



# Alaskan Adventure



# Adventure

The city of Anchorage, Alaska, offers both the urban traveler and the wilderness explorer easy access to a wealth of entertainment

BY GREG RIENZI

Anchorage, Alaska, has been transformed into a visitor's paradise during the past few decades, offering the best of both worlds: wilderness and city life.

The increasingly cosmopolitan city features a thriving cultural scene, a new shopping district, a variety of restaurants, an outstanding transportation system and a relatively mild climate for such a northern destination. Perhaps the best part of Anchorage, however, remains the same—the view.

On a clear day in Anchorage, you can see the postcard version of Alaska.

The city is engulfed with natural splendor. Depending on where you look, you can see snowcapped mountains, glaciers, forests, tundra or the ocean. Anchorage is literally perched on the edge of a vast wilderness. To highlight that feature, the city's tourism board in 2007 adopted the slogan "Big Wild Life." The city itself resembles a sprawling suburb, but a half-million acres of forest lie just outside its borders.

The outdoor enthusiast should certainly add Anchorage to his or her top wilderness destination lists. Whether you enjoy ice climbing, kayaking, hiking or fishing, you will never become bored in Anchorage's expansive backyard.





**The aurora borealis can be seen all year in Alaska, but are best viewed from late August to early April.**

the scenery that makes it unforgettable.

“Many visitors don’t quite expect the mammoth scale of the beauty here. The mountains look down on the city, which is graded to the ocean. It really is stunning,” Wozniak says. “Yet downtown Anchorage is very metropolitan with theaters, a night life and culture. Everything a big city should have.”

Metropolitan, yes, but that is not to say the wildlife stays on its side of the fence. Anchorage is home to nearly 2,000 moose that munch on the city’s trees. (Last year, one ate too many fermented crab apples and inherited the name “Buzzwinkle.”) A few black bear also have been known to wander into town.

On the ocean side, blue whales migrate to the waters outside of Anchorage in July and early August. The city is also a haven for bird-watchers, especially those seeking migratory waterfowl.

The area’s early settlers were American Indian tribes and then later, in 1784, Russian explorers established themselves in southern Alaska. The English explorer Capt. James Cook is credited with first exploring the Anchorage area in 1778 during his third voyage of discovery.

Relatively young, even by North American standards, the city’s roots trace back to 1915, when it was a tent camp for some 200 Alaskan Railroad workers. With the discovery of oil in nearby Prudhoe Bay and the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in the mid-1970s, the city of Anchorage evolved rapidly. The oil industry still ranks among the top industries in the state (Alaska produces 14 percent of the United States’ crude oil, according to the Energy Information Administration), along with fishing and logging. Anchorage claims a large cargo port, and the U.S. military has a strong presence there, with two major bases.

Today, Anchorage has more than 277,000 residents—an amazing 42 percent of the state’s population—making it Alaska’s largest city.

Though nature gets top billing here, the downtown area does have its own beauty. During the summer, dazzling displays of flowers adorn homes and storefronts, and “Wild Salmon on

Roughly the size of the state of Delaware, Anchorage stretches from Portage Glacier to Eklutna, encompassing 1,955 square miles. It sits at the base of the Chugach Mountains along the coast of Cook Inlet located in the south-central portion of the state.

You can see the Chugach, Kenai, Talkeetna, Tordrillo, Aleutian and Alaska mountain ranges from Anchorage, and perhaps Alaska’s most famous mountain attraction, Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America (20,320 feet/6,193.6 meters). If you’re lucky, you can also catch a glimpse of the aurora borealis (the northern lights) from your hotel room. Although the northern lights can be seen all year, they generally need a dark Alaskan night sky (during late August through early April) to appear the most vivid.

Shelly Wozniak, public relations manager for the Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau, says a visitor can be hiking in a state park one minute and in a short time be back for a massage and dinner in the city. The convenience makes a vacation action packed in Anchorage, but it’s

## How Cold is It?

Alaska is divided into five distinct regions with climates that can vary somewhat dramatically. Travel to the Far North and you’ll discover an arctic climate with long, cold winters. The north is dry and windy with average annual snowfall of 30 to 35 inches and an average annual temperature of 10 degrees Fahrenheit (-12 degrees Celsius). Average high in the summer is a relatively balmy 47 degrees F (8 degrees C).

The Interior region, which covers the largest land mass, is considered a conti-

ental climate and temperatures vary greatly. The summer months see highs in the 70s F (up to mid-20s C), compared to lows averaging -20 to -25 F (-29 to -31C) come January. The area gets about 65 inches of annual snowfall.

The Southwest, Southcentral and Southeast (also known as the Inside Passage) regions all have maritime climates, meaning temperatures won’t get too high in the summer or too low in the winter. Although more windy than other

areas of the state, the average annual temperatures are above freezing. These areas also see the most precipitation. Valdez, a town east of Anchorage, boasts more than 300 inches of snowfall annually.

Weather conditions on the state’s west coast, or Bering Sea Coast, vary depending on sea ice cover, the presence of which substantially reduces the Bering’s maritime influence and flood conditions.

FIGURES COURTESY OF THE ALASKA CLIMATE RESEARCH CENTER.

# ANCHORAGE FACTS



**The people:** Anchorage prides itself on its newfound diversity. A once predominantly white and American Indian population now features a growing number of Hispanic people, Pacific Islanders and those of every creed and color. A telltale sign of the city's melting pot status are the amazing 95 different languages spoken in the school system.

**When to go:** May and September bookend the peak tourism season. The summer months boast warm, bright and beautiful weather. Daylight lasts nearly all day in June and most of July, with highs in the 70s and even low 80s (Fahrenheit). Dubbed the city of flowers, Anchorage also blooms with color during this time.

For the true northern experience, locals will say go in the dead of winter, December and January. It's cold (average 20 degrees Fahrenheit) and very dark, but the skiing and snow-covered landscapes are spectacular.

If you want to catch the start of the Iditarod dogsled race, however, you have to be in town in early March.



**What to see and do:** Take a walk or rent a bike. Anchorage features 128 miles of paved trails and 300 miles of unpaved and wilderness trails. Depending on when you go, you can pull out your skis and just take in the scenery. Hit the trailheads just outside of town to ski into the backcountry or hike just a few miles to be completely absorbed by the Alaskan wild.

To learn about Alaska's indigenous people, visit the Alaska Native Heritage Center, a renowned cultural museum that reveals the rich heritage of the area's 11 cultural groups. The Anchorage Museum, the largest museum in the state, offers exhibits and programs to learn about the culture and science of the north, from the pioneer days to its cosmopolitan present.

Shoppers will find that Anchorage has an eclectic range of galleries, art shops and craft bazaars. On weekends from May to September, stroll down to the Anchorage Market and Festival where local farmers and artisans sell their goods.

As one would guess, many visitors seek out the mountains and surrounding terrain to ski, snowboard and snowmobile. Two popular spots are the nearby Hilltop Ski Area and the Alyeska Resort, located 45 minutes south of the city. Chugach State Park offers infinite ice climbing options for those of all skills and fear tolerances.

In the warmer months, fish or raft on the nearby Eagle River, which weaves through quiet primeval forests, or on Ship Creek River, located in the heart of downtown. Many locals head there right from work to slip on some hip waders and land 40-pound king salmon.

Want to see it all? Go "flightseeing." Helicopter and plane tours provide stunning views of gorges, alpine glaciers and glacial amphitheatres. Afraid of heights? Take a boat tour. Two good bets are the Prince William Sound glacier cruises and the blue whale watching tours in the summer.



**Where to eat and drink:** The restaurant scene in Anchorage is getting better all the time.

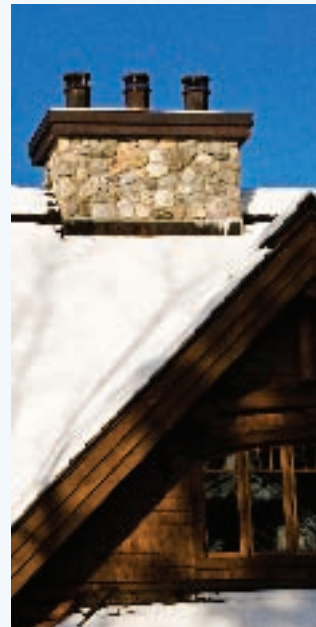
One standout is Orso Ristorante, a fine place to sample Alaskan seafood like king salmon and prawns that are paired beautifully with local vegetables. Jen's Restaurant, located in midtown, is a lively place with fine service and an extensive menu.

For an intimate dining experience, Sacks Café specializes in healthy and adventurous fusion cuisine. The meat and seafood will sound familiar, but where else will you find Alaskan king crab with grilled pineapple and banana basil red coconut curry?

A touch of elegant dining can be had at the Marx Bros. Café, which has a vast wine list and a trim but star-studded menu.

Anchorage has become a beer capital, and the city contains several brew houses and breweries. Snow Goose beers should hit the spot.

Don't leave Anchorage without trying a reindeer hot dog. Yes, it's actually reindeer meat. The dogs look more like bratwurst and are typically served on a hoagie roll with caramelized onions and sauerkraut or relish.



**Where to stay:** The Hotel Captain Cook claims to be Anchorage's only true luxury hotel. It just might be. The Captain Cook, named after the famous explorer Capt. James Cook, features an athletic club, three restaurants and a coffee and wine bar. The hotel's four-star Crow's Nest restaurant offers panoramic views of Cook Inlet, the downtown area and the Chugach Mountains.

If a room with a view is what you are looking for, check into the Inlet Tower Hotel and its sleek, modern accommodations.

Go back in time and book a stay at the historic Anchorage Hotel. Opened in 1916, the hotel has been elegantly restored and furnished. It's one of the oldest properties in town, and also the most haunted. Some say the spirits from the gold rush era still reside there.

The area's best bed and breakfast inns are located just south of Anchorage in the town of Indian, Alaska. Many offer great views of mountain scenery and Cook Inlet.

# Ride the Rails into the Wilderness

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALASKA RAILROAD CORPORATION



You can't only visit Anchorage. At least, you shouldn't. Alaska's many wild wonders need to be explored and what more romantic way to reach them than by rail?

Whether it's just a day trip, or an extended tour, the Alaska Railroad provides the best seat in the house to see mountains, forests, glaciers, rivers, and—if you pay attention—moose, bear, eagles and the occasional fox.

The 500-mile railway system heads north to Fairbanks, south to Seward and stops at a host of destinations in between. Sit back, gaze out the window and wait for the gentle lurch to whisk you through scenic wild and panoramic vistas.

Each train features dining areas, comfortable seating, domed cars, knowledgeable tour guides and even gift shops. The Alaska Railroad has three main types of service: standard (adventure class), private dome and the new "GoldStar," which is offered exclusively on the Denali Star and Coastal Classic train lines.

Amenities and cost vary. The standard service places you in a single-level car where fellow "adventure class" passengers shuffle in and out of the attached dome and dining cars. Private dome service will get you a seat in a restored "Budd" coach from the 1950s and guaranteed

dome access. Introduced in 2006, the two-level GoldStar railcars feature large dome windows, upscale dining service and a private outdoor viewing deck. Seats go fast, so book ahead.

The popular Denali Star train line stops at Talkeetna, Denali National Park and Fairbanks. Visitors flock to Talkeetna, once the supply center for a gold mining district, to enjoy fishing, rafting and scouting the local arts scene. Talkeetna is also a hub for "flightseeing" tours over Denali, the 6 million-acre park that is home to color-brushed tundra and North America's highest mountain, the 20,320-foot-tall Mount McKinley. Denali's tenants include grizzly bear, moose, wolves, Dall sheep and caribou.

Hop back on the train to reach historic Fairbanks, the northern line's final stop. Once there, take a ride on the *Riverboat Discovery*, a sternwheeler boat that coasts along the Chena and Tanana rivers. Or strike it rich at the El Dorado Gold Mine where you can learn about old and new mining methods, and pan for your own.

In the winter (late September to early May), take the Aurora Winter Train, a 350-mile wilderness run between Anchorage and Fairbanks that goes past snow-blanketed landscapes, Denali and other inspir-

ing scenery. Ride north on Saturday with a return trip on Sunday. The Aurora is a flag-stop train, meaning you can wave it down anywhere.

In any season, buy a ticket for the Coastal Classic, which travels south to the small coastal town of Seward, gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park. The park's crystal green waters contain otters, sea lions, harbor seals, humpback whales and other marine animals that swim in the shadow of sheer glacier cliffs.

Seward, located about 125 miles south of Anchorage, sits at the head of Resurrection Bay on the Kenai Peninsula. The town dates back to the early 1900s and has only 3,000 year-round residents. The population swells considerably during the summer, when thousands come to visit the bustling harbor and historical downtown district filled with quaint shops, art galleries and seafood restaurants. The town is famous for its Fourth of July celebration that features a grueling footrace to the top of Mount Marathon. Seward also is home to the Alaska Sealife Center, a non-profit marine science facility that has extensive seal and salmon exhibits.

Want to yell "mush" and mean it? Go to Mitch Seavey's Iditarod Racing Kennel. The kennel lets you dress in racing gear and mush two miles on an Iditarod sled.

Seward also offers great charter salmon fishing, kayak experiences and whale cruises.

The railroad's Coastal Classic line stops at Girdwood and the Spencer Glacier, where no roads lead. Once there, combine a scenic rail trip with a gentle float tour of Chugach National Forest Park to see iceberg-choked Spencer Lake.

Tara Stevens, a spokeswoman for the Alaska tourism agency, says that riding the rails is a must.

"The scenery is just fantastic," Stevens says. "It's very old-fashioned, fun and unique. I love it. You sit there in total comfort while a guide points out glaciers, mountains and wildlife. All you have to do is get your camera ready."

Parade” sculptures appear along city blocks. Thousands of lights decorate downtown in the winter.

The city also loves to party and hosts many annual festivals. Each year, Anchorage famously kicks off the Iditarod, the 1,150-mile trail dogsled race beginning downtown and ending in Nome, Alaska. In 2007, the city adopted a new annual tradition, the Running of the Reindeer. A dozen reindeer are set loose downtown in late February to “safely” chase down participants. Nearly 1,000 people took part in the inaugural event, which is part of the city’s winter festival, called Fur Rendezvous.

In 2009, Alaska turns 50. To celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Statehood, Anchorage will host a Grand Ball on Jan. 3, 2009. “It will be a huge celebration,” Wozniak says. “The mother of all shows with national headlining acts, parades, a festival and bonfires.”

The downtown area’s newest draw is the “SoNo” district, a homage to New York’s SoHo area that translates to south of Nordstrom. This part of town contains an array of boutique shops and hosts an annual fashion week that culmi-



**Mount McKinley reflected in a tundra pond, in Denali National Park.**

nates with a Paris- and Milan-inspired fashion show.

Downtown has become a “cool” area, Wozniak says, and has never been livelier. Truly cool sights not to miss in Anchorage are the nearly 60 glaciers that reside within 50 miles of the city, with Portage Glacier being the most popular.

Dorn Van Dommelen, chair and professor of geography/environmental studies at the

University of Alaska, Anchorage, says that the city was literally shaped by glaciers. “It’s a glacial landscape bonanza,” says Van Dommelen, who recommends seeing one of the icy cliffs close up, but notes the trip involves a drive.

But he says it’s worth going the extra mile. “There are vast tracts of wilderness out there that 99 percent of visitors to Alaska will never see,” he says. “It’s fascinating to see such a very North American city in the middle of an area that is so unsettled, or very sparsely settled by its native people.”

Anchorage is a versatile destination, so live it up in the city, but be sure to get out of town. ➤

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