

ALASKA

Beyond Bears and Glaciers

Aside from its scenic beauty and historical importance, the area around Independence Mine State Historical Park (shown) is a popular spot to pick wild blueberries in late summer.

CLASSIC ALASKA

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Discovering the Great Land's lesser-known riches

BY ERIC LUCAS

Most visitors to Alaska come north aboard cruise ships to see whales, bears, glaciers, and, perhaps, Denali National Park and Preserve and a bit of gold rush history—all superb attractions. But 20 trips (and counting) to the Great Land have convinced me that Alaska is America's most interesting state because of other equally wonderful things, including midnight golf on one-of-a-kind courses, splendid seafood cuisine, museums with world-class indigenous art, and state parks that rival national parks in the Lower 48.



On a morning hike in **Chugach State Park**, I glance up to spy a tawny-skinned cow moose in the woods 30 yards away. Young but big—6 feet at the shoulder. I wonder under my breath whether we're too close, but my local guide just shrugs: The moose is clearly not interested in us. So off we go among old-growth spruces, past a chalk-blue stream, on a boardwalk over beaver pond wetlands.

Chugach epitomizes one of Alaska's great secrets, a marvelous state park system that largely escapes notice. Spanning almost a half-million acres along the mountains east of Anchorage (yet still inside the city's 1,961 square miles), Chugach is the most visible. But many others are worthwhile destinations.

Petroglyph Beach State Historic Site, just north of downtown Wrangell, is one of the best and easiest places in the United States to see ancient rock carvings; here, the more than 40 examples are centuries or millennia old, clearly visible on large shale boulders. **Eagle Beach State Recreation Area**, north of Juneau, is an expanse of golden sand great for picnics, sunbathing, and wildlife watching. **Independence Mine State Historical Park**, 90 minutes north of Anchorage, is an abandoned gold mine that offers great wildflowers in July and blueberries in August.

At 1.6 million acres, **Wood-Tikchik State Park**, near Dillingham, is the nation's largest and comprises, by itself, nearly 15 percent of all U.S. state park land. It's a wonderful wilderness of river, lake, forest, and mountain—and bigger than every Lower 48 national park except Death Valley and Yellowstone.

GREEN SCENE

For more information about these and other **ALASKA STATE PARKS**, visit dnr.alaska.gov/parks.



Standing with two dozen other awestruck passengers in an open boxcar door, I'm admiring Mount McKinley's 20,237-foot bulk. Our continent's tallest mountain is memorably visible in its full glory from this lakeside curve along the **Alaska Railroad** near Talkeetna, about 110 miles north of Anchorage. It's mid-March, we're on the weekend-only Aurora Winter Train, and the vista before us is one rarely seen—Mount McKinley exposed from base to summit.

From Anchorage north to Fairbanks, the railroad's 360-mile path rolls over high passes and past glaciers, lakes, and untracked wilderness. The 126-mile, half-day Coastal Classic journey from Seward to Anchorage includes a breathtaking ride through more untracked wilderness on the steep ascent to Grandview Pass and its complex series of trestles—*How'd they build this?* I wonder—before the train descends to glide along Turnagain Arm's ever-roiling tidewaters.

The state-owned railroad provides invaluable freight-hauling service in addition to passenger runs, day trips, and vacations (chiefly in the summer). Luxury dome cars offer great views and impeccable comfort.

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While the Alaska Railroad carries thousands of visitors each summer on daily trains between Seward, Anchorage, Denali National Park, and Fairbanks, it also has weekend winter trains that depart Anchorage on Saturday mornings, reach Fairbanks that night, and return on Sunday—providing skiers and snowshoers access to wilderness trails. The whistle-stop trains drop off and pick up passengers at various remote locations along the route.

Anchorage Golf Course is one of Alaska's
14 USGA-member golf courses.



As my approach shot bounds onto the green at **North Star Golf Club's** par-4 11th hole, long shadows in bright light frame my 5-foot birdie putt. I take a deep breath, swing carefully, and sink it—at exactly midnight. It's midsummer in Fairbanks, Alaska.

"Moose hoof marks on the green, I guess that's the ultimate natural hazard," says a local member of our foursome as we watch a yearling bull moose galumph along an adjoining fairway. "Free drop?" I ask. "No, it's a repairable natural hazard," he explains. Can't experience that in Arizona, can you?

The highlight of Alaska golf comes in June and July, when long days allow late-evening tee offs, or even two (or three) rounds on the state's two dozen courses. But unlimited daylight is only the beginning—Alaska's landscape offers surroundings beyond compare: Mount McKinley's summit is the backdrop at several locales along **Anchorage Golf Course**. And the rugged, wild terrain provides course novelties like nowhere else—AGC's fifth hole has two midfairway hazards that are glacial erratic boulders; and a permafrost slump, a 3-foot-deep crease, divides the hole's green. At Wrangell's **Muskeg Meadows**, first-time visitors gape at the 25-foot-tall, 40-foot-wide boulder on the ninth fairway.

Throughout the state, "raven rough" rules provide a free drop for any golfer whose ball is carried away by a raven, eagle, bear, or moose. When they're not trampling the greens.

FORE!

NORTH STAR GOLF CLUB

(907) 457-4653 (May through September);
northstargolf.com

ANCHORAGE GOLF COURSE

(907) 522-3363;
anchoragegolfcourse.com

MUSKEG MEADOWS

wrangellalaskagolf.com

For more information,
see alaskagolflinks.com.

Book It

If you're cruising to Alaska, *Frommer's EasyGuide to Alaskan Cruises and Ports of Call* by Fran Wenograd Golden and Gene Sloan (FrommerMedia, 2014, \$10.95) offers detailed discussions of the cruise lines that serve the state, their ships, the ports they visit, and the activities they offer. The book is available at a discount for Auto Club members at AAA BookStores in local branches.





A single object smaller than my hand at the **University of Alaska Museum of the North** in Fairbanks is among my favorite artworks on earth, a haunting 2,000-year-old ivory carving known as the Okvik Madonna. It's near a 20th-century "fancy parka" of seal, wolf, beaver, and caribou skin that's not only gorgeous, but also visibly suited for Alaska's famous subzero cold—I feel warm just admiring it. Though I've been here a half dozen times, each trip to Fairbanks brings me back to the Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery.

This is just one of three superb collections of indigenous art in Alaska museum galleries—collections as memorable as any in the metropolitan museums of Europe or North America. The **Anchorage Museum's** Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center gallery has priceless artifacts ranging from a 19th-century Tlingit war helmet to an intricately sewn gut parka from St. Lawrence Island. In Juneau's **Alaska State Museum** (closed until spring 2016 for a renovation that will double its size), an elaborately figured frog hat from the Tlingit Kiks.adi clan occasionally leaves on trips for ceremonial use—as in a peace ceremony concluding a centuries-old war between the Tlingit and descendants of Alexander Baranov, to heal a rift created when Russian traders invaded Sitka Tlingit territory in 1804.

"Museums in Alaska offer a unique opportunity to experience the rich arts and cultures of the diverse communities that have called this home for thousands of years," says Bob Banghart, deputy director of Libraries, Archives, and Museums at Alaska State Museums. "The vitality of the human spirit present in the arts, tools, and objects of daily life displayed here reflects a direct link of history to the present time."

Other worthwhile stops include the **Alaska Sealife Center** in Seward, the only place to see Steller sea lions in captivity; Sitka's **Alaska Raptor Center**, where visitors meet eagles up close; and the quirky collection of Alaskan items such as scrimshaw cribbage boards at Valdez's **Maxine & Jesse Whitney Museum**.

ON THE WALL

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA MUSEUM OF THE NORTH
(907) 474-7505;
uaf.edu/museum

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM
(907) 929-9200;
anchagemuseum.org

ALASKA STATE MUSEUM
(907) 465-2901;
museums.alaska.gov

ALASKA SEALIFE CENTER
(907) 224-6300;
www.alaskasealife.org

ALASKA RAPTOR CENTER
(907) 747-8662;
alaskaraptor.org

MAXINE & JESSE WHITNEY MUSEUM
(907) 834-1690;
mjwhitneymuseum.org

For more information about museums in Alaska, visit museumsalaska.org.

Woody, Alaska Sealife Center's star resident sea lion, is also a father—the center welcomed his second pup, Forrest, this past summer.





WHEN TO GO

Many people think the best time to visit Alaska is in July and August, the height of summer in the Lower 48. But the North Pacific climate's vagaries bring much of the best weather in May and early June, especially in Southeast Alaska (Juneau's peak rainfall comes September through December). Fine weather may occur any time from April to October, especially in September in the interior, but June is your best bet.

However, the real secret of Alaska weather (and travel) is March. Daylight is rebuilding to 12 hours; subzero temperatures grow rarer; and the frequently fair skies make both the Northern Lights and all of Denali visible. Snowfall is subsiding, spring rains haven't yet arrived, and the sun is sometimes strong enough for basking outside (I've done that, in a T-shirt and shorts in downtown Anchorage on March 5). It's not golf season—but it's a great time for sightseeing, Nordic skiing, dogsled excursions, and enjoying all of the state's other virtues.

For more information on everything Alaska has to offer, visit travelalaska.com.

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A deceptively simple platter of fish—half a sockeye salmon poached in duck fat with oven-roasted potatoes—served during the summer at **The Rookery**

Café in Juneau typifies what's coming to be known as Alaska

Regional Cuisine. The Great Land has long been known for cedar-planked salmon, snow crab, and reindeer sausage, but today's chefs are broadening the menu.

"Alaska cuisine is an intriguing blend of the past and present, of geography, politics, and forged lives amid adverse circumstances," says Kirsten Dixon, one of Alaska's celebrity chefs and co-owner of **Within the Wild**, which operates **Winterlake Lodge**, one of several culinary destinations in the state reachable only by floatplane. "There are elements of Russian heritage, native culture, sourdough fortitude, garden harvests, pickled and preserved delicacies to last a harsh winter, Scandinavian influence, and all the seafood to be found in the cold, clear waters of the Pacific Ocean."

I've had rich reindeer tenderloin and elk meatloaf at **The Pump House** in Fairbanks; bison short ribs at the AAA Four Diamond **Seven Glaciers** in Girdwood; Alaskan paella with spot prawns, rockfish, scallops, clams, and calamari at **Ludvig's Bistro** in Sitka; and seasonal halibut pan-roasted with wild mushrooms and miso at the **Southside Bistro** in Anchorage.

In my opinion, Alaska spot prawns are the world's best shrimp, lightly sautéed or, as some locals favor, eaten right after catch as sashimi. Lingcod is savory, firm-textured, and dark—the North Pacific's grouper. Alaska cranberries spice up pancakes sensationally. As for dessert: Alaska's seasonal blueberries and huckleberries excel in pies, tarts, mousses, and more, even when frozen for use throughout the year. **W**

Seattle-based Eric Lucas is the author of the 2013 Michelin Must Sees Alaska guidebook.

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therookerycafe.com

WINTERLAKE LODGE
(907) 274-2710;
withinthewild.com/lodges/winterlake

THE PUMP HOUSE
(907) 479-8452;
pumphouse.com

SEVEN GLACIERS
(907) 754-2111;
alyskaresort.com/dining

LUDVIG'S BISTRO
(closed in winter)
(907) 966-3663;
ludvigsbistro.com

SOUTHSIDE BISTRO
(907) 348-0088;
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