

1 Alaska, from Folly to Fantastic

The top sights and experiences, plus recommended itineraries

WHEN U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE WILLIAM HENRY SEWARD NEGOTIATED the purchase of Alaska for 2¢ an acre in 1867, skeptics branded Seward a colossal sucker. He had just spent a whopping \$7.2 million on an inhospitable, frozen wasteland as immense as it was useless. The only thing “Russian America,” as it was then known, ever had going for it was fur. But the rapacious Russians, after a century of peeling the pelts from every sea otter and fur seal they would trap, shoot, stab, or club to death, had pushed the animals to the verge of extinction. No wonder the tsar wanted to dump the place on the United States. And Seward was his patsy.

It took a few decades before Americans realized that Seward had, in fact, negotiated one of the dirt-dog-cheapest land deals of all time. Sure, the 9 punishing months of winter were a bit much, but Alaska was anything but a wasteland. First, people discovered that Alaska was rich in gold, and with the succession of gold rushes in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, references to Walrussia, Icebergia, and Seward’s Icebox went out the window. In the public’s imagination, Alaska became The Last Frontier. Or simply The Great Land, using the translation of the Native word for Alaska. The gold rush was followed by rushes to mine copper, can salmon, cut timber, and drill for oil. In the annals of natural resource extraction, Alaska is a land that just keeps giving and giving.

Yet despite the constant drive to reap wealth from the wild, Alaska has remained remarkably pristine. To visit Alaska today is to immerse yourself in a land where civilization is a string of tiny footprints across a wild, untrammled, and extreme landscape. In fact, Alaska has more land protected in national parks, preserves, wilderness areas, and state parks than all of the other states combined. Huge parts of Alaska are heaved upward into dazzling mountains. There are three major ranges and 30 smaller ones. Alaska’s great mountains are so immense and remote that thousands of peaks have neither been climbed nor named.

The one thing that Seward’s critics had right about Alaska was its enormity. Just to give you an idea of that scope, consider that it has:

- ◆ 3,000 rivers
- ◆ Three million lakes
- ◆ 100,000 glaciers

- ◆ 47,000 miles of coastline
- ◆ 17 of the 20 highest peaks in the nation, including McKinley, the tallest mountain on the continent
- ◆ And a wildlife population that rivals Africa's (the sea otters and fur seals have sprung back!)

Alaska is really more like a small continent than a single state. Transpose it on a map of the Lower 48, and Alaska would stretch from Mexico to Canada, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The easternmost city in the state, Ketchikan, would overlap Charleston, South Carolina, while the westernmost island, Attu, would fall in Los Angeles County. From north to south, Alaska would poke up around Winnipeg and drop down below Tijuana. If you could see 1 million acres of Alaska each day for a year, you still wouldn't quite get through the entire 375-million-acre state.

So how on earth do you begin to plan a vacation to the state so ridiculously big? Selectively. Very, very selectively. Advanced planning is important on all vacations, but for Alaska it will make or break your holiday. I'd suggest either zeroing in on one of the broad regions described below, or following one of the suggested itineraries you'll see later in the chapter. Those on a budget—and I assume that means you since you've picked up this budget guide—are well advised to calculate transportation costs before setting an itinerary (see p. 367 in “The Essentials of Planning” chapter for more on that) as that, more than any other element of the trip, will rip your wallet to shreds.

THE REGIONS OF ALASKA

SOUTHCENTRAL ALASKA

You can think of the Southcentral part of the state as a generous Alaskan sampler platter. It's got at least a little of what the rest of the state has to offer—from wilderness and wildlife, to salmon and halibut fishing, to calving glaciers, to sea kayaking and white-water rafting, to Native culture, to gold mines, to old Russian churches. It also has Anchorage, which has the distinction of housing half of the state's population within its metropolitan area, making Southcentral Alaska the state's most populous region by far. Don't get the wrong idea, though. It's not crowded. But it does have good roads for easy access to all the fun.

SOUTHEAST ALASKA

This long strip of Alaska, wedged between Canada and the Pacific Ocean, is what you'll visit if you choose a cruise vacation (though it can also be visited independently, by hopping on and off the ferries of the Alaskan Marine Highway System). Home to the state capital, Juneau, it's more akin to the Pacific Northwestern region of the United States, in ambience and weather, than the rest of Alaska (milder temps, more rain, and a hip, politically savvy populace). That being said, it still boasts many of the sights and experiences that have drawn you to Alaska in the first place. You'll witness mighty blue glaciers calving into the sea as eagles soar overhead, and on shore, bears shuffling by. There are alpine meadows and cedar forests to explore, and jagged mountain peaks to climb. You'll find all of that in the Alaskan Panhandle, as it's called, with living Native culture (think totem poles—lots of 'em) and a good measure of Russian and gold rush history thrown into the mix, as well.

THE INTERIOR

The Alaskan Heartland's greatest draw is the 6-million-acre Denali National Park, home to the tallest mountain on the continent. It's arguably the state's easiest wilderness area to tour thanks to a fleet of old school buses that shuttle visitors deep, deep into the wild. But the Interior is far more than just Mt. McKinley and its backyard. It's here where Alaska's extremes are lived and celebrated. In the "Golden Heart City" of Fairbanks, for example, baseball is played beneath the midnight sun in the summer and enormous ice sculptures are carved under the northern lights in the winter. Head to more rural areas and you'll find folks who enjoy hot springing in sub-zero temperatures, rafting down raging rapids, and crisscrossing the Arctic Circle just to say they did it.

THE BUSH

The sweeping stretches of Alaska that are inaccessible by road—which is really most of the state—make up the Alaskan Bush. Most of the Bush is simply too wild and remote for casual visitors, but there are communities you can visit without the help of a dog sled or bush pilot. They include: Barrow, where Eskimos still hunt for bowhead whales on the Arctic Ocean, as they've done for generations; Nome, a gold-rush boomtown on the Bering Sea where gold still turns up in beach sand; and the windblown Aleutian Island community of Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, home to the storied Bering Sea king crab fishing fleet.

TOP EXPERIENCES

BEST PLACES TO SEE GLACIERS

GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK This is simply the largest concentration of tidewater glaciers on the planet. At Glacier Bay, 16 glaciers creep out of the snowy St. Elias and Fairweather mountains to the sea; there are even more glaciers in the alpine valleys overhead. See p. 227.

PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND The dozens of glaciers here are scattered around the vast inland sea called Prince William Sound, including the sprawling Columbia Glacier, one of the most massive glaciers you'll ever see. It's so big, it could nearly cover Los Angeles. The face of the Columbia is 3 miles wide, and you have to keep your distance because of the enormous slabs of ice—some as big as shopping malls—that split off from the face and crash into the sea. See p. 80.

KENAI FJORDS NATIONAL PARK All but one of the several glaciers you can visit in Kenai Fjords National Park are only accessible by boat. The exception is Exit Glacier, which is that rarest of glaciers: a drive-up glacier. Here, you can climb to the top of the mountain along the trail bordering Exit Glacier and look out across the Harding Icefield, a sea of ice the size of Rhode Island. See p. 109.

CHILDS GLACIER The Childs Glacier keeps visitors on their toes. The Childs' 20-story face can send icebergs crashing into the river below it that are so huge, they create tidal waves that rush up the opposite bank, where visitors gather. Either be prepared to hightail it, or enjoy the ice show from the elevated viewing platform that will keep you out of the tsunami inundation area. See p. 105.

BEST PLACES TO SEE BEARS

PACK CREEK The Alaska Natives' name for Admiralty Island, near Juneau, is Kootznoowoo, or "fortress of the bears." It is a bruin stronghold—home of the largest concentration of brown bears in the world. From a viewing tower and platform safely off to the side, you can watch hungry bears swipe swimming salmon out of the creek with their claws or snatch jumping salmon out of mid-air with their teeth. See p. 232.

KODIAK ISLAND The brown bears of Kodiak Island have been isolated from their mainland brethren for so long, they've evolved into a separate subspecies, the Kodiak Bear. They are the biggest, baddest bears on the planet, and the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, accessible by floatplane, is the place to see them. See p. 143.

DENALI NATIONAL PARK Alaska's most accessible—and affordable—wilderness is the easiest place to encounter brown bears, and a host of other wildlife. While there's no guarantee that you'll spot bears, passengers on the park shuttle who ride at least 60 miles into the park typically see at least a few. See p. 306.

ANAN CREEK WILDLIFE OBSERVATORY The black bears feasting on the salmon in Anan Creek have to share their seafood smorgasbord with hungry harbor seals and bald eagles. Viewing platforms off to the side give you a front-seat view on the summer wildlife feeding frenzy. See p. 180.

BEST FISHING

HOMER Halibut fishing is the name of the game in Homer, the "The Halibut Fishing Capital of the World" and home of Alaska's largest charter fishing fleet. Every day throughout the summer, fishermen land halibut larger than third-graders. See p. 139.

KENAI RIVER The king salmon in the Kenai river are so big they're in a trophy class all by themselves. Land a 50-pound king in any other Alaskan river and the state Department of Fish and Game certifies it as trophy. On the Kenai River, you've got to muscle in a 75-pounder before you're in the trophy class. See p. 127.

BEST WHALE-WATCHING WATERS

FREDERICK SOUND Humpback whales fatten up for the summer in the nutrient-rich waters near Petersburg, and small mom-and-pop-operated tour boats carry passengers out to have a look. See p. 188.

SITKA SOUND Humpback whales are so common in the waters around Sitka, you can see them right from shore at Whale Park (tour boats can also take you out for a closer look). A local radio station with a hydrophone in the sound broadcasts the songs of the whales live, 24 hours a day. See p. 200.

KENAI FJORDS NATIONAL PARK Visitors riding tour boats to see the tidewater glaciers in the park often spot humpback whales and sometimes killer

whales en route. The killer whales live there year-round; humpbacks just visit for the summer. See p. 122.

BEST MUSEUMS

THE MUSEUM OF THE NORTH Housed in a spectacular “concept” building that’s all swoops, curves, and silvery skin, the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Museum of the North will bring you up to speed on the last 11,000 years of human history in Alaska, and the past few million years of natural history. Thousands of years of Alaskan art are also on display. Modern works are placed side-by-side with ancient ivory carvings. See p. 277.

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM AT RASMUSON CENTER This big metropolitan museum boasts seven galleries packed with Alaskan history and art. Artifacts in the cavernous Alaska Gallery are displayed in life-size dioramas, and cover a span of time stretching from the days when Alaskans built the Trans-Alaska Pipeline back to when they were hunting woolly mammoths. See p. 45.

THE PRATT MUSEUM The Pratt is a little powerhouse of a museum, packed from floor to ceiling with hands-on activities and surprises. Pull out a drawer and examine the remains of an ancient midden, a Native garbage dump that reveals what the locals had for dinner 2,000 years ago. Pick up a ship’s receiver and listen to Captain Joseph Hazelwood explain to the Coast Guard that he just ran aground in his oil tanker, the *Exxon Valdez*. Pull a survival suit out of a bin and see if you can struggle into it in 30 seconds, which is how much time you’d get if your fishing trawler were to suddenly sink. See p. 137.

THE ALASKA STATE MUSEUM Here, the rich history of Alaska is revealed largely through everyday objects, including the crisply pressed wool cape worn by William Henry Seward, who brokered the purchase of Alaska from Russia for the U.S., and a pair of caribou skin diapers lined with downy soft, disposable moss, which an Athabascan infant might have worn. See p. 217.

BEST PLACES TO LEARN ABOUT NATIVE CULTURE

KETCHIKAN Totem poles can be thought of as books—very tall, very heavy, very well-illustrated books. They tell stories, record histories, trace genealogies, ridicule those in need of ridiculing, and do all sorts of other booklike things. Nowhere can you get a sense of the incredible versatility of totem poles quite like you can in Ketchikan, home of the largest collection of totem poles in the world. There you’ll see ancient poles carefully preserved in a climate-controlled museum, old poles slowly weathering in the woods as their makers expected, and the next generation of poles emerging from freshly cut logs at the hands of modern Native artisans. See p. 157.

SITKA You’ll also see impressive Totem Poles in Sitka, which houses the older poles in a high-ceilinged gallery (you’ll simply stumble upon the newer ones, slowly aging in the misty woods). The folks that make these poles and practice other Native arts and crafts have studios at the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, and a visit here will certainly be a highlight of your trip. For a touch of

history, head to the Sitka National Historical Park; the Battle of Sitka, the last major fight between the Tlingit and the Russians, took place in the woods here. And you can chat with Native artisans in their studios at the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center. See p. 189.

ALASKA NATIVE HERITAGE CENTER Both a tourist attraction and a gathering place for Alaskan Natives from throughout the state, the Heritage Center features traditional Native dwellings from the Aleutians to the Arctic, as well as dance performances, storytelling, and exhibitions by Native athletes. See p. 47.

BARROW The northernmost community in the United States is also the largest Eskimo village in Alaska. During April and May, Native hunters pursue giant bowhead whales, as their ancestors have done for thousands of years. If you're around when they land one, you might get to participate in their celebratory blanket toss and try a bite of muktuk, or whale blubber, the local delicacy. See p. 351.

BEST KAYAKING

PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND Protected waters, a multitude of islands, hidden coves and beaches, and an abundance of wildlife and tidewater glaciers make for some awesome paddling here. See p. 53.

KACHEMAK BAY STATE PARK This marine wilderness at the foot of the snow-capped Kenai Mountains, and just across the bay from Homer, is both easy to get to and easy to lose yourself in, on single- or multiday kayaking trips. See p. 140.

GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK You can camp along the shoreline of this 65-mile-long, Y-shaped bay as you explore the many glaciers and hike in the surrounding area. See p. 227.

BEST "OTHER" ALASKA

DIG INTO THE NATIVE PAST Lend a hand to the archaeologists from the Alutiiq Museum as they unearth tools, hearths, fish bones, and other remains from ancient Native villages on Kodiak Island. See p. 148.

BEND AN ELBOW WITH ALASKAN BREWERS The same rich, malty, long-on-the-palate alt-style beer that Juneau's gold miners slaked their thirst on is still made in Juneau today. Visit the city's Alaskan Brewing Company and you can see how it's made and how it tastes. See p. 224.

RESEARCH IN THE FAR NORTH Take a behind the scenes tour of the high-latitude research facilities at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, and get current on global warming, Alaskan volcanoes, the aurora borealis, and other fields of geophysical interest. Immerse yourself in virtual reality in the Arctic Region Supercomputing Center, where scientists use huge stereoscopic screens and some of the world's fastest computers to bring their boring data sets to life. See p. 279.

HOBNOB WITH THE CURLERS Scottish gold miners brought the ancient winter sport of curling (that curious intersection of ice skating, shuffleboard, and street sweeping) to Fairbanks in the early-20th century, playing on the frozen Chena River. Today you can watch the members of the Fairbanks Curling Club compete in their very own ice arena. Ask nicely and you can even get a lesson. See p. 281.

BEST THINGS TO DO IN WINTER

VISIT ALYESKA SKI RESORT Deep snow, great views, a long season, and remarkably short lift lines make for fantastic downhill skiing at Alaska's only ski resort. See p. 67.

FLOAT BENEATH AURORA BOREALIS Visit Chena Hot Springs outside of Fairbanks, strip down to your swim suit, and watch the colorful northern lights dance in the starry winter sky while you soak in steamy mineral water. See p. 290.

POLAR BEAR VIEWING IN BARROW When the Arctic Ocean freezes, the polar bears come ashore, and tour guides out of Barrow will help you find them—safely. See p. 357.

CATCH THE IDITAROD The longest dog sled race in the world starts in Anchorage and ends 1,000 miles later in Nome. There's a big party at either end and a grueling endurance race across a huge swath of frozen Alaska in between. See p. 76.

SUGGESTED ITINERARIES

A WEEK OF HIGH ADVENTURE

Scaling a mountain, paragliding, hiking and camping in the wilderness, white-water rafting, sea kayaking, and possibly an urban moose and whale hunt: This itinerary packs a slew of adventures into a short and busy week and is perfect for the vacationer with energy to burn, who gets antsy sitting in one place for very long. Bring whatever camping gear you can, and rent what you can't in Anchorage on Day 1.

Day 1 Hike, Paraglide

Head from Anchorage into the Chugach Mountains, which bump up to the edge of the city, and hike to the top of 3,550-foot Flattop Mountain (p. 52). Be sure to leave time for Girdwood (p. 68), where, if your courage holds, you'll take a tandem paragliding flight from the top of Mount Alyeska back down to sea level strapped to the body of an experienced instructor. Spend the night in Girdwood or camp at Bird Creek (p. 40) along beautiful Turnagain Arm.

Day 2 Buzz the Roof of the Continent

Set out early for the half-day drive to Denali National Park (p. 306), and check in at the park's Back Country Information Center to get a backcountry hiking permit (permits can be reserved no more than a day in advance). After consulting with the park rangers on your trip plan (and getting the required wildlife safety

briefing), use the rest of the day for a flightseeing trip around 20,320-foot Mount McKinley, North America's tallest mountain. Since the mountain is obscured in clouds most of the time, getting up in a plane is the surest way to get a good look at The High One.

Days 3 & 4 Wander in the Wilderness

Spend Days 3 and 4 hiking, camping, and mingling with Denali's moose, caribou, bears, and other resident wildlife. There are no trails in the park, so it's up to you to find your way. It's not as hard as it sounds. Much of the landscape is wide-open tundra with long views.

Day 5 White-Water Rafting

Shoot the rapids on the icy Nenana River (p. 327) bordering the park. It has enough class III and IV thrills to give you an adrenaline buzz that should get you through the long afternoon drive back to Anchorage, where you'll spend the night.

Day 6 Sea Kayaking

From Anchorage, head to Whittier (p. 97) for a guided sea kayaking tour among the tidewater glaciers, icebergs, seals, and sea lions of Prince William Sound. No experience is necessary and the waters are as calm as can be, except when icebergs crash into the sea and kick up rollercoaster-like waves. Return to Anchorage that night.

Day 7 Urban Moose & Whale Hunt

Before your late flight home, rent bikes in downtown Anchorage for a ride along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail (p. 51), which runs along the edge of the city and is the best place in town to catch a glimpse of Cook Inlet's resident population of beluga whales. Watch for moose along the way, and give them a wide berth if you come upon one—they have a John McEnroe vs. the umpire mentality when it comes to cyclists. If you pedal far enough, you'll come to the end of the airport runway, an area especially popular among moose, for some reason.

A SCENIC DRIVING TOUR

This driving tour begins and ends in Anchorage and takes you through a broad cross-section of Alaska without backtracking. It's a giant triangle of a drive that crosses one mountain range, dips in and out of another, and takes time for some Alaska history, Native culture, glaciers, wildlife, and sled dogs along the way.

Day 1 Turnagain Arm

Arrive in Anchorage, rent a car, and set off on the scenic Seward Highway along Turnagain Arm. Watch for mountain goats, rock climbers, and waterfalls at the edge of the mountains to your left, and beluga whales, bore tides, and windsurfers in the long narrow fjord to your right. Make time for a hike at one of the many trails along the way. Spend the night at the ski resort community of Girdwood (p. 63), where you can ride a tram to the top of Mount Alyeska for alpine hiking and sublime views.

Day 2 Ferry Across Prince William Sound to Valdez

Head to the oddball town of Whittier (where most of the residents live in a single high-rise) to hop aboard a tour boat for a visit to the tidewater glaciers on Prince William Sound (p. 96). When you return, put your car on one of the ferries of the Alaska Marine Highway System and cross the sound to Valdez, where you'll spend the night.

Day 3 Into the Chugach Range

The spectacular Richardson Highway traverses the Chugach Mountains, the next trek along your itinerary (you can motor quickly through much of it, but you'll want to take in the view from 2,678 ft. Thompson Pass and inspect Worthington Glacier). The Richardson Highway goes all the way to Fairbanks, paralleling the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which carries crude oil from the Arctic oilfields at Prudhoe Bay to oil tankers in Valdez Harbor. You'll turn off on the Glenn Highway, and spend the night at Sheep Mountain Lodge (p. 71), where the moving dots speckling the nearby mountainside are actually wild sheep.

Day 4 Head to Palmer

Visit the Matanuska Glacier (p. 73), the only glacier in Alaska you can safely wander around on without special training or a guide. Then continue on the Glenn Highway to Palmer, an agricultural town founded by Midwestern farmers during the Great Depression. Make a pit stop at the Palmer Musk Ox Farm (p. 72), where a herd of shaggy arctic ungulates is raised for a fine, ultra-warm wool (Native weavers make garments from it).

Day 5 Into the Talkeetna Mountains

Today you head into the Talkeetna Mountains to explore the ruins and restored buildings of the Independence Gold Mine (p. 74), once Alaska's most productive hard-rock gold mine and now a historical park. Hike the high alpine tundra, or borrow a gold pan from the visitor center and try your luck panning for gold in the creek. Flecks of gold that work their way out of the mountain are still found there.

Day 6 Back to Anchorage

On your drive back to Anchorage, detour through Wasilla to visit the headquarters of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race (p. 75). You'll get to pretend you're a contender in the race with a ride in a dog cart pulled by a yelping, slobbering team of sled dogs. Another worthy stop on the way back to Anchorage is the Alaska Native Heritage Center (p. 47), where Native storytellers, athletes, and dancers put on impressive performances and demonstrations.

Day 7 A Farewell Hike

Get up early and hike to the top of Flattop Mountain (p. 52) above the city for a final, phenomenal look at Alaska before heading to the airport for your flight home.

A WEEK WITH KIDS

With kids in tow, you want to limit the distances you have to travel and maximize the amount of time you spend loafing in and exploring interesting places. The Kenai Peninsula is the place to do it. It's within easy reach of Anchorage, and it's loaded with mountains, glaciers, fjords, and wildlife galore—it also boasts good campsites. Camping makes good sense for families: Kids won't feel cooped up in hotel rooms, parents won't need to enforce indoor voices in restaurants, and everybody will get in touch with Alaska's great outdoors. Plus, you'll save a ton of money.

Day 1 Arrive into Anchorage

Pick up your rental car, stock up on groceries, and head out of town on the Seward Highway along scenic Turnagain Arm. Make camp at Bird Creek Campground (p. 40), then head to Girdwood to pan for gold in the river at Crow Creek Gold Mine (p. 68), an amazingly well-preserved mining camp dating to the 1890s.

Day 2 Drive to Seward

Enjoy the scenic drive to Seward, then head to the Alaska SeaLife Center (p. 117). Put the family on the big digital scale by the sea lion's tank and see how you stack up, pound for pound, against Woody, the 2,000-pound resident Steller sea lion. Stay at Primrose Campground (p. 113), on the edge of Kenai Lake, not far out of town.

Day 3 Tidewater Glaciers

Hop aboard a boat for a trip to Kenai Fjords National Park (p. 118) to see tide-water glaciers and some of the large marine mammals you spotted at the SeaLife Center, only in the wild. Make sure everybody takes seasickness medicine before embarking. A segment of the trip crosses the Gulf of Alaska, which can be rough.

Day 4 Head to Homer

Stop in Soldotna or Kenai along the way (to break up the 4-hr. drive) to eat, and maybe stroll along the beach at the mouth of the Kenai River. In Homer, stop at the Islands and Ocean Visitor Center (p. 137) for a grounding in the area's cultural and natural history. Let the kids run around on Bishop's Beach for a while, or take in the Pratt Museum (p. 137) to learn about the area's natural history. Camp on Homer Spit (p. 135).

Day 5 Kachemak Bay State Park

If your kids are old enough for sea kayaking, go for a guided tour across the bay from Homer at Kachemak Bay State Park (p. 140). The park's sheltered waters, at the foot of the towering, snow-capped Kenai Mountains, are safe enough for raw beginners but awe-inspiring enough to hold the attention of even the most jaded 'tweens. Watch for marine life, including sea otters, seals, porpoises, and sometimes whales. On shore you might spot moose, black bear, coyotes, mountain goats, and wolves. If your kids are too young to sea kayak, take them to Bishop's Beach (p. 138) instead, for beachcombing and sand castle building.

Day 6 Return to Anchorage

Stop at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (p. 61) on the drive back to Anchorage and see the resident elk, musk ox, bison, caribou, owls, and eagles. The enclosures are large enough to give the animals room to roam, but there's no guarantee of up-close sightings, which may frustrate young kids (under age 6 or so) who have trouble picking the animals out at a distance. If that looks like it might be the case, go instead to the Alaska Zoo (p. 48) in Anchorage, where you'll have guaranteed face time with the critters. Give yourselves a night in a hotel (and hot showers before you get on the plane!).

Day 7 A Day in Anchorage

Visit the Alaska Native Heritage Center (p. 47) and spend the morning listening to the age-old tales of Alaska Native storytellers, watching Native dancers and athletes perform, and exploring the traditional dwellings used by Natives from different parts of the state. After lunch, take in the Imaginarium Science Discovery Center (p. 47) to study frogs, solve puzzles, fire an air cannon, test the aerodynamics of an aircraft wing, examine plankton through a microscope, touch a meteorite, and stand inside a giant soap bubble, among other things.

CLASSIC ALASKA IN 2 WEEKS

As I've said before, Alaska is a huge state, and this tour covers an enormous chunk of it. It will give you a good taste of the drizzly Southeast, richly diverse Southcentral Alaska, the wildly popular Denali National Park wilderness, and the boreal forests and rolling gold hills of the immense Alaskan Interior. It's a fast-paced, whirlwind trip that will keep you on the move by ferry, mountain tram, tour boat, white-water raft, old school bus (the Denali shuttles), rent-a-car, and possibly riverboat, with a very relaxing treat at the end.

Day 1 Sitka: An Introduction

Sitka, once the capital of Russian America, is one of the most gorgeously situated cities in Alaska. For your first day here, take in the city's Slavic sights, visiting St. Michael's Cathedral (p. 201) to inspect age-old Russian Orthodox icons and religious treasures, taking a tour of the Russian Bishop's House (p. 196), whose original occupant was later named a saint, and climbing to the top of Castle Hill (p. 198), where Russia transferred Alaska to the U.S.

Day 2 Sitka: Native History & Wildlife

For your second day, concentrate on Sitka's Native and natural wonders, starting with the Sitka National Historical Park (p. 195) where ancient totem poles are displayed in a high-ceilinged gallery while latter-day totem poles slowly weather outdoors in the mossy woods. Chat with modern Tlingit artisans in their workshops, then stroll the battleground where the Tlingit made their last stand against the Russians. Pay a visit to the Alaska Raptor Center (p. 199), where injured bald eagles learn to fly again. Then get out onto the water to see seals, otters, sea lions, and humpback whales on a boat tour to the St. Lazaria Island National Wildlife Refuge (p. 200).

Day 3 Ferry to Juneau

Hop the all-day trip to Juneau aboard an Alaska Marine Highway System ferry (p. 208), as thrilling an experience as any of the state's more expensive nature cruises. Keep your eyes peeled for bears, whales, and other wildlife as you thread your way through the islands of the Inside Passage. In downtown Juneau, ride Mount Roberts Tramway (p. 216) to the top of a nearly vertical mountain looming over the city and take in the view from 1,800 feet.

Day 4 Juneau

Head out to the suburbs to poke around Mendenhall Glacier, then take a flight-seeing tour of the Juneau Icefield (p. 222), from which dozens of glaciers, including the Mendenhall, spring. If the weather grounds your flight (it happens in Juneau), head to the Alaska State Museum (p. 217), or go for a self-guided walking tour of downtown to see the state capitol, the governor's mansion, and other sites. Hop the 4:30 p.m. boat to Glacier Bay National Park, where you'll spend the night at Glacier Bay Lodge (p. 230). Watch for humpback whales along the way.

Day 5 Glacier Bay National Park

Board the boat docked out in front of Glacier Bay Lodge for a day-long tour of Glacier Bay (p. 229), which boasts the largest cluster of tidewater glaciers on earth. Bring warm clothing—you'll need it around glaciers, even in the summer. Ride back to Juneau that evening.

Day 6 Anchorage

Hop a flight to Anchorage and then rent a car to explore Alaska's largest city. Stop at the Alaska Native Heritage Center (p. 47), to get up to speed on Alaska's 11 distinct Native cultures and to see Native storytellers, athletes, and dancers perform. If you have time, pop over to the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center (p. 45) as well. Then head up to Flattop Mountain (p. 52) for a hike with a sweeping view of the city, the mountains, and Cook Inlet.

Day 7 Day Trip Along Turnagain Arm

Drive the scenic Seward Highway (p. 58) between the edge of the Chugach Mountains and the turbulent waters of a long, narrow fjord called Turnagain Arm. Watch for waterfalls, rock climbers, Dall sheep, mountain goats, beluga whales, and—if you're lucky—the bore tide (a literal tidal wave) along the way. Trailheads and picnic areas dot the route. Poke around the funky ski town of Girdwood (p. 63) and take a tour of the rapidly retreating Portage Glacier (p. 63) before returning to Anchorage.

Day 8 Anchorage to Talkeetna

Head up the Parks Highway toward Denali National Park to spend the night in Talkeetna (p. 328), an old riverside supply town for trappers and gold prospectors which has become the staging ground for international mountain climbers preparing to ascend nearby Mount McKinley. On the way to Talkeetna, stop in Palmer to see the Musk Ox Farm (p. 72), then drive up into the Talkeetna

Mountains to explore the Independence Gold Mine (p. 74), once Alaska's most productive hard-rock gold mine and now a historical park.

Day 9 Talkeetna to Denali

Continue your road trip to Denali National Park (p. 306). Outside the entrance to the park, take a refreshing white-water rafting ride on the swift, icy waters of the Nenana River. It's filled with class III and IV rapids, as well as slower sections for the less bold. Because you made reservations for the shuttle that carries visitors into the park long before you got to Alaska, you don't need to worry about it today (but if you didn't, then you might have to skip rafting and stand in line at the visitor center to be sure you have a ticket on an early bus for tomorrow).

Days 10 & 11 Explore the Park

Spend 2 full days in Denali National Park, a completely intact sub-Arctic ecosystem. Plan to get an early start. The wildlife is most active in the morning. You may spot bear, moose, caribou, and wolves, which are among the 39 species of mammals inhabiting the park. On a clear day, you might even see the High One itself—20,320-foot Mount McKinley (p. 320). Alaskans prefer to use the mountain's Native name, Denali.

Day 12 Denali to Fairbanks

Drive to Fairbanks for the night. The winters may be 40 below, but the summers are the warmest in the state. Make a beeline for the University of Alaska campus to see a 36,000-year-old mummified steppe bison, an ancient piece of carved ivory known as the Okvik Madonna, Alaska's largest display of gold, and the other wonders and curiosities on display at the Museum of the North (p. 277). Then stop by the Large Animal Research Station (p. 277) and get face to face with musk ox, reindeer, and caribou. If you're up for some entertainment, take in The Golden Heart Revue (p. 288), a stage show exploring the central question regarding Fairbanks' existence: Why?

Day 13 Fairbanks to Chena Hot Springs

Drive out to Chena Hot Springs (p. 290), get a room or a campsite for the night, and soak in the 104°F (40°C) waters of an Olympic-swimming-pool-size, boulder-lined hot spring. Stop along the way for a hike in the rolling hills of the Alaskan Interior in the Chena River Recreation Area (p. 285).

Day 14 Back to Fairbanks

Head back to Fairbanks. Leave time before your flight for a 3½-hour trip on the Chena River aboard the *Riverboat Discovery* (p. 276), run by an old Alaska family that's been in the riverboating business since the Klondike gold rush.