a marvelous introduction to the history, culture and art of the Great Land, with artifacts such as a watercolor painted in 1778 by William Ellis during Captain Cook's exploration of Alaska, and a natural history collection that contains about 1,200 seashells, minerals, skeletons, fossils and mounted animals.

Down the coast, in Wrangell, the centuries-old designs at Petroglyph Beach State Historic Park represent the creative aspirations of some of Alaska's first inhabitants.

Tlingit and Haida longhouses and interpretive centers in Juneau, Wrangell, Hoonah, Haines, Sitka, Ketchikan and Kasaan welcome modern visitors with compelling displays of formline design, the famous Northwest Coast art form marked by curving lines that swell and diminish, creating an outline of the chosen subject.

The woodland pathway at Sitka National Historical Park holds a vast collection of totems, old and new—one of the largest such outdoor displays in the United States. And the new Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage & Bald Eagle Preserve Visitor Center, near Haines, showcases the famous 19th century Whale House posts, which are considered by scholars to be some of the finest historic formline carvings ever made.

Interior Alaska

"Here, it's easy." Ilaura Reeves takes the gold pan from my hand, expertly swishes water, sweeps away a handful of sand, and points to the six gold flecks in the bottom of the pan.

"Sure, easy for you," I tell her. "You've been doing this all your life."

Indeed she has. Ilaura and her sister, Jordan, began helping with their dad's gold operations when they were toddlers more interested in bullion than Barbie. Now they run Gold Daughters, a charming attraction near Fairbanks where you can

try your hand at the art of gold panning. And I do mean "art"—even with Ilaura's expert guidance, it's not easy.

But it is fun. The good-humored atmosphere (the Reeves sisters happily concede they "salt" the pay-dirt sacks visitors receive with their \$20 admission) includes a gallery of humorous Alaska signs and a collection of antique mining equipment.

Alaska's gold-rush history, which dates to the Klondike Gold Rush in the 1890s, is just a small part of the Great Land's long human story told at the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks. North America's first inhabitants came through Alaska and settled throughout the Western Hemisphere, and their descendants still live and thrive here. Their cultural expressions highlight the museum's Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery, which includes a 2,000-year-old ivory figurine, *Okvik Madonna*.

From the museum's entrance, poised high on a ridge north of the city, you can see 20,310-foot Denali on clear days.



Top, Gold Daughters co-owner Jordan Reeves (left) helps a customer pan. Below, the northern lights stream over tractor trailers in Coldfoot.

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The massive mountain is about 125 miles south of Fairbanks, and the national park it anchors is a vast landscape of sub-Arctic forest and tundra. Bears, wolves, caribou, ptarmigan, foxes and other wildlife outnumber people; a bus ride into the park is a daylong adventure, immensely improved by a stay at one of the lodges in Kantishna.

Driving the Denali Highway, which bisects Interior Alaska east of the park, is a two-day adventure that reveals a landscape as memorable as Denali's, but with even fewer people.

Remote Alaska

Coldfoot represents a hallowed American institution—a truck stop—unlike any other in the country. This is a “census-designated place,” but census takers don't have much to do: The official population is 10. It's just a way station on the mostly gravel Dalton Highway, but what a stop it is. Long-haul truckers on the way north to Prudhoe Bay mingle with adventurous travelers driving the road in camper vans. All congregate in the cafe for hearty breakfasts scaled to the land.

Here, more than 50 miles north of the Arctic Circle, the sun hardly sets in June and July, and visitors taking a tour of Wiseman, a few miles farther north, learn that solar power is an important part of modern Alaskan life—all that sun helps turnips grow as big as melons.

In the winter, snow in this region is not only pretty, it's welcome as insulation that local residents pile up against the walls of their cabins to fend off 50-below cold, which is measured by alcohol thermometers since mercury freezes at minus 38. Reached by fly/drive tours from Fairbanks, about 270 miles south, this is both a summer and winter



Left, hikers trek on the Matanuska Glacier, which flows out of the Chugach Mountains. Right, the Anchorage Museum's new Rasmuson Wing is home to the Art of the North galleries, featuring paintings such as the 1929 Mount McKinley by Sydney Laurence.

destination, offering wildlife viewing in the warm months and aurora viewing late August through April. Yes, even in subzero temperatures—visitors bundle in comfortably warm gear.

Anchorage Area

Even though the Matanuska Glacier is a nearly 30-mile river of ice, on this bright and balmy August morning there is water everywhere: trickles and freshets, torrents and cascades, pools and lakes by the thousands. Crampons on our boots, my friend Jody and I climb up the Matanuska with our guide and traipse across the ice as if it were just a neighborhood park.

In a way, it is. About 100 miles from Anchorage, the Matanuska is one of the easiest Alaska glaciers for travelers to actually visit—as in, on the ice, walking its rumpled surface past its innumerable runnels. The sights, smells and sounds (a symphony of cracking, grinding and splashing) of a glacier are like no other place on land. With a guide, the valley

floor remains easily accessible.

Travelers heading south of Anchorage can find Portage Glacier about 60 miles from downtown. To get up close, take an hourlong boat cruise on Portage Lake, or hike on one of a number of foot trails that lead to the glacier.

Actual neighborhood parks are strewn around Anchorage itself; Alaska's largest metropolitan area is proud of its more than 120 miles of paved in-city trails, which serve walkers, bikers, bladders and strollers in summer, and skiers, snowshoers, fat-bike riders and dog mushers in winter. The best-known path, the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, is an 11-mile ribbon winding its way along Cook Inlet and offering stunning views of the Alaska Range.

Also downtown, the Anchorage Museum's new 25,000-square-foot Rasmuson Wing boosts this world-class facility's scope as a center devoted to the natural history and human stories of Alaska. The new wing's Art of the North galleries display a broad range of work, and the

museum's Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center gallery provides a memorable introduction to the heritage and culture of the Arctic's indigenous peoples.

From downtown Anchorage, it's only about 40 miles south to Girdwood, where Alyeska Resort provides the continent's northernmost big-mountain snow sports, with 2,500 vertical feet of deep-powder bowl skiing and boarding. As you wend down, take in the backdrop formed by Turnagain Arm and the Kenai Peninsula.

Unique like Alaska itself, the resort is one of the few places in North America where you can ski in sight of the ocean. ✕

Eric Lucas is the author of Michelin Must-Sees Alaska.

For more information on traveling in the Great Land, go to travelalaska.com, anchorage.net, explorefairbanks.com and traveljuneau.com. Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) offers daily service to destinations throughout Alaska.

Alapaa! Embracing the beauty of Alaska's cold

BY NICK JANS

I swing open my *kanisaaq* (storm shed) door, and icy air rolls in. Sheathed in layers of fleece, nylon and goose down, I step out into another world. The sun leans on the southern horizon, casting delicate shades of pink over a still, blue-white landscape. Hoarfrost coats everything—trees, cabins and the snow itself—in delicate, crystalline geometry. In just four hours, dawn will merge into dusk, the ethereal light giving way to a sky ablaze with layer upon layer of stars, more than you ever thought possible, and the pale, hypnotic wraiths of the aurora.

Deep cold has settled on Ambler—an Inupiaq village in northwest Alaska. In this remote communi-



Hoarfrost ice crystals carpet a boreal forest.

ty of about 250 people, roughly 45 miles north of the Arctic Circle and far off the road grid, no one bothers to comment on winter temperatures down to minus 20. The rhythm of life—traveling between villages on snowmobile, hunting and gathering—doesn't alter.

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Kids still roughhouse at the school playground, often wearing light jackets and sneakers. At 30 below, people start paying attention. “Alapaa!” my neighbors say. “I’m cold!”

And several times over an average winter, another level of cold descends over Arctic and Interior Alaska—40, 50, even 60 below zero. In notable cold spots such as Fort Yukon and Umiat, near minus 70 isn’t out of the question. Such conditions may last for days. I

can recall one stretch in Noatak in the mid-1980s when the temperature hovered between minus 30 and minus 60 for six straight weeks; and nearly a month in Ambler ranging from 40 below to 68 below. Harsh? Yes. But also gorgeous and surreal.

Such cold is an otherworldly experience, something people should feel at least once in their lives. At 40 below on down, the laws of physics manifest differently. It’s too cold for the wind to blow; too cold, it seems, for the sun to rise. Something as simple as a raven winging overhead or a hot cup of coffee seems a miracle. Toss the contents of that cup high in the air at minus 50, and the droplets freeze with a hiss and clatter to the ground.

In the dense, cold air, the atmosphere’s lenslike quality intensifies, creating phenomena known as arctic mirages: flat-topped mesas on the horizon where none exist; entire mountains flipped upside down, as if the pale sky were a great frozen lake. Sometimes the sun casts pale images of itself refracted through frozen ice crystals; other times it surrounds itself with a glowing halo. Through all of this, life continues in the Arctic. The village school is seldom called off. People go to work. The mail planes come and go in all but the most bitter conditions. It’s no big deal. It’s just cold. ✂

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JOSIE CARLSON



Mr. Whitekeys' satirical shows feature a reverse striptease.

Alaska

Raising the Curtain Up North

BY ERIC LUCAS

It's frosty in Fairbanks in winter—20 below, 30 below, sometimes even colder. But inside the Blue Loon tavern, things are heating up.

“Fifty below does have a few advantages,” local comedian Glenner Anderson tells a sellout crowd of 300. “You don’t have to worry about speeding tickets—the cops don’t want to get out of their cars.”

The audience roars with fond appreciation for the realities of life in the Great Land. One of those realities, the need to create their own entertainment, is on display at venues such as Blue Loon in Fairbanks—and on dozens of other stages throughout Alaska.

The perspective of this home-grown theater and entertainment ranges from no-holds-barred sarcasm to meaningful dramatic portraits of Alaska people and places.

“Alaska’s got stories that don’t exist in the same way anywhere else,” says Art Rotch, executive artistic director of Perseverance

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Theatre, which started in 1979 and is an organization that produces a half-dozen shows each year in Juneau and Anchorage.

Each season includes one or more plays set in the state, written by an Alaskan or about Alaskans—usually a chosen play has all three characteristics. About 25,000 theatergoers patronize PT every year to watch productions that range from classics such as *Cyrano de Bergerac* to original scripts such as this year's *William, Inc.*, a comedy-drama by Alaska Native playwright Lucas Rowley (through February 17 in Juneau; March 1–11 in Anchorage; ptalaska.org). In May, PT will show the world premiere of *Snow Child*, a musical based on Eowyn Ivey's novel, a 2013 Pulitzer Prize finalist set on a 1920s Alaska homestead.

Alaska stages also offer less serious material. In Anchorage, Mr. Whitekeys' long-running winter and summer shows are direct descendants of 19th century saloon vaudeville. A crowd-pleasing number features a songstress swaying across the stage to spoof cancan stereotypes with a reverse-engineered skit in which she dons her absent husband's fishing apparel. Onto her frame go waders, flannel and fishing vests while the audience chants: "Put it on! Put it on!"

"We have to laugh at ourselves," explains Whitekeys. "This is the frontier up here, a wide-open place. And we're happy with that."

Thus the strong support for local performance, whether serious or tongue-in-cheek.

"Alaska is indeed its own place," says Perseverance Theatre's Rotch. And the state's professional performance enterprises offer a unique—and uniquely entertaining—window on life in the North. ✈



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Alaska

CALENDAR

→ With a course stretching more than 2,000 miles from Anchorage to Nome to Fairbanks, the **Iron Dog Snowmobile Race** is billed as one of the world's longest—and one of the toughest—snow machine races. Race events kick off Feb. 16 in Big Lake and finish Feb. 24 in Fairbanks (irondog.org).

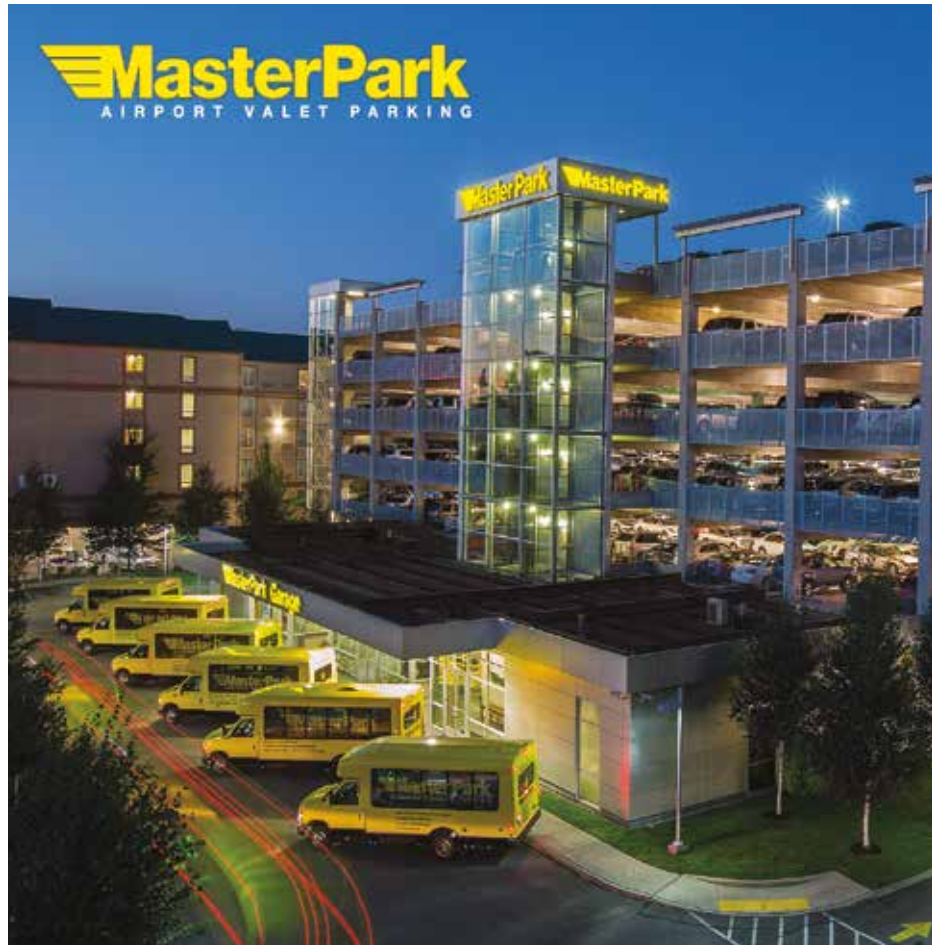
→ Sled-dog and outhouse races, snowshoe softball, fireworks, a Native arts market and the running of the reindeer—the **2018 Anchorage Fur Rendezvous**, Feb. 23–March 4, is one of Alaska's premier winter events. This year marks the festival's 83rd year (furrondy.net).

→ Showcasing traditional Native art, music and dance, the **Festival of Native Arts** at University of Alaska Fairbanks, March 1–3, has been celebrating indigenous culture since 1973 (fna.community.uaf.edu/event-information).

→ Hosting competitions that feature swimmers crossing an icy pond and skiers skidding across water at the base of a slope, Alyeska Resort's **Spring Carnival & Slush Cup**, April 13–15, will celebrate its 41st year. Other fun events include a mountain biking race and a tug-of-war (alyeskaresort.com).

→ Celebrate the longest day of the year, June 21, by watching a little baseball—first pitch is at 10:00 P.M. The **Midnight Sun Game**, hosted by the Alaska Goldpanners baseball team, has been a solstice tradition in Fairbanks since 1906 (goldpanners.pointstreaksites.com).

→ On July 4, Seward welcomes about 30,000 people as its streets take on a carnival-like atmosphere to celebrate the nation's birthday. Many visitors are there to participate in the **Mount Marathon Race**, a rugged run on the mountain. Registration opens March 1 (seward.com/welcome-to-seward-alaska/fourth-of-july-july). —*Chhavi Mehra*



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