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Alaska

2004

by Charles Wohlforth

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About the Author

Charles Wohlforth is a lifelong Alaskan who has been a writer and journalist since 1986. His *Frommer's Family Vacations in the National Parks* covers parks all over the United States based on insights from the Wohlforth family's own camping experiences. Wohlforth lives in Anchorage with his wife, Barbara, sons Robin and Joseph, and daughters Julia and Rebecca. In April, Farrar, Straus and Giroux will publish his new book about how Eskimos and scientists are learning about climate change in the Arctic, titled *The Whale and the Supercomputer.* Wohlforth welcomes reader questions and comments through his website, www.wohlforth.net.

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I couldn't put together a book such as this without a lot of help in covering Alaska's great distances and tracking its fast-changing visitor businesses. This is my seventh edition, and over the years so many friends have contributed their knowledge and support that the book seems to belong to a great community. A few had a special part this year, the reliable core team of researchers whom I would trust with any assignment: Kris Capps, Catherine Curtis, Karen Datko, Kathryn Gerlek, Tom Morphet, Kate Ripley, Jed Smith, Sharon Stockard, and Kathleen Tessaro. Many other friends and family members helped with this and previous editions, and I'm grateful to all of them.

—Charles Wohlforth

An Invitation to the Reader

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

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An Additional Note

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

Other Great Guides for Your Trip:

Frommer's Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call

Alaska for Dummies

Frommer's Star Ratings, Icons & Abbreviations

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system.** In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **seven feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

Finds	Special finds—those places only insiders know about
Fun Fact	Fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
Kids	Best bets for kids and advice for the whole family
Moments	Special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
Overrated	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
Tips	Insider tips—great ways to save time and money
Value	Great values—where to get the best deals

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE	American Express	DISC	Discover	V	Visa
DC	Diners Club	MC	MasterCard		

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- Online updates to our most popular guidebooks
- Vacation sweepstakes and contest giveaways
- Newsletters highlighting the hottest travel trends
- Online travel message boards with featured travel discussions

What's New in Alaska

Here are the latest happenings in Alaska, region by region.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP For more planning information, see chapters 2 and 3.

Prices and crowding are down at Alaska's visitor destinations. A lack of customers always drives bargains, and it has been easy to save money for the last two years. In 2003, even the published "rack rates" started coming down at some establishments and were stable at most others after years of routine hikes. At Denali National Park, visitation was strikingly down, meaning it was easier to get reservations in campgrounds and on the critical shuttle buses. Bad news for Alaska businesses, good news for visitors.

In 2003, the parent company of the biggest provider of escorted land tours became the owner of the second biggest, too. Carnival Cruise Lines, already owner of Holland America, bought Princess (contact information for each is in chapters 2 and 4). The two brands will continue to be operated separately, but presumably the competition that seemed to drive the excellence of both companies will be lessened.

Readers seem to appreciate my listing of Alaska travel agents and independent trip planners in chapter 2, so I have added more specialty operators: **Alaska Private Lodgings,** (✆ **866/435-3873** or 907/235-3873; www.alaskabandb.com) which puts travelers into bed and breakfasts and unique lodgings on complete custom itineraries; and **AskMatt Alaskan Adventures & Tours** (✆ **888/355-6288** or 907/677-1225; www.askmatt.com), run by a young guy (Matt) who knows a lot about activities such as charter fishing.

You'll also find a new explanation of bird-watching opportunities, which is an increasingly popular reason to come to Alaska. I have included statewide birding tours in chapter 2 and day trips or self-guided birding in individual towns where these opportunities are available. Anchorage has a great new birding tour available from **Bird Watching Tours of Anchorage Alaska** (✆ **888/334-7282** or 907/248-7283; www.anchoragebirding.com).

Another increasingly popular style of travel is to rent an RV, and there are more and more ways to do so, including relatively affordable one-way rental to Alaska from Seattle or other cities. I have covered those options in chapter 2, in the Skagway section of chapter 5 and in chapter 6, on Anchorage. In addition, it is now possible to rent a camper on a four-wheel-drive truck that you can drive over the gravel rural highways, such as the Dalton or the Denali. See "Equipped for the Backroads" in chapter 9; the business doing these rentals is **GoNorth Alaska Adventure Travel Center,** at 3500 Davis Rd. in Fairbanks (✆ **866/236-7272** or 907/479-7272; www.paratours.net).

All drivers should take note of a new road report service offered by the Alaska Department of Transportation. The service can be reached at ✆ **511** in Alaska or **http://511.alaska.gov**.

Check on construction and road conditions before any long drive to avoid delays.

The state passed a new 10% car rental tax, which brings the tax on car rentals in many communities near the 20% range, and almost to 30% at the Anchorage airport. I have listed car rentals outside of the airport in Anchorage to allow you to avoid at least 10% of the taxes. The legislature narrowly turned down a sales tax, but by the summer season of 2004, a state sales tax could be in effect.

Colors of Nature photography tours is no long in operation.

THE SOUTHEAST For more, see chapter 5.

A new, catamaran-hull fast ferry is due to be completed for the summer season in 2004, drastically cutting the Alaska Marine Highway System's run time between Juneau and Sitka.

In **Ketchikan** there is a cool new way to get to town from the airport, which is on Gravina Island (which has no bridge). **Tongass Water Taxi** (✆ **907/209-8294**) can take you all the way downtown for less than the cost of a cab. A couple of new restaurants in town: **Steamers** (✆ **907/225-1600**), a nice place on the cruise ship dock that was recently resurrected; and **Bar Harbor Restaurant,** a cute family-run place in a little house at 2813 Tongass Ave. (✆ **907/225-2813**).

In **Petersburg,** the famous **Tent City Campground** and the **Bear Necessities Guesthouse** did not open in 2003. The **Northern Lights Restaurant** at 203 Sing Lee Alley (✆ **907/772-2900**), has changed hands again; no word on changes, but there certainly will be food available in this prime location.

An exciting addition in **Sitka:** the **Alaska Raptor Center** (✆ **907/747-8662;** www.alaskaraptor.org) has completed its flight rehabilitation center, a large enclosure of rainforest vegetation where eagles can learn to fly again. Visitors walk through a tube in the enclosure and look through one-way glass. The admission has gone up to $12 for adults. All the work at the Forest Service's **Starrigavan Campground** is complete; it's among the best in Alaska.

There has been a change in the line-up of the best lodgings and dining in **Juneau.** An old favorite, the **Blueberry Lodge,** has stopped taking guests, but I have added **Alaska's Capital Inn** (✆ **888/588-6507** or 907/586-6507; www.alaskacapitalinn.com), a historic luxury B&B a block from the State Capitol building. For a great casual dinner in a spectacular dining room on the dock, try the **Twisted Fish Co. Alaskan Grill,** at 550 S. Franklin St. (✆ **907/463-5033**). **Pizzeria Roma** (✆ **907/723-4658**), at the waterfront next to The Hanger, makes great pie.

Transportation to **Gustavus** has changed: the boat now is called the **Glacier Bay Ferry** (✆ **800/820-2628** or 907/586-8687; www.auknutours.com) and runs only 4 days a week, leaving from downtown Juneau instead of Auke Bay; moreover, it goes to the Glacier Bay National Park headquarters at Bartlett Cove instead of the Gustavus dock. This is all in flux, however, so call ahead.

In **Haines,** the line-up of unusual museums seems to grow every year. If you make an odd museum pilgrimage, don't miss the new **Hammer Museum,** at 108 Main St., across from the bank (✆ **907/766-2374**). It has nothing but hammers. I've dropped the Fireweed Bakery, which was not always open consistently, and added **Wild Strawberry,** 138 2nd Ave. S. (✆ **907/766-3608**), where a commercial fishing family serves its own catch.

Skagway seems to be in the process of being erased by excessive tourism

development. Alaska's historic oldest hotel, the **Golden North,** closed down and turned into yet another T-shirt shop. Consider going out of town, instead, to a cabin at the new **Chilkoot Trail Outpost,** at 8.5 Mile Dyea Rd. (✆ **907/983-3799;** www.chilkoottrailoutpost.com).

ANCHORAGE & ENVIRONS For more, see chapter 6.

In February and March, the **Fur Rendezvous** winter festival in Anchorage has been extended to include the start of the **Iditarod,** the first weekend in March. The Fur Rondy also includes the world championship of sprint dog mushing (in dog mushing, a sprint is 75 miles instead of 1,000). Given good weather, it will be a great time for a visit.

A gorgeous new luxury hotel opened downtown, the **Aspen Hotel Anchorage,** 108 E. 8th Ave., (✆ **907/868-1605;** www.aspenhotelsak.com). You'll also find more great B&Bs listed in the downtown area. One of the best budget hotels, Hillside Motel and RV Park, changed its name to **Creekwood Inn.**

I've added a restaurant with Southwestern cuisine and seafood as good as some of the best in town, for prices much lower: the **Bear Tooth Grill & Theater Pub** at 1230 W. 27th Ave. (✆ **907/276-4200**).

Wolfsong of Alaska, the downtown wildlife museum, closed its doors. The **Alaska State Troopers Museum** moved a block to 245 W. 5th Avenue (✆ **800/770-5050** or 907/279-5050).

Two important aviation services ceased operations. **Ketchum Air Service,** an Anchorage institution, stopped flying when the owners retired. The classic DC-3 tours by **Era Aviation** were not offered in 2003, although the airline continues to operate.

KENAI PENINSULA & PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND For more, see chapter 7.

The overpriced hotels of **Seward** have some good new alternatives, the best of which is the historic **Van Gilder Hotel,** 308 Adams St. (✆ **800/204-6835** or 907/224-3079; www.vangilderhotel.com).

In **Soldotna,** I have added a gourmet dining option, **Mykel's,** 35041 Kenai Spur Hwy. (✆ **907/262-4305**), with a traditional dark dining room. If you are considering a canoe trip on the Swan Lake Route, there is a good rental outlet in Sterling, **Alaska Canoe & Campground** (✆ **907/262-2331;** www.alaskacanoetrips.com).

A new whale-watching option is sailing from **Homer,** offered by **Rainbow Tours** (✆ **907/235-7272;** www.rainbowtours.net), which takes visitors to the Gulf of Alaska after dropping other passengers off in Seldovia.

In **Valdez, Alaska Woollybugger B&B** is no more. I have included a full review of a good restaurant on the waterfront, **Harbor's Edge Restaurant** at 107 N. Harbor Drive (✆ **907/835-5989**).

The big news in **Cordova** is the closing of **The Reluctant Fisherman**, the largest hotel in town, which also operated the town's airport shuttle service, a car rental service, and a popular restaurant. The lodging closed right before this book went to press, so it is too soon to say if it will reopen or if another establishment will replace it. If you'd like to spend the night in Cordova, contact the **Cordova Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center** (✆ **907/424-7260;** www.cordovachamber.com) before you go for an update on the current lodging and transportation situation.

DENALI NATIONAL PARK For more, see chapter 8.

Visitors in 2004 should be the first beneficiaries of the disruptive construction work at the park entrance, where a new Visitor Center Campus will open with vastly improved educational facilities. Bus and permit operations will concentrate at the old Visitor Access Center. As part of the reconstruction, the **Morino Backpackers Campground** has been eliminated and the **Riley Creek Campground** expanded, in addition to other changes.

THE INTERIOR For more, see chapter 9.

Construction will continue on a long-awaited, $31-million expansion project at the **University of Alaska Museum** in Fairbanks, but the old exhibits and programs will be accessible during this time. I have added two hotels in Fairbanks, the comfortable all-suite **Sophie Station** and the economical downtown **Bridgewater;** reach either at ✆ **800/528-4916** or **www.fountainheadhotels.com**.

Downtown in Fairbanks, **Lavelle's Bistro,** at 575 1st Ave. (✆ **907/450-0555;** www.lavellesbistro.com) is one of Alaska's best restaurants. North of town, the **Turtle Club,** at 10 Mile Old Steese Hwy. (✆ **907/457-3883**), is an immensely popular place for prime rib and barbecued ribs.

On the **Steese Highway,** the historic **Arctic Circle Hot Springs** has closed, erasing the biggest reason to make that long, dusty drive.

THE BUSH For more, see chapter 10.

The polar bear viewing trips to the tip of Point Barrow are, at this writing, no longer being offered due to bear–human conflicts that may have been aggravated by too many vehicles at the point. It's such a great opportunity, however, that if you want to see polar bears, it is worth calling the Barrow visitors center to find out the latest.

1

The Best of Alaska

As a child, when my family traveled outside Alaska for vacations, I often met other children who asked, "Wow, you live in Alaska? What's it like?" I never did well with that question. To me, the place I was visiting was far simpler and easier to describe than the one I was from. The Lower 48 seemed a fairly homogeneous land of freeways and fast food, a well-mapped network of established places. Alaska, on the other hand, wasn't—and isn't—even completely explored. Natural forces of vast scale and subtlety still shape the land in their own way, inscribing a different story on each of an infinite number of places. As a child, each region, whether populated or not, was unique far beyond my ability to explain. Alaska was so large and new, so unconquered and exquisitely real, as to defy summation.

In contrast to many places you might choose to visit, it's Alaska's unformed newness that makes it so interesting and fun. Despite the best efforts of tour planners, the most memorable parts of a visit are unpredictable and often unexpected: a humpback whale leaping clear of the water, the face of a glacier releasing huge ice chunks, a bear feasting on salmon in a river, a huge salmon chomping onto your line. You'll have the opportunity to gaze at totem poles and see Alaska Native cultural demonstrations, and you can also get to know indigenous people who still live by traditional ways. And sometimes grand, quiet moments come, and those are the ones that endure most deeply.

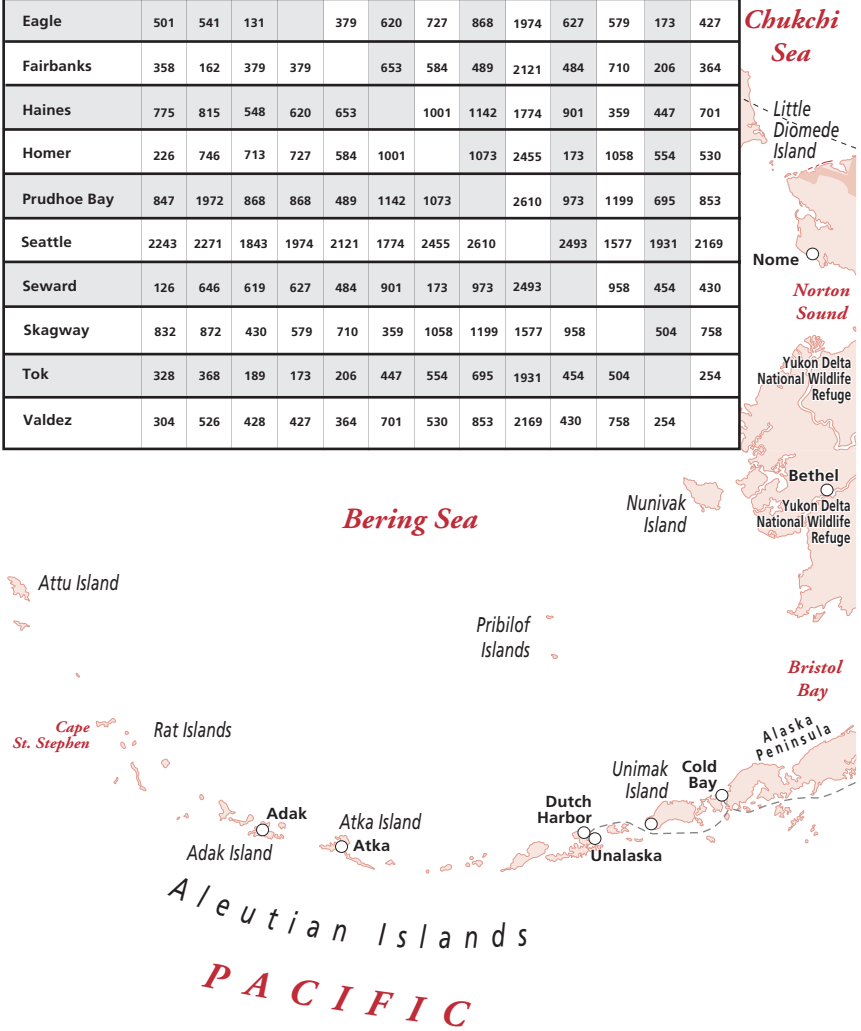
As the writer of this guidebook, I aim to help you get to places where you may encounter what's new, real, and unexpected. Opening yourself to those experiences is your job, but it's an effort that's likely to pay off. Although I have lived here all my life, I often envy the stories visitors tell me about the Alaskan places they have gone to and what happened there. No one owns Alaska, and most of us are newcomers here. In all this immensity, a visitor fresh off the boat is just as likely as a lifelong resident to see or do something amazing.

1 The Best Views

- **A First Sight of Alaska:** Flying north from Seattle, you're in clouds, so you concentrate on a book. When you look up, the light from the window has changed. Down below, the clouds are gone, and under the wing, where you're used to seeing roads, cities, and farms on most flights, you see instead only high, snowy mountain peaks, without the slightest mark of human presence, stretching as far as the horizon. Welcome to Alaska.
- **Punchbowl Cove** (Misty Fjords National Monument): A sheer granite cliff rises smooth and implacable 3,150 feet straight up from the water. A pair of bald eagles wheels and soars across its face, providing the only sense of scale. They look the size of gnats. See p. 107.

Alaska

MILEAGE CHART Approximate driving distances in miles between cities.	Anchorage	Circle	Dawson City	Eagle	Fairbanks	Haines	Homer	Prudhoe Bay	Seattle	Seward	Skagway	Tok	Valdez
Anchorage		520	494	501	358	775	226	847	2234	126	832	328	304
Circle	520		530	541	162	815	746	1972	2271	646	872	368	526
Dawson City	494	530		131	379	548	713	868	1843	619	430	189	428
Eagle	501	541	131		379	620	727	868	1974	627	579	173	427
Fairbanks	358	162	379	379		653	584	489	2121	484	710	206	364
Haines	775	815	548	620	653		1001	1142	1774	901	359	447	701
Homer	226	746	713	727	584	1001		1073	2455	173	1058	554	530
Prudhoe Bay	847	1972	868	868	489	1142	1073		2610	973	1199	695	853
Seattle	2243	2271	1843	1974	2121	1774	2455	2610		2493	1577	1931	2169
Seward	126	646	619	627	484	901	173	973	2493		958	454	430
Skagway	832	872	430	579	710	359	1058	1199	1577	958		504	758
Tok	328	368	189	173	206	447	554	695	1931	454	504		254
Valdez	304	526	428	427	364	701	530	853	2169	430	758	254	



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Arctic Ocean
Beaufort Sea
Barrow
Prudhoe Bay
Deadhorse
Cape Krusenstern National Monument
Brooks Range
Noatak National Preserve
Anaktuvuk Pass
Dalton Hwy.
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
United States
Canada
Kobuk Valley National Park
Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve
Brooks Range
Kotzebue
Coldfoot
Bettles
Bering Land Bridge National Preserve
Fort Yukon
Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge
Arctic Circle
Dempster Hwy.
Chena Hot Springs
Circle
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
Galena
Manley Hot Springs
Fairbanks
North Pole
Eagle
Unalakleet
Nenana
Delta Junction
Yukon River
Denali National Park
Alaska Range
Dawson City, Yukon
McGrath
Mt. McKinley
Tok
Kuskokwim River
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Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve
Valdez
Whitehorse, Yukon
ANCHORAGE
Lake Clark National Park and Preserve
Kenai
Soldotna
Whittier
Cordova
Seward
Cook Inlet
Prince William Sound
Dillingham
Homer
Halibut Cove
Kenai Fjords National Park
King Salmon
Seldovia
Katmai National Park and Preserve
Alaska Marine Highway
Kodiak
Gulf of Alaska
Yakutat
Haines
Skagway
Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve
Gustavus
Juneau
Admiralty Island National Monument
Chichagof Island
Admiralty Island
Baranof Island
Sitka
Petersburg
Wrangell
Prince of Wales Island
Craig
Ketchikan
Misty Fjords National Monument
Prince Rupert, B.C.
Kodiak Island
Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve
CANADA
YUKON
BRITISH COLUMBIA
To Seattle
Unpaved Road
Ferry
Paved Road
State or Provincial Route
OCEAN

- **From the Chugach Mountains Over Anchorage, at Sunset:** The city sparkles below, on the edge of an orange-reflecting Cook Inlet, far below the mountainside where you stand. Beyond the pink and purple silhouettes of mountains on the other side of the inlet, the sun is spraying warm, dying light into puffs of clouds. And yet it's midnight. See "Getting Outside" in chapter 6.
- **Mount McKinley From the Air** (Denali National Park): Your bush pilot guides his plane up from the flatlands of Talkeetna into a realm of eternal white, where a profusion of insanely rugged peaks rises in higher relief than any other spot on earth. After circling a 3-mile-high wall and slipping through a mile-deep canyon, you land on a glacier, get out of the plane, and for the first time realize the overwhelming scale of it all. See "Attractions & Activities Outside the Park" and "Talkeetna: Back Door to Denali" in chapter 8.
- **The Northern Lights** (Alaska's Interior): Blue, purple, green, and red lines spin from the center of the sky, draping long tendrils of slow-moving light. Bright, flashing, sky-covering waves wash across the dome of stars like ripples driven by a gust of wind on a pond. Looking around, you see that your companions' faces are rosy in a silver, snowy night, and all are gazing straight up with their mouths open. See p. 367.

2 The Best Alaska Cruises

Cruises provide comfortable, leisurely access to the Inside Passage and the Gulf of Alaska. Here are some of the best bets. See chapter 4 for details.

- **Best Up-Close Alaska Experience:** Glacier Bay Cruiseline's *Wilderness Adventurer* and *Wilderness Explorer* sail itineraries that shun overcrowded port towns in favor of wilderness areas and small fishing villages. Both carry sea kayaks for off-ship exploration, and both feature naturalist-led hikes as central features of the experience. The line is owned by an Alaska Native corporation and the ships are small (carrying 74 and 36 passengers, respectively) and very casual. They're not fancy, but that's the point—it's where they take you that counts.
- **Best Itinerary:** World Explorer Cruises' *Universe Explorer* is unmatched, offering a 14-day round-trip itinerary from Vancouver that includes all the major ports of call and a few others, too. They also offer a 9-night round-trip out of Vancouver, featuring the best of the Inside Passage. The ship is large, though not huge, and stresses education rather than the typical big-ship cruise diversions.
- **Most Comfortable Small Ships:** Cruise West's *Spirit of Endeavor* and *Spirit of '98* (a 19th-c. coastal steamer re-creation) and Clipper's *Yorktown Clipper* offer a higher level of comfort than the other small ships in Alaska while still giving you an intimate, casual, up-close small-ship experience.
- **Most Luxurious Big Ships:** *Crystal Harmony* is the top-of-the-line ship in the Alaska market, with superb cuisine, elegant service, lovely surroundings, great cabins, and sparkling entertainment. If you want a more casual kind of luxury, Radisson Seven Seas' *Seven Seas Mariner* (which is slightly smaller than the *Harmony*) offers just that. Among the mainstream cruise ships, Celebrity's *Mercury,*

Infinity, and *Summit* are the big winners, offering cutting-edge modern ships with great service, dining, and design.

- **Best Cruisetours:** Holland America Line and Princess are the leaders in linking cruises with land tours into the Interior, either before or after your cruise. They own their own hotels, deluxe motor coaches, and railcars, and after many years in the business, they both really know what they're doing. Princess concentrates more on the Anchorage/Denali/Fairbanks routes, while Holland America has many itineraries that get you to the Yukon Territory's Dawson City and Whitehorse.

3 The Best Glaciers

More of Alaska—more than 100 times more—is covered by glacier ice than is settled by human beings.

- **Grand Pacific Glacier** (Glacier Bay National Park): Two vast glaciers of deep blue meet at the top of an utterly barren fjord. They rubbed and creased the gray rock below for thousands of years before just recently releasing it to the air again. Three intimidating walls of ice surround boats that pull close to the glaciers. See "Glacier Bay National Park" in chapter 5.
- **Childs Glacier** (Cordova): Out on the Copper River Highway from Cordova, this is a participatory glacier-viewing experience. The glacier is cut by the Copper River, which is ¼ mile broad; standing on the opposite shore (unless you're up in the viewing tower), you have to be ready to run like hell when the creaking, popping ice gives way and a huge berg falls into the river, potentially swamping the picnic area. Even when the glacier isn't calving, you can feel the ice groaning in your gut. See "Cordova: Hidden Treasure" in chapter 7.
- **Exit Glacier** (Seward): You can drive near the glacier and walk the rest of the way up to the glacier on a gravel path. It towers above like a huge blue sculpture. The spires of broken ice are close enough to breathe a freezer-door chill down on visitors. See "Exit Glacier" in chapter 7.
- **Western Prince William Sound:** On a boat from Whittier, you can see a couple dozen glaciers in a day. Some of these are the amazing tidewater glaciers that dump huge, office-building-size spires of ice into the ocean, each setting off a terrific splash and outward-radiating sea wave. See "Whittier: Dock on the Sound" in chapter 7.

4 The Most Beautiful Drives & Train Rides

Here are some highlights of Alaska's road and railway systems:

- **White Pass and Yukon Route Railway** (Skagway to Summit): This narrow-gauge excursion train, sometimes pulled by vintage steam engines, climbs the steep grade that was chiseled into the granite mountains by stampeders to the Klondike gold rush. The train is a sort of mechanical mountain goat, balancing on trestles and steep rock walls far above deep gorges. See p. 190.
- **Seward Highway/Alaska Railroad** (Anchorage to Seward): Just south of Anchorage, the highway and rail line have been chipped

into the side of the Chugach Mountains over the surging gray water of Turnagain Arm. Above, Dall sheep and mountain goats pick their way along the cliffs, within easy sight. Below, white beluga whales chase salmon through the turbid water. Farther south, the route splits and climbs through the mountain passes of the Kenai Peninsula See "The Seward Highway: A Road Guide" in Chapter 7 for information on the highway, and p. 200 for information on this Alaska Railroad route.

- **Denali Highway:** Leading east-west through the Alaska Range, this highway crosses terrain that could be another Denali National Park, full of wildlife and with views so huge and grand they seem impossible. See p. 321.
- **Richardson Highway:** Just out of Valdez heading north, the Richardson Highway rises quickly from sea level to more than 2,600 feet, switching back and forth on the side of a mountain. With each turn, the drop down the impassable slope becomes more amazing. North of Glennallen, the highway rises again, bursting through the tree line between a series of mountains and tracing the edges of long alpine lakes, before descending, parallel with the silver skein of the Alaska pipeline, to Delta Junction. See p. 360.
- **The Roads Around Nome:** You can't drive to Nome, but 250 miles of gravel roads radiate from the Arctic community into tundra that's populated only by musk oxen, bear, reindeer, birds, and other wildlife. See p. 426.
- **The Dalton Highway:** When you're ready for an expedition—a real wilderness trip by road—the Dalton Highway leads from Fairbanks across northern Alaska to the Arctic Ocean, a mind-blowing drive through 500 miles of spectacular virgin country. See p. 361.

5 The Best Fishing

The quality of salmon fishing in Alaska isn't so much a function of place as of time. See p. 41 for information on how to find the fish when you arrive.

- **Bristol Bay:** This is the world's richest salmon fishery; lodges on the remote rivers of the region are an angler's paradise. See p. 408.
- **Copper River Delta, Cordova:** The Copper itself is silty with glacial runoff, but feeder streams and rivers are rich with trout, Dolly Varden, and salmon, with few other anglers in evidence. See p. 317.
- **The Kenai River:** The biggest king salmon—up to 98 pounds—come from the swift Kenai River. Big fish are so common in the second run of kings that there's a special, higher standard for what makes a trophy. Silvers and reds add to a mad, summer-long fishing frenzy. See p. 275.
- **Homer:** Alaska's largest charter-fishing fleet goes for halibut ranging into the hundreds of pounds. See p. 295.
- **Unalaska:** Beyond the road system, Unalaska has the biggest halibut. See p. 421.
- **Kodiak Island:** The bears are so big here because they live on an island that's crammed with spawning salmon in the summer. Kodiak has the best roadside salmon fishing in Alaska, and the remote fishing, at lodges or fly-in stream banks, is legendary. See p. 413.

6 The Best Tips for Cooking Salmon

Now that you've caught a Pacific salmon, you need to know how to cook it—or order it in a restaurant—to avoid spoiling the rich flavor. Tips for getting your fish home are on p. 296.

- **Freeze As Little As Possible:** It's a sad fact that salmon loses some of its richness and gets more "fishy" as soon as it's frozen. Eat as much as you can fresh, because it'll never be better. Ask if the salmon is fresh when you order it in a restaurant. Don't overlook smoking, the traditional Native way of preserving fish for the winter. See p. 296 for information on where to get your salmon frozen and smoked.
- **Choose the Best Fish:** The best restaurants advertise where their salmon comes from on the menu. In early summer, Copper River kings and reds are the richest in flavor; later in the summer, Yukon River salmon are best. The oil in the salmon gives it the rich, meaty flavor; the fish from the Copper and Yukon are high in oil content. King, red, and silver salmon are the only species you should find in a restaurant. Avoid farm-reared salmon, which is mushy and flavorless compared with wild Alaska salmon.
- **Keep It Simple:** When ordering salmon or halibut in a restaurant, avoid anything with cheese or heavy sauces. When salmon is fresh, it's best with light seasoning, perhaps just a little lemon, dill weed, and pepper and salt, or basted with soy sauce; or without anything on it at all, grilled over alder coals.
- **Don't Overcook It:** Salmon should be cooked just until the moment the meat changes color and becomes flaky through to the bone, or slightly before. A minute more, and some of the texture and flavor are lost. That's why those huge barbecue salmon bakes often are not as good as they should be—it's too hard to cook hundreds of pieces of fish just right and serve them all hot.
- **Filets, Not Steaks:** Salmon is cut two ways in Alaska: lengthwise filets or crosswise steaks. The filet is cut with the grain of the flesh, keeping the oil and moisture in the fish. Do not remove the skin before cooking—it holds in the oils, and will fall off easily when the fish is done. If you have a large group, cook the salmon bone-in (sometimes called a roast), stuffing seasonings in the body cavity. When it's done, the skin easily peels off and, after eating the first side, you can effortlessly lift out the skeleton.

7 The Best Bear Viewing

There are many places to see bears in Alaska, but if your goal is to make *sure* you see a bear—and potentially lots of bears—these are the best places:

- **Anan Wildlife Observatory:** When the fish are running, you can see many dozens of black bear feeding in a salmon stream from close at hand. Access is easiest from Wrangell. See p. 116.
- **Pack Creek** (Admiralty Island): The brown bears of this island, which is more thickly populated with them than anywhere else on earth, have learned to ignore the daily visitors who stand on the

platforms at Pack Creek. Access is by air from Juneau. See p. 160.

- **Katmai National Park:** During the July and September salmon runs, dozens of giant brown bears congregate around Brooks Camp, where, from wooden platforms a few yards away, you can watch the full range of their behaviors. Flight services from Kodiak also bring guests at any time of the summer to see bears dig clams on the park's eastern seashore. See "Katmai National Park" in chapter 10.
- **Kodiak Island:** This island's incredible salmon runs nourish the world's largest bears, Kodiak brown bears; pilots know where to find them week to week, landing floatplanes as near as possible. See p. 413.
- **Denali National Park:** The park offers the best and least expensive wildlife-viewing safari in the state. Passengers on the buses that drive the park road as far as the Eielson Visitor Center usually see at least some grizzlies. See chapter 8.

8 The Best Marine Mammal Viewing

You've got a good chance of seeing marine mammals almost anywhere you go boating in Alaska, but in some places it's almost guaranteed.

- **Frederick Sound** (Petersburg): A humpback jumped right into the boat with whale-watchers here in 1995. Petersburg boats also see otters and baby seals sitting on icebergs floating in front of LeConte Glacier. See p. 125.
- **Icy Strait** (Gustavus) & **Bartlett Cove** (Glacier Bay National Park): Humpback whales show up off Point Adolphus, in Icy Strait, just a few miles from little Gustavus, a town of luxurious country inns, and in Bartlett Cove within Glacier Bay National Park. See "Glacier Bay National Park" in chapter 5.
- **Sitka Sound:** Lots of otters and humpback whales show up in the waters near Sitka. In fall, when the town holds its Whale Fest, you can spot them from a city park built for the purpose. See "Sitka: Rich Prize of Russian Conquest" in chapter 5.
- **Kenai Fjords National Park** (near Seward): You don't have to go all the way into the park—you're pretty well assured of sea otters and sea lions in Resurrection Bay, near Seward, and humpbacks and killer whales often show up, too. See "Kenai Fjords National Park" in chapter 7.
- **Prince William Sound:** Otters, seals, and sea lions are easy—you'll see them on most trips out of Valdez, Whittier, or Cordova—but you also have a good chance of spotting both humpback and killer whales in the Sound. See chapter 7.

9 The Best Encounters with Native Culture

- **Ketchikan Totem Poles:** At Totem Heritage Center, real historic poles are on display inside. Totem Bight State Historical Park displays poles carved since 1938, in a natural setting. At Saxman Native Village Totem Pole Park, you can meet actual totem pole carvers while they work. See p. 99.
- **Alaska Native Heritage Center** (Anchorage): All of Alaska's Native

groups joined together to build this grand living museum and gathering place, where dance and music performances, storytelling, art and craft demonstrations, and simple meetings of people happen every day. See p. 222.

- **Alutiiq Museum** (Kodiak): The Koniag people are recovering their culture from the ground and from artifacts repatriated from the world's museums. Visitors can even join in archaeological fieldwork. See p. 411.
- **Inupiat Heritage Center** (Barrow): A living museum, this is a place to meet and enjoy performances by the Native people who built it, and to see extraordinary artifacts they have made and recovered from digs. See p. 434.
- **NANA Museum of the Arctic** (Kotzebue): Eskimos of this still-traditional city/village proudly show off their Inupiat way of life with a combination of high-tech and age-old entertainment. See p. 430.

10 The Best Community Museums & Historic Sites

- **Sitka National Historic Park:** The site of the 1804 battle between the Tlingits and Russians, in a totem pole park and seaside stand of old-growth forest, allows you to really appreciate what the Native people were fighting for. Inside the visitor center, Native craftspeople carry on their traditional work and talk with visitors. See p. 132.
- **The Alaska State Museum** (Juneau): This richly endowed museum doesn't just show off its wealth of objects—it also uses them to teach about the state. A visit will put Alaska's Native cultures and pioneer history entirely in context. See p. 146.
- **Anchorage Museum of History and Art:** Alaska's largest museum has the room and expertise to tell the story of Native and white history in Alaska, and to showcase contemporary Alaskan art and culture. See p. 221.
- **The Pratt Museum** (Homer): The Pratt explains natural history (especially the life of the ocean) in an intimate and clear way you'll find nowhere else in Alaska. See p. 291.
- **University of Alaska Museum** (Fairbanks): The wealth of knowledge and artifacts that have resulted from the university's study of Alaska, in all its forms, is put on display in galleries and daily shows. Exhibits range from equipment used to study the aurora borealis to a petrified bison. See p. 369.

11 The Best Winter Destinations

- **Anchorage:** The Fur Rendezvous and Iditarod sled dog races keep a winter-carnival atmosphere going through much of February and March, and those who enjoy participatory winter sports will truly enjoy Anchorage in the winter. The city has some of the best Nordic and telemark skiing anywhere, close access to three downhill skiing areas, dog mushing, and lake skating. See chapter 6.
- **Alyeska Resort** (Girdwood): Alaska's premier downhill skiing area has lots of snow over a long season, fantastic views, new lifts, and a luxurious hotel. See "The Best Hotels," below, and p. 240.
- **Chena Hot Springs Resort:** A 90-minute ride from Fairbanks

and you're out in the country, where the northern lights are clear on a starry winter afternoon and night. The resort has lots of activities to get you out into the snowy countryside, or you can just relax in the hot mineral springs. See p. 385.

- **Sitka:** Much of historic Sitka is just as accessible and interesting in winter as at any other time of year, but with fewer crowds and lower prices. The humpback whale-watching is exceptional in the late fall and early winter, as the whales stop off here on their migration. See "Sitka: Rich Prize of Russian Conquest" in chapter 5.
- **Barrow:** Go to the shore of the frozen Arctic Ocean and you have a chance to experience the most extreme winter conditions in the world. It's dark for 65 days, when the aurora blasts across the sky. There's not much to do, but you could run into a polar bear in the street. See "Barrow: Way North" in chapter 10.

12 The Strangest Community Events

- **Cordova Ice Worm Festival** (Cordova)**:** The truth is, ice worms do exist. Really. This winter carnival celebrates them in February. The highlight is the traditional annual march of the ice worm (a costume with dozens of feet sticking out) down the main street. See p. 314.
- **Midnight Sun Baseball Game** (Fairbanks): The semipro baseball game, played without lights, doesn't begin until 10:30pm on the longest day of the year. See p. 366.
- **Bering Sea Ice Golf Classic** (Nome): The greens are Astroturf, as the sea ice won't support a decent lawn in mid-March. Hook a drive and you could end up spending hours wandering among the pressure ridges, but you must play the ball as it lies. See p. 425.
- **Polar Bear Swim** (Nome): This swim in the frigid Bering Sea takes place in late June, but only if the sea ice has opened up sufficiently to provide enough water. See p. 425.
- **Pillar Mountain Golf Classic** (Kodiak): The course is one hole, par is 70, and elevation gain is 1,400 feet. Having a spotter in the deep snow of late March is helpful, but use of two-way radios, dogs, and chain saws is prohibited. Also, there's no cutting down of power poles, and cursing tournament officials carries a $25 fine. See p. 411.
- **Tea-Making Contest** (Barrow): Part of the April Piuraagiaqt festival, the contest sets couples against each other in a race to set up a camp stove, gather a piece of ice, and brew a good cup of tea. See p. 434.
- **Mountain Mother Contest** (Talkeetna): In this event in the July Moose Dropping Festival, mothers compete in a test of Bush skills, including splitting wood, balancing on rocks to cross a stream, carrying water, and diapering a baby. See p. 353.

13 The Best Hotels

- **Westcoast Cape Fox Lodge** (Ketchikan; ✆ **866/225-8001**): Standing in its own little forest atop a rocky promontory that dominates downtown Ketchikan, this cleanly luxurious hotel has the

feel of a mountain lodge or resort. A funicular tram carries visitors to the Creek Street boardwalks, or you can take the wooded cliff-side path. The rooms and common areas, accented with masterpieces of Tlingit art, have exceptional views of the city and Tongass Narrows through the trees. See p. 104.

- **Hotel Captain Cook** (Anchorage; ✆ **800/843-1950**): This is the grand old hotel of downtown Anchorage, with a heavy nautical theme, teak paneling, and every possible amenity. It remains the state's standard of service and luxury. See p. 204.
- **Alyeska Prince Hotel** (Girdwood; ✆ **800/880-3880**): The first sight of this ski resort hotel—designed in a château style and standing in an undeveloped mountain valley—will make you catch your breath. Wait till you get inside and see the starscape and polar bear diorama in the lobby atrium, or the swimming pool, with its high-beamed ceiling and windows, looking out on the mountain. A tram carries skiers and diners to the mountaintop. See p. 240.
- **Kenai Princess Lodge** (Cooper Landing; ✆ **800/426-0500**): Princess Cruises and Tours has several superb hotels in Alaska; I especially like this one because it really is like a lodge, with working fireplaces and balconies in the romantic rooms. Each room feels like a luxury backwoods cabins. See p. 276.
- **Grand Aleutian Hotel** (Unalaska/Dutch Harbor; ✆ **888/581-3844**): This large, lodge-style luxury hotel, which is competitive with the best in the state, gets extra points for the sheer audacity of its existence on this remote, volcanic island. The hotel creates a unique opportunity for those who want to see the Bush and enjoy the best fishing and wildlife- and bird-watching, while staying in a fine hotel. See p. 422.

14 The Best Bed & Breakfasts

- **Alaska Ocean View Bed & Breakfast** (Sitka; ✆ **907/747-8310**): The family that runs this place has set out to turn their home into the perfect lodging, with every detail attended to and warm, overflowing hospitality. It works. See p. 138.
- **Pearson's Pond Luxury Inn and Adventure Spa** (Juneau; ✆ **888/658-6328**): Diane Pearson takes the prize for the most obsessive attention to detail at any B&B in Alaska, creating a great collection of honeymoon suites. See p. 162.
- **Glacier Trail Bed & Breakfast** (Juneau; ✆ **907/789-5646**): The hosts built their house to be the perfect B&B, with Jacuzzi tubs, stunning glacier views from the bedrooms, and many amenities. Others could have done that, but only this fascinating and very Alaskan couple could make their guests feel so welcome. See p. 164.
- **The Oscar Gill House Bed & Breakfast** (Anchorage; ✆ **907/279-1344**): This beautifully restored historic B&B is right in downtown Anchorage and has low rates. See p. 208.
- **Aurora Express Bed and Breakfast** (Fairbanks; ✆ **800/221-0073**): The owners bought an old-fashioned railroad train, hauled it up the side of a mountain above Fairbanks, and remodeled the cars in luxurious theme decor as a bed-and-breakfast. See p. 377.

15 The Best Websites

Many useful websites are listed throughout the book; some of the best are under "Visitor Information" near the beginning of each town section.

- **www.trollart.com**. Ketchikan artist Ray Troll has created a website that carries you deep into his mind, which is full of odd and resonant humor about the evolution of fish, man, and our common relations. His vibrantly colored art makes it an aesthetic journey.
- **www.alaska.gov/adfg**. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game posts valuable information for anyone interested in fishing, hunting, wildlife-watching, or just learning about creatures. Everyone from children to wildlife biologists will find something at his or her level.
- **www.alaska.com**. Operated by Alaska's largest newspaper, the *Anchorage Daily News,* this site is so full of information for visitors that it's a bit disorienting. Find answers to travel and outdoor questions and read on many topics you never thought of.
- **www.awrta.org**. The Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association unites hundreds of small eco-tourism operators. Authentic local guides and lodges can be hard to find, but they're all listed here on a comprehensive and well-organized site.
- **www.gi.alaska.edu**. The Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks maintains a fascinating and cool site filled with real-time earth science information about Alaska, such as aurora predictions, volcano watches, earthquake and tsunami updates, rocketry, and space science.
- **www.wohlforth.net**. A bit of self-promotion here, but readers can get something out of it. I answer reader questions on a discussion board on my own website. Read answers to scores of other readers' questions and, if you like, ask your own. I supply answers on the entirely free service as soon as I have time, usually within a day or two.
- **Favorite Small-Town Sites:** Small-town Alaska newspapers, and people in communities too small to have a newspaper, are communicating through the Internet; visitors to these sites can vicariously experience the pleasures and pitfalls of remote living, which can be touching and hilarious. The best I've found are: Seldovia's **www.seldovia.com**; McCarthy and Kennecott's **www.mccarthy-kennicott.com/WSEN.htm**; Nome's **www.nomenugget.com**; Kotzebue's **www.cityofkotzebue.com;** and Talkeetna's **www.talkeetnanews.com**.

2

Planning Your Trip to Alaska

Planning a trip to Alaska can be a bit more complicated than getting ready to travel in the rest of the United States. In addition to the obstacles that vast distances and the range of climatic conditions present, there is the added problem that the best places book up quickly for the high summer season. This chapter provides general orientation information, then covers when and how to plan a trip to Alaska, including information on the best outdoor activities and the businesses that can help you experience the outdoors. I've also included primers on fishing and shopping for Alaska Native art.

1 The Regions in Brief

SOUTHEAST ALASKA The Southeast Panhandle is the relatively narrow strip of mountains and islands lying between Canada and the Gulf of Alaska. To Alaskans, it's Southeast, but to the rest of the country, it's more like the northernmost extension of the lush Pacific Northwest. It's a land of huge rainforest trees, glacier-garbed mountains, and countless islands ranging in size from the nation's third largest to tiny, one-tree islets that are strewn like confetti along the channels and fjords. The water is the highway of Southeast Alaska, as the land is generally too steep and rugged to build roads. Many of the towns and villages are reachable via the extensive ferry system or by cruise ship. Southeast contains **Juneau,** Alaska's capital and third-largest city, and **Ketchikan,** next in size to Juneau. Southeast's towns are as quaint and historic as any in Alaska, especially **Sitka,** which preserves the story of Russian America and its conflict with the indigenous Native people. Alaska Native culture—here, Tlingit and Haida—is rich and close at hand. No other region offers more opportunities for boating or seeing marine wildlife. Likewise, no other region is as crowded with tourists, with well over half a million cruise-ship passengers jamming the little towns all summer. The weather is wet and temperate.

SOUTHCENTRAL ALASKA As a region, Southcentral is something of a catchall. The area is roughly defined by the arc of the Gulf of Alaska from the Canadian border on the east to Cook Inlet and the end of the road network to the west. It's a microcosm of the state, containing **Prince William Sound,** which is similar to the wooded island habitat of Southeast; the **Kenai Peninsula,** a fishing, boating, and outdoor mecca with roads; **Anchorage,** the state's modern, major city; and the **Matanuska and Susitna valleys,** an agricultural and suburban region of broad flatlands between steep mountains. Southcentral dominates Alaska, with most of the state's population and a more highly developed transportation system than anywhere else, including a network of highways and the Alaska Railroad. The ocean influences Southcentral's weather, keeping it from being very hot or very cold. The coastal areas are

Alaska by the Numbers

This chart shows some comparative indicators for 17 of Alaska's most popular destinations. The third column is the best season to visit—months during at least part of which there's enough going on and weather is suitable (that includes weather that's good for winter sports). The fourth column lists modes of transportation to each community—in Alaska you can't drive everywhere.

Place	Population	Season	Transportation	Precip. (in.)	Snow (in.)
Anchorage	260,283	May–Sept Jan–Mar	Road, air, rail	15.7	71
Barrow	4,581	June–Aug	Air	4.5	30
Cordova	2,454	May–Sept	Air, ferry	93.1	119
Denali National Park	169	June–Sept	Road, rail	15.3	83
Fairbanks	82,840	May–Sept Jan–Mar	Road, air, rail	10.5	68
Glacier Bay National Park	429	May–Sept	Air, boat	70	117
Haines	1,811	May–Sept/ Nov	Road, ferry, air	48	123
Homer	3,946	May–Sept	Road, air, ferry	24.6	55
Juneau	30,711	May–Sept	Air, ferry	56.3	99
Kenai	6,942	May–Sept	Road, air	19.3	61
Ketchikan	14,070	May–Sept	Air, ferry	150.7	37
Kodiak Island	13,913	May–Sept	Air, ferry	76.3	73
Kotzebue	3,082	June–Aug	Air	9.5	50
Nome	3,505	June–Aug/ Mar	Air	16.1	61
Petersburg	3,224	May–Sept	Air, ferry	110.4	67
Seward	2,830	May–Sept	Road, rail, ferry	66.4	81
Sitka	8,835	May–Sept/ Nov	Air, ferry	86.4	39
Skagway	862	May–Sept	Road, ferry, air	26.4	50
Unalaska/ Dutch Harbor	4,283	June–Sept	Air, ferry	59.9	88
Valdez	4,036	May–Sept	Road, air, ferry	61.5	304

wet, while the areas just behind the coastal mountains are drier.

THE INTERIOR The vast central part of the state is crossed by highways and by rivers that act as highways. Big river valleys lie between great mountain ranges, the largest of which are the Alaska Range, which contains

Mount McKinley, North America's tallest peak, and the Brooks Range, the northern end of the cordillera that includes the Rockies. McKinley is the centerpiece of **Denali National Park,** Alaska's premier road-accessible wildlife-viewing destination. The region's dominant city is **Fairbanks,** Alaska's second largest, which lies on the lazy Chena River, roughly in the middle of the state. The natural environment is drier and less fertile than that in Southeast or Southcentral. The Athabascans, the Interior's first people, still subsist on this bare land in tiny villages and river fish camps. Summer days can be hot and winters very cold in the Interior, because of the distance from the ocean.

THE BUSH Bush Alaska is linked by lifestyle rather than by geography. One good definition would be that the Bush is the part of the state that's closer to the wilderness than to civilization. It's also the only part of the state where Native people outnumber whites and other relative newcomers. In many Bush villages, readily accessible to the outside world only by small plane, people still live according to age-old subsistence hunting-and-gathering traditions. The Bush region includes the majority of Alaska outside the road and water highway networks, ranging from the north end of the Canadian border all the way around the coast, out to the Aleutians, and the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island, south of Anchorage. But some towns in each of the other regions also could be called "Bush villages." The Bush contains many regions, including Northwest and Southwest Alaska, and the Arctic.

2 Visitor Information

The **Alaska Travel Industry Association,** 2600 Cordova Street, Suite 201, Anchorage, AK 99503 (✆ **800/862-5275;** www.travelalaska.com) is the state's official visitor information agency, but you may find the Anchorage Convention and Visitor Bureau more responsive (see p. 201).

For outdoor recreation, the **Alaska Public Lands Information Centers** are centralized sources of information on all government lands, which include some 85% of the state. The centers, located in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Ketchikan, and Tok, are operated cooperatively by many land agencies, including the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. The Anchorage center is at 605 W. 4th Ave., Suite 105, Anchorage, AK.

Tips Questions, Anyone?

If you can't find the answers you are looking for in this book, check out my personal website, at www.wohlforth.net, where I post and respond to reader questions. I enjoy getting specific questions (not "what should I do on my vacation?") and I use them to improve each edition of the book. Readers' experiences, both good and bad, also play a decisive part in my coverage and I welcome them on the site. You will also find some of my other writings about Alaska on the website, and information about my new book, *The Whale and the Supercomputer; Climate Change Comes to the North* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), which is about the adventures of Eskimos and scientists dealing with the warming of the Arctic. In addition, online updates of this book are posted at www.frommers.com/guidebooks/guidebook_updates.cfm.

99501 (✆ **907/271-2737;** www.nps.gov/aplic). See the chapters dedicated to the other regions mentioned above for the address and contact information for those branches.

3 Money

Alaska is an expensive destination any way you slice it. With the exception of a few out-of-the-way spots, good standard motel rooms are rarely less than $100 in the high season, and usually over $120. Airfare from Seattle to Anchorage fluctuates wildly with competition among the airlines, but a $300 round-trip, with 14-day advance purchase, is an excellent deal. (Flying is cheaper than the alternatives, driving or taking the ferry and bus.) You can easily pay twice that to fly to an Alaska Bush community. Even the train is expensive, with a one-way fare from Anchorage to Fairbanks (a 350-mile trip) costing $175 on the least luxurious of three choices of cars.

A couple ordering a good salmon dinner, appetizers, and wine will likely pay $100 in a fine restaurant, plus tip. One reason cruise ships have become such a popular way to visit Alaska is that, for the same quality level, they're less expensive on a daily basis than independent travel, and offer the chance to see remote coastal areas that can be quite costly to get to for land-based visitors. (See chapter 4 for details on cruising.)

To travel at a standard American comfort level, a couple should allow $120 per person, per day, for room and board. The cost of an activity such as flightseeing, wildlife cruises, or guided fishing typically is $75 to $250 per person. Add ground transportation to your budget—a car is the best way to see much of the state. You won't do much better than $50 a day for an economy model from the major national firms, although you can save with an unknown brand. Weekly rentals generally cost the same as renting for 5 individual days. You may also need train and ferry tickets.

You can trim your costs, however, by cutting your demands. You'll learn more about the real Alaska staying in B&B accommodations than in a standard hotel room. Expect to pay $90 to $110 for a nice room with a shared bathroom, $100 to $130 for a private bathroom (much more in a luxury B&B inn). The complimentary breakfast cuts down on food costs, too. And there are plenty of family restaurants where you can eat a modest dinner for two for $35, with a tip and a glass of beer. Traveling in that style will bring down the cost of room and board to about $90 per person, per day, for a couple.

You can save the most money by giving up a private room every night and cooking some of your own meals. Camping is a fun way to really see Alaska and costs only $10 to $15 a night in state and federal government campgrounds. Hostels are available in most towns for under $20 a night.

Don't economize, however, when it comes to activities. Unlike other destinations where relatively inexpensive museums or an interesting street scene take up much of your time, a trip to Alaska is all about getting outside and seeing nature. You can hike for nothing, but to go sea kayaking, whale-watching, or flying out to see bears or to fish in a remote stream, you have to pay. Cut those expenses and you cut much of the reason for going in the first place.

You can save even on activities, however, by traveling in the shoulder season, before and after the peak summer season. Hotel and guided activity prices drop significantly, typically 25% or more. May and September are solidly in the shoulder season, and sometimes you get bargains as late as

Native Art: Finding the Real Thing

In a gift shop in Southeast Alaska, I watched as a woman who said she was an artist's assistant sanded a Tlingit-style carving. When I asked who made the carving, the artist said, "It's my work." At the time, that seemed like an odd way of putting it. Only later did I learn from one of the artist's former assistants that his "work" involved ordering the carvings from Southeast Asia and shipping them to Alaska, where he hired locals to pretend to be working on them in the shop. Journalists have repeatedly documented shops fraudulently removing "Made in Taiwan" stickers and the like, and replacing them with "Made in Alaska." One journalist found a whole village in Bali carving Alaska Native designs out of ivory, whalebone, and other materials sent from Alaska.

Good estimates don't exist of the amount of counterfeit Alaska Native art sold annually, but authorities put it close to $100 million. That's money taken from Alaska Bush economies where jobs in the cash economy are virtually nonexistent and prices for essentials such as fuel and housing are astronomical. Buying fake Native art is cultural and financial theft from subsistence hunters and fishermen who can least afford it. And besides, who wants to come home with an Eskimo mask made in Bali?

You can avoid being scammed if you pay attention. Ask questions before you buy. Any reputable art dealer will provide you with a biography of the artist who created an expensive work. Ask specifically if that artist actually carved the piece: Some Native artists have sold their names and designs to wholesalers who produce knockoffs. Price is another tip-off. An elaborate mask is more likely to cost $3,000 than $300. Another indicator is the choice of materials; most soapstone carvings are not made in Alaska. Even less expensive craftwork should bear the name of the person who made it, and the shop owner should be able to tell you how he or she acquired the item.

The **Alaska State Council on the Arts** (✆ **907/269-6610**) authenticates Native arts and crafts with a **silver hand** label, which assures you it was made by the hands of an Alaska Native with Alaskan materials. But the program isn't universally used, so the absence of the label doesn't mean the work definitely isn't authentic. Other labels aren't worth much: An item could say **alaska made** even if only insignificant assembly work happened here. Of course, in Bush Alaska and in some urban shops, you can buy authentic work directly from craftspeople. Buying in Native-owned co-ops is also safe.

Another program covers any item made within the state, both Native and non-Native. The logo of a mother bear and cub (www.madeinalaska.org/mia) indicates that a state contractor has determined that the product was made in Alaska, when possible with Alaskan materials. Non-Natives produce Alaskan crafts of ceramics, wood, or fabric, but not plastic—if it's plastic, it probably wasn't made here. Again, price is an indicator: As with anywhere else in the United States, the cheapest products come from Asia.

June 15 or as early as August 15. Traveling in the winter is a whole different experience, but certainly saves a lot of money—where hotels are open, you'll find their rates typically running half of their high-season levels. For other considerations on off-season and shoulder-season travel, see "When to Go," later in this chapter.

Carrying your money need not be a problem, regardless of your style of travel; those from the United States don't need to make any adjustments in their usual habits. Even Bush hub communities now have ATMs. The only places that don't usually have ATMs these days are remote outdoor destinations such as lodges or parks and tiny Native villages. In the "Fast Facts" section for each town in this book, I'll tell you where to find an ATM, or if you should get cash before going.

Every business you'd expect to take credit, charge, or debit cards at home will accept them here. Even bed-and-breakfasts and greasy-spoon diners usually take cards now. Few businesses of any kind will take an out-of-state personal check. Traveler's checks are good just about anywhere, but there's no longer any reason to go through the hassle and expense.

4 When to Go

CLIMATE & SEASONS

The weather in Alaska can be extreme and unpredictable. The state is the first to get whatever Arctic Siberia or the void of the North Pacific have to throw at North America. The extremes of recorded temperatures are a high of 100°F (38°C) and low of –80°F (–62°C). At any time of year your vacation could be enlivened by weeks of unbroken sunny weather or weighed down by weeks of unbroken rain. All you can do is play the averages, hope for the best, and, if you do get bad weather, get out and have fun anyway—that's what Alaskans do. A statistical summary of weather probabilities in various Alaska places is found below in "Alaska's Climate, by Months & Regions." I've summarized the best visitor season in each destination in "Alaska By The Numbers," earlier in the chapter.

Alaska's Climate, by Months & Regions

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Anchorage: Southcentral Alaska												
Average high**	21/-6	26/-3	33/1	44/7	55/13	62/17	65/18	63/17	55/13	40/4	28/-2	22/-6
Average low**	8/-13	11/-12	17/-8	29/-2	39/4	47/8	51/11	49/9	41/5	28/-2	16/-9	10/-12
Hours of light*	6:53	9:41	12:22	15:20	18:00	19:22	18:00	15:15	12:19	9:29	6:46	5:27
Sunny days†	12	10	13	12	11	10	9	9	9	10	10	10
Rainy or snowy days	8	8	8	6	7	8	11	13	14	12	10	11
Precipitation‡	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.7	1.0	1.9	2.7	2.6	1.9	1.1	1.1
Barrow: Arctic Alaska												
Average high**	8/-13	-12/-24	-8/-22	6/-14	25/-4	39/4	46/8	43/6	34/1	20/-7	5/-15	-6/-21
Average low**	-20/-29	-24/-31	-21/-29	-8/-22	15/-9	30/-1	34/1	34/1	27/-3	10/-12	-6/-21	-17/-27
Hours of light*	0:00	8:05	12:33	17:43	24:00	24:00	24:00	17:34	12:30	7:46	0:00	0:00
Sunny days†	7	18	21	18	8	9	11	5	4	6	8	4
Rainy or snowy days	4	4	4	4	4	5	9	11	11	11	6	5
Precipitation‡	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.9	1.0	0.6	0.5	0.2	0.2

Cold Bay: Aleutian Archipelago

Average high**	33/1	32/1	35/2	38/3	45/7	50/10	55/13	56/13	52/11	44/7	39/4	35/2
Average low**	24/-4	23/-5	25/-4	29/-2	35/2	41/5	46/8	47/8	43/6	35/2	30/-1	27/-3
Hours of light*	8:05	10:10	12:17	14:36	16:32	17:25	16:33	14:34	12:17	10:04	8:01	7:08
Sunny days†	8	6	8	4	3	3	3	2	4	6	6	7
Rainy or snowy days	19	17	18	16	17	16	17	20	21	23	22	21
Precipitation‡	2.8	2.5	2.3	2.0	2.5	2.3	2.4	3.7	4.3	4.2	4.2	3.3

Fairbanks: Interior Alaska

Average high**	-2/-18	8/-13	24/-4	42/6	60/16	71/22	73/23	66/19	55/13	32/0	11/-12	1/-17
Average low**	-19/-28	-15/-26	-2/-19	20/-7	38/3	52/11	52/11	47/8	36/2	17/-8	-5/-21	-16/-27
Hours of light*	5:46	9:14	12:22	15:54	19:22	21:48	19:26	15:52	12:24	9:04	5:39	3:43
Sunny days†	15	14	17	14	16	13	12	10	10	9	12	12
Rainy or snowy days	8	7	6	5	7	11	12	12	10	11	11	9
Precipitation‡	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.6	1.4	1.8	1.8	1.1	0.8	0.7	0.8

Juneau: Southeast Alaska

Average high**	29/-2	34/1	39/4	48/9	55/13	62/17	64/18	63/17	56/13	47/8	37/3	32/0
Average low**	18/-8	23/-5	27/-3	32/0	39/4	45/7	48/9	48/9	43/6	37/3	28/-2	23/-5
Hours of light*	7:31	9:55	12:18	14:55	17:11	18:17	17:13	14:54	12:20	9:49	7:27	6:22
Sunny days†	8	7	7	8	8	8	8	9	6	4	6	5
Rainy or snowy days	18	17	18	17	17	15	17	17	20	24	20	21
Precipitation‡	4.3	3.9	3.5	2.9	3.5	3.1	4.2	5.3	7.2	7.8	5.4	5.1

Valdez: Prince William Sound

Average high**	27/-3	30/-1	37/3	45/7	53/12	60/16	63/17	61/16	54/12	43/6	33/1	29/-2
Average low**	18/-8	19/-7	24/-4	31/-1	39/4	45/7	48/9	46/8	41/5	33/1	23/-5	19/-7
Hours of light*	6:54	9:41	12:22	15:19	17:58	19:20	17:57	15:14	12:20	9:30	6:48	5:29
Sunny days†	9	9	11	11	9	8	8	10	8	8	10	7
Rainy or snowy days	17	14	16	14	17	15	17	17	20	20	16	18
Precipitation‡	5.7	5.5	4.7	3.2	3.2	2.8	3.6	6.5	9.3	7.9	5.7	7.6

*Hours of light is sunrise to sunset on the 21st day of each month.

**All temperatures are given in degrees Fahrenheit first, with degrees Celsius after the slash.

†Sunny days include the average observed clear and partly cloudy days per month.

‡Precipitation is the average water equivalent of rain or snow.

JUNE, JULY & AUGUST Summer in Alaska is a miraculous time, when the sun refuses to set, the salmon run upriver, and people are energized by limitless daylight. The sun dips below the horizon in Anchorage for only about 4 hours on June 21, the longest day of the year, and the sky is light all night. The state fills with people coming to visit and to work in the seasonal fishing, timber, and construction industries. Weather gets warmer, although how warm depends on where you go (see the chart above). June is the driest of the summer months, July the warmest, and August generally the rainiest month of the brief summer, but warmer than June. In most respects, June is the best summer month to make a visit, but it does have some drawbacks to consider: In the Arctic, snow can linger until mid-June; in Southcentral Alaska, trails at high elevations or in the shade may be

too muddy or snowy; and not all activities or facilities at Denali National Park open until late June. It's also the worst time for mosquitoes.

Summer is also the season of high prices. Most operators in the visitor industry have only these 90 days to make their year's income, and they charge whatever the market will bear. July is the absolute peak of the tourist season, when you must book well ahead and when crowds are most prevalent. (Of course, crowding depends on where you are. With a population density of roughly one person per square mile, Alaska is never *really* crowded.) Before June 15 and after August 15, the season is not at its peak, providing occasional bargains and more elbowroom, with the real off-season prices at most places showing up before Memorial Day and after Labor Day. But the length and intensity of the visitor season varies widely in different areas: In cruise-ship ports, it's busy from chilly early May into stormy October.

MAY & SEPTEMBER More and more visitors are coming to Alaska during these "shoulder months" to take advantage of the lower prices, reduced crowds, and special beauty.

May is the drier of the two months and can be as warm as summer if you're lucky, but as you travel farther north and earlier in the month, your chances of finding cold, mud, and even snow increase. In Alaska, there is no spring—the melt of snow and resultant seas of mud are called **breakup.** Flowers show up with the start of summer. Many outdoor activities aren't possible during breakup, which can extend well into May. Except for those in cruise-ship towns, most tourist-oriented activities and facilities are still closed before May 15, and a few don't open until Memorial Day or June 1. Where visitor facilities are open, they often have significantly lower prices. Also, the first visitors of the year usually receive an especially warm welcome. The very earliest salmon runs start in May, but for a fishing-oriented trip it's better to come later in the summer. Cruise ships begin calling May 1, and the towns they visit swing into action when they arrive.

Sometime between late August and mid-September, weather patterns change, bringing clouds, frequent rainstorms, and cooling weather, and signaling the trees and tundra to turn bright, vivid colors. For a week or two (what week it is depends on your latitude), the bright yellow birches of the boreal forest and the rich red of the heathery tundra make September the loveliest time of year. But the rain and the nip in the air, similar to late October or November in New England, mean you'll likely have to bundle up; and September is among the wettest months of the year. Most tourist-oriented businesses stay open, with lower prices, till September 15, except in the Arctic. After September 15, it's potluck. Some areas close up tight, but the silver salmon fishing hits prime time on the Kenai Peninsula, and the season there stays active until the end of the month. A lucky visitor can come in September and hit a month of crisp, sunny, perfect weather, and have the state relatively to him- or herself. Or, it can be cold and rainy all month. Cruise ships continue to ply the Inside Passage well into October, while the sky dumps torrential rains: Ketchikan averages 22 inches and 24 rainy days in October.

OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, APRIL I always love Alaska, but I love it least during these transition months between winter and summer. From Southcentral Alaska northward, snow and ice come sometime in October; in Southeast Alaska, it is the month of cold, unending rain. Winter starts in November, but you can't count on it. April is a month of waiting, as winter

sports come to an end and summer activities are blocked by melt and mud. In-town activities are down in these months, too; with few visitors, many facilities are closed.

DECEMBER THROUGH MARCH Winter is the whole point of Alaska. For sightseeing, the scenery is at its best (although there are far fewer wildlife viewing opportunities). This is the time to see the aurora borealis. Communities get busy with activities such as sled dog and snow machine races, theater, music and other performing arts, ice carving competitions and winter carnivals, and all the rest of the real local culture that takes a break in the summer, when most visitors come. If you enjoy winter and its outdoor activities, an Alaska visit is paradise, with superb downhill, cross-country, and backcountry skiing; snowshoeing; snowmobiling; dog mushing; ice skating—anything that can be done on snow and ice.

By far the best time to come is late winter, from February 1 through mid-March, when the sun is up longer and winter activities hit their peak. Anchorage's Fur Rendezvous is in February, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race is in March. Visiting in late March could mean thin snow at lower elevations for cross-country skiing, but downhill skiing and skiing at backcountry locations keep going strong (at Alyeska Resort, south of Anchorage, some skiing goes on through Memorial Day).

If you come in winter, you sacrifice some popular Alaska experiences. Some tourism-oriented towns such as Skagway close down almost completely. In places on the ocean, most activities and attractions are closed for the season, but services remain open for business travelers. Inland, where winter sports are better, there is more to do. Hotel prices are often less than half of what you'd pay in the high season. Quite luxurious rooms sometimes go for the cost of a budget motel.

WHAT TO WEAR

You'll find little use for a tie or any formal attire anywhere in Alaska, but you do need to prepare for broad swings in weather.

SUMMER You're not going to the South Pole, and you don't need a down parka or winter boots weighing down your luggage. But you do need to be ready for a variety of weather, from sunny, 80°F (27°C) days to windy, rainy 50°F (10°C) outings on the water. The way Alaskans prepare for such a range is with layers. The content of the layers depends on what you'll be doing, but everyone should bring at least this: warm-weather clothes, heavy long-sleeved shirts and pants, a wool sweater or fleece equivalent, a warm jacket, and a waterproof raincoat and rain pants. Gloves and wool hats are a good idea, too, especially for boating trips. If you'll be camping, add synthetic thermal long underwear and wool socks and make your jacket thick synthetic fleece. Combining these items, you'll be ready for any summer conditions. For hiking, bring sturdy shoes or cross trainers.

WINTER You can be warm and comfortable no matter how cold it is. Once you know how to dress, winter is not a time of suffering, and the world of snow opens up to you. First, what not to wear: People don't wear heavy Arctic gear in town, even in the Arctic. To make the dash from car to heated building, all you need is a greatcoat, sweater, hat, gloves, and wool socks. For outdoor pursuits, what to wear depends on how active you will be. The key to warmth and safety during vigorous outdoor activities is to wear layers of breathable clothing that will stay warm when wet, such as wool or synthetics. With the following layers, you can be ready for temperatures well below zero (at which point you won't want to ski or

Moments Only-in-Alaska Events

By the end of the winter, sports in Alaska can get extreme. The **Tesoro Arctic Man Ski & Sno-Go Classic** (✆ **907/456-2626;** www.arcticman.com) sounds insane just in the description: a skier goes straight down a steep 1,700-foot slope, then grabs a rope to be pulled up the next slope by a snow machine going as fast as 88 mph, then skis down the next, 1,200-foot slope. Thousands of spectators build a hard-partying city of RVs and snow machines in the remote, treeless hills of the Alaska Range near Summit Lake on the Richardson Highway. The event will be held from April 7 to 11, 2004.

Muscle-powered sports also have big late winter events, including the 50km **Tour of Anchorage** Nordic ski race (✆ **907/276-7609;** www.tourofanchorage.com), which winds its way from one side of the city to the other, on March 7, 2004. With more than 1,700 racers, it has become a major community happening, drawing elite skiers, kids, and grandmothers. Other towns around Alaska have started their own ski marathons during the following weeks.

And don't forget the various human-powered wilderness races that cross Alaska, winter and summer. The most famous of these was the **Iditasport,** now defunct, which gave competitors the option of walking, biking, or skiing over hundreds of miles of the same Iditarod Trail used by the 1,000-mile sled dog race. The **Iditarod Trail Invitational** (www.alaskaultrasport.com) carries on the tradition with common insane distances, tough conditions, and hardy people.

skate anyway): synthetic thermal long underwear, synthetic fleece pants and coat, wool sweater, wind-resistant pants and jacket, wool socks and hat, warm boots with liners or covers, and lined mittens. Remove layers for warmer temperatures. For more sedentary outdoor activities, such as watching the aurora or riding a snow machine or dog sled, you need warmer clothing. Likewise, drives on rural highways in winter require warm clothing in case of breakdowns. On guided trips or at cold weather resorts they'll tell you what to bring or provide or rent it to you. A full cold weather outfit includes synthetic thermal long underwear, the stoutest Sorel-style or Air Force bunny boots, insulated snow pants, a heavy down or fur parka with a hood, thick, insulated mittens (not gloves), a wool hat, a face-insulating mask, and ski goggles or quality sunglasses. You don't want any skin showing while riding a snow machine or standing in a strong wind in below-zero (Fahrenheit) temperatures. Such a get-up costs more than $500. You can buy what you need in Anchorage at **Army Navy Store,** at 320 W. 4th Ave. (✆ **907/279-2401**); or in Fairbanks at **Big Ray's Store,** at 507 2nd Ave. (✆ **907/452-3458**).

ALASKA CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Here are some of the biggest community events of the year in Alaska's cities and towns. Because of our deadlines, many of the dates are estimates. Don't plan a vacation around them without checking for up-to-date details. I haven't listed fishing derbies, which go on in almost every coastal town in the summer and are listed in the sections on each town.

February

The Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race (✆ **907/452-7954;** www.yukonquest.org). This sled dog race runs between Fairbanks and Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, trading the direction each year. Mushers say this rugged 1,000-mile race is even tougher than the Iditarod. Starts February 14, 2004, in Fairbanks.

The Anchorage Fur Rendezvous Winter Festival (✆ **907/274-1177;** www.furrondy.net), Anchorage. This is a huge, citywide winter celebration, with many community events, fireworks, craft fairs, snowshoe softball, dog sled rides, and other fun. The main event has always been the **World Champion Sled Dog Race,** a 3-day sprint event of about 25 miles per heat. In 2004, the Rondy's end will coincide with the start of the Iditarod (see directly below). February 20 to March 7, 2004.

March

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race (✆ **907/376-5155;** www.iditarod.com). This famed sled dog race starts with fanfare from **Anchorage** (it will be part of the winter festival in 2004). After the Anchorage ceremonial start, the teams are loaded into trucks for the **Iditarod Restart,** in **Wasilla,** which is the real beginning of the race. Here the historic gold rush trail becomes continuous for the dogs' 1,000-mile run to Nome. The event enlivens Wasilla at the end of a long winter. The finish in Nome is the biggest event of the year in the Arctic, drawing world media attention and turning Nome into a huge party for a few days (they even play golf out on the sea ice). The race solicits volunteers to help, which is a much better way to experience it than just watching. See p. 425 for more details on the Iditarod. In 2004 the race starts March 6.

The Nenana Ice Classic (✆ **907/832-5446;** www.nenanaakiceclassic.com), Nenana. This event starts with Tripod Days, when a "four-legged tripod" that will mark the breakup of ice on the Tanana River is erected, ushering in a weekend celebration of dance performances, dog mushing, and other activities. The ticket buyer who guesses the minute the tripod will move in response to the ice breakup wins the jackpot, typically over $300,000. Tripod Days are held the first weekend in March.

The World Ice Art Championships (✆ **907/451-8250;** www.icealaska.com), Fairbanks. Carvers from all over the world sculpt immense chunks of clear ice cut from a Fairbanks pond. Among ice carvers, Fairbanks's ice is famous for its clarity and the great size of the chunks. Some spectacular ice sculptures stand as tall as a two-story building. Carving will be March 4 to 5 and 8 to 14 with the best viewing from March 14 to 21, 2004.

April

The Alaska Folk Festival (✆ **907/463-3316;** www.alaskafolkfestival.org), Juneau. This is Juneau's community-wide celebration, drawing musicians, whether on the bill or not, from all over the state. April 12 to 18, 2004.

May

Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival (✆ **907/424-7260;** www.cordovachamber.com), Cordova. This festival revolves around the coming of dizzying swarms of millions of shorebirds that use the delta and beaches near the town as a migratory stopover in early May. The whole community gets involved

to host bird-watchers and put on a schedule of educational and outdoor activities for 3 days. May 7 to 9, 2004.

The Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival, (✆ **907/235-7740;** homeralaska.org/shorebird.htm), Homer. Held in early May, this festival includes guided bird-watching hikes and boat excursions, natural-history workshops, art shows, performances, a wooden boat festival, and other events. May 6 to 9, 2004.

Little Norway Festival, (✆ **907/772-4636;** www.petersburg.org/visitors/events.html), Petersburg. This festival celebrates the May 17, 1814, declaration of the independence of Norway from Sweden. The town has several days of community events. The festival takes place on the third full weekend in May.

Koniag's Kodiak Crab Festival (✆ **907/486-5557;** www.kodiak.org/crabfest.html), Kodiak. Lasting 5 days over Memorial Day weekend, this is the town's biggest event of the year and includes many fun events, the solemn blessing of the fleet, and a memorial service for lost fishermen. May 27-31, 2004.

June

The Sitka Summer Music Festival (✆ **907/747-6774;** www.sitkamusicfestival.org), Sitka. This chamber music series that began in 1972 draws musicians from all over the world throughout most of June. Performances take place Tuesdays and Fridays, and other events are held throughout the month. June 5-26, 2004.

Midnight Sun Baseball Game, Fairbanks. A summer-solstice event: The local semipro baseball team, the Fairbanks Goldpanners (✆ **907/451-0095;** www.goldpanners.com) plays a game without artificial lights beginning at 10:30pm. Around June 21.

Midnight Sun Festival, Nome. Nome celebrates the summer solstice, when the village gets more than 22 hours of direct sunlight, with a parade, softball tournament, raft race, and polar bear swim (when sea ice permits). Call ✆ **907/443-5535** for information. June 21.

The Last Frontier Theater Conference (✆ **907/834-1612;** www.uaa.alaska.edu/pwscc/theatre/theatere_conference.html), Valdez. This conference brings playwrights and directors to the community for seminars and performances in June. Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and other famous writers have met the public here in an intimate setting. Call for 2004 dates.

July

Independence Day. Most of the small towns in Alaska make a big deal of the Fourth of July. Seward always has a huge celebration, exploding with visitors, primarily from Anchorage. Besides the parade and many small-town festivities, the main attraction is the **Mount Marathon Race,** which goes from the middle of town straight up rocky Mount Marathon to its 3,022-foot peak and down again. **Seldovia, Ketchikan, Skagway,** and **Juneau** also have exceptional Fourth of July events. See the individual town sections for more information.

August

The Southeast Alaska State Fair and Bald Eagle Music Festival (✆ **907/766-2476**), Haines. Held for 4 days in mid-August, this is a regional small-town get-together, with livestock, cooking, a logging show, a parade, music, and other entertainment. Usually begins on the second Wednesday in August, but call to confirm.

The Alaska State Fair (✆ **907/745-4827;** www.akstatefair.org), Palmer.

This is the region's biggest event of the year. It's a typical state fair, except for the huge vegetables. The good soil and long Valley days produce cabbages the size of beanbag chairs. A mere beach ball–size cabbage wouldn't even make it into competition. Held the 12 days before Labor Day, August 26 to September 6, 2004.

October

Alaska Day Festival (✆ **907/747-3512**), Sitka. Alaska Day, commemorating the Alaska purchase on October 18, 1867, is a big deal in this former Russian and U.S. territorial capital city.

November

Sitka WhaleFest (✆ **907/747-5940;** www.sitkawhalefest.org), Sitka. Over a weekend in early November, during the fall and early winter period when humpback whales congregate in Sitka Sound, there are workshops, whale-watching tours, a concert, and other community events. The event coordinates with the Alaska Bald Eagle Festival (discussed directly below). Call for 2004 dates.

The Alaska Bald Eagle Festival (✆ **907/766-2202;** www.baldeaglefest.org), Haines. Seminars and special events mark an annual congregation of 3,000 eagles near Haines. It's timed to allow visitors to also attend the WhaleFest in Sitka (see above).

Carrs/Safeway Great Alaska Shootout (✆ **907/786-1293;** www.goseawolves.com/shootout), Anchorage. The University of Alaska Seawolves hosts a roster of the nation's top-ranked NCAA Division I men's and women's basketball teams at the Sullivan Arena. Thanksgiving weekend.

5 Travel Insurance

Check your existing insurance policies and credit-card coverage before you buy travel insurance. You may already be covered for lost luggage, cancelled tickets, or medical expenses. The cost of travel insurance varies widely, depending on the cost and length of your trip, your age, health, and the type of trip you're taking.

There are three kinds of travel insurance: for **trip cancellation or interruption,** for **medical costs,** and **lost-luggage.** Insurance for trip cancellation or interruption is a must if you have paid the large cash deposits demanded by many Alaska outfitters, fishing guides, wilderness lodges, package tour operators, and cruise companies. A premium of 8% of the cost of the trip is well worth the protection against the uncertainty of Alaska weather (most deposits are lost in case of weather delays or cancellations) or unexpected crises that might prevent you from being able to depart as planned. Interruption insurance will even get you home under covered circumstances. Read the policy carefully to find out when you are covered. Think twice before buying insurance directly from the operator holding your deposit: what if they go out of business? Also, major third-party insurers such as those listed below offer policy holders access to 24-hour phone assistance to help handle crises.

Medical insurance for travelers from outside the United States is a worthwhile investment, too, but travelers from the U.S. likely are already covered under their regular health insurance. You want extra insurance, however, for astronomically expensive emergency medical transportation if you will spend much time on your own in remote areas; check the coverage offered by your credit cards or buy a policy just for the trip.

If you require additional medical insurance, try **MEDEX International** (✆ **800/527-0218** or 410/453-6300; www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (✆ **800/821-2828;** www.travelassistance.com; for general information on services, call the company's **Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc.,** at ✆ **800/777-8710**).

Insurance on baggage is rarely advantageous. Your baggage is probably covered under your homeowners' policy or credit card benefits. Besides, if the airline loses your bags, they are usually responsible for up to $2,500 per passenger on domestic flights or, on international flights, $9.07 per pound, up to approximately $635 per checked bag. Consider insurance only if your baggage is worth more than that and is not covered under your existing policies; then, you can add it to your general travel policy. In any event, retain a bill of sale or other proof of the value of any expensive items in your baggage. Some credit- and charge-card companies may also insure you against airplane crashes and other travel accidents if you buy tickets with their cards.

Various companies sell travel insurance; you can conveniently buy online. Reputable firms include: **Access America** (✆ 866/807-3982; www.accessamerica.com); **Travel Guard International** (✆ 800/826-4919; www.travelguard.com); **Travel Insured International** (✆ 800/243-3174; www.travelinsured.com); and **Travelex Insurance Services** (✆ 888/457-4602; www.travelex-insurance.com).

But the best way to get a good price on this kind of insurance is to go to **www.insure.com** and click on the "Travel" tab. The site allows travelers to get instant quotes from many insurance companies at once by providing the dates of the trip, amount and type of coverage, and ages of the travelers.

With **rental cars** you face a whole different set of insurance considerations. Most of these are the same as renting a car anywhere, and a few simple preparations will get you through. Before you leave home, check your own auto policy for your liability coverage with a rented car (bringing proof of insurance along is a good idea), and check with your credit card issuer for coverage for damage to a rented car (make sure to use that card when you rent, too). Chances are, you are already covered and don't need to buy the unreasonably priced insurance offered by the rental car company when you rent, but if you are not covered, do buy it: the potential costs you face are even larger than having a crash at home, including the rental company's lost business.

One special Alaska consideration: ask the reservation agent or check the rental contract for rules about driving on unpaved roads or other restrictions. I have listed a company that rents for unpaved highways in the Fairbanks section in Chapter 9, but very few others allow it. Cars do get damaged on these roads, and you may be setting yourself up for a real headache if you violate the rental contract and your car is damaged.

6 Health & Safety

STAYING HEALTHY

GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

You'll find modern, full-service hospitals in each of Alaska's larger cities, and even in some small towns that act as regional centers. There's some kind of clinic even in the smallest towns, although they often are staffed by physicians' assistants rather than medical doctors. I've listed the address and phone numbers for medical facilities

in each destination under "Fast Facts." Call those numbers, too, for referrals to a dentist or other health professional. In an emergency, call ✆ **911.**

WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET SICK AWAY FROM HOME

In most cases, your existing health plan will provide the coverage you need. But double-check; you may want to buy **travel medical insurance** instead. (See the section on insurance, above.) Bring your insurance ID card with you when you travel.

If you suffer from a chronic illness, consult your doctor before your departure. For conditions like epilepsy, diabetes, or heart problems, wear a **Medic Alert Identification Tag** (✆ **800/825-3785;** www.medicalert.org), which will immediately alert doctors to your condition and give them access to your records through Medic Alert's 24-hour hotline.

Pack **prescription medications** in your carry-on luggage, and carry prescription medications in their original containers, with pharmacy labels—otherwise they won't make it through airport security. Also bring along copies of your prescriptions in case you lose your pills or run out. Don't forget an extra pair of contact lenses or prescription glasses.

OUTDOORS HEALTH & SAFETY

Here are a few basic health and safety issues to be aware of in Alaska's outdoors. Treat this list as a starting point to build your awareness: don't go into the backcountry without a professional guide unless you have a good medical kit, basic knowledge about how to use it, and a book giving detailed advice for emergencies. We carry *Wilderness Medicine* by Robert W. Forgey, M.D. (Globe Pequot Press; $15).

AVALANCHE When snow sliding down a mountain comes to a stop, it hardens to a consistency that only metal tools can dig through. Avalanche survivors describe the terror of being helplessly locked in this unyielding material hoping for rescue. Understandably, survivors are in the minority. If a victim isn't found quickly (well before emergency personnel can arrive at a remote slope) they do not survive. No one should go into the snowy backcountry without training in avalanche avoidance and recovery equipment, including locator beacons, probes and shovels. Go with a guide if you are unsure. An avalanche hotline is available for the Chugach National Forest near Anchorage: ✆ **907/754-2369** or www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach/glacier/snow.html.

BEARS & OTHER WILDLIFE Being eaten by a bear is probably the least likely way for your vacation to end. Deaths from dog bites are much more common, for example. But it's still wise to be prepared for bears and to know how to avoid being trampled by moose, which can be fatal.

The first rule of defense is simple: *Don't attract bears.* All food and trash must be kept in airtight containers when you're camping. When car camping, the trunk of the vehicle will do. When backpacking, you can protect your food by hanging it from a long tree branch or, above tree line, storing it in a bear-resistant canister (for rent or loan in Anchorage or at Denali or Wrangell-St. Elias National Parks; see chapters 8 and 9). Be careful not to spread food odors when you're cooking and cleaning up. Never keep food, pungent items, or clothing that smells like fish in your tent. Clean fish away from your campsite.

When walking through brush or thick trees, make lots of noise to avoid surprising a bear or moose. Bells that you can hang on your belt are for sale at sporting-goods shops, or you can sing or carry on loud conversation.

You might not scare a bear away this way, but at least you won't startle it.

At all costs, avoid coming between a bear and its cubs or a bear and food (if a bear wants the fish you just caught, that's his food too). Moose also are strongly defensive of their young and can attack if they feel you're getting too close.

If you see a bear, stop, wave your arms, make noise, and, if you're with others, group together so you look larger to the bear. Don't run, tempting the bear to chase; depart by slowly backing away, at an angle if possible. If the bear follows, stop. Once in a great while, the bear may bluff a charge; even less often, it may attack. If you're attacked, fall and play dead, rolling into a ball facedown with your hands behind your neck. The bear should lose interest. In extremely rare instances, a bear may not lose interest, because it's planning to make a meal of you. If this happens, fight back for all you're worth.

Many Alaskans carry a gun for protection in bear country, but that's not practical for visitors. A good alternative is a bear-deterrent spray. These are canisters that you shoot to produce a burning fog of capsaicin pepper between you and a threatening bear. While less effective than a gun, especially in wind or rain, the sprays are legal in national parks and OK to carry across the Canadian border—two big advantages over firearms. (Note, however, that you *cannot* bring bear-deterrent spray in your carry-on luggage.) A can costs about $40 at sporting-goods stores, or order direct from **Counter Assault** (✆ **800/695-3394;** www.counterassault.com). Be sure to get a holster, too, as the spray is of no use buried in your backpack.

If you do take a gun, it had better be a big one, such as a .300-Magnum rifle or 12-gauge shotgun loaded with rifled slugs. No handgun is big enough for a large bear.

BOATING SAFETY Because of the cool temperatures, unpredictable weather, and cold water, going out on the ocean or floating a fast river is more hazardous in Alaska than in most other places, and you should go only with an experienced, licensed operator unless you really know what you're doing. There's little margin for error if you fall into the water or capsize—you have only minutes to get out and get warm before hypothermia and death. A life jacket will keep you afloat, but it won't keep you alive in 40°F (4°C) water. If you're sea kayaking or canoeing, stay close to shore and take plastic dry bags (also called float bags) with everything you need to quickly warm a person who gets wet (see "Hypothermia," below).

HYPOTHERMIA A potentially fatal lowering of core body temperature can sneak up on you. It's most dangerous when you don't realize how cold you are, perhaps in 50°F (10°C) weather on a damp mountain hike or a rainy boating trip. Dress in material (whether wool or synthetic) that keeps its warmth when wet, choosing layers to avoid chilling perspiration. (See "What to Wear," earlier in this chapter.) Eating well and avoiding exhaustion are also important. Among the symptoms of hypothermia are cold extremities, being uncommunicative, displaying poor judgment or coordination, and sleepiness. A shivering victim still has the ability to warm up if better dressed; a lack of shivering means the body has gone beyond that point and warmth must be added from the outside or from warm drinks. Get indoors, force hot liquids into the victim (except if the victim is not fully conscious, because an unresponsive patient could choke on liquids), and, if shelter is unavailable, apply body heat from another person, skin on skin, in a sleeping bag.

INSECT BITES The good news is that Alaska has no snakes or poisonous spiders. The bad news is that Alaska makes up for it with mosquitoes and other biting insects. West Nile virus has not arrived here at this writing, so mosquitoes are not dangerous, but they can ruin a trip. Effective insect repellent is a necessity, as is having a place where you can get away from them. Hikers in the Interior, where mosquitoes are worst, sometimes use head nets. Mosquitoes can bite through light fabric, which is why people in the Bush wear heavy Carhart pants and jackets (made of canvas) even on the hottest days. Benadryl tablets or other antihistamines will often relieve swelling caused by mosquito bites.

DANGEROUS PLANTS Two shrubs common in Alaska can cause skin irritation, but there is nothing here that's as bad as poison ivy or poison oak. **Pushki,** also called cow parsnip, is a large-leafed plant growing primarily in open areas, up to shoulder height by late summer, with white flowers. The celerylike stalks break easily, and the sap has the quality of intensifying the burning power of the sun on skin. Wash it off quickly to avoid a rash. **Devil's Club,** a more obviously dangerous plant, grows on steep slopes and has ferocious spines that can pierce through clothing. Also, don't eat anything you can't positively identify, as there are deadly poisonous mushrooms and plants.

GETTING LOST Even experienced people do it. Hiking off trail or voyaging in a canoe, raft or kayak, you quickly find that one mountain looks a lot like another. If you are unsure of your navigational skills, maps, or equipment, don't go without a guide. Beyond those basics, the most important safety precautions are to go with another person and to make sure someone knows where you are and when you will be back. Leave a trip plan with a person who will call rescuers if you don't return on time. At the very least, leave a note in your car indicating where you are bound. Cell phones sometimes work near towns and some highways, but not reliably, and there is no coverage beyond populated areas. Nowadays, it is possible to rent an Iridium satellite phone that will work outdoors anywhere on earth from **RoadPost** (✆ **888/290-1606** or 905/272-5665, www.roadpost.com), starting at $69 a week plus $1.49 a minute; cheap if it saves your life, but not as good an option as knowing where you are and knowing what you are doing.

RIVER CROSSINGS Hiking in Alaska's backcountry often requires crossing rivers without bridges. Use great caution: It's easy to get in trouble. Often, the water is glacial melt, barely above freezing and heavy with silt that makes it opaque. The silt can fill your pockets and drag you down. If in doubt, don't do it. If you do decide to cross, unbuckle your pack, keep your shoes on, face upstream, use a heavy walking stick if possible, and rig a safety line. Children should go in the eddy behind a larger person, or be carried.

SHELLFISH Don't eat mussels, clams, or scallops you pick or dig from the seashore unless you know they're safe. The **Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation** maintains a hotline and website (✆ **800/731-1312;** www.state.ak.us/dec/deh/seafood/psp), which explains the risks and lists beaches that have been tested and approved. These mostly are on Kachemak Bay in small inlets around oyster farms. Most of Alaska's remote beaches are not tested and so are not safe. The risk is paralytic shellfish poisoning, a potentially fatal malady caused by a naturally occurring toxin. It causes total paralysis that includes

your respiratory system. A victim may be kept alive with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until medical help is obtained.

SWIMMING Ask about lake water before swimming in it. In recent years, some lakes have been infested with a bug that causes an itchy rash.

WATER Unpurified river or lake water may not be safe to drink. Handheld filters available from sporting-goods stores for around $75 are the most practical way of dealing with the problem. Iodine kits and boiling also work. The danger is a protozoan cyst called *Giardia lamblia,* which causes diarrhea and has been spread to thousands of water bodies all over the United States by dog feces. It may not show up until a couple of weeks after exposure and could become chronic. If symptoms show up after you get home, tell your doctor you may have been exposed so that you can get tested and cured.

DRIVING SAFETY

ROAD REPORTS The Alaska Department of Transportation has centralized highway reports with a handy toll-free phone and Internet system (✆ **511,** http://511.alaska.gov). Even in dry summer conditions, it is wise to make the call or check the site before heading on an inter-city drive, because road construction can cause long delays—at times, they will close a major highway overnight for work. In winter, checking on conditions is a basic safety essential. Following are more seasonal tips.

SUMMER Keep your headlights on all the time for safety on the highway. Drivers are required to pull over at the next pull-out whenever five or more cars are trailing them on a two-lane highway, regardless of how fast they're going. This saves the lives of people who otherwise will try to pass. When passing a truck going the other way on a gravel highway, slow down or stop and pull as far as possible to the side of the road to avoid losing your windshield to a flying rock. Always think about the path of rocks you're kicking up toward others' vehicles. Make sure you've got a good, full-size spare tire and jack if you're driving a gravel highway. For remote driving, bring along a first-aid kit, emergency food, a towrope, and jumper cables, and keep your gas tank full.

WINTER Drivers on Alaska's highways in winter should be prepared for cold-weather emergencies far from help. Take all the items listed for rural summer driving, plus a flashlight, matches and materials to light a fire, chains, a shovel, and an ice scraper. A camp stove to make hot beverages is also a good idea. If you're driving a remote highway (such as the Alaska Hwy.) between December and March, take along gear adequate to keep you safe from the cold even if you have to wait overnight with a dead car at –40°F/–40°C (see "What to Wear," earlier in this chapter, and add blankets and sleeping bags). Never drive a road marked "Closed" or "Unmaintained in Winter." Even on maintained rural roads, other vehicles rarely come by. All Alaska roads are icy all winter. Studded tires are a necessity—nonstudded snow tires or so-called "all-weather" tires aren't adequate. Also, never leave your car's engine stopped for more than 4 hours in temperatures of –10°F (–23°C) or colder. Alaskans generally have electrical head-bolt heaters installed to keep the engine warm overnight; you'll find electrical outlets everywhere in cold, Interior Alaska areas.

STAYING SAFE

Sadly, crime rates are not low in Alaska's larger cities, although muggings are rare. Take the normal precautions you'd take at home. You're safe in daylight hours anywhere tourists commonly go, less so late at night leaving a bar or walking in a lonely place.

Women need to be especially careful on their own, as Alaska has a disproportionately high rate of rape. Most women I know avoid walking by themselves at night, especially in wooded or out-of-the-way areas. The late-night sunlight can be deceiving—just because it's light out doesn't mean it's safe. Sexual assaults occur in towns big and small. Women should never hitchhike alone. If you are a victim of a crime, you can reach police almost anywhere by calling ✆ **911,** or, if it is not an emergency, by using the numbers listed under "Fast Facts" in each community section.

7 Escorted Tour or Do-It-Yourself Independent Travel?

Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to Alaska each year on escorted package tours, leaving virtually all their travel arrangements in the hands of a single company that takes responsibility for ushering them through the state for a single, lump-sum fee. Many others cut the apron strings and explore Alaska on their own, in the process discovering a more relaxed, spontaneous experience. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages, of course, and which way you choose to visit depends on how you value those pros and cons. Unfortunately, some people make the choice based on expectations that aren't valid, so it's important to know what you're getting into.

An escorted package tour provides security. You'll know in advance how much everything will cost, you don't have to worry about making hotel and ground-transportation reservations, you're guaranteed to see the highlights of each town you visit, and you'll have someone telling you what you're looking at. Often, a package price saves money over traveling at the same level of comfort independently. If there are weather delays or other travel problems, it's the tour company's problem, not yours. Everything happens on schedule, and you never have to touch your baggage other than to unpack when it magically shows up in your room. If you sometimes feel like you're a member of a herd on an escorted tour, you'll also meet new people, a big advantage if you're traveling on your own. Many passengers on these trips are retired, over age 65.

If you're short on time, escorted package tours make the most of it, as they often travel at an exhausting pace. Passengers get up early and cover a lot of ground, with sights and activities scheduled solidly through the day. Stops last only long enough to get a taste of what the sight is about, not to dig in and learn a whole lot about a place you're especially interested in. On an escorted trip, you'll meet few, if any, Alaska residents, since most tour companies hire college students from "Outside" (a term Alaskans use to refer to any place that's not in Alaska) to fill summer jobs. You'll stay in only the largest hotels and eat in the largest, tourist-oriented restaurants—no small, quaint places loaded with local character. For visiting wilderness, such as Denali National Park, the quick and superficial approach can, in my opinion, spoil the whole point of going to a destination that's about an experience, not just seeing a particular object or place.

Studies by Alaska tourism experts have found that many people choose escorted packages to avoid risks that don't really exist. Alaska may still be untamed, but that doesn't mean it's a dangerous or uncomfortable place to travel. Except for tiny Bush villages that you're unlikely to visit anyway, you'll come across standard American hotel room almost anywhere you go. The tourism infrastructure is well developed even in small towns—you're never far from help unless you want to be.

Tips For The 18-to-35 Crowd

Contiki Tours (✆ 888-CONTIKI; www.contiki.com) offers two excellent package tours of Alaska for 18- to 35-year-olds.

It's also possible for an independent traveler to obtain some of the predictability a package tour provides. You can reserve accommodations and activities and control your expenses by using a good travel agent experienced in Alaska travel. Some agencies even offer fixed-price itineraries that allow you to travel on your own (see "Independent Travel Planning," at the end of this section). But independent travelers never have the complete security of those on group tours. Once you're on the road, you'll be on your own to take care of the details, and weather delays and other cancellations can confound the best-laid plans. If you can't relax and enjoy a trip knowing that unforeseen difficulties could happen, then an escorted package tour is the way to go.

LARGE PACKAGE TOUR COMPANIES

Two major tour and cruise-ship companies dominate the Alaska package-tour market with "vertically integrated" operations that allow them to take care of everything you'll experience in Alaska with tight quality control. Each of the companies also offers tours as short as a couple of hours to independent travelers who want to combine their own exploring with a more structured experience. All can be booked through any travel agent. Other cruise lines also offer land tours, but typically only for their own passengers. If you will cruise to Alaska and want an escorted land tour, check for deals with your cruise line first.

Holland America Tours The Holland America cruise line is the giant of Alaska tourism. Holland America purchased other services to help build their business. Through Holland America, companies such as Gray Line and Westours transport visitors in buses, trains, and boats, and the Westmark hotel chain puts travelers up for the night. Today, the Alaska/Yukon operation employs more than 2,500 workers operating 184 buses, 13 railcars, and 2 day-boats. Most clients arrive in the state on one of the company's ships (see chapter 4), but even within Alaska, chances are good that a tour you sign up for will put you on a Gray Line coach and exclusively in Westmark hotels. The quality of the Westmark chain is inconsistent; most are described in the town sections of this book. Other than the classy Baranof in Juneau, they tend to have standard to small rooms with above average amenities. However, on a group tour, you don't spend much time in the room, as schedules are generally tightly planned and daily departures are early. You'll find a description of the company's railcars on the Anchorage-Denali-Fairbanks run in chapter 8. Gray Line coaches are first-rate, especially the several super-luxurious, extra-long vehicles that bend in the middle and have a lounge in the back. And the company goes more places than any other, with a catalog that covers just about anything in the state that could possibly be done with a group. They also have self-drive tours, wherein you drive an Avis rental car on a pre-set itinerary and stay at any of the company's accommodations. Some of the tour excursions—on the Yukon River between Dawson City and Eagle, for example—are entirely unique. Prices depend on a variety of factors, but in general, a tour of a week is about

$1,400 per person (the fee includes the rental car and each night's accommodations). You can start planning your trip by writing to 300 Elliot Ave. W, Seattle, WA 98119, calling ✆ 800/544-2206, or visiting www.graylineofalaska.com or www.hollandamerica.com.

Princess Cruises and Tours Princess Cruises recently sold out to Carnival Corp., the owner of Carnival Cruise Lines and Princess' primary competition, Holland America (see above). The new owners promised to continue to operate the Princess and Holland America independently, but it is unfortunate that these two fierce competitors will no longer to be trying to top each other. The Princess cruise line built its land-tour operation from the ground up, surpassing Holland America with the consistently outstanding quality of its smaller list of offerings. The five Princess hotels are all among Alaska's best. Two are near Denali National Park, and one each are in Fairbanks, in Cooper Landing (on the Kenai Peninsula), and in Copper Center, near Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. Princess operates its own coaches and has superb railcars on the Alaska Railroad route to Denali. Descriptions of each hostelry can be found in the appropriate chapter. Most people on the tours come to Alaska on a cruise ship, but tours are for sale separately, too. You can contact Princess by writing to 2815 2nd Ave., Suite 400, Seattle, WA 98121-1299, calling ✆ **800/426-0442,** or visiting www.princesslodges.com.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL PLANNING

With this guidebook, you can book everything yourself, but for a long trip it can get quite complicated to keep track of all the dates and deposits. If you're using a trusted travel agency to make trip arrangements, our reviews can help you make informed decisions. Read through the book, make your selections, and approach the agent with as detailed a plan as possible, derived from your own research. Then let the agent make the bookings you have chosen. Most agents who don't specialize in Alaska are aware of only the biggest attractions and best-marketed companies. Another option is to use a travel agency or trip-planner based in Alaska. They'll know much more about the place and can help you more in picking out what you want to do. I've listed a few below.

Unfortunately, there are precautions to take in using the agencies. They work on commission, which means they're being paid by the establishments you're buying from. A good agent will disregard the size of the commission and really look out for you, but I've encountered so many visitors on poorly planned itineraries that I feel the need to issue a warning. Some travel agents book visitors on trips to far-flung corners of the state in quick succession, so they wind up staying only briefly in expensive places and then zoom off somewhere else, all with little concern for the visitors' true interests. Your best defense is to do

Value For Coupon Clippers

A coupon book called **The Great Alaskan Tour Saver** (✆ **907/278-7600;** www.toursaver.com), which costs $100, is well worth the price if you plan on traveling as a couple, especially in the Southcentral region. Among more than 100 coupons, there are some freebies and many two-for-one deals on some of the best activities and tours. The savings are valuable enough to pay for the book with just a couple of uses.

enough research so you can actively participate in the planning.

Here I've gathered the names of some agencies that book Alaska trips. Expect to pay booking fees and to have the agent collect commissions from the businesses you use. My knowledge of these agencies is limited to contacting them as a journalist, so a mention here is no guarantee; however, I do remove agencies from the list when I receive justified complaints.

Alaska Bound This Michigan-based agency is the only one I know of in the Lower 48 that specializes in Alaska. It started as a cruise planner, working primarily with Holland America, but now plans many independent trips, too, charging $100 per person.

116 Cass St. Traverse City, MI 49684. ✆ **888/ALASKA-7** or 231/439-3000. www.alaskabound.com.

Alaska Private Lodgings This business started as a bed and breakfast booking service in Anchorage and then expanded to cover the whole state and to plan complete itineraries for travelers. Choose them if you like staying in B&Bs, cabins, apartments, and other unique and generally lower cost lodgings. The whole inventory is on the website.

P.O. Box 1307, Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **866/435-3873** or 907/235-3873. Fax 907/235-0518. www.alaskabandb.com.

Alaska Tour and Travel Operated by the same folks who operate the Park Connection shuttle between Denali and Kenai Fjords national parks, this agency covers the parks and points between, plus Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Fairbanks. The fancy website includes pre-set itineraries for independent travelers that they will customize without additional cost.

P.O. Box 221011, Anchorage, AK 99522. ✆ **800/208-0200**. www.alaskatravel.com.

All Ways Travel This is a traditional travel agency in downtown Anchorage with many years of experience in arranging Alaska trips. Fees depend on the effort expended and type of bookings you need.

302 G St., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/676-2946** or 907/276-3644. allways@alaska.net. www.alaskatripshop.com.

AskMatt Alaskan Adventures & Tours Matthew Lowe developed a knowledge base in his years staffing the tour desk at a high-end Anchorage hotel. His business still occupies the lobby, but now he puts together full custom itineraries, priding himself on tailoring trips for budget travelers as well as high rollers and charging no up-front fee.

4800 Spenard Rd., Anchorage, AK 99517-3236. ✆ **888/355-6288** or 907/677-1225. www.askmatt.com.

Fantasia Travel This agency, under the same ownership as CampAlaska Tours (mentioned later in this chapter) gladly puts clients in B&Bs and cabins, not just the high-priced hotels that most agents prefer to use. Sign up for notification of airfare sales by e-mail on their website.

290 N. Yenlo, L-2, Wasilla, AK 99654. ✆ **800/478-2622** or 907/376-2622. www.alaskaflights.com.

Sport Fishing Alaska Choose this company to plan a fishing vacation. The owners, Larry and Sheary Suiter, are former guides and float, charter, and air-taxi operators, and they know where the fish will be week to week. They can also book the balance of your trip at fun and interesting places. They charge a $95 upfront fee. (See "Fishing," later in this chapter.)

9310 Shorecrest Dr., Anchorage, AK 99502. ✆ **888/552-8674** or 907/344-8674. www.AlaskaTripPlanners.com.

Viking Travel An entrepreneur in the small Southeast Alaska town of

Petersburg built this travel agency, initially specializing in independent outdoor trips in the Petersburg area. The company now plans trips for the whole state and books Alaska and B.C. ferries without surcharge. Get on their list and they will book your cabins and vehicle reservations on the first day that the ferry system makes reservations available.

P.O. Box 787, Petersburg, AK 99833 ✆ **800/327-2571** or 907/772-3818. www.alaskaferry.com.

8 Planning an Outdoor Vacation

Most people visit Alaska to experience wilderness, so it's ironic that so many spend their time in crowded ships, buses, trains, and airplanes—the antithesis of a wilderness experience. You do need technology to get to the wilderness of Alaska, but unless you at least partly loosen your hold of that umbilical cord, you'll never really arrive at your destination.

Every town in Alaska is a threshold to the wild. There's always a way to go hiking, biking, or sea kayaking, or to get on the bank of a stream or the deck of a boat to hook into a furiously fighting wild salmon—and end up in the evening back in a comfortable hotel room. Or take it a step further: Plan to go out overnight, perhaps with a friendly local guide at first, and then go out on your own. I've included lots of details on how to do this throughout the book. Scary? If it weren't a little scary, it would be Disneyland, and that it definitely is not. It's real, and that's why it's worth doing.

Wilderness lodges are listed in the following sections: Gustavus and Admiralty Island in chapter 5; across Kachemak Bay from Homer in chapter 7; and in and around Denali National Park in chapter 8. Remote Forest Service cabins in Tongass and Chugach national forests are covered in chapters 5 and 7, respectively.

ACTIVITIES

BACKPACKING Alaska's best backpacking country for trail hikes is in **Chugach State Park** near Anchorage (chapter 6), on Chena Hot Springs Road and the Steese Highway near Fairbanks (chapter 9), and in the **Chugach National Forest** on the Kenai Peninsula (chapter 7). For hiking beyond trails, go to **Denali** or the Denali Highway (chapter 8), **Wrangell–St. Elias national parks** or the Dalton Highway (chapter 9). Alaska trail hikes require the same skills as backpacking anywhere else, plus preparation for cold and damp (see "What to Wear," earlier). Hiking beyond the trails is a glorious experience, but you need to know how to cross rivers and find your way—it's best if you have some outdoor experience. Or go with a guide; they're listed below. See section 6, earlier in this chapter, for some backcountry safety tips.

BIKING Most every town in Alaska has a bike-rental agency. There are excellent bike routes all over the state and few restrictions on where you can ride. A bike is a great way into Denali National Park (see chapter 8); Anchorage has an extensive network of paved trails and many mountain biking routes (see chapter 6); and guided biking is available in Haines and Skagway (see chapter 5). **Alaskan Bicycle Adventures,** described later in this section, leads longer tours.

BIRD WATCHING In Alaska, birders can encounter birds in greater variety and greater numbers than they have seen before, and add many new species to their life lists. Serious birders with money to spend can dedicate a trip to some of the worlds' best and most famous remote bird-watching sites. Find those tours advertised in

birding magazines, such as *Birders' World* (www.birdersworld.com) or *Bird Watcher's Digest* (www.birdwatchersdigest.com).

Among the reputable operators that run trips to Alaska are Arizona-based **High Lonesome Ecotours** (✆ **800/743-2668;** www.hilonesome.com), priding itself on small groups, and Texas-based **Victor Emanuel Tours** (✆ **800/328-8368;** www.ventbird.com), which counts well-known authors among its leaders.

The very best bird and wildlife destination in Alaska is probably the Pribilof Islands. You can sign up directly with the island's own residents for a tour there, described in chapter 10. Travelers with a less intense interest in bird watching can also pursue it as part of a vacation that encompasses a variety of activities. I describe a guided bird watching day tour in Anchorage in chapter 6, and day tours that include exceptional bird sighting opportunities are to be had in Wrangell, Sitka, and Haines (chapter 5); at Whittier and Kenai Fjords National Park (chapter 7); and at Unalaska (chapter 10). Community events surrounding spring migration happen in Wrangell, Cordova (chapter 7), and Homer. Self-guided birding opportunities crop up in almost every town; I have described the best in the outdoors section for each town. Among those destinations where self-guided bird watching justifies a special trip are the Copper River Delta near Cordova, the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines, and the roads and beaches around Nome and Barrow (chapter 10).

CANOEING Paddling a canoe on a remote Alaska lake or river is the best way to get into the wilderness without a backpack, a guide, or a great deal of expense. For beginners, it's easy to rent a canoe in Fairbanks (chapter 9) for a day trip. If you're ready to go overnight, the choices of routes are extraordinary, including the rivers of the Interior (chapter 9), canoe routes with rental cabins in Southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest (chapter 5), the bird-watching country of the Copper River Delta near Cordova, and the supreme lake canoe routes of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (both in chapter 7).

CAR OR RV CAMPING Campgrounds are almost everywhere in Alaska, many in extraordinarily beautiful natural places. Public campgrounds far outnumber commercial ones. They're usually located where they are because there's something special about the place: a great view or beach, an exceptional fishing stream or a trailhead. Rarely will you find running water or flush toilets. Most campgrounds are seasonal, with hand pumps for water. (When it's time to wash up, stay at a commercial campground, which I've noted in each town section in the destination chapters throughout this book.) Many of Alaska's public campgrounds rarely fill up (the Kenai River and Denali

Tips A Guide to Guide Gratuities

As a general rule, tip fishing guides and outfitters $10 to $20 per person per day. For outings of less than a day, adjust the tip accordingly. At wilderness lodges, which normally have all-inclusive rates, it's often best to add the tip to your final payment when you leave and let the proprietor distribute it to the staff rather than try to do it at each meal. A blanket tip of $15 per person per day is acceptable.

National Park campgrounds are among the exceptions), so campers have flexibility that other travelers don't, and are able to stop when and where they like.

Even if you don't usually consider camping, think about renting a comfortable RV for a tour. One company offers RV rentals as add-ons with cruise vacations, taking care of all the details for clients (that company and other rental options are under "Getting There & Getting Around," later in this chapter).

If you fly to Alaska, car camping can be a bit complicated. Carrying a camp stove on an airplane is forbidden unless there is no attached fuel canister and no odor of fuel (even in that case, keep the unit handy for inspection at check in). It may make sense to buy a new stove in Alaska and then give it away or mail it back to yourself at the end of the trip. Much car camping equipment is bulky and hard to fit into your limit of two checked bags. Consider renting some of your gear here: rental agencies are listed for most towns in this book. You can also use the mail, sending packages to yourself care of General Delivery at any post office, or simply invest in compact backpacking equipment that you can fit in your luggage.

I've mentioned some great campgrounds throughout the book, but there are many more than I had space to cover. The "Alaska Public Lands Campground Map" lists all the public campgrounds in Alaska. It's available from the Alaska Public Lands Information Centers (see "Visitor Information," earlier) for 50¢. If you are planning to camp the whole way, get a copy of *Traveler's Guide to Alaskan Camping,* by Mike and Terri Church (Rolling Homes Press; $22), which contains detailed reviews of virtually every public and commercial campground in the state.

Finally, you can join a car camping tour with a group and a guide who handles all the details. CampAlaska Tours and Alaska Wildland Adventures, described below under "Outfitters & Outdoor Package Trips," both offer these tours.

FISHING Fishing in Alaska may spoil you for fishing anywhere else. The world's largest salmon and halibut were caught here in recent years, and Pacific salmon are so plentiful that catching and processing them still provides the state's largest source of employment. Fly fishermen also come for thriving wild stocks of steelhead, cutthroat, and rainbow trout; Dolly Varden and Arctic char; and Arctic grayling.

There's no room here to tell you how to fish in Alaska—the best way is to pick it up from other anglers, most conveniently by going with a guide on your first outing. If you can afford it, a day of guided fly-in fishing to a remote stream is the ultimate fishing trip (you can do it from virtually any town listed in chapters 5, 6, or 7). You can also study fishing by book; several are available, the best of which focus on individual areas of the state or particular fishing techniques rather than trying to cover everything.

The best all-around source of information is the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game Sport Fish Division** (✆ **800/465-4180;** www.alaska.gov/adfg; click on "sport fish"). Browse the website for run timing information and hot spots updated weekly, to learn generally about fishing in Alaska, and to obtain particulars about where to wet a line in different parts of the state (click "publications" and then the region you are visiting). You can even buy a fishing license online. If you lack Internet access, the agency also produces printed guides and fields questions from the public by telephone, and they record the weekly

A Salmon Primer

In Alaska, it's not so much where you wet your line, but when. The primary catch, Pacific salmon, lives in salt water but spawns in fresh water, with each fish returning to the stream of its birth during a certain, narrow window of time called a "run." When the salmon are running, fishing is hot; when they're not running, it's dead. And the runs change from day to day, typically lasting only a few weeks. (Halibut, on the other hand, are bottom-dwelling ocean fish; you can fish them from a boat every day when the tide is right.) You can fish salmon all over the state in fresh and salt water, but the closer you are to the ocean, the better the fish are. Salmon flesh softens in fresh water and the skin turns dull and red. Salmon right from salt water that haven't started their spawning cycle are called silver bright—when you see one, you'll understand why. No Pacific salmon feeds in fresh water, but kings and silvers, which are meat eaters at sea, strike bait out of habit when they reach fresh water rivers.

There are five species of Pacific salmon, each preferring its own habitat, and, even when the habitat overlaps, each timing its run differently. Each species has two names.

King (or **chinook**) is the most coveted, best fighting-fish, commonly growing to 30 pounds in 5 to 7 years at sea (the sport record, from the Kenai River, was 97 pounds, and the largest ever, taken by commercial fishermen near Petersburg, was 126 pounds). It takes a lot of effort to hook and land a big king, but it's the ultimate in Alaska fishing. You also need a special king stamp on your fishing license from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, which you can buy at the same time you buy your license. (You can buy your license online; see p. 41). King runs come mostly from late May to early July.

The **silver** (or **coho**) is smaller than the king, typically 6 to 9 pounds, but it fights and jumps ferociously, making it nearly as big a prize.

local updates on telephone hotlines, which I have listed in town sections.

If fishing is the primary goal of your trip, think about booking time at a fishing lodge. The remote rivers of the Bristol Bay region have Alaska's most prolific salmon fishing, and the only way out there is to take a floatplane to a remote site. Here, you may well find a stream jammed with salmon and with few other anglers around to compete with. But you'll waste your money if you book a date that's not near the peak of the local salmon run (that does happen, as lodge owners hate to admit slow fishing). Consequently, I've listed few river-fishing lodges in this book. (The exceptions: on the Kenai River in Cooper Landing and Kenai-Soldotna, in chapter 7; and ocean fishing in Ketchikan in chapter 5.) Instead, I recommend booking through **Sport Fishing Alaska,** 9310 Shorecrest Dr., Anchorage, AK 99502 (✆ **888/552-8674** or 907/344-8674; www.alaskatripplanners.com). The business is run by a couple, Larry and Sheary Suiter, with years of experience on the Kenai River and in Southwest Alaska. After receiving a $95 advance fee, they plan a fishing vacation tailored to your budget that puts

Silvers run mostly in the fall, beginning in August and lasting into October in some streams.

Red (or **sockeye**) salmon, so named for their tasty red flesh, are the trickiest to catch. They usually weigh 4 to 8 pounds and can run in any of the summer months, depending on the region and stream. Reds feed primarily on plankton at sea, and when they strike a fly, it's out of an instinct that no one really understands; you need perfect river conditions to catch reds legally, because snagging them on the body is generally not allowed in fresh water.

Pinks (or **humpies**) grow to only a few pounds and aren't as tasty as the other three species; their flesh lacks the fat that makes salmon so meaty. Pinks are so plentiful that Alaska anglers usually view them as a nuisance to get off the line, but visitors often enjoy catching them: There's nothing wrong with a hard-fighting 4-pound fish, especially if you use light tackle, and a sliver-bright fish is tasty if cooked right.

Chum (or **dog**) salmon return plentifully to streams over much of the state but are rarely targeted by anglers. Yet a typical 5- to 10-pound chum hits and fights hard. Like pinks, chums aren't prized for the table and are mostly used for subsistence by Alaska Natives, who smoke or dry the fish for winter use or freeze it to feed dog teams.

The gear you use depends on the species you are after and the regulations for the area you're fishing. You have to catch the fish in the mouth; snagging is allowed only in special circumstances. On salt water, boats troll for kings and silvers with herring bait and gear to hold it down. Lures, salmon eggs, or flies will work on silvers and kings in the rivers, but regulations vary. Flies work best with reds. Most Alaska fishermen use spinning gear on the larger salmon species—landing such a large fish is iffy with a fly rod.

you right where fishing is hot at the time when you will be traveling.

FLIGHTSEEING No one should come to Alaska without seeing the scenery at least once from a small plane. The most spectacular rides of all are the Mount McKinley flights from Talkeetna (chapter 8) and the Glacier Bay National Park flights from Haines or other surrounding communities (chapter 5). But just about anywhere you go is worth seeing from the air; only then can you grasp how huge and complex the land is and how little changed it is by mankind. Fixed-wing flights give you the most time aloft for your money, with seats starting at around $100 for a half-hour flight. If you can't afford that, consider taking scheduled prop service between small communities on your itinerary, which can cost less than $50 and allows you to see almost as much.

RAFTING Letting an Alaskan river pull you through untouched wild country in a raft provides a unique perspective without the sweat and toil of backpacking. Alaska has many great rivers, virtually all undeveloped, and, with few exceptions, never crowded. White-water guides operate on rivers all over the state, offering day trips in

many towns. Outfitters also lead trips deep into Alaska, using the rivers to visit extraordinary places that can't be reached any other way. Many companies offer floats; some are listed later in this section and others are described in the destination chapters throughout this book.

SEA KAYAKING Just about every coastal town, from Kodiak east through Kachemak Bay, Prince William Sound, and the Southeast Panhandle, has a kayak outfitter taking visitors on day trips or expeditions. I think it would be a shame for any fit person to come to Alaska and not take a sea-kayaking day trip. It is your best chance to get close enough to really know the wilderness and see whales, sea otters, seabirds, and marine life in an intimate way. Local guides are listed in each town section. Outfitters offering longer trips to a variety of places are listed below.

OUTFITTERS & OUTDOOR PACKAGE TRIPS

Besides the outfitters and tour guides listed below, I've noted other operators in the destination chapters covering the towns where they are based. Browse through those chapters before deciding on a trip, as a trip with a small-town guide service can be wonderful. There are many other larger operators, too; increasingly, international adventure travel companies bring groups to Alaska, renting equipment or even hiring guides here. Although those trips may be excellent, I've listed mostly homegrown operators who know their territory intimately.

Alaskan Bicycle Adventures This well-run operation provides all the arrangements for bicycle expeditions over Alaska's rural highways, including a support van that follows the group and ferries bicyclists over dangerous or boring patches of road, or picks them up just because they're tired—allowing stronger and weaker riders to tour together. Sea-kayaking and hiking excursions break up some trips. Choose from many itineraries; one appealing program lasts a week, looping from Anchorage, over the Denali Highway, down the Richardson Highway, a little bit into Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, then to Valdez and across Prince William Sound (by boat) and back to Anchorage. It costs $2,595.

907 E. Dowling Rd. no. 29, Anchorage, AK 99518. ✆ **800/770-7242** or 907/243-2329. www.alaskabike.com.

Alaska Discovery A homegrown eco-tourism pioneer, Alaska Discovery was bought out by the famous Mountain Travel Sobek expedition company, but still keeps its local staff in Juneau and offers some of the best sea-kayaking trips in Southeast Alaska. Glacier Bay and Admiralty Island outings cater to both beginners and the truly rugged. Their inn-to-inn trips are essentially outdoor-oriented package tours, taking groups to the best spots for day activities like kayaking, rafting, or watching wildlife. Extended river trips float through the Arctic and on the Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers. They also offer outdoor packages for complete vacations. A 3-day kayak expedition near Juneau is $495 or $595, while 10 days in the Arctic is around $3,500.

5130 Glacier Hwy., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **800/586-1911** or 907/780-6226. www.akdiscovery.com.

Alaska Wildland Adventures This company specializes in trips for regular folks who may not have done a lot of arduous outdoor activities before. Concentrating on the Kenai Peninsula, where they operate two wilderness lodges, but also going to Denali National Park, most of the company's trips link together a series of outdoor day activities, such as rafting, hiking,

Tips Make Yourself Useful

You don't have to see Alaska only as an observer—you can be a participant. The **Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race** (✆ **907/376-5155;** www.iditarod.com) uses hundreds of volunteers as it passes through remote villages on the 1,000-mile trek from Anchorage to Nome in March. Visitors can be part of it, and see the real Alaska along the way, contributing only their time and travel to Alaska. Find the application on the website and act early; they get more volunteers than they can use. Other races and events also use volunteers but don't have a formal program like the Iditarod's.

Some archaeological programs also use visitors to help dig Alaska Native sites and process the artifacts they find. A program that has been going on for years is called Dig Afognak, in Kodiak (see chapter 10). It costs you a bit in travel and accommodations, but it's a great opportunity to learn and make a contribution on your vacation.

or wildlife watching, with beds and indoor plumbing in the evening. A 10-day safari is around $4,600; shorter trips, trips for families with kids, and trips with tent camping included are available, too.

P.O. Box 389, Girdwood, AK 99587. ✆ **800/334-8730** or 907/783-2928. www.alaskawildland.com.

CampAlaska Tours Readers have told me about the wonderful time they had with these folks, traveling in a van with only 12 adults and camping each night along the way. Trips last 6 days to 3 weeks, with hiking, rafting, kayaking, and an opportunity to see the outdoors with a new group of outdoors-oriented friends. Their philosophy is to keep things loose and allow people to pursue their own interests. Prices are around $125 per day, and one itinerary is available for families with children as young as age 10.

P.O. Box 872247, Wasilla, AK 99687. ✆ **800/376-9438** or 907/376-9438. www.campalaska.com.

Equinox Wilderness Expeditions Karen Jettmar, author of *The Alaska River Guide,* the standard guidebook on floating Alaska's rivers, leads challenging rafting, sea-kayaking, and hiking trips and base-camp wildlife viewing each summer in some of the wildest and most exotic places around the state. Her groups are tiny, with five to eight members, and she offers co-ed, family and women's trips. A 10-day Arctic float trip costs around $3,500.

2440 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, AK 99507. ✆ **877-615-9087** or 604-562-9146. www.equinoxexpeditions.com.

Nova These guys started commercial rafting on Alaska's rivers in 1975, but as the industry developed, they kept their company small, keeping their base in a tiny village on the Matanuska River, northeast of Anchorage, and primarily employing Alaskan guides. Their catalog covers longer expeditions on some of the state's wildest rivers, but also includes more affordable itineraries of 2 or 3 days. Two days on the Matanuska costs $275; 3 days on the Talkeetna, including a trip through 14-mile-long Class IV rapids of the Talkeetna Canyon, costs $950.

P.O. Box 1129, Chickaloon, AK 99674. ✆ **800/746-5753** or 907/745-5753. www.novalaska.com.

St. Elias Alpine Guides When you're ready for a real expedition, these are the real professionals to contact. Having given up on McKinley years ago as too crowded, they specialize in trekking, climbing, and floating through the deep and rugged

wilderness of Wrangell–St. Elias National Park. Theirs is the only trip catalog I know of that offers first ascents as part of the product line; so far, they've taken clients to the tops of previously unclimbed mountains more than 45 times. For details, see p. 402.

P.O. Box 111241, Anchorage, AK 99511. ✆ **888/933-5427** or 907/345-9048; summer 907/554-4445. www.steliasguides.com.

9 Specialized Travel Resources

FOR TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Today, it is rare to find a hotel without rooms accessible for people with disabilities, and even some B&Bs have made the necessary adjustments. The results often make these the best rooms in the house. Make sure to ask for special rooms when making reservations, and question smaller establishments closely about exactly what accessible means to them.

The U.S. National Park Service offers a **Golden Access Passport** that gives free lifetime entrance to all properties administered by the National Park Service—national parks, monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, and national wildlife refuges—for persons who are blind or permanently disabled, regardless of age. You may pick up a Golden Access Passport at any NPS entrance fee area by showing proof of medically determined disability and eligibility for receiving benefits under federal law. Besides free entry, the Golden Access Passport also offers a 50% discount on federal-use fees charged for such facilities as camping, swimming, parking, boat launching, and tours. For more information, go to **www.nps.gov/fees_passes.htm** or call ✆**888/467-2757.**

There are several Alaska agencies for people with disabilities. **Challenge Alaska,** 3350 Commercial Dr., Suite 208, Anchorage, AK 99501 (✆ **907/344-7399;** www.challenge.ak.org), a nonprofit organization, offers therapeutic recreation and education, including outdoor adventures. They operate an adaptive ski school at their International Sports, Recreation, and Education Center at Alyeska Resort in Girdwood (✆ **907/783-2925**). Summer outings are inexpensive: a 2-day sea-kayaking outing is only $115. Get on the mailing list for current listings.

Alaska Welcomes You! Inc., P.O. Box 91333, Anchorage, AK 99509-1333 (✆ or TTY **800/349-6301,** or 907/349-6301; www.accessiblealaska.com), books accessible cruises, tours in Southcentral Alaska, and extended travel packages to Denali National Park and the Kenai Peninsula, and does trip planning for independent travelers with special needs. The operator is a respected community worker for those with disabilities; he field-checks the places he books to make sure they really are accessible.

FOR SENIORS

People over age 65 get reduced-admission prices to many Alaska attractions, and some accommodations have special senior rates. Also mention your age when booking your airfare; most domestic airlines offer senior discounts.

Members of **AARP** (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons), 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (✆ **800/424-3410** or 202/434-2277; www.aarp.org), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.

The **U.S. National Park Service** offers a **Golden Age Passport** that gives seniors 62 years or older lifetime entrance to all properties administered

by the National Park Service—national parks, monuments, historic sites, recreation areas, and national wildlife refuges—for a one-time processing fee of $10, the passport must be purchased in person at any NPS facility that charges an entrance fee. Besides free entry, a Golden Age Passport also offers a 50% discount on federal-use fees charged for such facilities as camping, swimming, parking, boat launching, and tours. For more information, go to **www.nps.gov/fees_passes.htm** or call ✆ **888/467-2757.**

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (✆ **877/426-8056;** www.elderhostel.org) arranges study programs for those aged 55 and over (and a spouse or companion of any age) in the U.S. and in more than 80 countries around the world. Most courses last 5 to 7 days in the U.S. (2–4 weeks abroad), and many include airfare, accommodations in university dormitories or modest inns, meals, and tuition. **ElderTreks** (✆ **800/741-7956;** www.eldertreks.com) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older.

Most towns have a senior center where you'll find activities and help with any special needs. The **Anchorage Senior Center** (✆ **907/258-7823**) offers guidance for visitors, as well as use of the restaurant, showers, a gift shop, and fitness room. A big band plays Friday nights for dancing.

FOR GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Anchorage, Juneau, and Fairbanks have active gay and lesbian communities. In Anchorage, **Identity Inc.** (✆ **907/258-4777;** www.alaska.net/~identity) offers referrals, publishes a newsletter called *Northview,* and sponsors activities throughout the year. The June Pridefest includes a parade and picnic, among other events. Their community center is at 2110 E. Northern Lights, Suite A (✆ **907/929-4528**). Bob DeLoach is a real expert on gay and lesbian Alaska travel. His **Apollo Travel,** operating with **Whitsett Travel** (✆ **907/274-0547** or 907/892-1888), has a website with online booking at **www.apollotravelalaska.com.**

FOR FAMILIES

When we researched our first edition of this book, my son, Robin, was 3, and my daughter, Julia, was 6 months. As I write this, Robin is 11, Julia is 8, Joseph is 4, and Becky is 2. You might run into us in a campground or on a boat dock anywhere in the state as we travel to research the next edition of "our Alaska book." Robin loves to surprise people he sees carrying the book. We also write *Frommer's Family Vacations in the National Parks* together. Yes, it's a great job, and bringing the family along is the best part.

Alaska's magnificent scenery is something even young children can understand and appreciate. Also, an Alaska vacation is largely spent outdoors, which is where kids like to be. The children never get enough ferry riding, and all four enjoy camping immensely, even Becky. Our extensive experience camping with babies, even as young as 3 months, has been entirely positive. Having everyone sleep in a tent, at baby level, is an infant's idea of vacation paradise.

There are drawbacks to Alaska as a family destination. The primary one is the expense. The airlines' half-off companion fares are inconsistently applied, and we haven't yet gotten one on the Alaska route. Activities such as flightseeing and tour-boat cruises tend to have less-than-generous children's discounts and cost too much for most families. Often, bed-and-breakfast rooms are too small for a family. In addition, hotel rooms and restaurant

meals are expensive in Alaska. Car camping solves many of those problems, with stops in a hotel every few days to get everyone cleaned up. I wouldn't take kids over the Alaska Highway, however; instead, I'd fly to Anchorage and rent a car and any bulky camping gear there (see "Car or RV Camping," in section 8 of this chapter).

Be careful in choosing your itinerary and activities with children. The highways in Alaska are long and children will require a gradual approach to covering a lot of ground. They also need time to play, explore, and rest. Frankly, children often don't enjoy activities like wildlife watching. It takes a long time to find the animals, and when you do, they're usually off in the distance—kids younger than 8 often don't have the visual skills or patience to pick out the animals from the landscape. Don't overtax children with walks and hiking trips; we keep track of the longest hike we've managed without excessive whining, then try to extend that record just a little bit each time out. Short sea-kayaking excursions, on the other hand, are great for children who are old enough, riding in the front of a double-seat boat with a parent in back; we began with Robin at age 7, and I have friends who have done it with a 3-year-old. In practice, the age limit depends on the outfitter and your child's level of responsibility.

If you're interested in a package tour with your family, most of the companies listed in this chapter will take children, but research carefully to make sure you will have enough down time. A better choice would be an outdoor-oriented trip designed for children by an outfitter. **Alaska Wildland Adventures** (✆ **800/334-8730;** www.alaskawildland.com) has various trips for kids as young as 12, and even offers a "Family Safari" for families with children ages 6 through 12 that strings together activities and hotels on the Kenai Peninsula for 8 days, including Kenai River rafting and a boat tour in Kenai Fjords National Park. It's essentially a kid-oriented escorted package tour. The cost is $3,195 for adults, $2,995 for kids, exclusive of air travel.

Alaska Discovery (✆ 800/586-1911; www.akdiscovery.com) takes children as young as 12 on some of its extended Southeast Alaska sea-kayaking trips, which start at $495 to $595 for 3 days and 2 nights.

10 Getting There & Getting Around

BY PLANE

Anchorage is the main entry hub, served by several major carriers to the rest of the United States and sometimes flights from Germany, Japan, or Korea. It's also possible to fly into Fairbanks or Southeast Alaska. Most passengers come into Anchorage through Seattle, but for a bit more you can fly nonstop to Anchorage from various major cities. There are far more choices in summer than in winter. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) has more flights than all other airlines combined, with as many as 20 a day to Seattle in summer, plus summer nonstops to various other cities, including L.A., Vancouver and Chicago. Other major airlines serving Anchorage at this writing include **Northwest** (✆ **800/225-2525;** www.nwa.com), **Continental** (✆ **800/523-3273;** www.continental.com), **United** (✆ **800/864-8331;** www.ual.com), **Air Canada** (✆ **888/247-2262;** www.aircanada.com) and **Delta** (✆ **800/221-1212;** www.delta.com). The flight line-up (and the existence of the airlines) changes too fast to keep track of here, so all of this is subject to radical change.

The Seattle-Anchorage route is competitive and prices are volatile, sometimes as low as $300 round-trip.

Shop around before booking. A website maintained by an Anchorage travel consultant (www.alaskatravelgram.com/airfares) lists the current lowest fares from many cities. Use it for a reference, but don't expect to get those rock-bottom fares without a lot of flexibility and a skilled travel agent. Summer sales sometimes hit in April. If you can make a last-minute decision, sign up for Web specials on the Alaska Airlines website and other airline sites, as there often are bargains to be had that you can't get any other way. **Alaska Airlines** is the only jet carrier with more than token coverage anywhere in Alaska other than Anchorage and has arrangements with commuter lines that fan out from its network to smaller communities.

To fly to a roadless village, or to fly between most towns without returning to a hub, you will take a small, prop-driven plane with an Alaska bush pilot at the controls. Small air taxis also charter to fishing sites, lodges, remote cabins, or anywhere else you want to go. An authentic Alaskan adventure can be had by taking a Bush mail plane round-trip to a village and back. The ticket price is generally less than a flightseeing trip, and you'll have at least a brief chance to look around a Native village, although don't expect to find any visitor facilities without making arrangements in advance. Kodiak, Homer, Nome, Kotzebue, and Barrow are places from which you can do this with a little research. Contact the visitor information sources listed for each town in this book and ask for their advice.

BY SHIP

The most popular way to get to Alaska is on a **cruise ship** (chapter 4, "Cruising Alaska's Coast," provides an in-depth look at your options).

For an affordable, independent trip by sea, with a chance to stop as long as you like along the way, take the **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066,** TDD 800/764-3779; www.ferryalaska.com). It's my favorite form of public transportation. The big blue, white, and gold ferries ply the Inside Passage from Bellingham, Washington, and Prince Rupert, B.C., to the towns of Southeast Alaska, with road links to the rest of the state at Haines and Skagway. In summer, one ferry a month connects from that system across the Gulf of Alaska to the central part of the state. From there, smaller ferries connect towns in Prince William Sound and the Kenai Peninsula to Kodiak Island and the Aleutian Archipelago. For a complete discussion of the system and its intricacies, see "Getting Around by Ferry: The Alaska Marine Highway" in chapter 5.

BY RAIL

You can't get to Alaska by train, but you can get close. **Amtrak** (✆ **800/USA-RAIL;** www.amtrak.com) serves

Value The Cheapest Way to Alaska

Flying is the cheapest and by far the simplest way to get to Alaska. Take other means only for the adventure, not for the cost. Round-trip train, ferry, and bus fare between Seattle and Anchorage costs four times as much as good airfare between the same cities. Driving is expensive, too, when you count rooms, food, and wear and tear on your vehicle. Fuel for the 4,500-mile drive from Seattle to Anchorage and back would cost about $400 in a car that gets 20 miles to the gallon—more than a plane ticket. (Okay, maybe a foursome in a car, camping every night and eating rice and beans, can do it cheaper.)

Bellingham, Washington; the dock for the Alaska ferry is quite close to the railroad station. From the east, it makes more sense to catch the ferry in Prince Rupert, B.C., getting there on Canada's **Via Rail** (✆ **888/VIA-RAIL;** www.viarail.ca); you change from the transcontinental route in Jasper.

BY CAR

Among the questions I am asked most frequently on my website (www.wohlforth.net) is how long it takes to drive between various points. You can easily calculate this for yourself. Get the mileage from the chart on page 6 or go to **http://maps.yahoo.com**, click on "Driving Directions," and type in the two points on your route. For paved highways, you can count on averaging 50 miles per hour; simply divide the mileage by 50 to get the hours of your trip. On most roads you can go faster than 50, but you can't often drive at freeway speeds on these two-lane highways. Even when the surface is smooth (not always a given), the roads aren't designed for high speeds. Besides, you need to be on the look-out for moose; hit one of those at 75 mph and you both die.

Driving to Alaska is a great adventure, but it requires thousands of miles on the road and plenty of time. By car, Anchorage is 2,250 miles from Seattle and 3,400 miles from Los Angeles. By comparison, New York to L.A. is 2,800 miles. Traveling at an average of 50 miles per hour, few vacationers will want to cover more than 500 or 600 miles a day, and that's on a day of nothing but driving. On such a plan, Seattle is four or five days from Anchorage without breaks.

Some of the 1,400-mile **Alaska Highway** is dull, but there are spectacular sections of the route, too, and few experiences give you a better feel for the size and personality of Alaska. Putting your car on the ferry cuts the length of the trip considerably, but raises the cost; you could rent a car for 2 weeks for the same price as carrying an economy car on the ferry one-way from Bellingham to Haines. I love riding the ferry up the Inside Passage, but I usually rent a car or bike to get around in the towns on the way. Details on the Alaska section of the Alaska Highway, and other highways, are contained in chapter 9. ***The Milepost*** (Morris Communications; $26) contains mile-by-mile logs of all Alaska highways and approaches, and is sold widely (the commercial listings are advertisements, and are not objective).

Renting a car is the easiest way to see the Interior and Southcentral parts of the state. All the major national car-rental companies are represented in Anchorage as well as many local operators, who may have lower prices for older cars and possibly will allow you to drive on gravel roads (see p. 200). In smaller cities and towns, there are usually a couple of agencies; the town descriptions throughout the book provide details on firms in each town. Base rates for major rental companies are in the range of $50 a day for an economy car. Weekly rentals equate roughly to 5 days' cost.

One-way rentals between Alaska towns are an attractive way to travel, but you generally pay steep drop-off charges, so a more popular plan is to fly into and out of Anchorage and pick up and return the car there. There are two popular circular routes from Anchorage: to Denali and Fairbanks on the Parks Highway and back on the Richardson and Glenn highways, or to Valdez by ferry from Whittier and back on another part of the Richardson Highway and the Glenn Highway.

BY RV

Touring Alaska in an RV, or even driving one to the state, makes a good deal

of sense. The home on wheels offers spontaneity by freeing you from hotel reservations (see "Car or RV Camping," above), and it gets you out of town and into the countryside, closer to the natural Alaska most visitors come for. At the same time, an RV is more comfortable than a tent in cool, unpredictable weather conditions.

Many retirees drive to Alaska in their motor homes, park the RV by a salmon stream, and spend the summer fishing. Sounds nice, but for most of the rest of us, with limited time, it makes more sense to rent an RV after flying to Alaska. Rental agencies are listed in Skagway (chapter 5), Anchorage (chapter 6), and Fairbanks (chapter 9). The option of shipping your own RV to Alaska is also covered in the Anchorage chapter. Unless you have a large family, an RV rental saves little over traveling with a rental car, staying in hotels, and eating in restaurants (RVs rent for around $1,400 a week, plus gas and possibly mileage charges), so you make this choice to gain advantages, not avoid costs.

Alaska Highway Cruises (✆ **800/323-5757;** www.alaskarv.com) offers the unique option of traveling one way on a Holland America cruise ship then picking up an RV for a land tour. You can choose a package that ends up back at Seattle by road or by air. The tours follow set itineraries with reservations along the way—the service is designed for first time Alaska travelers and RV drivers who don't want to worry about the details—so some spontaneity is sacrificed. You get the security and simplicity of a package without being marched around in a group or cooped up in hotels. A 2-week cruise and tour cost $3,000 to $4,000 per person, double occupancy; a 3-week cruise to Alaska and drive back (or reverse) is up to $5,000 per person. There are various discounts, including for third and fourth passengers.

Simple one-way RV rentals to Alaska are available, too. I have listed options from Seattle and Skagway to Anchorage in chapter 6. A large national firm, **Cruise America,** 8850 Runamuck Place (✆ **800/327-7799** or 907/349-0499; www.cruiseamerica.com) offers one-way rentals between Anchorage and any of their centers around the country, as far away as Florida, depending on availability. The drop-off fee is $1,000 (plus all the normal rental costs) regardless of your starting point.

There is one way to do a one-way RV odyssey without spending so much. At the beginning and end of the season, the rental companies often find themselves with units in the wrong places: a clever and flexible traveler can snag a great deal by delivering an RV to where it belongs.

11 Suggested Itineraries

Many visitors to Alaska feel compelled to cover the whole state, traveling to each region, and planning everything around seeing certain famous wilderness parks. By doing so, they spend more time and money than they should. Each of Alaska's regions, by itself, has most of what you're coming to Alaska for—wildlife, mountains, glaciers, historic sites, cute little towns—and you can have a better trip touring one or two regions than spending precious time going from region to region.

The other mistake some people make is traveling only to the largest and most famous destinations. Such a goal-oriented style of travel misses the fun, offbeat places only you can discover. Alaska's greatest sights certainly

are worth your time, but visitors often tell me those were not the most memorable moments. Save time for chance encounters with wildlife or interesting local people, or simply to enjoy a peaceful moment alone in the woods.

To help readers understand how Alaska destinations can fit together, I've set up a series of itineraries in 1-week loops or tours. For 2- or 3-week itineraries, link a few itineraries together, spend more time in each place, or add trips to the many places I haven't included in these loops. This isn't intended as a menu, just as inspiration to create your own trip. If you're driving to Alaska, add a week to each end of your trip.

A Northern Southeast Alaska Itinerary

Day 1 Fly to Juneau, settle in.

Day 2 Take a look at the State Museum and other sights in town and the Mendenhall Glacier, or take a day hike or sea-kayaking excursion.

Day 3 Take the passenger ferry to Gustavus, with a whale-watching excursion on the way. Spend the night at one of the charming inns there.

Day 4 See Glacier Bay National Park on a boat tour. Spend another night in Gustavus.

Day 5 Fly on a small plane to Haines, spending the day there seeing the eagles and totem carving studio. Spend the nights at a historic inn in Haines.

Day 6 Take the passenger ferry to Skagway to see the historic sites and take the train excursion, or take a hike or mountain bike ride. Spend the night in Skagway.

Day 7 Take the Alaska ferry back to Juneau and fly home.

A Southern Southeast Alaska Itinerary

Day 1 Arrive in Ketchikan by ferry from Prince Rupert.

Day 2 Tour the cultural sites in Ketchikan or take a hike in the rain forest.

Day 3 Take a flightseeing day trip from Ketchikan to Misty Fjords National Monument, or take a charter fishing or sea kayaking excursion from town.

Day 4 Take the ferry to Sitka (an overnight trip).

Day 5 See the historic sites and museums in Sitka.

Day 6 Get outdoors in Sitka, hiking, fishing, sea kayaking, or on a whale and sea otter cruise.

Day 7 Take the ferry or fly to Juneau, then fly out.

A National Parks Itinerary: Kenai Fjords & Denali

Day 1 Fly to Anchorage and spend the night there.

Day 2 Spend a day taking in the city, with a visit to the museum, zoo, or Native cultural center; or, outdoors, ride a bike on the coastal trail or hike in Chugach State Park.

Day 3 Take the train to Seward, and take a boat ride into Kenai Fjords National Park. Spend the night in Seward.

Day 4 Enjoy Seward, the Alaska SeaLife Center and Exit Glacier, or take a hike or a sea kayak paddle, returning to Anchorage on the evening train.

Day 5 Rent a car and drive to Denali National Park, taking an afternoon hike or raft ride in the entrance area. Camp out or stay in one of the accommodations near the park entrance.

Day 6 Take a shuttle bus into the park for wildlife viewing and day hiking, retiring after a long day for a second night at your camp or at one of the accommodations near the park entrance.

Day 7 Drive back to Anchorage and fly out.

A Prince William Sound Loop

Day 1 Fly to Anchorage, and spend the night in Anchorage.

Day 2 Rent a car and drive all day to Wrangell–St. Elias National Park (take the van over the gravel road unless you are covered for your rental car). Stay at a lodge in McCarthy or Kennecott.

Day 3 See Kennecott and take a hike near the glacier.

Day 4 Drive to Valdez and see the sights in town, fish for salmon, or take a hike.

Day 5 Take a boat ride to Columbia Glacier or go sea kayaking or rafting.

Day 6 Take the car ferry from Valdez to Whittier and drive to Girdwood for a hike or tram ride and spend the night at the resort hotel there.

Day 7 Drive to Anchorage and fly home.

A Fairbanks Interior Tour

Day 1 Fly to Fairbanks and rent a car.

Day 2 Spend a day in Fairbanks exploring the city and its attractions.

Day 3 Drive the Parks Highway to Denali National Park, taking an afternoon hike or raft ride in the entrance area. Spending the night (and the next) in your own tent or in lodgings near the park entrance.

Day 4 Take a shuttle bus into the park for wildlife viewing and day hiking.

Day 5 Drive via the Denali Highway (conditions and your car permitting; otherwise simply retrace your steps on the Parks Highway) and Richardson Highway back to Fairbanks, then drive out Chena Hot Springs Road to the resort, or to camp in the Chena Hot Springs State Recreation Area.

Day 6 Swim at the Hot Springs and hike in the recreation area.

Day 7 Return to Fairbanks and fly out.

FAST FACTS: Alaska

Area Code All of Alaska is in area code **907.** In the Yukon Territory, the area code is **867.** When placing a toll call within the state, you must dial 1, the area code, and the number. See "Telephone," below, for important tips.

Banks & ATMs There are banks and automated teller machines in all but the tiniest towns.

Business Hours In the larger cities, major grocery stores are open until late at night and carry a wide range of products (even fishing gear) in addition to food. At a minimum, **stores** are open Monday through Friday from 10am to 6pm, are open on Saturday afternoon, and are closed on Sunday, but many are open much longer hours, especially in summer. **Banks** may close an hour earlier and, if open on Saturday, it's only in the morning. Under state law, **bars** don't have to close until 5am, but many communities have an earlier closing, generally around 2am.

Cellular Phone Coverage The populated portion of the state and most of the paved highways have cellular coverage. The largest provider is an Alaska company called ACS, which posts maps of its coverage area at **www.acsalaska.com/wireless/calling_areas**. AT&T has the second best network. I've found usable coverage is often less than what the companies claim, so don't bet your life on being able to make a call. In any event, if you plan to use your phone, check with your wireless provider to make sure it will work in Alaska and to find out just how badly you will be gouged on roaming charges.

Embassies & Consulates *See* chapter 3, "For International Visitors."

Emergencies Generally, you can call ✆ **911** for medical, police, or fire emergencies. On remote highways, there are sometimes gaps in 911 coverage, but dialing 0 will generally get an operator who can connect you to emergency services. Citizens Band channels 9 and 11 are monitored for emergencies on most highways, as are channels 14 and 19 in some areas.

Holidays Besides the normal national holidays, banks and state and local government offices close on two state holidays: Seward's Day (the last Mon in Mar) and Alaska Day (Oct 18, or the nearest Fri or Mon if it falls on a weekend). See chapter 3 for a listing of national holidays. See "Calendar of Events," earlier in this chapter for more information on holidays and festivals.

Liquor Laws The minimum drinking age in Alaska is 21. Most restaurants sell beer and wine, and a minority have full bars that serve hard liquor as well. Packaged alcohol, beer, and wine are sold only in licensed stores, not in grocery stores, but these are common and are open long hours every day. More than 100 rural communities have laws prohibiting the importation and possession of alcohol (this is known as being "dry") or only the sale but not possession of alcohol (known as being "damp"). With a few exceptions, these are tiny Bush communities off the road network; urban areas are all "wet." Of the communities featured in this book, Kotzebue and Barrow are damp, and the rest are wet. Before flying into a Native village with alcohol, ask about the law—bootlegging is a serious crime (and serious bad manners), or check a list online (go to www.abc.revenue.state.ak.us and click on "Local Option Restrictions").

Lost or Stolen Credit Cards Be sure to tell all of your credit card companies the minute you discover your wallet has been lost or stolen and file a report at the nearest police precinct. Your credit card company or insurer may require a police report number or record of the loss. Most credit card companies have an emergency toll-free number to call if your card is lost or stolen; they may be able to wire you a cash advance immediately or deliver an emergency credit card in a day or two. **Visa's** U.S. emergency number is ✆ **800/847-2911** or 410/581-9994. **American Express** cardholders and traveler's check holders should call ✆ **800/221-7282. MasterCard** holders should call ✆ **800/307-7309** or 636/722-7111. For other credit cards, call the toll-free number directory at ✆ **800/555-1212.**

If you need emergency cash over the weekend when all banks and American Express offices are closed, you can have money wired to you via **Western Union** (✆ **800/325-6000;** www.westernunion.com).

Identity theft or fraud are potential complications of losing your wallet, especially if you've lost your driver's license along with your cash and credit cards. Notify the major credit-reporting bureaus immediately; placing a fraud alert on your records may protect you against liability for criminal activity. The three major U.S. credit-reporting agencies are **Equifax** (✆ **800/766-0008;** www.equifax.com), **Experian** (✆ **888/397-3742;** www.experian.com), and **TransUnion** (✆ **800/680-7289;** www.transunion.com). Finally, if you've lost all forms of photo ID call your airline and explain the situation; they might allow you to board the plane if you have a copy of your passport or birth certificate and a copy of the police report you've filed.

Maps I've noted the best trail maps in each applicable section throughout this book. For most of the popular areas, I recommend the excellent trail maps published by **Trails Illustrated,** part of *National Geographic* (✆ **800/962-1643;** maps.nationalgeographic.com/trails). They're sold in park visitor centers, too. The maps are printed on plastic, so they don't get spoiled by rain; however, they don't cover the whole state. The same people operate a map vending machine that allows users to produce waterproof USGS topographic maps of any spot in the country at the Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Anchorage (see chapter 6). A shop in Anchorage called **The Maps Place,** at 601 W. 36th Ave. (✆ **907/562-7277**) carries every map and chart imaginable and is run by a knowledgeable staff.

Newspapers The state's dominant newspaper is the *Anchorage Daily News* (www.adn.com); it's available everywhere but is not always easy to find in Southeast Alaska. Seattle newspapers and *USA Today* are often available, and in Anchorage you can get virtually any newspaper.

Taxes At this writing, there is no state sales tax, but most local governments have a sales tax and a bed tax on accommodations. The tax rates are listed in each town section throughout the book under its "Fast Facts" section. The state is considering imposing a sales tax, so this information may change.

Telephone I am assured that all major calling cards will work in Alaska, but this certainly hasn't been the case in the past. To make sure, contact your long-distance company, or buy a by-the-minute card.

Time Zone Although the state naturally spans five time zones, in the 1980s Alaska's middle time zone was stretched so almost the entire state would lie all in one zone, known as Alaska time. It's 1 hour earlier than the U.S. West Coast's Pacific time, 4 hours earlier than Eastern time. Crossing over the border from Alaska to Canada adds an hour and puts you at the same time as the West Coast. As with almost everywhere else in the United States, daylight saving time is in effect from 1am on the first Sunday in April (turn your clocks ahead 1 hr.) until 2am on the last Sunday in October (turn clocks back again).

Water See "Health & Safety" in section 6 of this chapter.

3 For International Visitors

Visitors from the rest of the United States sometimes say Alaska is like a foreign country full of Americans. If you are coming from overseas, it may be doubly unfamiliar. This chapter aims to help you through the details so you can better enjoy the differences.

Information on border crossings between the United States and Canada on the Alaska Highway is contained in chapter 9.

1 Preparing for Your Trip

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Check at any U.S. embassy or consulate for current information and requirements. You can also obtain a visa application and other information online at the **U.S. State Department**'s website, at **www.travel.state.gov**.

DO YOU NEED A VISA? Most tourists coming to the United States do not need a visa. Canadian citizens only need proof of residence (not even a passport). The U.S. State Department has a **Visa Waiver Program** allowing citizens of certain countries to enter the United States without a visa for stays of up to 90 days. At press time these countries included Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Citizens of these countries need only a valid passport and a round-trip air or cruise ticket in their possession upon arrival. If they first enter the United States, they may also visit Mexico, Canada, Bermuda, and/or the Caribbean islands and return to the United States without a visa. Further information is available from any U.S. embassy or consulate.

Citizens of all other countries must have (1) a valid passport that expires at least 6 months later than the scheduled end of their visit to the United States, and (2) a tourist visa, which may be obtained without charge from any U.S. consulate.

OBTAINING A VISA **To obtain a visa,** the traveler must submit a completed application form (either in person or by mail) with a 1½-inch-square photo, and must demonstrate binding ties to a residence abroad. Usually you can obtain a visa at once or within 24 hours, but it may take longer during the summer rush from June through August. If you cannot go in person, contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate for directions on applying by mail. Your travel agent or airline office may also be able to provide you with visa applications and instructions. The U.S. consulate or embassy that issues your visa will determine whether you will be issued a multiple- or single-entry visa and any restrictions regarding the length of your stay.

British travelers can obtain up-to-date visa information by calling the **U.S. Embassy Visa Information**

Line (✆ **0891/200-290**) or by visiting the "Consular Services" section of the American Embassy London's website at **www.usembassy.org.uk**.

Irish citizens can obtain up-to-date visa information through the **Embassy of the USA Dublin,** 42 Elgin Rd., Dublin 4, Ireland (✆ **353/1-668-8777;** or by checking the "Consular Services" section of the website at **www.usembassy.ie**.

Australian citizens can obtain up-to-date visa information by contacting the **U.S. Embassy Canberra,** Moonah Place, Yarralumla, ACT 2600 (✆ **02/6214-5600**) or by checking the U.S. Diplomatic Mission's website at **http://usembassy-australia.state.gov/consular**.

Citizens of **New Zealand** can obtain up-to-date visa information by contacting the **U.S. Embassy New Zealand,** 29 Fitzherbert Terr., Thorndon, Wellington (✆ **644/472-2068**), or get the information directly from the "Services to New Zealanders" section of the website at **http://usembassy.org.nz**.

MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS Unless you're arriving from an area known to be suffering from an epidemic (particularly cholera or yellow fever), inoculations or vaccinations are not required for entry into the U.S. If you have a medical condition that requires **syringe-administered medications,** carry a valid signed prescription from your physician. Airline passengers may not pack syringes in their carry-on baggage without documented proof of medical need such as a signed prescription or letter from your physician. If you have a disease that requires treatment with **narcotics,** you should also carry documented proof with you—smuggling narcotics aboard a plane is a serious offense that carries severe penalties in the U.S.

HIV-positive visitors should do their own research, because requirements for entering the United States are somewhat vague and change frequently. According to the latest publication of *HIV and Immigrants: A Manual for AIDS Service Providers,* the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) doesn't require a medical exam for entry into the United States, but INS officials may stop individuals because they look sick or because they are carrying AIDS/HIV medicine.

If an HIV-positive noncitizen applies for a non-immigrant visa, the question on the application regarding communicable diseases is tricky no matter which way it's answered. If the applicant checks "no," INS may deny the visa on the grounds that the applicant committed fraud. If the applicant checks "yes" or if INS suspects the person is HIV-positive, it will deny the visa unless the applicant asks for a special waiver for visitors. This waiver is for people visiting the United States for a short time, to attend a conference, for instance, to visit close relatives, or to receive medical treatment. It can be a confusing situation. For up-to-the-minute information, contact **AIDSinfo** (✆ **800/448-0440** or 301/519-6616 outside the U.S.; www.aidsinfo.nih.gov) or the **Gay Men's Health Crisis** (✆ **212/367-1000;** www.gmhc.org).

DRIVER'S LICENSES Foreign driver's licenses are mostly recognized in the United States, although you may want to get an international driver's license if your home license is not written in English.

CUSTOMS

WHAT YOU CAN BRING IN

Personal effects, such as cameras and fishing rods, are exempt from duties. In addition, every visitor over 21 years of age may bring in the following without paying duties: (1) 1 liter of wine or hard liquor; (2) 200 cigarettes, or 100 cigars (but not from Cuba), or 3 pounds of smoking tobacco; and (3) $100 worth of gifts. To claim these

exemptions you must spend at least 72 hours in the United States and cannot have claimed them within the preceding 6 months. It is altogether forbidden to bring into the country foodstuffs (particularly fruit, cooked meats, and canned goods) and plants (vegetables, seeds, tropical plants, and the like). Foreign tourists may bring in or take out up to $10,000 in U.S. or foreign currency with no formalities; larger sums must be declared to U.S. Customs on entering or leaving, which includes filing form CM 4790. For more specific information regarding U.S. Customs, contact your nearest U.S. embassy or consulate, or the **U.S. Customs** office (✆ **202/927-1770;** www.customs.ustreas.gov).

The duty on goods exceeding these exemptions is 3% of the value on the first $1,000 (the flat rate); above that amount, it depends on the item. The flat rate applies only to items for your own use or gifts and can be used only once in 30 days.

It is exceedingly complicated for foreign visitors to bring **firearms** into the United States; don't even consider it except for a hunting trip. Unless you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident alien, you cannot bring in, buy, or even possess a gun without a permit from the **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms** (✆ **202/927-8320;** www.atf.treas.gov); these take several months to acquire (the application is on the ATF website). The application must be accompanied by a valid hunting license (there are a few narrow exceptions, such as athletes involved in shooting competitions). The **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** (✆ **907/465-4190;** www.alaska.gov/adfg) sells hunting licenses to non-resident aliens for $300; however, aliens can hunt only with a registered guide. First, find the guide, then let him or her help with all the paperwork, but start many months in advance and be ready to pay.

For more details on what you can and cannot bring, go to the **U.S. Customs** website at **www.customs.ustreas.gov** and click "Travel."

WHAT YOU CAN TAKE HOME

WILDLIFE PRODUCTS Alaska Native art and crafts made from protected marine mammals are perfectly legal (even though possessing the raw animal pelts is not legal for non-Natives), but you do need to get permits to take these items out of the country. Permits also are required to export products made from brown or black bear, bobcat, wolf, lynx, or river otter. The best solution is to have the shop where you buy the item mail it to you insured, and have them take care of the paperwork. If you carry it with you, or buy from someone who can't handle the paperwork, you'll need to get your own permits. For Alaska wildlife products other than marine mammals, get a Personal Effects Exemption Certificate for the item by calling the **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** in Anchorage (✆ **907/271-6198**). They can handle it in a few days. To take **marine mammal products** to another country, you need a permit from the **Fish and Wildlife Service** in Washington, D.C. (✆ **800/358-2104;** http://international.fws.gov). It can take a month to get these permits. There may be other regulations for bringing walrus ivory into your home country because of the international ban on elephant ivory. It's important to note that Alaska Natives have used these materials for thousands of years, and their harvest poses no threat to the species.

OTHER GOODS Rules governing what you can bring back duty-free vary from country to country, and generally are posted on the Web.

U.K. citizens returning from a non-EU country have a customs allowance of: 200 cigarettes; 50 cigars;

250g of smoking tobacco; 2 liters of still table wine; 1 liter of spirits or strong liqueurs (over 22% volume); 2 liters of fortified wine, sparkling wine or other liqueurs; 60cc (ml) perfume; 250cc (ml) of toilet water; and £145 worth of all other goods, including gifts and souvenirs. People under 17 cannot have the tobacco or alcohol allowance. For more information, contact **HM Customs & Excise** at ✆ **0845/010-9000** (from outside the U.K., 020/8929-0152), or consult their website at **www.hmce.gov.uk**.

For a clear summary of **Canadian** rules, request the booklet *I Declare,* issued by the **Canada Customs and Revenue Agency** (✆ **800/461-9999** in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.ccra-adrc.gc.ca). Canada allows its citizens a C$750 exemption, and you're allowed to bring back duty-free 1 carton of cigarettes, 1 can of tobacco, 40 imperial ounces of liquor, and 50 cigars. In addition, you're allowed to mail gifts to Canada valued at less than C$60 a day, provided they're unsolicited and don't contain alcohol or tobacco (write on the package "Unsolicited gift, under $60 value"). All valuables should be declared on the Y-38 form before departure from Canada, including serial numbers of valuables you already own, such as expensive foreign cameras. *Note:* The $750 exemption can only be used once a year and only after an absence of 7 days.

The duty-free allowance in **Australia** is A$400 or, for those under 18, A$200. Citizens age 18 and over can bring in 250 cigarettes or 250 grams of loose tobacco, and 1,125cc (ml) of alcohol. If you're returning with valuables you already own, such as foreign-made cameras, you should file form B263. A helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go.* For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ✆ **1300/363-263,** or log on to **www.customs.gov.au**.

The duty-free allowance for **New Zealand** is NZ$700. Citizens over 17 can bring in 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, or 250 grams of tobacco (or a mixture of all 3 if their combined weight doesn't exceed 250g); plus 4.5 liters of wine and beer, or 1.125 liters of liquor. New Zealand currency does not carry import or export restrictions. Fill out a certificate of export, listing the valuables you are taking out of the country; that way, you can bring them back without paying duty. Most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4.* For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs,** The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (✆ **0800/428-786** or 04/473-6099; www.customs.govt.nz).

INSURANCE

Although it's not required of travelers, health insurance is highly recommended. Unlike many European countries, the United States does not usually offer free or low-cost medical care to its citizens or visitors. Doctors and hospitals are expensive, and in most cases will require advance payment or proof of coverage before they render their services. Though lack of health insurance may prevent you from being admitted to a hospital in nonemergencies, don't worry about being left on a street corner to die: The American way is to fix you now and bill the living daylights out of you later.

Insurance policies can cover everything from the loss or theft of your baggage and trip cancellation to the guarantee of bail in case you're arrested. Good policies will also cover the costs of an accident, repatriation, or death. See "Insurance" in chapter 2 for more information.

Packages such as **Europ Assistance's "Worldwide Healthcare Plan"** are sold by European automobile clubs and travel agencies at attractive rates.

Tips Exchange Money Before Leaving Home

There are no formal foreign currency exchange bureaus in Alaska. A **Wells Fargo Bank** branch in the 5th Avenue Mall in Anchorage (✆ **907/265-2093;** www.wellsfargo.com) has a currency exchange desk, the only specialized service in the state. You can change money elsewhere, but it generally is not a good idea. Obtain U.S. dollars before you leave home. You can pay for almost anything with a credit or charge card, with the exchange automatically made by your bank. You can also withdraw US dollars from ATMs by using your credit card, although the credit card company will usually charge an astronomical fee. You need to know your credit card PIN in order to use your card at an ATM.

Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc. (✆ **800/821-2828;** www.worldwide-assistance.com) is the agent for Europ Assistance in the United States.

In Britain, most big travel agents offer their own insurance and will probably try to sell you their package when you book a holiday. Think before you sign. **Britain's Consumers' Association** recommends that you insist on seeing the policy and reading the fine print before buying travel insurance. **The Association of British Insurers** (✆ **020/7600-3333;** www.abi.org.uk) gives advice by phone and publishes *Holiday Insurance,* a free guide to policy provisions and prices. You might also shop around for better deals: Try **Columbus Direct** (✆ **020/7375-0011;** www.columbusdirect.net).

Canadians should check with their provincial health plan offices or call **Health Canada** (✆ **613/957-2991;** www.hc-sc.gc.ca) to find out the extent of their coverage and what documentation and receipts they must take home in case they are treated in the United States.

I also strongly recommend trip-cancellation and interruption insurance if you place deposits on Alaska services or accommodations. Insurance providers are covered under "Insurance," in chapter 2. Don't buy the insurance directly from the provider, as their bankruptcy is one of the pitfalls you should insure against.

MONEY

CURRENCY The U.S. monetary system is very simple: The most common **bills** are the $1 (colloquially, a "buck"), $5, $10, and $20 denominations. There are also $2 bills (seldom encountered), $50 bills, and $100 bills (the last two are usually not welcome as payment for small purchases). All the paper money was recently redesigned, making the famous faces adorning them disproportionately large. The old-style bills are still legal tender.

There are seven denominations of **coins**: 1¢ (1 cent, or a penny); 5¢ (5 cents, or a nickel); 10¢ (10 cents, or a dime); 25¢ (25 cents, or a quarter); 50¢ (50 cents, or a half dollar); the new gold-colored "Sacagawea" coin worth $1; and, prized by collectors, the rare, older silver dollar.

In addition to the section below, see chapter 2 for further discussion of **credit cards, ATMs, traveler's checks,** and other payment methods in Alaska.

CREDIT CARDS & ATMS At least one credit card is a virtual necessity, essential to rent a car or place a deposit with many businesses. Credit cards are the most widely used form of payment in the United States: Visa (Barclaycard in Britain), MasterCard (EuroCard in Europe, Access in Britain, Chargex in Canada), American Express, Diners Club, and Discover. There are, however, a handful of stores and restaurants that do not take credit

cards, so be sure to ask in advance. Most businesses display a sticker near their entrance to let you know which cards they accept. (Note: Businesses may require a minimum purchase, usually around $10, to use a credit card.)

SAFETY

Robberies (like muggings) are quite rare in Alaska, even in Anchorage, but the incidence of rape is high. Precautions are covered in chapter 2. Thefts can happen even in tiny towns. Keep an eye on your belongings and lock your car and hotel doors. Don't leave valuables in sight in the car. Guns are ubiquitous in Alaska. I'm not aware of a tourist ever being shot, but be aware that guns enter into violent disputes more quickly here than elsewhere.

In hotels and other lodgings, always lock your room door—don't assume that once you're inside the hotel you are automatically safe and no longer need to be aware of your surroundings. Hotels are open to the public, and in a large hotel, security may not be able to screen everyone who enters.

2 Getting to the United States

All but a smattering of overseas travelers to Alaska come through other domestic airports, requiring them to pass through Seattle or another major city.

The exception is Canadians, who can drive to Alaska over the Alaska or Top of the World highways, covered in chapter 9, take an Alaska Marine Highway System ferry from Prince Rupert, B.C., covered in chapter 5, or fly from Vancouver to Anchorage.

Getting through immigration control and Customs can take 2 or 3 hours, especially if you enter the country at a big-city airport on a busy summer day. Leave at least that much time to connect to a domestic flight. Passing between Alaska and Canada takes no time at all unless you have special complications. See chapter 9 for Canadian border requirements.

The smart traveler can find numerable ways to reduce the price of a plane ticket simply by taking time to shop around. For example, overseas visitors can take advantage of the APEX (Advance Purchase Excursion) reductions offered by all major U.S. and European carriers.

FAST FACTS: For the International Traveler

See "Fast Facts: Alaska" in chapter 2 for information not listed here.

Automobile Organizations Auto clubs will supply maps, suggested routes, guidebooks, accident and bail-bond insurance, and emergency road service. The **American Automobile Association (AAA)** is the major auto club in the United States. If you belong to an auto club in your home country, inquire about AAA reciprocity before you leave. You may be able to join AAA even if you're not a member of a reciprocal club; to inquire, call AAA (✆ **800/222-4357**). AAA is actually an organization of regional auto clubs; so look under "AAA Automobile Club" in the White Pages of the telephone directory. AAA has a nationwide emergency road service telephone number (✆ **800/AAA-HELP**).

Business Hours See p. 53.

Currency & Exchange See "Money" under "Preparing for Your Trip," above.

Drinking Laws The legal age for purchase and consumption of alcoholic beverages is 21; proof of age is required and often requested at bars, nightclubs, and restaurants, so it's always a good idea to bring ID when you go out. Beer and wine often can be purchased in supermarkets, but liquor laws vary from state to state.

Do not carry open containers of alcohol in your car or any public area that isn't zoned for alcohol consumption. The police can fine you on the spot. And nothing will ruin your trip faster than getting a citation for DUI ("driving under the influence"), so don't even think about driving while intoxicated. See p. 54 for information on rural communities that have laws prohibiting the importation and possession of alcohol (this is known as being "dry") or only the sale but not possession of alcohol (known as being "damp").

Electricity Like Canada, the United States uses 110 to 120 volts AC (60 cycles), compared to 220 to 240 volts AC (50 cycles) in most of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. If your small appliances use 220 to 240 volts, you'll need a 110-volt transformer and a plug adapter with two flat parallel pins to operate them here. Downward converters that change 220–240 volts to 110–120 volts are difficult to find in the United States, so bring one with you.

Embassies & Consulates **Japan** is the only nation that has a consulate-general in Alaska. It's located in Anchorage, at 3601 C St., Suite 1300, Anchorage, AK 99503 (✆ **907/562-8424**).

All embassies are located in Washington, D.C. Call for directory information in Washington, D.C. (✆ **202/555-1212**) or log on to **www.embassy.org/embassies**.

Emergencies Call ✆ **911** to report a fire, call the police, or get an ambulance almost anywhere in the United States. This is a toll-free call (no coins are required at public telephones).

Gasoline (Petrol) Petrol is known as gasoline (or simply "gas") in the United States, and petrol stations are known as both gas stations and service stations. Gasoline costs less here than in Europe (about $1.70 per gal. at press time). Taxes are already included in the printed pump price. One U.S. gallon equals 3.8 liters or .85 imperial gallons.

Holidays Banks, government offices, post offices, and many stores, restaurants, and museums are closed on the following legal national holidays: January 1 (New Year's Day), the third Monday in January (Martin Luther King Jr., Day), the third Monday in February (Presidents' Day, Washington's Birthday), the last Monday in May (Memorial Day), July 4 (Independence Day), the first Monday in September (Labor Day), the second Monday in October (Columbus Day), November 11 (Veterans' Day/Armistice Day), the fourth Thursday in November (Thanksgiving Day), and December 25 (Christmas). Additionally, banks and state government offices in Alaska close on two state holidays: the last Monday in March (Seward's Day) and October 18 (Alaska Day, which is celebrated on the nearest Fri or Mon if the 18th falls on a weekend).

Legal Aid If you are "pulled over" for a minor infraction (such as speeding), never attempt to pay the fine directly to a police officer; this could

be construed as attempted bribery, a much more serious crime. Pay fines by mail, or directly into the hands of the clerk of the court. If accused of a more serious offense, say and do nothing before consulting a lawyer. Here the burden is on the state to prove a person's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, and everyone has the right to remain silent, whether he or she is suspected of a crime or actually arrested. Once arrested, a person can make one telephone call to a party of his or her choice. Call your embassy or consulate.

Mail The locations of the post offices in each town in this book are listed in the appropriate "Fast Facts" sections. You can send mail from your hotel or the post office. Mail in the United States must have a five-digit postal code (or ZIP code), after the two-letter abbreviation of the state to which the mail is addressed.

If you aren't sure what your address will be in the United States, mail can be sent to you, in your name, c/o ("care of") General Delivery at the main post office of the city or region where you expect to be. (Call ✆ **800/275-8777** for information on the nearest post office.) The addressee must pick up mail in person and must produce proof of identity (driver's license, passport, etc.). Most post offices will hold your mail for up to 1 month, and are open Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm, and Saturday from 9am to 3pm.

At press time, domestic postage rates were 23¢ for a postcard and 37¢ for a letter. For international mail, mailing a first-class letter of up to 1 ounce costs 80¢ (60¢ to Canada and to Mexico), a first-class postcard 70¢ (50¢ to Canada and Mexico), and a preprinted postal aerogramme costs 70¢.

Measurements See the chart on the inside front cover of this book for details on converting metric measurements to U.S. equivalents.

Taxes Neither the U.S. nor the state of Alaska impose a value-added tax (VAT) or sales tax, but most Alaska communities, with the exception of Anchorage, levy their own sales taxes, and all communities impose taxes on hotel rooms and rental cars. See the individual town sections' "Fast Facts" for local tax rates.

Telephone & Fax Before using a telephone in a hotel, check for surcharges on long-distance and local calls, which can be astronomical. If so, you're better off using a **public pay telephone,** which you'll find in most public buildings and private establishments as well as in hotel lobbies and on the street. Many convenience stores sell **prepaid calling cards** in denominations up to $50; these can be the least expensive way to call home. **Local calls** made from public pay phones usually cost 25¢. In smaller Alaska communities, you may have to wait for the person you are calling to answer before quickly putting the money in the phone. Pay phones do not accept pennies or anything larger than a quarter.

Most long-distance and international calls can be dialed directly from any phone. For **long-distance calls within Alaska and the United States and to Canada,** dial 1 followed by the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number. An area code of 800, 888, or 877 is toll free from anywhere. However, calls to numbers in area codes **700** and **900** (chat lines,

bulletin boards, "dating" services, and so on) can be very expensive—usually a charge of 95¢ to $3 or more per minute, and they sometimes have minimum charges that can run as high as $15 or more.

For **international calls to places other than Canada,** dial 011 followed by the country code, city code, and telephone number of the person you are calling. U.S. area codes and international country codes are listed in the front of the White Pages telephone directory, or dial 0 to get a country code from the operator. If you're calling the **United States** from another country, the country code is 01.

For **collect, operator-assisted, and person-to-person calls,** dial 0 (the number zero) followed by the area code and number you want; an operator will then come on the line, and you should specify that you are calling collect, or person-to-person, or both. If your operator-assisted call is international, ask for the overseas operator.

For **local directory assistance** ("information"), dial 411; for long-distance information, dial 1, then the appropriate area code and 555-1212.

There are two kinds of telephone directories in the United States. The so-called **White Pages** list private households and business subscribers in alphabetical order; the **Yellow Pages** list businesses and organizations categorized by the services they provide. In Alaska, the two directories are contained in the same book in all towns except Anchorage. Look in the front of the White Pages for emergency numbers and instructions on making long-distance calls. Blue pages near the front of the White Pages directory list numbers for government agencies.

Time Most of the U.S. is divided into six time zones. From east to west, they are: Eastern, Central, Mountain, Pacific, Alaska, and Hawaii/Aleutian. For example, noon in New York City is 11am in Chicago, 10am in Denver, 9am in Los Angeles, 8am in mainland Alaska, and 7am in Honolulu and the outer Aleutian Islands. Daylight saving time is in effect from 1am on the first Sunday in April to 1am the last Sunday in October and moves the clock 1 hour ahead of standard time.

Tipping Tips make up a major part of the compensation for many service workers. To leave no tip in a restaurant is socially unacceptable and leaves your server unpaid. To leave a small tip is a powerful indication of displeasure for bad service.

In restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, tip your server 15% to 20% of the check, depending on the quality of service. Tip **bartenders** 10% to 15%, tip **checkroom attendants** $1 per garment, and tip **valet-parking attendants** $1 per vehicle. Tipping is not expected in cafeterias or fast-food restaurants where you order at a counter. In hotels, tip **bellhops** $1 per bag ($2–$3 if you have a lot of luggage) and tip the **housekeeper** at least $1 to $2 per day. Tip **cab drivers** 15% of the fare and tip **hairdressers** and **barbers** 15% to 20%. Do not tip gas-station attendants and ushers at movies and theaters.

See the box "A Guide to Guide Gratuities" on p. 40 for guidelines on tipping outdoor guides and outfitters.

Toilets You won't find public toilets (or "restrooms") on the streets in most U.S. cities, but they can be found in hotel lobbies, bars, restaurants, museums, department stores, railway and bus stations, or service stations.

4

Cruising Alaska's Coast

By Jerry Brown & Fran Wenograd Golden

Alaska is one of the top cruise destinations in the world, with three-quarters of a million people sailing the state's coast annually, visiting the towns and wilderness areas of the Southeast and the Gulf of Alaska by day and burrowing into their ships for effortless travel by night. This element of cruise travel—the fact that it's *easy*—is one of its main drawing cards for visitors to the Southeast, where the lack of roads between towns makes the waters of the Inside Passage the region's de facto highway. You could do the same routes on the Alaska Marine Highway System (the state ferry), but you'd have to be willing to invest more time—both for the actual traveling and for the planning—and be willing to give up the cruise ship's comforts and diversions. (On the other hand, the ferry gives you unlimited stops along the way and a chance to meet Alaskan residents; see "Exploring Southeast Alaska," in chapter 5.)

Now for the bad news: All those cruise ships aren't necessarily good for Alaska and its residents. Alaskans are known for their hospitality, but we all have our limits. The presence of too many cruise passengers has unquestionably spoiled some of Alaska's quaint places. Once-charming streets are transformed into carnival midways jammed wall-to-wall with people from simultaneous ships landings. Some communities feel that the cultural bulldozing brought by these floating cities is not worth the economic benefit, and have placed limits on the number of ships that can come in to port or levied new taxes based on the number of people the ships bring. After years of fast growth, the industry, too, has begun talk of a "carrying capacity."

As a visitor, you can avoid these problems or you can ignore them. To avoid overcrowded port calls, choose a small-ship cruise that spends less time hopping from town to town and more time enjoying the wilderness. Such vessels also call on small towns that the big ships can't get into. On the other hand, riding a megaship is a different kind of fun—the ship itself is an attraction with far more amenities than any of the towns along the way. If you need to relax and leave all stresses of life at home behind—and if seeing Alaska isn't the most important part of your trip—a big ship is the way to go. You can always travel independently after the cruise to find the real Alaska. (For more on the relative benefits of big versus small cruise ships, see "Weighing Your Cruise Options," below.)

In this chapter we'll go through the cruise options available in the state, focusing primarily on those that give a real in-depth experience. For even more information, pick up a copy of *Frommer's Alaska Cruises & Ports of Call.*

1 Weighing Your Cruise Options

Your three main questions in choosing a cruise in Alaska are, "When should I go?" "Where do I want to go?" and "How big a ship?"

WHEN TO GO?

Alaska is a seasonal, as opposed to year-round, cruise destination, with the season generally running May through September, although some smaller ships start up in April. May and September are considered the shoulder season, and lower brochure rates are offered during these months (and more aggressive discounts, as well). Cruising in May is extremely pleasant—the crowds have yet to arrive and locals are friendlier than they are later in the season, when they're pretty much ready to see the tourists go home for the winter. There is also the statistical fact that May in the Inside Passage ports is the driest month in the season. Late September, though, also offers the advantage of fewer fellow tourists clogging the ports. The warmest months are June, July, and August, with temperatures generally around 50° to 80°F (10°C–27°C) during the day, and cooler at night. You may not need a parka, but you will need to bring along some outerwear. June 21 is the longest day of the year, with the sky lit virtually all night. June tends to be drier than July and August (we have experienced trips in July when it rained nearly every day). April and May are drier than September, although in early April you may encounter freezing rain and other vestiges of winter. If you are considering traveling in a shoulder month, keep in mind that some shops don't open until Memorial Day, and the visitor season is generally considered over on Labor Day (although cruise lines operate well into Sept).

INSIDE PASSAGE OR THE GULF OF ALASKA?

Typically, the cruise lines offer two basic weeklong itineraries. **Inside Passage cruises** generally sail round-trip from Vancouver, British Columbia, visiting three or four port towns (typically Juneau, Skagway, Ketchikan, and either Sitka, Haines, or Victoria, B.C.) along the Inside Passage, spending a day in Glacier Bay or one of the other glacier areas, and spending 2 days "at sea," meaning they just cruise along, allowing you to relax and enjoy the scenery.

Gulf of Alaska cruises generally sail north- and southbound between Vancouver and Seward (the port for Anchorage) in alternating weeks (Princess cruises go up to Whittier this year), visiting many of the same towns and attractions as the Inside Passage cruises but—since they don't have to turn around and

Tips Sick Ships

Every summer, hundreds of cruise-ship passengers and plenty of visitors on shore come down with vomiting and diarrhea caused by a bug now known as the norovirus. I believe I've had it, and my review is definitely negative. The miserable illness lasts a day or two; it's rarely serious, although some passengers do end up in the hospital because of dehydration. The virus is extremely contagious from the first symptoms until at least three days and up to two weeks after it clears up. Touching a contaminated handrail and then your face is enough to catch it. To minimize your chances of contracting the virus, wash hands frequently, drink bottled water and avoid eating raw food on board, especially shellfish. The Centers for Disease Control also recommended in 1998 that passengers 65 and older or those with chronic illnesses check with their doctors before taking a cruise. The CDC website (www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp) posts sanitation inspection scores for each ship. Type "norovirus" into their search page to find a fact sheet.

sail back to Vancouver—also tacking on a visit to Valdez, Hubbard Glacier, College Fjord, or one or more of the other Gulf towns or natural attractions.

Though most of the major operators stick pretty closely to these two basic routes, the small-ship cruise lines tend to offer more **small-port and wilderness-oriented itineraries,** some sailing round-trip from Juneau or Sitka, some sailing between Juneau and Ketchikan, and one even sailing between Juneau and Glacier Bay. Many of these ships visit the major ports of call, but may also include visits to small ports that aren't accessible to the bigger ships, calling at towns like Petersburg, Wrangell, Gustavus, Elfin Cove, and possibly the Native village of Metlakatla. Some ships sail itineraries where passengers can explore by kayak or take hiking treks.

Cruisetours combine a cruise with a land tour, either before or after the cruise. Typical packages link the cruise with a 3- to 5-day Anchorage/Denali/Fairbanks tour, a 7-day Yukon tour (which visits Anchorage, Denali, and Fairbanks on the way), or a 5- to 7-day tour of the Canadian Rockies. Holland America, Princess, and Cruise West (a distant 3rd) are the three leaders in the cruisetour market. Even if you book with another cruise line, chances are your land tour will be through one of these operators.

BIG SHIP OR SMALL?

Imagine an elephant. Now imagine your pet pug dog, Sparky. That's about the size difference between your options in the Alaska market: behemoth modern ships and small, more exploratory coastal vessels.

BIG SHIPS The **big ships** in the Alaska market fall generally into two categories: midsize ships and megaships. Carrying as many as 2,670 passengers, the **megaships** look and feel like floating resorts. Big on glitz, they offer loads of activities, attract many families and (especially in Alaska) seniors, offer many public rooms (including fancy casinos and fully equipped gyms), and provide a wide variety of meal and entertainment options. And though they may feature 1 or 2 formal nights per trip, the ambience is generally casual. The Alaska vessels of the Carnival, Celebrity, Princess, and Royal Caribbean fleets all fit in this category, as does Norwegian Cruise Line's *Norwegian Sky* and *Norwegian Sun.* **Midsize ships** in Alaska for 2004 fall into two segments: the ultra-luxury ships of the Crystal and Radisson Seven Seas fleets; and the modern midsize *Veendam, Ryndam, Volendam, Amsterdam, Maasdam, Zaandam,* and *Statendam* of Holland America Line. In general, the sizes of these ships are less significant than the general on-board atmosphere of the company that runs them. Both the midsize ships and the megaships have a great range of facilities for passengers. Cabins on these ships range from cubbyholes to large suites, depending on the ship and the type of cabin you book. Big dining rooms and a tremendous variety of cuisines are the norm. These ships carry a lot of people and can, at times, feel crowded.

The sizes of these big ships also come with **three major drawbacks** for passengers: (1) they can't sail into narrow passages or shallow-water ports, (2) their size and inflexible schedules limit their ability to stop or even slow down when wildlife is spotted, and (3) when their passengers disembark in a town, they tend to overwhelm that town, limiting your ability to see the real Alaska.

SMALL SHIPS Just as big cruise ships are mostly for people who want every resort amenity, **small** or **alternative ships** are best suited for people who prefer a casual, crowd-free cruise experience that gives passengers a chance to get up close and personal with Alaska's natural surroundings and wildlife. Small ships offer little in terms of amenities: they usually have small cabins, only one

lounge/bar and dining room, and no exercise facilities, entertainment, or organized activities. There are no stabilizers on most of these smaller ships, and the ride can be bumpy in open water—which isn't much of a problem on Inside Passage itineraries, since most of the cruising area is protected from sea waves. They are also difficult for travelers with disabilities, as only four (Cruise West's *Spirit of '98* and *Spirit of Oceanus,* Clipper's *Clipper Odyssey,* and American West Steamboat Company's *Express of the North*) have elevators. Despite all of this, they're universally more expensive than the big ships, and offer fewer discounts. That's the minus side.

On the plus side, they can sail almost anywhere (including far into Misty Fjords, where no large ship can penetrate). These ships tend to have more flexibility in their schedules than the large ships, and will usually take time to linger if whales or other wildlife are sighted nearby. Their small size doesn't scare off wildlife as easily as the big ships, and the fact that you're at or near the waterline (rather than 10 stories up, as on the large ships) means you get a more close-up view. Many smaller cruise companies compensate for a lack of on-board activities by offering more active off-ship opportunities, such as hiking or kayaking. The alternative ships are also more likely to feature expert lectures on Alaska-specific topics, such as marine biology, history, and Native culture.

Visitors aboard large ships may physically be in Alaska, but unless they're reminded of it they might never know, such is the disjunction between the glitzy modern ships and the real world outside. Visitors aboard small ships, however, get an experience that's many times more intimate, allowing them to really get in touch with the place they've come to see. For all these reasons, my advice to anyone wanting to experience Alaska rather than just get a postcard impression of it is to spend the extra money for a small-ship cruise. As with any product, you get what you pay for, and by paying extra in the short term for a more intimate cruise, you're almost guaranteed to have an Alaska experience that you'll remember your whole life.

2 The Best Cruise Experiences in Alaska

Cruise lines are in the business of giving their guests a good time, so they've all got something going for them. Here's my pick of Alaska's best, though, in a few different categories.

- **The Best Ships for Luxury:** Crystal Cruises' 940-passenger ***Crystal Harmony*** is the big luxury ship in the Alaska market. We're talking superb cuisine, elegant service, lovely surroundings, great cabins, and sparkling entertainment. If you want a more casual kind of luxury (a really nice ship with a no-tie-required policy), Radisson Seven Seas Cruises' ***Seven Seas Mariner*** offers just that, including plush all-suite cabins (most with private balconies) and excellent cuisine (plus, you get complimentary wine with dinner). And for the ultimate Alaska small ship experience, check out the yachts of ***American Safari Cruises,*** where soft adventure comes with luxury accouterments.
- **The Best of the Mainstream Ships:** Every line's most recent ships are beautiful, but Celebrity's ***Infinity*** is a stunner, as is its sister ship, ***Summit.*** These modern vessels, with their extensive art collections, cushy public rooms, and expanded spa areas, give Celebrity a formidable presence in Alaska in 2004.
- **The Best of the Small Ships:** Clipper Cruise Line's newest vessel, the ***Clipper Odyssey,*** is a really stunning little ship, offering a higher level of comfort

than most of the other small ships in this category. The most adventurous small-ship itineraries in Alaska are offered by Glacier Bay Cruiseline, whose ***Wilderness Adventurer*** and ***Wilderness Explorer*** both concentrate on kayaking, hiking, and wildlife, hardly visiting any ports at all over the course of their itineraries.

- **The Best Ships for Families:** All the major lines have well-established kids' programs. Holland America and Norwegian Cruise Line win points in Alaska for their special shore excursions for kids and teens, and Carnival offers special shore excursions for teens.
- **The Best Ships for Pampering:** It's a toss-up: Celebrity's ***Infinity*** and ***Summit*** offer wonderful AquaSpas complete with thalassotherapy pools and a wealth of soothing and beautifying treatments, while ***Crystal Harmony*** pampers all around, and the solariums on Royal Caribbean's ***Vision of the Seas, Legend of the Seas,*** and new ***Radiance of the Seas*** offer relaxing indoor pool retreats.
- **The Best Shipboard Cuisine:** Radisson and Crystal (in that order) are tops. Of the mainstream lines, Celebrity is the best, with its cuisine overseen by renowned French chef Michel Roux. And there are signs of a new and rather surprising challenger for the cuisine award: Carnival. Although the line had not hitherto been especially noted for its food, it has upgraded both its main dining room and buffet offerings. And the line's new ***Carnival Spirit*** has raised the company's standards considerably. Its intimate Nouveau Supper Club (which you can visit for a $25 fee) serves about as elegant a meal as you're likely to find anywhere.
- **The Best Ships for On-board Activities:** The ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean offer a very full roster of on-board activities, that range from the sublime (such as lectures) to the ridiculous (such as contests designed to get passengers to do or say crazy things).
- **The Best Ships for Entertainment:** Look to the big ships here. Carnival and Royal Caribbean are tops when it comes to an overall package of show productions, nightclub acts, lounge performances, and audience-participation entertainment. And Princess offers particularly well-done stage shows.
- **The Best Ships for Whale-Watching:** If they come close enough, you can see whales from all the ships in Alaska. Smaller ships, though, such as those operated by Glacier Bay Cruiseline and Cruise West, may actually change course to follow a whale. Get your cameras ready!
- **The Best Ships for Cruisetours:** Princess and Holland America are the entrenched market leaders in getting you into the Interior either before or after your cruise. They own their own hotels, deluxe motor coaches, and rail cars, and after many years in the business, they both really know what they're doing. Some of the other lines actually buy their cruisetour products from Princess or Holland America. Holland America's cruisetours' strength is its 3- and 4-night cruises combined with an Alaska/Yukon land package. Its exclusive entry into the Yukon's Kluane National Park last year proved extremely popular. Princess is arguably stronger in 7-day Gulf of Alaska cruises in conjunction with Denali/Fairbanks or Kenai Peninsula land arrangements. In 2002, Princess also introduced its fifth wilderness lodge—the Copper River Lodge, by the entry to hitherto difficult-to-access Wrangell–St. Elias National Park. Its addition gave Princess an attractive new cruisetour component, which will be even more popular this year, with growing public awareness.

- **The Best Ports: Juneau** and **Skagway** are our favorites, but we also really like Haines. Juneau is one of the most visually pleasing small cities anywhere and certainly the prettiest capital city in America. It's fronted by the Gastineau Channel and backed by Mount Juneau and Mount Roberts, offers the very accessible Mendenhall Glacier, and is otherwise surrounded by wilderness—and it's a really fun city to visit, too. As for Skagway, no town in Alaska is more historically significant, and the old buildings are so perfect you might think you stepped into a Disney version of what a gold-rush town should look like. If, that is, you can get over the decidedly turn-of-the-millennium Starbucks coffee vendor in the Mercantile Center and all the upscale jewelry shops that have followed cruise passengers from the Caribbean. For a more low-key Alaska experience, take the ferry from Skagway to Haines, which really reminds us of the low-key Alaska as depicted on the TV show *Northern Exposure* and is a great place to spot eagles and other wildlife. (Some ships also stop at Haines as a port of call.)
- **The Best Shore Excursions:** Flightseeing and helicopter trips in Alaska are really unforgettable ways to check out the scenery if you can afford them. (They're pretty pricey.) A helicopter trip to a dog sled camp at the top of a glacier (usually the priciest of the offerings) affords both incredibly pretty views and a chance to try your hand at the truly Alaskan sport of dog sledding (and earn great bragging rights with the folks back home). For a less extravagant excursion, nothing beats a ride on a clear day on the aforementioned White Pass and Yukon Route railway out of Skagway. And we also like to get active with kayak and mountain-biking excursions offered by most lines at most ports; in addition to affording a chance to work off those shipboard calories, these excursions typically provide optimum opportunities for spotting eagles, bears, seals, and other wildlife.
- **The Best Natural Sights Seen from On Board:** There are so many in Alaska it's hard to choose, but Glacier Bay, Hubbard Glacier, College Fjord, and Misty Fjords National Monument (into which big ships can only get a short distance) would have to appear on anyone's top-10 list.

3 Booking Your Cruise

Almost every cruise line publishes brochure prices that are the travel equivalent of a new car's sticker price: wildly inflated in the hope that someone, somewhere, might take them at face value. In reality, especially as sailings get close and it looks as if the line will get stuck with unsold space, cruise lines are almost universally willing to sell their cruises for much, much less. (The small-ship lines tend to be the exception to this rule. Since they have less space to sell and appeal to a more specific market niche, they can often get their initial asking price.)

Traditionally (meaning over the past 30 years or so) people have booked their cruises through **travel agents.** But, you may be wondering, hasn't the traditional travel agent been replaced by the **Internet,** and gone the way of typewriters and eight-track tapes? Not exactly. Travel agents are alive and kicking, though the Internet has indeed staked its claim alongside them and knocked some out of business. Some traditional agencies have also created their own websites to try and keep pace.

So which is the better way to book a cruise these days? Good question. The answer can be both. If you're computer savvy, have a good handle on all the elements that go into a cruise, and have narrowed down the choices to a few cruise lines that appeal to you, websites are a great way to trawl the seas at your

Tips Shopping for Shore Tours

Most cruise-ship passengers sign up for onshore activities and excursions that leave from the dock when they arrive on board. It's easy and convenient, and you can be sure the outing will be timed to your port of call. On the down side, these tend to be the most superficial and highest-priced choices in town and almost always involve large groups. For outdoor activities, trooping down a trail or paddling a sea kayak in a big mob can spoil the experience. There is an alternative, however. A large part of the high shipboard price for shore tours is the cut taken by the cruise line. You can get a much better deal (as much as half off) by arranging your own activities in advance. Most guides will be happy to tailor an outing to your limited time, and you'll probably have a far more intimate experience in the bargain. And it only takes a little advance prepwork: Study your ports of call, the activities and operators there (for which this book will be an invaluable guide), and the time you will be ashore, and then make your reservations before you leave, putting down the appropriate deposits and getting directions for making transfers.

own pace and check out last-minute deals, which can be dramatic. On the other hand, you'll barely get a stitch of personalized service searching for and booking a cruise online. If something goes wrong or you need help getting a refund or arranging special meals or other matters, you're on your own.

BOOKING A SMALL-SHIP CRUISE

The small-ship companies in Alaska—Glacier Bay Cruiseline, American Safari Cruises, Clipper, Cruise West, and Lindblad Expeditions—all offer real niche-oriented cruise experiences, attracting passengers who have a very good idea of the kind of experience they want (usually educational and/or adventurous, and always casual and small-scale). In many cases, a large percentage of passengers on any given cruise will have sailed with the line before. Because of all this, and because the passenger capacity of these small ships is so low (12–138), in general you're not going to find the kind of deep discounts you do with the large ships. Still, for the most part these lines rely on agents to handle their bookings, taking very few reservations directly. (Clipper is the exception to this rule, taking most of their Alaska bookings directly, rather than through agents.) All of the lines have a list of agents with whom they do considerable business and can hook you up with one or another of them if you call (or e-mail) and ask for an agent near you.

BOOKING A MAINSTREAM CRUISE

If you don't know a good travel agent already, try to find one through your friends, preferably those who have cruised before. For the most personal service, look for an agent in your local area, and for the most knowledgeable service, look for an agent who has cruising experience. It's perfectly okay to ask an agent questions about his or her personal knowledge of the product, such as whether he or she has ever cruised in Alaska or with one of the lines you're considering. The easiest way to be sure the agent is experienced in booking cruises is to work with an agent at a **cruise-only agency** (meaning that the whole agency specializes in

cruises) or to find an agent who is a **cruise specialist** (meaning he or she specializes in cruises). If you are calling a full-service travel agency, ask for the **cruise desk,** which is where you'll find these specialists.

A good and easy rule of thumb to maximize your chances of finding an agent who has cruise experience and who won't rip you off is to book with agencies that are members of the **Cruise Lines International Association** (CLIA) (✆ **212/921-0066;** www.cruising.org) or the **National Association of Cruise Oriented Agencies** (NACOA) (✆ **305/663-5626;** www.nacoaonline.com). Members of both groups are cruise specialists. Membership in the **American Society of Travel Agents** (ASTA) (✆ **800/275-2782;** www.astanet.com) assures the agency is monitored for ethical practices, although it does not in itself designate cruise experience.

You can tap into the Internet sites of these organizations for easy access to agents in your area.

THE COST: WHAT'S INCLUDED & WHAT'S NOT

However you arrange to buy your cruise, what you basically have in hand at the end is a contract for transportation, lodging, dining, entertainment, housekeeping, and assorted other miscellaneous services that will be provided to you over the course of your vacation. It's important, though, to remember what extras are *not* included in your cruise fare. Are you getting a price that includes port charges, taxes, fees, and insurance, or are you getting a cruise-only fare? Are airfare and airport transfers included, or do you have to book them separately (either as an add-on to the cruise fare or on your own)? Make sure you're comparing apples with apples when making price comparisons. Read the fine print!

Aside from **airfare,** which is usually not included in your cruise fare (see more on air arrangements below), the most pricey addition to your cruise fare, particularly in Alaska, will likely be **shore excursions.** Ranging from about $20 for a walking tour to $350 or more for a helicopter or seaplane flightseeing excursion, these sightseeing tours are designed to help cruise passengers make the most of their time at the ports the ship visits, but they can add a hefty sum to your vacation costs.

You'll also want to add to your calculations **tips for the ship's crew.** Tips are given at the end of the cruise, and passengers should reserve at least $9 per passenger per day ($10 on some ships) for tips for the room steward, waiter, and busperson. (In practice, we find that most people tend to give a little more.) Additional tips to other personnel, such as the head waiter or Maitre d,' are at your discretion. On the small ships, all tips often go into one pot, which the crew divides up after the cruise.

Most ships charge extra for **alcoholic beverages** (including wine at dinner) and for soda. Nonbubbly soft drinks, such as lemonade and iced tea, are included in your cruise fare.

MONEY-SAVING STRATEGIES

Cruise pricing is a fluid medium, and there are a number of strategies you can use to save money off the booking price.

EARLY AND LATE BOOKING

The best way to save on an Alaska cruise is to **book in advance.** In a typical year, lines offer early-bird rates, usually 25% or more off the brochure rate, to those who book their Alaska cruise by mid- to late February of the year of the cruise. If the cabins do not fill up by the cutoff date, the early-bird rate may be extended, but it may be slightly lower—say, a 15% or 20% savings.

It used to be rare to find last-minute deals on Alaska cruises due to their popularity, but over the past few years, with bigger capacity ships in the Alaska market, there has been a proliferation of discounting (with last-minute specials offering up to 60% off and in some cases even more), and that trend is likely to continue for 2004. Keep in mind, though, that last-minute deals are usually for a very limited selection of cabins. Planning your Alaska cruise vacation well in advance and taking advantage of early-booking discounts is still the best way to go.

SHOULDER SEASON DISCOUNTS

You can save by booking a cruise in the **shoulder months of May or September,** when cruise pricing is lower than during the high summer months. Typically, Alaska cruises are divided into budget, low, economy, value, standard, and peak seasons, but since these overlap quite a bit from cruise line to cruise line, we can lump them into three basic periods:

1. **Budget/Low/Economy Season:** May and September
2. **Value/Standard Season:** Early June and late August
3. **Peak Season:** Late June, July, and early to mid-August

DISCOUNTS FOR THIRD & FOURTH PASSENGERS & GROUPS

Most ships offer highly discounted rates for third and fourth passengers sharing a cabin with two full-fare passengers, even if those two have booked at a discounted rate. It may mean a tight squeeze, but it'll save you a bundle. Some lines offer **special rates for kids,** usually on a seasonal or select-sailings basis, that may include free or discounted airfare.

One of the best ways to get a cruise deal is to book as a **group** of at least 16 people in at least eight cabins. The savings include a discounted rate, and at least the cruise portion of the 16th ticket will be free. Ask your travel agent about any group deals they may offer.

SENIOR DISCOUNTS

Seniors may be able to get extra savings on their cruise. Some lines will take 5% off the top for those 55 and up, and the senior rate applies even if the second person in the cabin is younger. Membership in groups such as AARP is not required, but such membership may bring additional savings.

BOOKING AIR TRAVEL THROUGH THE CRUISE LINE

Except during special promotions, airfare to the port of embarkation is rarely included in the cruise rates, so you'll have to purchase airfare on your own or buy it as a package with your cruise through your travel agent or online cruise site. You can usually find information on these "air/sea" programs in the back of cruise line brochures, along with prices. The benefits of booking through the cruise line is that round-trip **transfers** between the airport and the ship are usually included, and as big customers of the airlines, the cruise lines tend to get decent (if not the best) discounted airfare rates. Also, the cruise line will know your airline schedule, and in the event of delayed flights and other unavoidable snafus, will be able to do more to make sure you and the other people on your flight get on the ship; if you've booked your air transportation separately, you're on your own. The only time it may pay to book your own air transportation is if you are using frequent-flier miles and can get the air for free, or if you are fussy about which carrier you fly or route you take.

CHOOSING YOUR CABIN

Cruise-ship cabins run from tiny boxes with accordion doors and bunk beds to palatial multiroom suites with hot tubs on the balcony. Which is right for you? Price will likely be a big factor here, but so should the vacation style you prefer. If, for instance, you plan to spend a lot of quiet time in your cabin, you should probably consider booking the biggest room you can afford. If, conversely, you plan to be out on deck all the time checking out the glaciers and wildlife, you might be just as happy with a smaller (and cheaper) cabin to crash in at the end of the day. Cabins are either **inside** (without a window or porthole) or **outside** (with), the latter being more expensive. On the big ships, the more deluxe outside cabins may also come with **private verandas.** The cabins are usually described by price (highest to lowest), category (suite, deluxe, superior, standard, economy, and others), and furniture configuration ("sitting area with two lower beds," for example).

SPECIAL MENU REQUESTS

The cruise line should be informed at the time you make your reservations about any special dietary requests you have. Some lines offer kosher menus, and all will have vegetarian, low-fat, low-salt, and sugar-free options available.

4 The Small-Ship Cruise Lines

Small ships allow you to see Alaska from sea level, without the kind of distractions you get aboard the big ships—no glitzy interiors, no big shows or loud music, no casinos, no spas, and no crowds, as the largest of these ships carries only 235 passengers. You're immersed in the 49th state from the minute you wake up to the minute you fall asleep, and, for the most part, you're left alone to form your own opinions. Personally, we feel that despite these ships' higher cost, they provide by far the better cruise experience for those who really want to get the feel of Alaska.

Small-ship itineraries can be categorized as **port-to-port,** meaning they mimic the larger ships in simply sailing between port towns; **soft-adventure,** meaning they provide some outdoors experiences like hiking and kayaking, while not requiring participants to be trained athletes; and **active-adventure,** meaning the hiking and kayaking will be the real focus of the trip, and may be strenuous.

On all of these types of cruises, the small-ship experience tends toward education rather than glitzy entertainment. You'll likely get **informal and informative lectures** and, sometimes, video presentations on Alaska wildlife, history, and Native culture. Meals are served in open seatings, so you can sit where and

Discover Prince William Sound by Boat

Discovery Voyages is one of the few cruise companies that offers overnight trips into Prince William Sound. The 12-passenger, 65-foot *Discovery* departs from Whittier on 5-, 6-, 7- and 11-day cruises that bring you up close and personal with the area's glaciers. Naturalists and outdoor guides are on board to organize such trip activities as birding, whale and wildlife watching, kayaking, and hiking excursions. For more information, call ✆ **800/324-7602** or try www.discoveryvoyages.com. For more on Prince William Sound, see chapter 7.

with whom you like, and time spent huddled on the outside decks scanning for whales fosters great camaraderie among passengers.

Cabins on these ships don't generally offer TVs or telephones, and they tend to be very small and sometimes spartan (see the individual reviews for exceptions). There are no stabilizers on most of these smaller ships, so the ride can be bumpy in rough seas. Alaska Sightseeing's *Spirit of '98* and *Spirit of Oceanus,* Clipper Cruise Line's *Clipper Odyssey,* and American West Steamboat Company's *Empress of the North* have elevators, but in general the small ships are not good choices for travelers who require the use of wheelchairs or have other mobility problems.

AMERICAN SAFARI CRUISES

19101 36th Ave. W., Suite 201, Lynnwood, WA 98036. ✆ **888/862-8881.** Fax 425/776-8889. www.amsafari.com.

Directed to the slightly jaded high-end traveler, American Safari Cruises promises an intimate, all-inclusive yacht cruise to some of the more out-of-the-way stretches of the Inside Passage. The company books only 12 to 22 people per cruise, guaranteeing unparalleled flexibility and privacy. Black-bear aficionados can chug off in a Zodiac boat for a better look; active adventurers can explore the shoreline in one of the yacht's four kayaks; and lazier travelers can relax aboard ship. Another big plus: All off-ship excursions—including flightseeing and trips to boardwalked cannery villages and Tlingit villages—are included in the cruise fare, as are drinks. The price is considerable, as is the pampering.

The line offers 7-night and 8-night Inside Passage cruises.

PASSENGER PROFILE Passengers, almost always couples, tend to be more than comfortably wealthy and range from 45 to 65 years of age. Most hope to get close to nature without sacrificing luxury. Dress is always casual, with comfort being the prime goal.

SHIPS More private yachts than cruise ships, the 22-passenger ***Safari Quest,*** the 12-passenger ***Safari Spirit,*** and the 12-passenger ***Safari Escape*** look like Ferraris—all sleek, contoured lines and dark glass. Cabins are comfortable, and sitting rooms are intimate and luxurious, almost as if they had been transported whole from a spacious suburban home. A big-screen TV in the main lounge forms a natural center for impromptu lectures during the day and movie-watching at night. A shipboard chef assails guests with multiple-course meals and clever snacks, barters with nearby fishing boats for the catch of the day, and raids local markets for the freshest fruits and vegetables—say, strawberries the size of a cub's paw and potent strains of basil and cilantro. **Brochure rates per person:** Lowest-price outside cabins $3,994 for a 7-night cruise; no inside cabins or suites.

AMERICAN WEST STEAMBOAT COMPANY

2101 Fourth Avenue, Suite 1150, Seattle, WA 98121, ✆ **800/434-1232** of 206/292-9606. Fax 206/340-0975. www.columbiarivercruise.com

Carrying 235 passengers, this company's ship, *Empress of the North,* belongs in a whole, new, separate category—sternwheelers. Clearly, the appeal here is the nostalgia. Pure Americana—that's what the *Empress of the North* represents. There is not much in the way of organized fun and games. A lecturer accompanies each cruise, offering insights into the passing scenery and cultures. Shore excursions are included in the price, but don't look for kayaks off the back of the vessel, or scuba diving or anything of that nature.

The line offers 11-night Inside Passage cruises.

PASSENGER PROFILE Not necessarily filthy rich, but probably comfortably off. And they are experienced cruisers.

SHIPS *Empress of the North,* built in 2003, carries 235 passengers. It has four decks, two lounges, and elevators. The cabins are large by small-ship standards, all have views of the ocean, and 105 out of 112 of the cabins have verandas. Elegance is the byword in public rooms. **Sample rates per person**: Outside $4,859 for 11-night cruise, suites $7,399 for 11-night cruise; no inside cabins.

CLIPPER CRUISE LINE

11969 Westline Industrial Dr., St. Louis, MO 63146. ✆ **800/325-0010** or 314/655-6700. Fax 314/655-6670. www.clippercruise.com.

Clipper's down-to-earth, comfortable small ships focus on offbeat ports of call, learning, and mingling with your fellow passengers. It's the ideal small-ship cruise for people who've tried Holland America or Princess but want a more intimate cruise experience. Its ships sail port-to-port itineraries. As aboard Alaska's other small-ship lines, the on-board atmosphere is casual; what lies out there beyond the ship's rail is most passengers' real focus. Throughout the cruise, onboard naturalists offer a series of informal lectures and accompany passengers on shore excursions. Organized shore excursions are offered at each port (the tours cost extra), including flightseeing, sport fishing, and city tours with commentary by local residents. No need to dress up here—everything's casual.

The ships sail 14-night Alaska Coast/Russian Far East itineraries, 13-night Gulf of Alaska/Inside Passage/British Columbia itineraries, 12-night Inside Passage/British Columbia itineraries, and 7-night Inside Passage itineraries.

PASSENGER PROFILE The majority of Clipper passengers are well-traveled, 50+ couples. Most are well-educated though not academic, casual though not sloppily so, and adventurous in the sense that they're up for a little hiking but are happy to be able to get back to their comfortable cabins or have a drink in the lounge afterwards.

SHIPS Along with Cruise West's *Spirit of Endeavor* and *Spirit of Oceanus* and Glacier Bay's *Executive Explorer,* the 120-passenger ***Clipper Odyssey*** and 138-passenger ***Yorktown Clipper*** are two of the best choices in Alaska for someone who wants small-ship intimacy and flexibility but doesn't want to skimp on comfort. Their public rooms are larger and more appealing than those aboard competing ships, and all cabins are outside. Except for those at the lowest level (which have portholes), all cabins have picture windows. Although relatively simple in ingredients and presentation, the cuisine is easily the equal of all but the best that is served aboard mainstream megaships. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price outside cabins on *Yorktown Clipper:* $2,410 for 7-night cruise; on *Odyssey:* $5,370 for 13-night cruise. No inside cabins on either ship.

CRUISE WEST

2401 4th Ave., Suite 700, Seattle, WA 98121. ✆ **800/426-7702** or 206/441-8687. Fax 206/441-4757. www.cruisewest.com.

Cruise West is the largest operator of small ships in Alaska, offering port-to-port itineraries in various areas of Alaska, friendly service, and a casual on-board atmosphere. As with Clipper Cruise Line, Cruise West's ships are for people who want to visit Alaska's port towns and see its wilderness areas up close and in a relaxed, small-scale environment without big-ship distractions; they're not for people who want to spend their days hiking and kayaking.

The operative words here are casual, relaxed, and friendly. The line's friendly, enthusiastic staffs are a big, big plus, making guests feel right at home. At sea, the lack of organized activities on the line's port-to-port itineraries leaves you free to scan for wildlife, peruse the natural sights, or read a book. In port, the line arranges some novel, intimate shore excursions, such as a visit with local artists at their home outside Haines or an educational walking tour led by a Native guide in Ketchikan.

A cheerful and knowledgeable **cruise coordinator** accompanies each trip to answer passengers' questions about Alaska's flora, fauna, geology, and history, and Forest Service rangers, local fishers, and Native Alaskans sometimes come aboard to teach about the culture and industry of the state.

Ships sail a 10-night Inside Passage itinerary, an 8-night "Wilderness Waterways" itinerary (a round-trip from Juneau that visits Tracy Arm, Endicott Arm, Sitka, Glacier Bay, and Icy Strait), and a 13-night Bering Sea itinerary that cruises between Nome to Anchorage.

PASSENGER PROFILE Cruise West passengers tend to be older (typically around 60–75), financially stable, well educated, and independent-minded—folks who want to visit Alaska's ports and see its natural wonders in a relaxed, dress-down atmosphere.

SHIPS The 96-passenger ***Spirit of '98,*** a replica of a 19th-century steamship, carries its Victorian flavor so well that fully two-thirds of the people we met on board thought the ship had been a private yacht at the turn of the 20th century. If you use a wheelchair or otherwise have mobility problems, note that the *'98* is one of only four small ships in Alaska that has an elevator. (The line's *Spirit of Oceanus,* American West Steamboat Company's *Empress of the North,* and Clipper's *Clipper Odyssey* are the others.) The 78-passenger ***Spirit of Alaska*** and ***Spirit of Columbia,*** and 84-passenger ***Spirit of Discovery*** are all spartan ships designed to get passengers into small ports and allow them to see the state up close. The 102-passenger ***Spirit of Endeavour,*** on the other hand, offers among the highest levels of small-ship comfort of any small ship in Alaska, comparable to Clipper's *Yorktown Clipper* and Glacier Bay's *Executive Explorer.* The line's new, 114-passenger ***Spirit of Oceanus,*** the former *Renaissance V* of Renaissance Cruises, is the line's most luxurious ship, able to sail more far-flung itineraries. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $2,699 for 8-night cruise, lowest-price outside $3,049 for 8-night cruise.

GLACIER BAY CRUISELINE

107 Denny Way, Suite 303, Seattle, WA 98119. ✆ **800/451-5952** or 206/623-2417. Fax 206/623-7809. www.glacierbaycruiseline.com.

Glacier Bay Cruiseline—the only Native-owned cruise line in Alaska—offers three types of cruises: soft-adventure (aboard the *Wilderness Explorer*), active-adventure (aboard the *Wilderness Adventurer*), and port-to-port (aboard the slightly more luxurious *Executive Explorer*). The *Wilderness Discoverer* is a hybrid, sailing itineraries that mix 3 days of adventure activities with 3 days spent visiting popular ports of call. At press time, the company's owner, Goldbelt, an Alaska Native Corporation, was in negotiation to sell. Consequently, its 2004 plans were somewhat fluid, especially in the area of cruisetours.

The adventure sailings are for a particular type of traveler, one interested in exploring Alaska's wilds rather than its towns. On the *Wilderness Explorer*'s soft-adventure cruises, for example, the biggest town you're likely to encounter after departing Juneau is tiny little Elfin Cove, population around 30 to 35 (at least

in the summer). Other than this, days are spent hiking in remote regions, exploring the glaciers, cruising the waterways looking for whales and other wildlife, and kayaking—the *Wilderness Adventurer, Wilderness Explorer,* and *Wilderness Discoverer* carry fleets of stable two-person sea kayaks, which are launched from dry platforms at the ships' sterns. A weeklong sailing typically includes three kayak treks. **Naturalists** sail with every cruise to point out natural features and lead off-ship expeditions, all of which are included in the cruise price. On board, the atmosphere is casual and friendly; the staff provides just enough informal attention while leaving you the space to enjoy your vacation. Entertainment facilities on all ships are minimal: board games, books, and a TV/VCR in the lounge, on which passengers can view tapes on wildlife, Alaska history, Native culture, and a few feature films. Cabins are basic and quite small.

Ships sail 5-night Glacier Bay itineraries and 7-night Inside Passage itineraries.

PASSENGER PROFILE Passengers tend to be on the youngish side, with as many couples in their 40s and 50s as in their 60s and 70s, and a scattering of 30-somethings (and a few 80- or 90-somethings) filling out the list. Whatever their age, passengers tend to be active and interested in nature and wildlife, especially on the adventure itineraries.

SHIPS The 49-passenger ***Executive Explorer*** is the line's fanciest vessel. The spartan, 74-passenger ***Wilderness Adventurer*** and almost identical 86-passenger ***Wilderness Discoverer*** are the line's soft-adventure ships, outfitted with sea kayaks and kayak dry-launch platforms in their sterns. The 36-passenger ***Wilderness Explorer*** is the line's most basic ship, with tiny cabins and bunk-style beds. She visits no ports, instead offering the most active cruise experience available in Alaska, with cruises structured so passengers are out kayaking and hiking most of each day and only use the vessel to eat, sleep, and get from place to place. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $2,520; lowest-price outdoor cabins $2,735 for a 7-night cruise; lowest-price outside cabins $1,780 (on the *Wilderness Explorer*) for a 5-night cruise.

LINDBLAD EXPEDITIONS

720 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10019. ✆ **800/397-3348** or 212/765-7740. Fax 212/265-3770. www.expeditions.com.

Lindblad Expeditions specializes in environmentally sensitive, soft-adventure vacations that are explorative and informal in nature, designed to appeal to the intellectually curious traveler seeking a cruise that's educational as well as relaxing. Days aboard are spent learning about the Alaskan outdoors from high-caliber expedition leaders trained in botany, anthropology, biology, and geology, and observing the world around you either from the ship or during shore excursions, which are included in the cruise package. Educational films and slide presentations aboard ship precede nature hikes and quick jaunts aboard Zodiac boats. Flexibility and spontaneity are keys to the experience, as the route may be altered at any time to follow a pod of whales or school of dolphins.

The ship cruises an 11-day itinerary between Juneau and Seattle, and a 7-day "coastal wilderness" itinerary between Juneau and Sitka.

PASSENGER PROFILE Lindblad Expeditions tends to attract well-traveled and well-educated, professional, 55+ couples who have "been there, done that" and are looking for something completely different in a cruise experience.

SHIPS The shallow-draft, 70-passenger ***Sea Lion*** and ***Sea Bird*** are identical twins. With just two public rooms and utilitarian cabins, they're very similar to

Tips Midsize Educational Cruising

In the past, **World Explorer Cruises** (✆ **800/854-3835** or 415/393-1565; www.wecruise.com), has offered a one-of-a-kind Alaska cruise experience that combined a large ship with an education-oriented approach that was more typical of a small-ship line. The company didn't offer any Alaska cruises in the summer of 2003, but they promise to be back with even stronger offerings for the summer of 2004, so check out their site or call them if a midsize educational cruise appeals to you.

other "expedition style" small ships, such as Glacier Bay's *Wilderness Adventurer* and Cruise West's *Spirit of Alaska.* Cabins are small and functional, and public space is limited to the open sun deck and bow areas, the dining room, and an observation lounge that serves as the nerve center for activities. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price outside cabins $3,840 for a 7-night cruise; lowest-price outside cabins $3,980 for an 11-day cruise; no inside cabins or suites.

5 The Big-Ship Cruise Lines

The ships featured in this section vary in size, age, and offerings, but share the common thread of having more activities and entertainment options than any one person can possibly take in over the course of a cruise. You'll find swimming pools, health clubs, spas, nightclubs, movie theaters, shops, casinos, multiple restaurants, bars, and special kids' playrooms, and in some cases sports decks, virtual golf, computer rooms, martini bars, and cigar clubs, as well as quiet spaces where you can get away from it all. In most cases you'll find lots and lots of onboard activities, including games, contests, classes, and lectures, plus a variety of entertainment options and show productions, some very sophisticated.

CARNIVAL CRUISE LINES

3655 NW 87th Ave., Miami, FL 33178-2428. ✆ **800/CARNIVAL.** Fax 305/471-4740. www.carnival.com.

Translating the line's warm-weather experience to Alaska has meant combining the "24-hour orgy of good times" philosophy to include the natural wonders, so you may find yourself bellying up to the rail with a multicolored party drink to gawk at a glacier. Drinking and R-rated comedians are part of the scene, as are "hairy-chest contests" and the like.

Entertainment is among the industry's best, with each ship boasting a dozen dancers, a 12-piece orchestra, comedians, jugglers, and numerous live bands, as well as a big casino. Activity is nonstop. Cocktails begin to flow before lunch, and through the course of the day you can learn to country line-dance or ballroom dance, take cooking lessons, learn to play bridge, watch first-run movies, practice your golf swing by smashing balls into a net, or just eat, drink, shop, and then eat again. Alaska-specific naturalist lectures are delivered daily. In port, Carnival offers **nearly 100 shore excursions,** divided into categories of easy, moderate, and adventure. For kids, the line offers Camp Carnival, an expertly run children's program with activities that include Native arts and crafts sessions, lectures conducted by wildlife experts, and special shore excursions for teens.

Ships cruise the Gulf of Alaska route. In May and September, inside passage cruises that visit Glacier Bay are offered.

PASSENGER PROFILE Overall, Carnival has some of the youngest demographics in the industry: mostly under 50, including couples, lots and lots of singles, and a good share of families. It's the same Middle America crowd that can be found in Las Vegas and Atlantic City and at Florida's megaresorts. This is not a sedate, bird-watching crowd. They may want to see whales and icebergs, but they will also dance the Macarena on cue.

SHIPS The 2,124-passenger, 84,000-ton ***Carnival Spirit*** is big, new, and impressive, with four swimming pools, a wedding chapel, a conference center, and, in addition to the formal dining room and casual buffet restaurant, an alternative restaurant sitting high up by the ship's smokestack. The ship also has more of what makes Carnival tick, including a two-level oceanview gym, balconies on over half the cabins, a large children's center (complete with beepers for parents who want to stay in touch), and two consecutive decks of bars, lounges, and nightspots, one with an outdoor wraparound promenade. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $1,919, lowest outside $2,219, lowest suite $3,269 for a 7-night cruise.

CELEBRITY CRUISES

1050 Caribbean Way, Miami, FL 33132. ✆ **800/437-3111** or 305/262-8322. Fax 800/437-5111. www.celebritycruises.com.

Celebrity Cruises offers a great combination: a classy, tasteful, and luxurious cruise experience at a moderate price—it's definitely the best in the midpriced category. The line's ships are real works of art; its cuisine—guided by Michel Roux, one of the top French chefs in Britain—is outstanding; its service first-class, friendly, and unobtrusive; and its spa facilities among the best in the business.

A typical day might offer bridge, darts, a culinary art demonstration, a trapshooting competition, a fitness-fashion show, an art auction, a volleyball tournament, and a none-too-shabby stage show. Resident experts give lectures on the various ports of call, the Alaskan environment, glaciers, and Alaskan culture. For children, Celebrity ships employ a group of counselors who direct and supervise a camp-style children's program. Activities are geared toward different age groups. There's an impressive kids' play area and a lounge area for teens.

The company offers 7-night Inside Passage and 7-night Gulf of Alaska itineraries.

PASSENGER PROFILE The typical Celebrity guest is one who prefers to pursue his or her R&R at a relatively relaxed pace, with a minimum of aggressively promoted group activities. The overall impression leans more toward sophistication and less to the kind of orgiastic Technicolor whoopee that you'll find, say, aboard a Carnival ship. You'll find everyone from kids to retirees.

SHIPS Sleek, modern, and stunningly designed, both the 1,870-passenger ***Mercury*** and the larger, 1,950-passenger ***Infinity*** and ***Summit*** have a lot of open deck space and lots of large windows that provide access to the wide skies and the grand Alaskan vistas. All the ships (but especially *Mercury*) feature incredible spas with hydrotherapy pools, steam rooms, and saunas, plus health and beauty services and exceptionally large fitness areas. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $850, lowest outside $1,100, lowest suite $2,600 for a 7-night cruise.

CRYSTAL CRUISES

2049 Century Park E, Suite 1400, Los Angeles, CA 90067. ✆ **800/446-6620** or 310/785-9300. Fax 310/785-3891. www.crystalcruises.com.

Luxury all the way. Crystal offers all the amenities of much bigger ships, but in a more luxurious and intimate atmosphere, with only 960 passengers. Everything on the ***Crystal Harmony*** is first class, with fine attention paid to detail and to making guests feel comfortable. Service on the ship is nothing short of superb. The ship carries a battery of Alaska naturalists, environmentalists, and National Park Service rangers to educate and entertain passengers in the wilderness areas of the 49th state. The line's food-and-wine series presents well-known chefs and wine experts who put on food preparation demonstrations, lecture on the art of cookery, and prepare dinner one night during the cruise. A PGA-approved golf pro accompanies practically every *Harmony* cruise, conducting clinics along the way. There's dazzling show-lounge entertainment, first-run movies, and a casino operated by Caesar's World.

The ship cruises a 12-night-long route through the Inside Passage.

TYPICAL PASSENGERS Passengers aboard Crystal tend to be successful businesspeople who can afford to pay for the best. In years past, the average age was probably closer to 60 than 70. But that average age is dropping fast to cruisers in their 40s and 50s—probably thanks to Crystal's *incredible* shore-excursion program, its Caesar's Palace–operated casino, and its entertainment package. Whatever their age, they tend to be people who like to dress up rather than down. "Casual night" doesn't mean the same thing to Crystal guests as it means to other people.

SHIPS A handsome ship by any standard, the ***Harmony*** has one of the highest passenger-space ratios of any cruise ship. Its cabins are large, well appointed, and tastefully decorated with quality fittings and in agreeable color tones. Almost half of them have private verandas. The one small criticism is that space to hang clothes is a little tight in some of the lower cabin categories. Public rooms are classy throughout. It's our opinion that Palm Court is the prettiest public space afloat. Two alternative restaurants, Prego (Italian, mostly northern) and Kyoto (Asian/Japanese), introduce variety to the dining experience. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $5,090, lowest outside $5,545, lowest suite $11,845 for a 12-night cruise.

HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

300 Elliott Ave. W., Seattle, WA 98119. ✆ **800/426-0327** or 206/281-3535. Fax 206/286-7110. www.hollandamerica.com.

Holland America can be summed up in one word: *tradition.* The company was formed way back in 1873 as the Netherlands-America Steamship Company, and its ships today strive to present an aura of history and dignity, like a European hotel where they never let rock stars register. And thanks to its acquisition, over the years, of numerous land-based tour operators, Holland America has positioned itself as Alaska's most experienced and comprehensive cruise company.

Though most of the line's Alaskan fleet is relatively young, the ships are designed with a decidedly "classic" feel—no flashing neon lights here. Similarly, Holland America's ships are heavy on more mature, less frenetic kinds of activities. You'll find good bridge programs and music to dance (or just listen) to in the bars and lounges, plus health spas and the other amenities found on most large ships. The line has improved its nightly show-lounge entertainment. In 2004, the line continues its Artists in Residence Program, arranged through the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, with Alaska Native artists accompanying all 7-night cruises and demonstrating traditional art forms such as ivory and soapstone carving, basket weaving, and mask making. Club HAL is one of

the industry's more creative children's programs, though the children's playrooms (often no more than a meeting room stocked with toys) are no match for what you find on the latest Princess or Celebrity megaships.

Alaska itineraries include 7-night Inside Passage cruises and 7-night Gulf of Alaska cruises.

PASSENGER PROFILE Holland America's passenger profile used to reflect a much older crowd. Now the average age is dropping, partly thanks to an increased emphasis on its Club HAL program for children and partly due to some updating of its onboard entertainment. Still, HAL's passengers in Alaska include a large percentage of middle-aged-and-up vacationers.

SHIPS The 1,266-passenger ***Maasdam, Ryndam, Statendam,*** and ***Veendam*** are more or less identical. All cabins have a sitting area and lots of closet and drawer space, and even the least expensive inside cabins run almost 190 square feet, quite large by industry standards. Outside doubles have either picture windows or verandas. The striking dining rooms, two-tiered showrooms, and Crow's Nest forward bar/lounges are among these ships' best features. The newer, 1,440-passenger ***Volendam*** and ***Zaandam*** are larger and fancier, with triple-decked oval atriums, 197 suites and deluxe staterooms with private verandas, five showrooms and lounges, and an alternative restaurant designed as an artist's bistro, featuring drawings and etchings. The smallest cabin is a comfortable 190 square feet. The 1,380-passenger ***Amsterdam*** is an attractive, midsize ship that combines classic style with innovation. Strategically located in public areas around the ship are sculptures of big ol' Alaskan grizzly bears, done by British artist Susanna Holt. Accommodations are warm, comfortable, low-key—and totally functional. The ***Oosterdam,*** the newest vessel in the fleet, is 85,000 tons and carries 1,848 passengers. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $999, lowest outside $1,356, lowest suite $1,813.

NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

7665 Corporate Center Dr., Miami, FL 33126. ✆ **800/327-7030** or 305/436-4000. Fax 305/436-4120. www.ncl.com.

Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) offers an informal and upbeat on-board atmosphere on the *Norwegian Sun,* sailing from Vancouver, and the *Norwegian Sky* and *Norwegian Star,* both sailing from Seattle. The line excels at activities, and its recreational and fitness programs are among the best in the industry. Though the on-board food has been described as unmemorable, NCL recently inaugurated what has become a very popular casual-dining policy that allows passengers to dine when they want pretty much any time between 5:30pm and midnight, with whomever they want, dressed however they want.

In Alaska, NCL offers an Alaskan lecturer, wine tastings, art auctions, trap shooting, cooking demonstrations, craft and dance classes, an incentive fitness program, and bingo, among other activities. Passengers can choose from a good selection of soft-adventure shore excursions, including hiking, biking, and kayaking. Entertainment is generally strong, and includes Vegas-style musical productions. The top-notch kids' program includes an activity room, video games, an ice-cream bar, and guaranteed babysitting aboard, plus sessions with park rangers and escorted shore excursions.

The line offers 7-night Inside Passage cruises.

PASSENGER PROFILE In Alaska, the demographic tends more toward retirees than on the line's warmer-climate sailings, but you'll find families as well, including grandparents bringing along the grandkids.

SHIPS The 1,936-passenger ***Norwegian Sun*** is the first ship built with NCL's new "freestyle" dining policy in mind, as evidenced by the nine separate on-board restaurants. An airy eight-story glass atrium welcomes visitors in the lobby. More than two-thirds of the guest rooms (about 650 in all) have ocean views, and closet space is more generous than on other NCL ships. The 2,002-passenger ***Norwegian Sky*** has an Internet cafe, a huge sun deck (complete with a driver in a golf cart delivering drinks), a basketball court and batting cage, and a wedding chapel (for in-port ceremonies only). The 2,240-passenger ***Norwegian Star*** has no fewer than 11 rooms in which people can eat—depending on the time of day. The *Star* is well equipped for the sports-minded and active vacationer—in addition to the fitness center, there are three heated pools, a jogging/walking track, and a wide array of sports facilities. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $959, lowest outside $1,259, lowest suite $1,909 for a 7-night cruise.

PRINCESS CRUISES

24305 Town Center Dr., Santa Clarita, CA 91355. ✆ **800/LOVE-BOAT** (568-3262) or 661/753-4999. Fax 310/277-6175. www.princess.com.

Consistency is Princess's strength. With new ships joining its fleet like so many cars off a Detroit assembly line, you'd think that maintaining acceptable service standards could be a problem. All things considered, though, Princess accomplishes this rather well. Throughout the fleet, the service in all areas—dining room, lounge, cabin maintenance, and so on—tends to be of consistently high quality. Aboard Princess, you get a lot of bang for your buck, attractively packaged and well executed. Although its ships serve every corner of the globe, nowhere is the Princess presence more visible than in Alaska. Through its affiliate, Princess Tours, it owns wilderness lodges, motor coaches, and railcars in the 49th state, making it one of the major players in the Alaska cruise market, alongside Holland America.

Princess passengers can expect enough on-board activities to keep them going morning to night, if they've a mind to, and enough nooks and crannies to allow them to do absolutely nothing, if that's their thing. Kids are well taken care of, with especially large children's playrooms. On shore, the line's shore-excursion staffs get big points for efficiency.

Princess offers 7-night Inside Passage cruises, 7-night Gulf of Alaska cruises and a special 10-night round-trip Inside Passage cruise that departs from San Francisco.

PASSENGER PROFILE Typical Princess passengers are likely to be between, say, 50 and 65, and are experienced cruisers who know what they want and are prepared to pay for it. Recent additional emphasis on its youth and children's facilities has begun to attract a bigger share of the **family market**.

SHIPS The ***Dawn, Sun, Coral*** and ***Island Princess*** ships are virtually indistinguishable from one another except for cosmetics. They all carry around 1,950 passengers, but despite their size, you'll probably never feel crowded. Decks, buffet dining areas, and lounges feel spacious. There are beautiful libraries, patisseries for pastries and cappuccino, and pizzerias for good made-to-order Italian fast food. The ships have extensive children's playrooms. As for cabins, even the smallest is a spacious 175 square feet, and more than 80% of rooms have private verandas. The 2,670-passenger ***Diamond Princess*** and ***Sapphire Princess*** are the newest Princess ships on the water. Their offerings are large and impressive, including a wide range of dining, lounge and bar options and generously

equipped spas and fitness centers. The 1,590-passenger ***Regal Princess*** offers spacious and tasteful cabins, and a well-equipped gym and aerobics room. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $1,689; lowest outside $1,869; lowest suite $3,029 for a 7-night cruise.

RADISSON SEVEN SEAS CRUISES

600 Corporate Dr., Suite 410, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33334. ✆ **800/285-1835.** www.rssc.com.

Radisson offers the best in food, service, and accommodations in an environment that's a little more casual and small-shiplike than Crystal's more determined luxury.

The line assumes for the most part that passengers want to entertain themselves on board, so organized activities are limited, but they do include lectures by local experts, well-known authors, and the like, plus facilities for card and board games, blackjack and Ping Pong tournaments, bingo, big screen movies with popcorn, and instruction in the fine arts of pom-pom making, juggling, and such. Bridge instructors are onboard on select sailings. The line has a no-tipping policy, and offers creative shore excursions. Room service is about the best you'll find on any ship, and the cuisine is excellent.

The ship sails a 7-night Gulf of Alaska itinerary.

PASSENGER PROFILE Radisson tends to passengers in their 50s with a household income of more than $100,000, who don't like to flaunt their wealth. The typical passenger is well educated, well traveled, and inquisitive.

SHIPS Cabins on the 700-passenger ***Seven Seas Mariner*** are all oceanview suites, and all have private verandas. The standard suite is a large 301 square feet; some suites can interconnect if you want to book two for additional space. The Constellation Theater is two-tiered and designed to resemble a 1930s nightclub. There are two additional lounges, plus a casino and the Connoisseur Club, a cushy venue for pre-dinner drinks and after-dinner fine brandy and cigars. The ship's spa offers Judith Jackson European spa treatments using a variety of herbal and water-based therapies. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price suite $3,195 for 7-night cruise; no inside or standard outside cabins.

ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL

1050 Caribbean Way, Miami, FL 33132. ✆ **800/327-6700** or 305/379-4731. www.rccl.com.

Royal Caribbean sells a mass-market style of cruising that's reasonably priced and offered aboard informal, well-run ships with nearly every diversion imaginable—craft classes, horse racing, bingo, shuffleboard, deck games, line-dancing lessons, wine-and-cheese tastings, cooking demonstrations, art auctions, and the like—plus elaborate health clubs and spas, covered swimming pools, large open sun deck areas, and innumerable bars, lounges, and other entertainment centers. The Viking Crown Lounge and other glassed-in areas make excellent observation rooms from which to see the Alaska sights. Royal Caribbean spends big bucks on entertainment, which includes high-tech show productions. Headliners are often featured. Port lectures are offered on topics such as Alaska wildlife, and the line offers some 65 shore excursions. The line's children's activities are some of the most extensive afloat.

The line offers 7-night Inside Passage cruises.

PASSENGER PROFILE The crowd on Royal Caribbean ships, like the decor, rates pretty high on the party scale, though not quite at the Carnival level. Passengers represent an age mix from 30 to 60, and a good number of families are attracted by the line's well-established and fine-tuned kids' programs. In

Alaska, Royal Caribbean is focusing more on international sales than the entrenched market leaders, Princess and Holland America, which has resulted in sailings populated by a good many international passengers, especially travelers from Asia and Europe.

SHIPS The 1,800-passenger ***Legend of the Seas*** offers plenty of nice touches that gives it the feel of a top-flight shore resort. You'll find sumptuous, big-windowed health club/spas and loads of fine shopping, dining, and entertainment options. Cabins are not large but do have small sitting areas. All outside cabins on the Bridge and Commodore decks have balconies and can sleep up to four quite comfortably. The 2,100-passenger ***Radiance of the Seas*** and ***Serenade of the Seas*** are slightly more upscale than the line's other vessels. They are designed to remind guests they are at sea—walls of glass everywhere you go allow you to view the passing Alaska scenery. Cabins are larger than on the *Vision*—the smallest is 170 square feet—and more come with verandas. And here's a nice touch: the pool tables have built-in self-leveling mechanisms in case waves get too high. The 2,000-passenger ***Vision of the Seas*** has small cabins, though nearly a quarter of them offer verandas and all have sitting areas. The ship also offers loads of fine dining, shopping, and entertainment options. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price inside cabins $1,439, lowest outside $1,889, lowest suite $3,089 for a 7-night cruise.

SILVERSEA CRUISES

110 E. Broward Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301. ✆ **800/774-9996.** www.silversea.com.

No argument here: Radisson Seven Seas and Crystal Cruises, the two recognized luxury operators in Alaska, have some new and very real competition resulting from Silversea's decision to offer the 49th state as a cruise destination in 2004. With the company entering its tenth year of operation, Silversea's four ships have roamed the globe, generally eschewing the mass market destinations such as the Caribbean in favor of more exotic trades—the Mediterranean, for example, Southeast Asia, South America and the like. This will be the company's debut year in Alaska.

The line offers 11-night round-trip cruises from San Francisco.

PASSENGER PROFILE Silversea's guests tend toward the 60–and–up age bracket. They are well-educated, experienced cruisers with very definite ideas about the meaning of the word luxury in service, cuisine and accommodations. And the means to pay for it!

THE SHIP ***Silver Shadow*** is a 382–passenger, all–suite vessel that is the last word in elegance and service. Spacious suites, no tipping expected, free beverages (alcoholic and otherwise), friendly faces, swift and caring baggage handling—these are the hallmarks of the Silversea product. The cabins are all outside suites, all but a few of them with private verandas. The smallest suite has no veranda, but it's plenty big—278 square feet. From there, sizes get better and better. All the suites come with convertible twin–to–queen-size beds, walk-in closets, marble-appointed bathrooms with double vanity basins, full-size tubs and showers, TVs and VCRs, and refrigerator/minibars. Nothing has been left to chance. Nothing has been overlooked. The biggest suites have guest powder rooms and flat screen televisions. Get the message? The Steiner–operated spa offers just about everything you would want on a cruise, including a range of hydrotherapy, massage and beauty treatments, men's and women's sauna and steam rooms and two whirlpool baths. **Sample rates per person:** Lowest-price suites $4,036 for a 11-night cruise; the ship only has suites.

5

Southeast Alaska

Rich, proud people have lived in Southeast Alaska for thousands of years, fishing the region's salmon and hunting through its primeval forests, where the tree trunks grow up to 10 feet thick. In canoes, they explored the hundreds of misty, mossy, enchanted islands where animals, trees, and even ice had living spirits. The salmon lived under the sea in human form, becoming fish in the summer to swim in seething masses up the rivers and streams as a gift of food to feed their kin, the people. In return, the people treated the salmon with respect and ceremony, allowing their spirits to return to human form under the sea to live another year. These early Southeast Alaskan inhabitants, the Tlingit and the Haida, built great, carved houses and poles, fought wars, owned slaves, traded with faraway tribes, and held rich contests of giving called potlatches, where they passed on the stories that still help explain their mysterious world. Even now, it's easy to find yourself listening for the spirits of the trees speaking their mysteries as you walk in the grand quiet of the old-growth rainforest.

Southeast Alaska is still being discovered. A honeycomb of limestone caves under Prince of Wales Island wasn't found until 1987. Explorers continue to map its endless miles of caverns, finding the bones of extinct animals, the artifacts of some of North America's earliest prehistoric people, bear dens, strange eyeless shrimp that live nowhere else, and even underground streams that host spawning salmon. The caves break off at every step into passages that lead straight up or down or off to either side, and some are only wide enough to allow a cool wind to pass through. The unfathomable intricacy of the cave system is exhilarating but also a bit disquieting, like a breath of the supernatural, for it seems unknowable.

Southeast Alaska unfolds like this intricate, hidden world below the tree roots. On a map, this land of ice and forest may not look as large as other parts of Alaska, but the better you know it, the bigger it becomes, until you have to surrender to its immensity. You don't need to go underground to experience the sensation—you can feel it by gazing from a boat at the fractal geometry of the endlessly folded, rocky shoreline. On a cruise through the Inside Passage, you'll marvel at all the little beaches and rocky outcroppings that you'll pass—you'll steam by hundreds of inviting spots each day. If you were to stop at random on any one of those uninhabited beaches in a skiff or kayak, you'd find you could spend a day taking in the few acres of rocks, the overhanging forest, and the tiny pools of water left behind by the tide. And if you gazed down into any one of those pools, you'd find a complex world all its own, where tiny predators and prey live out their own drama of life in the space of a few square feet. The discoveries you'll make in Southeast Alaska will depend on how closely you look.

The southeast region stands apart from the rest of Alaska, and not only

because most of it can't be reached by road. No other part of the state shares the mysterious, spirit-laden quality of the coastal rainforest. No other area has such mild weather, more akin to the climate of the Pacific Northwest than to the heart of Alaska. Certainly no other area in Alaska gets as much rain. The traditional Native people here differed from other Alaska Natives, too: They were far richer and left behind more physical artifacts. The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian utilized the wealth that nature gave them and amplified it by successfully trading with tribes to the south and over the mountains in today's British Columbia and Yukon Territory. In their early contact, the Tlingits even briefly defeated the Russian invaders in the Battle of Sitka, and after white dominance was established, they managed to save many of their cultural artifacts and stories.

Along with its other riches and complexities, Southeast Alaska also has many charming small towns and villages that seem to have grown organically from the mountainsides bordering the fjords and channels of the islands. With economies that predate Alaska's oil boom, they developed slowly, their fishermen building houses to hand down to their children. The smaller towns remain completely free of the American blight of corporate sameness. Real, old-fashioned main streets are prosperous with family businesses where the proprietors know their customers by first name.

1 Exploring Southeast Alaska

A unique and inviting aspect of travel in Southeast Alaska is that no roads connect most of the communities. People are forced to get out of their speeding cars and ride on boats, where they can meet their fellow travelers and see what's passing by—slowly. The islands of the region form a protected waterway called the **Inside Passage,** along which almost all of the region's towns are arrayed. Thanks to the **Alaska Marine Highway** ferry system, it's inexpensive to travel the entire passage, hopping from town to town and spending as much time in each place as you like. And if you're short on time, air service is frequent, with jets to the major towns and commuter planes to the villages.

GETTING AROUND BY FERRY: THE ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

The state-run **Alaska Marine Highway System,** 6858 Glacier Hwy., Juneau, AK 99801-7909 (✆ **800/642-0066** or 907/465-3941, TDD 800/764-3779; www.ferryalaska.com), is a subsidized fleet of big, blue-hulled ferries whose mission is to connect the roadless coastal towns of Alaska for roughly the same cost you'd pay if there were roads and you were driving. Call for a free schedule or download it from the website.

PROS & CONS The ferry system's strengths are its low cost, frequent summer sailings, inexpensive stopovers, exceptional safety, and the fact that kids love it. In the summer, Forest Service guides offer interpretive talks on board in Southeast's Inside Passage and in Prince William Sound. The system's weaknesses are crowding during the July peak season, the fact that if they're late they can be many hours late (though they're usually on time), and a shortage of cabins, which means that most people have to camp on deck or in chairs during overnight passages.

ROUTES The system mostly serves Southeast Alaska, though it does cover most of coastal Alaska, with one sailing a month (the *Kennicott*) connecting

Tips Ferry System Booking

The introduction of Internet booking for **Alaska Marine Highway** ferries (www.ferryalaska.com) should simplify life for those who use it. Just be sure to make vehicle and cabin reservations as early as possible. If you need to talk to a real person for advice or to change reservations, the system has a toll-free number (✆ **800/642-0066**), but it can be understaffed, with waits of half an hour for an operator. Try instead the staff at the ferry office in Anchorage, where they have less to do, at ✆ **907/272-7116.** That office is staffed for walk-ins, too, and is located in the Alaska Public Lands Information Center, at 4th and F streets in Anchorage. Or call **Viking Travel,** in Petersburg (**800/327-2571** or 907/772-3818; www.AlaskaFerry.com), which will hold your early booking until the first day it becomes available on the system, making sure you are the first in line—in other words, if you call before the ferry starts taking reservations, they will keep your request and make your reservations as soon as the ferry begins accepting reservations.

You can sometimes avoid crowds on the boats with some savvy scheduling. Ferries are crowded northbound in June and southbound in August and both ways in July. If you're planning to fly one way and take the ferry the other, go against the flow (cruise southbound in June and northbound in Aug.).

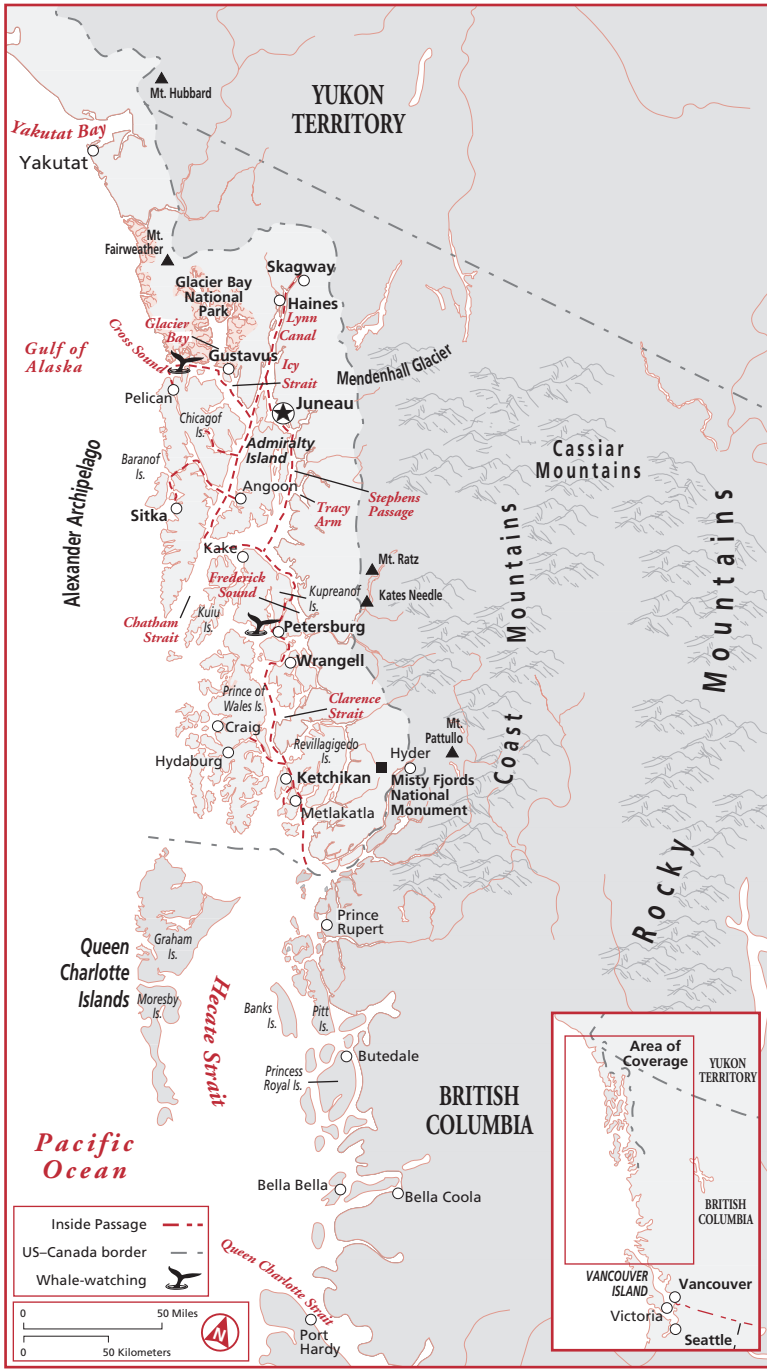
Southeast Alaska with the Southcentral region nearer Anchorage. Two smaller ferries out of Anchorage link communities all the way down the Aleutian chain (see chapters 7 and 10).

In the Southeast, five large, mainline ferries serve the Inside Passage. Two begin their run in British Columbia's Prince Rupert and run about 30 hours north to Haines and Skagway. Two more start in Bellingham, Washington, travel 37 hours nonstop to Ketchikan, then continue up to Skagway and Haines. Each of these four towns is connected to the rest of the world by roads, but none of the towns in between are. In the summer, the large ships stop at least daily (although sometimes in the middle of the night) in Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Juneau, Haines, and Skagway. Some make a side trip to Sitka on the way. Juneau is the hub, with many extra sailings north from Juneau on the Lynn Canal to Haines and Skagway, especially in the summer, when extra vessels travel the round trip route daily. A brand new fast ferry is due to come on line in 2004 to cut the time between Juneau and Sitka.

Two smaller feeder ferries, the *LeConte* and *Aurora,* connect the larger towns to tiny villages up and down the coast. They mostly take local residents back and forth to their villages, so they're rarely crowded. Those routes are definitely off the beaten track, offering the cheapest and easiest way to absorb the real wilderness of the Alaska Bush. The feeder ferries have food service but no cabins.

CONNECTING TO THE FERRY **From the south:** The appeal of taking the Alaskan Marin Highway ferry to Alaska from Bellingham, Washington is obvious, but it is not cheaper than flying and it takes 2 days just to get to Ketchikan. The popular alternative is to board the ferry in Prince Rupert, B.C.

You can get to Prince Rupert by rail (this is covered under "Getting There & Getting Around" in chapter 2). Or you can drive and leave your vehicle at a


YUKON TERRITORY
Mt. Hubbard
Yakutat Bay
Yakutat
Mt. Fairweather
Glacier Bay National Park
Skagway
Haines
Lynn Canal
Glacier Bay
Cross Sound
Gulf of Alaska
Gustavus
Icy Strait
Mendenhall Glacier
Pelican
Juneau
Chicagof Is.
Admiralty Island
Baranof Is.
Angoon
Stephens Passage
Tracy Arm
Sitka
Alexander Archipelago
Kake
Mt. Ratz
Frederick Sound
Kupreanof Is.
Kates Needle
Kuiu Is.
Chatham Strait
Petersburg
Wrangell
Prince of Wales Is.
Clarence Strait
Craig
Mt. Pattullo
Revillagigedo Is.
Hydaburg
Hyder
Ketchikan
Misty Fjords National Monument
Metlakatla
Cassiar Mountains
Coast Mountains
Rocky Mountains
Prince Rupert
Graham Is.
Queen Charlotte Islands
Moresby Is.
Hecate Strait
Banks Is.
Pitt Is.
Butedale
Princess Royal Is.
BRITISH COLUMBIA
Pacific Ocean
Bella Bella
Bella Coola
Queen Charlotte Strait
Port Hardy
Inside Passage
US–Canada border
Whale-watching
0
50 Miles
0
50 Kilometers
Area of Coverage
YUKON TERRITORY
BRITISH COLUMBIA
VANCOUVER ISLAND
Vancouver
Victoria
Seattle

secured lot operated by Park Avenue Corner Store (✆ **888/437-1373**), for C$5 a day for cars or up to C$9 for RVs, with monthly discounts. The parking lot offers a shuttle to the dock.

Another option is riding the **BC Ferries** system, 1112 Fort St., Victoria, B.C., Canada V8V 4V2 (✆ **250/386-3431;** www.bcferries.bc.ca) to Prince Rupert, B.C. You can tour British Columbia's Vancouver Island by car on the way. By ferry, you can reach the town of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island from the city of Vancouver on the mainland, or you can reach Vancouver Island's city of Victoria from Port Angeles, Washington (that route is operated by **Black Ball Transport;** ✆ **360/457-4491;** www.northolympic.com/coho). Once you're on Vancouver Island, you can drive north to Port Hardy and take the B.C. ferry to Prince Rupert, where it docks right next to the Alaska ferry.

To the north: The northern end of the Inside Passage ferry system rejoins Alaska's road system in Skagway and Haines. Haines is a bit closer to the rest of the state and there is a car rental agency there. Skagway has more transportation options, including car and RV rental and a bus that connects Skagway to Whitehorse, Yukon, where you can catch another bus to the Alaska Highway. See the Skagway and Haines sections, below, for details.

By air: By flying to your starting point, you can save time and reduce the chance of having to spend the night sleeping in a chair on board. Long hauls on the ferry can be uncomfortable and don't save you much money over flying. Fly into Juneau, Sitka, or another sizable town and plan a ferry trip from there, stopping at various places before returning to catch your plane home.

STOPPING OVER Buying ahead or booking round-trip tickets saves you nothing on the ferry, and stopovers of any length add little to the cost of your passage. Use the ferry system to explore the towns along the way, grabbing the next ferry through to continue your journey. If you travel without a vehicle, you generally don't need reservations (with the possible exceptions of the Bellingham sailings and passages across the Gulf of Alaska). Bring along a bike, or even a sea kayak, to have total freedom in exploring the Southeast. Don't count on port calls to be long enough to see the towns; if the boat is running late, they may not let you off at all. In that case, you can always hop off and then catch the next ferry out of town.

WALK-ON FARES The adult walk-on fare from Prince Rupert to Skagway is $152. Bellingham to Ketchikan is $193, Bellingham to Skagway $296. Juneau to Sitka is $32. Fares for children 11 and under are half price, rounded up to the next dollar, and children 2 and under ride free. Off season only, October through April, the driver of a vehicle does not need a separate walk-on ticket, and kids 4 and under ride free.

BRINGING VEHICLES In the summer, you often need a reservation if you want to have a shot at taking your vehicle on the ferry. The vehicle spots on the ferries from Bellingham and Prince Rupert are particularly coveted, so you need to reserve a spot several months in advance. Fares vary according to the size of the car as well as your destination; a passage from Prince Rupert to Haines for a typical 15-foot car is $303, the passage from Bellingham to Haines is $617. You also have to buy a separate ticket for each person on the ferry, including, in summer, the driver. Renting a car at your destination will probably save money and enhance your trip because you will have more flexibility in your stopovers. You can carry a kayak, canoe, or bike on the ferry quite inexpensively.

CABIN RESERVATIONS Sometimes you can snag a cabin from the standby list (approach the purser quickly upon boarding) on the same day, but generally you must reserve ahead for the summer season. Cabins from Bellingham book far ahead. A two-berth outside cabin (one with a window) with a bathroom is around $60 on most town-to-town hops, $143 from Prince Rupert to Haines, and $320 from Bellingham to Haines, plus the cost of your ticket. The great majority of the cabins are small and spartan, coming in two- and four-bunk configurations, but for a premium you can reserve a more comfortable sitting-room unit on some vessels. Most cabins have tiny private bathrooms with showers. Try to get an outside cabin so that you can watch the world go by. Cabins can be stuffy, and the windowless units can be claustrophobic as well.

DO YOU NEED A CABIN? If you do a lot of layovers in Southeast's towns, you can arrange to do most of your ferry travel during the day, but you'll probably have to sleep on board at least once. You can't sleep in your vehicle. One of the adventures of ferry travel is finding a chair to sleep in or setting up a tent on deck with everyone else. The patio-furniture lounge chairs on the covered outdoor solarium, on the top deck, are the best public sleeping spot on board, in part because the noise of the ship covers other sounds. If you're tenting, the best place is behind the solarium, where it's not too windy. On the *Columbia,* that space is small, so grab it early. Bring duct tape to secure your tent to the deck in case you can't find a sheltered spot, as the wind over the deck of a ship in motion blows like an endless gale. The recliner lounges are comfortable, too, but can be stuffy. Bring a pillow. If the ship looks crowded, grab your spot fast to get a choice location. **Showers** are available, although there may be lines. Lock the valuables and luggage you don't need in the **coin-operated lockers.** If all that sounds too rugged, or if you have small children and no tent, reserve a cabin. It offers a safe and private home base and a good night's rest, and there's a certain romance to having your own compartment on a public conveyance.

FERRY FOOD If you can, bring at least some of your own food on the ferry. Ferry food can get boring after several meals in a row and, during peak season, lines are sometimes unreasonably long. We usually bring a cooler or picnic basket. Even if you're traveling light, you can pick up some bagels and deli sandwiches on a stopover or long port call.

THE BEST RUNS Going to Sitka through **Peril Straits,** the ferry fits through extraordinarily narrow passages where no other vessel of its size ventures; the smooth, reflective water is lovely, and you may see deer along the shore. The **Wrangell Narrows,** between Petersburg and Wrangell, is also an incredible ride, day or night, as the ship accomplishes a slalom between shores that seem so close you could touch them, in water so shallow the schedules must be timed for high tide. **Frederick Sound,** between the Narrows and Wrangell, is prime for whale sightings. Approaching Skagway through the towering mountains of the **Lynn Canal** fjord also is impressive.

GETTING AROUND BY AIR AND ROAD

BY AIR Air travel is the primary link between Southeast's towns and the rest of the world. Major towns without road access have jet service, provided by **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com), the region's only major airline. Juneau is Southeast Alaska's travel hub. Ketchikan and Sitka each have a few flights a day, while Wrangell, Petersburg, and Yakutat each have one

Tips Seeing Southeast From Above

If you can possibly afford it, take a **flightseeing** trip at some point during your trip. The poor man's way of doing this is to fly a small prop plane on a scheduled run between two of your destinations instead of taking the ferry. If you ask, the pilot may even go out of his or her way to show you the sights; if not, you'll still gain an appreciation for the richness and extreme topography of the region. Most prop pilots also offers flightseeing tours (which usually take off and land in the same place) in addition to scheduled runs between destinations. Flightseeing cost as little as $100 for a brief spin. Flight services are listed in each town section.

flight going each direction daily. Gustavus is served from Juneau once daily during the summer. Some of these "milk runs" never get very far off the ground on hops between small towns: On the 31-mile Wrangell-to-Petersburg flight, the cabin attendants never have time to unbuckle. Haines and Skagway, which have highway connections, don't receive visits from jets, but all the towns and even the tiny villages have scheduled prop service.

Like the ferries, the planes can be quite late. Each of the airports in Southeast has its own challenges caused by the steep, mountainous terrain and the water. In bad weather, even jet flights are delayed or they "overhead"—they can't land at the intended destination so they leave their passengers somewhere else. Your only protection against these contingencies are travel insurance, a schedule that allows plenty of slack in case you're significantly delayed, and low blood pressure.

BY ROAD Three Southeast Alaska communities are accessible by road: Haines, Skagway, and the village of Hyder, which lies on the British Columbia border east of Ketchikan and is accessible from the gravel Cassiar Highway through Canada. If you're driving the Alaska Highway, passing through Haines and Skagway adds 160 miles of very scenic driving to the trip, as well as a 15-mile ferry ride (1 hour) between the two towns (they're separated by 362 road miles). This ferry route is not as heavily booked as the routes heading between either town and Juneau, but it's still a good idea to reserve ahead. You also can rent a car from Haines or Skagway for travel to the rest of the state at the end of a ferry journey (Haines saves just 60 miles over Skagway); buses serve Skagway; details are listed in the sections on each of those towns. If you're driving the highway in winter, you should be prepared for weather as cold as 40°F below zero (–40°C). Alaska winter driving information is under "Health & Safety" in chapter 2.

Bikes make a lot of sense for getting around Southeast's small towns, which tend to be compact. You can rent one almost anywhere you go, or bring your own on the ferry. The networks of abandoned or little-used logging roads on some islands offer limitless routes for mountain biking. Elsewhere, Forest Service hiking trails are often open for riding.

GETTING OUTSIDE IN THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

Nearly all of Southeast Alaska, stretching 500 miles from Ketchikan to Yakutat, is in Tongass National Forest. The towns sit in small pockets of private land surrounded by 17 million acres of land controlled by the U.S. Forest Service—an area nearly as large as the state of Maine, and considerably larger than any other

national forest or national park in the United States. The majority of this land has never been logged and the rate of logging has dropped dramatically in recent years, preserving one of the world's great temperate rainforests in its virgin state. It's an intact ecosystem full of wildlife, and mostly free of human development. Indeed, you quickly forget it *is* the Tongass National Forest. Since it always surrounds you when you're in this region, it's simply the land.

FOREST SERVICE CABINS

One of the best ways to get into Southeast's wilderness is by staying at one of the scores of remote Forest Service Public Recreation Cabins. These are simple cabins without electricity or running water where you can lay your sleeping bag on a bunk and sit by a warm woodstove out of the rain. You need to bring everything with you, as if camping, but it's a good deal more comfortable than a tent. And you will probably find yourself in a stunningly beautiful spot, perhaps with your own lake and a boat for fishing. Cabins are located along canoe trails, on beaches best reached by sea kayak, on high mountain lakes accessible only by floatplane, and along hiking trails. We do this with our family several times a summer by boat or canoe or on foot. I've learned three critical lessons to pass on: Do your research, pack carefully (take all the essentials, but little more), and spend at least 3 nights, preferably a week, to make all the effort pay off with real relaxation.

GETTING CABIN INFORMATION In this chapter, I've listed a few of the cabins in the sections devoted to the town that they're closest to, but for complete information check the Tongass website (**www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass**) or get copies of the free publications for each of the three major areas in the national forest: the southern area, which includes Ketchikan, Prince of Wales Island, and Misty Fjords National Monument; the Stikine area, around Petersburg and Wrangell; and the Chatham area, around Juneau, Sitka, and Admiralty Island. Each cabin is briefly described in these booklets. You can either get a hold of these publications from the visitor centers and ranger offices listed in each town section in this chapter, or write ahead to the **Tongass National Forest,** 50 Main St., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **907/228-6220** or 907/288-6237 TDD; fax 907/228-6234).

You'll need a good map to figure out where the cabins are, and an idea of how to get there and how much travel will cost—generally, the cost of transportation will be several times larger than the cabin rental fee of $25 to $45 a night. Few

Fun Fact Why There Are No Highways

A tectonic plate under the Pacific Ocean brought the islands of the Southeast Alaska Panhandle from across the globe and squished them up against the plate that carries the landmass of Canada. Along the line of this glancing collision, large glacial mountains thrust up and islands were stretched and torn into the fractured geography that makes the area so interesting. In short, it's just too expensive to build roads through those icy mountains and across the steep, jumbled terrain of the islands. In 2000, Gov. Tony Knowles shelved a plan to build a road to Juneau, the capital city, because of the cost, electing to add more ferries instead. In 2002, the new governor, Frank Murkowski, resurrected the road plan. If the plan is undertaken, it will take many years and many hundreds of millions of dollars.

cabins can be reached without a boat or aircraft, and for all but large groups, flying is the economical way to go. A flight service can help you choose a cabin according to your interests and how far you can afford to fly. You may be able to rent the gear you need, but you'll have to reserve that ahead, too. The solution to these puzzles is different for each town; I've listed where to find help in the town sections later in this chapter.

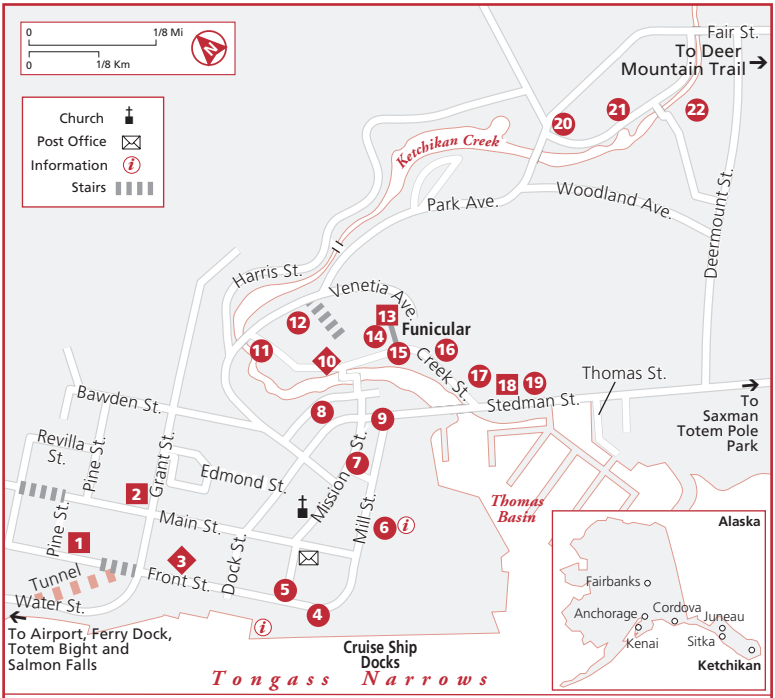
RESERVING A CABIN OR CAMPSITE The cabins and some campgrounds are reserved through a national system. Don't rely on the reservations operators or website for advice or cabin information—they're in upstate New York—instead, pose your questions to the ranger station nearest where you plan to go. The rangers are friendly and have probably stayed in the cabin you're interested in. Use the reservations system when you're ready to book; you can check cabin availability dates and reserve on the Internet, which is by far the best way to do it (**www.reserveusa.com**). By telephone, contact the **National Recreation Reservations Service (NRRS),** operated by **Reserve America,** at ✆ **877/444-6777,** 877/833-6777 TDD, or 518/885-3639 with toll from overseas. The phone lines are open April 1 through Labor Day daily from 8am to midnight EST, winter daily from 10am to 7pm. They take American Express, Discover, MasterCard, and Visa, or you can reserve on the phone and then pay by certified check. Cabins are available for reservation on a first-come, first-served basis, starting 180 days ahead, and campsites are available 240 days ahead. For the most popular cabins, you need to be online the minute reservations become available to have a chance.

2 Ketchikan: On the Waterfront

Had they known about it, the film noir directors of the 1950s would have chosen the Ketchikan (*ketch*-e-kan) waterfront for Humphrey Bogart to sleuth. The black-and-white montage: A pelting rain drains from the brim of his hat, suspicious figures dart through saloon doors and into the lobbies of concrete-faced hotels, a forest of workboat masts fades into the midsummer twilight along a shore where the sea and land seem to merge in miles of floating docks. Along Creek Street, salmon on their way to spawn swim under houses chaotically perched on pilings beside a narrow boardwalk; inside, men are spawning, too, in the arms of legal prostitutes. Meanwhile, the faces of totem poles gaze down on the scene disapprovingly, mute holders of their own ancient secrets.

Today, the director hoping to re-create that scene would have his work cut out for him removing the T-shirt shops and bright street-front signs that seek to draw in throngs of cruise passengers to buy plastic gewgaws. Not so long ago, Ketchikan was a rugged, exotic intersection of cultures built on the profits made by logging Southeast's rainforest, but in a decade it has transformed itself into a tourist center, softening its rough edges while selling its charm to visitors. And the changes can only accelerate. More and bigger ships are coming, and Southeast Alaska's last major timber mill—the Louisiana Pacific–owned pulp plant in Ward Cove, north of town—closed in 1997 due, in part, to environmental concerns. A major portion of the mill was blown up in 1999; they sold tickets to see who would get to press the button on the explosives, but the occasion was less than festive, as former employees saw the scene of their work lives disappear into dust. A smaller, more labor-intensive operation, intended to replace the lost timber mill jobs with jobs in sawing lumber and making veneer, closed down in 2001. In the meantime, the economy had moved on.

Downtown Ketchikan



ACCOMMODATIONS
Blueberry Hill Bed and Breakfast **1**
First United Methodist Church Hostel **2**
New York Hotel **18**
Westmark Cape Fox Lodge **13**

DINING
Annabelle's Famous Keg & Chowder House **3**
Good Fortune Chinese Restaurant **10**

ATTRACTIONS
The Cape Fox Hill-Creek Street Funicular **14**
City Park **16**
Creek Street **15**
Deer Mountain Tribal Hatchery and Eagle Center **20**
Dolly's House **17**
Fish Ladder **11**
Married Men's Trail **12**
Southeast Alaska Discovery Center **6**
Tongass Historical Museum **8**
Totem Heritage Center **22**

SHOPPING
Alaska Eagle Art **10**
Blue Heron Gallery and Gifts **9**
Exploration Gallery **7**
Herring Cove Originals **19**
Hide-A-Way Gifts **16**
Soho Coho **10**
Scanlon Gallery **5**

On summer days, the white cruise ships tower above the town like huge new buildings on the dock facing Front Street, the downtown's main drag. Each morning their gangways disgorge thousands of visitors who clog the streets and, for a few hours, transform the town into a teeming carnival. With only a few hours to spend here, the passengers explore the closest of the twisting streets, see the museum at the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center, or take a tour to one of the totem pole parks. Then evening comes, the streets empty, and the cruise ships slide off quietly on the way to their next port.

That is when a sense of the old, misty, mysterious Ketchikan starts to return. Visitors with a little more time to spend, and the willingness to explore beyond the core tourist areas, can drink in the history and atmosphere of the place. Stay in a quaint old hotel, hike a boardwalk path through the primeval rainforest, and visit the museums, clan house replicas, and totem pole parks that make Ketchikan a center of Tlingit and Haida culture.

Ketchikan also makes a great jumping-off point for some spectacular outdoor experiences, including a trip to **Misty Fjords National Monument** (see section 3, later in this chapter). As the state's fourth-largest city, Ketchikan is the transportation hub for the southern portion of Southeast Alaska. (The nickname "Gateway City" refers to its geographical location and transportation function.) Seaplanes based on docks along the waterfront are the taxis of the region, and a big inter-agency visitor center can get you started on your explorations of the area. Ketchikan is one of the wettest spots on earth, with rain measured in the hundreds of inches; quality rain gear is requisite for any activity, in the wilds or in the streets of town.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY AIR **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) provides Ketchikan with nonstop jet service to and from Seattle and with flights to and from the north, stopping in Petersburg, Wrangell, Sitka, Juneau, and Anchorage. Commuter lines run wheeled planes and floatplanes from Ketchikan to the neighboring communities, and also offer fishing packages and flightseeing.

The airport is on Gravina Island, to which there is no bridge. A ferry runs each way every ½ hour (more frequently at peak times). Believe the airline when it tells you when to catch the ferry for your plane. The fare is $4 for adults, $2 ages 6 to 12, and free under 6. Returning the same day is free. The fare for cars is $6 each way, no matter how soon you come back. See "Getting Around," below, for how to get from the airport ferry dock to town and for a water taxi right from the airport (a fun option).

BY FERRY The dock is 2½ miles north of downtown. **Alaska Marine Highway** ferries (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com) run 6 hours north to Wrangell and 6 hours south to Prince Rupert, B.C. The walk-on fare from Prince Rupert is $45, from Wrangell it's $27; children under 12 go half price. Call the local terminal at ✆ **907/225-6182** or 907/225-6181 for a recording of updated arrival and departure times.

ORIENTATION

Ketchikan is on huge **Revillagigedo Island,** popularly known as **Revilla Island.** The downtown area, pretty much taken over by tourism, is quite compact and walkable, but the whole of Ketchikan, including a second commercial area used by locals, is long, strung out between the Tongass Narrows and the mountains. A waterfront road goes under various names through town (it's Water St. on our map), becoming North Tongass Highway as it stretches about 16 miles to the north. Saxman is 2½ miles to the south of downtown on the 14-mile South Tongass Highway.

GETTING AROUND

You can spend a day seeing the downtown sights on foot, but you will need transportation to get to the totem pole parks or airport.

BY SHUTTLE OR BUS The **Airporter Shuttle** (✆ **907/225-5429**) meets each flight and picks up at the major hotels according to a schedule you can get at the front desk. They'll pick up anywhere else by arrangement. The $18 fare downtown includes the cost of the airport ferry—a good deal for a single passenger, but a couple would save money taking the ferry and then getting a cab. Since the shuttle drives right to the terminal, however, it's still the best way to go for a couple with a lot of luggage. The least costly way to get from the airport ferry dock is the **Ketchikan Gateway Borough bus** (✆ **907/247-7442**), which runs two overlapping lines, either of which can get you downtown. The fare is $1.50 on the shorter green line, $2.25 on the blue line (which runs all the way to Saxman). Your luggage must fit under the seat.

BY TAXI The local taxis, mostly minivans, are convenient and usually easy to flag down on the single main road through town. Try **Sourdough Cab** (✆ **907/225-5544**) or **Yellow Taxi** (✆ **907/225-5555**). Taking a cab to the airport terminal is costly because of time that runs up on the meter waiting for and riding the ferry to Gravina Island. Take the cab just to the airport ferry dock and walk on. If you have a lot of luggage, take the Airporter Shuttle (see above), which goes to the terminal, or take a water taxi from downtown.

BY WATER TAXI Only in Ketchikan could you take a boat from the airport to your hotel. **Tongass Water Taxi** (✆ **907/209-8294**) also happens to be reasonably priced. The six-passenger boat runs back and forth from near the airport ferry dock to downtown all day for $15 per person. It also crosses the same route as the airport ferry (without going on to downtown) for $4. Several hotels are right on the water, so the water taxi can take you almost to your door.

BY RENTAL CAR **Alaska Car Rental** (✆ **800/662-0007** or 907/225-5000; www.akcarrental.com) has an office at the airport or will pick up or deliver the car for free.

BY BIKE A bike is a good way to get around Ketchikan. A 2½-mile bike trail runs along the water to Saxman, stopping a few blocks short of the totem pole park there, and another goes north 6⅓ miles to the Ward Lake Recreation Area. **Southeast Exposure,** 515 Water St. (✆ **907/225-8829;** www.southeastexposure.com), rents bikes for $12 ½ day and $22 full day, and offers guided bike outings.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Southeast Alaska Discovery Center,** 50 Main St., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **907/228-6220** or 907/288-6237 TDD; fax 907/228-6234; www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass), is much more than a visitor center. Housed in a large, attractive building of log beams and concrete, and located a block from the cruise-ship dock, the center is the best museum in the region when it comes to illustrating the interaction of the region's ecology and human society, including both traditional Native and contemporary uses. Some of the exhibits about logging seem strained, as if intended to counter potential opposition on the part of the viewer, but that doesn't spoil the overall impact, which is to show what's special about these lands. An auditorium here shows a high-tech slide show. Admission to these facilities in summer costs $5, free ages 6 and under, with a $15 family maximum; in winter it's free. Without paying, you can get guidance about planning your time and activities in the outdoors. An information kiosk and bookstore are located near the entrance, and downstairs you'll find a trip-planning room decorated like an explorer's private den, with information about outdoor

pursuits all around the state. The center is open May through September daily from 8am to 5pm, October through April Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 4:30pm.

The **Ketchikan Visitors Bureau,** 131 Front St., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **800/770-3300** or 907/225-6166; fax 907/225-4250; www.visit-ketchikan.com), stands right on the cruise-ship dock, offering town information and desks where tourism businesses sell their wares, including tickets for tours. The center is open daily in the summer from 8am to 5pm and when cruise ships are in town; weekdays only in winter.

SPECIAL EVENTS

There's a detailed **events calendar** at **www.visit-ketchikan.com/event_calendar/calendar.html**.

Celebration of the Sea, a 10-day event beginning around the first of May, includes a variety of art, music, and community events; you can get a schedule from the Ketchikan Visitors Bureau. **King Salmon Derby,** a fishing event that's a 50-year-old tradition, takes place at the end of May through the beginning of June.

The Fourth of July celebration is huge, with a long parade on Front Street attended by mobs of locals and cruise-ship passengers. After the parade, there's a **Timber Carnival** with an all-afternoon loggers' competition at the baseball field near City Park on Park Avenue; admission is free.

The crowd-pleasing **Great Alaskan Lumberjack Show** goes on all summer behind the Alaska Discovery Center (✆ **888/320-9049;** www.lumberjacksports.com). Canadian and U.S. professional teams compete three or more times daily, mostly for an audience of cruise-ship passengers. Tickets are $29 adults, half price ages 5 to 12.

The Blueberry Arts Festival, held the first weekend of August, has booths, music, and food, and is put on by the very active Ketchikan Area Arts and Humanities Council, 716 Totem Way (✆ **907/225-2211;** www.ketchikanarts.org). Check with the council for winter performing-arts events, too, including the **Monthly Grind** music and poetry show in the Saxman Tribal House every third Saturday from September to April, and a wearable art show in February.

FAST FACTS: Ketchikan

Banks A bank with an ATM is at 306 Main St.; grocery stores and the visitor center also have ATMs.

Hospital **General Hospital** is at 3100 Tongass Ave. (✆ **907/225-5171**).

Internet Access **SeaPort Cyberstations** (✆ **907/247-7599,** www.seaportel.com) is at the ship dock on the second floor at 5 Salmon Landing.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. Call ✆ **907/225-6631** for nonemergencies.

Post Office 3609 Tongass Ave.; a more convenient downtown substation is at the Great Alaska Clothing Company, 422 Mission St.

Taxes Sales tax is 5.5%. Room taxes for accommodations total 11.5%.

EXPLORING KETCHIKAN

Pick up a copy of the **Official Historic Ketchikan Walking Tour Map,** available all over town, which has three ways through town to follow and loads of information about sites of both great and modest interest on the way.

Schoolteacher Lois Munch, of **Classic Tours** (✆ **907/225-3091;** www.classictours.com), makes her tours fun: She wears a poodle skirt to drive visitors around in her '55 Chevy. A 2-hour tour to the Saxman totem poles is $70; a 3-hour tour adds a natural history stop and costs $90. Rates are per person and include the admission to Saxman and tax. The maximum group size is five. Other residents offer tours, too; check at the town visitor center for many more choices.

TLINGIT, HAIDA & TSIMSHIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Ketchikan area has two totem pole parks and a totem pole museum, as well as a wealth of contemporary Native art displayed all over town. Notable pieces stand at Whale Park at Mission and Bawden streets and at the Westcoast Cape Fox Lodge. Most of what you see in Southeast Alaska is Tlingit—the Haida and Tsimshian generally live to the south and east in British Columbia—but Ketchikan is near the areas that the three peoples inhabit, so their similar cultures mix here.

Totem Heritage Center ★★ Located near City Park, the center contains the largest collection of original 19th-century totem poles in existence. The poles, up to 160 years old, are displayed indoors, and are mostly unpainted, many with the grass and moss still attached from when they were rescued from the elements in villages. Totem poles were never meant to be maintained or repainted—they generally disintegrate after about 70 years, and were constantly replaced—but these were preserved to help keep the culture alive. A high ceiling and muted lighting highlight the spirituality of the art. Well-trained guides are on hand to explain what you're looking at, and there are good interpretive signs. The gift shop, open during the summer, carries authentic Native crafts.

601 Deermount St. ✆ **907/225-5900.** Admission $5 in summer, free in winter. Summer daily 8am–5pm; winter Mon–Fri 1–5pm.

Totem Bight State Historical Park ★★★ This park presents poles and a clan house carved beginning in 1938 by Natives working with traditional tools to copy fragments of historic poles that had mostly rotted away. The project, funded by the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, helped save Tlingit and Haida culture, which had been essentially outlawed until that time. The setting, purportedly the site of a traditional fishing camp, is a peaceful spot on the edge of Tongass Narrows, at the end of a short walk through the woods, so the experience is both aesthetic and educational. The park also stands out for its excellent interpretive signs, printed guide, and interpretive website. There's a small park bookstore.

10 miles out of town on N. Tongass Hwy. Ketchikan Area State Park Office, 9883 N. Tongass Hwy. ✆ **907/247-8574.** www.alaskastateparks.org (click on "Individual Parks"). No admission fee. Park open year-round every day at all times.

Saxman Native Village Totem Pole Park ★ Saxman's park has artifacts similar to those at Totem Bight park, but with an added perk: You can see carvers working in the building to the right of the park. However, the setting is less inspiring than the Totem Bight surroundings. It's possible to visit the studio and

Tips Avoiding the Crowds

Ketchikan is overrun with as many as 8,000 cruise-ship passengers every day May through September, far more than the small visitor attractions or even the streets can comfortably handle. Independent travelers can avoid the crush by planning to visit popular spots in the afternoon. Spend the morning on an outdoors activity instead. At the **Deer Mountain Tribal Hatchery and Eagle Center** (see p. 100) the buses all come through before noon. At **Totem Bight State Park** (see p. 99) the trails quiet down by midafternoon. Ships usually leave the town in early evening.

the poles without joining a tour, using a pamphlet that costs $1.50, but interpretive materials are scant compared to those at Totem Bight. Cape Fox Corp., the owner of the park, caters mainly to cruise-ship passengers with its 2-hour tour, which includes entry to the clan house, a short performance of a Tlingit legend, and a demonstration of traditional dance and song by the Cape Fox Dancers. The tour schedule is different each day, depending on the ships. Buy tour tickets in the gift store on the right as you enter the park.

In Saxman, 2½ miles south of Ketchikan on the S. Tongass Hwy. ✆ **907/225-4846** for tour times and tickets. http://capefoxtours.com. Tour $35 adults, $17.50 children 12 and under; unguided visits free. Park open at all times. No tours Oct–Apr.

DOWNTOWN ATTRACTIONS

Ketchikan's best downtown attractions are all within walking distance of one another. See Creek Street, then walk up Park Avenue past the Ketchikan Creek fish ladder and up to lovely **City Park,** site of the Totem Heritage Center, described above. The park is among my favorite places in Ketchikan. The creek splits into a maze of ornamental pools and streams once used as a hatchery, with footbridges, a fountain, and large trees with creeping roots.

The Creek Street ★ boardwalk starts at the Stedman Street bridge, running over the tidal creek. It was Ketchikan's red-light district until fairly recently; now it's a quaint tourist mall. Prostitution was semi-legal in Alaska until 1952, recent enough to survive in local memories but distant enough to have made Creek Street historic and to transform the women who worked there from outcasts to icons. Dolly Arthur, who started in business for herself on the creek in 1919 and died in 1975, lived through both eras, and her home became a commercial museum not long after her death. **Dolly's House** (✆ **907/225-6329**) is amusing, mildly racy, and a little sad. Admission is $4; it's open from 8am to 4pm during the summer and when cruise ships are in town.

Creek Street has some interesting shops, described below, but it's also fun just to walk on the creekside boardwalk, into the forest above, and over the "Married Men's Trail"—once a discreet way for married men to reach the red-light district. **The Cape Fox Hill–Creek Street Funicular** (known as "the tram"), a sort of diagonal elevator, runs 211 feet from the boardwalk up to the Westcoast Cape Fox Lodge on top of the hill. Take it up and then enjoy the walk down through the woods. The summertime fare is $2, but if no one is around, just press the "up" button and go.

Deer Mountain Tribal Hatchery and Eagle Center ★★ This remarkable nonprofit center offers one of Alaska's best hatchery tours and one of the best places to see a bald eagle close up. The wooden buildings stand over Ketchikan

Creek. You can see fish climbing against the current up into pools where they are sorted before being cut open to complete their biological purpose (salmon die when they spawn anyway). These hatchery tours are special for letting you get so close to the action. In fact, you can feed the tiny fry (young salmon) yourself. The hatchery produces king and silver salmon and steelhead trout. Visitors can also walk right through the eagle enclosure. Remarkably, the resident pair of injured, flightless bald eagles have mated for life and built a nest where they lay eggs each year. They hunt salmon swimming naturally through their enclosure, and you can watch from a few feet away, with no glass in between you and the eagles.

1158 Salmon Rd. ✆ **800/252-5158** or 907/225-6760. Admission $7.95 adults, $3.50 ages 6–12. May–Sept daily 8am–4:30pm; winter by arrangement.

Tongass Historical Museum This one-room museum is where Ketchikan talks back to itself, with well-executed revolving exhibits that have always held my interest. A small permanent area shows Native artifacts. In the same building, the attractive Ketchikan Public Library is a great place to recharge, especially in the children's section downstairs, where big windows look out on Ketchikan Creek's falls.

629 Dock St. ✆ **907/225-5600.** Admission $2 summer; free winter. Summer daily 8am–5pm; winter Wed–Fri 1–5pm, Sat 10am–4pm, Sun 1–4pm.

SHOPPING

The Ketchikan art scene is one of Alaska's liveliest, thanks in part to the Ketchikan Arts and Humanities Council, whose helpful staff operates the **Main Stay Gallery,** at 716 Totem Way (www.ketchikanarts.org). Shows change monthly.

Generally, shops are open daily in the summer during usual business hours (10am–6pm) and sometimes later or earlier depending on the flow of trade. In the winter many shops close, especially on Creek Street and near the cruise ship dock, but most of those described here are owned and operated by locals who stay open year round, although rarely on weekends in winter.

Ray Troll is Alaska's leading fish-obsessed artist. His small gallery, **Soho Coho,** at 5 Creek St., is worth a visit even if you aren't a shopper. It shows Troll's own work and that of other Ketchikan artists from the same school of surreal rainforest humor. In Troll's art, subtle ironies and silly puns coexist in a solidly decorated interior world. T-shirts are his most popular canvas; "Spawn Till You Die" is a classic. Troll's incredible art website delves far into his strange mind (and sells shirts), at www.trollart.com. The gallery is open summer daily from 9am to 6pm; winter Wednesday through Saturday from noon to 5:30pm; or order at ✆ **800/888-4070.**

Adjacent to Soho Coho, **Alaska Eagle Arts** is a serious gallery featuring the bold yet traditional work of Native artist Marvin Oliver. Upstairs, don't miss **Parnassus Books,** a wonderfully cluttered browsing nirvana with broad, sophisticated collections of Alaskana, art, and women's art, among other subject areas. Down the boardwalk at 18 Creek St., craftspeople carve and interact with visitors at **Hide-A-Way Gifts.**

At 123 Stedman St., across the creek, **Blue Heron Gallery and Gifts** carries Alaska arts and crafts that appeal to locals as well as visitors, including jewelry, stained glass, clothing, jam, prints, and so on. At 229 Stedman St., **Herring Cove Originals** is Sharon Huffman's studio and gallery, filled with sharp, vivid prints made by applying ink to fish, plants, and other things from nature and

them printing them on paper or materials (a Japanese art form called *gyotaku*); pieces cover a broad price range. Also nearby, at 633 Mission St., **Exploration Gallery** specializes in antique maps and prints, and also carries contemporary prints, pottery, and Native art, with more thoughtful selections than the sameness found in most other shops. Farther down the same street, **Scanlon Gallery,** at 318 Mission St., carries a huge selection of contemporary art, Alaska Native art, affordable prints, and other items in various media.

Note: Ketchikan is a shopping and art destination, but if you want something authentically Alaskan you have to be careful. For some important tips, see "Native Art: Finding the Real Thing," in chapter 2.

GETTING OUTSIDE

There's lots to do outdoors around Ketchikan, but most of it will require a boat or plane; drive-by attractions are limited. See the next section, on Misty Fjords National Monument, for more options. In any event, your first stop should be the trip-planning room at the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center (see "Visitor Information," near the beginning of the Ketchikan section), for details on trails, fishing, and dozens of U.S. Forest Service cabins.

SPECIAL PLACES

REMOTE CABINS The U.S. Forest Service maintains more than 50 cabins around Ketchikan; all are remote and primitive, but at $25 to $45 a night, you can't beat the price or the settings. This is a chance to be utterly alone in the wilderness; many of the lake cabins come with a boat for fishing and exploring. For details and descriptions of all the cabins, contact the **Southeast Alaska Discovery Center** (✆ **907/228-6220;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass). The reservations system to use when you're actually ready to book a cabin is described in "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest" on p. 92.

If you stay in a cabin, you'll need all your camping gear except a tent, including sleeping bags, a camp stove, your own cooking outfit, a lantern, and so on. **Alaska Wilderness Outfitting and Camping Rentals,** 3857 Fairview St. (✆ **907/225-7335;** www.latitude56.com/camping/index.html), rents most of the gear you'll need, including small outboards for the skiffs. They will even take care of your grocery shopping. They don't rent sleeping bags, however.

The cabins are remote. You can hike or take a boat to some of them, but most are accessible only by floatplane (and unless you have loads of stuff, flying is probably the cheapest way to go). Expect to pay at least $450 round-trip for three passengers. For a recommended carrier, see "The Coolest Flights," later, in the section on Misty Fjords National Monument.

SCENIC TRAILS The wide, gravel **Ward Lake Nature Trail** circles a smooth lake for 1⅓ miles among old-growth Sitka spruce large enough to put you in your place. Ward Creek has steelhead and cutthroat trout, Dolly Varden char, and silver salmon; check current regulations before fishing. To reach the trail, campgrounds, and picnic area, travel about 8 miles on North Tongass Highway and turn right on Revilla Road. For a slightly more challenging hike, **Perseverance Lake Trail,** made up of boardwalks with steps, winds from the Three Cs Campground (located across the road from Ward Lake), to a lake 2⅓ miles away, with good berry picking along the route.

Deer Mountain Trail, right behind downtown, is a steep but rewarding climb through a forest of big, mossy trees up to great views. You can walk from City Park to the trailhead, ½ a mile and 500 feet higher on steep Fair Street and

Ketchikan Lakes Road, but if you take a cab you will save energy for the trail. The first mile rises 1,000 feet to a great ocean view south of Tongass Narrows, and the next mile and 1,000 feet reward you with another great view, this time of Ketchikan. The alpine summit, at 3,001 feet, comes near the 3-mile mark. The Deer Mountain Forest Service cabin is a bit farther, and the trail continues to another trailhead 10 miles away. Pick up a trail guide sheet from the Forest Service at the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center (see p. 97).

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

FISHING The **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** produces a 24-page fishing guide to Ketchikan with details on where to find fish in both fresh and salt water, plus a list of 17 fishing spots accessible from the roads. You can pick this guide up at the Southeast Alaska Discovery Center (p. 97). For licenses and other help, the local **Fish and Game office** is at 2030 Sea Level Dr., Suite 205, Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **907/225-2859;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click "Sport Fish" then "Region 1").

Guided fishing charters can take you out on the water for salmon and halibut, and nonguided, bareboat rental also is available (generally, you pay under $200 a day for a skiff, but you need to know what you are doing). The Ketchikan Visitors Bureau can put you in contact with a fishing boat operator. A daylong guided charter costs around $225 per person, ½ day about $140. If you want to devote your time in Ketchikan to fishing, check out the fishing lodges listed below under "Where to Stay."

SEA KAYAKING The islands, coves, and channels around Ketchikan create protected waters that are rich with life and welcome exploration by kayak. **Southeast Exposure,** 515 Water St. (✆ **907/225-8829;** www.southeastexposure.com), rents kayaks and guides day trips and overnight trips. Day trips are $50 to $110; a 4-day Misty Fjords National Monument paddle is $708 per person.

WHERE TO STAY

In addition to the hotels and B&Bs listed below, the **Ketchikan Reservation Service,** 412 D–1 Loop Rd., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **800/987-5337** or phone/fax 907/247-5337; www.ketchikan-lodging.com), books many bed-and-breakfasts and outfitted apartments online.

EXPENSIVE

Best Western Landing ★ This establishment offers a variety of good, unremarkable rooms on long hallways. The newer rooms are large, with two queen beds, good-size bathrooms, tables, and microwave ovens; the older wing has slightly smaller (and less expensive) rooms. The location, right across from the ferry dock, is distant from the downtown sights, so you'll need to rent a car or use the courtesy van that the hotel offers.

The **Landing Restaurant,** a grill with lots of chrome, is a local favorite. Lunch is $6.50 to $11; a burger is $7.75. Dinner is $12 to $26, with a steak and seafood menu that's a bit pretentious for the setting. I prefer to eat dinner upstairs, at **Jeremiah's** bar, which serves sandwiches, pizza, and quite good pasta in a sumptuous room; the nonsmoking area is glassed off and not smoky.

3434 Tongass Ave., Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **800/428-8304** or 907/225-5166. Fax 907/225-6900. www.landinghotel.com. 76 units. High season $144–$170 double; $155–$182 suite. Low season $104–$115 double; $130 suite. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; health club; limited room service; courtesy van; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Salmon Falls Resort ★★ If fishing is your goal, a stay at this huge on-island lodge has several advantages. First, there's the incredible setting, on island-dotted Clover Pass next to a waterfall where 10,000 pink salmon spawn. Next is the cost savings of a road-accessible lodge, since you don't have to fly in and out. Finally, you're not trapped in the middle of nowhere if one of you doesn't want to fish—the attractions of Ketchikan are a 17-mile drive down the road. The facilities are quite good: large, up-to-date white-walled motel rooms with phones and small bathrooms but without TVs. Rooms in the upper building are slightly preferable and cost the same as rooms in the lower building. The restaurant and bar are housed in a massive log octagon held up in the center by a section of the Alaska pipeline, with great views and a well-prepared menu of steak and seafood ranging from $18 to $29. The restaurant is worth a drive for dinner even if you aren't staying here (it's open nightly from May 15–Sept 15). Some 40 lodge-operated boats await at the dock. Inclusive fishing packages start at $900 per person, double occupancy, for a 3-day stay with 2 days on the water, self-guided. With a guide, the price is $1,300 per person. Without fishing, room and board are $600.

16707 N. Tongass Hwy. (P.O. Box 5700), Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **800/247-9059** (reservations) or 907/225-2752. Fax 907/225-2710. www.salmonfallsresort.net. 52 units. AE, MC, V. Closed Sept 15–May 15. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar.

Westcoast Cape Fox Lodge ★★★ This is Alaska's most beautiful hotel. It stands on a wooded pinnacle above downtown, accessible from Creek Street by a funicular. The sheer drop-off and tall rainforest trees create the lofty feeling of a treehouse in the rooms and restaurant. Perfectly proportioned buildings are decorated in extraordinarily good taste. Warm wood window frames complement the stunning views out of the double-hung windows. The Cape Fox Native corporation built the hotel, and the lobby and parking area are a museum of Tlingit art masterpieces, adding to the peaceful rainforest atmosphere. Rooms are large and airy, appointed in rich-toned wood, and all but a dozen share a view of Ketchikan (rooms on the opposite side are $10 less). Each room has an attractively tiled bathroom.

The **Heen Kahidi** ★★ restaurant is the best in town. The dining room, a tall, narrow rectangle of windows with a fireplace, is a beautiful, calming place to eat. The service is highly professional, and the cuisine, emphasizing local seafood with rich sauces, is plentiful and skillfully turned out. Lunch ranges from $7 to $20; dinner main courses range from $17 to $37, with most around $25. The dining room is open from 7am to 9pm daily.

800 Venetia Wy., Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **866/225-8001** or 907/225-8001. Fax 907/225-8286. www.westcoasthotels.com. 72 units. High season $169–$179 double; low season $139–$149 double; year-round $250 suite. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; limited room service; dry cleaning. *In room:* TV w/pay movies and Nintendo rental, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

MODERATE

Blueberry Hill Bed and Breakfast ★★ *Finds* This gracious 1917 house, once a residence for nuns, stands atop the rocky cliff that bounds the north side of the downtown waterfront, above the tunnel. The center of Ketchikan's action is a short drive or 117 steps away on a public stairway, but up here all is peaceful in common rooms with high ceilings and stately dimensions and trim. Talented, solicitous Vicki Zahler presides, bringing her background as an interior decorator and caterer in Oregon to her role as innkeeper. Her experience shows in the antiques, the art, the comfortable, "just right" country decor, and the

candles and soft New Age music in the living room. Each of the guest rooms is large and light, with its own bathroom and phone, as well as queen beds with down comforters. Smoking is not allowed in the house.

500 Front St. (P.O. Box 9508), Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **877/449-2583** or 907/247-2583. Fax 907/247-2584. www.blueberryhillbb.com. 4 units. High season $110–$145 double. Low season $80–$105. Extra person $25. Rates include full breakfast and afternoon snack. DISC, MC, V.

Edgewater Bed and Breakfast ★ Situated over the water on the coastal bike trail about 1½ miles south of town, this place is a great choice for long stays or if you want to cook for yourself. The rooms are large and light, if sparsely decorated, with big bathrooms and access to a large kitchen stocked with food. Each room except one has a private entry from the wraparound deck. An upstairs suite is enormous, perfect for a family or group—the host doesn't charge extra for more people. Best of all, the ocean is at your doorstep. You can fish right from the property, and on my brief inspection I saw a sea otter and a nesting bald eagle. You can bike here, but you'll probably want a car.

2070 S. Tongass Hwy. (P.O. Box 9302), Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **907/247-3343.** Fax 907/225-1184. www.edgewaterbb.com. 4 units. Summer $125–$150; winter rates negotiable. MC, V. **Amenities:** Free laundry machines. *In room:* TV.

The Narrows Inn ★ The motel buildings sit above the water, where fishing charters and floatplanes collect guests for outings. The rooms, done in an outdoors theme, are fresh and nicely decorated, with wallpaper borders, but they are small—the TV is mounted on the wall. Bathrooms are large. Rooms with balconies rent for $10 more. The location is 4 miles from downtown; they have an airport shuttle, but I would rent a car if staying here.

4871 N. Tongass Hwy. (P.O. Box 8296), Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **888/686-2600** or 907/247-2600. Fax 907/247-2602. www.narrowsinn.com. 46 units. High season $130–$140 double; $210 suite. Low season $89–$99 double; $150 suite. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; courtesy airport shuttle; marina. *In room:* TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, microwave.

INEXPENSIVE

Captain's Quarters Bed & Breakfast ★★ *Value* The rooms here—large, quiet, and immaculate, with self-contained self-service breakfast rooms and sweeping views of the city and ocean—rival the best hotel rooms in Ketchikan (those at the Cape Fox), but cost half as much. A nautical theme carries through the hotel, with oak woodwork. One room has a full kitchen. The setup allows as much privacy as you want—socialize with hostess Toni Bass, a gregarious school secretary, or come and go without seeing anyone. The house is perched in a mountainside neighborhood just north of the tunnel, where half the streets are stairs. It's a doable walk from downtown. There's no smoking in the house.

325 Lund St., Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **907/225-4912.** www.ptialaska.net/~captbnb. 3 units. High season $85 double; low season $69 double. Extra person $20. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

New York Hotel ★★ *Value* This funny little 1924 building, in a perfectly central location just off Creek Street, contains charming, antique-furnished rooms that look out on a small boat harbor. Rooms are an almost unreal value, and are far more attractive than those at other hotels in town that cost much more. Plus, the hotel offers a courtesy van to the airport, ferries, and hiking trails. Energetic new owners keep this place sparkling clean; they've added new carpets, big TVs, quality linens, and several two-level suites with cooking facilities. They know what they've got, however, and are striving to retain the quirks

and charm of the building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. The lobby is tiny and the standard rooms are not large; steep, narrow stairs to those units may be a barrier to some.

The same owners have made the attached **New York Café** into a good eatery. They serve three healthy and hearty meals a day, local seafood, a wide selection of beer and wine, espresso, quiche, salads, sandwiches, and pastries baked in-house, with most items under $10. The cafe is open at least from 7am to 10pm, sometimes earlier or later. The dining room contains an old-fashioned lunch counter and table seating (or sit outside in good weather). Light floods in from high windows on a black, white, and red tiled floor and a large Ray Troll mural. It's smoke free.

207 Stedman St., Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **866/225-0246** or 907/225-0246. Fax 907/225-1803. www.thenewyorkhotel.com. 10 units. High season $89–$99 double, $139 suite. Low season $69–$79 double, $99 suite. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; courtesy van. *In room:* TV, dataport.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

First United Methodist Church This downtown church hostel is affiliated with HI/AYH, so you can get your member discount. Dorms are male and female, and guests have use of the church kitchen. Bring a sleeping bag. It is open only June through August; office hours are from 7 to 9am and 6 to 11pm. No atmosphere, just utilitarian hostel bunks.

400 Main St. (P.O. Box 8515), Ketchikan, AK 99901. ✆ **907/225-3319.** 23 beds. $12 per person HI/AYH member, $15 nonmembers. Closed Sept–May.

Three Forest Service campgrounds with a total of 47 sites are located at **Ward Lake** (see "Special Places" on p. 102). A salmon stream runs through the middle of the lakeside Signal Creek Campground, which, along with the Last Chance Campground, can be reserved through the national system described in "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest," in section 1 of this chapter. The camping fee at either place is $10.

Eighteen miles out of town on North Tongass Highway, the **Settler's Cove State Park** includes a sandy beach (a good place to watch whales, beachcomb, or even swim); a disabilities-accessible path to a spectacular waterfall; and a short coastal trail. There are 14 campsites, half of which will take rigs of up to 30 feet, without hookups. Camping costs $10 a night. For information, contact the **Alaska Division of Parks** (✆ **907/247-8574**), 9883 N. Tongass Hwy.

If you need hookups for an RV, try **Clover Pass Resort,** about 13 miles north of the ferry terminal on North Point Higgins Road (✆ **800/410-2234** or 907/247-2234; www.cloverpassresort.com). They charge $28 a night.

WHERE TO DINE

The best restaurant in town is in the Westcoast Cape Fox Lodge. See the reviews for Salmon Falls Resort, Best Western Landing, and New York Hotel, all above, for other good choices. **Bar Harbor Restaurant,** 2813 Tongass Ave. (✆ **907/225-2813**) is a charming new family-operated restaurant in a small house in the north part of town, a drive from the main tourist area. The food is terrific, the tiny dining room is intimate, and the family members who cook and serve pasta, steak and seafood are wonderfully warm and attentive. Lunch is $7 to $11, dinner $13 to $30. A popular espresso place is **The Edge,** at 5 Salmon Landing Market, in an airy water-view corner space (✆ **907/225-1465**).

Annabelle's Famous Keg and Chowder House ★ STEAK & SEAFOOD The dining room here is formal, decorated in a heavy late–19th-century theme,

with high-backed armchairs at well-spaced tables, dark wood, and floral patterns. The straightforward dinner menu includes steak and seafood, plus a few more-ambitious selections, one of which I ordered on my last visit: a stuffed halibut special that was nicely seasoned but overdone, with excellent vegetables and rice pilaf. A more limited selection, including the tasty chowder, is served in the spacious bar.

326 Front St. ✆ **907/225-9423.** Dinner $19–$50. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Good Fortune Chinese Restaurant CHINESE This restaurant stands on pilings in Creek Street, with small upstairs and downstairs dining rooms. The food is consistently good year after year, with a long and varied menu that allows you to choose by style of cuisine—Cantonese, Szechuan, and so on.

4 Creek St. ✆ **907/225-1818.** Lunch $6.50; dinner $7–$20. DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–9pm; Sun noon–9pm.

Ocean View Restaurante ★★ *Finds* MEXICAN/ITALIAN When you find food as good as this at an apparently typical family restaurant, you want to stop people in the street to tell them about it. But everyone in Ketchikan already knows, which is one reason the place is so lively and festive even on an off-season weeknight. Few tourists know about it or make the drive a mile from downtown. The menu is long and reasonably priced, with separate columns of Mexican and Italian cuisine (and an occasional Greek item slipped into the Italian column), a page of seafood and sautéed entrees, plus chicken, veal, steak, pasta, and pizza. Variety is a common technique used by small-town restaurants to make it through the winter; the difference here is remarkably good cooking. Service is friendly and efficient, and a meal need not take long. They serve beer and wine. Smoking is not allowed. The pizza, delivered free, is the best in town.

1831 Tongass Ave. ✆ **907/225-7566.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $7–$9; dinner $6–$16. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Steamers ★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This dining room, a couple of floors up on the cruise ship dock, with high ceilings and big windows looking over the water, is a pleasant place to eat, although it gets crowded when the ships are in town. The service is attentive and the food is consistently good, if not great. If there isn't a crush from cruise passengers, stop in for an afternoon nosh and a beer—the hot wings are really hot.

76 Front St. ✆ **907/225-1600.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $9–$35, dinner $15–$40. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–9pm.

3 Misty Fjords National Monument

Among the vast uninhabited islands, bottomless bays and fjords, massive trees, and inconceivably towering cliffs of the southern Alaska Panhandle are 2.3 million acres of inviolate wilderness, which Jimmy Carter set aside as a national monument with a stroke of his presidential pen in 1978. There are sheer cliffs that rise 3,150 feet straight up from remote Punchbowl Cove, where only passengers of boats, kayaks, or floatplanes can see them. A floatplane can also show you the high lakes and high country ice. But the vast majority of the monument receives no visitors at all. There's no question that this land, larger than Yellowstone National Park, qualifies scenically as among America's greatest wild places, but without roads or trails, it's more like a great national park a century ago than the busy parks we know today. Here, a seemingly endless untouched wilderness forces you to admit that your own imagination is puny by comparison.

Don't go to Misty Fjords to see animals. You may see harbor seals, but here the attraction is the land itself and its outrageous geology. Also, the name is accurate: It's misty. Or it could be pouring rain. This is among the rainiest spots on earth, and if the weather is very bad, what you see will be limited.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY BOAT The most affordable way to see the fjords is to go on one of the tour-boat excursions offered by Ketchikan operators. The largest and most experienced of these is **Alaska Cruises,** owned by Juneau's Goldbelt Native corporation, 29 Main St., Suite 205, Ketchikan (✆ **800/228-1905** or 907/225-6044; www.goldbelttours.com). They run a high-speed, 92-passenger catamaran on daily 6½-hour trips out to Rudyerd Bay and back. The tour travels up the Behm Canal, passes New Eddystone Rock, then drifts through Punchbowl Cove before finally coming to a floating dock at the head of Rudyerd Bay, where passengers from cruise ships board floatplanes for the return trip. The fare is $150 adults, $125 children. They serve a continental breakfast on the outbound trip, and snacks and chowder on the way back. If you're susceptible to seasickness, consider seeing the fjords by air, instead; the water is smooth in the fjords but can be rough on the way there. (Take Dramamine *before* you set out; once you're underway, it's generally too late.)

If you have a larger group, consider a private charter, of which many are available in Ketchikan. You will certainly pay more, even on a per person basis, but the benefit is an itinerary and pace you control.

BY PLANE Flying over Misty Fjords and landing in a floatplane is mind-blowing. The landing is crucial. As you're flying, you see this breathtaking

Moments The Coolest Flights

You can fly to Misty Fjords for an hour, listening to tape-recorded commentary on headphones with a pilot hired for the summer by the flight service; or you can go for twice as long and have more fun with Michelle Madsen, with her long blond hair flowing and her little white dog Perro at her side (although she'll gladly leave him behind if you request), Madsen lets passengers pick out a CD for the stereo as background to her impromptu commentary about the fjords. We soared with Van Morrison while she told us about her favorite places down below, then landed for as long as anyone wanted to soak in the awesome surroundings. It felt like an outing with old friends. The business is called **Island Wings Air Service,** 1935 Tongass Ave., Ketchikan (✆ **888/854-2444** or 907/225-2444; www.islandwings.com). She charges $189 for a seat on a six-passenger DeHavilland Beaver for a 2-hour flight that includes 45 minutes on the ground at the fjords. Michelle can also help plan cabin trips; she knows these places intimately, and will take the time to help you choose a Forest Service cabin that suits your interests and budget. She has round-trip fares to each of the cabins on her informative website, which makes planning far easier than trying to figure out hourly charter times. Mid-July through mid-September she flies bear viewing flights, too.

terrain unfold below; when you stand on the ground, you get your first sense of scale, and everything you've seen is suddenly magnified (and at the same time you shrink). Go in the late afternoon when the light is pretty and the swarms of planes carrying cruise-ship passengers are gone. Several air-taxi operators in Ketchikan take flightseeing day trips or drop clients at remote cabins. The largest is **Promech Air** (✆ **800/860-3845** or 907/225-3845; www.promechair.com), which charges $185 for a 50-minute flight, with 10 minutes on the ground. My favorite is under "The Coolest Flights," above.

BY KAYAK There are few more spectacular places for overnight kayak expeditions. If you have only a few days, concentrate on Rudyerd Bay. Don't miss Punchbowl Cove or the waterfall trail to Punchbowl Lake, where there is a shelter and good camping. There is also a trail and shelter at Nooya Lake. Both lakes have public rowing skiffs.

Southeast Exposure (✆ **907/225-8829;** www.southeastexposure.com) offers guided kayak trips to Misty Fjords National Monument, starting at 4 days for $708 per person. I don't recommend an unguided trip for first-time kayakers, but it is an appealing option for those with prior paddling experience. Southeast Exposure rents kayaks for $30 to $50 a day to experienced paddlers and you can rent other equipment from **Alaska Wilderness Outfitting and Camping Rentals,** listed under "Remote Cabins" in the Ketchikan section. **Alaska Cruises** (see "By Boat," above) drops off or picks up kayakers at Rudyerd Bay for $200 per person.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Southeast Alaska Discovery Center,** 50 Main St., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **907/228-6220;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass), can give you a trip-planning packet about Misty Fjords. Get the names of charter operators from the **Ketchikan Visitors Bureau,** 131 Front St., Ketchikan, AK 99901 (✆ **800/770-2200** or 907/225-6166; fax 907/225-4250; www.visit-ketchikan.com).

WHERE TO STAY

The only lodgings in the monument are 14 **U.S. Forest Service cabins** and several three-sided shelters. Some are little used and extremely remote, and all those on lakes come with their own rowboats. The cabins cost $25 to $45 per night, but that's only a small part of the cost of using them. You also have to pay for a floatplane (plan on $550–$850 round-trip for a three- to six-passenger plane) to take you there and back. See "By Air" and "The Coolest Flights," above. For a complete listing of cabins, contact the Forest Service; their website, with an interactive map, is the best source of information (**www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass**). For reservation information, see "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest," on p. 92.

4 Wrangell

Wrangell, valued for its position near the mouth of the Stikine River, began as a Tlingit stronghold and trading post and became the site of a Russian fort built in 1834. The British leased the area from the Russians in 1840, and their flag flew until the U.S. purchase of Alaska in 1867. Over the balance of the 19th century, Wrangell experienced three gold rushes and the construction of a cannery and sawmill.

Then time pretty much stopped.

While the world outside changed, Wrangell stayed the same from the mid–20th century on. It even moved backward. Elsewhere, Wal-Mart and shopping malls were invented and small-town main streets deflated. Then people noticed what they had lost and tried to bring back their communities. Not out here, beyond the road system. With little incentive for anyone to visit, Wrangell stayed as it was after a 1952 fire burned the downtown: a burly, blue-collar American logging town, simple and conservative. Wrangell cut trees, processed them, and shipped them. The bars stayed busy, and no one thought of opening a health food restaurant. As long as there were trees to saw into lumber, the future was safe in the past.

Or so it seemed until environmental and economic issues closed the mill. Some feared the town would die, too. Sawing lumber had sustained the local economy for more than 100 years and a third of the paychecks in town came from that one plant. But, as it turned out, change hasn't destroyed Wrangell. The town is quieter, and some trailer houses have disappeared and some stores have closed, but the year-round population is down only modestly, at about 2,300. In its new incarnation, Wrangell is working to improve on its positive qualities, and the residents show an endearing eagerness to please. A big new museum is planned, and eco-tourism operators are offering kayaking, hiking, and the like. Tour boats take guests up the wild Stikine River, out on the water for Southeast's great salmon fishing, and over to the mainland to see hordes of bears at the Anan Wildlife Observatory. The U.S. Forest Service maintains gravel roads that lead to some spectacular places. The town even built a golf course called **Muskeg Meadows** (✆ **907/874-GOLF**). Named for the area's hummocky swamps, it was built up on wood waste from the old mill, and there's a course rule that there's no penalty if a raven steals your ball.

The town has a nonthreatening, small-scale feel that allows a family to wander comfortably and make friends. Another family we had just met invited us home to dinner. With so little crime, there is no fear of strangers. We picnicked in a totem pole park, hiked in the rainforest, and looked at ancient art strewn across Petroglyph Beach. We were sorry to have to leave. On the ferry back to Juneau, a class of Wrangell sixth-graders sat next to us. They talked with excited innocence of all the new things they hoped to experience in the state capital, the most electrifying of which seemed to be the prospect of eating for the first time at McDonald's. Wrangell, I thought, still has a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the world, and that is a condition much to be envied.

ESSENTIALS

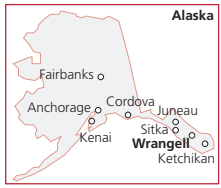
GETTING THERE **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) serves Wrangell once daily with a jet flying 28 minutes north from Ketchikan and another 19 minutes south from Petersburg, a flight that skims treetops the entire way.

Wrangell is on the main line of the **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com). The voyage through the narrow, winding **Wrangell Narrows** north to Petersburg is one of the most beautiful and fascinating in Southeast Alaska. It's quite a navigational feat as the 400-foot ships squeeze through a passage so slender and shallow the vessel's own displacement changes the water level onshore as it passes. The route, not taken by cruise ships, which approach through larger waterways, is also a source of delays, as the narrows are deep enough for passage only at high tide. The walk-on fare is $27 from Ketchikan, $22 from Petersburg. The terminal is downtown (✆ **907/874-3711**) a block from the Stikine Inn.

ATTRACTIONS
Grave of Chief Shakes **7**
Wrangell Museum **4**

DINING
Diamond C Cafe **5**
Waterfront Grill **1**
Zak's Cafe **6**

ACCOMMODATIONS
Harding's Old Sourdough Lodge **8**
Rooney's Roost Bed & Breakfast **2**
Stikine Inn **1**
Wrangell Hostel **3**



VISITOR INFORMATION The small office of the **Wrangell Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center** is located in the Stikine Inn (P.O. Box 49), Wrangell, AK 99929 (✆ **907/874-3901;** www.wrangellchamber.org), facing the city dock, where cruise ships tie up. A complete community directory is at **www.wrangell.com**.

The Forest Service also has an information desk at the **Wrangell Ranger District Office,** 525 Bennett St. (P.O. Box 51), Wrangell, AK 99929 (✆ **907/874-2323;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass), located on the hill behind town. Here you can draw on local knowledge of the logging roads and fishing holes, obtain guides to each Forest Service cabin and path, and, for $4, buy a detailed Wrangell Island Road Guide topographic map that shows and describes the island's outdoor attractions. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm.

ORIENTATION The main part of town is laid out north to south along the waterfront, sitting on the northern point of Wrangell Island. **Front Street** is the main business street, leading from the small-boat harbor and **Chief Shakes Island** at the south to the city dock and the ferry dock at the north. Most of the rest of the town is along **Church Street,** which runs parallel to Front Street a block higher up the hill. **Evergreen Avenue** and **Bennett Street** form a loop to the north that goes to the airport. The only road to the rest of the island, the **Zimovia Highway,** heads out of town to the south, paved for about 12 miles, then connects to over 100 miles of gravel logging roads built and maintained by

the Forest Service, most of which are usable for two-wheel-drive vehicles in the summer.

GETTING AROUND You can do the town on foot, but you will need wheels for the airport or Zimovia Highway. The only place to rent a car in Wrangell is **Practical Rent A Car,** at the airport (✆ **907/874-3975**). **Northern Lights Taxi** is at ✆ **907/874-4646.**

Rent bikes from **Rainwalker Expeditions** (✆ **907/874-2549;** www.rainwalkerexpeditions.com) at the city dock, described under "Gearing Up," below.

FAST FACTS: Wrangell

Bank **Wells Fargo** is at 115 Front St., with an ATM. There's also an ATM across from the visitor center.

Hospital **Wrangell Medical Center** is at 310 Bennett St. (✆ **907/874-7000**).

Internet Access At the public library on Church Street. (✆ **907/874-3535).** An **Internet Café** is on Lynch Street.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. For non-emergency calls, dial ✆ **907/874-3304.**

Post Office At 105 Federal Way, near the ferry dock.

Taxes Sales tax is 7%. Rooms carry a $4 bed tax on top of that.

SPECIAL EVENTS **The Garnet Festival,** held the third week of April, marks the arrival of the sea lions, hooligans, shorebirds, and bald eagles on the Stikine River Delta, a spring tornado of wildlife in the region's largest coastal marshes. Community activities take place in town while jet boat tours traverse the delta. **The Wrangell King Salmon Derby,** the last half of May and first half of June, is a fishing fest that started in 1953. Contact the Wrangell Chamber of Commerce (listed above under "Visitor Information"), or check their website for details. Wrangell also puts on a classic small-town **Independence Day** celebration.

EXPLORING WRANGELL & ENVIRONS

Before white settlers arrived, the Tlingits had already warred for centuries over this strategic trading location near the mouth of the Stikine River. The first Chief Shakes was a successful conqueror who enslaved his enemies, then handed down power through the female line, in the Tlingit tradition, for 7 generations. Charlie Jones was recognized as Chief Shakes VII, the last of the line, at a potlatch in 1940, but the position had long since lost most of its status. The decline began after the Alaska purchase, in 1867. Word came of the Emancipation Proclamation, which theoretically freed a third of the residents of the coast's Tlingit villages. Chief Shakes VI sent his slaves in canoes to dry halibut; they kept paddling home to Puget Sound, never looking back. (An excellent pamphlet, "Authentic History of Shakes Island and Clan," by E. L. Keithhahn, sells for $4 at the Wrangell Museum, described below.)

Chief Shakes Island, a tiny islet in the middle of the small-boat harbor, is the site of a Tlingit clan house and collection of totem poles constructed by Native workers, using traditional tools, in the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s. Unlike some CCC clan house replicas in the region, which mix Tlingit

styles, this house is an exact, scaled-down copy of the 1834 house in which Chief Shakes VI lay in state in 1916. The inside of the clan house is fascinating, both in the sense it gives of the people's ways, and for some extraordinary artifacts. Unfortunately, it takes some effort to get inside, as it is open mostly only when the cruise ships are in town, a few times a week in the summer. These times are posted around town or at the clan house. At those times, admission is $2.50. Otherwise, you can pay a $25 minimum to have someone come down and show you around. Call Nora Rinehart at ✆ **907/874-2023** (e-mail norarinehart@yahoo.com), or, if you can't reach Nora, Margret Sturdevant at ✆ **907/874-3747.** Nora can give you the cruise ship schedule before you come, too. Even if you can't manage that, visit the island to see the rotting totem poles and the charming setting (and, with extra time, visit the overgrown grave of Chief Shakes V, on Case Ave. just across the harbor). There's a resident otter that you can often see near the island's footbridge, sometimes feeding its young.

The carved house posts in the clan house are replicas of the mid–18th-century originals that now stand in the **Wrangell Museum,** 318 Church St. (✆ **907/874-3770**). These are probably the oldest and certainly the best-preserved Tlingit house posts in existence, still bearing the original fish egg and mineral paints, and a gash where, during a potlatch, a chief hacked off an image that a visitor admired and gave it to him—a gesture that demonstrated (and still demonstrates) the extent of his wealth then. The museum has many other important Alaska Native pieces, plus a lot of plain old stuff that tells the story of Wrangell, one of Alaska's most historic towns. A new museum building has been planned for years but delayed by town politics; perhaps it will be open by the time you visit. Admission is $3 for adults, free ages 16 and under. Summer hours are Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm and when the ships are in; closed in winter.

The museum helped preserve an impressive set of petroglyphs that lie on the beach a mile north of town. The 50 carvings at **Wrangell Petroglyph Beach State Historic Park** probably represent the work of forgotten indigenous people pre-dating the Tlingit, and were made over a long period of time. The images, chipped into rocks, are of animals and geometric forms. Their purpose is lost to time. Walk north on Evergreen Avenue and follow the signs down to the beach (don't go within an hour of high tide). Replicas of the petroglyphs were recently carved so that visitors who want to take rubbings will not destroy the originals; also try not to step on them. The great pleasure here is simply to search for the carvings—they're just lying out there, and it takes some looking—and to wonder at their meaning and age.

GETTING OUTSIDE: ON WRANGELL ISLAND

Wrangell Island's network of gravel roads, maintained by the Forest Service, lead to places of awesome beauty rarely visited by non-Alaskans. There are a few day-hike trails, some lovely campsites, and paths to remote cabins and fishing lakes you can have to yourself. There are also a couple of calm and scenic places to start a kayak paddle.

There's only one way out of town: south on the Zimovia Highway along narrow Zimovia Strait. The Forest Service map (see "Visitor Information," above) is helpful for anything you might want to do along this route.

The point of interest on the highway is **City Park,** just south of town. Besides having a picnic area on the shore among big trees, it's a fine **tide pooling** spot. Go a couple of hours before a good low tide.

Five miles out Zimovia Highway you reach the **Shoemaker Bay Recreation Area,** with a small boat harbor, campground, and picnic sites (see "Camping," below).

Continuing south, **Eight Mile Beach** is a good stop for a ramble, and don't miss **Nemo Point,** a high, oceanside overlook from which you can see more than 13 miles along Zimovia Strait all the way back to town. There are eight gorgeous campsites, and a boardwalk trail along the road leads down to the beach.

All the way across the island, about 45 minutes from town, **Earl West Cove** gives access to the protected wilderness waters on the Eastern Passage. There's a campsite there, too.

GEARING UP For a lift over the water, a guide, or rental equipment, there are several long established businesses available to help in Wrangell. **Alaska Waters,** 241 Berger St. (✆ **800/347-4462** or 907/874-2378; www.alaskawaters.com) rents equipment and offers various marine services, including fishing and tours. **Alaska Vistas,** at the cruise ship dock (the city dock) (✆ **866/874-3006** or 907/874-3006; www.alaskavistas.com) started as a sea kayaking business, but now offers water taxis and other services. You can stop in at their office on the dock for advice, books and maps, gear, and espresso. Both companies are listed below under the appropriate headings.

Marie Oboczky's **Rainwalker Expeditions** (✆ **907/874-2549;** www.rainwalkerexpeditions.com) rents bikes, sea kayaks and canoes, as well as leading guided hikes (see "Hiking," below) and offers accommodations on a houseboat in Wrangell or afield. Oboczky also has teamed up with other outdoor businesses in town to offer joint booking and trip planning. She offers advice on her website and at an office near the city dock, next door to the Stikine Inn.

BIKING A paved 6-mile bike trail leads from the Zimovia Highway to the water, all the way from town to the Shoemaker Bay Loop Road. There are many more miles of appealing mountain-bike routes on Forest Service roads all over the island. See "Gearing Up," above.

FISHING Anglers can dip a line in various streams and lakes on Wrangell Island, some with public cabins, reachable by car or a drive and short hike. The Forest Service provides a list, and the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** (✆ **907/874-3822;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click "Sport Fish" then "Region 1") publishes a 20-page *Petersburg/Wrangell Sport Fishing Guide.* May and June are the prime months for king salmon fishing, silvers start in July, and halibut are available all summer.

The well-run **Alaska Waters** (see "Gearing Up," above) offers a long day of saltwater fishing for $225 per person. They also rent skiffs with outboard motors for self-guided fishing. Many other charter boats are available at the harbor; ask at the visitor center. You can often arrange to use part of the day on the boat for sightseeing and wildlife watching.

HIKING Across the road from the Shoemaker Bay Recreation Area, the **Rainbow Falls Trail** climbs steeply for just under a mile (and 500 ft. in elevation gain) on a boardwalk with steps, up a ridge between two creeks, forested with big, mossy Sitka spruce and western hemlock. The falls seem to tumble down between the branches. From that point, you can continue another 2⅔ miles and another 1,100 feet higher into open alpine terrain on the **Institute Creek Trail** to the Shoemaker Overlook, where there are great views, a picnic area, and a shelter. A new section of the trail continues from there another 8 miles across the island. **Rainwalker Expeditions** (see "Gearing Up," above)

leads nature walks on the lower part of the trail, and longer hikes all over the island, starting at $25 for a 2-hour outing. The advantage of going with guide Marie Oboczky is that she is a skilled naturalist and teacher and knows all the best places to go.

The Rainbow Falls Trail is the island's busiest, especially when cruise ships are in town. If you want to be sure you won't see anyone, take one of the less developed walks you can reach along the logging roads—the Forest Service can point the way. One good choice is the **Salamander Ridge Trail,** which leads a mile to subalpine terrain, where you can go off-trail hiking. The trail begins 27 miles from Wrangell on Salamander Road, also known as Forest Road 50050. The **Long Lake Trail** leads over a ½-mile boardwalk to a public shelter and rowboat on the lake, on Forest Road 6271 (you'll need a map).

SEA KAYAKING **Alaska Vistas** (see "Gearing Up," above) offers kayaking day trip paddles starting from the boat harbor, longer day tours to lovely Earl West Cove on the east side of the island, and many longer guided trips, such as a 5-day excursion that starts with a jet-boat trip on the Stikine River to Shakes Lake, and then paddles back to Wrangell with stops at the natural hot springs and other sites along the way.

GETTING OUTSIDE: OFF THE ISLAND

Wrangell lies in an extraordinary place, surrounded by vast, rich wild lands for fishing, rafting, sea kayaking, and wildlife watching. I've described two of the main off-island destinations below—the Stikine River and the Anan Wildlife Observatory—but there are many more, too many to mention. The guides I've listed can give ideas, or contact the Forest Service to get a list of the cabins they rent to the public, many of which provide exclusive access to exceptional fishing.

To get anywhere, you need a boat or floatplane. You can go independently, hiring a water taxi for $120 to $150 an hour; it costs about $450 to $700, one-way, to get to a remote Forest Service cabin. That service is offered by various operators, including **Alaska Waters** (see "Gearing Up," above). They also rent all the outdoor stuff you'll need, including camping equipment, canoes, and skiffs with outboard motors. They also offer guided fishing, Stikine River jet boat tours and expeditions, and trips to the Anan Wildlife Observatory. Commentary includes information on natural history and Tlingit cultural traditions and legends.

If you're going by air, **Sunrise Aviation** (✆ **800/874-2311** or 907/874-2319) is a Wrangell-based operator.

THE STIKINE RIVER

The Stikine's gray, glacial waters rush all the way from the dry Interior of British Columbia to a broad, shallow delta in the rainforest a few miles from Wrangell. It's among the fastest free flowing navigable rivers in North America, and in early gold rush years it was a route through the Coastal Range. The best way to explore the river is to take a jet boat tour. Tours sometimes go as far as Telegraph Creek, B.C., utilizing the high power of the jet boats to manage the swift current.

The shallow delta is an exceptionally rich wildlife-viewing area, with sea lions, eagles, and many other species of birds. When the salmon are running, you can see them thrashing in their spawning pools. Farther upriver, tours see Sitka black-tailed deer, moose, brown and black bears, mountain goats, river otters,

and beavers. See the "LeConte Glacier/Stikine River Delta" under "Petersburg" for more information on exploring the delta.

Traveling upriver, tours usually stop at the **Shakes Glacier** and **Shakes Lake,** where there are 3,000-foot cliffs and some 50 waterfalls. Bring a swimsuit for a dip in the Forest Service–owned **Chief Shakes Hot Springs,** where there's an indoor and an outdoor tub for public bathing. The temperature is adjustable up to 120°F (49°C). Alaska Water and Alaska Vistas offer these tours (see "Gearing Up," above). Alaska Waters goes all the way to Telegraph, B.C., 160 miles upriver, bringing travelers to a remote homestead lodge. A 3-day, 2-night package is $750. The going rate for a shorter, 6-hour jet boat tour from Wrangell to the glacier, delta and hot springs is $150 to $175.

Rafting the Stikine offers fast water, expansive scenery, and the potential for a remote, many-day journey. Alaska Vistas offers these guided trips, lasting about 10 days to 2 weeks, for an inclusive price of around $2,500 per person. Alaska Vistas and Alaska Waters rent rafts and other gear for floating the Stikine. A raft rents for about $100 a day. (See "Gearing Up," above.)

ANAN WILDLIFE OBSERVATORY

When the pink salmon are running in July and August (peak is mid-July to Aug 20), more than 40 **black bears** and a few brown bears gather at a waterfall on Anan Creek, on the mainland southeast of Wrangell Island, often walking close to a platform where visitors stand watching. Don't visit outside of July and August, however, unless you have it on good authority that bears are actively using the creek. Forest Service interpreters are on duty during the bear months; visitors must also follow safe bear behavior (they'll brief you when you arrive; also see "Outdoors Health & Safety," in chapter 2). Most visitors will enjoy a guided day trip from Wrangell more than going on their own. Both **Alaska Waters** and **Alaska Vistas** go by boat (see "Gearing Up," above), each charging about $175 per person for the hour-long run from Wrangell and a few hours with the bears. It's also possible to go without a guide, and no permit is needed; there's even a Forest Service cabin for rent, although it's in high demand during the bear season. The walk to the observatory is ½ a mile from the shore where you land, on a good trail. **Sunrise Aviation** (✆ **800/874-2311** or 907/874-2319) offers charters to Anan for prices competitive with going by boat.

WHERE TO STAY

Besides the places listed below, you will also find good, inexpensive rooms at **Grand View Bed and Breakfast,** Mile 2, Zimovia Hwy. (P.O. Box 927), Wrangell, AK 99929 (✆ or fax **907/874-3225;** www.grandviewbnb.com).

Harding's Old Sourdough Lodge ★ Mayor Bruce Harding, a large dog and a cat run this hotel in the style of a fishing lodge. Harding (and his pets) rent the rooms alone or as packages with trips to the Anan Bear Observatory, Stikine River tours, fishing, kayaking, rafting, and other outdoor activities. The attractive building with a wraparound porch is in a waterfront area about a mile from the ferry dock, but Harding will drive you there or wherever else you want to go. The lodge is rustic, decorated with Alaska Native art and plenty of plants, and offering a vista of Wrangell Harbor. Although large suites have a Jacuzzi, most rooms are small, without TVs, and most have only shower stalls, not tubs. The suites are huge. Fresh seafood dinners are served nightly, family style (you eat what they cook). Dinner prices are $16 to $24 per person; nonguests by reservation only. Harding will happily freeze any fish that you catch.

Fun Fact Why the Garnet Stands?

In the streets of Wrangell, you sometimes encounter kids selling garnets the way children in other places sell lemonade. The gems come from the Garnet Ledge, near the mouth of the Stikine River, a mine that is still productive recreationally 130 years after its discovery. A visit to the mine isn't worth the effort for most travelers, but the story is interesting. The ledge was mined commercially from 1907 to 1936 by the first all-woman corporation in the nation, a group of investors from Minneapolis. Its current ownership is unusual, too: a 1962 deed gave the mine to the Boy Scouts and all the children of Wrangell, which is interpreted to mean that only children have the right to remove the stones. You can get a water taxi out there, but take a kid along if you intend to remove garnets. Of course, it's easier to simply buy garnets from a kid at a card table in the street.

1104 Peninsula (P.O. Box 1062), Wrangell, AK 99929. ✆ **800/874-3613** or 907/874-3613. Fax 907/874-3455. www.akgetaway.com. 16 units. $95 double; $135 triple or quad; $150–$195 suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Sauna; bike rental; tour desk; courtesy car; coin-op laundry.

Rooney's Roost Bed & Breakfast ★★ Located downtown, this attractive old house with dormer windows was restored by a new generation of the family that has operated the place for years. They didn't miss a detail, adding antiques and keeping the hardwood floors, which results in an elegance otherwise unknown in Wrangell. The rooms, while small, are decorated according to various whimsical themes (the Moose Room features outdoorsy decor, the Princess Room is all roses, and so on). All rooms have fans and four-poster beds with thick mattresses, comforters, and oversize pillows. The bathrooms attached to three of the rooms are brand new; two have showers only, one has a claw-foot tub. The other rooms share bathrooms. Elaborate breakfasts with local ingredients, such as seafood or berries, are served in a sunny dining room at the guests' convenience. The rooms with private bathrooms also have TVs with VCRs.

206 McKinnon (P.O. Box 552), Wrangell, AK 99929. ✆ **907/874-2026.** Fax 907/874-4404. www.rooneysroost.com. 6 units, 3 with private bathroom. $95 double private bathroom; $75 double shared bathroom. Extra person $15. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy car; laundry service. *In room:* TV/VCR in some rooms.

Stikine Inn The town's main hotel is close to the ferry dock and stands right on the water's edge. A center of community activity, it houses the town visitor center. Unfortunately, the premises are rather drab. The hallways are dark and the rooms, while clean, tend to be worn and outdated. The more modern units have only one bed. But the waterside views are superb (those rooms are $10 more). You can hear the water lapping the shore outside as you fall asleep, or watch the sunset on the ocean.

The restaurant is described under "Where to Dine," below. The large art gallery and gift shop on the ground floor, **River's Edge Fine Arts & Gifts,** has fine art, pottery, and inexpensive gifts.

107 Front St. (P.O. Box 990), Wrangell, AK 99929. ✆ **888/874-3388** or 907/874-3388. Fax 907/874-3923. www.stikine.com. 34 units. High season $100–$111 double; $122 suite. Low season $80–$90 double, $100 suite. Extra person over age 12 $5. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV, dataport.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Wrangell Hostel is at the First Presbyterian Church, 220 Church St., Wrangell, AK 99929 (✆ **907/874-3534**). They're open from mid-June to Labor Day, and the rate is $18 a night.

There are several attractive campgrounds in Wrangell. I've never seen a campground in a spot like the mountaintop **Nemo Point Forest Service Campground,** but it's more than a dozen miles out of town. Five miles south of town, the **Shoemaker Bay Recreation Area** has sites by the road overlooking the boat harbor, right across from the Rainbow Falls Trail. There are free tent sites and RV sites with electric hookups for $10 a night, $6 without electric; the camping fee includes use of the town pool and its showers. Contact the **Wrangell Recreation and Parks Department** (✆ **907/874-2444**) for information. They also manage **City Park,** right at the edge of town on Zimovia Highway, where camping is permitted with a 1-night limit.

For a full hookup RV site, try **Alaska Waters'** small park, at 241 Berger St. (✆ **800/347-4462**). They charge $18 a night.

WHERE TO DINE

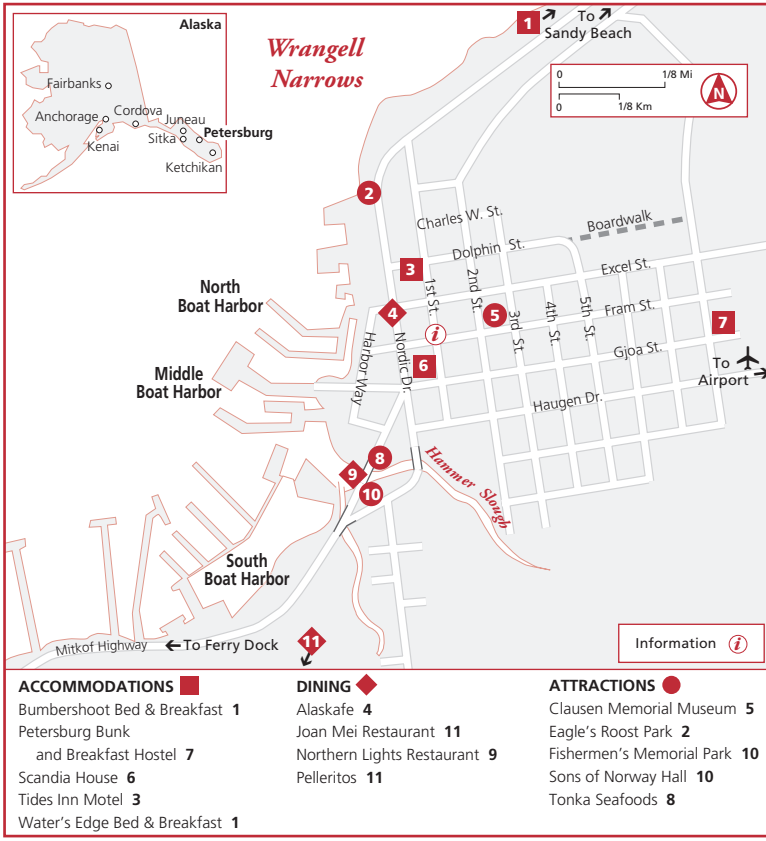
There's just one really good restaurant in Wrangell, Zak's, described in detail below. Otherwise, the **Diamond C Cafe,** 215 Front St. (✆ **907/874-3677**) is a nice, clean diner that's open early in the morning, daily in summer. The **Waterfront Grill** at the Stikine Inn (see "Where to Stay," above) is a typical family restaurant serving three meals a day. When you sit down for dinner, they bring two menus, one for fine dining and another for the less expensive fare favored by the locals. Nothing is terribly expensive or terribly exciting among the steak, seafood, sandwiches, or pizza. The dining room has superb ocean views. **Harding's Old Sourdough Lodge** (see "Where to Stay," above) serves meals to guests, and to others by reservation. It's a family-style dinner without a menu.

Zak's Café ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD It's a surprising treat to find food like this in Wrangell. There's a good reason for the existence of this cafe: the owners got tired of the lack of good dining options and decided to do something about it. For lunch they serve salads, wraps, and sandwiches; for dinner, a short but diverse menu of steak, seafood, pasta, and chicken. The stir-fry was seasoned just right, and the steak béarnaise melted in the mouth. The dining room is small, light, and spare; it doesn't live up to the food. Take the time to talk with the fascinating owners, James and Katherine, who staff the kitchen and dining room respectively.

Front St. ✆ **907/874-3355.** Reservations recommended for dinner. Lunch $6.25–$10, dinner $13–$25. MC, V. Summer daily 11am–9pm. Winter Mon–Sat 11am–9pm.

5 Petersburg: Unvarnished Threshold to the Outdoors

Petersburg is the perfect small town, the sort of prosperous, picturesque, quirky place that used to be mythologized in Disney films. Except that Petersburg would never let Disney in the door. People here are too smart for that, and too protective of a place they know would be spoiled by too much attention. For the same reason, Petersburg is glad that big cruise ships can't enter their narrow harbor. The town is unspoiled by the ships' throngs of tourists and seasonal gift shops. Instead, locals spend the money that keeps Nordic Drive, the main street, thriving with family-owned grocery and hardware stores, restaurants, a fish market, and other businesses. Wooden streets over Hammer Slough still serve utilitarian purposes, making them far more appealing than if they were prettied up



ACCOMMODATIONS
Bumbershoot Bed & Breakfast **1**
Petersburg Bunk and Breakfast Hostel **7**
Scandia House **6**
Tides Inn Motel **3**
Water's Edge Bed & Breakfast **1**

DINING
Alaskafe **4**
Joan Mei Restaurant **11**
Northern Lights Restaurant **9**
Pelleritos **11**

ATTRACTIONS
Clausen Memorial Museum **5**
Eagle's Roost Park **2**
Fishermen's Memorial Park **10**
Sons of Norway Hall **10**
Tonka Seafoods **8**

as tourist areas. As you walk along Sing Lee Alley and check out the stylish little bookstore, you'll see Norwegian fishermen in pickup trucks and blond-haired kids on bikes.

Because Petersburg is so insular and authentic, the sublime nearby outdoor opportunities are never overrun. There are wonderful trails, mountain-biking routes, and secret places. On the water, the humpback whale–watching is as reliable as anywhere in Alaska and largely undiscovered. There's a glacier to visit, terrific fishing, and limitless sea-kayaking waters. The in-town attractions are few—a day is plenty for simple sightseeing—and little attempt has been made to accommodate lazy gawkers. But Alaska's best is waiting for those willing to spend the effort to look.

Petersburg is named for its founder, Peter Buschmann, who killed himself after living here for only 4 years. But that shouldn't be a reflection on the town, which is in an ideal location and has flourished since that inauspicious beginning. In 1898, or thereabouts (historians differ), Buschmann founded a cannery on Mitkof Island facing the slender, peaceful Wrangell Narrows in what was to become Petersburg. The stunning abundance of salmon and halibut and a nearby source of ice—the LeConte Glacier—made the site a natural. Buschmann had emigrated from Norway in 1891 and, as a proud old Son of Norway told me, he always hired Norwegians. Any Norwegian who came to

him, he hired. In a few years, the cannery failed. Perhaps an excessive payroll? My suggestion was met with an icy glance and a change of subject. Teasing aside, Buschmann's mistake was merging his cannery with a firm trying to challenge a monopolistic canning operation, and they went down together.

Buschmann's suicide followed his financial reverses, but the promise of Petersburg remained. The Norwegians stayed and slowly built a charming town of white clapboard houses with steeply pitched roofs, hugging the water. Their living came from the sea, as it still does. Appropriately, the downtown area doesn't stop at water's edge. Roads, boardwalks, and buildings continue over the smooth waters of Wrangell Narrows, out to the cannery buildings that survive on long wooden piers, and into the boat harbors, which branch out in a network whose size far surpasses the area of the city streets.

Today, the town's economy is based on fishing and government work (the Stikine Ranger District of the Tongass National Forest is headquartered here), which makes for a wealthy, sophisticated, and stable population.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Petersburg has the most welcoming **ferry terminal** in the system (✆ **907/772-3855**), with a grassy lawn and a pier from which to watch the boats and marine animals. It's about a mile to the town center. The **Alaska Marine Highway** (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com) connects to Juneau directly (an 8-hr. run), or by way of Sitka (10 hr. to Sitka from Juneau, then 9 more from Sitka to Petersburg). The reason for the longer trip is that Sitka is well to the west of the straight line between Juneau and Petersburg. The fare is $22 from Wrangell (3 hr.), $32 from Sitka, and $50 from Juneau.

Petersburg is served by **Alaska Airlines** jets (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) once north and once south each day, with the nearest stops on the puddle jumper being Juneau and Wrangell.

From the airport, call **Maine Cab** (✆ **907/772-6969**) for a taxi into town.

VISITOR INFORMATION The Petersburg Chamber of Commerce **Visitor Information Center,** at the corner of 1st and Fram streets (P.O. Box 649), Petersburg, AK 99833 (✆ **907/772-4636;** www.petersburg.org), offers guidance on outdoor opportunities, boats, and lodging, and distributes trail guides and natural history publications. The center is open in summer Monday through Saturday from 9am to 5pm, Sunday from noon to 4pm; winter Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm.

The full-service **Viking Travel** agency, corner of Nordic Drive and Sing Lee Alley (✆ **800/327-2571** or 907/772-3818; www.alaskaferry.com), also specializes in booking local guides for tours, kayaks, whale-watching, flights, fishing charters, and other activities. Owners Dave and Nancy Berg are knowledgeable and helpful.

ORIENTATION Petersburg is on Mitkof Island, divided from the much larger Kupreanof Island by the long, slender channel of the Wrangell Narrows. There are three small-boat harbors and so many docks, boardwalks, and wooden streets that the town seems to sit on the ocean. **Nordic Drive** is the main street, running from the ferry dock through town, then becoming **Sandy Beach Road** as it rounds Hungry Point to the north. At Sandy Beach, you can circle back, past the airport, which stands above the town, to **Haugen Drive,** which meets Nordic again near **Hammer Slough,** right in town. To the south, Nordic becomes the **Mitkof Highway,** which runs to the undeveloped balance of the island.

GETTING AROUND You can walk downtown Petersburg, but you'll need wheels or a boat to get to most outdoor activities. The **Tides Inn Motel** and **Scandia House** (see "Where to Stay," later) both rent cars, but not many are available in town, so book well in advance for summer. The Scandia House also rents small boats, a wonderful way to explore Wrangell Narrows and get to trails across on the other side, or to go fishing inexpensively. An 18-footer with a 40-horsepower outboard rents for $160 a day, gas included, $25 less for guests of the hotel. They don't provide fishing gear.

FAST FACTS: Petersburg

Banks There are two banks, both with ATMs, at the intersection of Nordic Drive and Fram Street.

Hospital **Petersburg Medical Center** is at 2nd and Fram streets (✆ **907/772-4291**).

Internet Access Free at the public library, at Nordic and Haugen drives.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. Find them on Nordic Drive near Haugen; nonemergencies ✆ **907/772-3838**.

Post Office Near the airport at the corner of Haugen Street and Nordic Drive.

Taxes Sales tax is 6%. The tax on accommodations totals 10%.

SPECIAL EVENTS **The Little Norway Festival,** which celebrates the May 17, 1814 declaration of independence of Norway from Sweden, is an occasion for Petersburg to go wild. The 4-day schedule of events includes a street fair, a parade, a seafood feast, and so on. The celebration is held on the third full weekend of May. **The King Salmon Derby** fishing contest offers $30,000 in prizes over Memorial Day weekend. **July 4th** is a very big deal in Petersburg. **The Canned Salmon Classic** lasts from July 1 to August 15, with a first prize of up to $4,000 going to the person who guesses how many cans of salmon will be packed in Petersburg during the season. **Julebukking,** a Norwegian tradition, happens on Christmas Eve, when merchants offer food and drink to their customers and the streets fill with people.

For information on any of the above events, contact the **Petersburg Chamber of Commerce** (✆ **907/772-3646;** www.petersburg.org/visitors/events.html).

EXPLORING PETERSBURG

A walk around Petersburg should include the boardwalk streets of **Hammer Slough,** the tidal mouth of a creek that feeds into the waterfront. **Sing Lee Alley** leads from North Nordic Drive at the charming center of town, passing by several interesting little shops, including **Sing Lee Alley Books,** at no. 11 (✆ **907/772-4440**), where there's a good collection on natural history and local culture. Petersburg has so many thriving little shops because of its isolation and healthy economy—so far, it's been too small to attract the predation of Wal-Mart and other chains.

Sing Lee Alley turns from solid ground to wooden dock before you reach the **Sons of Norway Hall,** a town center where a large model Viking ship used

in the Little Norway Festival is often parked. Next door, also on pilings, is the **Fishermen's Memorial Park.** Plaques memorialize Petersburg mariners lost at sea under a bronze statue of Bojer Wikan, a fisherman and lifelong resident.

Across the street, on the outboard side, **Tonka Seafoods** (✆ **907/772-3662;** www.tonkaseafoods.com) is a specialty fish processor with a shop and mail-order operation; they will process your sport-caught fish, too. They offer 1-hour tours for $5 during the summer at 1 and 3pm Monday through Saturday.

Continue on to Nordic Drive, then turn left, crossing back over the slough to charming, authentic **Birch Street,** which follows the slough's bank on pilings and leads upstream past old, weathered houses that hang over the placid channel. Many of these houses have one door for the road and another for the water. Step out of the way of cars on the one-lane dock/street.

Back down at the waterfront, stroll the harbor floats to see the frenetic activity of the huge commercial fishing fleet in the summer, then continue north on Nordic Drive to **Eagle's Roost Park,** where there is a grassy area to sit and a stairway that leads down to the water. At low tide an interesting but rugged beach walk starts here. You're almost guaranteed to see eagles, which congregate to feed on fish waste from the nearby cannery. Look in the tops of the trees. As a matter of fact, you can see eagles almost anytime and anywhere along the water in Petersburg, so keep your eyes open. Another nice walk leads you on a boardwalk a ⅓ of a mile over muskeg swamp. This walk begins at the uphill side of the elementary school, at 4th Street.

The **Clausen Memorial Museum,** at 2nd and Fram streets (✆ **907/772-3598;** www.clausenmuseum.alaska.net), interprets Petersburg and its history for the people who live here. It has a living, community feel and is like being invited into the town's collective memory. On one visit a portfolio of old photographs was on display with notes for visitors to write down the names of anyone they could identify and other memories. The office of a leading fish packer is displayed just as he left it in the 1970s, a time capsule of the ordinary that says much about the town. No doubt the local fishermen are fascinated by the obsolete fishing gear, rugged old nautical equipment, and model fish trap, which was outlawed in 1959 when Alaska became a state. The museum is open in summer Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm, and Saturday from 10am to 4:30pm; call for hours in the winter. Admission is $2 for adults, free for children 12 and under.

GETTING OUTSIDE

I have listed only a few highlights from Petersburg's wealth of outdoor opportunities. For other choices, many of them just as good as those I've written about here, or for the detailed trail and backcountry information you'll need, contact the U.S. Forest Service at the **Petersburg Ranger District** offices at 12 N. Nordic Dr. (P.O. Box 1328), Petersburg, AK 99833 (✆ **907/772-3871;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass).

Some of the best places to go around Petersburg require a boat. **Viking Travel** (see "Visitor Information," above) books most of the dozen or so small charter boats that operate from the harbor at any one time, allowing them to consolidate small groups into 6- to 15-person boatloads for whale-watching, sightseeing, or fishing. Some operators have made a specialty of natural history and environmentally responsible tours. Barry Bracken, a marine biologist, offers these kinds of trips on his 28-foot vessel. Contact **Kaleidoscope Cruises** (✆ **800/TO-THE-SEA** or 907/772-3736; www.alaska.net/~bbsea).

SPECIAL PLACES

SANDY BEACH The beach is an easy bike ride or a longish walk 1½ miles up Nordic Drive, around Hungry Point at the northern tip of the island, then along Sandy Beach Road to the beach and picnic area. Return by way of the airport, coming back into town on Haugen Drive. The beach itself is coarse sand and fine gravel, and you won't want to swim in the frigid water, but it's a lovely spot, facing Frederick Sound on the east side of Mitkof Island.

If you go at high tide, you can beachcomb and bird-watch—a great blue heron was hanging out last time I visited—but a better plan is to time your visit at a low tide (free tide books are widely available, or ask at the visitor center). At tides of 1 foot or lower, you can see the outlines of ancient fish traps built on the beach beginning 2,000 years ago. They look like V-shaped rows of rocks, and at times you can see stakes. Indigenous people built these traps and they function by creating channels that would corral salmon at high tide, leaving them stranded to be gathered up when the water receded. These ancient people presumably also created the petroglyphs on rocks near the traps, which may depict the traps or could have something to do with the sun. Finding the traps and petroglyphs isn't easy—it's best if you can get someone to lead you, perhaps by joining the occasional Forest Service walks that you can ask about at the Ranger District office. But, if you have the time and inclination to explore, walk out to the left from the picnic area, to the edge of the lagoon near the house with the greenhouse. A major petroglyph is on a black bedrock face, visible when you are looking back toward the picnic area, and the traps are just offshore from there.

RAVEN TRAIL & RAVEN'S ROOST CABIN About 4 miles up the steep but spectacular Raven Trail, which begins behind the airport off Haugen Drive, roughly a mile from town, the Raven's Roost Forest Service cabin sits atop a mountain with a sweeping view of the town and surrounding waters and islands. It's the sort of place that inspires artists and poets. Allow 3 to 4 hours for the climb along a boardwalk, then up a steep muddy slope, then along a ridge, with an elevation gain of over 1,000 feet. It's possible to continue hiking over the steep, subalpine terrain of the Twin Ridge Ski Trail another 5 miles to the Twin Creek Road, and then get a ride 11 miles back to town. Check with the visitor center for trail conditions. You'll need sleeping bags, cooking gear, lights, and food. Reserve the cabin through the national system described in section 1 of this chapter, "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest," and check there for information sources on the other 19 cabins in the area, most of which are reached by plane or boat.

MITKOF ISLAND The Mitkof Highway, leading south from Petersburg, gives you access to most of Mitkof Island, with its king salmon fishing; views of swans, fish, and glaciers; salmon hatchery; hiking trails; lakes; and many miles of remote roads for mountain biking. The town's swimming hole and ice-skating pond are on the road, too. Anyone can enjoy a day's sightseeing drive over the island, and if you like hiking and the outdoors, you'll find days of fun. Pick up the $4 *Forest Service Mitkof Island Road Guide* map at the visitor center or ranger office; it shows what you'll find along the way.

The **Three Lakes Loop Road** intersects with the highway twice, once 10 miles from Petersburg, and again 20 miles from town. From the north intersection, the one closest to town, it's 15 more miles to the level, 4½-mile boardwalk **Three Lakes Trail,** which circles four small lakes, each of which contains trout, and three of which have Forest Service rowboats for public use. Besides the fish,

it's a place of abundant wildflowers and berries, where you may see deer, beavers, bears, and many birds, including seasonal sandhill cranes.

Fourteen miles down Mitkof Highway from Petersburg, a ¼-mile wheelchair accessible boardwalk leads across the damp, hummocky ground of the rainforest muskeg to **Blind River Rapids,** a peaceful spot with a three-sided shelter where you can watch and fish for king salmon in June and silvers in September, and sometimes see eagles and bears feeding on the fish. A mile-long loop leads farther into the forest and muskeg.

At 17 miles, somewhat hidden in the trees on the right, a bird-watching blind looks out on **Blind Slough,** where trumpeter swans winter. Swans normally will be gone by mid-March.

At 18 miles, at the end of the pavement, you'll reach the **Blind Slough Recreation Area,** where locals go to swim in amber water in the summer. Water warms in the narrow slough, more than 5 miles from Wrangell Narrows. These are appealing canoeing or sea-kayaking waters as well. In the winter, much of the town congregates here for ice-skating and bonfires. A branch road at the recreation area leads over the slough to the **Crystal Lake Hatchery,** which raises king and silver salmon.

At 20½ miles from Petersburg, the popular **Man Made Hole** picnic area and swimming pond is newly improved with foot bridges and a pathway.

At 22 miles you reach the **Ohmer Creek campground,** with a 1-mile trail, a floating bridge over a beaver pond, and access to king salmon in June and July and trout and some salmon in late summer. The road continues from here along the south shore of Mitkof Island, with great ocean views, to its end at mile 32.

PETERSBURG CREEK The lovely, grassy Petersburg Creek area is perfect both for an afternoon's family frolic among the meadows of wildflowers that meet the water, or the start to a challenging 21-mile, multiday hike into the **Petersburg Creek–Duncan Salt Chuck Wilderness.** The fishing here is exceptional. You'll need a skiff or sea kayak, or get a charter to drop you off, as the creek is on Kupreanof Island, across Wrangell Narrows from town; the state maintains a dock there. **Guided sea-kayak day trips** go up the creek (see "Sea Kayaking," below), which contains four species of salmon and two of trout. The trail is maintained by the Forest Service and has miles of boardwalks and two cabins, one at Petersburg Lake and one at East Salt Chuck, each with a boat for public use (reservations are required). Petersburg Lake has trout, and odds are good that you'll see ducks, geese, loons, trumpeter swans, bald eagles, and black bears. The Kupreanof dock also provides access to the 3-mile, 3,000-foot trail that climbs Petersburg Mountain, a challenging hike that has spectacular views from the top.

LECONTE GLACIER/STIKINE RIVER DELTA Ice calving from the glacier has choked the water in front, making approach difficult, but in June you can see

Finds The Spot for Takeout Lunch and Frozen Take-home Fish

Stop in at **Coastal Cold Storage,** at Excel Street and Nordic Drive (✆ **907/772-4177**), where they sell seafood from freezers and live from tanks. They'll freeze and ship seafood home for you. This place also sells burgers, sandwiches, fish specials, and ice-cream cones at the counter.

seal pups on the floating ice and possibly mountain goats on shore. A bit farther on is the Stikine River Delta, a wildlife habitat of grasslands, braided channels, and marshes with excellent bird-watching. In late April and early May, when the hooligans run, more than 1,500 bald eagles congregate, and some two million other birds rest on their West Coast migration. The charter operators listed above can take you here, or Viking Travel can book one of the other operators who offer these trips. Boat tours based in Wrangell specialize in going to the delta, too, and Wrangell is actually located closer to the river. The going rate for a 4- to 5-hour tour to LeConte Glacier from Petersburg is about $125 per person. Going on to the delta would be more like $175 per person and take all day.

ACTIVITIES

FISHING There are many fishing streams and lakes that you can reach on the roads—several are mentioned above, under "Mitkof Island." For more choices, check at the visitor center, or contact the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** (✆ **907/772-5231,** www.alaska.gov/adfg). They produce an informative *Petersburg/Wrangell Sport Fishing Guide.*

The boat harbor has a couple dozen licensed charter fishing boats, mostly six-passenger vessels. As elsewhere, halibut and salmon are usually the target. You can get a list of operators at the visitor center, or book through **Viking Travel** (see "Visitor Information," earlier). Half-day salmon charters cost around $160 per person, while halibut charters or longer salmon charters are around $200.

SEA KAYAKING The waters of Wrangell Narrows are protected and interesting, with plenty to see. On longer trips of 3 days to a week, you can get out among the glaciers, Stikine River Delta, and even the whales—there's as much variety here, among these rainforest islands, as anywhere in the region. It's possible to set up a kayak trip linking some of the Forest Service cabins, too, or to use one as a base camp for a few days of exploration. **Tongass Kayak Adventures** (✆ **907/772-4600;** www.tongasskayak.com) offers guided and unguided versions of each of these adventures (they rent equipment, too). Their 4-hour paddle crosses Wrangell Narrows from the harbor and penetrates Petersburg Creek, where they stop for a snack and often see bear and deer. No experience is required; they charge $65. A 3-night base camp tour costs $690 per person; an 8-night version begins at $1,320.

WHALE-WATCHING Most summers, **Frederick Sound** is one of the best places in the state to see humpbacks feeding. Whale-watching charters can go any day from May 15 to September 15, but the height is July and August. You may see stunning bubble-net feeding, when the whales confine a school of fish in a circle of bubbles, then lunge upward to scoop them up, bursting through the surface in a great swoosh. Whales have even been known to "spy-hop," poking their heads as high above the surface as possible in order to look down into the boats that are watching them. In summer 1995, a humpback jumped right into one of these boats, presumably accidentally. (No one was injured, but a few people fell into the water.) Several charter operators offer trips in small, six-passenger boats. Some, including Kaleidoscope Cruises (see p. 122), have hydrophones on board, so you may be able to hear the whales' vocalizations while waiting for them to surface, if their feeding behavior and the water conditions are right. Book trips through Viking Travel or directly with one of the operators. Trips usually leave around 8am and stay out 6 to 10 hours, with several hours among the whales. Prices are $135 to $185 per person. The nonprofit **Petersburg Marine Mammal Center** teaches about the whales; their visitor center is at 12 Sing Lee Alley.

WHERE TO STAY

Bumbershoot Bed & Breakfast ★ *Finds* The industrious Gloria Ohmer, who also owns the Tides Inn Motel (see below), has opened her extraordinary waterfront home on Frederick Sound to guests as well. The rooms are large, decorated with quilts she made. Gloria and her husband, Don Koenigs, will also share their beadwork, woodwork, sewing, stained glass, stone cutting and engraving, music room, fish-cleaning room, and deck barbecue with you. It's hard to come away without gaining a little of their enthusiasm for life. Rooms with water views—and the water is only barely beyond your reach—rent for $10 more. For $150 a night, you can rent the entire downstairs apartment, with two rooms, a kitchen, and a large living room with a fireplace. They also lend bicycles, offer free use of the laundry machines, and arrange transportation from the ferry dock or airport.

901 Sandy Beach Rd. (P.O. Box 372), Petersburg, AK 99833. ✆ **907/772-4683.** Fax 907/772-4627. glohmer@pobox.aptalaska.net. 4 units, 2 with shared bathroom. $80–$90 double. Extra person $10. Rates include continental breakfast. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Free bicycle loan; courtesy car; free laundry machines. *In room:* TV/VCR, hair dryer, iron.

Scandia House ★★ Rebuilt in the town's distinctive Norwegian style, this building's solid simplicity puts it in a class by itself. White rooms with blondewood trim are blessed with natural light. You have a choice: front rooms with king-size beds, rooms with kitchenettes, twin-bedded rooms, or a magnificent fourth-floor suite with towering ceilings. Most rooms have only one bed and a few have shower stalls, not tubs. Book well in advance for the busy summer season. The owners offer skiff rentals and car rentals.

110 Nordic Dr. (P.O. Box 689), Petersburg, AK 99833. ✆ **800/722-5006** or 907/772-4281. Fax 907/772-4301. scandia@alaska.net. 33 units. $90–$110 double, $130 double with kitchenette; $185 suite. Extra person over age 12 $10. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Car rental; courtesy van. *In room:* TV.

Tides Inn Motel ★ *Value* Few hotels in Alaska have such good rooms at such affordable prices. The kitchenette rooms, which rent for the same rate as the rooms without kitchenettes, are an incredible bargain. The biggest difference among the rooms is the views. Those in the older part of the motel face the other building, while nonsmoking units in the front of the new section get a sweeping view. I watched bald eagles doing aerobatics less than 50 feet from my front window. The management is efficient and committed to quality, and they are slowly remodeling rooms while keeping those that remain outdated in clean, attractive condition. The hotel has an Avis car-rental franchise and serves a continental breakfast in the lobby.

307 N. 1st St. (P.O. Box 1048), Petersburg, AK 99833. ✆ **800/665-8433** or 907/772-4288. Fax 907/772-4286. tidesinn@alaska.net. $85 double. Extra person $10. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Car rental; courtesy van. *In room:* TV.

Waterfront Bed & Breakfast This building, designed as a bed-and-breakfast as well as a family home, sits on pilings over the Wrangell Narrows near the ferry dock. Rooms are decorated with Mission-style oak furniture and down comforters; they have shower stalls, not tubs. Two rooms each have a single queen-size bed while the third has two doubles and costs $10 more; the rate is the same no matter how many people stay in the room. They'll take guests to or from the airport or harbor with prior arrangements. No smoking is allowed on the premises.

1004 S. Nordic Dr. (P.O. Box 1613), Petersburg, AK 99833. ✆ **907/772-9300.** Fax 907/772-9308. www.alaska.net/~h20frbnb. 3 units. $95–$105 per room regardless of number of people in the room. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Covered outdoor Jacuzzi; free laundry machines.

Water's Edge Bed & Breakfast ★ *Finds* Barry and Kathy Bracken's house sits right on the beach on Frederick Sound, about 2 miles from town center, with a creek running next to one room. You can sit in the large common room and watch waterfowl through big windows, or borrow the canoe for a paddle along the shore. Probably the best thing to do here is to book a package combining a stay at the B&B and an excursion on Barry's 28-foot boat. A marine biologist, he leads natural history glacier- and whale-watching excursions. His knowledge of the area is deep and his enthusiasm infectious. Book well ahead, as it's a rare and popular opportunity. No smoking is permitted.

705 Sandy Beach Rd. (P.O. Box 1201), Petersburg, AK 99833. ✆ **800/TO-THE-SEA** (800/868-4373) or phone/fax 907/772-3736. www.alaska.net/~bbsea. 2 units. High season $100 double; low season $70 double. Extra person $10. 2-night minimum stay. Rates include continental breakfast. No credit cards. No children under 12. **Amenities:** Free canoe and bike loan; courtesy car; free laundry machines; kitchenette. *In room:* Hair dryer.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Friendly little **Petersburg Bunk and Breakfast Hostel,** at 805 Gjoa St. (✆ **907/772-3632** or 907/723-5340**;** www.bunkandbreakfast.com), has male and female dorm rooms with four beds in each. The $25 nightly rate includes a continental breakfast, room tax, and Internet access. They're open only from May 15 to September 15 except by special arrangement; check in and office hours are 8 to 10am and 5 to 8pm.

The closest natural camping is found 22 miles out on the Mitkof Highway at **Ohmer Creek** (see "Special Places: Mitkof Island," above). **Twin Creek RV Park** is 7½ miles out on the highway (✆ **907/772-3244**), charging $20 for full hookups.

WHERE TO DINE

Petersburg mostly has typical small-town family restaurants, and not much else that rises above that level (the best of the offerings are detailed below). For takeout pizza or calzone, try **Pelleritos** (✆ **907/772-3727**), across from the ferry terminal, open daily except Sunday from 4pm to 9pm. **Alaskafe,** upstairs at 306B N. Nordic, at the corner with Excel Street (✆ **907/772-JAVA**), serves lunch at indoor and outdoor dining areas and displays local art. They're open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 3pm.

Joan Mei Restaurant ★ CHINESE The whole family works together in this large, bright dining room, serving flaky egg rolls and entrees with vegetables that remain crisp and flavorful rather than being smothered or overcooked. Locals come here for a nice dinner out, and we saw many happy faces. They also have a karaoke room.

1103 S. Nordic, across from the ferry dock. ✆ **907/772-4222.** Lunch $6.25–$12; dinner $6.25–$20. MC, V. Mon–Tues and Thurs–Fri 11am–9pm; Sat–Sun 7am–9pm. Closed mid-Jan–mid-Feb.

Northern Lights Restaurant ★ *Kids* SEAFOOD/DINER You couldn't find a much better site for a restaurant than this one, sitting on pilings in Hammer Slough, overlooking two boat harbors. Unfortunately, it seems to change hands every few years, and that had just happened again at this writing, so all the information here is subject to drastic change. The food has consisted of good, plentiful burgers, salads, pasta, and specials year round, plus fine-dining seafood entrees added in the summer for visitors. The ice cream parlor furniture, video games, and ice cream counter remain from various previous incarnations. Anyway, the dining room has such a view and such a location that you can't go too far wrong with a visit here.

203 Sing Lee Alley. ✆ **907/772-2900.** Lunch $7–$8.50; dinner $12–$15; summer dinner to $28. MC, V. Summer Mon–Sat 5am–11pm, Sun 5am–10pm. Winter Mon–Fri 6am–8pm, Sat 7am–8pm, Sun 9am–8pm.

6 Sitka: Rich Prize of Russian Conquest

If I could visit only one Alaska town, it would probably be Sitka.

Sitka preserves the Russian buildings of Alaska's earliest white settlement and, more deeply, the story of the cultural conflict between Alaska Natives and the new settlers, and the Natives' resistance and ultimate accommodation to the new ways. Here, 18th-century Russian conquerors that had successfully enslaved Aleuts to the west met their match in battle against the rich, powerful, and sophisticated Tlingit. A visit to Sitka reveals the story of that war, and also the cultural blending that occurred in the uneasy peace that followed under the influence of the Russian Orthodox church—an influence that remained even after the Russians sold Alaska to the U.S. in 1867 (an event that also happened here), and that continues today.

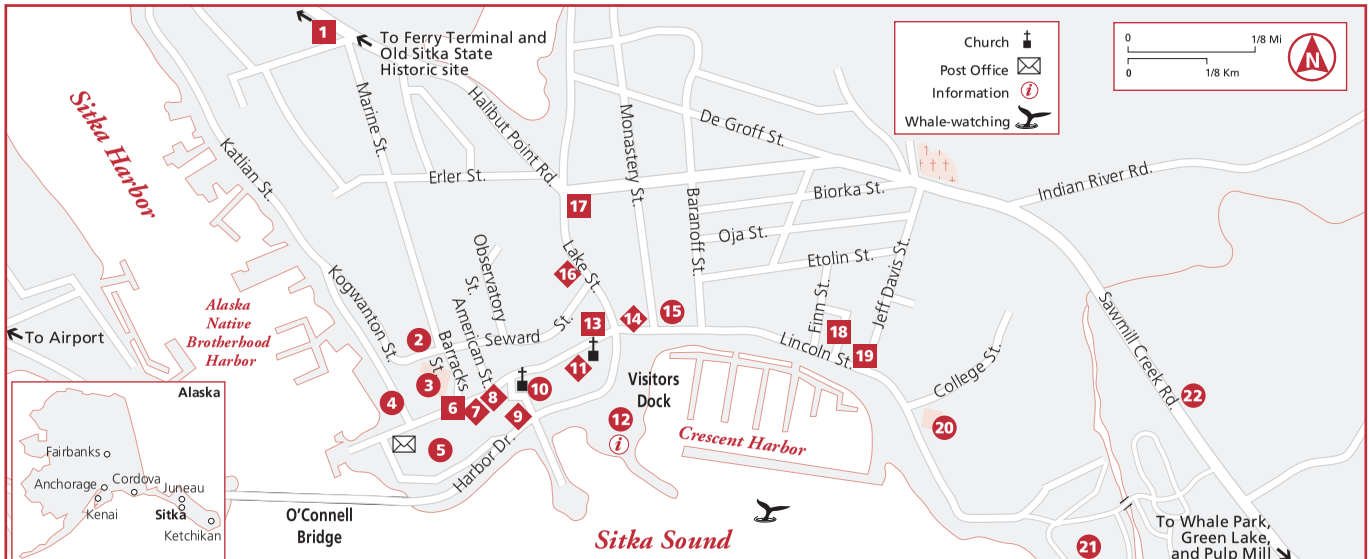
Sitka's history is Alaska's richest, and there's more of real interest in this town than any other town you might visit. The fact is, most Alaska towns haven't been on the map long enough to have accumulated much history. Those that have been around for a while often have been wiped out a time or two, leaving little to remind you of the distant past. There's usually a small museum and a few gold rush sites that can be seen in half a day. Not so in Sitka. Historic photographs bear a surprising resemblance to today's city. The National Park Service protects buildings and grounds of major historic significance. Even a superficial exploration of the attractions takes a day, and that's without time for visits to out-of-the way points of interest or the great outdoors.

In 1799, the Russians chose these protected waters on Sitka Sound, on the ocean side of Baranof Island, for a new fort as part of a strategy of pushing their sea otter hunting operations and territorial claims east and south along the west coast of North America. The Tlingit understandably considered this to be an invasion and in 1802 they attacked the Russian's redoubt and killed almost everyone inside. The Russians counterattacked in 1804 with the cannons of the ship *Neva* and a swarm of Aleut warriors, eventually forcing the Tlingit battle leader, Katlian, to withdraw. But the Russians never rested easy in their new capital, named New Archangel, and the hostility of the proud and dangerous Tlingit remained. Some Russian laborers intermarried and essentially adopted Tlingit culture, but the bureaucrats and naval officers sent to run the colony for the czar tended to view Alaska as purgatory and left as soon as they could. With their ineffective and uninterested control, the Russians made surprisingly little impression on the great mass of Alaska. They failed to explore the Interior and held only tenuous control of the vast coastline.

The departing Russians rushed home, leaving only three significant towns—Unalaska, Kodiak, and Sitka—of which only Sitka retains more than a single

Fun Fact Thank You. No, Thank *You.*

In 1867, Russia's Czar Alexander feared that he couldn't hold the unprofitable colony of Alaska and saw a political advantage in doing his American allies the favor of selling it to them. Ironically, the Americans thought they were doing Russia a favor by buying it. Congress balked at paying the $7 million price that Secretary of State William Seward had negotiated for this worthless waste, relenting more than a year later partly out of fear of offending the czar. Americans didn't change their dim view of "Seward's Folly" until gold discoveries decades later.



ACCOMMODATIONS
Alaska Ocean View Bed & Breakfast **1**
Cascade Inn **1**
Crescent Harbor Hideaway **18**
Finn Alley Inn **19**
Sitka Hotel **6**
Super 8 Sitka **17**
Westmark Shee Atika **13**

DINING
Backdoor Café **7**
Bayview Restaurant **14**
Channel Club **1**
Highliner Coffee **16**
Mojo Café **8**
Pizza Express **11**
Van Winkle and Sons **9**

ATTRACTIONS
Alaska Raptor Center **22**
Castle Hill **5**
Harrigan Centennial Hall Visitor Center **12**
Pioneers' Home **3**
The Russian Bishop's House **15**
Russian Blockhouse **2**
Sheldon Jackson Museum **20**
Sitka National Historic Park **21**
Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Community House (home of Sitka Tribe Dance Performances) **4**
St. Michael's Cathedral **10**

Russian building. During their century of rule the Russians had nearly wiped out the sea otter and the culture of the Aleuts, but both would eventually bounce back. The Russian Orthodox church stood as the Russians' only lasting cultural gift to the Native Alaskans. Thanks to the efforts of one extraordinary cleric, Bishop Innocent Veniaminov, Alaska Natives were able to worship in their own languages, winning for the Russian Orthodox church many villages' continuing loyalty over less tolerant Protestant churches that came under American rule.

Besides its historic significance, Sitka also is fun to visit. Somehow it has retained a friendly, authentic feel, despite the crush of thousands of visitors. Perhaps because cruise-ship travelers must ride shuttle boats to shore, or because Sitka is a slightly inconvenient, out-of-the-way stop on the Alaska Marine Highway's main-line ferry routes, the city's streets haven't been choked by solid rows of seasonal gift shops, as has occurred in Ketchikan, Skagway, and a large part of Juneau. It remains picturesque, facing Sitka Sound, which is dotted with islands and populated by feeding eagles. Tourism is important here, but Sitka's community remains the reason for this town's existence. The process of being "spoiled" hasn't begun.

In addition to the town's many attractions and rich history, Sitka is a gateway to a large, remote portion of Southeast Alaska, in the western coastal islands. This area contains some of Tongass National Forest's least-used outdoor opportunities. The ocean halibut and salmon fishing are excellent and not overexploited, and the bird- and wildlife-watching is exceptional.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Sitka sits on the west side of Baranof Island, a detour from the Inside Passage. The big, main-line ferries on the **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com) don't always stop here, but the small *LeConte* adds more connecting trips each week, often stopping at villages in the region. The ride through narrow Peril Straits into Sitka is definitely worth the trip. The shore seems close enough to touch, and if you look closely you can sometimes see deer. The fare from either Juneau (9 hr. away) or Petersburg (10 hr.) is $32. The ferry dock (✆ **907/747-3300**) is 7 miles out of town.

Alaska Airlines (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) links Sitka daily to Juneau and Ketchikan, with flights that then continue nonstop to Seattle and Anchorage.

To get to town from the airport or ferry dock, the **Sitka Tours** bus charges $5 one-way, $7 round-trip. No reservations are needed, just climb aboard and pay the driver. **Sitka Cab** is at ✆ **907/747-5001;** the ride from the ferry dock is around $15.

VISITOR INFORMATION A kiosk in the city-operated **Harrigan Centennial Hall Visitor Center,** 330 Harbor Dr., next to the Crescent Boat Harbor (✆ **907/747-3225**), is the only walk-in information stop. It is staffed by volunteers only when cruise ships are in town, although you may be able to ask questions of hall staff at other times. The hall is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 10pm, Saturday 8am to 5pm and sometimes Sunday. The town's professional visitor organization is the **Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau,** at P.O. Box 1226, Sitka, AK 99835 (✆ **907/747-5940;** fax 907/747-3739). They maintain a very useful website at **www.sitka.org**.

At the **Sitka National Historic Park Visitor Center,** 106 Metlakatla St., Sitka, AK 99835 (✆ **907/747-6281;** www.nps.gov/sitk), run by the National Park, you can gather information about the park and the history of the area. The

"Historic Sites of Sitka" map produced by the park service and Sitka Historical Society is an indispensable guide to the buildings and parks around town. You can easily see Sitka's history on foot with one of these maps. The center is open daily from 8am to 5pm in summer, Monday through Saturday from 8am to 5pm in winter. Also see "Exploring Sitka," below, for more on the park.

ORIENTATION Sitka, on the west side of Baranof Island, has only a few miles of road. The **ferry terminal** is located at its north end, 7 miles out, on **Halibut Point Road;** the site of an abandoned pulp mill is at the south end, roughly the same distance out on **Sawmill Creek Road.** The town faces Sitka Sound. Across Sitka Channel are **Japonski Island** and the **airport** (don't worry, it only looks as if your plane is going to land in the water). **Lincoln Street** contains most of the tourist attractions.

GETTING AROUND The airport has branches of **Avis** (✆ **800/331-1212** or 907/966-2264; www.avis.com) and **North Star Rent-a-Car** (✆ **800/722-6927** or 907/966-2552; www.ptialaska.net/~rfahey).

The Visitor Transit Bus operated by the **Sitka Tribe** (see "Exploring Sitka," below) makes a continuous circuit of the sites from May to September, Monday through Friday from 12:30 to 4:30pm, with added morning hours when cruise ships are in. The fare is $7 all day, $5 one-way, and kids ride free.

Bike rental makes a good deal of sense in Sitka. **Yellow Jersey Cycles,** at 329 Harbor Dr., right across from the Centennial Hall downtown, (✆ **907/747-6317;** www.geocities.com/yellow_jersey_cycles), rents quality bikes for $25 a day.

FAST FACTS: Sitka

Banks There are two banks, at 300 Lincoln St. and 318 Lincoln St. Both have ATMs, and you can also find ATMs at the local grocery stores.

Hospital **Sitka Community (✆ 907/747-3241)** is at 209 Moller Dr.

Internet Access Try **Highliner Coffee,** on Lake Street near Seward Street (✆ **907/747-4924**), or at the downtown post office.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. Call ✆ **907/747-3245** for nonemergency business.

Post Office At 338 Lincoln St.; it is open Saturday.

Taxes Sales tax is 5%. The tax on rooms totals 11%.

SPECIAL EVENTS The **Starring Ceremony,** January 7, marks Russian Orthodox Christmas with a procession through the streets and song and prayer at the doors of the faithful. Call St. Michael's Cathedral for information (✆ **907/747-8120** or 907/747-3560 voice message).

The **Sitka Salmon Derby** occurs at the end of May and beginning of June, when the kings are running; contact the Sitka Sportsman's Association (✆ **907/747-8791**) for information on the fishing contest.

The **Sitka Summer Music Festival,** a chamber-music series that began in 1972, is one of Alaska's most important cultural events, drawing musicians from all over the world in early June (from June 5–26 in 2004). Performances take place Tuesdays and Fridays, and other events are held during the rest of the

week. Contact the festival office for information (✆ **907/747-6774;** www.sitkamusicfestival.org).

Alaska Day, October 18, commemorating the Alaska Purchase, is a big deal in this former Russian capital city; the **Alaska Day Festival** lasts 4 days leading up to the big event (on the 18th). The Convention and Visitors Bureau has information. The **Sitka Grind,** a music and arts celebration at varying sites around town, takes place the third Saturday of each month from October to March.

The **Sitka WhaleFest** (✆ **907/747-7964;** www.sitkawhalefest.org) takes place over a weekend in early November, during the fall and early winter period when humpback whales congregate in Sitka Sound. National experts come to teach workshops, and there are whale-watching tours and community events. Consider combining it with the Alaska Bald Eagle Festival in Haines, coordinated to follow the WhaleFest (see section 10 of this chapter, on Haines).

EXPLORING SITKA

The **Sitka Tribe of Alaska's** Community House is a good starting point, where you can join walking or bus tours, including trail hikes and a 2-hour walking tour of the town and historical park, and watch dance performances (see below) The house is at 200 Katlian St. (✆ **888/270-8687** or 907/747-7290; www.sitkatribe.org). **Sitka Tours** (✆ **907/747-8443**) also offers tours, taking more of the Russian perspective. On days when cruise ships are in town you can combine their tours with a Russian folk dance performance by the **New Archangel Dancers** (✆ **907/747-5516**) in the Harrigan Centennial Hall, at 330 Harbor Dr., next to the Crescent Boat Harbor. Prices for each choice of tour range from about $10 for a brief downtown tour to $42 for a longer town tour that includes most of the attractions and dancing; the type of dancing—Native or Russian—depends on which firm you go with.

SITKA'S TLINGIT & RUSSIAN HERITAGE

Sitka National Historic Park ★★★ In 1799, the Russian America Company, led by Alexander Baranof, landed from their base in Kodiak, established Redoubt St. Michael (today the **Old Sitka State Historic Site,** 7½ miles north of town—just a grassy picnic area with interpretive signs), and claimed the Pacific Northwest of America for Russia. The Tlingit, who were sophisticated traders and already had acquired flintlocks, attacked with knives, spears, and guns, and destroyed the redoubt in mid-June 1802, killing almost all of the Russians. The Natives immediately began building fortifications on the site now within the national historical park, anticipating a Russian counterattack, which came in 1804. Baranof returned with an attacking force of a Russian gunship and a swarm of Aleut kayaks, which towed the becalmed vessel into position to begin the bombardment. The Tlingits withstood the siege for 6 days, then vacated their fort at night, after taking heavy losses from the shelling and from a bomb-laden canoe. The Russians founded and heavily fortified the town of New Archangel, and in 1808 it became their administrative capital. But the Tlingit name is the one that stuck: Shee Atika, since contracted to Sitka.

The historic significance of the battle site was recognized early, and Pres. Benjamin Harrison, a friend of Alaska missionary Sheldon Jackson, set the land aside in 1890. In 1905, a collection of totem poles from around Southeast was brought here, and in 1910 the site was designated a national historic park. The park emphasizes the Native perspective. In the newly remodeled visitor center, exhibits explain the history and the art of totem carving. A new, 30-foot-high hall allows

display of original poles, some of which have been in storage since the 1930s (reproductions stand outside). The site is old enough now that its own history is a subject, including discussion of the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, which saved the poles and created the reproductions. And history continues to live, as artisans of the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center work in a series of windowed workshops creating traditional crafts of metal, wood, beads, textiles, and woven grass. A free 12-minute video provides a good historical overview.

I've always been most impressed with the totem park and battle site. The totems stand tall and forbidding along a pathway through massive spruce and hemlock, where misty rain often wanders down from an unseen sky somewhere above the trees. The battle site is along the trail—only a grassy area now—but among the trees and totems, with the sound of the lapping sea and the raven's call, you can feel deep down what the Tlingits were fighting for.

Though they lost the battle, the Tlingit won the war—they're still here. In 1996, a gathering of clans erected a major new pole in front of the center to explain their story back to mankind's arrival in North America. It took quite a bit of debate to settle the story the pole would tell. For example, the crests of the eagle and raven tribal moieties are traditionally never shown on the same pole, but they had to be to tell the whole history of the Tlingits. In 1999, another new pole rose at the site of the battle to commemorate the story of the fight. At the bottom of the pole is a carving of the raven helmet worn by Katlian, the Tlingit's leader in the battle of Sitka. You can see the helmet itself in the Sheldon Jackson Museum (see below). Contrary to the popular phrase "low man on the totem pole," the position shows the strength with which Katlian led and supported his people.

106 Metlakatla St. ✆ **907/747-6281.** Admission $3. Visitor center open summer daily 8am–5pm; winter Mon–Sat 8am–5pm. Park open summer daily 6am–10pm, winter daily 7am–8pm.

The Russian Bishop's House ★★★ Bishop Innocent Veniaminov, born in 1797, translated scriptures into Tlingit and trained deacons to carry Russian Orthodoxy back to their Native villages. Unlike most of the later Protestant missionaries led by Sitka's other historic religious figure, Sheldon Jackson, Veniaminov and his followers allowed parishioners to use their own language, a key element to saving Native cultures. When the United States bought Alaska in 1867, few Russians remained, but thanks to Veniaminov's work, the Russian Orthodox faith remains strong in Native Alaska; today there are 89 parishes, primarily in tiny Native villages. In 1977, Veniaminov was canonized as St. Innocent in the Orthodox faith.

In 1842, the Russian America Company retained Finnish shipbuilders to construct this extraordinary house for Veniaminov as a residence, school, and chapel. It survived many years of neglect in part because its huge beams fit together like a ship's. In 1972, the National Park Service bought and began restoring the building, which is the best of only three surviving houses from all of Russian America (the others are in Kodiak and at 206 Lincoln St. in Sitka, today occupied by the Log Cache Gifts). The Bishop's House is Alaska's most interesting historic site. Downstairs is a self-guided museum; upstairs, the bishop's quarters are furnished with original and period pieces. It's an extraordinary window into an alternate stream of American history, from a time before the founding of Seattle or San Francisco, when Sitka was the most important city on North America's Pacific Coast. The tour concludes with a visit to a beautiful little chapel with many of the original icons Innocent brought from Russia.

Lincoln and Monastery sts. No phone; call Sitka National Historical Park Visitor Center (✆ **907/747-0110**). Admission $3 per person or $15 per family. Summer daily 9am–5pm; by appointment in winter.

Sheldon Jackson Museum ★★ Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian missionary with powerful friends in Washington, was Alaska's first General Agent for Education, a paternal guardian of the welfare, schooling, and spiritual lives of Alaska's Natives. His benevolent aim was to defend Natives from exploitation and abuse and bring them into American civilization as equals. Tragically, his strategy to accomplish this goal was to erase indigenous cultures and replace them with Protestantism, causing incalculable, lasting harm to the cultures of peoples over a broad swath of Alaska. As a side hobby during his travels from 1888 to 1898, Jackson gathered a widely varied 5,000-piece collection of Native art, plus Native cultural and everyday objects. That collection, the best in Alaska, has been displayed for more than a century in a concrete building on the college campus that bears Jackson's name. It's a jewel box, and Alaska state museum curators display the overwhelming wealth of objects in such ingenious ways that the museum never feels cluttered. Many drawers open to reveal more displays. Despite the age of many of the pieces, they appear new, as if just made. Don't miss Katlian's helmet, worn by the Kiksadi clan's war leader in the Battle of Sitka in 1804; raven-shaped, it is that rare piece of great history that's also great art. Native artists demonstrate their skill on summer days, and the gift shop contains almost exclusively authentic Native arts and crafts. Authentic Native art pieces cost more than tourist trinkets: plan to spend over $100 except for small, simple items.

104 College Dr. ✆ **907/747-8981.** www.museums.state.ak.us. Admission $4 adults, free for ages 18 and under. Mid-May–mid-Sept daily 9am–5pm; mid-Sept–mid-May Tues–Sat 10am–4pm.

St. Michael's Cathedral ★ The first Orthodox cathedral in the New World stands grandly in the middle of Sitka's principal street, where it was completed in 1848. Bishop Veniaminov (see "The Russian Bishop's House," above) designed it and oversaw construction. The cathedral contains several miraculous icons, some dating from the 17th century. The St. Michael, the farthest right of six on the front screen, was bound for Sitka aboard the *Neva* in 1813 when the ship went down some 30 miles from Sitka. Thirty days later the icon, in its crate, washed ashore undamaged and was recovered by Sitka's townspeople. The original building burned down in a 1966 fire that started elsewhere and took much of Sitka's downtown, but a human chain saved almost all the contents of the church in the 30 minutes before the building was destroyed. One man lifted down the huge central chandelier, which later took six men to carry. Orthodox Christians all over the United States raised the money to rebuild the cathedral exactly as it had been, using a Russian architect who could interpret Veniaminov's original plans. It was completed in 1976. A knowledgeable guide is on hand to answer questions or give talks when large groups congregate. Sunday services are sung in English, Slavonic, Tlingit, Aleut, and Yupik.

Lincoln and Cathedral sts. ✆ **907/747-8120.** $2 donation requested. Summer Mon–Fri 9am–4pm. Call for weekend and winter hours.

Sitka Tribe Dance Performances ★ The Sheet'ka Kwaan Naā Kahidi, Sitka's community house, standing on the north side of the downtown parade ground, is a modern version of a Tlingit Clan House, with an air handling system that pulls smoke from the central fire pit straight up to the chimney. The magnificent house screen at the front of the hall, installed in 2000, is the largest in the Pacific Northwest. Performances last 30 minutes, including three dances and a story. It's entirely traditional and put on by members of the tribe. You can also sign up for tours and activities in the lobby.

200 Katlian St. ✆ **888/270-8687** or 907/747-7290. www.sitkatribal.com. $6 adults, $4 children. Call for times.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS IN TOWN

Alaska Raptor Center This nonprofit center takes in injured birds of prey (mainly bald eagles, but also owls, hawks, and other species) for veterinary treatment and release or, if too badly injured, for placement in a zoo or in the collection of 25 that live on-site. Visitors get to see the impressive birds up close in a lecture setting, through the glass wall of the veterinary clinic, or in outdoor enclosures. A new flight-training center, completed in 2003, is a little rainforest in an aviary where recuperating birds learn to fly again. Visitors walk through in a tube with one-way glass so they can watch the birds without disturbing them. A pleasant, disabled-accessible nature trail leads down to a river where healthy eagles sometimes feed.

1101 Sawmill Creek Blvd. ✆ **907/747-8662.** www.alaskaraptor.org. $12 adults, $6 ages 12 and under. Summer Sun–Fri 8am–4pm. Winter by appointment.

WALKING DOWNTOWN The grassy park at Lincoln and Katlian was the site of the Russians' barracks and parade ground. Just north on Marine Street is a replica of a **Russian Blockhouse;** across Lincoln Street to the south and up the stairs is **Castle Hill,** a site of historic significance for the ancient Tlingits, for the Russians, and for Native Alaskans. The first American flag raised in Alaska was hoisted here in 1867. There are historic markers and cannons. As you walk east past the cathedral and Crescent Harbor, several quaint historic buildings are on the left. My favorite is **St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church,** a lovely stone-and-timber chapel with a pipe organ, consecrated in 1899. At the east end of the harbor is a **public playground;** turn left, uphill on Jeff Davis Street (named for the first commander of the Alaska garrison, not the Confederate president) past **Sheldon Jackson College** to the Sitka National Cemetery, which has some old and interesting graves.

SHOPPING

There are some good shops and galleries in Sitka, mostly on Lincoln and Harbor streets. Several are across the street from St. Michael's Cathedral. **Impressions,** at 239 Lincoln St., carries prints by many of Alaska's best contemporary artists. **Fairweather Prints,** at 209 Lincoln St., has a fun, youthful feel; it is large and has a diverse selection, including wearable art (including T-shirts), watercolors, prints, ceramics, and cute, inexpensive crafts. Continuing west on Lincoln, **Baranov's Russian and American Store** is on the right, as is **Log Cache Gifts,** a typical gift store housed in an 1835 Russian cabin. **Old Harbor Books,** at 201 Lincoln St., is a good browsing store with an excellent selection of Alaska books (**The Backdoor** espresso shop inside is covered under "Where to Dine," later.) Back in the other direction, near the Crescent Harbor dock, the **Sitka Rose Gallery** occupies a Victorian house at 419 Lincoln St., featuring higher-end work, mostly local: sculpture, original paintings, engraving, and jewelry. It's quite grand. The **Sheldon Jackson Museum Gift Shop,** 104 College Dr., is an excellent place to buy Alaska Native arts and crafts with assurance of their authenticity.

GETTING OUTSIDE: ON THE WATER

The little islands and rocks that dot Sitka Sound are an invitation to the sea otter in all of us; you must get out on the water.

DIVING

These waters tend to be clear and biologically rich, making them appealing to divers. Winter is best, when plankton isn't blooming, but there are good periods

in summer, too. Try **Island Fever Diving and Adventures,** 246 Katlian St. (✆ **907/747-7871**).

SALTWATER FISHING

Many charter boats are available for salmon or halibut fishing. The Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau (see "Visitor Information," earlier) keeps a detailed charter boat list, including rates, that goes on for pages.

Alaska Adventures Unlimited (✆ **907/747-5576;** akfish@gci.net.) is a booking agent that makes reservations for more than half of the charter boats in the harbor. If you can handle your own boat, skiffs rent for $85 for a ½ day and up from **Sitka Sound Ocean Adventures** (✆ **907/747-6375;** www.ssocean adventures.com).

SEA KAYAKING

Sitka's protected waters and intricate shorelines are perfect for sea kayaking. You're almost sure to see sea otters, seals, sea lions, and eagles, and could see whales. Various companies offer guided paddles.

Sitka Sound Ocean Adventures (✆ **907/747-6375;** www.ssoceanadventures. com), run by the same friendly couple as the Camp Coogan Bay Hideaway (see "Rent a Floathouse," below), takes many beginners. Their small-group, 2-hour paddles cost $60 per person, and they do trips of up to 3 days. They also rent kayaks for independent kayakers at reasonable prices, but lessons may be required.

Baidarka Boats is a good place for serious kayakers to know about. Their well-stocked shop, which also offers rentals and guided tours is at 320 Seward St. (✆ **907/747-8996;** www.kayaksite.com). Their shortest guided paddle is 3 hours, allowing time for beachcombing, tide pooling, and snacks. The competitive rates depend on the size of your group.

SIGHTSEEING & WILDLIFE TOURS

Tour boats visit **St. Lazaria Island,** a bird rookery where you can expect to see tufted puffins, murres, rhinoceros auklets, and other pelagic birds. Storm petrels show up by the hundreds of thousands at dawn and dusk for those who charter a boat to stay overnight at the rookery. Humpback whales show up in large groups in the fall and are often seen by the half dozen in the summer. There are so many bald eagles that you're pretty well guaranteed to see them even from shore. But the lowly sea otter is the most common and, in my experience, most amusing and endearing of marine mammals, and you'll certainly see them from a tour boat. The volcanic rock drops straight down into deep water, so even big boats can come close, though in rough weather even they won't go to the exposed location of the island. The public tubs at **Goddard Hot Springs,** 17 miles south of town, are another possible stop for charters.

The **Sitka Wildlife Quest,** operated by Allen Marine Tours (✆ **888/747-8101** or 907/747-8100; www.allenmarinetours.com), runs a terrific charter of the waters in the area, with well-trained naturalists to explain the wildlife. You have a good chance of encountering humpback whales and sea otters on this 2-hour cruise, which costs $49 for adults and $30 for children. The tour leaves from the Crescent Harbor Visitors Dock Tuesday and Thursday at 6pm and Saturday and Sunday at 9am from late May to the end of August. The boats will visit St. Lazaria Island when sea conditions permit. Buy tickets on board. These are different excursions from the ones offered to cruise-ship passengers. Allen Marine is a remarkable homegrown success story, a Sitka boat building company that has grown to the point that they are now building new passenger ferries for use in New York Harbor.

For $100 per person, you can charter a six-passenger boat for a 4-hour tour to St. Lazaria Island for whale-watching, and to learn about the Sound with a married couple who are both former wildlife biologists, Kent Hall and Beverly Minn, at **Sitka's Secrets**, located at 500 Lincoln St., #641 (✆ **907/747-5089;** www.sitkasecret.com). They do fishing charters, too.

Sea Life Discovery Tours (✆ **877/966-2301** or 907/966-2301; www.sealifediscoverytours.com) offers a chance to see the rich underwater life of Sitka Sound from an extraordinary boat with big windows 4 feet below the waterline; it's really cool. They charge $65 for a 90-minute tour; call for times.

GETTING OUTSIDE: ONSHORE

FRESHWATER FISHING

Anglers should pick up the ***Sitka Area Sport Fishing Guide,*** which has lots of tips on streams, lakes, and fishing methods in the area. You can write ahead for it from the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 802 3rd St. (P.O. Box 240020), Douglas, AK 99824 (✆ **907/465-4270),** or download it from www.alaska.gov/adfg (click "Sport Fish," then "Region 1," then "Sitka"). The local Fish and Game office is at 304 Lake St., Room 103, Sitka, AK 99835 (✆ **907/747-5355**).

FOREST SERVICE CABINS

The **Sitka Ranger District,** 204 Siginaka Way, Sitka, AK 99835 (✆ **907/747-6671;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass), maintains two dozen wilderness cabins on Baranof, Chichagof, and Kruzof islands, in sea kayaking coves and on remote fishing lakes, where rowing skiffs generally are provided. The cabins and their facilities are described in a Forest Service handout or on their website.

You will need camping gear and a boat or floatplane to get there, a much greater cost than the nightly rental of $35 to $45. For cabins on salt water within 40 miles of Sitka, the most affordable way is via **Sitka Sound Water Taxi** (✆ **907/738-5970;** www.sitkawatertaxi.com). **Harris Aircraft Services,** 400 Airport Rd. (✆ **877/966-3050** Alaska only, or 907/966-3050; www.harrisaircraft.com) offers floatplane charters to cabins or anywhere else. Either way, allow time in your schedule in case bad weather prevents backcountry travel. Information on researching and reserving a cabin is under "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest," in section 1 of this chapter. Another remote cabin option is listed below, under "Where to Stay."

HIKING

Already a great hiking area, Sitka is busily building more trails to thread all over the mountains behind the town. There are a dozen U.S. Forest Service hiking trails accessible from the roads around Sitka and another 20 rough trails you can get to by plane or boat. A handy map, the *Outdoor Recreation Guide,* shows all the road-accessible trails, including easy walks from downtown. Get it and advice from the ranger district (see the preceding paragraph for information).

From downtown, the 4-mile (one-way) **Indian River Trail** is a relaxing rainforest walk rising gradually up the river valley to a small waterfall. Take Indian River Road off Sawmill Creek Road just east of the downtown. For a steeper mountain-climbing trail to alpine terrain and great views, the **Gavan Hill–Harbor Mountain Trail** is near the end of Baranof Street, which starts near the Russian Bishop's House. It gains 2,500 feet over 3 miles to the peak of Gavan Hill, then continues another 3 miles along a ridge to meet Harbor Mountain Road. The **Sitka Cross Trail** connects these trails and neighborhood streets, allowing you to start almost anywhere.

At the north end of Halibut Point Road, 7½ miles from downtown, several wonderful trails loop through the **Starrigavan Recreation Area.** On the right, the **Estuary Life Trail** and **Forest Muskeg Trail,** totaling about a mile, are exquisitely developed and accessible to anyone, circling a grassy estuary rich with birds and fish. The well-built **Mosquito Cove Trail,** starting from the far end left, loops 1¼ miles along the shore to the secluded gravel beach of the cove (great for spying into tide pools), returning over boardwalk steps through the old-growth forest. You can also camp in this area (see "A Hostel & Camping" below).

TIDE POOLING & SHORE WALKS

Halibut Point State Recreation Area, 4½ miles north of town on Halibut Point Road, is a great place for a picnic, shore ramble, and tide pooling. The Mosquito Cove Trail (above) is also promising. To find the best low tides, check a tide book, available all over town. It's best to go at the lowest tide possible, arriving on the shore an hour before the low. To identify the little creatures you'll see, buy a plastic-covered field guide at the National Park Service Visitor Center at the historical park (see p. 187).

WHALE-WATCHING

Humpback whales stop to feed in Sitka Sound on their way south in the winter migration. During October, November, December, and March, you can watch from shore—the local government has even built a special park for the purpose. At **Whale Park,** just south of town on Sawmill Creek Road, spotting scopes are mounted on platforms along a boardwalk and at the end of staircases that descend the dramatic, wooded cliffs. Excellent interpretive signs, located near surfacing concrete whales in the parking lot, explain the whales. The Sitka WhaleFest, in November (see "Special Events," earlier), is the best time for whale enthusiasts; you can watch whales in the company of many cetacean scientists.

WHERE TO STAY

In addition to the places below, you'll find excellent standard rooms in a quiet building downtown at the **Super 8 Sitka,** 404 Sawmill Creek Blvd. (✆ **800/800-8000** for reservations, or 907/747-8804; www.super8.com). A nice single-unit B&B, **Finn Alley Inn** (✆ **907/747-3655;** www.ptialaska.net/~seakdist/finn.htm), is at 711 Lincoln St. Also, the **Sitka Convention and Visitors Bureau** (✆ **907/747-5940;** www.sitka.org) has links to many B&Bs on its website, and can send you a printed list as well.

Alaska Ocean View Bed & Breakfast ★★ Ebullient Carole Denkinger and her husband Bill have a passion for making their bed-and-breakfast one you'll remember. They've thought of everything—the covered outdoor Jacuzzi where you can watch the eagles, toys and games for the kids, thick robes and slippers, an open snack counter, a big and delicious full breakfast, a barbecue, and even Alaska wildflower seeds to take home. Rooms are plush and guests are pampered. The B&B is on a residential street with a view of the water, situated about a mile from the historic district. No smoking is permitted.

1101 Edgecumbe Dr., Sitka, AK 99835. ✆ **907/747-8310.** Fax 907/747-3440. www.sitka-alaska-lodging.com. 3 units. High season $119–$189 double, extra person $10–$30. Low season $79–$129 double, extra person up to $30. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Outdoor Jacuzzi; business center. *In room:* TV/VCR and DVD, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, microwave, CD player, free media library.

Cascade Inn ★ Although the gas station and convenience store out front may turn you off, once you get into the rooms of this waterside building you'll find

a clean oasis of ocean light. Each room has a balcony right over the water's edge. The views over Sitka Sound are remarkable and you can fall asleep to the sound of the sea. The rooms themselves are small but crisply clean, with one or two queen-size beds. Kitchenette units cost $15 more. The sauna has a glass front to take advantage of the view and the inn offers access to a barbecue. It's 2½ miles to town. *Note:* Stay elsewhere if you have trouble with stairs.

2035 Halibut Point Rd. ✆ **800/532-0908** outside Alaska, or 907/747-6804. www.travelsitka.com/cascade. 10 units. High season $115–$140 double, low season $85–$105 double; Extra person beyond 2 or 4 (depending on room) $10 each in some rooms. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Sauna; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV/VCR, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Crescent Harbor Hideaway ★ *Finds* This stately 1897 house, one of Sitka's oldest, stands across a quiet street from Crescent Harbor and the lovely park at the harbor's edge, with a glassed-in porch to watch the world go by. One unit is a large, one-bedroom apartment with a full kitchen and a private patio and phone line; it's the best unit I've seen in Sitka. The other nestles adorably under the eaves. The style is simple elegance, with antiques and colonial reproductions, Berber carpet, and attractive bathrooms. Everything is clean and fresh. Hostess Susan Stanford is an artist and enjoys her guests, sometimes serving cookies in the afternoon. If you're very lucky, you might get to see her blow glass. The common areas are shared with an Australian shepherd dog named Lacy. No smoking is permitted, even outside.

709 Lincoln St., Sitka, AK 99835. ✆/fax **907/747-4900.** www.ptialaska.net/~bareis/B&B.htm. 2 units. High season $120–$150 double; low season $85–$115 double. Extra person $25. Rates include continental breakfast. No credit cards. *In room:* TV/VCR, kitchenette in 1 room, hair dryer.

Sitka Hotel *Value* This is a family-owned budget hotel. Each year the proprietors take on another improvement project in the 1939 building. The small rooms will never be luxurious, but the owners have put together many comfortable, quirky units and they keep them clean and well maintained. The location is prime, right across from the Russian parade grounds. Some rooms have shared bathrooms rather than private bathrooms, but there are only about four people to a shared bathroom and the facilities are in good shape. On our last stay, however, they were unable to reduce the heat in our top floor room, while other units were reportedly too cold—perhaps the price that it sometimes paid for staying in a place with very low rates. **Victoria's Restaurant,** with about a dozen tables in the storefront downstairs, tries, like the hotel, for a high Victorian feel, but in actuality it's more of a friendly small-town diner, with hearty breakfasts and lunches in winter and an inexpensive fine-dining dinner menu added in the summer.

118 Lincoln St., Sitka, AK 99835. ✆ **907/747-3288.** Fax 907/747-8499. www.sitkahotel.com. 60 units, 45 with private bathroom. $60 double with shared bathroom, $80 double with private bathroom. Extra person $7. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

Westmark Shee Atika ★ The community's main upscale hotel, overlooking Crescent Harbor in the heart of the historic district, falls short mostly because of the structure itself, a brown, five-story wooden building with plywood siding, hanging ceilings in the halls, and small rooms. The furniture, carpets, TVs, and other amenities are up to date and the rooms are well kept, but blah browns and cramped spaces lower the appeal of the place. However, the restaurant, lounge (a local hangout), and most rooms have very good waterfront views (harborside rooms are $10 more).

The **Raven Dining Room** is everything you'd expect from an upscale hotel cafe, with a long menu of seafood and beef in the evening.

Finds Rent a Floathouse

Southeast Alaska has a unique kind of dwelling called a floathouse, a house on a barge, permanently anchored in some quiet, forgotten cove. There have even been float-towns, with houses, schools, and other buildings tied together, usually at remote logging sites. **Camp Coogan Bay Hideaway** (✆ **907/747-6375;** www.ssoceanadventures.com) is a floathouse you can rent. It floats in a narrow, placid bay out of a wilderness fantasy, 20 minutes from Sitka by boat. A charming, peeling old bunkhouse from town was stuck on a 1940s barge and anchored here, with a rainwater system, a woodstove for heat, propane appliances, and a diesel generator if you want light. A wood-fired sauna and a gas barbecue are out on deck. Don't expect the Hilton: It's primitive and a little grubby. You'll want to rent a boat or sea kayaks for mobility; owners John and Barbara DeLong offer those services too, and have two other floathouses for rent. The floathouse's cove is the best place in the area to see bears.

330 Seward St., Sitka, AK 99835-7523. ✆ **800/544-0970** for reservations, or 907/747-6241. Fax 907/747-5486. www.westmarkhotels.com. 101 units. High season $149–$159 double; low season $139–$149 double. Extra person over age 13 $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; summer tour desk. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Hostelling International—Sitka is located at 303 Kimsham St., in the United Methodist Church (P.O. Box 2645, Sitka, AK 99835; ✆ **907/747-8661**), more than a mile from downtown. The 18 beds are $13 per night for members, $16 for non-members. They request that guests bring sleeping bags, but linens are for rent. It's open June through August; office hours and dorm access are from 8 to 10am and 6 to 10pm. Reservations are required, but advance payment is not accepted: simply call or write to tell them when you will need a bed.

The Forest Service's **Starrigavan Campground,** at the north end of Halibut Point Road, 7½ miles from town and ½ mile from the ferry dock, is one of the loveliest in Alaska. There are three loops. The Backpackers' Loop has six hike-in sites. The Estuary Loop (which joins the Estuary Life Trail), on the right, has sites for RVs or tents, which are widely separated and situated under huge trees. The Bayside Loop, at the water's edge, is the last left on the highway. Three of its sites are situated next to the Starrigavan Bay, which makes you feel like you're way out in the wilderness. Fees are $12 to $16 a night. Twelve sites are available on a first-come, first-served basis, but all the rest must be reserved on the national system (see "Reserving a Cabin or Campsite" in section 1). The campground is open all year, but vehicle access is restricted in the winter. May through mid-September, access gates are locked from 10pm to 7am.

There are two RV parks, each with water and electric hookups only that charge under $22: City-run **Sealing Cove RV Park** (✆ **907/747-3439**) is near the airport, and **Sitka Sportsman's Association RV Park** (✆ **907/747-6033**) is near the ferry dock.

WHERE TO DINE

See other restaurant choices at the Westmark Shee Atika and Sitka Hotel above, under "Where to Stay." A Subway sandwich shop is at Seward and Lake streets, behind the Westmark.

Bayview Restaurant ★★ BURGERS/PASTA/SEAFOOD The view of the boat harbor and good food make this small second-story restaurant popular year-round, although it's sometimes noisy and a bit cramped. Everything I've tried from the extensive menu has been well prepared and quickly served. The clam chowder sings, and people come back for the halibut and burgers. My lunch of halibut fish and chips was tasty and done just right, although the portion and plate were small. A BLT is $8. Dinner prices are higher. The wine list has a nice selection and reasonable prices. This is a great spot for breakfast.

407 Lincoln St. ✆ **907/747-5440.** Main courses $5.50–$27. AE, DISC, MC, V. High season Mon–Sat 5am–10pm, Sun 5am–3pm. Winter daily 7am–3pm.

Channel Club ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD The steaks have always been great here, and the salad bar, which comes with every meal, is legendary. It's really an appetizer bar, and the crab alone is worth the trip. The restaurant is in one big room, with a swordfish on one wall and the menu on another, and the dress code seems to be T-shirts and baseball caps. The service is as casual as in the greasiest greasy-spoon diner. That's all part of the manly "club" thing, and it works, producing an appropriately rough-and-ready atmosphere that's perfect after a day outdoors. The restaurant treats families well. Channel Club is several miles out on Halibut Point Road, but a courtesy van will come get you and take you home at the end of the evening. They have a full bar, which stays open an hour after the restaurant closes (hours below are just for the restaurant).

2906 Halibut Point Rd. ✆ **907/747-9916.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $12–$42. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sat 5–11pm.

Tips Hip Eats & Coffee in Sitka

The same cool couple owns two of the coolest places in town: **Mojo Café**, at 203 Lincoln St. (✆ **907/747-0667**), and **The Backdoor Café**, in the back half of Old Harbor Books at 104 Barracks St. (✆ **907/747-8856**). These are the kinds of places that develop a following among the local poets, musicians, and the like. Mojo is open Monday through Saturday from 6:30am to 3pm and Sunday 9am to 3pm, serving fresh pastries for breakfast and soup, sandwiches, and specials for lunch. The Backdoor is more of a coffee place, which also offers the owner's own homemade bagels and a lunch special. It's a great hangout, open Monday through Saturday from 7am to 5pm. Neither place takes credit cards.

Highliner Coffee, on Lake Street just above Seward Street (✆ **907/747-4924**), is a fancier place, with Internet access ($5.25 for the first ½ hr.). A "highliner" is a top commercial fisherman; the name here is a bit of a boast for its fisherpeople owners, who hope to educate customers about their way of life as well as roasting Sitka's coffee. It's open Monday through Saturday from 5:30am to 5pm, Sunday from 8am to 4pm.

Pizza Express *Value* MEXICAN/PIZZA Come here when you want a filling, inexpensive meal in a light, pleasant dining room. The owners and most of the menu are Mexican, but they also serve and deliver good pizza.

236 Lincoln St., Ste. 106. ✆ **907/966-2428.** Main courses $7–$13. MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–10pm; Sun noon–10pm; closes at 9pm on Sundays in winter.

Van Winkle and Sons SEAFOOD/PASTA/PIZZA This is a typical small-town family restaurant with a good water view and booths. Order the simple seafood, beef, or pizza on the menu instead the more sophisticated dishes.

205 Harbor Dr. ✆ **907/747-7652.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $6–$10; dinner $11–$24. AE, MC, V. High season Mon–Fri 11:30am–2pm, daily 5–9:30pm. Low season Mon–Fri 11:30am–2pm, daily 5–8:30pm.

7 Juneau: Forest Capital

Juneau (*June*-oh) hustles and bustles like no other city in Alaska. The steep downtown streets echo with the mad shopping sprees of cruise-ship passengers in the summer tourist season and the whispered intrigues of politicians during the winter legislative session. Miners, loggers, and eco-tourism operators come to lobby for their share of Southeast's forest. Lunch hour arrives, and well-to-do state and federal bureaucrats burst from the office buildings to try the latest restaurant or brown-bag on one of the waterfront wharves, with the sparkling water before them and gift store malls behind. The center of town becomes an ad hoc pedestrian mall as the crush of people forces cars to creep.

My Juneau is close at hand, but very different. As a child, at a magical age, I lived here with my family in a house on the side of the mountains above downtown. My Juneau is up the 99 steps that lead from the cemetery to the bottom of Pine Street—the way I walked home from school—and then to the top of residential Evergreen Avenue, where the pavement gives way to a forest trail among fiddlehead ferns and massive rainforest spruces. That trail leads to the flume (a wooden aqueduct that used to bring water down from the mountains), upon which we would walk into the land of bears and salmon, the rumbling water at our feet. It's still a short walk from the rackety downtown streets to a misty forest quiet, where you can listen for the voices of trees.

Juneau is Alaska's third-largest city (Anchorage and Fairbanks are larger), with a population of 30,000, but it feels like a small town that's just been stuffed with people. Splattered on the sides of Mount Juneau and Mount Roberts along Gastineau Channel—where there isn't room for much of a town—its setting is picturesque but impractical. Further development up the mountains is hemmed in by avalanche danger; beyond is the 1,500-square-mile **Juneau Icefield,** an impenetrable barrier. Gold-mine tailings dumped into the Gastineau created the flat land near the water where much of the downtown area now stands. The Native village that originally stood on the waterfront is today a little pocket of mobile homes several blocks from the shore. There's no road to the outside world, and the terrain discourages building one. Jets are the main way in and out, threading down through the mountains to the airport.

Gold was responsible for the location; it was found here in 1880 by Joe Juneau and Richard Harris, assisted by the Tlingit chief Kowee, who told them where to look. All three men are buried in the Evergreen Cemetery. Their find started Alaska's development. The territory's first significant roads and bridges and its first electrical plant were built in the mountains here, which were carved with miles of hard rock tunnels well before the Klondike gold rush began. In a

few years these mines removed more gold than the United States paid for all of Alaska, as attested to by a photograph in the State Museum showing comparative piles. There's plenty of gold left, but mining died out with World War II; efforts to start again are stymied by environmental controls and low gold prices. There are several interesting gold mining sites to explore here.

In 1900, Congress moved the territorial capital here from Sitka, which had fallen behind in the flurry of gold rush development. Alaskans have been fighting over whether or not to keep it here for many decades since, but Juneau's economy is heavily dependent on government jobs, and it has successfully fought off a series of challenges to its capital status. In 2002 voters turned down a petition initiative to move the legislature by a two to one margin. The closest the issue came was in the 1970s, when voters approved moving the capital, but then balked at the cost of building a whole new city to house it—a necessity since neither Anchorage nor Fairbanks, which have their own rivalry, would support the move if it meant the other city got to have the capital nearby.

There's plenty to see in Juneau, and it's a good town to visit because the population of government workers supports restaurants and amenities of a quality not found elsewhere in the Southeast. Alaska's most accessible glacier, the Mendenhall, is in Juneau, and many businesses have set up tours, which also include visits to the fish hatchery, the brewery and an abandoned mine. Juneau is also a starting point and travel hub for outdoor activities all over the northern Panhandle: you'll likely pass through on your way to Glacier Bay or virtually anywhere else in the region. The outdoors is always close at hand in Juneau. You can start from the capitol building for a hike to the top of Mount Juneau or Mount Roberts, or up the Perseverance Trail that leads in between. Sea-kayaking and whale-watching excursions are nearby, as are some of Alaska's most scenic tide pooling and beach walking.

Downtown, the crush of visitors can be overwhelming when many cruise ships are in port at once and the streets around the docks have been entirely taken over by shops and other touristy businesses. Many of these are owned by people from outside of Alaska who come to the state for the summer to sell gifts (which are usually not made in Alaska). But only a few blocks away are quiet mountainside neighborhoods of houses with mossy roofs, and only a few blocks farther are the woods and the mountains, populated by bear, eagles, and salmon.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY AIR Jet service is available only from **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com), with several daily nonstop flights from Seattle and Anchorage and from the smaller Southeast Alaska towns. Many of the region's commuter and air-taxi operators also maintain desks at the airport and have flights out of Juneau. Among the best, with many flights to surrounding communities and an active flightseeing operation, is **Wings of Alaska** (✆ **907/789-0790;** www.wingsofalaska.com).

BY FERRY All the mainline ferries of Southeast's **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com; see p. 87 for a full description) stop at the terminal in Auke Bay (✆ **907/789-7453** or 907/465-3940 recording), 14 miles from downtown. A "day boat" ferry runs daily up the Lynn Canal to Haines and Skagway and back mid-June through August. The passenger fare is $27 to Haines, $37 to Skagway. Cabins with outside windows have been made into inexpensive private day rooms, a relaxing way to travel. If all

Tips Flying to Juneau

Don't schedule anything tightly around a flight to Juneau: The mist-shrouded airport, wedged between ocean and mountain, is tough to get into and can be a hair-raising place to land. It even has its own verb: *to overhead.* That means that when you fly to Juneau, you could end up landing somewhere else instead if the weather is too bad. The airline will put you on the next flight back to Juneau when the weather clears, but they won't pay for hotel rooms or give you a refund. Your only protection is travel insurance and a loose itinerary. This situation is such an ingrained part of Juneau's way of life that a channel on the cable TV system broadcasts the view from the airport 24 hours a day, showing the weather over the Gastineau Channel (it's called the Channel Channel, 23 on the dial). Residents know the view so well they can tell from the silent image if they'll get out that day.

goes according to plan, a new "fast ferry" shuttle will be added for the 2004 season between Juneau and Sitka, cutting the time on that run significantly; details weren't available at this writing.

GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT & FERRY TERMINAL

Privately-owned airport shuttles have been starting up and going out of business regularly for several years; at this writing, there are none, but that doesn't mean a new one won't start up by the time you arrive; ask at the visitor desk in the baggage claim area. An express **Capital Transit city bus** (✆ **907/789-6901**) comes to the airport at 11 minutes past the hour on weekdays from 7:11am to 5:11pm and costs $1.50; your luggage has to fit under your seat or at your feet. Ask the driver for the stop closest to your hotel; you may need a short cab ride from there.

At this writing, there is no public transportation at all from the ferry dock, so you have to take a cab. **Capital Cab** (✆ **907/586-2772** or 907/789-2772) offers **taxi service** (as well as tours for $55 an hr.). A cab into town from the airport will cost you $20, from the ferry dock $28.

ORIENTATION

Juneau has three main areas: downtown, the Mendenhall Valley, and Douglas. Downtown Juneau is a numbered grid of streets overlying the uneven topography like a patterned quilt over a pile of pillows. As you look at Juneau from the water, Mount Juneau is on the left and Mount Roberts on the right; Mount Roberts is a few hundred feet taller, at 3,819 feet. **Franklin Street** extends south of town 5½ miles to good hiking trails and the hamlet of Thane. When the city outgrew its original site downtown, housing spread to the suburban **Mendenhall Valley,** about a dozen miles north on the Egan Expressway or the parallel, two-lane Glacier Highway. The glacial valley also contains the Juneau International Airport, University of Alaska Southeast, and **Auke Bay** area, where the ferry terminal is located. The road continues 40 miles to a place known as **"The End of the Road."** Across a bridge, over the Gastineau Channel from downtown Juneau, is Douglas Island. Turn left for the town of **Douglas,** mostly a bedroom community for Juneau, and turn right for the North Douglas Highway, which leads to the ski area and some beautiful rocky beaches.

GETTING AROUND

BY RENTAL CAR A car is a hindrance in compact downtown Juneau, but if you're going to the Mendenhall Glacier or to any of the attractions on the road or on Douglas Island, renting a car for a day or two is a good idea. Hertz, Avis, Budget, and National are based at the airport.

BY BIKE If you can handle hills, bikes make good sense in Juneau, where separated paths parallel many of the main roads and downtown traffic is slow. The 24-mile round-trip to Mendenhall Glacier keeps you on a bike path almost all the way. Bikes are for rent at the **Driftwood Lodge,** 435 Willoughby Ave. (✆ **800/544-2239** or 907/586-2280l; www.driftwoodalaska.com) for $25 a day, $15 ½ day.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Visitor Information Center** is in the Centennial Hall at 101 Egan Dr., near the State Museum (✆ **888/581-2201** or 907/586-2201; fax 907/586-6304; www.traveljuneau.com). Operated by the Juneau Convention and Visitors Bureau, the center distributes a *Juneau Travel Planner,* online or on paper, that contains exhaustive listings of hotels and B&Bs, charter boats, tours, and other services, including objective information such as rates that booster organizations usually don't publish. The center is open in summer Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm, and Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 5pm; in winter Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm. During the summer, volunteers also staff a **visitor information desk** at the airport, near the door in the baggage-claim area.

The **Tongass National Forest Juneau Ranger District** is near the airport at 8465 Old Dairy Rd., Juneau, AK 99801 (✆ 907/586-8800, TTY 907/790-7444; fax 907/586-8808; www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass).

FAST FACTS: Juneau

Banks **Wells Fargo,** at 123 Seward St. (✆ 907/586-3324), is one of the many banks and stores that have ATMs.

Hospital **Bartlett Regional,** at 3260 Hospital Dr. (✆ **907/796-8900**), is 3 miles out on the Glacier Highway.

Internet Access **Uncle Arty's,** 493 S. Franklin St., second floor (✆ **907/463-2543**), is open summer daily from 8am to 11pm.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. The station is at 6255 Alaway Ave. (✆ **907/586-0600** for nonemergencies).

Post Office Downtown in the federal building, 709 W. 9th St.; and in the Mendenhall Valley at 9491 Vintage Blvd., by Carr's supermarket. A postal contract station handy to the cruise ship dock is at 127 S. Franklin St.

Taxes Sales tax is 5%. You pay 12% tax on rooms.

SPECIAL EVENTS

An exhaustive event calendar is posted on the visitors' bureau website: www.travel juneau.com/discover.

The Alaska Folk Festival (✆ **907/463-3316;** www.alaskafolkfestival.org) is the state's biggest annual gathering of musicians, at Centennial Hall, from April 12 to 18 in 2004.

The Juneau Jazz and Classics Festival (✆ **907/463-3378;** www.jazzandclassics.org), from May 21 to 29, 2004, includes concerts in many styles of music at various venues, even on a boat, and at many prices—free to $50 a ticket.

Celebration (✆ **907/463-4844**) is a huge Alaska Native dance and cultural gathering, with arts and crafts sales, happening only every other year. The next meeting is June 3 to 5, 2004. **Gold Rush Days** (✆ **907/780-6075;** Goldrush@alaska.com) includes logging and mining events and competitions that anyone can join It will be held on June 26 and 27 in 2004.

The Golden North Salmon Derby (✆ **907/463-3830;** www.salmonderby.org), held annually since 1947, targets kings and silvers over a weekend in late August. Unlike some other such fishing contests around the state, this isn't just a tourist thing—everyone in town comes to watch and it's even covered live on the radio.

EXPLORING DOWNTOWN

Alaska-Gastineau Mill and Gold Mine Tour ★ A ½-day tour visits the ruins of a hard rock gold operation that functioned from 1915 to 1921, then goes 360 feet into one of the tunnels for a mining demonstration. Although Princess Tours provides the buses and sells the tickets, the tour is the work of people who came to Juneau to reopen the A.J. mine (of which this was a part), and stayed to turn it into a tourist attraction when that project failed; their fascination and enthusiasm for the mine is infectious. The mine site is south of town, but buses pick visitors up at the state museum downtown. The tour is quite in-depth; those without interest in mining history or mechanical matters may get bored. Dress warmly.

Book though Princess Tours, 151 Mill St. ✆ **907/463-3900.** $59 adults, $39 children. Daily departures during summer; call ahead to reserve.

Alaska State Museum ★★★ The museum contains a large collection of art and historical artifacts, but it doesn't seem overwhelming at all because the objects' presentation is based on their meaning, making the exhibits very accessible. Come here to put the rest of your visit into context. A clan house in the Alaska Native Gallery contains authentic art in the functional places where you would really find it. The Lincoln Pole is here, carved by an artist who used a picture of the president as his model to represent his clan's first encounter with whites. Native cultures from around the state contributed superb artifacts, presented to illustrate the lifestyle of those who made them. The ramp to the second floor wraps around the

Tips Where Do You Get Off: Disembarking from the Cruise Ships

Cruise-ship passengers disembark in Juneau's attractive **Marine Park** waterfront area, where a kiosk dispenses information and tour operators sell their services. Downtown shops and attractions are close by. Among the most popular sights is one right at the dock, the statue of a small dog facing the ships as they come in. This is ***Patsy Ann,*** a bull terrier that, in the 1930s, always seemed to know when a steamer was arriving and faithfully stationed herself on the dock to meet the disembarking passengers. For a quiet break, visit the beautiful library at the top of the parking garage at the south end of the dock.

natural history display, and at the top, a state history gallery uses significant art and artifacts to tell Alaska's story. The children's area is among the best we've seen, with a ship that kids can play in—I just about needed a crowbar to get my son out. The gift store carries authentic Native arts and crafts, plus books, maps, and so on.

395 Whittier St. ✆ **907/465-2901.** www.museums.state.ak.us. Admission mid-May–mid-Sept $5 adults, free for ages 18 and under; mid-Sept–mid-May $3 adults, free for ages 18 and under. Mid-May–mid-Sept daily 8:30am–5:30pm; mid-Sept–mid-May Tues–Sat 10am–4pm.

The Juneau-Douglas City Museum ★ This fun little museum, with gorgeous stained-glass windows, displays artifacts and photographs from the city's pioneer and mining days, plus exhibits on Tlingit culture. Special exhibits change annually. A 26-minute video on Juneau's gold mining history is played every ½ hour. The tiny bookshop is stocked with handy information for your visit to Juneau, including the historic hike guide booklet, a free historic walking-tour map, and maps of the Evergreen Cemetery and the old Treadwell Mine. The plaza in front is where the 49-star U.S. flag was first raised in 1959—they didn't make many of those, as Hawaii was admitted as the 50th within a year, but you'll still find one flying here.

At the corner of 4th and Main sts. ✆ **907/586-3572.** www.juneau.org/parksrec/museum. Admission $3 adults ($2 in winter), free for ages 18 and under. Summer Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat–Sun 10am–5pm. Winter Tues–Sat noon–4pm.

The Last Chance Mining Museum ★ *Finds* This museum preserves old mining buildings on forested Gold Creek, complete with some of their original equipment, including an immense 1912 air compressor and a layered glass map of the tunnels. This was once a nerve center for one of the world's biggest hard-rock mines. The highlight is its energetic and learned guide, Renee Hughes, who lives above the compressor with her husband Gary Gillette, who is a fellow leader of the Gastineau Channel Historical Society. Ask her about the cave-in of the Treadwell Mine to hear her riveting storytelling.

1001 Basin Rd. (From downtown, take Gold St. up the hill to it's end, then turn left onto Basin Rd., continuing 1½ miles up the valley to the end of the road.) ✆ **907/586-5338.** Admission $4. Daily 9:30am–12:30pm and 3:30–6:30pm. Closed Oct–mid-May.

Mount Roberts Tramway ★ The tram takes only 6 minutes to whisk passengers from tourist-clogged Franklin Street to the clear air and overwhelming views at the tree line (1,760 ft.), a destination that used to require a day of huffing and puffing to witness. The tram can be crowded; it's once you're up there that the beauty hits you. The Alaska Native owners seem to understand that, and they have done a good job of building a network of paths that take advantage of the views as you pass through a fascinating alpine ecosystem. Check out the artwork that the owners have carved into the living trunks of some of the trees. If you're energetic, you can start a strenuous 6-mile round-trip hike to Mount Roberts's summit (at 3,819 ft.), or you can hike the 2½ miles back to downtown. There's an auditorium at the top tram station showing a film on Tlingit culture, plus a multimedia performance on wildlife. A bar and grill serves lunch and dinner, but the food and service have been poor. Don't bother with the tram on a day of fog or low overcast—it's not worth the money without the view.

490 S. Franklin St., at the waterfront near the cruise-ship dock. ✆ **888/461-8726** or 907/463-3412. www.goldbelttours.com. Full-day pass $22 adults, $13 children 12 and under, tax included. Mar–Nov daily 9am–9pm. Closed Oct–Apr.

A JUNEAU WALKING TOUR

Start & Finish: Alaska State Capitol, 4th and Seward streets.

Time: 1 to 1½ hours for standard tour; 2½ hours for the extended tour, with minimal stops.

❶ The Alaska State Capitol

This structure fills the block between 4th and 5th and Main and Seward streets. Except for the marble portico on the 4th Street side, it is a non-descript brick box, probably the least impressive state capitol in the most beautiful setting in the nation. The federal government built the structure in 1931, when Alaska was still a territory. Inside, some of the old-fashioned woodwork and decorative details are interesting, and the building is mostly without security to block your wanderings. During the summer, free tours start every ½ hour Monday through Friday from 9am to 4:30pm; other times, pick up a self-guided tour brochure in the lobby. Call ✆ **907/465-3800** for information. The legislature is in session from January to early May.

Across 4th is the:

❷ State Courthouse

The statue of a bear in front defines Alaskan taste in art: It replaced a hated abstract steel sculpture called *Nimbus* that was removed by an act of the legislature and that finally came to rest in front of the state museum a few blocks away.

On the opposite, northwest corner is the:

❸ Juneau-Douglas City Museum

Stop in here now to buy the Evergreen Cemetery map if you plan to include a visit to the cemetery in your walk, or get the *Historic Downtown Juneau Guide* for added information about the points of interest on your walk.

On the southwest corner of Main and 4th is the:

❹ State Office Building

This building is built into the edge of a cliff that forms a major barrier through the downtown area; if you're headed for the lower land, where the State Museum and Centennial Hall are located, you can avoid eight flights of steps in between by taking the building's elevator down. In any event, visit the towering atrium, with its great views and a 1928 movie theater pipe organ that's played on Fridays at noon. The state library historical collections off the lobby contain historic photographs and artifacts, some of which are often on exhibit. On sunny days, the patio off the atrium is a great place for a picnic, with a fabulous view.

Leaving out the door that you entered through, turn left and follow Calhoun Street around the curve. An outdoor staircase here leads down to the flat area of town below (but you can also take the elevator). Originally, the lowlands were mostly underwater and this embankment stood just above the shoreline, which continued along Front and South Franklin streets. The land you see below you is made up of mine tailings that were dumped in the Channel.

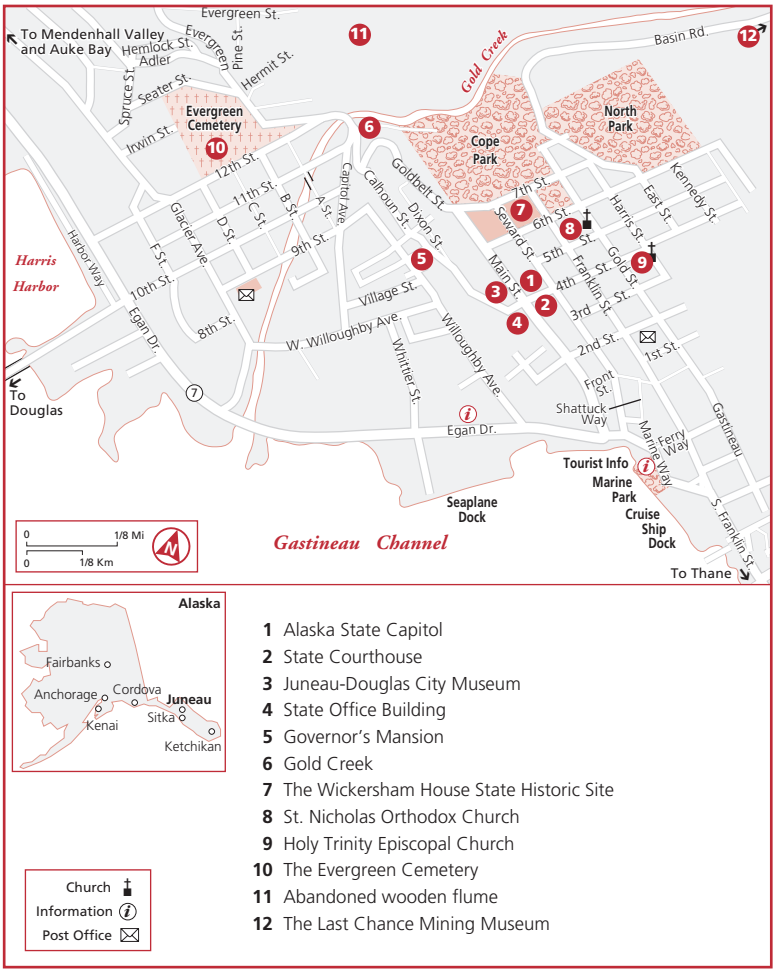
Continue on Calhoun; the governor uses the public pedestrian overpass (which we walk under) to cross Calhoun to get to the Capitol from the white, neoclassical:

❺ Governor's Mansion

Located on the left, the mansion was built by the federal government in 1912 for $40,000. It isn't normally open for public tours. Gov. Frank Murkowski, a Republican, became the eighth to hold the office when he was sworn in on December 2, 2002, returning from 22 years as a U.S. Senator.

Shortcut: If you don't mind missing the next stop (Gold Creek), you can save yourself some hill-climbing by continuing on Calhoun, turning

Downtown Juneau Walking Tour



Church
Information
Post Office

1. Alaska State Capitol
2. State Courthouse
3. Juneau-Douglas City Museum
4. State Office Building
5. Governor's Mansion
6. Gold Creek
7. The Wickersham House State Historic Site
8. St. Nicholas Orthodox Church
9. Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
10. The Evergreen Cemetery
11. Abandoned wooden flume
12. The Last Chance Mining Museum

right on Goldbelt Street, climbing past some beautiful houses to 7th, then picking up the tour at the Wickersham House.

Continuing down Calhoun, you'll come to:

6 Gold Creek

Juneau's founders made their gold strike in this stream in 1880. Trace it upstream through peaceful **Cope Park,** past the playground and tennis courts to the unique ballfield, which is bounded by the stream's forested canyon walls. (To continue this walk to Evergreen Cemetery and up to the top of the town and through the woods on the flume—a long, strenuous walk—return to Calhoun Street and continue in the direction you were going. This detour is covered below under "The Extended Walk.") At the end of the baseball diamond's left field line is a lovely path and public stairway through the woods up to 7th Street. Seventh runs along a narrow ridge between downtown Juneau and the creek.

Across the street from the top of the stairway is:

❼ The Wickersham House State Historic Site

This white, 1898 frame house, at 213 7th St. (✆ **907/586-9001;** www.alaskastateparks.org, click "Individual Parks"), was the retirement home of Judge James Wickersham, who was revered by Alaskans for bringing law to the gold rush in Eagle, Nome, and Fairbanks; for exploring the Denali area and helping to make it a national park; for convincing the federal government to build the Alaska railroad and found the state university; and for winning Alaska's right to make its own laws when he represented the territory in Congress. The house was in the family from 1928 until the state bought it in 1984, so it still contains Wickersham's belongings, including an Edison cylinder gramophone he took to Fairbanks, and his assignment to go to Alaska, which is signed by Theodore Roosevelt. The house badly needs work, but the short tour is charming. A live-in guide requests a $2 donation. It is open from mid-May to the end of September from 10am to noon and 1 to 5pm, winter by appointment. You can learn more about the house and about Wickersham at the website above.

Continue on 7th to Gold Street, turn right and follow Gold Street downhill to 5th, site of the:

❽ St. Nicholas Orthodox Church

This small structure is a significant architectural and historic landmark. The octagonal chapel was built in 1893–94 by Slavic miners and Tlingits. Many Tlingits chose the Russian Orthodox faith in the late 19th century when government-sponsored Protestant missionaries arrived with authority to force Christianity on Alaska Natives. The Protestants' "civilizing" program entailed wiping out Native languages and culture, but the Russian Orthodox faith allowed Tlingits to worship in their own language and to practice more of their own customs. Bishop Innocent Veniaminov (p. 133) had translated sacred texts into Tlingit 50 years earlier when the Russians were still in Sitka. Today, Alaska Natives make up the bulk of Russian Orthodox congregations in Alaska, and St. Nicholas still has an active Tlingit parish. Lengthy services are sung in English, Tlingit, and Slavic for Saturday vespers at 6pm and on Sunday morning at 9am; the congregation stands throughout the service. Otherwise, the church is open for visitors during the summer Monday through Saturday from 9am to 5pm, Sunday noon to 5pm. A $2 donation is requested.

One block down, on Gold and 4th, is:

❾ Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

This church is worth a stop to explore its peaceful turn-of-the-20th-century sanctuary of dark wood under a steeply pitched roof; it's unlocked all day. The church was built in 1896 by Alaska's first Episcopal bishop, when he established the first Episcopal mission in Juneau. A little-known piece of church history: As an undersize acolyte at age 8, I almost smashed the stained glass in the back of the church when I lost control of the heavy crucifix and had to run down the aisle to keep up with it.

Turn right and walk 2 blocks to the start/finish point.

THE EXTENDED WALK

This walk of roughly 3 miles includes some steep stairways and streets. Follow the walking tour until you reach Gold Creek (see number 6, above).

Cross the creek and stay on the same road (which goes under various names), bearing right as it becomes Martin Street. On the left is:

❿ The Evergreen Cemetery

The cemetery slopes toward the ocean, offering a wonderful vista over the clear green lawn. One reason that the land is so broad and open is that the markers

are flush with the ground. The old Alaska Native graves are located in the wooded area on the far side of the cemetery. Joe Juneau and Richard Harris, the city's founders, are buried near the cross at the top of the cemetery, where you entered.

Across the road from the cross, Hermit Street reaches a little way into the mountainside. Follow the steep public stairs next to house no. 430 up to the bottom of Pine Street. This is the walk I described in the introduction. The views get better and better as you rise to the top of Pine Street, then go right on Evergreen Street, following the road to where it turns into a trail among shadowy spruce and western hemlock.

Continue on the peaceful forest trail among the ferns and evergreens up the valley, coming to the:

⓫ Abandoned wooden flume

Once the town's aqueduct, the flume is now maintained as a boardwalk into the forest. Since it carried water, it's nearly level, but watch your step in wet weather, as it crosses some high trestles over gullies.

At the end of the flume, cross over the valley to Basin Road. Stop here to see:

⓬ The Last Chance Mining Museum

The museum is described on p. 147.

To the left is the Perseverance Trail, described below, which continues up between the mountains. Also to the left is a trailhead for a challenging hike up Mount Juneau (both hikes are covered later).

To get back to town, follow Basin Road 1½ miles back down the valley. Taking the first right will put you at the top of Gold Street. Descend a block to 7th and pick up the walking tour at stop seven (the Wickersham House is a block down 7th) or continue down Gold to St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, stop eight on the tour.

SHOPPING

The shops near the dock cater primarily to cruise-ship passengers. After the last of more than 500 cruises over the course of a summer sails away, many shops close their doors. The year-round community and more local shops tend to be farther up the hill. If you're looking for authentic Alaska Native arts and crafts, be warned that counterfeiting is widespread. For buying tips, read "Native Art: Finding the Real Thing" in chapter 2.

The Raven's Journey, 439 S. Franklin (✆ **907/463-4686**), offers Tlingit and other Northwest Indian carvings and masks, plus whalebone, ivory, and fossil ivory carvings and jewelry from the Yupik and Inupiat of western and northern Alaska. Works are displayed with placards containing the biographies of the artists.

Juneau Artists Gallery, in the Senate Building at 175 S. Franklin (✆ **907/586-9891**), is staffed by a co-op of local artists and displays their work—good and inexpensive paintings, etchings, photography, jewelry, fabrics, and ceramics.

Rie Muñoz is one of Juneau's best-known artists, producing simple, graphic, generally cheerful watercolors of coastal Alaskan communities and Native people. Her prints and tapestries are shown downtown at the **Decker Gallery,** 233 S. Franklin (✆ **907/463-5536**), and in the Mendenhall Valley at the **Rie Muñoz Gallery,** at 2101 Jordan Ave. (✆ **800/247-3151** or 907/789-7449; www.riemunoz.com).

For gifts, try **Annie Kaill's** fine arts and crafts gallery at 244 Front St. It's located a little out of the cruise-ship shopping area and gets business from locals. The shop has a rich, full, homey feeling, with local work at various price levels. The long-established **Ad Lib,** at 231 S. Franklin St., is reliable and oriented to items made in Alaska.

Galligaskins, 219 S. Franklin St. (www.galligaskins.com), features clothing with Alaska-themed designs.

Hearthside Books (www.hearthsidebooks.com) is a cubbyhole of a bookstore at the corner of Franklin and Front streets, but has a good selection for its size, especially of Alaskan books. (Their much larger branch is in the Mendenhall Valley's Nugget Mall, at 8745 Glacier Hwy.)

The Observatory, at 200 N. Franklin St. (✆ **907/586-9676;** www.observatorybooks.com), specializes in rare maps and books about Alaska, and is owned by a real expert, a member of the Royal Geographical Society.

Bill Spear sells his own brightly colored enamel pins and zipper pulls from his studio upstairs at 174 S. Franklin (✆ **907/586-2209;** www.wmspear.com). Alaskans collect the vividly executed fish, birds, airplanes, dinosaurs, vegetables, and other witty, provocative, and beautiful pins, which cost from $4 to $20 each.

Taku Smokeries, at 550 S. Franklin, across the parking lot from the tram station (✆ **800/582-5122** or 907/463-3474; www.takusmokeries.com), is worth a stop even if you're not in the market for the pricey delicacies sold here: It's interesting to watch workers fillet, smoke, and pack salmon through large windows, and to read the explanatory signs about what they're doing. They'll ship the smoked fish anywhere in the U.S.

ATTRACTIONS BEYOND WALKING DISTANCE

Mendenhall Glacier Transport (✆ **907/789-5460;** www.mightygreattrips.com) does a 2½-hour town and Mendenhall Glacier tour for $24. Otherwise, take a rented car or, for vigorous people, bike 24 miles out to the Mendenhall Glacier and back. I've listed these sites by distance from downtown Juneau. The directions are from a starting point in downtown.

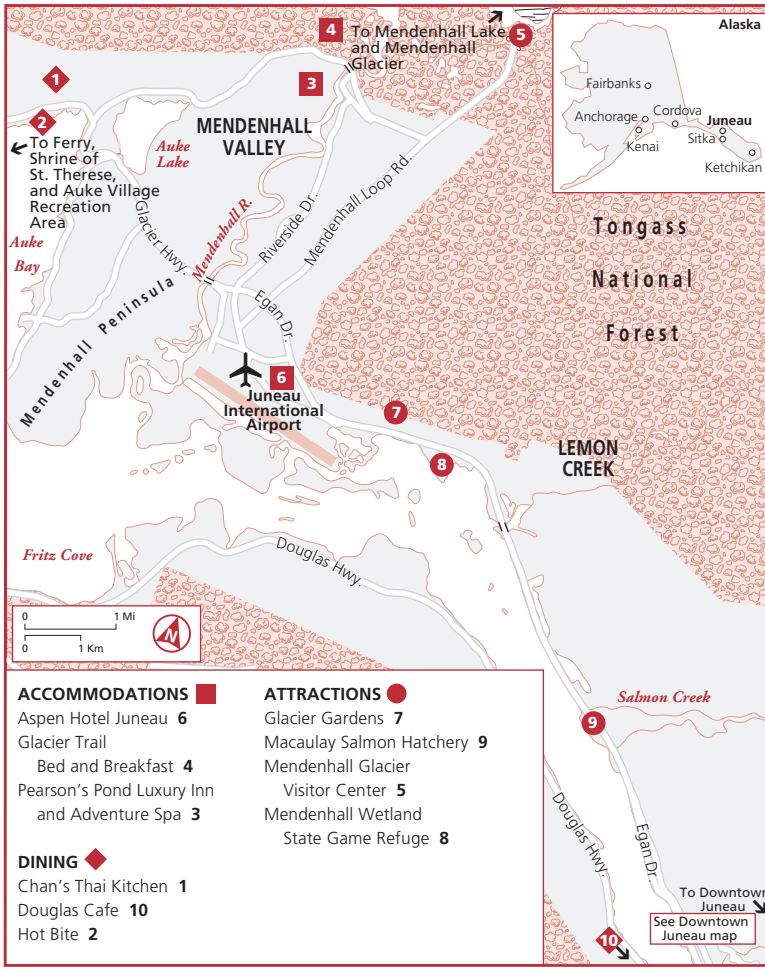
Alaskan Brewing Company Beer lovers and aspiring capitalists will enjoy the tour of Alaska's most popular craft brewery. Now too big to be called "micro," the brewery started small in 1986 when Geoff and Marcy Larson had the idea of bringing a local gold rush–era brew back to life. It worked, and now Alaskan Amber and several other brews are everywhere in Alaska and in much of the Northwest, and the brewery has won a long list of national and international awards for its brews. The short, free tour, which starts every ½ hour, includes a tasting of half a dozen beers.

5429 Shaune Dr. ✆ **907/780-5866.** www.alaskanbeer.com. May–Sept daily 11am–4:30pm; Oct–Apr Thurs–Sat 11am–4pm. Turn right from Egan Dr. on Vanderbilt Hill Rd., which becomes Glacier Hwy., then right on Anka St., and right again on Shaune Dr.

Glacier Gardens This is the place to see the rainforest if you have mobility problems. The heart of the hour-long tour is a ride in vehicles similar to golf carts up a steep mountainside, past a stream and pools, to a platform with a view of the Gastineau Channel. If you're planning a hike in the area, the ride will hold less interest. Gardeners will especially enjoy the extraordinary hanging baskets and other bright and ingenious plantings in the lower area. Regardless of the beauty, I think the admission price is too high.

7600 Glacier Hwy. (near the Fred Meyer store about 1 mile from the airport). ✆ **907/790-3377.** www.glaciergardens.com. Admission $18 adults, $13 ages 6–12. Summer daily 9am–6pm. Closed Oct–Apr.

Macaulay Salmon Hatchery ★ The hatchery, known by locals as DIPAC (Douglas Island Pink and Chum, Inc.), was ingeniously designed to allow visitors to watch the whole process of harvesting and fertilizing eggs from outdoor



decks. From mid-June to October, salmon swim up a 450-foot fish ladder, visible through a window, into a sorting mechanism, then are "unzipped" by workers who remove the eggs. Guides and exhibits explain what's happening. From mid-June to October, you can often see seals and other wildlife feeding on the returning salmon just offshore from the hatchery. Inside, large saltwater aquariums show off the area's marine life as it looks in the natural environment. The tour is less impressive in May and June, before the fish are running. If you come during these months you will get to see the immature salmon before their release and you might even get to feed them. The tours don't take long; allow 45 minutes for your entire visit.

2697 Channel Dr. (3 miles from downtown, turn left at the first group of buildings on Egan Dr.). ✆ **877/463-2486** or 907/463-4810. www.dipac.net. Admission $3 adults, $1.50 children ages 12 and under. Summer Mon–Fri 10am–6pm, Sat–Sun 10am–5pm. Off season call ahead.

Mendenhall Glacier ★★ At the head of Mendenhall Valley, the Mendenhall Glacier glows bluish white, looming above the suburbs like an Ice Age monster that missed extinction. Besides being a truly impressive sight, Mendenhall is the most easily accessible glacier in Alaska and the state's third most visited attraction. The parking and an adjacent shelter have a great view across the lake to the glacier's face, and a wheelchair-accessible trail leads to the water's edge. The land near the parking lot shows signs of the glacier's recent passage, with little topsoil, stunted vegetation, and, in many places, bare rock that shows the scratch marks of the glacier's movement. Atop a bedrock hill reached by stairs, a ramp, or an elevator, the recently remodeled Forest Service visitor center contains a glacier museum with excellent explanatory models, computerized displays, and ranger talks. Admission is $3 for adults, free for children under 12. In late summer, you can watch red and silver salmon spawning in **Steep Creek,** just short of the visitor center on the road.

There are several trails at the glacier, ranging from a ½-mile nature trail loop to two fairly steep 3½-mile hikes approaching each side of the glacier. At the visitor center and a booth near the parking lot, the Forest Service distributes a brochure, "Mendenhall Glacier: Carver of a Landscape," which includes a trail map. The **East Glacier Loop Trail** is a beautiful day hike leading through the forest to a waterfall near the glacier's face and parts of an abandoned rail tram and an abandoned dam on Nugget Creek; the trail has steep parts but is doable for school-age children. You can park at the visitor center and start from there. The **West Glacier Trail** is more challenging, leaving from 300 yards beyond the Skater's Cabin and following the edge of the lake and glacier, providing access to the ice itself for experienced climbers with the right equipment. You will probably want to drive to the trailhead. Take the Mendenhall Loop Road to Montana Creek Road, turn right, and then turn right again on Skater's Cabin Road.

The Skater's Cabin is also the starting point for a groomed cross-country-ski loop on Mendenhall Lake in front of the glacier. Don't go beyond the orange safety markers near the glacier's face. Other trails weave through the pothole lakes across from the glacier.

At the head of Glacier Spur Rd. (right from Egan Dr. on Mendenhall Loop to Glacier Spur). Visitor center (✆ **907/789-0097**) open daily in summer 8am–6pm; winter Thurs–Fri 10am–4pm, Sat–Sun 9am–4pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO "OUT THE ROAD"

On sunny summer weekends, Juneau families get in the car and drive "out the road" (northwest along the Glacier Hwy., as it's officially known). The views of island-stippled water from the paved two-lane highway are incredible, plus there are several good places to stop. To use this road guide, set your trip odometer to zero at the Juneau ferry dock (which is 14 miles from downtown Juneau on the main highway).

The **Auke Village Recreation Area** is a mile beyond the ferry dock and is a good place for picnics and beach walks. Less than a mile farther is a Forest Service campground.

The Shrine of St. Therese ★ (✆ **907/780-6112;** www.shrineofsainttherese.org), 9 miles beyond the ferry dock, stands on a tiny island reached by a foot-trail causeway. The wonderfully simple chapel of rounded beach stones, circled by markers of the 15 stations of the cross, stands peaceful and mysterious amid trees, rock, water, and the cries of the raven. It is the most spiritual place I know. The vaguely Gothic structure was built in the 1930s of stone picked up from these shores and dedicated by Alaska's first Catholic bishop to St. Therese of

Lisieux, who died in 1897 at the age of 24. The website contains a complete history. Liturgy services are held from June to September at 1:30pm. The Juneau Catholic Diocese maintains a log retreat hall on the shore facing the island, as well as several cabins for rent for lodging. The shrine's island is a good vantage from which to look for marine mammals at **Lynn Canal,** or, at low tide, to go tide pooling among the rocks.

Eagle Beach, 14 miles beyond the ferry dock, makes a good picnic area in nice weather, when you can walk among the tall beach grass or out on the sandy tidal flats to look for eagles, or go north along the beach to look for fossils in the rock outcroppings.

The road turns to gravel, then comes to **Point Bridget State Park,** 24 miles beyond the ferry dock (✆ **907/465-4563;** www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks"). A flat 3½-mile path leads through forest, meadow, and marsh to the shore, where you may see sea lions and possibly humpback whales. Two public-use cabins rent for $35 a night. See "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in chapter 7. The road ends 26 miles from the ferry dock at pretty **Echo Cove.**

GETTING OUTSIDE: ONSHORE

BIRD-WATCHING Bald eagles are more common than pigeons in Juneau. Years ago, one of them made off with a tourist's Chihuahua, starting a statewide debate about whether it was funny or horrible. Eagles are most common on the shoreline, especially where fish are plentiful, such as at the hatchery. For more variety, visit the **Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge,** which encompasses 4,000 acres of tidal estuaries in the Gastineau Channel near the airport. Some 140 species of birds use the refuge, mainly during the April and May migrations. Access points are on either side of the channel, including a viewing platform on the downtown-bound side of Egan Drive, at mile six.

FRESHWATER FISHING Juneau isn't known particularly for its stream fishing, but there are a few places on the roads where you can put in a line. The advice you need is in a free printed sportfishing guide called the **Juneau Sportfishing Guide** available from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 802 3rd St. (P.O. Box 240020), Douglas, AK 99824 (✆ **907/465-4270;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click on "Sport Fish," then "Region 1").

For a remote fly-in experience with fly or spinning gear, contact **Alaska Fly 'N' Fish Charters,** 9604 Kelly Court (✆ **907/790-2120;** www.alaskabyair.com). A guided 4½-hour trip is $400 per person, with a two-person minimum. The same reputable guy (Butch Laughlin) also does flightseeing and bear viewing flights.

HIKING I've mentioned several good hikes at Mendenhall Glacier and out the road, above. ***In the Miner's Footsteps,*** a guide to the history behind 14 Juneau trails, is available for $3.50 from the Juneau–Douglas City Museum. The Juneau city **Department of Parks and Recreation** (✆ **907/586-5226;** www.juneau.org/parksrec) leads hikes (and other activities) through the year; check the website or call the 24-hour hike line at ✆ **907/586-0428.**

The **Perseverance Trail** climbs up the valley behind Juneau and into an old mining area. It can be busy in summer. The trailhead is about 1½ miles from town on Basin Road. The trail is 4 miles of easy walking on the mountainside above Gold Creek to the Perseverance Mine, at the Silverbow Basin, a mining community from 1885 to 1921. Use caution on icy patches, as there are steep drop-offs. A well-documented $1 historic guide is for sale at the Juneau–Douglas City Museum.

Tips Gearing Up for Juneau's Outdoors

You can rent the gear you need for outings on the water or for Forest Service cabin visits from **Alaska Boat and Kayak,** at the Auke Bay Harbor (✆ **907/586-8220** or 907/789-6886; www.juneaukayak.com). They rent sea kayaks, camping gear, and skiffs with outboard motors that you can use for fishing or exploring, and they offer guidance in planning where and how to go. See "Getting Around," above, for bike rentals.

Two trails start from points along the Perseverance Trail. The challenging **Mount Juneau Trail** rises more than 3,500 feet in about 2 miles from a point 1 mile along from the Perseverance trailhead. Go only in dry weather to avoid disastrous falls. The **Granite Creek Trail,** starting 2 miles in on the Perseverance Trail, climbs 1,200 feet over 1½ miles to an alpine basin. Both are quieter than the Perseverance Trail.

Another hike right from downtown climbs **Mount Roberts**—just follow the stairway from the top of 6th Street in a neighborhood called Star Hill. The summit is 4½ miles and 3,819 vertical feet away, but you don't have to go all the way to the top for incredible views and alpine terrain. At the 1,760-foot level, you come to the restaurant at the top of the Mount Roberts tram, mentioned on p. 147. Of course, it's easier to take the tram up and hike down, or start from the tram stop to hike to the summit.

The **Treadwell Mine Historic Trail,** on Douglas Island, is a fascinating hour's stroll through the ruins of a massive hard-rock mine complex that once employed and housed 2,000 men. Since its abandonment in 1922 big trees have grown up through the foundations, intertwining their roots through rails and machinery and adding to the site's exceptional power over the imagination. A well-written guide to numbered posts on the trail is available from the Juneau–Douglas City Museum. This is a great hike for kids. To find the trailhead, take 3rd Street in Douglas, bearing left at the Y onto Savikko Street, which leads to Savikko Park, also known as Sandy Beach Park. The trail starts at the far end of the park.

Another great family outing is to the **Outer Point Trail,** 1⅓ miles on a forest boardwalk to a beach with good tide pooling, lots of eagles, and possible whale sightings. No other place I know has such a variety of lovely spots in such a short walk: the mossy rainforest, the stunted muskeg swamp, a glassy little creek, and the pebbled beach and bedrock ocean pools. From the beach at the end of the trail, on the western point of Douglas Island—the opposite side from Juneau—you can see Auke Bay to the east, Admiralty Island to the west, and the tiny islands of Stephens Passage before you. The only drawback is crowding on the trail, especially when tour groups tromp through; avoid them by going early or late. To get there, drive over the bridge to Douglas, then right on North Douglas Highway 11½ miles to the trailhead.

RAFTING The Mendenhall River isn't a wild or scary ride, so the guides on the Native-owned **Auk Ta Shaa Discovery,** 76 Egan Dr. (✆ **800/820-2628** or 907/586-8687; www.goldbelttours.com), offer commentary on Native legends and natural history. The 4-hour rides cost $98 for adults, $66 ages 16 and under (no kids under 70 lb. allowed). Transportation from downtown is included in the price, but rafting in Juneau is still a bit expensive compared to rafting at other Alaska destinations.

Finds Remote Cabins on Foot

Five U.S. Forest Service cabins and two Alaska State Parks cabins are accessible by hikes of less than a day on trails connected to Juneau's road system. That means that you can get to these cabins without an expensive plane or boat charter, and that's a rarity. The two Alaska State Parks cabins are at Point Bridget State Park (see "What to See & Do Out the Road," above). The Forest Service cabins include: **Peterson Lake,** with lake and stream fishing for Dolly Varden char and cutthroat trout; **John Muir,** on a 1,500-foot ridge top above Auke Bay, up the Auk Nu Trail; **Dan Moller,** on Douglas Island right across from town; **Eagle Glacier,** overlooking the glacier upriver from Eagle Beach and reached by the Amalga Trail; and beautiful **Windfall Lake,** with fishing. Each cabin rents for $35 a night, and generally there's a 2-night maximum stay. All are popular and must be reserved well in advance. If you can afford a charter, or if you are an expert sea kayaker, there are many more choices farther afield, especially on Admiralty Island (see below). You'll need camping gear to stay at these primitive cabins (see "Gearing Up for Juneau's Outdoors," above). Get information on cabins from the Ranger District (see "Visitor Information," earlier), then reserve through the national system described in "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest" in section 1 of this chapter.

SKIING For **downhill skiing,** the city-owned **Eaglecrest Ski Area** (✆ **907/790-2000;** www.juneau.org/eaglecrest) is the large, steep home hill of Olympic silver medalist Hillary Lindh, Juneau's favorite daughter (her father helped choose the site in the 1970s). A chair goes almost to the top of Douglas Island, with expansive views and 640 acres of skiing terrain. There are 31 runs with a total vertical drop of 1,400 feet, rated 40% expert, 40% intermediate, and 20% novice. It's only 12 miles from downtown on North Douglas Highway. An all-day lift ticket is $26 for adults. Eaglecrest is a hidden treasure: It's the second best ski resort in the state (after Alyeska Resort near Anchorage), yet few people know about it outside of Juneau.

There are 5 miles of **cross-country-skiing** trail at Eaglecrest. Juneau's warm, damp winters don't always provide enough snow for good cross-country skiing at the lower elevations, but many of the hiking trails into the mountains become winter backcountry routes, and snow does stick up there. Before going out, always check with the Forest Service (see "Visitor Information," earlier) for advice on your route and on avalanche conditions. Several of the Forest Service cabins also serve as winter warm-up houses during the day, and make good skiing destinations. If conditions permit, a network of trails is set around the Mendenhall Glacier (see above).

GETTING OUTSIDE: ON THE WATER

SEA KAYAKING The protected waters around Juneau are ideal for sea kayaking, and the city is a popular hub for long trips on the water. Besides the sublime scenery, you'll almost certainly see eagles, sea birds, and seals, and possibly humpback whales.

There are at least five operators offering sea-kayaking excursions, but the area's most established eco-tourism operator is **Alaska Discovery,** 5310 Glacier Hwy. (✆ **800/586-1911** or 907/780-6226; www.akdiscovery.com), with trips all over Southeast and beyond. Part of the company's ethic and reason for being is to build support for protecting Southeast's wild places. A multiday kayak trip is your chance to really get to know the Alaska wilderness. Alaska Discovery will even custom-design a trip for your group. If you haven't spent much time in the outdoors but would like to see real Alaska wilderness, I couldn't recommend a better introductory trip than the Coastal Escape, a 3-day, 2-night camping trip to Berner's Bay, on Lynn Canal, north of the end of the road. Besides paddling, groups spend plenty of time exploring the beaches and rainforest shorelines. Fit beginners will do fine, with teens as young as 14 normally invited; some trips may include kids as young as 10. No whiners, however: There's a good chance of rain, you'll sleep in a two-person tent, and paddling is work. The cost is $495 to $595 per person. Alaska Discovery's other trips range up to 12 days and go to some truly incredible places, including Glacier Bay National Park (see section 8 of this chapter); they're best for those with some sea-kayaking experience.

If you don't have that kind of time, **Alaska Travel Adventures** (✆ **800/791-2673** outside Alaska or 907/789-0052; www.alaskaadventures.com), offers 4-hour kayak trips from an unspoiled spot out the road for $80. The tour includes orientation for beginners, transportation from downtown and a lunch snack.

A business that rents kayaks is listed under "Gearing Up for Juneau's Outdoors" (p. 156). Typically, you'll pay about $40 a day for a single, $55 for a double. Delivery is easy to arrange on the road system.

SALTWATER FISHING & WHALE-WATCHING The closest I ever came to a humpback whale—I almost touched it—was on the way back from king salmon fishing out of Juneau on a friend's boat. More than two dozen charter companies offer fishing and whale watching from Juneau and Auke Bay; you can go to **watch whales** or **fish,** or both. Juneau is well protected behind layers of islands, so the water is generally calm.

A lot of companies offer trips. The Juneau Convention and Visitors Bureau maintains a list of businesses, and their website has links to each. **Juneau Sportfishing and Sightseeing,** 2 Marine Way, Suite 230 (✆ **907/586-1887;** www.juneausportfishing.com), is one of the largest operators, and their rates are typical: $215 per person for a full day of fishing, $125 for 4 hours; or $95 for a 2½-hour whale-watching trip.

BOATING AND YACHTING A motor yacht can put you in the wilderness of the Inside Passage in perfect comfort, and with the freedom that only hardy outdoors people usually have. Imagine motoring up to a glacier or landing on a remote beach on an uninhabited island for a picnic, or catching your own salmon dinner and watching humpback whales from your deck. Of course, it's also quite expensive to go this way.

Various Juneau operators offer multiday cruising charters on motor yachts. **Adventures Afloat** (✆ **800/323-5628** or 907/789-0111; www.ptialaska.net/~valkyrie) offers crewed boats of various sizes for around $450 per person, per day. **Alaska Yacht Charters** (✆ **800/725-3913;** www.alaskayachtcharters.com) is owned and operated by a couple with two lifetimes of fishing experience; their private, live-on-board fishing and sightseeing cruises are limited to parties of six or fewer.

A Day Trip to Tracy Arm

Readers gush to me about the **boat tours to Tracy Arm,** south of Juneau. One reason, I suspect, is that the fjords of the Tracy Arm–Fords Terror Wilderness (part of Tongass National Forest) are relatively unknown outside the area, but the scenery and wildlife viewing easily rival those of Glacier Bay National Park, which was rated the best national park to visit by the readers of *Consumer Reports.* For those not riding a cruise ship, Tracy Arm has a significant advantage over Glacier Bay: It costs less than half as much and is easier to get to. You can get to Tracy Arm in about 8 hours; going to Glacier Bay from Juneau is an exhausting day trip—it's wiser to overnight there, though that adds more to the cost.

The Tracy Arm fjord is a long, narrow, twisting passageway into the coastal mountains, with peaks up to a mile high that jut straight out of the water, with waterfalls tumbling thousands of feet down their sides. At its head, Sawyer Glacier and South Sawyer Glacier calve ice into the water with a rumble and a splash. Whales and other wildlife usually show up along the way. And, as at Glacier Bay, John Muir paid a visit. No second-best here!

The largest operator is the Native-owned **Auk Nu Tours** (part of Goldbelt, which owns many of the big tourism businesses in town), 76 Egan Dr., Juneau (✆ **800/820-2628** or 907/586-8687; www.auknutours.com). They offer daylong trips Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday starting at 8:45am in the summer (check for schedule changes). A naturalist provides commentary on the high-speed catamaran. A light meal and the use of binoculars are included in the adult price of $119, $70 children.

Other large boats compete with the Auk Nu boats, and you can shop around. **Adventure Bound Alaska,** at 215 Ferry Way, Juneau (✆ **800/228-3875** or 907/463-2509; www.adventureboundalaska.com), is a family business operating a 56-foot single-hull boat with deck space all the way around. Time on the water is longer, in part because the boat is slower, which gives you more time to see wildlife and scenery. They charge $105 adults, $65 ages 17 and younger.

Another way to go is to charter your own boat. Although it may cost twice as much or more per person, you can decide when and where to linger with the animals or ice. Check with the visitor center for a referral, or with **Juneau Sportfishing and Sightseeing** (✆ **907/586-1887**), listed in this section under "Saltwater Fishing & Whale-Watching."

DIVING The **Channel Dive Center,** 8365 Old Dairy Rd. (✆ **907/790-4665;** www.channeldive.com), offers instruction, rentals, and guides for dry-suit diving. Guided dives include historic shipwrecks near town. From fall to spring, you can dive among sea lions. Diving is not as good in the summer, when plankton blooms tend to cloud the water.

GETTING OUTSIDE: ON THE ICE

More than 36 major glaciers around Juneau flow from a single ocean of ice behind the mountains, the 1,500-square-mile **Juneau Icefield.** You can land on the icefield

in a helicopter to touch the ice, or to take a nature hike or dog sled ride. It's expensive, but there are few other places where you can see, let alone explore, the kind of ice sheet that carved North America in the last ice age. From the air, the glaciers look unreal, like creations by a graphic artist, their sinuous lines of blue and white ice striped with darker gray gravel debris. Only standing on the ice, which on closer inspection resembles the crusty compressed snow of springtime snow berms, do you get a clear sense of this entirely unfamiliar kind of terrain.

It's worth noting that these tours have had some major mishaps. While the accidents represent a tiny fraction of all the safe flights, they're a reminder that flying a helicopter to a glacier is not like flying an airliner.

Era Helicopters (✆ **800/843-1947** or 907/586-2030; www.flightseeingtours.com) is among Alaska's oldest and most respected operators. Their 1-hour glacier landing flight costs $215 per person. They also offer a program of **dog sled rides** on the ice. This is a neat idea: A lot of visitors to Alaska want to ride a dog sled, but it's a winter sport that really can't be re-created with sleds on wheels, as most dog sled tours try to do in the summer. Here, you do it on snow, as it's meant to be done. That excursion costs $365 per person. One caveat: Poor or even overcast weather makes it difficult to see the ice clearly, but if you wait for a sunny morning, all seats will likely be booked. They have a 48-hour cancellation policy, so you have to gamble to some extent on good viewing conditions. Of course, they don't fly in unsafe conditions.

NorthStar Trekking (✆ **907/790-4530;** www.glaciertrekking.com), another company with its own helicopters, specializes in hiking and teaching about glaciers. Their small groups (a maximum of 11, with two guides) go on ice hiking excursions of up to a few miles, with the speed determined by the group. The 4-hour trip, which includes 2 hours on the ice and ½ an hour in the air (the balance is getting to the helicopter and gearing up), costs $319 per person. They have more and less expensive options, too.

Wings of Alaska (✆ **907/789-0790;** www.wingsofalaska.com) offers glacier overflights by floatplane and flightseeing tours to the remote Taku Lodge, where they land for salmon for brunch, lunch or dinner.

GETTING OUTSIDE: ON ADMIRALTY ISLAND

Beyond Douglas Island from Juneau, near the entrance to Gastineau Channel, is 900,000-acre Admiralty Island, one of the largest virgin blocks of old-growth forest in the country. The vast majority of the island is the protected **Kootznoowoo Wilderness.** Kootznoowoo, Tlingit for "fortress of bears," is said to have the highest concentration of brown bears on earth. Despite the town of Angoon on the western side of the island, there are more bears than people on Admiralty. The island's **Pack Creek Bear Viewing Area** is the most famous and surefire place to see bears in Southeast. The area has been managed for bear viewing since the 1930s, when hunting was outlawed. There's a platform for watching the bears up close as they feed on salmon spawning in the creek in July and August. Peak viewing occurs in the middle of that period. The bears generally pay no attention to the people watching them from a safe viewing platform.

Only 25 miles from Juneau, Pack Creek is so popular that the Forest Service uses a permit system to keep it from being overrun during the day (from 9pm–9am no humans are allowed). The great majority of people go for only a few hours. There are no facilities in this wilderness area and you can't even camp without some kind of watercraft to get to a permitted area. The easiest way to go is with a tour operator who has permits. The Forest Service District Ranger

Office can give you a list of guides. **Alaska Discovery,** 5310 Glacier Hwy. (✆ **800/586-1911** or 907/780-6226; www.akdiscovery.com), has many permits for sea-kayak trips. Their 1-day excursion flies out and then paddles to the creek; no experience is necessary, but you must be physically capable of hiking and paddling. It costs $495 per person. A 2-night campout and sea kayak near the creek offers more time to see the bears and appreciate the scenery. It costs $950 per person. **Alaska Fly 'N' Fish Charters,** 9604 Kelly Court (✆ **907/790-2120;** www.alaskabyair.com), also has permits for its naturalist-guided 5½-hour fly-in visits, which cost $475 per person, with everything you need included.

Twelve permits per day go to the commercial operators and 12 to people who go without any guide (and you aren't allowed to hire a guide after getting the permit); 8 of those 12 can be booked in advance with the Forest Service, and the other four are distributed 3 days before the date on which they're good, or the previous Friday for Tuesday and Wednesday, at 9am at the Juneau Ranger District Office. In the peak season, permits cost $50 for adults, $25 for those ages 16 or under or 62 and over. After you have the permit, you'll still need a way to get there, plus your own gear (including rubber boots and binoculars). **Alaska Fly 'N' Fish Charters** charges $250 per person, round-trip, to drop off customers with their own permits; the price drops to $175 per person for groups of three or more.

Protected **Seymour Canal,** on the east side of the island, is good for canoeing and kayaking, and has two other sites besides Pack Creek where bears often show up: Swan Cove and Windfall Harbor. Outfitters are listed above. There are 15 Forest Service cabins on Admiralty, and the well-regarded **Thayer Lake Lodge** (✆ **907/247-8897;** www.alaskaone.com/thayerlake), is located on a wilderness inholding near Angoon. For information on the island and cabins and an excellent $4 map, contact the **Admiralty Island National Monument,** 8461 Old Dairy Rd., Juneau (✆ **907/586-8790;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/admiralty).

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel rooms are tight in the summer, so book ahead. Bed-and-breakfasts are a good way to go in Juneau. You can get a better room and have more fun for less money. The Juneau Convention and Visitors Bureau's *Juneau Travel Planner* and website contain listings of the hotels and B&Bs with links (✆ **888/581-2201;** www.traveljuneau.com). **Bed & Breakfast Association of Alaska, INNside Passage Chapter,** communicates through its website (**www.accommodations-alaska.com**), where you will find more than a dozen Juneau B&Bs listed with links to their own pages.

EXPENSIVE

Alaska's Capital Inn ★★★ This scrupulously restored 1906 mansion offers constant surprises in its fascinating detail: the shining potbellied stove and 1879 pump organ in the parlor, the Alaskan artwork and Persian rugs, the original (electrified) gas lamps and even those old-fashioned push-button light switches. It's no wonder owners Linda Wendeborn and Mark Thorson have won awards and garnered national attention for their efforts. For guests, however, the warmth and fun of the place may mean more than the history. The common rooms are conducive to visiting or reading, the courtesy car is a 1961 Cadillac Fleetwood with big tail fins, and breakfast includes items such as eggs Benedict made with Dungeness crab. Rooms are sumptuously and comfortably outfitted, with quilts and fine trim. Their price range defies categorization: Three rooms

are $150 or less, two are over $150 and two are well over $200. The Governor's suite takes up the whole top floor. All rooms except the smallest one have either a Jacuzzi or a claw-footed tub, and there is another Jacuzzi on the deck. The location is prime, just up from the Capitol. The owners also offer charters on their 35-foot boat. Smoking is not allowed.

113 W. 5th St., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **888/588-6507** or 907/586-6507. Fax 907/586-6508. www.alaskacapitalinn.com. 7 units. High season $124–$275 double; low season $105–$215 double; Extra person $15. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Children under 11 are not permitted. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi; courtesy car; shared computer with Internet access. *In room:* TV/VCR, dataport.

Baranof Hotel ★★ The Baranof is the only lodging in Alaska with the pedigree and style to pull off the role of the old-fashioned grand hotel. Built of concrete in 1939, it served for decades as an informal branch of the state capitol. Legislators and lobbyists still confer in the dark, opulent lobby and restaurants. The structure itself limits modernization—the bathrooms and many rooms tend to be small—but features such as glass doorknobs and pressed-tin ceilings remain to show that it comes by its faults honestly. Recent remodeling has lightened many rooms while keeping the style intact. The upper-floor rooms have great views on the water side, while lower rooms were redone most recently. There are many appealing suites.

The Art Deco **Gold Room** ★ restaurant is Juneau's most traditional fine-dining establishment. The dining room combines intimacy and grandeur in a real showplace of shining brass, frosted glass, and rich wood. The food varies greatly in quality year to year. Most entrees are $20 to $25.

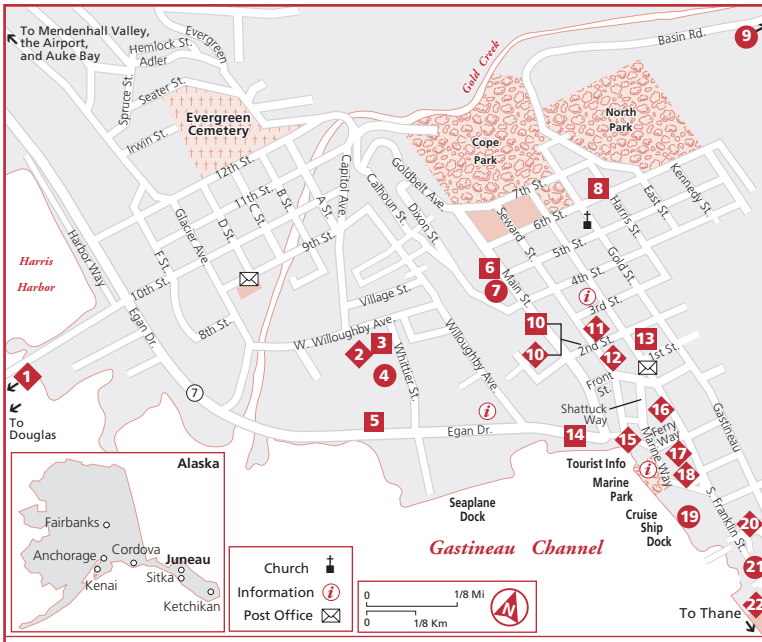
127 N. Franklin St., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **800/544-0970** or 907/586-2660. Fax 907/586-8315. www.westmarkhotels.com. 196 units. High season $149–$169 double, low season $129–$139 double. Extra person over age 12 $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; tour desk; salon; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* TV, dataport, kitchenettes in some rooms, iron.

Goldbelt Hotel Juneau ★★ The Goldbelt Native corporation purchased this formerly bland upscale hotel near the water and brought its public spaces to life with masterpieces of Tlingit art, including a new totem pole out front, a huge yellow cedar bas-relief by Nathan Jackson in the lobby-restaurant area, and a museum-quality Chilkat blanket in a display case. The large bedrooms, with either two full-size or one king bed, were upgraded with bold colors and new furniture in a dark cherry finish. They're noticeably quiet and immaculate. Those at the front, $10 more, have good views of the Gastineau Channel.

51 W. Egan Dr., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **888/478-6909** or 907/586-6900. Fax 907/463-3567. www.goldbelttours.com. 105 units. High season $169–$179 double; low season $139–$149 double. Extra person $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; limited room service. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Pearson's Pond Luxury Inn and Adventure Spa ★★★ Imagine you're a slightly obsessed bed-and-breakfast host and you decide to give your guests every amenity you can possibly think of. Now go to Diane Pearson's house and count how many you missed. A refrigerator and coffee machine? Child's play. Pearson provides a kitchen stocked with food, wine, and her own home-baked bread. Maybe you thought of a private duck pond with a dock, a rowboat, and a fountain? But did you stock the pond with fish? And did you remember massage, yoga, two separate hot tubs in the garden, and high-speed Internet service in each room? There's much more, as Pearson is constantly adding to the inn: a new building includes a skylit atrium and three suites, two with big Jacuzzis. But, I have to add

Downtown Juneau



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See Juneau Walking Tour map for other attractions

two caveats: First, it is still a house, not a luxury hotel; second, all the extras may be a bit much unless you're planning a honeymoon-like stay. Pearson's is in the Mendenhall Valley, 15 minutes from downtown.

4541 Sawa Circle, Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **888/658-6328** or 907/789-3772. Fax 907/789-6722. www.pearsonspond.com. 5 units. High season $169–$299 double; low season $79–$179 double. Extra person $30. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Exercise room; 2 outdoor Jacuzzis; rowboat, paddleboat and fishing gear loan; bike loan; concierge; car rental; business center (with laptop computer loan); massage; laundry service. *In room:* TV/VCR and DVD, dataport, kitchenette, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, CD player.

Prospector Hotel ★ This is a comfortable waterfront hotel with large standard rooms outfitted in washed pine, wrought iron, and marble, with fabrics of rich brown and red. Stay here if you like a typical upscale room without surprises; the location is good and the price reasonable. Rooms facing the channel have good views but suffer from highway noise. The lower level, called the first floor, is a half-basement and lacks an elevator. A parking garage takes care of the

chronic shortage of downtown parking. The attached restaurant, **TK McGuire's,** is comfortable and consistent.

375 Whittier St., Juneau, AK 99801-1781. ✆ **800/331-2711** outside Alaska, 800/478-5866 inside Alaska, or 907/586-3737. Fax 907/586-1204. www.prospectorhotel.com. 63 units. High season $155 double; low season $137 double. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; limited room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

MODERATE

Glacier Trail Bed & Breakfast ★★ *Finds* At this B&B, you'll wake up to an expansive view of the Mendenhall Glacier filling a picture window in a big, quiet, tastefully decorated room. Luke and Connie Nelson built the house with this moment in mind. Before beginning construction, they researched B&Bs all over the country, gleaning ideas for amenities to add to the rooms and gaining inspiration for how to put the rooms together—not just as bedrooms with a lot of stuff in them, but as a cohesive, calming whole. The "Bear Den," a family apartment downstairs, is perfect for large groups, and has a kitchen. All rooms offer luxurious Jacuzzi bathtubs. The Nelsons are fascinating, well-read people with varied interests and a lifetime of experience in Alaska's outdoors. Luke's family owns a lodge on Admiralty Island, and he runs Pack Creek tours (see "Getting Outside: On Admiralty Island," above) with them. You'll need to rent a car if you stay here. The Nelsons also rent kayaks for outings on nearby Mendenhall Lake.

1081 Arctic Circle, Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **907/789-5646.** www.juneaulodging.com. 3 units. High season $128–$153 double; low season $93–$108 double. Extra person $20. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Bike loan; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV/VCR, kitchen/kitchenette, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, microwave.

The Historic Silverbow Inn ★ The young proprietors here have created an original and oddly pleasing style in their little downtown hotel. The 1914 building, with wood floors, bare brick, and stained glass, is decorated with family pictures and weird postcards. The overlay of new on old gives the rooms a charming "Pottery Barn" style. Considerate touches show up repeatedly, including the shelf of supplies you may have forgotten, the answering machines on the direct-line phones, the hard candies, and the sack breakfast if you have to leave very early. There's a free breakfast buffet, including authentic bagels from the family bakery. The rooms and bathrooms are small—more reminiscent of rooms in a European pension than in a standard hotel. There is a small, funky, on-site cinema where you can watch new and classic movies while you chow down on pastries or a main course, and toss down a few pints of beer. Popcorn is free! The restaurant, Silverbow Bakery, is described below.

120 2nd St., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **800/586-4146** or 907/586-4146. Fax 907/586-4242. www.silverbowinn.com. 6 units. High season $138 double; low season $88 double. Extra person $15. $10 surcharge for 1-night stays in high season. Rates include continental breakfast. DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Tips Lodging at the Airport

The **Aspen Hotel Juneau** (✆ **888/559-9846** or 907/790-6435; www.aspenhotelsak.com) is nearer to your gate than the check-in desk at most airports, and it's also among Juneau's best hotels, with large, elegantly decorated rooms with high ceilings and every amenity, including a continental breakfast that is included in the price of the room. The hotel has a small pool. A room for two people is $139 summer, $79 winter.

Tips Ask Before You Light Up

Generally, **smoking** is not permitted at bed-and-breakfasts and inns; smokers should ask when they book if smoking is allowed outside.

INEXPENSIVE

Also see the Juneau International Hostel, under "A Hostel & Camping."

The Driftwood Lodge *Value* This downtown motel, next door to the State Museum, offers apartment-like suites with kitchenettes. It is popular with families, and houses legislators and aides in the winter. Although the building can't hide its cinderblock construction and old-fashioned motel exterior, small bathrooms and lack of elevators, the rooms are remarkably comfortable and well kept. The management has held prices low while making continuous improvements, so for the price of a budget room elsewhere ($115), you can put four people in a two-bedroom suite with a full kitchen. The round-the-clock courtesy van saves big money to the airport or ferry and the rental bikes will cover your transportation needs downtown.

435 Willoughby Ave., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **800/544-2239** or 907/586-2280. Fax 907/586-1034. www.driftwoodalaska.com. 63 units. High season $85 double, $93–$115 suite. Low season $62 double, $89 suite. Extra person $7. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Bike rental; courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, coffeemaker.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Juneau International Hostel *Finds* This place seems too good to be a hostel. The historic yellow house, situated among the downtown sights, is a showplace of custom cabinetry and big, light common rooms. The shared kitchen was squeaky-clean when I visited (everyone has to pitch in with a chore). Men and women sleep in a number of small separate dorm rooms, and there is one private family room, which is in high demand. Office hours are from 7 to 9am and 5pm to midnight in the summer, 8 to 9am and 5 to 10:30pm in the winter, with lockout during the day. There's a coin-op laundry, free Internet access, lockers, and free local calls. Prepaid reservations by mail are required and there is a 3-night maximum stay. Alcohol, drugs, and pets are not allowed and shoes must be removed at the door.

614 Harris St., Juneau, AK 99801. ✆ **907/586-9559.** www.juneauhostel.org. 47 beds. $10 per adult; $5 children ages 6–17 with adult, free 5 and under. No credit cards. Closed 2 weeks during winter holidays. **Amenities:** Free Internet access, coin-op laundry.

Juneau has two exceptional Forest Service campgrounds that are open from mid-May to mid-September. For information, call the Juneau Ranger District at ✆ **907/586-8800** or contact them at www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass. Neither campground takes reservations. **The Mendenhall Glacier Campground,** located next to the Mendenhall River, overlooking the lake and glacier, is the most-improved public campground in the state, with granite block construction. The new bathrooms have showers and flush toilets and there is a ½-mile disabled-accessible nature trail. The 69 sites are huge and broadly separated; nine have full RV hookups and another nine have electricity and water. Tents and RVs are segregated. To get there, turn right on Montana Creek Road from Mendenhall Loop Road. Tent sites are $10, RV sites $24 and $26. The 12-site **Auke Village Campground,** 1¾ miles north of the ferry dock, lies along an ocean beach, with pit toilets and running water. Sites are $8 per night.

Spruce Meadow RV Park, at 10200 Mendenhall Loop Rd. (✆ **907/789-1990;** www.juneaurv.com), has full hookups in a natural setting with many amenities. Full hookups are $26, cable TV $3 extra.

WHERE TO DINE

EXPENSIVE

Besides these restaurants, see the description of the Gold Room, in the Baranof Hotel, on p. 162. Unless stated otherwise, reservations are accepted.

DiSopra/The Fiddlehead Restaurant and Bakery ★★ SEAFOOD/ITALIAN Upstairs, DiSopra serves finely crafted northern Italian cuisine in a dining room with big windows, a mural, and solicitous service. The menu changes quarterly, and Juneau friends have complained of inconsistency, but the food is still the most sophisticated in town. Meanwhile, downstairs, the Fiddlehead has knotty pine paneling and ferny stained glass. It serves from a long menu of flavorful food, with a great variety of ethnic delicacies made into sandwiches. More expensive dinner entrees of seafood, beef, or pasta, similar to those upstairs, are also served in the Fiddlehead.

429 W. Willoughby Ave. ✆ **907/586-3150.** www.alaska.net/~fiddle. Reservations recommended for DiSopra. Lunch $8–$12; dinner $9–$25. 15% gratuity added for parties of 6 or more. AE, DISC, MC, V. Summer DiSopra daily 5–10pm; Fiddlehead daily 7am–10pm. Winter DiSopra Tues–Sat 5:30–9pm; Fiddlehead daily 7am–9pm.

The Summit Restaurant ★★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This is a great place for a romantic meal. The dining room, with only 10 tables, looks out over the cruise-ship dock from big windows. The formal service adds to an easy, world-weary elegance that is not easily faked, and the Summit is the only restaurant in Alaska that really has it. If you're lucky enough to get a reservation during the summer season, you'll find the seafood and vegetables from the constantly changing, sometimes creative menu well prepared and occasionally truly inspired, such as the halibut with spinach and Grand Marnier sauce on mashed potatoes. A little European-style hotel, the Inn at the Waterfront, is upstairs.

455 S. Franklin St. ✆ **907/586-2050.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $15–$28. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 5–11pm. Winter hours vary; call ahead. Closed Oct.

MODERATE

Douglas Cafe ★ *Finds* ECLECTIC It's a real pleasure to find a place like this hiding in the guise of an ordinary small-town burger joint. The key, I'm convinced, is the two owners working in the kitchen, indistinguishable from the other young guys in baseball caps back there. They turn out wonderful seafood, meat, and vegetarian dinners, drawing on many world cuisines, and lunches that translate such food into sandwiches and a great array of burgers. The small dining room is lively, bright, and casual but somewhat cramped, with stacking chairs and wooden benches that can feel hard by the end of a meal. Weekend breakfasts are an event, filling the place with townspeople. Service is quick and casual. Craft brews are on tap.

916 3rd St., Douglas (turn left after crossing the bridge from Juneau, then continue until you see the cafe on the left). ✆ **907/364-3307.** Lunch $6.50–$9; dinner $8.25–$17. MC, V. Wed–Fri 11am–8:30pm, Sat 9am–9pm, Sun 9am–12:30pm.

The Hangar ★ STEAK/SEAFOOD/PASTA Situated in a converted airplane hangar on a wooden pier with large windows, this bar and grill has great views and a fun atmosphere; even off-season, it's packed. It's a fine place to drink beer

Finds Quick Bites in Juneau

The **Silverbow Bakery,** at 120 2nd St. (✆ **907/586-4146;** www.silverbowinn.com), is a happening spot for bagels and hearty sandwiches. You can pick up a tasty picnic at the deli at the **Rainbow Food** health-food grocery at the corner of Seward and 2nd streets (✆ **907/586-6476**). At **Paradise Lunch and Bakery,** 245 Marine Way (✆ **907/586-2253**), you can get a take-away breakfast or lunch or eat in the restaurant's small dining room near the cruise ship dock. **Hot Bite,** a stand at the Auke Bay boat harbor, is a local secret, serving charcoal-broiled burgers and mind-blowing milkshakes. Downtown Juneau's young, professional population supports several good coffeehouses. **Valentine's Coffee House and Bakery,** 111 Seward St. (✆ **907/463-5144**), serves light hot meals in an authentic old-fashioned storefront. **Heritage Coffee Co. and Café,** 174 S. Franklin St. (✆ **907/586-1087,** www.heritagecoffee.com), also serves light meals and is a good people-watching place.

(with 24 brews on tap), listen to live music, or play at one of the three pool tables. What's surprising is that the food is good, too. The seared ahi sashimi appetizer, raw inside, had a pleasant texture and taste, and the jambalaya, a huge portion for $12, was spicy but balanced—the shrimp didn't get smothered, as they often do.

2 Marine Way. ✆ **907/586-5018.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $12–$21. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

Twisted Fish Co. Alaskan Grill ★★ SEAFOOD/PIZZA/BURGERS Overlooking the water at the cruise-ship dock, in the same building as Taku Smokeries, the dining room here is magnificent, with high ceilings and an entire wall of windows on the Gastineau Channel, a fireplace of beach rock, lots of hardwood and, to keep it from being too grand, cartoon-like fish looking down at you. The quality and range of the food brings locals to a tourist zone they would otherwise avoid. Items include sweet potato crab cakes, salmon on a cedar plank or in pastry, little pizzas, burgers, and terrific deserts. The service is fast and attentive, but the dining room makes you want to linger long after you are done eating.

550 S. Franklin St. ✆ **907/463-5033.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $7–$15, dinner $12–$30. AE, DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 11am–10pm. Closed Oct–Apr.

INEXPENSIVE

Chan's Thai Kitchen ★★ Finds THAI The small, overlit dining room in the half-basement level of a steak house sees few tourists, but locals brag to each other about how long they were willing to stand in the small entrance area to get a table. When I went, I became a believer, too—the authentic Thai food is good and the atmosphere, if lacking in polish, is conducive to a good time. You will need a car, as the location is 20 minutes from town across from the Auke Bay boat harbor. Reservations are not accepted and they do not have a liquor license.

11820 Glacier Hwy. ✆ **907/789-9777.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses $9–$13. MC, V. Tues–Fri 11:30am–2pm and 4:30–8:30pm; Sat 4:30–8:30pm; Sun 4:30–8pm.

Pizzeria Roma PIZZA The pizza here is fantastic—the best in Southeast Alaska. They also serve calzones, pasta and terrific salads and have good wine list. The dining room is small and gets quite crowded, but the staff is able to turn food out fast even in the height of the rush. The location is on the water, near the Hanger.

2 Marine Way (In the Wharf Building). ✆ **907/723-4658**. Reservations not accepted. All items $7–$15. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm.

NIGHTLIFE

Alaska Travel Adventures has offered its **Gold Creek Salmon Bake** for more than 30 years. It's touristy, yes, but fun, with marshmallow roasting, music, and other entertainment—great for families. (I'd avoid it in the rain, however.) The cost is $31 for adults, $20 for children. Call ✆ **907/789-0052** to arrange pickup by van.

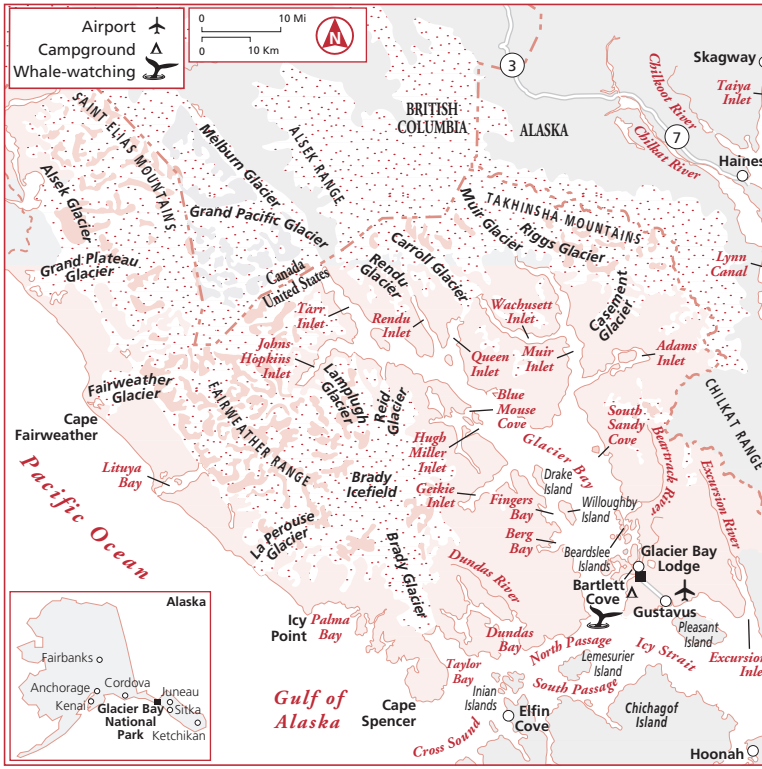
For more substantial performances, try to catch a show by Juneau's **Perseverance Theatre,** Alaska's largest professional theater. The winter season, starting in September and lasting until early June, includes Alaska's best cutting-edge drama, including serious homegrown work. Alumni have gone on to the big time nationally. Summer offerings are limited to youth theater and workshops. To find out what's playing, contact the theater's office at 914 3rd St., Douglas (✆ **907/364-2421**), or check the website at www.perseverancetheatre.org.

A political scandal or two put a damper on some of the infamous legislative partying that once occurred in Juneau, far away from home districts, but good places to go out drinking and dancing still exist. The **Red Dog Saloon,** at 278 S. Franklin St., is the town's most famous bar, with a sawdust-strewn floor, a slightly contrived but nonetheless infectious frontier atmosphere, and walls covered with Alaska memorabilia. The nightly live music is free of cover charge. Locals hang across the street, at **The Alaskan Bar,** 167 S. Franklin, which occupies an authentic gold rush hotel with a two-story Victorian bar room. Boisterous parties and music are on tap all year; the highlight is the Thursday night open mike, when crowds pack in for a wild, noisy evening. **The Hangar,** listed above under "Where to Dine," is the place for beer drinkers. They have a big-screen TV and live music Friday and Saturday nights, as well as pool and darts.

8 Glacier Bay National Park

Glacier Bay is a work in progress; the boat ride to its head is a chance to see creation unfolding. The bay John Muir discovered in a canoe in 1879 didn't exist a century earlier. Eighteenth-century explorers had found instead a wall of ice a mile thick where the entrance to the branching, 65-mile-long fjord now opens to the sea. Receding faster than any other glacier on earth, the ice melted into the ocean and opened a spectacular and still-unfinished land. The land itself is rising 1½ inches a year as it rebounds from the weight of now-melted glaciers. As your vessel retraces Muir's path—and then probes northward in deep water where ice stood in his day—the story of this new world unravels in reverse. The trees on the shore get smaller, then disappear, then all vegetation disappears, and finally, at the head of the bay, the ice stands at the water's edge surrounded by barren rock that has been rounded and scored by the passage of the ice but has not yet been marked by the waterfalls cascading from the clouds above. And there, still doing their landscape-shaping work, are the great, blue glaciers, including the awesome Grand Pacific Glacier, the largest of the bunch.

Glacier Bay National Park



Glacier Bay, first set aside by Calvin Coolidge in 1925, is managed by the National Park Service, which has the difficult job of protecting the wilderness, the whales, and the other wildlife while serving the huge crowds that visit the park. This rugged land, the size of Connecticut, can be seen only by boat or plane, and the presence of too many boats threatens the wilderness experience and may disturb the wildlife. The whales appear to be sensitive to the noise of vessels and, since the 1970s, when only a single whale returned all year, the park service has used a permit system to limit the number of ships that can enter the bay, though any boat still sees several other ships on a day's journey up the bay. Unfortunately, how much the vessels bother the whales and other wildlife is difficult to measure precisely, and political pressure always pushes for more huge ships. In response to legislation pushed through by Alaska's pro-development Congressional delegation, the park service increased the number of cruise ships entering the bay, but in 2001 environmentalists won a court ruling that briefly reduced the number and held off a further increase pending study. An Environmental Impact Statement under consideration at this writing proposes an increase from 139 cruise ships a year to 184. For more on the study, which is scheduled for completion early in 2004, go to www.glba.ene.com.

On my longest trip in Glacier Bay National Park, I saw humpback whales breaching (leaping all the way out of the water) every day. I saw orcas, too. One day, while fishing for halibut from a small boat in foggy Icy Strait, just outside

the park, I heard a sound like thunder not far off. Like thunder, the sound was repeated, growing closer, but its source remained hidden behind the white circle of fog that surrounded us. Then the smooth water suddenly bulged and a huge, barnacled creature shot upward and crashed down with a sharp clap and a splash that rocked the boat. And then it happened again. The whale went on performing for most of an hour. A day later, I encountered the same spectacle while sea kayaking in the park's Bartlett Cove.

Leaping whales and falling glaciers are hard to beat. But the park also has major drawbacks to consider. Sightings aren't guaranteed, so there's a risk that you'll spend a lot of money and not see any whales. And even though this is a huge wilderness, the opportunities to see it are limited and therefore the most easily accessible parts of the park are crowded. The lone concessionaire-operated tour boat into the bay costs $159 per person and is usually full of people. The large cruise ships that bring most visitors to the park view the scenery without getting up close to the shore or wildlife and miss the shore-based attractions. Smaller ships see more, with smaller groups and more chances to get outdoors. Independent travelers can spend a few days in some of Alaska's most attractive remote accommodations, in Gustavus, with great fishing, hiking, sea kayaking, and tour boat rides into the park. But the only way to see the heart of the park in true solitude is on a boat you charter for yourself (out of range of most budgets) or on a rugged overnight sea-kayaking adventure.

As an alternative, consider the other places to see Alaska's glaciers and whales that are easier and less expensive to visit. If you're in Juneau, consider a day trip to Tracy Arm instead. In Southcentral Alaska, plan a day trip from Whittier to see the glaciers of western Prince William Sound or from Seward to see Kenai Fjords National Park. There are other places in Southeast rich with marine wildlife. Still, Glacier Bay beats them all—and just about anyplace on earth—for the combination of lots of whales and lots of big glaciers.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Gustavus, covered in the next section of this chapter, is the gateway to Glacier Bay. Unless you're on a cruise ship passing through the bay without landing you will probably pass through Gustavus, either by air or on the Glacier Bay Ferry. To avoid duplication, I have covered the ferry in the Gustavus section on p. 173. Vans to the park headquarters at Bartlett Cove meet planes and boats and charge $12 to make the 10-mile trip to the park, plus $2 for baggage. It's free if you are traveling with a package tour; also, most of the inns and lodges in Gustavus offer free transfers to the park.

BY TOUR BOAT A day boat is the main way for independent travelers to see the park. It is operated by park concessionaire **Glacier Bay Cruiseline,** based at 107 W. Denny Way, Suite 303, Seattle, WA 98119 (✆ **800/451-5952** or 206/623-2417; fax 206/623-7809; www.glacierbaycruiseline.com), or, locally, in the summer only, at P.O. Box 199, Gustavus, AK 99826 (✆ **907/697-2226;** fax 907/697-2408). The boat leaves from the dock in Bartlett Cove and sails to the fjords' very head and the Grand Pacific Glacier. The 9-hour voyage is too long for many children. There's a snack bar, and a simple lunch is provided. Bring good rain gear and layers of warm clothing. Binoculars, a necessity, are provided. A park service ranger does the commentary, so you can count on accuracy and a didactic approach missing from most commercial tours. The fare is $159.50 for adults, $79.75 for children.

The company offers a same-day trip from Juneau, Haines, or Skagway, but it makes for too long a day, and the schedule leaves no shore time in Glacier Bay or Gustavus, or time for whale watching in Icy Strait (covered in the Gustavus section). The package fare from Juneau is $317, more from Haines or Skagway. A better choice is to take their 2- or 3-day packages. The 2-day package includes the ride from Juneau to Gustavus on the Glacier Bay Ferry directly to Bartlett Cove (the headquarters of the park), an overnight stay at the lodge, a boat tour the second day, and the flight back to Juneau, Haines, or Skagway. That package costs $381 from Juneau. See the Gustavus section for more choices.

BY SMALL CRUISE SHIP If your budget allows, there may be no better way to see Glacier Bay than on a small cruise-ship on an excursion of a couple of days or more. **Glacier Bay Cruiseline** has developed a whole small-ship cruise fleet around this idea, and visitors come back overjoyed. Three vessels, the ***Wilderness Explorer*** and the larger ***Wilderness Adventurer*** and ***Wilderness Discoverer,*** carry racks of sea kayaks. **Cruise West** also offers small-ship itineraries including Glacier Bay. See chapter 4 for complete reviews of each.

Local family operators based in Gustavus also do these trips. If you have a large group, you can have a boat and guide to yourself. Mike Nigro, a former backcountry ranger and longtime resident, takes groups of four to six for $1,600 per day on a 42-foot yacht. His **Gustavus Marine Charters** can be reached at ✆ **907/697-2233** or www.gustavusmarinecharters.com.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Contact the **Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve** at P.O. Box 140, Gustavus, AK 99826 (✆ **907/697-2230;** www.nps.gov/glba). The park service interprets the park mainly by placing well-prepared rangers on board all cruise and tour vessels entering the bay. The park also maintains a modest visitor center with displays on the park on the second floor of the lodge at wooded Bartlett Cove. Pick up the park map and handy guide, *The Fairweather.* Nearby are the park's offices, a free campground, a backcountry office, a few short hiking trails, a dock, sea kayak rental, and other park facilities. Rangers lead daily nature walks and present an evening slide show.

ACTIVITIES AT THE PARK

FLIGHTSEEING One way to get into the park is by flightseeing. Gustavus-based **Air Excursions** (✆ **907/697-2375**) offers air tours, as do other operators from various towns, Haines and Skagway being the closest (see sections 10 and 11, below). You'll see the incredible rivers of ice that flow down into the bay, and you may even see wildlife. What you give up is the sense of scale from ground level.

HIKING AT BARTLETT COVE There are three short hiking trails through the rainforest of Sitka spruce and western hemlock at Bartlett Cove. Each weaves through the cool, damp quiet created by these huge trees and the moss on the forest floor. Wet spots are often crossed by boardwalks with railings. A free trail guide is available at the visitor center.

The **Forest Loop** is an easy trail about 1 mile long, beginning at the lodge and passing through the woods and past some park buildings to the cove's pebble beach and back. The **Bartlett River Trail** is a 4-mile round-trip leading to the Bartlett River Estuary, a good bird-watching spot, especially during migrations. The **Bartlett Lake Trail,** a 3-mile one-way forest hike to the lake, branches off the Bartlett River Trail after about ¼ mile.

KAYAKING IN THE PARK You won't forget seeing a breaching humpback whale from a sea kayak, sitting just inches off the water. It happens around here. When we breathlessly told our innkeepers about the experience, they smiled politely. They hear the same descriptions all the time.

Inexperienced paddlers should choose a guided trip. **Alaska Discovery,** 5310 Glacier Hwy., Juneau (✆ **800/586-1911** or 907/780-6226; www.akdiscovery.com), is Alaska's best large sea-kayak guide organization. They offer paddles ranging from 6 hours to 8 days in Glacier Bay. A 6-hour guided paddle from Bartlett Cove is the best choice for beginners. Although the trip goes nowhere near the glaciers, the paddlers stand a good chance of seeing whales, sometimes quite close up. The guides are well trained and know how to teach and make the trip an adventure. Any fit person can enjoy the trip. It costs $125, including a tasty lunch and a ride from your lodgings or the airport. The longer tours are also well guided and outfitted, but I wouldn't recommend a week of sea kayaking to anyone who hasn't tried it before (what if you find out the first day that you don't like kayaking?). If you're up to it, however, this is the most intimate and authentic way to experience this wilderness, with almost unlimited time to see the glaciers and wildlife. A 6-day trip to the bay's more visited west arm, geared to novices, is $1,895; a more strenuous 8 days in the spectacular but forgotten east arm is $2,195. The company also has a simple bed-and-breakfast in Gustavus, for 1- or 2-night stays at the beginning or end of a sea-kayaking excursion.

It's also possible to paddle around Bartlett Cove or near Gustavus without a guide. Raw beginners can try it, but a safer course is to take a guided outing first. **Glacier Bay Sea Kayaks,** based in Gustavus (✆ **907/697-2257;** www.glacierbayseakayaks.com), is the park service concessionaire, operating from May 1 to September 30. They offer day kayak rentals, which begin with an instructional briefing, for $60 a day. Getting dropped off up the bay, a necessity for an expedition among the glaciers, costs $190 round-trip. You will need a backcountry permit from the park service to make a self-guided trip, and you'll have to attend the rental company's briefing. Permits are readily available at the park headquarters, but research what to bring before you leave for the park.

WHALE-WATCHING It's sometimes possible to see whales from the lodge at Bartlett Cove, and visitors often see whales on the day boat cruise that is the main way into the park. Another option practically guarantees whale sightings: The Glacier Bay Ferry, which takes off from the Bartlett Cove Dock four afternoons a week for whale watching in Icy Strait, outside the park. See p. 174.

WHERE TO STAY, CAMP & DINE

Glacier Bay Lodge Operated by the park concessionaire, Glacier Bay Cruiseline, this is the only place to stay in the park (although Gustavus, 10 miles down the road, has some of the most attractive accommodations in Alaska; see the next section). The lodge rooms are comfortable but, for the price, nothing special. The buildings are set amid the soothing quiet of large rainforest trees and are accessible from the main lodge by boardwalks and steps.

The **restaurant** has huge windows looking onto Bartlett Cove, where you can sometimes see whales. There are inexpensive main courses on the dinner menu, but mainly it's a beef and seafood establishment with white tablecloths and dishes in the $20 range. For a pleasant, less expensive meal, order from the menu on the deck after 4:30pm. Breakfast is available as early as 5:30am and dinner as late as 10pm. Drinks are served in the restaurant or on a deck over the cove from

4 to 10pm; on rainy days, visitors congregate around the fire in the comfortable lobby. Laundry facilities and bike rentals are available.

The area's least expensive lodgings are the bunks in men's and women's dorms with six beds each. The lodge also provides public showers for the free park service **campground.** About ¼ mile from the dock, the campground lacks running water but has a warming hut, firewood, and bear-resistant food caches. You have to cook in a fire ring in the intertidal zone and observe other bear avoidance rules that the rangers will explain. Get a camping permit at the ranger station when you arrive; the campground is almost never full.

Bartlett Cove (P.O. Box 199), Gustavus, AK 99826. ✆ **800/451-5952** or 907/697-2226. Fax 206/623-7809 or 907/697-2408. www.glacierbaycruiseline.com. 56 units. $179 double. Extra person $10. Hostel bunks $28 per person. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bike rental; coin-op laundry.

9 Gustavus: Country Inns & Quiet

The unincorporated town of Gustavus (gus-*tave*-us) remains an undiscovered treasure—or at least it succeeds in making itself feel that way. It's wonderfully remote, accessible only by air or a small passenger ferry, but has a selection of comfortable and even luxurious inns and lodges, plus several days' worth of outdoor activities, excellent salmon and halibut fishing, nearly surefire whale-watching, close access to sea kayaking and other activities at Glacier Bay National Park, and places for casual hiking and bicycle outings. Neither large cruise ships nor the Alaska state ferry land here, leaving the roads free of their throngs of shoppers. Miraculously, the 400 townspeople have been smart enough to value what they've got and build on it. Even the gas station is a work of art. Walking, biking, or driving down the quiet roads, everyone you pass—every single person—waves to you.

The buildings, mostly clapboard houses and log cabins, are scattered widely across an oceanfront alluvial plain. Several of the founding homesteads were farms, and the broad clearings of sandy soil wave with hay and wildflowers. The setting is unique in Alaska, and when I had a choice to go anywhere in the state for a 4-day trip with extended family, this is the place I chose. Each of us took something lasting from the trip. My older son, then 8, learned what it was like to be able to bike anywhere at will, making discoveries in the woods and friends on the quiet lanes without his parents reining him in. My parents, in their 60s, glowed when they returned from kayaking among the breaching humpback whales in the park's Bartlett Cove. I often reminisce about a day at the beach when I built dams and sand castles with the children, looking up to see a family of orcas romping just offshore. My cousin won't forget the huge platters of Dungeness crab that came for dinner one night at the inn.

The problem with Gustavus is the expense (and the dampness, but you get used to that). The best outdoor activities involve charters or rentals, which can add more than $200 a day per person to the cost of your trip. Most accommodations have all-inclusive plans, which include great meals but come with price

Tips Be Prepared before Arriving in Gustavus

Gustavus isn't formally a town; it has no bank or ATM and few other businesses. Bring cash, as credit cards aren't always accepted, and don't count on being able to buy incidentals. Reserve all accommodations before you come.

tags of at least $150 per person per night. Less expensive B&Bs exist, but the choice of restaurants for dinner is limited.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The **Glacier Bay Ferry,** a privately-operated passenger vessel (✆ **800/820-2628** or 907/586-8687; www.auknutours.com), leaves Juneau's waterfront bound for the national park headquarters in Bartlett Cove June through August on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8:45am, arriving at 1:15pm. Next, the boat goes on a 2½ hour whale-watching cruise in Icy Strait (sightings guaranteed or your money back), ending up at the Gustavus Dock (vans carry passengers who want to return to Bartlett Cove). At 5pm, the boat leaves Gustavus and arrives back in Juneau at 8:30pm. The schedule may change in 2004, perhaps with daily service; call ahead or check the website. The one-way fare from Juneau to Gustavus/Glacier Bay is $69 adults, $34.50 children. The whale watch alone costs $79 for adults and $60 for children. The combined round-trip and whale watch costs $195. The ferry will carry kayaks, bikes, and other cargo for an added fee, and they serve light meals.

During the summer, **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) flies a jet once a day from Juneau to Gustavus and back in the late afternoon. The fare is around $150, round-trip. For more frequent service by prop from Juneau to Gustavus, at roughly the same fare as Alaska Airlines, use **Wings of Alaska** (✆ **907/789-0790** reservations, or 907/697-2201 in Gustavus; www.wingsofalaska.com).

VISITOR INFORMATION There is no visitor center in Gustavus; there isn't any local government. Only the informal community association holds sway here. Generally, you contact a lodge, and once you're comfortable with them, you allow them to advise you and book your activities. A local online travel agency, **Alaska's Glacier Bay Travel** (✆ **907/697-2475;** www.glacierbaytravel.com), run by the same folks as the TLC Taxi (see below), also can help with choices and reservations. Be certain to reserve a place to stay before showing up in Gustavus.

GETTING AROUND There are just a few roads. The main one starts at the airport and runs about 10 miles to **Bartlett Cove,** the Glacier Bay National Park base of operations. **Dock Road** branches off to the left, at the gas station, and leads to the ocean dock. There's a map posted at the gas station and most businesses will give you one to take along for exploration by bicycle. Many inns and B&Bs have courtesy vans and free bicycles; ask about transportation when you reserve. **TLC Taxi** (✆ **907/697-2239;** e-mail: tlctaxi@glacierbaytravel.com) will carry you and your kayak; the fare depends on the number of travelers (reserve ahead if you need the taxi). **Bud's Rent a Car** is at ✆ **907/697-2403.**

EXPLORING GUSTAVUS

Everything to do in Gustavus involves the outdoors.

HIKING & BICYCLING There are few cars in Gustavus—they have to be hauled here on a barge or plane—but most inns provide bikes. The roads are fun to explore, and the sandy beaches, accessible from the town dock, are great for a walk and a picnic, to watch eagles and other birds and wildlife. You can go many miles, if you are of a mind for a run or long walk, but we saw little reason to go far before stopping to play and picnic on a broad sand beach undisturbed by any other human footprint.

SEA KAYAKING **Alaska Discovery,** 5310 Glacier Hwy., Juneau (✆ **800/586-1911** or 907/780-6226; www.akdiscovery.com), offers an easy 3-day, 2-night kayaking expedition among the whales for $799 per person. They take a boat to a base camp, then kayak among the whales from there. The outing is suitable for fit beginners and older children. Gustavus-based **Spirit Walker Expeditions** (✆ **800/KAYAKER** or 907/697-2266; www.seakayakalaska.com) has a good reputation locally. They lead guided 1- to 7-day trips to the whale-watching grounds and beyond. **Sea Otter Kayak Glacier Bay** (✆ **907/697-3007;** www.he.net/~seaotter) rents kayaks and gear and provides basic training (although beginners should go with a guide) on Dock Road for Gustavus or Glacier Bay waters. They also help with trip planning.

WHALE-WATCHING & FISHING Whales keep their own schedule, but you're almost certain to see them on a whale-watching excursion here, where the swirling current of Icy Strait creates such a rich feeding ground that humpbacks come back every summer without fail. Whale-watching trips aboard the Glacier Bay Ferry, a large, comfortable catamaran (see "Getting There," above), leave Bartlett Cove Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 2pm, returning to the Gustavus Dock at 4:30pm. The commentary is first rate, and a good, light meal is included in the price. The fare is $79 adults, $60 children, and you get your money back if you don't see whales—which virtually never happens.

Other smaller operators will provide a more intimate experience on smaller boats, usually getting you closer to the whales. They'll also combine the trip with superb halibut and salmon fishing (if salmon are running). The waters are protected and seasickness is generally not a concern. Your inn host in Gustavus can make the arrangements. A boat typically charters for $200 or more per person for a full day, plus the cost of having your fish professionally packed and shipped home for you.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Gustavus contains some of Alaska's best remote accommodations, more than I have room to describe here. In addition to the accommodations detailed below, another of the best is the **Glacier Bay Country Inn,** Tong Road (✆ **800/628-0912** or 907/697-2288; www.glacierbayalaska.com).

Most accommodations are "Gustavus style," which means they charge a daily per-person price for rooms, breakfast and dinner served family style, brown-bag lunches, bicycles and some other outdoor equipment, transfers, and booking fishing, sea kayaking, hiking, and Glacier Bay tours (these activities cost extra). It's expensive, but it's a great way to visit. Another set of accommodations charges less, but leaves you on your own for lunch and dinner.

If you choose the less costly, a la carte approach, you'll likely take your evening meals at the inns anyway, as Gustavus is short on restaurants. You'll have to make prior arrangements; you can't just show up and eat. The Glacier Bay Lodge serves three meals a day—but it's 10 miles away at the park's Bartlett Cove headquarters. Several free-standing restaurants have gone out of business periodically around town; your innkeeper can direct you to one that's currently operating. Also, a country store on Dock Road sells basics for picnics or cooking yourself.

One restaurant that's been going strong for several years is **A Bear's Nest Cafe,** on Rink Creek Road (✆ **907/697-2440**), where the often braided Lynne Morrow serves organic dishes, homemade bread, seafood specials, soup, sandwiches, and dessert in a dining room that's also the ground floor of her house,

from 11am to 9pm daily in the summer. She accepts Discover, MasterCard, and Visa and has a couple of cabins for rent, too.

Except as noted, rooms in Gustavus don't have phones. Some of the inns do not have licenses to serve alcohol; if that's a consideration, be sure to ask before you book your stay.

Blue Heron Bed and Breakfast at Glacier Bay ★ Stay here if your budget doesn't allow a pricey all-inclusive package, and you'll still get many of the same comforts in fresh, attractive rooms with features such as VCRs, comforters, and superior linens. The hosts, longtime residents, are enthusiastic about their guests and serve large breakfasts. If you rent one of the cottages, you can cook your own evening meal; even the rooms have limited cooking facilities. The location is among the wildflowers and marshland near the Gustavus waterfront.

Off Dock Rd. (P.O. Box 77), Gustavus, AK 99826. ✆ **907-697-2337.** Fax 907/697-2293. www.blueheronbnb.net. 2 units, 2 cabins. $130 double, $160 double cottage; Extra adult $60–$70; discounts for children. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Free bike loan; courtesy van; massage; laundry machines ($6 per load). *In room:* TV/VCR.

Glacier Bay's Bear Track Inn ★★★ Six miles from Gustavus, this extraordinary log building faces its own field of wildflowers, which, if you walk ½ a mile across it, leads to the sea. You look out on this scene from a lobby with a huge fireplace, a ceiling 28 feet high, and a wall of windows. The immense logs of the walls and the isolation give the place the feeling of a wilderness lodge, but the rooms are as good as those of any upscale hotel, and have the advantage of large dormer windows with sweeping views. Objectively, it's the best place in Gustavus, and one of the best remote lodges in Alaska; however, I found it too perfect to hold much charm. Unlike other lodges and inns in Gustavus, meals are cooked to order from a varied menu; the inn serves beer and wine. Those not staying here can buy dinner, too. The inn has its own car rental company.

255 Rink Rd., Gustavus, AK 99826. ✆ **888/697-2284** or 907/697-3017. Fax 907/697-2284. www.beartrackinn.com. 14 units. $454 per person, double occupancy; discounts for additional nights. Rates include round-trip air from Juneau, transfers and all meals. DISC, MC, V. Closed Oct–Apr. **Amenities:** Restaurant; free bike loan; children's programs; concierge; tour desk; car rental; business center; limited room service; massage; babysitting; laundry service. *In room:* Hair dryer.

Gustavus Inn at Glacier Bay ★★★ This is the original and still my favorite of the Gustavus full-service inns. By objective standards of modern luxury, imitators have surpassed the old homestead farmhouse, but no one could duplicate the extraordinary hospitality of the Lesh family, honed over 35 years of running the inn. They know how to make guests feel immediately a part of the place. The site is unsurpassed, too, standing at the center of the community amid blowing grass, with a huge vegetable garden that provides much of the dining room's wonderful food. Dave, the chef, has published a cookbook. The seasonings he uses on seafood are a real revelation, and dishes are served on big, inexhaustible platters in the dining room, where there's also a beer and wine bar and sushi appetizers. Before you get to the inn, talk over the activities that you want to experience with Dave or his father, Jack, and let them book everything.

Gustavus Rd. (P.O. Box 60), Gustavus, AK 99826. ✆ **800/649-5220** or 907/697-2254. Fax 907/697-2255. www.gustavusinn.com. 11 units. $150 per person per night based on double or triple occupancy. Half price for children under 12. Rates include all meals. AE, MC, V. Closed Sept 16–May 15. **Amenities:** Restaurant; fishing rods (bring your own tackle); bike loan; courtesy car; laundry service.

10 Haines: Eagles & the Unexpected

For years we always just passed through Haines on the way from the ferry up the highway. I didn't know what I was missing until I stopped and took a couple of days to really investigate. Now Haines is one of my favorite Alaska towns.

Haines is casual, happy, and slightly odd. It waits for you to find it, but once found, it unveils wonderful charms. If you're looking for the mythical town of Cicely from television's *Northern Exposure,* you'll get closer in Haines than anyplace else I know (in fact, the producers scouted here before choosing to shoot in Roslyn, Washington). As I walked down a sidewalk, I saw a sign in a storefront that said to look in the big tree across the street. I looked, and there was an eagle peering back at me. At the Alaska Indian Arts Native cultural center, seeking an office or a ticket window or someone in charge, I wandered into a totem pole studio where a carver was completing a major commission. He gladly stopped to talk. It turned out there wasn't anyone in charge. Issues that are a big deal in some other towns just aren't in Haines.

Haines's dominant feature, the 1904 **Fort William H. Seward,** gives the town a pastoral atmosphere. The fort is a collection of grand white-clapboard buildings arranged around a 9-acre parade ground, in the middle of which stands a Tlingit clan house—out of place, yes, but wonderfully symbolic of Haines. The town is a friendly, accessible center of Tlingit culture as well as a retired outpost of seemingly pointless military activity.

And Haines has **bald eagles**—always plenty of bald eagles, and in the fall, a ridiculous number of bald eagles. More, in fact, than anywhere else on earth. The chance to see the birds draws people into the outdoors here. There are well-established guides for any activity you might want to pursue, all cooperating and located together. There are some excellent hiking trails right from town, as well as protected sea-kayaking waters. Also, it's worth noting that because of its location in the flow of weather, adjacent to the drier Interior, Haines is not quite as rainy as towns farther south.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The **Alaska Marine Highway System,** 1591 Glacier Ave., Juneau, AK 99801-1427 (✆ **800/642-0066,** or 907/766-2111 locally; www.ferryalaska.com), is how most people get to Haines, and the cruise on the Lynn Canal fjord from Juneau or Skagway is among the most beautiful in the Inside Passage. The fare is $27 from Juneau and $21 from Skagway. The dock is 5 miles north of town. Unfortunately, since this is the northern highway connection where nearly all vehicles get off or on, there are often delays.

If you're just going to or from Skagway without a car, a good alternative is the Haines-Skagway Fast Ferry, operated by **Chilkat Cruises and Tours** (✆ **888/766-2103** or 907/766-2100; www.chilkatcruises.com). The company's *Fairweather Express,* a 150-passenger catamaran, makes at least three 35-minute round-trip runs a day. The catamaran leaves from the Port Chilkoot dock, below Fort William Seward. Adult round-trips are $44, one-way $24; children 12 and under pay half price. Weekend cruises to Juneau are $69 round-trip, $39 one-way.

If you're driving, the **Haines Highway** leads 155 miles to Haines Junction, Yukon Territory, an intersection with the Alaska Highway (you must pass through Canadian Customs—see the "Alaska Highway" section in chapter 9 for rules). The road runs along the Chilkat River and the bald eagle preserve, then climbs into spectacular alpine terrain. Anchorage is 760 driving miles from Haines; Fairbanks is 644.

Several air companies offer scheduled prop service, air taxis, and flightseeing tours to surrounding communities from Haines. **Wings of Alaska** (✆ **907/789-0790** reservations, or 907/766-2030 in Haines; www.wingsofalaska.com) has plenty of flights, charging $160 round trip from Juneau.

VISITOR INFORMATION The small but well-staffed and -stocked **Haines Convention and Visitors Bureau Visitor Information Center,** 2nd Avenue near Willard (P.O. Box 530), Haines, AK 99827 (✆ **800/458-3579** or 907/766-2234; www.haines.ak.us), is operated by the city government, which also sends out a vacation-planning packet. It's open summer Monday through Friday from 8am to 7pm, Saturday from 9am to 5pm, Sunday from 11am to 5pm; in winter, hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm.

ORIENTATION Haines sits on the narrow Chilkat Peninsula near the north end of the Southeast Alaska Panhandle. Highways run north and east on either side of the peninsula; the one on the east side goes to the ferry dock, 5 miles out, and ends after 11 miles at **Chilkoot Lake.** The other is the **Haines Highway,** which leads to the Canadian border, the Alaska Highway, and the rest of the world.

The town has two parts: the sparsely built downtown grid and, a short walk to the west down Front Street or 2nd Avenue, the Fort William Seward area. Vans and buses that meet the ferry offer free or inexpensive transfers, seeking to take you on a town tour.

GETTING AROUND Bikes are available from **Sockeye Cycle,** just uphill from the Port Chilkoot Dock on Portage Street in the Fort William Seward area (✆ **907/766-2869;** www.cyclealaska.com), for $12 for 2 hours or $30 a day.

Haines Shuttle and Tours is a taxi and shuttle service. It can be reached at ✆ **907/766-3138.** Rent at **Affordable Cars,** in the Captain's Choice Motel (see "Where to Stay," below).

FAST FACTS: Haines

Bank **First National Bank of Alaska,** which has an ATM, is at Main Street and 2nd Avenue.

Hospital The **Haines Medical Clinic** (✆ **907/766-2521**) is on 1st Avenue, near the visitor center.

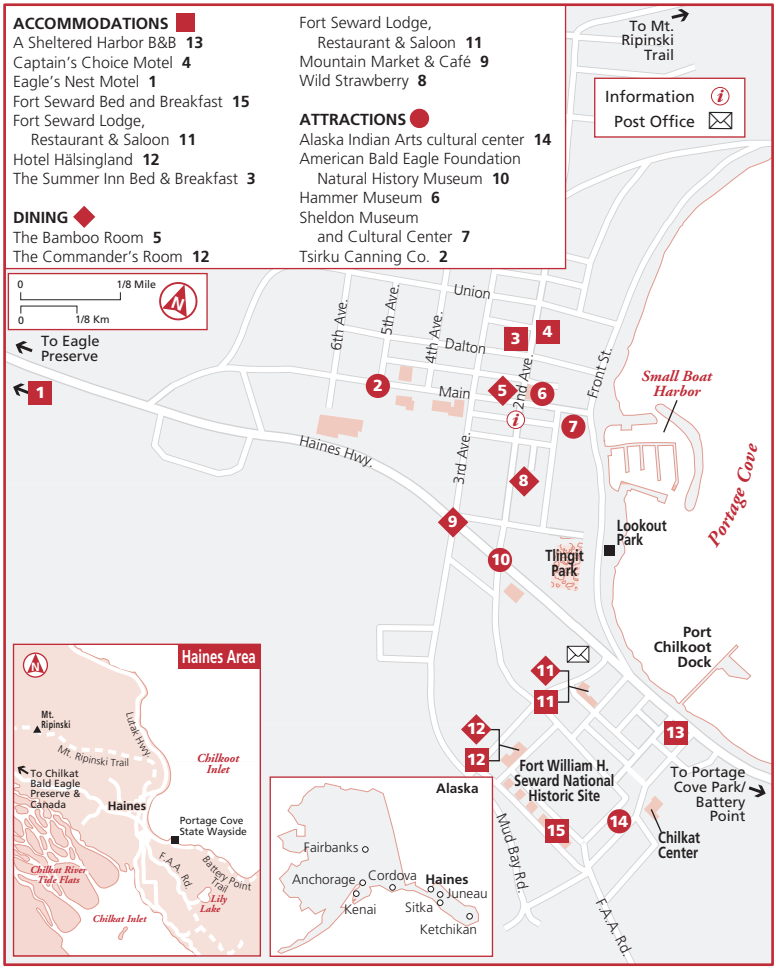
Internet Access **Mountain Market,** at 3rd Avenue and the Haines Highway (✆ **907/766-3340**), charges $8 an hour. Nearby, at the gorgeous **Haines Borough Library,** 111 3rd Ave. S. (✆ **907/766-2545,** www.haineslibrary.org), you can log on for free.

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. Reach city police in non-emergencies at ✆ **907/766-2121.** Outside city limits, call the **Alaska State Troopers** at ✆ **907/766-2552.**

Post Office At 55 Haines Hwy., just west of Fort Seward.

Taxes The local sales tax is 5.5%.

SPECIAL EVENTS The 160-mile **Kluane to Chilkat International Bike Relay** (✆ **907/766-2202**) is held the third Saturday in June, heading steeply down the Haines Highway from Haines Junction, with more than 1,000 entrants riding in teams of two, four or eight.



The **Southeast Alaska State Fair and Bald Eagle Music Festival** (✆ **907/766-2476,** www.seakfair.org) is the biggest event of the summer, held for 4 days in mid-August; it's a regional small-town get-together, with livestock, cooking, a logging show, a parade, music, and other entertainment. Buildings constructed for the filming of the movie *White Fang* in 1990 were donated to the fair, and now form the nucleus of a retail area here. (One stop of interest here, at any time, is the local microbrewery, Haines Brewing Co., which offers samples and informal tours.)

The **Alaska Bald Eagle Festival** (✆ **907/766-2202;** www.baldeaglefest.org) offers seminars and special events to mark the annual eagle congregation. Held over 4 days the second weekend in November, it is timed to allow visitors to also attend the WhaleFest in Sitka.

EXPLORING HAINES

It seems that each year Haines further cements its position as Alaska's center of odd or unusual museums. In the spirit of this distinction, I've described these

attractions in the order of their creation, beginning with the Tlingit art center in an old military hospital and ending with newest addition, a collection of more than 1,000 hammers.

As mentioned before, the town's main feature is **Fort William H. Seward National Historic Site,** a collection of large, white, wood-frame buildings around sloping parade grounds overlooking the magnificent Lynn Canal fjord. Get the informative walking-tour map of the National Historic Site from the Haines Convention and Visitors Bureau for additional information and a walking tour. The fort led a peaceful life for a military installation. By the time the U.S. Army built the fort, in 1904, the Klondike gold rush was over, and there's no evidence that it ever deterred any attack on this little peninsula at the north end of the Inside Passage. The fort was deactivated after being used for training during World War II.

In 1947, a group of five veterans from the Lower 48 bought the fort as surplus with the idea of forming a planned community. That idea didn't quite work out, but one of the new white families helped spark a Chilkat Tlingit cultural renaissance in the 1950s. The Heinmillers, who still own a majority of the shares in the fort, were looking for something to do with all of the property when someone suggested a Tlingit tribal house on the parade grounds. The project, led by a pair of elders, took on a life of its own, and the **Alaska Indian Arts** cultural center was built. Lee Heinmiller, a member of the second generation of the family, still manages the arts center, where you can see totem carving and silversmithing practiced. It is open from 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday and evenings when cruise ships are in town. It occupies the old fort hospital on the south side of the parade grounds.

In the downtown area, the **Sheldon Museum and Cultural Center,** 11 Main St. (✆ **907/766-2366;** www.sheldonmuseum.org), contains an upstairs gallery of well-presented Tlingit art and cultural artifacts; downstairs is an exhibit on the white history of the town. There's a uniquely personal feel to the Tlingit objects, some of which are displayed with pictures of the artisans who made them and the history of their relationship with the Sheldons, for whom the museum is named. It's open in summer Monday through Friday 11am to 6pm, Saturday and Sunday 2pm to 6pm; in winter it's open Monday through Friday from 1 to 4pm. Admission is $3 for adults, free for children under 12.

The entirely unique **American Bald Eagle Foundation Natural History Museum,** at 2nd Avenue and Haines Highway (✆ **907/766-3094;** www.baldeagles.org), is essentially a huge, hair-raising diorama of more than 180 eagles and other animal mounts. Dave Olerud often sits in a wheelchair behind the desk and will talk your ear off about the museum if you want him to—he worked on it for 18 years and was paralyzed in a fall during construction. Admission is $3 adults, $1 ages 8 to 12. It's open summer Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 4pm; winter Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 1 to 4pm.

The **Tsirku Canning Co.,** at 5th Avenue and Main Street (✆ **907/766-3474;** www.cannerytour.com), is a museum of Alaska salmon canning, full of 80-year-old machinery salvaged from abandoned canneries around the state, including a 120-foot line that goes through the process of canning imaginary fish. The fishing industry remains the state's largest employer, and for a long time was Alaska's largest industry by any measure. In 1929, 157 canneries stood all along the coast, teeming with summer workers and served by frequent

steamer service. Today, nothing remains of many of these former canning places except broken dock pilings. Haines had nine canneries at one point. The hour-long tour of the canning museum, including a 10-minute video, costs $10. The times for the tours change annually; call ahead.

The newest addition to Haines' line-up of unusual institutions is the **Hammer Museum,** at 108 Main St., across from the bank (✆ **907/766-2374**). Longshoreman Dave Pahl started his collection of hammers over a couple of decades of building a homestead. He found the prize of his collection, an 800-year-old Tlingit war hammer, while digging up the foundation of the museum itself. More than 1,000 hammers from all over the world, old and new, exotic and ordinary, fill a tiny space. The fun part is guessing what each is for. It is open summer Monday through Friday 10am to 5pm, closed during the winter. Admission is $2 adults, free for children.

GETTING OUTSIDE

EAGLE VIEWING Haines is probably the best place on earth to see bald eagles. The **Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve** protects 48,000 acres of river bottom along the Chilkat River. From October to mid-December, peaking around Thanksgiving, up to 3,000 eagles gather in the cottonwood trees (also known as western poplar) on a small section of the river, a phenomenon known as the Fall Congregation. (A healthy 200–400 are resident the rest of the year.) The eagles come for easy winter food: A very late salmon run spawns here into December in a 5-mile stretch of open water known as the Council Grounds. During the Congregation, dozens of eagles stand in each of the gnarled, leafless cottonwoods on the riverbanks, occasionally diving for a fish. The best places to see them are pull-outs, paths, and viewing areas along the Haines Highway from miles 18 to 21. Don't walk on the flats, as that disturbs the eagles. The preserve is managed by **Alaska State Parks** (www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks" and choose the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve). Contact the local ranger at ✆ **907/766-2292;** the headquarters is at 400 Willoughby, 3rd Floor, Juneau, AK 99801.

Local guides offer trips to see the eagles by raft, bicycle, or bus—mostly in the summer, when the eagles are fewer but visitors more numerous. **Chilkat Guides,** based at 1 Mile Haines Hwy. along Sawmill Road (✆ **907/766-2491;** www.raftalaska.com), does a rafting trip twice a day during the summer down the Chilkat to watch the eagles. The water is gentle—if it's too low, there's a chance you'll be asked to get out and push—and you'll see lots of eagles, mostly at a distance. The company is run by young people who create a sense of fellowship with their clients. The 4-hour trip, with a snack, costs $79 for adults, $62 for children. **Sockeye Cycle** (see "Biking," below) has guided bike tours to see eagles and Fort Seward on a 90-minute trip that costs $42. Serious bird watchers should join **Alaska Nature Tours** (✆ **907/766-2876;** www.alaskanaturetours.net), which leads 3-hour wildlife viewing tours by bus for $55 year round. The company also offers longer tours, such as all-day guided hikes, for $100, in and around the preserve. They also offer skiing.

BIKING **Sockeye Cycle,** at 24 Portage St., near the dock (✆ **907/766-2869;** www.cyclealaska.com), leads a variety of guided trips—a couple of hours, half or full day, or even a 9-day trek along gold rush routes. A 3-hour ride along Chilkoot Lake costs $85. Or you can rent your own bicycle for $30 a day. The area is quite conducive to biking.

FISHING There are several charter operators in Haines for halibut and salmon fishing, and there is guided freshwater fishing for silver or sockeye salmon, Dolly Varden, and cutthroat trout. The **Haines Convention and Visitors Bureau,** 2nd Street near Willard (P.O. Box 530), Haines, AK 99827 (✆ **800/458-3579** or 907/766-2234; www.haines.ak.us) can help you find a guide or fishing lodge through the links on their website or the operator list they keep at the office. For self-guided fishing advice and weekly updates of what's running, contact the local office of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (✆ **907/766-2625;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click on "Sport Fish," then "Region 1"). See "Sea Kayaking & Boating," below, for self-guided boat rental.

FLIGHTSEEING This is one of Alaska's best places to go flightseeing. The Inside Passage is beautiful, and one mountain away is Glacier Bay National Park; the icefield and the glaciers spilling through to the sea are a sight you won't forget. It's possible to land on an immense glacial icefield and see the sun slicing between the craggy peaks. **Alaska Mountain Flying and Travel,** 132 2nd Ave. (✆ **800/954-8747** or 907/766-3007; www.flyglacierbay.com), offers these flights; the owner and pilot is known for his glacier and beach landings. Prices range from $115 to $259 per person, and reservations are recommended. Other flight services offer these tours, too; ask at the visitor center.

HIKING There are several good trails near Haines, ranging from an easy beach walk to a 10-mile, 4,000-foot climb of **Mount Ripinsky,** north of town (it starts at the top of Young Street). Get the *Haines Is for Hikers* trail guide from the visitors' bureau. The easiest for families is the **Battery Point Trail,** which goes 2⅓ miles along a beach adorned with wild iris. The trail starts at the end of the shore road that leads southeast from the Port Chilkoot cruise-ship dock. **Mount Riley** is south of town, with three trail routes to a 1,760-foot summit that features great views and feels much higher than it is; get the trail guide or ask directions to one of the trailheads. **Seduction Point Trail** is 7 miles long, starting at Chilkat State Park at the end of Mud Bay Road south of town and leading to the end of the Chilkat Peninsula. It's a beach walk, so check the tides; they'll give you a tide table at the visitors bureau.

SEA KAYAKING & BOATING **Deishu Expeditions,** 425 Beach Rd. (✆ **800/552-9257** or 907/766-2427; www.seakayaks.com), offers instruction, short guided trips, longer expeditions, and rentals ($45 a day for a single, plus $25 for drop-off and pickup anywhere on the Haines Rd. system; or paddle right from the shop). A ½-day guided paddle is $85, including a snack; a full day, including lunch, is $125. They also offer rental of top-quality welded aluminum boats for self-guided sightseeing, fishing, or remote sea kayaking. You can take these well-equipped, heavy-duty skiffs out on your own to explore the places that only very experienced kayakers are able to reach. This freedom is a unique feeling. The boats are 23 feet long and rent for $300 for 8 hours, with fishing gear available (and they have good stuff, including fish finders and down riggers); it's a good deal. They also rent from Skagway. For this line of Deishu's Expeditions' business, the website is www.alaskaboatrentals.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Besides the hotels I've listed below, you'll find good economy rooms at these other places: **A Sheltered Harbor B&B,** 57 Beach Rd. (✆ or fax **907/766-2741;** www.geocities.com/asheltered); **Fort Seward Lodge, Restaurant & Saloon,** in the old fort exchange (✆ **800/478-7772** or 907/766-2009;

www.ftsewardlodge.com); and **Eagle's Nest Motel,** Mile 1, Haines Hwy. (✆ **800/354-6009** or 907/766-2891; www.eaglesnest.wytbear.com).

Captain's Choice Motel ★ Many towns have a lot of chainlike hotels and only one or two unique places with character. In Haines, the situation is reversed, and these trim, red-roofed buildings are that one exception to the rule of unusual, eccentric accommodations. This motel offers standard rooms containing all the anticipated amenities. Yet it still has a certain amount of charm, making it—objectively, anyway—probably the best hotel in town. The room decor is on the dark side, with paneling, and is somewhat out-of-date, but it's quite clean, and many of the rooms along a large sun deck have good views. A restaurant, lounge, and breakfast area were planned for completion by the 2004 season.

108 2nd St. N. at Dalton St. (P.O. Box 392), Haines, AK 99827. ✆ **800/478-2345** or 907/766-3111. Fax 907/766-3332. www.capchoice.com. 39 units. High season $110 double; $165 suite. Low season $76 double; $145 suite. Extra person $5. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Tour desk; car rental; courtesy van; limited room service; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker.

Fort Seward Bed and Breakfast ★ *Finds* The fort surgeon's quarters, with a big wraparound porch, overlooks the parade grounds and the Lynn Canal and has an unspoiled historic feel. Norm Smith has lived in this house most of his life, and in 1981 he started the B&B with his wife, Suzanne, a gifted hostess who instantly makes you feel like an old friend. The rooms have high ceilings, fireplaces, wonderful cabinetry—all kinds of authentic charm. It's a social place, with a barbecue on the porch, and guests are welcome to use the kitchen, where Norm produces a fine full breakfast. Smoking is not allowed.

1 Fort Seward Dr. (P.O. Box 5), Haines, AK 99827. ✆ **800/615-NORM** or phone/fax 907/766-2856. www.fortsewardbnb.com. 7 units, 4 with private bathroom. High season $90–$128 double; low season $78 double. Extra person $25. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed Oct 15–Easter. **Amenities:** Bike loan; courtesy car. *In room:* TV/VCR.

Hotel Hälsingland ★ This grandly rambling hotel fell on hard times after more than 50 years in the same family until new owners, Jeff and Shannon Butcher, took over in 2002 and started putting in a lot of work, including the addition of new carpeting, furniture, drapes, paint, and beds. The hotel has always been the most interesting place in town to stay. The group of buildings, designated a National Historic Landmark, served as the Commanding Officer's Quarters for Fort William Seward during both World Wars. You can almost hear well-shined boots on the wood floors, echoing off high ceilings and old-fashioned woodwork. Rooms vary widely, so it's a good idea to take a look before checking in. Those with private bathrooms have only shower stalls, not tubs. The hotel also books tours and has an RV park out back.

The remodeled **Commander's Room** restaurant offers a short menu of expertly prepared dishes, with prices for main courses in the $13 to $30 range. It's open for dinner and breakfast. The small bar has craft brews on tap. This is a friendly, low-key place in the evening.

Fort William Seward parade grounds (P.O. Box 1589), Haines, AK 99827. ✆ **800/542-6363** or 907/766-2000. Fax 907/766-2060. www.hotelhalsingland.com. 50 units, 45 with private bathroom. $69 double without bathroom, $109 double with private bathroom. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed mid-Nov–mid-Mar. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

The Summer Inn Bed & Breakfast *Value* This lovely old clapboard house downtown has a big porch and living room, and is decorated in whites and pale, lacy fabrics, like Grandma's house. The five rooms are cozy but small, and share

three bathrooms among them (bathrooms were immaculate when we last visited). The house was built by a reputed former member of Soapy Smith's gang in 1912 (see Skagway section for more on Soapy) and the great big claw foot tub is said to be the first in the history of Haines upstairs bathtubs. No smoking or drinking allowed.

117 2nd Ave. (P.O. Box 1198), Haines, AK 99827. ✆ and fax **907/766-2970.** www.summerinn.wytbear.com. 5 units, none with private bathroom. High season $80 double, $100 suite. Low season $70 double, $90 suite. Extra person $15. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V.

WHERE TO DINE

Haines doesn't have a great restaurant, but you can eat well at the Hotel Haälsingland (see "Where to Stay," above) during the summer, and there are lots of places for a burger or a slice of pizza. Among the best lunch places is the **Mountain Market & Café** ★, a natural food and grocery store at 3rd Avenue and the Haines Highway (✆ **907/766-3340**). The main town hangout and the best espresso stop, it serves hearty and reasonably priced sandwiches, tortilla wraps, and soups, and many fresh baked goods. Pick up a picnic, or stop by for coffee (roasted in-house) or breakfast.

The Bamboo Room ★ DINER/SEAFOOD This small restaurant, which has been in the same family for 50 years, was rescued from being a smoky adjunct to the bar next door. It has been divided off by attractive etched glass and made into a first-class diner serving burgers, salads, pasta, and lots of seafood. Many light and healthful items are on the menu along with the solid fried foods. The restaurant occupies a building that started as a French restaurant during the gold rush era and then became a brothel and speakeasy before the Tengs family started a restaurant here in 1953. The history is on the back of the menu. Get the halibut and chips.

2nd Ave. near Main St. ✆ **907/766-2474.** www.bambooroom.net. Lunch $6–$13; dinner $6–$23. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. Summer daily 6am–midnight; winter daily 6am–8pm.

Fort Seward Lodge, Restaurant & Saloon ★ STEAK/SEAFOOD A favorite of the locals, this restaurant occupies a tall room in the old Post Exchange of the historic fort, where patrons have long speared dollar bills to the ceiling. The restaurant is now papered with money. This is a fun place, with a friendly and gregarious staff and a partying tradition (although the bar is in a separate room). The food—simple seafood, meat, and vegetables—is among the best in town. The prime rib is especially famous, and in midsummer there is all-you-can-eat Dungeness crab. The full bar has Alaska microbrews on tap.

Mile 0 Haines Hwy., in Fort William Seward. ✆ **907/766-2009.** www.ftsewardlodge.com. Dinner $8–$25. DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 5–10pm; winter daily 5:30–9pm.

Wild Strawberry ★ SEAFOOD/DOWNHOME Owners Jim and Pam Moore also own a commercial fishing boat which Jim uses to catch the meals that are served to guests here. The fish is prepared many ways. The range of dishes includes such offering as Cajun king salmon steak, halibut tacos, tiger shrimp Alfredo linguini, and gingered sablefish—a regional dish you should have at least once. There is even halibut on the breakfast menu. The cedar-covered building, located two doors from the visitor center downtown, looks something like an ornate barn. Sit upstairs in comfortable, candlelit booths or outside on the covered patio. They serve beer and wine.

138 2nd Ave. S. ✆ **907/766-3608.** Lunch $8–$13, dinner $15–$25. MC, V. May–Sept daily 7am–9pm. Closed Oct–Apr.

Tips A Quick Side Trip to Juneau from Haines or Skagway

If you're visiting Skagway or Haines by highway, you can make a day trip to see the highlights of Juneau without a lot of hassle. **Alaska Fjordlines** (✆ **800-320-0146;** www.alaskafjordlines.com) carries passengers to Juneau on a high-speed catamaran to spend ½ a day in the city. The boat fare all by itself is $109 from Skagway, $99 from Haines, round-trip. For $20 more, add a narrated bus tour in Juneau. The whole day is 10 to 12 hours, depending on your starting point.

11 Skagway: After the Gold Rush

It's only been 100 years since white civilization came to Alaska. There were a few scattered towns in Southeast before that—Juneau, Sitka, and Wrangell, for example—but until the Klondike Gold Rush, the great mass of Alaska was populated only by Natives who had never seen a white face. Then, in a single year, 1898, the population exploded. It still stands as the biggest event in Alaska's short but eventful history, for the flow of people in a few short years set the patterns of development for years to come.

In the rush years of 1897 and 1898, Skagway and its ghost-town twin city of Dyea were the logical places to get off the boat to head off on a trek to the gold fields near the new city of Dawson City, Yukon Territories (see "Dawson City & Eagle: Detour Into History," p. 390). Skagway instantly grew from a single homestead to a population of between 15,000 and 25,000. No one knows exactly how many people passed through the area at that time—in part because the people were flowing through town so fast but also because there was no civil authority to count them. This was a wide-open boomtown, a true Wild West outpost that in its biggest years was completely without law other than the survival of the meanest. Then, almost as quickly as it started, the rush ended and the town deflated.

But Skagway survived by showing off where it all happened. In 1896 there was a single log cabin in Skagway, in 1897 the word of the Klondike strike made it to the outside world, and in 1898 Skagway was a huge gold rush boomtown. In 1899 the gold rush was ending, and in 1903, 300 tourists arrived in a single day to see where the gold rush happened. By 1908, local businessmen had started developing tourist attractions, moving picturesque gold rush buildings to Broadway, the main street, to create a more unified image when visitors arrived on the steamers. By 1920, tourism had become an important part of the economy. By 1933, historic preservation efforts had started. Today, more money and more than 20 times as many visitors come through in a year as made the trip to the Klondike during the gold rush.

With 862 residents and about half a million visitors annually, the "real" town has all but disappeared, and most of the people you'll meet are either fellow visitors or summer workers brought north to serve them. Most of the tourists are from cruise ships—it's not unusual for several ships to hit town in a single morning, unleashing waves of people up the wharf and into the one historic street. There are plenty of highway and ferry travelers, too, and outdoor enthusiasts come to do the Chilkoot Trail, just as the stampeders did.

Is it worth all those visits? Skagway, spared from fire and recognized so long ago for its history, may be the best-preserved gold rush town in the United States. What happened here in a 2-year period was certainly extraordinary, even if the phenomenon that the town celebrates is one of mass insanity based on greed, inhumanity, thuggery, prostitution, waste, and, for most, abject failure. While Canada was well policed by the Mounties, Skagway was truly lawless—a hell on earth, as one Mountie described it. Soapy Smith ruled this scam-pire with a team of con artists and toughs who milked suckers for every dollar available. Half of the stories about Soapy are probably lies, but this one is too good not to repeat: he set up a telegraph office for suckers to wire their money home, but with no telegraph line. Such was his influence and high repute in the newspapers he controlled, the governor offered to put Smith officially in charge as a territorial marshal and rode with him in the 1898 Independence Day parade. Four days later, Smith was shot dead in a gunfight with Frank Reid, who led a vigilante committee upset over one of Smith's thefts. Reid died of wounds sustained in the shootout, too, but Soapy Smith's gang was broken. Of course, the gold rush was about to end anyway.

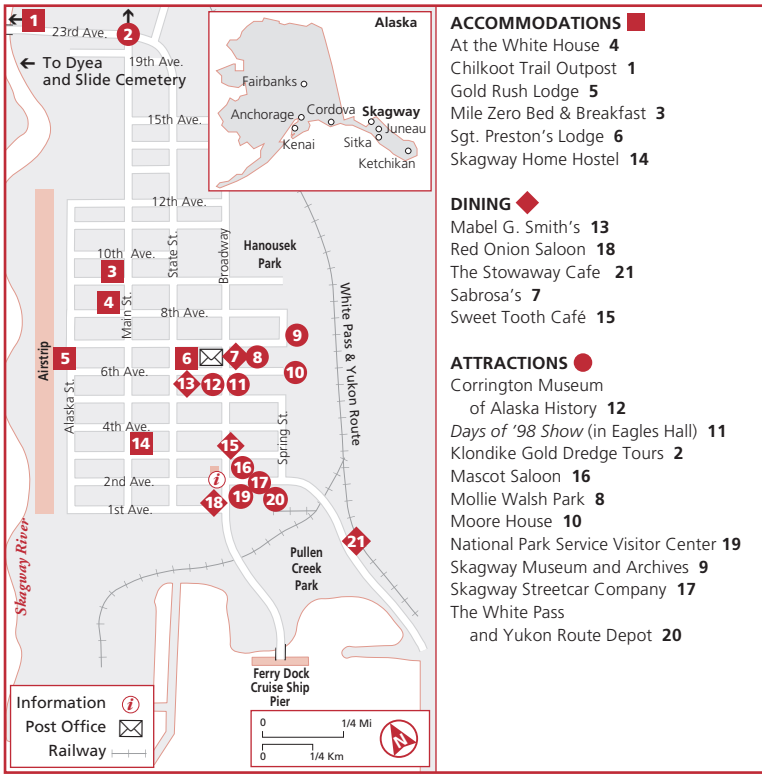
In 1976 the National Park Service began buying many of Skagway's best old buildings for the **Klondike Gold Rush National Historic District,** and now it owns about 15, having completed restoration in 1999. Broadway is a prosperous, freshly painted 6-block strip of gold rush era buildings. A few that look like real businesses turn out to be displays showing how it was back then. Other buildings restored by the park service are under lease to gift shops and such. Sadly, those historic businesses not preserved by the Park Service have been lost to the onslaught of cruise ship-oriented shopping: a curio shop operating since the gold rush was converted a few years ago, and in 2003 the longest operating hotel in Alaska, which dated from the earliest days, became a T-shirt shop.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066,** or 907/983-2941 locally; www.ferryalaska.com) connects Skagway daily with Haines and Juneau. The fare is $21 to and from Haines, $37 to and from Juneau. If you're headed to Haines without a vehicle, consider the private passenger ferry listed under "Getting There" in the Haines section. Haines is 15 miles away by boat but more than 350 miles by road.

Since 1978, **Klondike Highway 2** has traced the route of the stampeders through the White Pass into Canada, a parallel route to the Chilkoot Trail. The road runs 99 miles, then meets the Alaska Highway a dozen miles southeast of the Yukon capital of Whitehorse. The border is at the top of the pass, 14 miles from Skagway. (Information on Customs is in chapter 9 in the Alaska Highway section.) This is one of the most spectacular drives anywhere in Alaska, and the road is a well-maintained two-lane highway with wide shoulders. The views are basically equivalent to those from the White Pass and Yukon Route railway, but a lot cheaper. Do it in clear weather, if possible, as in cloudy weather all you'll see is whiteout. Car rentals are available from **Avis,** in the Westmark Hotel at 3rd and Spring streets (✆ **800/230-4898** or 907/983-2247; www.avis.com).

Riding the ferry or a cruise ship to Skagway and then heading inland in a rented RV is an attractive option. Two agencies rent rigs in Skagway with daily rates of around $200, plus many required extras (it's not a cheap option). **Alaska Motorhome Rentals** (✆ **800/254-9929;** www.alaskarv.com) rents RVs one-way to Anchorage with a $495 drop-off fee, plus the cost of the rental, mileage



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and gas. See chapter 6, about Anchorage, for more on this one-way rental plan. The same company, under a different name, also offers structured RV tours from Skagway as add-ons to cruise vacations; that's covered in chapter 2 under "Getting There & Getting Around." Anchorage-based **ABC Motorhome Rentals** (✆ **800/421-7456** or 907/279-2000; www.abcmotorhome.com) also has an outlet in Skagway.

It takes 2 days to travel by bus between Skagway and Anchorage or Fairbanks; you have to spend the night and change buses in Whitehorse, Yukon. **Alaska Direct Busline** (✆ **800/770-6652** or 907/277-6652) operates year-round from the ferry terminal, charging $215 one-way to Anchorage, $190 to Fairbanks. Call ahead to learn the frequency of service and departure times at the time you plan to travel.

Several air-taxi operators serve Skagway. A round trip from Juneau costs $182 on **Wings of Alaska** (✆ **907/789-0790** reservations, or 907/983-2442 in Skagway; www.wingsofalaska.com).

VISITOR INFORMATION Located in the restored railroad depot, the **National Park Service Visitor Center,** 2nd Avenue and Broadway (P.O. Box 517), Skagway, AK 99840 (✆ **907/983-2921;** www.nps.gov/klgo), is the focal point for activities in Skagway. Rangers answer questions, give lectures and show films, and five times a day lead an excellent guided walking tour. The building houses a small museum that lays the groundwork for the rest of what you'll see.

The park service's programs are free. The visitor center is open May through September daily from 8am to 6pm, the rest of the year Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm.

The **Skagway Convention and Visitors Bureau Center,** 245 Broadway (P.O. Box 1025), Skagway, AK 99840 (✆ **907/983-2854,** fax 907/983-3854; www.skagway.org), occupies the historic Arctic Brotherhood Hall, the building with the driftwood facade. The website contains links to lodgings and activities, and they will send you the information on paper if you request it (order at ✆ 888/762-1898). Stop in especially for the handy and informative *Skagway Walking Tour Map* of historic sites. The center is open daily from 8am to 6pm in the summer, Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm in the winter.

GETTING AROUND Skagway is laid out on a simple grid, with streets branching off from Broadway. All the main sights can be reached on foot.

If you want to go to Dyea (2 miles along Klondike Hwy. 2, then 8 miles on a gravel road) or the gold rush graveyard, a bike is a fun way to do it. **Sockeye Cycle,** on 5th Avenue off Broadway (✆ **907/983-2851;** www.cyclealaska.com), rents good mountain bikes for $12 for 2 hours and leads guided day trips (see "Getting Outside," below).

FAST FACTS: Skagway

Bank **Wells Fargo,** at Broadway at 6th Avenue, has an ATM.

Hospital The **Skagway Medical Clinic,** staffed by a physician's assistant, can be reached at ✆ **907/983-2255** during business hours.

Internet Access There are three choices, including **Alaska Cruiseship Services,** charging $6 an hour, at 2nd Avenue and State Street (✆ **907/983-3398**).

Police Call ✆ **911** for emergencies. For nonemergency business, call ✆ **907/983-2232.** The station is located at State St., just south of First Avenue.

Post Office On Broadway between 6th and 7th avenues.

Taxes Sales tax is 4%. The bed tax totals 8%.

SPECIAL EVENTS **Skagway's July 4th Parade and Celebration,** organized by the city and featuring lots of small-town events, has been a big deal since Soapy Smith led the parade in 1898. **The Klondike Road Relay,** a 110-mile overnight footrace over the pass, brings hundreds of runners in teams of 10 from all over the state. It's held in early September. Call the visitor center for information.

EXPLORING SKAGWAY

You can see most of Skagway on foot, and everything by bike. Many companies also offer car, van, or bus tours, too. No one goes to greater lengths to give travelers a unique experience than Steve Hites, whose **Skagway Streetcar Company,** 270 2nd Ave. (✆ **907/983-2908;** www.skagwaystreetcar.com), uses antique touring vehicles with costumed guides who consider their work "theater without walls." The very personal and amusing 2-hour streetcar tour, based on a tour originally given to President Harding in 1923, is $40 for adults and $20 for children 12 and under. The company operates out of a big gift shop with an espresso

counter and a theater, where the tour finishes. Book the tour at least 2 weeks in advance, as they're always sold out.

TOURING THE HISTORIC PARK

The main thing to do in Skagway is to see the old buildings and historic gold rush places. Do it with the ***Skagway Walking Tour Map*** or join a fascinating National Park Service guided walking tour (see "Visitor Information," above).

Start with a visit to the **museum**, which is located within the National Park Service Visitor Center and in the building next door to the Visitor Center. It helps put everything else in context. Of greatest interest is a collection of food and gear similar to the ton of supplies each prospector was required to carry over the pass in order to gain entry into Canada, a requirement that prevented famine among the stampeders, but made the job of getting to Dawson City an epic struggle.

While they prepared to go over the pass, gold rush greenhorns spent their time in Skagway drinking and getting fleeced in the many gambling dens and brothels. Nothing was against the law in the town's heyday because there was no civil authority. It's hard to picture at times, because everything looks so orderly now, but the park service has tried. For example, the **Mascot Saloon,** at Broadway and 3rd Avenue, has statues bellying up to the bar. It's open daily from 8am to 6pm; admission is free.

The park service offers free tours of the 1897 **Moore House,** near 5th Avenue and Spring Street, from 10am to 5pm during the summer. Ten years before the gold rush happened, Capt. William Moore brilliantly predicted it and homesteaded the land that would become Skagway, knowing that this would be a key staging area. He built a cabin in 1887, which stands nearby. But when the rush hit, the stampeders simply ignored his property claims and built the city on his land without offering compensation. Years later, he won in court.

A block east, on 6th Avenue, is **Mollie Walsh Park,** with a good children's play area, public restrooms, and phones. A sign tells the sad story of one of Skagway's first respectable women, a lady who chose to marry the wrong man among two suitors and was killed by him in a drunken rage. The other suitor—who'd previously killed another rival for her affections—commissioned the bust of Walsh that stands at the park.

The **Gold Rush Cemetery** is 1½ miles from town, up State Street. Used until 1908, it's small and overgrown with spruce trees, but some of the charm and mystery of the place is lost because of the number of visitors and the shiny new paint and maintenance of the wooden markers. The graves of Soapy Smith and Frank Reid are the big attractions, but don't miss the short walk up to Reid Falls. A map is available at the visitor center. The closely spaced dates on many of the markers attest to the epidemics that swept through the throngs of stampeders living in squalid conditions. Remember, there was little sanitation for the tens of thousands who passed this way in 1898.

About 9 miles north of Skagway is the ghost town of **Dyea,** where stampeders started climbing the Chilkoot Trail. It's a lovely coastal drive or bike ride: From Skagway, go 2 miles up Klondike Highway 2 and then turn left, continuing 8 miles on gravel road. Dyea is a lot more ghost than town. All that remains are a few boards, broken dock pilings, and miscellaneous iron trash. On a sunny day, however, the protected historical site is a perfect place for a picnic, among beach grasses, fields of wild iris, and the occasional reminder that a city once stood here. The National Park Service leads an interesting guided history and

nature walk here daily, usually at 2pm; check at the visitor center. (See "Getting Outside," below, for things to do in and around Dyea.)

The little-visited **Slide Cemetery,** in the woods near Dyea, is the last resting place of many of the 60 to 70 who died in an avalanche on the Chilkoot Trail on Palm Sunday, April 3, 1898. No one knows how many are here, or exactly who died, or how accurate the wooden markers are. In 1960, when the state reopened the Chilkoot Trail, the cemetery had been completely overgrown and the markers were replaced. But somehow the mystery and forgetting make it an even more ghostly place, and the sense of anonymous, hopeless hardship and death it conveys is as authentic a gold rush souvenir as anything in Skagway.

MUSEUMS & ATTRACTIONS

Corrington Museum of Alaska History The eclectic exhibit that leads into the gift shop here is well worth a brief stop. Alaska's history is told in 32 pieces of walrus ivory scrimshaw. Besides owning some interesting items, they've done a good job of putting it all together in an understandable way.

5th Ave. and Broadway, in Corrington's gift shop. ✆ **907/983-2580.** Free admission. Mid-May–mid-Sept 9am–7pm. Closed winter.

The White Pass and Yukon Route ★★ A narrow-gauge railroad line that originally ran to Whitehorse, the White Pass was completed after only 2 years in 1900. It's an engineering marvel and a fun way to see spectacular, historic scenery. The excursion begins at a depot with the spine-tingling whistle of a working steam engine. The steamer pulls the train a couple of miles, then diesels take the cars—some of them originals more than 100 years old—up steep tracks that were chipped out of the side of the mountains. They "recommend" you don't get out of your seat, but it's a long ride on a slow train, and most people get up and socialize; however, you cannot move from car to car while the train is moving. The trick is to go in clear weather. When the pass is socked in, all you see is white clouds. Tickets are expensive, however, and you have to reserve ahead. Take the gamble: Cancellation carries only a 10% penalty and you can change dates for no charge. Also, try to go on a weekend, when fewer cruise ships are in town taking up all the seats; you can often get a seat on weekend trains as little as a week ahead, while midweek excursions can book up months ahead. The summit excursion—which travels 20 miles with an elevation gain of 2,865 feet, then turns back—takes about 3 hours and costs $82 for adults. All fares except the Chilkoot Pass hiker's fares are half price for ages 3 to 12.

The biggest treats for train lovers are the steam-powered trips. An all-day round-trip to Lake Bennett, where the stampeders launched their boats for the trip to Dawson City, leaves each Saturday morning June through August. The fare is $156 including lunch and a walking tour at Lake Bennett. These days, the line operates only as a tourist attraction, May through September.

2nd Ave. depot (P.O. Box 435, Dept. B), Skagway, AK 99840. ✆ **800/343-7373** or 907/983-2217. www.wpyr.com. Summit Excursions $82 adults, $41 children; Mid-May–Sept daily departures at 8:15am and 12:45pm; in addition, from late May to early September there is a departure at 4:30pm. On certain Saturdays from May through September, the Summit Excursion will go all the way to Frasier, B.C.; this excursion departs at 8am and 12:30pm. Lake Bennett Steam Train $152 adults, $78 children; departs early Jun–late Aug Sat 8am. Skagway to Frasier, B.C., $66.50 adults, $33.25 children; Mid-May–late Sept departs Skagway daily 8am and 12:30pm, departs Frasier 10:20am and 2:30pm. Skagway to Whitehorse (bus transfer in Frasier, B.C.) $95 adults, $47.50 children; departs Skagway daily 8am, departs Whitehorse 1:30pm. Chilkoot Trail Hikers' Service (see "Backpacking," later in this chapter, for more information on hiking the Chilkoot Trail) $30 to Frasier, adults or children; $65 adults to Skagway, $32.50 children; $15 surcharge for buying tickets in Bennett; departs from Bennett June 9–Aug 23 Mon–Thurs and Sat 1pm, and Aug 25–Sept 11 Mon–Thurs 1pm.

Skagway Museum and Archives This museum contains a fine collection of gold rush artifacts and other items that reflect Skagway's colorful history. This is the town's most impressive building and one of the state's most dignified architectural landmarks, with crisp granite walls and a high-pitched roof standing among tall shade trees on the edge of town. It was built as a short-lived gold rush–era college and later became a federal courthouse and jail. The city hall and museum, in the building since 1961, moved back in when renovations were completed in 2000.

7th and Spring sts. ✆ **907/983-2420.** Admission $2 adults, $1 students, free for children 12 and under. Summer Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat–Sun 1–5pm. Winter hours vary, call ahead.

Klondike Gold Dredge Tours Gold mining never happened in Skagway; the city was only a transit point. But more gold rush tourists come here than anywhere else, so promoters brought a dredge to where the people are. The 1937 rig dug up and sorted gravel to remove gold first in Idaho and then near the border on the Top of the World Highway. A 2-hour tour includes a 10-minute video and gold panning. If you will visit Dawson City or Fairbanks, you can see larger dredges in authentic historic settings for less money, but if not, this stop can satisfy your mechanical curiosity.

Mile 1.7 Klondike Hwy. ✆ **877/983-3175** or 907/983-3175. www.klondikegolddredge.com. $29 adults, $19 under age 12. Add $5 for transfer from Skagway. Summer daily 8:30am–4:30pm.

GETTING OUTSIDE

The **Mountain Shop,** 355 4th Ave. (✆ **907/983-2544;** www.packerexpeditions.com), rents and sells the equipment that you need for backpacking or other outdoor activities in Skagway. The owner, who is also the mayor, leads guided day hikes, backpacking trips, and float trips under the name Packer Expeditions, at the same address.

BACKPACKING The National Park Service and Parks Canada jointly manage the famous **Chilkoot Pass Trail,** publishing a trail guide and offering information at their offices in Skagway and Whitehorse. Some 20,000 stampeders used the trail to get from Dyea—9 miles from Skagway—to Lake Bennett, 33 miles away, where they could build and launch boats bound for Dawson City. Today about 3,000 people a year make the challenging hike, taking 3 to 5 days. The Chilkoot is not so much a wilderness trail as an outdoor museum, but don't underestimate its difficulty, as so many did during the gold rush.

To control the numbers, **Parks Canada,** 205–300 Main St., Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 2B5 Canada (✆ **800/661-0486,** fax 867/393-6701; www.parkscanada.gc.ca/chilkoot), allows only 50 hikers with permits per day to cross the summit. To buy the permits, call with a Visa, American Express, or MasterCard, the date you plan to start, and the campsites you will use each night. Permits are $50 for adults, $25 ages 6 to 15, plus a $10 per person reservation fee. You pick up the permit at the Trail Centre in Skagway; that's also where 8 of the 50 daily permits are held for walk-ins, to be distributed along with any no-shows.

Once over the pass, you're on Lake Bennett, on the rail line 8 miles short of the road. You can walk to the road, or get back to Skagway on the White Pass and Yukon Route railway (see "Museums & Attractions," above), which runs at 1pm Monday through Thursday from early June through mid-September, with an extra departure on Saturday at 1pm from early June through late August. The one-way fare to Frasier, B.C., is $30 (no children's discount), and the scenic 3-hour ride to Skagway is $65. There is a $15 surcharge per person if you buy your tickets at Bennett. Be certain to make your reservations well in advance.

There are two **U.S. Forest Service cabins** near Skagway, and official access to both is by the White Pass and Yukon Route railway. Both are on trails described in the *Skagway Trail Map,* mentioned below. The **Denver Caboose** is an old, red White Pass caboose parked next to the tracks 6 miles up the line at the trailhead for the 4½-mile **Denver Glacier Trail.** Another cabin is 1½ miles off the track, 14 miles up on the spectacular **Laughton Glacier Trail.** For either, you need a $35 cabin permit (see "Getting Outside in the Tongass National Forest," in section 1 of this chapter, for reservations information) and a train ticket from the railroad. For details, contact the National Park Service visitor center (see above), or the **Juneau Ranger District,** 8465 Old Dairy Rd., Juneau, AK 99801 (✆ **907/586-8800;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass).

BIKING **Sockeye Cycle,** on 5th Avenue off Broadway (✆ **907/983-2851;** www.cyclealaska.com), leads bike tours, including one that takes clients to the top of the White Pass in a van and lets them coast down on bikes; the 2½-hour trip is $72. The company also leads a tour of the quiet ghost town site of Dyea for the same price, going over in a van. I rode to Dyea from Skagway, on my own, over the hilly, 10-mile coastal road, one of the most pleasant, scenic rides I can remember.

FLIGHTSEEING Skagway, like Haines, is a good place to choose for a flightseeing trip, as Glacier Bay National Park is just to the west. Both flightseeing operators listed in the Haines section offer flights from Skagway, too (p. 182). In addition, **Temsco Helicopters** (✆ **907/983-2900;** www.temscoair.com) takes 55-minute tours near Skagway with a 25-minute landing on a glacier (not in Glacier Bay); those flights cost $189. A helicopter and dog sled tour on Denver Glacier is $349.

HIKING A ***Skagway Trail Map*** is available from the visitor center, listing 11 hikes around Skagway. An easy evening walk starts at the suspension footbridge at the north end of 1st Avenue, crossing the Skagway River to **Yakutania Point Park,** where pine trees grow from cracks in the rounded granite of the shoreline. Across the park is a shortcut taking a couple of miles off the trip to Dyea and to the **Skyline Trail and A.B. Mountain,** a strenuous climb to a 3,500-foot summit with great views. On the southern side of town, across the railroad tracks, a network of trails heads up from Spring Street between 3rd and 4th avenues to a series of mountain lakes, the closest of which is **Lower Dewey Lake,** less than a mile up the trail.

WHERE TO STAY

The accommodations in Skagway are within close walking distance of the historic district, except as noted. Besides the places listed below, you'll also find inexpensive rooms at **Sgt. Preston's Lodge,** at 6th Ave. and State St. (✆ **907/983-2521**), with free Internet access in the lobby.

At The White House ★ The Tronrud family essentially rebuilt a burned 1902 gable-roofed inn, which has dormer and bow windows and two porticos with small Doric columns. They made the rooms comfortable and modern while retaining the authentic gold rush style of the original owner, Lee Guthrie, a successful gambler and saloon owner of the early years. The inn has hardwood floors and fine woodwork. Bedrooms vary in size, but all have quilts and other nice touches, including ceiling fans.

Corner of 8th and Main sts. (P.O. Box 41), Skagway, AK 99840-0041. ✆ **907/983-9000.** Fax 907/983-9010. www.atthewhitehouse.com. 10 units. High season $108 double; low season $75 double. Extra person $10. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy van. *In room:* TV.

Chilkoot Trail Outpost These beautifully crafted log cabins built in 2002 by long-time residents contain comfortable, modern rooms with carpeted floors and log interior walls, some in the form of two-room suites, with many amenities (but no phones). Two rooms in a duplex with bunkbeds rent for just $35 per room. The location, in Dyea near the Chilkoot Trail and Taiya River, puts you in quiet, natural surroundings away from the carnival atmosphere created by the crush of tourists in Skagway proper. You can cook your own food at a barbecue and sink situated in a screened gazebo. Breakfast, served in a remarkable log building with a vaulted ceiling, includes a hot ham and egg sandwich. They pick up guests in Skagway, if necessary, and lend bikes.

8.5 Mile Dyea Rd. (P.O. Box 286), Skagway, AK 99840. ✆ **907/983-3799.** Fax 907/983-3599. www.chilkootrailoutpost.com. 10 units. $35 per person double in duplex, $125 cabin for 2. Extra adult $25, extra child 2-10 years $12.50. DISC, MC, V. Rates include full breakfast. **Amenities:** Bike loan, courtesy car. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, microwave, no phone.

Gold Rush Lodge *Value* This is a clean, comfortable motel by the airstrip, 3 blocks from the historic district, with a grassy picnic area out back. The rooms are on the small side but are modern and are attractively decorated in light colors. Rooms have many amenities, including fans. Bathrooms have shower stalls, no tubs. The hosts provide fruit, coffee, and a cookie jar in the lobby, and write the guests' names and hometowns on an erasable board so they can get to know each other. Smoking is not allowed.

6th Ave. and Alaska St. (P.O. Box 514), Skagway, AK 99840. ✆ **877/983-3509** or 907/983-2831. Fax 907/983-2742. www.goldrushlodge.com. 12 units. High season $80–$115 double; low season $65–$85 double. Extra person $10. Ask about discounts. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy car. *In room:* TV/VCR, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, microwave.

Mile Zero Bed & Breakfast In 1995, Howard and Judy Mallory built this place, located a few blocks from the historic area, specifically to serve as a B&B. Rooms are large, crisp, and soundproof, with two entrances: from an internal hall and through French doors that lead to a porch. The idea is to give guests the privacy and convenience of a motel and the warmth and character of a B&B, and it works nicely. No smoking permitted. There are barbecue facilities on-site.

9th Ave. and Main St. (P.O. Box 165), Skagway, AK 99840. ✆ **907/983-3045.** Fax 907/983-3046. www.milezero.com. 7 units. High season $105 double; low season $70 double. Extra person $20. Rates include continental breakfast. DISC, MC, V.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Skagway Home Hostel Frank Wasmer and Nancy Schave open up their historic home to hostellers, sharing their meals, refrigerator, bathrooms, laundry machines, bicycles, and hospitality with guests. The atmosphere is like off-campus shared housing at college, except the house is nicer and better kept. Bunks are in separate male and female dorm rooms (except for the single private room). To reserve, you have to send the money ahead—they don't return long-distance calls. In winter, reservations are required, as Frank and Nancy might otherwise not be there. Summer registration hours are from 5:30 to 10:30pm. No pets, alcohol, or smoking.

3rd Ave. near Main St. (P.O. Box 231), Skagway, AK 99840. ✆ **907/983-2131.** www.skagwayhostel.com. 1 private room, 3 dorms. $15 per bunk, $40 double private room. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Bike loan; coin-op laundry.

The primitive **National Park Service Dyea Campground** has 22 well-separated sites near the water; with a $5 fee. There are several RV parks. The **Pullen Creek**

RV Park (✆ **800/936-3731** or 907/983-2768) is near the small-boat harbor, with coin-operated showers. RV sites with power, water, and dump station use are $25, car camping sites are $18, tenting with no vehicle is $14.

WHERE TO DINE

Restaurants go out of business and open up faster in Skagway's entirely seasonal economy than anywhere else I know, so you may need to ask around for a current recommendation. Stop off for espresso and baked goods at **Mabel G. Smith's** (✆ **907/983-2609**), a bakery, card, gift, and coffee shop on 5th Avenue off Broadway. Also, the **Sweet Tooth Café,** at 315 Broadway (✆ **907/983-2405**), is a good year-round diner, open for breakfast and lunch.

Sabrosa's ★ *Finds* DELI/MEXICAN/VEGETARIAN This tiny sidewalk cafe, situated down an alley across from the post office, feeds locals. Seating is either indoors or in a pleasant fenced area—a sort of patio arrangement. It's an island of intimacy out of the stream of the tourist rush. Our halibut, pasta salad, and vegetarian sandwich were tasty, wholesome, filling, and inexpensive, a rare combination in Skagway. They also serve Mexican specials and fresh baked goods, plus beer, wine and homemade sangria. Service is quick and friendly.

6th and Broadway. ✆ **907/983-2469.** Lunch $3.50–$9, dinner $8–$20. No credit cards. Summer daily 7am–9pm. Closed off-season.

The Stowaway Cafe ★★ SEAFOOD/CAJUN Housed in a small, gray clapboard house overlooking the boat harbor, a 5-minute walk from the historic sites, Jim and Kim Long's little restaurant is a labor of love—they met here when he worked the kitchen part time when if first opened, a decade ago. Jim is still back in the kitchen, cooking the grilled and blackened salmon and halibut that anchor the menu; there's also beef, pasta, and all the usual waterfront restaurant items. Kim handles the front (and the paperwork). Service is fast. The tiny dining room is decorated with a miscellaneous collection of knickknacks that will keep your attention almost as well as the harbor view. They have a beer and wine license and serve inexpensive lunches.

End of Congress Way near the small boat harbor. ✆ **907/983-3463.** Reservations recommended. Dinner $13–$29. V. Summer daily 11am–10pm. Closed winter.

NIGHTLIFE

Incredibly, the ***Days of '98 Show*** has been playing since 1927 in the Fraternal Order of Eagles Hall No. 25, at 6th Avenue and Broadway (✆ **907/983-2545**). Jim Richards carries on the tradition each summer with actors imported from all over the United States, doing three shows a day. The evening shows begin with mock gambling at a casino run by the actors. The performance includes singing, cancan dancing, a Robert Service reading, and the story of the shooting of Soapy Smith. Matinees are $14 and evening shows are $16. Children 15 and under are charged half price.

The **Red Onion Saloon,** at 2nd Avenue and Broadway, is an authentic-feeling old bar that often has terrific live jazz and other styles of music, though the players sometimes jump up suddenly and leave—they're cruise-ship musicians who enjoy coming here to stretch out and jam, and they can't afford to miss the boat. It was a brothel originally—what wasn't in this town?—and a mock madam is on hand offering tours of the upstairs. The bar closes in winter. **Moe's Frontier Bar,** at 5th Avenue and Broadway, is more of a gritty local hangout, open year-round.

6

Anchorage & Environs

As teenagers living in Anchorage, my cousin and I got a job from a family friend painting his lake cabin outside of the city. He flew us out on his floatplane and left us there, with paint, food, and a little beer. A creek that ran past the lake was so full of salmon that we caught one on every cast until we got bored and started thinking of ways to make it more difficult. We cooked the salmon over a fire, then floated in a boat on the lake under the endless sunshine of a summer night, talking and diving naked into the clear, green water. We met some guys building another cabin one day, but otherwise we saw no other human beings. When the week was over, the cabin was painted—it didn't take long—and the floatplane came back to get us. As we lifted off and cleared the trees, Anchorage opened in front of us, barely 10 minutes away.

The state's largest city, Anchorage—where 40% of Alaska's population resides—is accused crushingly of being just like a city "Outside," not really part of Alaska at all. It's true that the closer you get to Anchorage, the more the human development reminds you of the outskirts of Anytown, USA, with fast-food franchises, occasional traffic jams, and the ugly big-box retail development inflicted everywhere by strange and relentless corporate logic. You often hear the joke, "Anchorage isn't Alaska, but you can see it from there," and writers piously warn visitors to land in Anchorage but move on as soon as possible, as if it's catching.

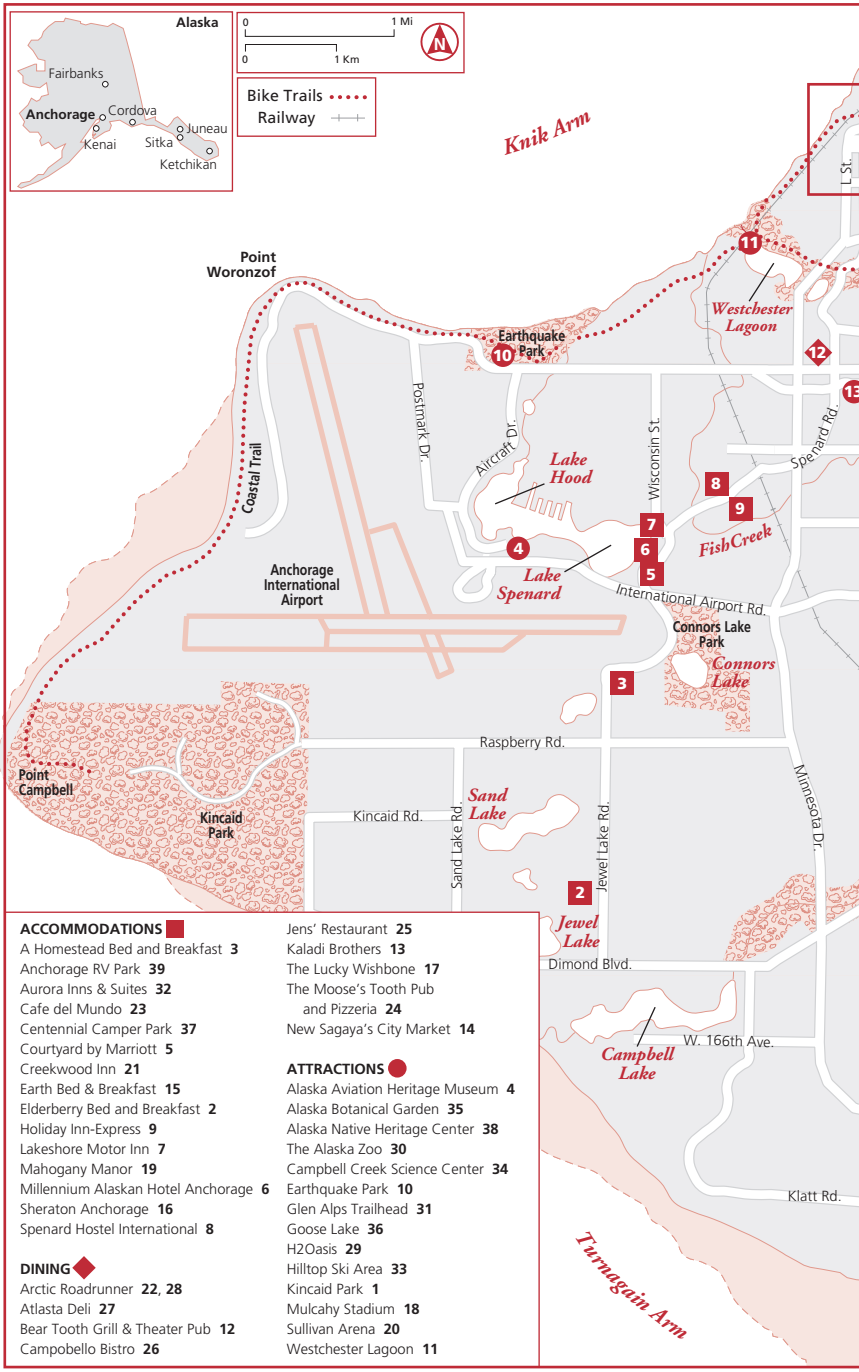
When I hear that advice, I think of the many great experiences I've had here—like painting that cabin, years ago. Anyone in Anchorage with a few hundred dollars for a floatplane can be on a lake or river with the bears and salmon in a matter of minutes, in wilderness deeper than any you could find in the Lower 48. **Chugach State Park** is largely within the city limits, but it's the size of Rocky Mountain National Park and has similar alpine terrain, with the critical difference that most of it is virtually never visited. You can be climbing mountains there after ½ an hour's journey from your downtown hotel. **Chugach National Forest,** the nation's second largest National Forest, is less than an hour down the road. In downtown's **Ship Creek,** people catch 40-pound salmon from under a freeway bridge. Even within the city, you can bike dozens of miles along the coast or through wooded greenbelts, and you can ski in one of the nation's best Nordic skiing parks.

Anchorage is indeed a big American city, with big-city problems of crime and pollution, but it's also entirely unique because it's surrounded by pristine and spectacular wild lands. Anywhere else, Anchorage would be known not for its shortcomings, but as one of America's greatest cities for outdoor enthusiasts.

ANCHORAGE YESTERDAY & TODAY

Anchorage isn't old enough to have a sharp identity as a city—individuals from its first home-grown generation are still alive. The city started as a tent camp for

Anchorage



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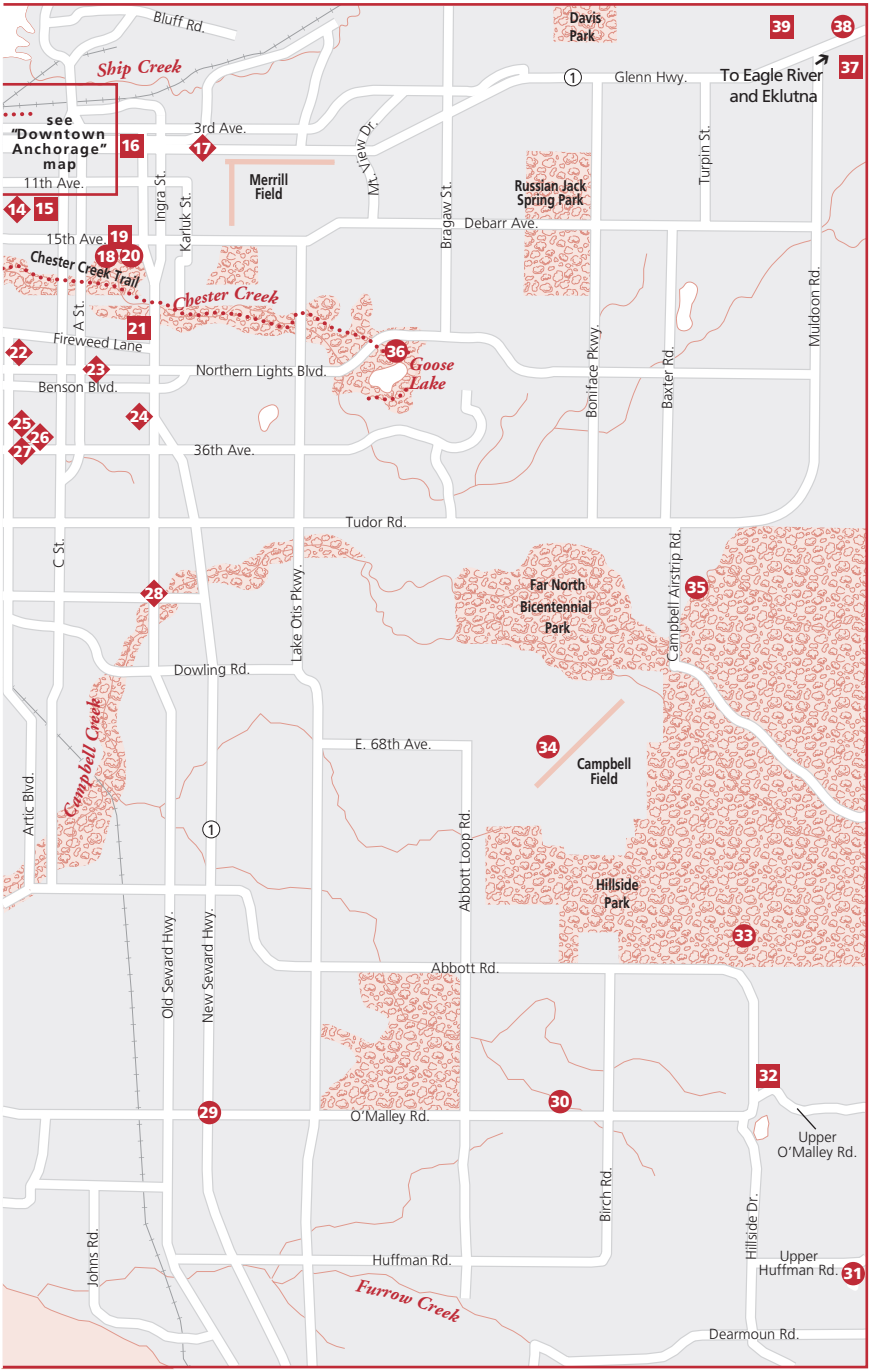
Bluff Rd.
Ship Creek
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3rd Ave.
Ingra St.
Karluk St.
Merrill Field
Mt. View Dr.
Davis Park
Glenn Hwy.
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Turpin St.
Russian Jack Spring Park
Bragaw St.
Debarr Ave.
15th Ave.
Chester Creek Trail
Chester Creek
A St.
Fireweed Lane
Northern Lights Blvd.
Goose Lake
Boniface Pkwy.
Baxter Rd.
Muldoon Rd.
Benson Blvd.
36th Ave.
Tudor Rd.
C St.
Lake Otis Pkwy.
Far North Bicentennial Park
Campbell Airstrip Rd.
Dowling Rd.
Campbell Creek
E. 68th Ave.
Campbell Field
Artic Blvd.
Abbott Loop Rd.
Hillside Park
Old Seward Hwy.
New Seward Hwy.
Abbott Rd.
O'Malley Rd.
Upper O'Malley Rd.
Birch Rd.
Hillside Dr.
Johns Rd.
Huffman Rd.
Upper Huffman Rd.
Furrow Creek
Dearmoun Rd.

workers mobilized to build the Alaska Railroad in 1915. A few houses and businesses went up to serve the federal employees who were building and later running the railroad, as Steve McCutcheon's father was. McCutcheon, who died in 1998, remembers Anchorage as a remote, sleepy railroad town that was never more than strictly functional, though it was enlivened by a couple of large World War II military bases. One visitor who came in the early 1940s wrote that the entire town looked like it was built on the wrong side of the tracks.

McCutcheon looked out the picture window from his living room on a placid lake surrounded by huge, half-million-dollar houses, each with a floatplane pulled up on the green front lawn, and he recalled the year people started to take Anchorage seriously. It was the year, he said, when they started thinking it would be a permanent city, not just an encampment where you went for a few years to make money before moving on—the year they started building Anchorage to last. That year was 1957. Oil was discovered on the Kenai Peninsula's Swanson River, south of here. It was around that time that McCutcheon built his own house all by itself on a lake, far out in the country. At that time, you could homestead in the Anchorage bowl. Those who had the opportunity but chose not to—my wife's family, for example—gave it a pass only because it seemed too improbable that the flat, wet acreage way out of town would ever be worth anything.

Oil fueled Anchorage's growth like nitrogen fertilizer poured on a shooting weed. Those homesteads from the 1950s and early 1960s now have shopping malls and high-rise office buildings on them. Fortunes came fast, development was haphazard, and a lot was built that we'd all soon regret. I had the bizarre experience of coming home from college to the town I'd grown up in and getting completely lost in a large area of the city that had been nothing but moose browse the last time I'd seen it. Visitors found a city full of life but empty of charm.

In the last 15 years, that has started to change. Anchorage is slowly outgrowing its gawky adolescence. It's still young, prosperous, and vibrant—and exhausting when the summer sun refuses to set—but now it also has some excellent restaurants, a good museum, a new Native cultural center, a nice little zoo, and culture in the evening besides the tourist melodramas you'll find in every Alaska town. People still complain that Anchorage isn't really Alaska—in Fairbanks, they call it "Los Anchorage" (and in Anchorage, Fairbanks is known as "Squarebanks")—yet the great wilderness around the city remains intertwined with its streets. Along with a quarter million people, Anchorage is full of moose—so many that they're considered pests and wintertime hazards, inspiring debate about hunting them within the city limits. Plus, bears and bald eagles show up regularly on the system of greenbelts and bike trails that bring the woods into almost every neighborhood.

Anchorage stands on broad, flat sediment between the Chugach Mountains and the silt-laden waters of upper Cook Inlet. At water's edge, mud flats that have not yet been made into land stretch far offshore when the tide is at its low point, up to 38 vertical feet below high water. There's a **downtown area** of about 8 by 20 blocks that's located near Ship Creek (where the city started), but most of the city lies on long commercial strips. Like many urban centers built since the arrival of the automobile, the layout is not particularly conducive to any other form of transportation. But the roads go only so far. Just beyond, wilds beckon in the Chugach, along the trails of Turnagain Arm, at Alyeska Ski Resort in Girdwood, in Prince William Sound, and in the Matanuska and Susitna

valleys. You'll find ways to that wilderness, plus ways to explore Anchorage's growing urban pleasures, throughout this chapter.

1 Essentials

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE You'll probably get to Anchorage at the start of your trip by air, as it has the most flights linking Alaska to the rest of the world on many airlines. The **Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport** is a major hub. Seattle has the most frequent flights to and from Anchorage, with numerous domestic carriers flying nonstop all day. (See "Getting There & Getting Around," in chapter 2 for more details.) Within Alaska, most flights route through Anchorage, even for communities much closer to each other than they are to the city. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) is the dominant carrier for Alaska destinations, and the only jet operator to most Alaska cities.

Various commuter carriers link Anchorage to rural destinations not served by jet. **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394** or 907/266-8394; www.flyera.com) is one of the largest carriers for Southcentral Alaska destinations and can be booked directly or through Alaska Airlines.

Unless your hotel has a courtesy van or you rent a car, a taxi is probably the best way to get downtown from the airport. A **taxi ride** downtown from the airport runs about $15. Try **Alaska Cab** (✆ **907/563-5353**).

Various shuttle vans sometimes operate, but they have not been consistent enough to merit mention here. The People Mover city bus also serves the airport on a seasonal basis; see "Getting Around," below.

BY CAR There's only one road to the rest of the world: the Glenn Highway. It leads through the Mat-Su Valley area and Glennallen to Tok, and to the Alaska Highway, 330 miles from Anchorage. Thirty miles out of town, the Glenn meets the Parks Highway, which leads to Denali National Park and Fairbanks. The other road out of town, the Seward Highway, leads south to the Kenai Peninsula. See "Alaska's Highways a la Carte," in chapter 9. For more on driving to Alaska, see chapter 2.

BY BUS **Alaska Trails** (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com), a van and bus service, runs between Anchorage and Fairbanks, with stops in Talkeetna and Denali National Park. From Fairbanks, they run to Valdez and Dawson City, and anyplace on the way. In Anchorage they stop at the downtown Hostelling International, Anchorage, at 700 H St. A ticket to Denali is $59, Fairbanks $79. Various other van and bus services offer transportation to and from Seward, Homer, Talkeetna, Fairbanks, and Denali National Park; see the sections on each of those places for details.

BY RV A recreational vehicle is a popular way to explore the region. Renting an RV in Anchorage for a tour is covered below under "Getting Around." Driving an RV to Alaska is covered in chapter 2. It's also possible to come to Alaska with an RV without making the time-consuming round trip by shipping your RV either way (or both ways) between Anchorage and Tacoma, Washington. **Totem Ocean Trailer Express** (✆ **800/234-8683** in Anchorage, **800/426-0074** in the Lower 48; www.totemocean.com) offers this service.

In addition, several firms offer one-way rentals between Anchorage and Skagway (the ferry terminus) or cities around the U.S. **Alaska Motorhome Rentals** (✆ **800/254-9929;** www.alaskarv.com) offers Skagway one-way rentals to Anchorage with a $495 drop-off fee for leaving the vehicle in Anchorage instead

of the starting point and a $795 drop-off fee for Seattle, plus the cost of the rental, $175 to $215 a day in the high season, plus mileage (or pay $25 a day for unlimited mileage), and gas (which you will use plenty of). The same company has another operation, **Alaska Motorhome & Cruise Vacations** (✆ **800/323-5757**), that provides packages to cruise one way, tour Alaska in an RV, and fly home. For more on that option and on one-way rentals from the balance of the Lower 48, see chapter 2.

BY RAIL The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552,** 907/265-2494, or 907/265-2620 TDD; www.alaskarailroad.com) connects Anchorage with Seward and Whittier to the south and Fairbanks and Denali National Park to the north. It's a fun way to travel, with expert commentary in the summer, good food, and clean, comfortable cars. However, the train is priced as a tourism excursion and costs much more than ordinary transportation. For example, the spectacular Seward run, only about 120 miles, costs $98 round-trip. Most trains run only in the summer, but a snowy 12-hour odyssey to Fairbanks runs once a week all winter (the summer fare is $175 one-way, the winter fare is $115 one way). See chapter 8 on Denali National Park, and sections on other destinations for fares and service details.

ORIENTATION

Many visitors never make it beyond the **downtown** area, the old-fashioned grid of streets at the northwest corner of town where the large hotels and gift shops are located. Street numbers and letters work on a simple pattern, and navigation is easy. Beyond downtown, most of Anchorage is oriented to commercial strips, and you'll need a map to find your way. The map on p. 196 will suffice for major thoroughfares, but to find anything on smaller streets, pick up a detailed map at the visitor centers, at a grocery store, or on the Internet. Some parts of greater Anchorage are in distinct communities outside the bowl formed by the Chugach Mountains, including **Eagle River** and **Eklutna,** out on the Glenn Highway to the northeast, and **Girdwood** and **Portage,** on the Seward Highway, to the south. The suburban **Matanuska and Susitna valleys** (known as Mat-Su) lie north of the city on the Glenn and Parks highways.

GETTING AROUND

BY RENTAL CAR Driving is the most practical way for most independent travelers to tour the main part of Alaska, and the location of Anchorage at the hub of transportation networks makes it the handiest place to start. A car improves a visit to Anchorage, too, as the city is spread out and public transportation and taxi service are poor. Most major car-rental companies operate in Anchorage, largely from desks at the airport in a tunnel off the domestic baggage-claim area. A compact car for $50 a day, with unlimited mileage, is a fair deal. The airport adds a 10% concession fee, which you can avoid by renting offsite from **Avis,** at 5th Avenue and B Street (✆ **800/230-4898** or 907/277-4567; www.avis.com), **Budget,** 5011 Spenard Road (✆ **800/527-0700** or 907/274-1002; www.budget.com) and **National,** 1300 E. 5th Ave. (✆ **800/CAR-RENT** or 907/265-7553; www.nationalcar.com), among other nationals, and any number of local firms (these local numbers are for the off-airport locations). The city charges an 8% rental car tax and the state just added an additional 10% tax. Including the airport fee, that's a total tax of 28%. Sorry about that! Cars can sell out in summer, so reserve ahead.

BY RENTAL RV Several large RV rental agencies operate in Anchorage (see "Getting There," above). High-season rates are around $1,400 a week, plus the

large amount of fuel you use. **ABC Motorhome Rentals,** 3875 W. International Airport Rd. (✆ **800/421-7456** or 907/279-2000; www.abcmotorhome.com), charges no mileage fee. See chapter 2 "Getting There and Getting Around," for more on this option.

BY BUS It takes a long time to go far using the **People Mover** bus system (✆ **907/343-6543;** www.peoplemover.org), but if you have the time, it's inexpensive and covers most of the city. Bus fares all over town are $1.25 for adults, 75¢ for ages 5 to 18, 25¢ over age 60. The transit center bus depot is at 6th Avenue and G Street. Buses generally come every ½ hour but are less frequent on weekends.

BY BIKE The network of bike trails is a great way to see the best side of Anchorage, but is not a practical means of transportation from destination to destination for most people. The **Tony Knowles Coastal Trail** starts right downtown (see "Getting Outside," later in this chapter). Good street bikes are usually for rent from the **Copper Whale Inn,** at the corner of 5th and L (✆ **866/258-7999** or 907/258-7999), located near Elderberry Park downtown, at the start of the Coastal Trail. They charge $15 for a ½ day, $25 for 24 hours. In Midtown, **The Bicycle Shop** at 1035 W. Northern Lights Blvd. (✆ **907/272-5219**), rents and services a wide selection of bikes, charging $20 the first day, $15 for additional days, or $85 a week.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Anchorage Convention and Visitor Bureau,** 524 W. 4th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501-2212 (✆ **907/276-4118;** fax 907/278-5559; www.anchorage.net), offers information on the whole state at its centers and extensive website. The main location is the **Log Cabin Visitor Information Center,** downtown at 4th Avenue and F Street (✆ **907/274-3531;** open daily June–Aug 7:30am–7pm, May and Sept 8am–6pm, Oct–Apr 9am–4pm). If it's crowded, go to the storefront office right behind it. You'll also find visitor information desks at the airport: one in the baggage-claim area in the domestic terminal and two in the international terminal (in the lobby and the secured transit area). An Internet kiosk that allows visitors to research businesses and print out information and maps is located at the Sears mall near Northern Lights Boulevard and the Seward Highway (it is at the entrance facing Northern Lights halfway down the mall).

The **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** located at 605 W. 4th Ave. (across the intersection from the log cabin at 4th and F), Suite 105, Anchorage, AK 99501 (✆ **907/271-2737** or 907/271-2738 TTY; www.nps.gov/aplic; open daily 9am–5pm in summer, Mon–Fri 10am–5pm in winter), can help anyone who is planning to spend time outdoors anywhere in Alaska. Rangers, whose advice is based on personal experience, represent all the land agencies. You can buy ferry tickets for the Alaska Marine Highway System here, and the bookstore has an excellent selection of trail and field guides. The store also has a National Geographic Map Machine, which prints out topographical maps of any place in the United States on waterproof material for $7.95 each. A big advantage over pre-printed maps is that you can center the coverage area over your route so that you don't have to buy multiple map sheets and then use only a small corner of some of them.

The information center also has some interesting exhibits on Alaska's cultural and natural offerings. The center occupies a grand room with high ceilings in a 1930s post office and federal courthouse.

SPECIAL EVENTS

For an extensive event listing, with information on activities and events taking place on almost every day of the year, check **www.anchorage.net**. Also see "The Performing Arts," below.

The **Anchorage Folk Festival** (✆ **907/566-2334;** www.anchoragefolk festival.org), which is being held over the weekends of January 16 and 23 in 2004, imports musicians and shows off local talent in free concerts and jam sessions. They have other events throughout the year, including some in the summer; check the website.

The **Fur Rendezvous Winter Festival** (✆ **907/274-1177;** www.furrondy.net; Feb 20–Mar 7, 2004) is the city's big winter celebration, with many community events, fireworks, craft fairs, snowshoe softball, dog sled rides, and other fun. Expanded for the first time to two weeks in 2004, the Rondy will include both the **World Champion Sled Dog Race,** a 3-day sprint event of about 25 miles per heat, and the unofficial start of the **Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race** (✆ **907/376-5155;** www.iditarod.com). The Iditarod usually begins from Anchorage the first Saturday in March (the 6th in '04) and then proceeds in trucks to the restart the next day in Wasilla for the 1,000-mile run to Nome (see the section on Nome in chapter 10 for more details). The weird winter of 2003 caused officials to move the restart all the way to Fairbanks, but that was a first.

The Native Youth Olympics (✆ **907-297-2011**), held in late April at the University of Alaska Sports Center, is a tough competition in traditional Alaska Native sports such as the knuckle hop and the spectacular high kick, which can reach almost 7 feet off the floor.

The **Saturday Market** is a big street fair and farmer's market held every Saturday from mid-May through mid-September at 3rd Avenue and E Street (✆ **907/277-5634;** www.anchoragemarkets.com).

The **Anchorage Festival of Music** (✆ **907/276-2465;** www.festivalmusic.org) presents a classical music series around the summer solstice in June. The **Mayor's Midnight Sun Marathon** (✆ **907/786-1230;** www.mayors marathon.com), Alaska's largest marathon, brings more than 4,000 runners for full- and half-marathon and 5-mile races on the weekend nearest the summer solstice.

The **Ship Creek Salmon Derby,** for 10 days in early June and again in early August, offers a chance to win cash and benefit charity by catching big salmon in downtown Anchorage (✆ **907/276-6472;** www.anchoragederbies.com).

The **Alaska State Fair** (✆ **907/745-4827;** www.alaskastatefair.org), held on the 12 days leading to Labor Day (Aug 26–Sept 6 in 2004), is the biggest event of the year. It takes place in Palmer, 40 miles north of Anchorage on the Glenn Highway. In most ways, it's a typical state fair, with rides, booths, exhibits, contests, fireworks, and live music. However, the vegetables on display are anything but typical. The good soil and long days in the Matanuska Valley around Palmer cause vegetables to grow to massive size—the stuff of childhood nightmares. Cabbages are the size of beanbag chairs. A mere beach ball–sized cabbage would be laughed off the stage. And it's not just the 100-pound cabbages. Imagine a 19-pound carrot, 35-pound broccoli, 42-pound beet, and 75-pound rutabaga (all world records from the fair). The flower gardens are amazing too, although not in the same way.

The annual convention of the **Alaska Federation of Natives** (✆ **907/274-3611;** www.nativefederation.org), held in late October, brings villagers from all over the state, and with them dance celebrations and an exceptional

opportunity to buy Native crafts at a huge craft fair at the Egan Convention and Visitors Center on 5th Avenue downtown.

The **Carrs/Safeway Great Alaska Shootout** basketball tournament (✆ **907/786-1293;** www.goseawolves.com/shootout), hosted by the University of Alaska-Anchorage, brings top-ranked college teams to the Sullivan Arena. Men's games are played over Thanksgiving weekend and women's games are played in the days prior to Thanksgiving weekend.

FAST FACTS: Anchorage

Banks A bank is rarely far away, and grocery stores also have ATMs. Downtown, **Wells Fargo** (✆ **907/263-2501**) has a branch in the 5th Avenue Mall (5th Ave. and D St.), with a foreign exchange desk and wire transfer services.

Hospitals **Alaska Regional Hospital** is at 2801 DeBarr Rd. (✆ **907/276-1131;** www.alaskaregional.com), and **Providence Alaska Medical Center** is at 3200 Providence Dr. (✆ **907/562-2211;** www.providence.org).

Internet Access and Business Services Downtown, **Mail Boxes Etc.,** at 645 G St., next to City Hall (✆ **907/276-7888**), has three public computers with DSL connections.. **Kaladi Brothers Coffee Co.** has computers at its 1360 W. Northern Lights location (✆ **907/277-5127;** www.kaladi.com), a shopping center that also contains the REI sporting goods store and a huge used book store. The **Z. J. Loussac Library,** midtown at 3600 Denali St. (✆ **907/343-2975;** lexicon.ci.anchorage.ak.us), offers free Internet access.

Police Call ✆ **911** in an emergency. The **Anchorage Police Department** has main offices at 4501 S. Bragaw Rd., south of Tudor Road; for a nonemergency call ✆ **907/786-8500.** For nonemergency police business outside the city, call the **Alaska State Troopers,** 5700 E. Tudor Rd. (✆ **907/269-5511**).

Post Office Downtown, it's downstairs in the brown building at 4th Avenue and D Street.

Taxes There's no sales tax in Anchorage. The bed tax is 8%.

2 Where to Stay

Hotel rooms are overpriced in Anchorage, so this is a good place to choose a B&B or small inn. I've searched for such places, choosing those with character and reasonable prices. There are hundreds more, many of them just as good.

About 80 B&Bs link through a website maintained by the cooperative **Anchorage Alaska Bed and Breakfast Association (www.anchorage-bnb.com)**. Rates, amenities and location are listed in a grid with links to each business's own website. Without a computer, call their hotline (✆ **888/584-5147** or 907/272-5909), which is answered by hosts at member properties to offer referrals to places that meet callers' requirements.

See the listing for **Alaska Private Lodgings** in chapter 2 (under "Independent Travel Planning") for another B&B booking service with many choices in Anchorage.

DOWNTOWN

VERY EXPENSIVE

Besides the Hotel Captain Cook, described in full below, three other high-rise hotels downtown offer a similar level of service without as much character or quite as many amenities. The large, recently remodeled **Hilton Anchorage,** 500 W. 3rd Ave. (✆ **800/HILTONS** or 907/272-7411; www.hilton.com), is right at the center of downtown activities. The **Sheraton Anchorage,** 401 E. 6th Ave. (✆ **800/325-3535** or 907/276-8700; www.sheraton.com), is comparable to the Hilton, but is located in a less attractive area a few blocks off the downtown tourist area. The newer **Anchorage Marriott Downtown,** 820 W. 7th Ave. (✆ **888/236-2427** or 907/279-8000; www.marriotthotels.com), has a nice pool and fabulous views from rooms with wall-size picture windows.

Hotel Captain Cook ★★★ This is Alaska's great, grand hotel, where royalty and rock stars stay. Former governor Wally Hickel built the first of the three towers after the 1964 earthquake, and now the hotel fills a city block and anchors the city skyline. Inside, the brown decor has a fully realized (maybe a little excessive) nautical theme, with art memorializing Cook's voyages and enough teak to build a square-rigger. The regularly renewed rooms are decorated in a rich, sumptuous style using exquisite fabrics, unique pieces of custom-built furniture, and lots of varnished trim. The hotel never abandoned the deep colors that are now returning to fashion—not a scrap of pale wood or generic beige ever came into the hotel. Rooms are comfortable in size, but not as large as those in modern upscale chains, and all have a choice only of a king or two twin beds. Lots of custom tile and mirrors make up for the relatively small size of the bathrooms. There are great views from all sides and you don't pay more to be on a higher floor. The pool in the basement is one of the best in town.

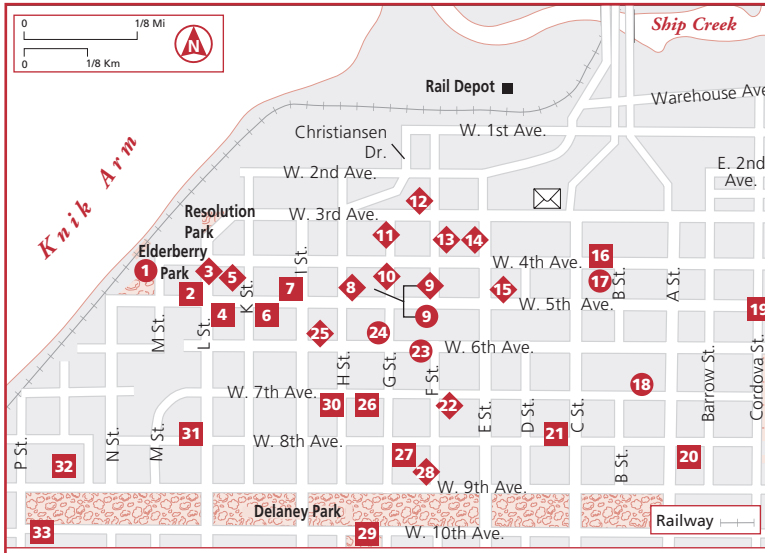
Sophisticated Continental food and elaborately formal service justify the high prices at **The Crows Nest** ★★★, the city's most traditional fine-dining restaurant, on the hotel's top floor. Pheasant, quail, bison, and venison were on recent menus, along with the standard seafood, beef, and lamb. Our most recent meals were expertly prepared if not exactly inspired. All tables have stupendous views, and high-backed booths lend intimacy for a romantic dinner. The deliberate service requires that you set aside a full evening for a special meal—dinner unfolds gradually, with almost theatrical formality. Main courses range from $26 to $50. **Fletcher's,** off the lobby, is an English pub serving good Italian-style pizza and sandwiches. **The Pantry** is a terrific cafe, with excellent service and interesting entrees mixed in with more predictable choices. The **Whale's Tail** serves light meals, coffee and cocktails and has a long bar in a sort of men's clubroom, with overstuffed chairs and big TVs.

4th Ave. and K St. (P.O. Box 102280), Anchorage, AK 99510-2280. ✆ **800/843-1950** or 907/276-6000. Fax 907/343-2298. www.captaincook.com. 547 units. High season $240–$250 double; $260–$1,500 suite. Low season $135–$145 double; $150–$1,500 suite. Extra person $20. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; indoor pool; health club with racquetball, Jacuzzi, and sauna; concierge; car-rental desk; business center; shopping arcade; salon; 24-hr. room service; massage; dry cleaning; concierge-level rooms. *In room:* TV w/pay movies, dual-line dataport, hair dryer, iron, Web TV.

EXPENSIVE

Here are a few chain-hotel options downtown in case the other hotels listed here don't appeal to you: The **Days Inn,** 321 E. 5th Avenue (✆ **800/325-2525** or 907/276-7226; www.daysinnalaska.com), which has a courtesy van to the airport; the **Holiday Inn-Anchorage,** 239 W. 4th Avenue (✆ **800/HOLIDAY** or

Downtown Anchorage



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Anchorage Marriott Downtown **26**
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The Oscar Anderson House Museum **1**

907/793-5500; www.holiday-inn.com), which has a pool; the **Clarion Suites,** 325 W. 8th Avenue (✆ **888/389-6575** or 907/274-1000; www.hotelchoice.com), an all-suite building across from the Federal Building, with a small pool; and the **Hawthorn Suites,** 1110 W. 8th Avenue (✆ **888/469-6575** or 907/222-5005; www.hawthorn.com), with similar facilities as the Clarion Suites, plus a Benihana Restaurant on-site.

Aspen Hotel Anchorage ★★ *Kids* The rooms in this new hotel, right across from the museum and Federal Building, attain such a level of luxury that it is hard to think of anything else they could have added. The ceilings are high and the colors bold, the furniture mostly stylish antique or Shaker reproductions, and the amenities, including microwaves and speakerphones, leave nothing to be desired. Some suites have cooking facilities and others, for families, have a separate kids' room with bunkbeds, a Sony PlayStation and their own DVD player. The hotel's exterior and faux brick courtyard make it look like a Disney version of something from a French village. These pleasing if phony details

continue throughout the hotel, even extending to the small indoor pool and large spa, which have a deck of attractive tile. Rates include a large continental breakfast served in the lobby from 6 to 10am.

108 E. 8th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **907/868-1605.** Fax 907/868-3520. www.aspenhotelsak.com. 89 units. High season $169 double, $199 suite. Low season $79 double, $99 suite. Extra person over age 17 $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Indoor pool; health club; spa; business center, coin-op laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hairdryer, iron/ironing board, microwave.

Copper Whale Inn ★ This inn, located right on the Coastal Trail downtown, is made up of a pair of clapboard houses that overlook the water and Elderberry Park. The charming rooms in the older of the two buildings come in a variety of shapes and sizes. There's a wonderfully casual feeling to the place, with a host who serves a full breakfast and befriends guests. Two rooms that share a couple of bathrooms on the second floor of the older building are my favorite for their wonderful views, funny angles and cozy decoration. The rooms in the newer building, lower on the hill, have cherry wood furniture, high ceilings on the upper level, and are generally larger. None are large; you stay here not for luxury but for the style and for the location, which is the best in town. Rooms don't have TVs, but you can get one hooked up by request. High-speed Internet is available in the lobby.

Finds Three Exceptional Downtown B&Bs

These houses and the warm and hospitable people who live there offer some of the most authentic and comfortable lodging in Alaska.

G Street House (✆ **888/435-3873** or 907/276-3284), is an elegant home within easy walking distance of downtown Anchorage's sights. The classy rooms go for only $95 for a double with a private bath. The hosts are energetic and interesting: he's on the city assembly and she's an expert on local history and a community volunteer.

Earth Bed and Breakfast, just a block further from downtown than G Street House, at 1001 W. 12th Ave. (✆ **907/279-9907,** www.alaskaone.com/earthbb), is the vocation of Margritte VanLaake, whose mission is to share a light and pleasant house with guests from all over the world. She is fluent in Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Italian and English. The house has a communal feel and is popular with mountain climbers. Rooms with shared baths are $99 in summer, rooms with private baths are $109 in summer.

Near the Mulcahy Park baseball stadium, a 15-minute walk to the downtown sights, **Mahogany Manor,** 204 E. 15th Ave. (✆ **888/777-0346** or 907/278-1111, www.mahoganymanor.com), feels like it's out in the country, with big windows that look out on treetops. The house was a grand mansion of the 1950s and the Alaskana atmosphere is preserved with redwood plank paneling, indoor waterfalls and an extraordinary collection of Alaskan art and crafts. The rooms and property are packed with every luxury amenity; summer rates range from $209 for a simple bedroom to $309 for a family-sized three-bedroom suite.

440 L St., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **866/258-7999** or 907/258-7999. Fax 888/WHALE-IN or 907/258-6213. www.copperwhale.com. 18 units, 16 with private bathroom. High season $125 double with shared bathroom, $155–$185 double with private bathroom. Low season $69 double with shared bathroom, $95 double with private bathroom. Extra person $10. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Access to health club; bike rental; concierge. *In room:* TV upon request, dataport, iron.

The Voyager Hotel ★★ Thanks to its exacting proprietor, Stan Williams, The Voyager is just right, from the warm, professional hospitality to the high quality of the linen. The size is small and the location is central. The rooms are large and light, all with well-designed kitchenettes, and the housekeeping is exceptional. The desks have speakerphones, high-speed or dial-up dataports, and extra electrical outlets. A recently remodeled lobby updates part of the building, although room furnishings are a little behind the times. There's nothing ostentatious or outwardly remarkable about the hotel, yet the most experienced travelers rave about it the loudest. Smoking is not permitted on the property.

501 K St., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/247-9070** or 907/277-9501. Fax 907/274-0333. www.voyagerhotel.com. 40 units. High season $179 (up to 3 people per room); low season $89 (up to 3 people per room). Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. No smoking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; access to nearby health club with $7.50 day pass; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, kitchenette, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

MODERATE

Duke's 8th Avenue Hotel ★ *Value* *Kids* This cinderblock apartment house downtown was converted into surprisingly light and comfortable one- and two-bedroom suites with full kitchens. A family or business party on a long stay can save a lot of money here: The two-bedroom units accommodate four adults for the basic rate. The one-bedroom-unit rates are for two people, but since they are quite large and kids 12 and under stay free, a family of five could stay there in comfort for the base price. In addition, the cooking and dining setup is adequate for creating and eating real meals. On the downside, the four-story building has no elevator and is not accessible for travelers with disabilities, and the 100-level is a half basement. Each unit has two telephones and an extra line for your computer.

630 W. 8th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/478-4837** or 907/274-6213. Fax 907/272-6308. www.dukesalaskahotel.com. 28 units. High season $140–$165 suite; low season $80–$105 suite. Children 12 and under stay free in parents' room. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, kitchen, coffeemaker.

INEXPENSIVE

Caribou Inn I list this old wooden house only for budget travelers whose overriding priority is to save money staying in the downtown core without bedding down at a hostel. Considering the location and the fact that this is a respectable place (not a flop house), the rates are very low, especially when you count the breakfast, airport transfer, free bike loans, and parking pass. Don't expect luxury or charm: The furniture is garage-sale style, common areas smell of cigarettes, corridors are narrow and confusing, and a room I looked at had stained carpet and a chair covered with a bedspread. The hospitality is strictly business.

501 L St., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/272-5878** or 907/272-0444. Fax 907/274-4828. www.alaska.net/~caribou. 14 units, 9 with private bathroom. Summer $89 double with shared bathroom, $99 double with private bathroom; winter $49 double with shared bathroom, $59 double with private bathroom; Extra person $15. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

The Oscar Gill House Bed & Breakfast ★★ On the Delaney Park strip, just a few blocks from downtown, this is truly the oldest house in Anchorage—it was built in 1913, in Knik, before Anchorage was founded, and moved here on a barge a few years later. Oscar Gill was an early civic leader. The house was to be torn down in 1982 but was moved to storage by a historic preservation group; Mark and Susan Lutz saved it in 1994, transferring it to its present location and, with their own labor, restoring it authentically as a cozy bed-and-breakfast. Now it's on the National Historic Register. Appropriate antiques sit on plank floors in rooms sized in those more modest times. With the period decoration it's like visiting your grandmother's house when it was brand new. The Lutzes are good people and like to get to know their guests, and the breakfast is great. Free bikes are available. Book early, as they fill; you can check availability and even select a room on their website.

1344 W. 10th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ and fax **907/279-1344.** www.oscargill.com. 3 units, 1 with private bathroom. High season $95 double with shared bathroom, $115 double with private bathroom. Low season $65 double with shared bathroom, $75 double with private bathroom. Extra person $20. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Bike loan; babysitting. *In room:* TV, dataport, hair dryer, iron.

Susitna Place ★ *Value* Just a few blocks from the downtown core, where a narrow residential street reaches a quiet end, a nondescript door under a car port leads into a rambling house of rooms ranging from comfortable and inexpensive to grand. It turns out the that street side is really the back of the house, which sits at the top of a high bluff facing an unobstructed view of Cook Inlet and Mount Susitna beyond; a view so unlike most urban vistas, it is easy to forget you are right in town. The suite is a showplace, with its own fireplace, deck access and superb view, but the five rooms that share bathrooms are the more rare find. Cozy and very clean, with an excellent location, theses room allow travelers to save money without compromise. The hosts, successful journalists, are hospitable Alaskans.

727 N St., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **907/274-3344.** Fax 907/272-4141. www.susitnaplace.com. 8 units, 3 with private bath. High season $90–$105 double with shared bath, $115–$125 double with private bath, $165 suite. Low season $55–$60 with shared bath, $70–$75 with private bath, $100 suite. Extra person $15. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. *In room:* TV.

A HOSTEL

Hostelling International, Anchorage, 700 H St. (✆ **907/276-3635;** fax 907/276-7772; www.alaska.net/~hianch), is a 95-bed hostel right downtown, with an urban feel. A coin-op laundry, kitchen, and baggage storage are available, and they have Internet access in the lobby, plus a courtesy phone and bike rental. Dorm rooms are small, with just a few bunks each. Members pay $16, nonmembers $19; private rooms are $40 to $50 for two. Dorms close between noon and 5pm daily and the curfew is 1am. A homier hostel outside the downtown area is detailed below.

BEYOND DOWNTOWN

VERY EXPENSIVE

Millennium Alaskan Hotel Anchorage ★★ This hotel is located next to the float plane base at Lake Spenard, near the airport. The large lobby, with its warm colors and fly rods and animal mounts on display, suggests a huge fishing and hunting lodge. There's a big patio to catch the sun and watch the planes. The rooms are exceptional. They are decorated in deep, bold colors with a subtle Alaska Native motif, and are packed with thoughtful details—a delight to the eye and an invitation for relaxation. All have king-sized or two queen beds

Tips Affordable Rooms Near the Airport

Good, inexpensive standard motel rooms near the airport are rare to the vanishing point, although luxurious rooms (like those at the Millennium Alaskan Hotel Anchorage) and B&Bs are readily available. The lowest priced, consistently acceptable standard hotel rooms I could find were $139 a night double, at peak season, at the **Lakeshore Motor Inn** (✆ **800/770-3000** or 907/248-3485; www.lakeshore motorinn.com). They have a 24-hour courtesy van.

If you enjoy staying with a family, **Elderberry Bed and Breakfast** (✆ **907/243-6968;** www.elderberrybb.com) has three rooms with private bathrooms for $75 to $95 per double. The hosts enjoy socializing and relating their Alaska experiences. I also recommend A Homestead Bed and Breakfast, below.

Two good chain hotels stand near the airport, with higher rates: **Courtyard by Marriott** (✆ **800/321-2211** or 907/245-0322; http://courtyard.com/ANCCY), with many amenities and a pool, at $179 per double in summer; and the **Holiday Inn Express** (✆ **800/HOLIDAY** or 907/248-8848; www.holiday-inn.com), at $189 per double.

and are wired for either dial-up or high-speed wireless Internet. A courtesy van runs a regular schedule downtown, but for convenience you really need to rent a car if you stay in this area.

4800 Spenard Rd., Anchorage, AK 99517-3236. ✆ **800/544-0553** or 907/243-2300. Fax 907/243-8815. www.millenniumhotels.com. 248 units. High season $270–$285 double; $325–$600 suite. Low season $165–$185 double; $250–$400 suite. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; concierge; tour desk; 24-hr. room service; laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* AC, TV w/Nintendo, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, high-speed internet.

INEXPENSIVE

A Homestead Bed and Breakfast *Finds* This is a real 1930s homestead house built of logs, once remote but now a few minutes from the airport and Kincaid Park. Frank and Patricia Jasper have lived here more than 30 years, and they've kept it as an authentic slice of Alaska (like themselves). One of the accommodations is a charming log cabin with plank floors, the other is a suite upstairs with many rooms and four beds, plus an outside entrance and many odd corners and pieces of furniture. Both rooms have cooking facilities. It's a great deal. (Beware, an entirely different place on Spenard Road has an almost identical name.) No smoking is permitted.

6141 Jewel Lake Rd., Anchorage, AK 99502. ✆ **907/243-5678.** Fax 907/248-6184. jasper@chugach.net. 2 units. Summer $95 double; winter $65 double. Extra person $20. Rates include full breakfast in summer, continental in winter. MC, V (5% surcharge for credit cards). *In room:* TV/VCR, kitchenette, coffeemaker.

Creekwood Inn *Value* Sharing a busy highway with a car dealership and a self-storage business, this funny little hotel is a friendly oasis. Rooms are clean and well maintained and have features, such as microwave ovens, that make them quite practical, although they're not luxurious or up to date (some of the bathrooms raise the question, "when was *that* color *ever* popular?). The sunny attitude and hard work of the staff make up for the decorating misdemeanors. Six rooms have kitchenettes and there's a comfortable cabin for four, with a full

kitchen, out in the parking lot. The wooded Lanie Fleischer Chester Creek Trail, for biking, walking, or Nordic skiing, is just beyond a gate in the RV park (full hookups are $24).

2150 Gambell St., Anchorage, AK 99503. ✆ **800/478-6008** or 907/258-6006. Fax 907/279-8972. www.hillside-alaska.com. 26 units. High season $95–$159 double; low season $53–$95 double. Extra person $10. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

Spenard Hostel International, 2845 W. 42nd Place (✆ **907/248-5036;** www.alaskahostel.org), is a friendly place near the airport, with free phones, inexpensive bike and storage rental, Internet access, a laundry machine, and a black Lab, Skeeter. There are three lounges for different activities and three kitchens. You can come and go 24 hours a day. It feels more like communal housing than an impersonal hostel. The office is open daily from 9am to 1pm and from 7 to 11pm in summer, 7 to 11pm winter. Beds are $16, cash, a dollar more if you use a credit card (Discover, MasterCard or Visa), with off-season discounts.

Anchorage is a big city, but you can find natural camping right on the urban outskirts. The municipally owned **Centennial Park** is on Boundary Road at the Muldoon Road exit from the Glenn Highway (✆ **907/333-9711,** or 907/343-4474 off season; www.muni.org/parks/camping.cfm), just as you enter town from the north. Although it is near Muldoon's run-down commercial strip, many of the 83 sites are nicely wooded. The campground has a dump station and free showers and charges $15 a night ($13 for residents).

There are several RV parks within the Anchorage bowl. The best is the wooded and landscaped **Anchorage RV Park,** 7300 Oilwell Rd. (✆ **800/400-7275** or 907/338-7275; www.anchrvpark.com), near Centennial Park and the Alaska Native Heritage Center. It has full services and excellent facilities, including instant phone hookups. Each of the 195 sites costs $30 to $38 per night. Reserve ahead. They don't take tenters.

Near downtown, the RV park at the Creekside Inn is listed above under "Inexpensive."

For a less urban camping experience, you need to head out of town to Chugach State Park (see "Getting Outside," later) or Chugach National Forest (see chapter 7), which have the closest state park campgrounds. One of my favorites is the 28-site, $10-per-night **Bird Creek Campground,** 25 miles south on the Seward Highway (mile 101), next to Turnagain Arm and the salmon-filled creek. Sites are near a paved pathway under large spruce trees. The 57-site **Eagle River Campground** sits in a thickly wooded riverside spot, and it's well developed with paved roads and large sites with lots of privacy. It costs $15 a night and is the only state park campground where sites can be reserved in advance. Book up to a year ahead at ✆ **907/694-7982** or 907/746-4644 (www.lifetimeadventures.net). The hosts also book rafting on the Eagle River. The campground is on the Glenn Highway, 12 miles north from Anchorage; take the Hiland Road exit off the Glenn Highway.

3 Where to Dine

DOWNTOWN

EXPENSIVE

Club Paris ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD Coming from a bright spring afternoon into midnight darkness, walking under a neon Eiffel Tower and past the bar,

I sat down at a secretive booth for two, and felt as if I should lean across the table and plot a shady 1950s oil deal with my companion. And I would probably not have been the first. In contrast to Sullivan's Steakhouse, across the street, which contrives a masculine, retro feel, Club Paris is the real thing, decorated with mounted swordfish and other cocktail-era decor. The club is the essence of old Anchorage boomtown years, when the streets were dusty and an oilman needed a classy joint in which to do business. Steak, of course, is what to order, and rare really means rare. Ask for the blue cheese stuffing. This place has a full liquor license.

417 W. 5th Ave. ✆ **907/277-6332.** www.clubparisrestaurant.com. Reservations recommended. Lunch $5.75–$15; dinner $14–$44. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11:30am–2:30pm and 5–11pm; Sun 5–10pm.

The Marx Brothers Cafe ★★★ ECLECTIC/REGIONAL A restaurant started by three friends back when gourmet food was an exotic hobby in Anchorage is now a standard of excellence in the state. Treatments of Alaska seafood that started here as cutting-edge creative approaches now turn up in many of the best restaurants. Chef Jack Amon still presides in the kitchen of the cottage downtown, one of the city's first houses. Maitre d' Van Hale still presides out front, preparing his famous Caesar salad at tableside, a ritual that allows him to schmooze with anyone he chooses in the tiny dining rooms. His attitude mirrors the casual elegance of the entire restaurant, where those wearing ties are in the minority. The cuisine is varied and creative, ranging from Asian to Italian, and is always turned out flawlessly, often with subtle surprises. A meal is an experience that takes much of the evening and most entrees are over $30. Waiting in the small entryway can be uncomfortable if your table isn't ready. The wine cellar is famous, with a list the size of a dictionary, but wine prices are not unreasonable.

627 W. 3rd Ave. ✆ **907/278-2133.** www.marxcafe.com. Reservations required. Main courses $18–$36. AE, DC, MC, V. Summer Tues–Sat 5:30–10pm. Winter Wed–Sat 5:30–10pm.

Finds The Best Takeout in Town

Anchorage has great takeout food (as my family's continued survival attests). Downtown, **The Muffin Man,** at 817 W. 6th Ave. (✆ **907/279-6836**) produces some of the best meals eaten at desks in Anchorage, including the memorably delicious smoked red salmon and cream cheese sandwich. You can eat in the sunny, tiled dining room, too. The best, most original burgers are at **Arctic Roadrunner,** with locations on Arctic Boulevard at Fireweed Lane and on Old Seward Highway at International Airport Road. Try the Kodiak Islander, which has peppers, ham, onion rings, and God knows what else on top. The best gourmet deli, with legendary subs, is **Atlasta Deli** (✆ **907/563-3354**), in the shopping mall at Arctic Boulevard and 36th Avenue. I had a sub that cost $12, and I didn't regret it (the price range is $7.50 to $12). They deliver. We get carry-out Chinese from **New Sagaya's City Market** (✆ **907/274-6173;** www.newsagaya.com) at the corner of 13th and I streets. It's also a wonderful gourmet grocery and community meeting place, and has a good deli and Italian-style brick-oven pizza. Pack a picnic here, or eat in the enclosed or sidewalk dining areas.

Orso ★★ ITALIAN/MEDITERRANEAN Anchorage is growing up. Although the city has long had little boutique restaurants to show off the talents of particular chefs, only with this large, theatrically decorated place has a big investment been made in sophisticated dining. It's fun to eat in the ornate rooms, and the food, mostly a combination of northern and southern Italian cuisine with some local seafood inventions, is generally good and occasionally exceptional. Perhaps concerned about overshooting our provincial tastes, however, I had the sense they'd toned down some dishes. Some of the best items on the menu are pasta dishes that are under $20 and the portions generally are large, so you can avoid spending too much money by ordering only one course.

737 W. 5th Ave. ✆ **907/222-3232.** www.orsoalaska.com. Reservations recommended. Lunch $8–$18; dinner $12–$33. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Summer Mon–Fri 11:30am–2:30pm and 5–11pm, Sat–Sun 5–11pm. Winter Sun–Mon 5–9:30pm, Tues–Thurs 5–10pm, Fri–Sat 5–11pm.

Sacks Cafe ★★★ CREATIVE/ECLECTIC This is the most fashionable restaurant in town, and also one of the best. The storefront dining room, in warm Southwest colors and sharp angles, is a showcase for the food and diners, who can sit at tables or at a tapas bar. The cuisine defies categorization, but is consistently interesting and creative, frequently with Thai influences. The menu changes, but one recent offering was chicken with scallops, shiitake mushrooms, snow peas, udon noodles, ginger cream sauce, and black bean salsa. Vegetarians do as well as meat eaters. For lunch, the sandwiches are unforgettable, with choices such as shrimp and avocado with herb cream cheese on sourdough. The beer and wine list is extensive and reasonably priced. They serve brunch Saturday and Sunday.

328 G St. ✆ **907/274-4022.** www.sackscafe.com. Reservations recommended for dinner (reserve a day ahead for weekend nights). Lunch $5.25–$13; dinner $18–$28. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–3pm and 5–9:30pm; Fri and Sat till 10:30pm.

Simon and Seafort's Saloon and Grill ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD Simon's, as it's known, is the most fun fine-dining place in town, a jolly beef and seafood grill where voices boom off the high ceilings. On sunny summer evenings, the rooms, fitted with brass turn-of-the-20th-century saloon decor, fill with light off Cook Inlet, down below the bluff; the views are magnificent. The food is consistently very good. A long list of nightly specials includes items as exotic as a tasty crab- and macadamia-stuffed halibut, but most of the cuisine is simpler. The service, too, stands out: warm and professional, and quick enough to allow time for other evening activities. Children are treated well. To enjoy the place on a budget, order a sandwich and soup for lunch in the well-stocked bar.

420 L St. ✆ **907/274-3502.** Reservations recommended (reserve a couple of days in advance in summer). Lunch $7–$15; dinner $16–$40. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:15am–3:30pm and 5–10pm; Sat–Sun 5–10pm.

MODERATE

Glacier Brewhouse ★ GRILL/SEAFOOD/PIZZA An eclectic and ever-changing menu is served in this large dining room with lodge decor, where the pleasant scent of the wood-fired grill hangs in the air. They brew eight or more hearty beers behind a glass wall. It's a lively place to see and be seen, with lots of agreeable (if trendy) touches, such as the bread, made from spent brewery grain, that's set out on the tables with olive oil. An advantage for travelers is the wide price range—a pizza with feta cheese, sun-dried tomatoes, pesto and garlic is $10; crab legs are $37. The food is usually quite good. Choose this place for a boisterous meal with quick, casual service that will get you out in time to do something else with the evening. Do reserve ahead, however, as waits can be long.

737 W. 5th Ave. ✆ **907/274-BREW.** www.glacierbrewhouse.com. Reservations recommended for dinner. Lunch $8–$15; dinner $9–$34. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. High season daily 11am–11pm. Low season Mon 11am–9:30pm, Tues–Thurs 11am–10pm, Fri–Sat 11am–11pm, Sun 4–9:30pm.

Kumagoro ★ JAPANESE Anchorage has several good, authentic Japanese restaurants, but this one, right on the main tourist street downtown, has the most convenient location. Among my favorite lunches anywhere is their lunch box ($14), a large sampler of many dishes, including sushi, sashimi, and other tasty things I couldn't identify. The dining room is pleasantly low-key, with tables in rows, so you may have the opportunity to meet those seated next to you. This place has a beer and wine license.

533 W. 4th Ave. ✆ **907/272-9905.** Lunch $6.50–$14; dinner $13–$39. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. Summer daily 11am–10:45pm; winter daily 11am–9:45pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Cilantros Mexican Restaurant *Finds* MEXICAN This place serves authentic, inexpensive Mexican food in a little house on the park strip, in cheery but sparsely decorated dining rooms large enough for only a few tables. The service is quick rather than friendly or polished, but it's tough to complain when the food is this good and this cheap. Each of my meals has been just right. They serve from the entire, very long menu all day, including breakfast: The huevos rancheros are great. This is a real find for dinner when you want to save time and money.

611 W. 9th Ave. ✆ **907/279-8226.** Breakfast $6–$8; lunch and dinner $7–$14. MC, V. Mon–Fri 11am–10pm; Sat 4–10pm. Closed Sun.

Dianne's Restaurant *Value* SOUP/SANDWICH This is my first choice for a quick, healthful, inexpensive lunch downtown. Located in the base of a tall, glass office building, Dianne's cafeteria line fills with well-dressed folk seeking the hearty freshly baked bread, soups, sandwiches, and specials turned out for the lunch hour. The atmosphere is bright and casual. This is a great place for a quick lunch. The restaurant has no liquor license.

550 W. 7th Ave., Ste. 110. ✆ **907/279-7243.** Main courses $4–$8.25. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–4pm.

Downtown Deli and Cafe *Kids* DELI Former governor Tony Knowles started this 4th Avenue sandwich restaurant before his success in politics. In 1994, President Clinton came for dinner. Knowing his appetite, I hope he ordered some side dishes, because much of the food here is served strictly a la carte. The best choices are the quiche of the day, the breakfasts, and the salmon dinner. Prices are reasonable for dinner (downtown is short on inexpensive sit-down places), and kids are treated well. Service can suffer on summer mornings when the place is overrun with tourists. They serve beer and wine.

525 W. 4th Ave. ✆ **907/276-7116.** Main courses $6.25–$12. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 6am–10pm. Winter Sun 9am–4pm, Mon–Thurs 7am–4pm, Fri–Sat 7am–9pm.

Snow City Cafe ★ VEGETARIAN/HOME STYLE This is a meeting place for a young, environmentally conscious crowd, and also a good restaurant. The food, served by a friendly, committed staff in a daylight-filled storefront dining room, is laced with interesting flavors and features varied styles of preparation. Many vegetarian dishes are on the menu. For lunch, the sandwiches are filling and varied, but breakfast is the main event. On weekend mornings the cafe fills with people chowing down on eggs Benedict, salmon cakes, homemade granola, and such, which are served all day. They hold an open mike on Sunday nights

Tips Coffeehouses

There are coffeehouses all over the city, where people go for a cup of java and a pastry, and to meet people and engage in conversation. My favorite is **Side Street Espresso,** on G Street between 4th and 5th, a gathering place for artists, activists, and anyone who wants to trade ideas, often with live acoustic music in the evening. **Cafe del Mundo,** at Northern Lights and Denali midtown, gathers an older crowd of businesspeople, yuppies, stay-at-home parents, and those looking for a comfortable meeting spot. **Kaladi Brothers,** in the shopping center on Northern Lights Boulevard between Arctic and Minnesota, which shares space with a huge used book store, is next to the essential REI sporting goods store and has computers with Internet access.

and an Irish music jam on Wednesdays. Monthly art shows begin with artist receptions every first Friday, held along with receptions at all the downtown galleries. They serve beer and wine.

1034 W. 4th Ave. ✆ **907/272-CITY.** www.snowcitycafe.com. Breakfast and lunch $5–$10. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–4pm.

BEYOND DOWNTOWN

EXPENSIVE

Jens' Restaurant ★★★ INTERNATIONAL Chef Jens Hansen is truly gifted. His restaurant is for the kind of diner who loves exciting food, surprises, and beautiful plates of new tastes and textures; the meals are about the food, sharing bites, and saying "Wow," and "How did he do that?" I won't call it experimental, because I've never had a meal here that wasn't perfect, but the cuisine is highly eclectic and there's often only one item on the changing menu that isn't unusual or challenging: the superb pepper steak. Like everything else, the steak dish also has a complex and memorable sauce. The wine list is exceptional and reasonably priced, and you can sip your selection while dining inexpensively on appetizers in a pleasant bar area; try the incredible spinach ravioli with Gorgonzola, for example. Desserts are sublime, such as the chocolate dome, which is made up of layers of chocolate fudge truffle and black raspberry dark chocolate, and served with fudge sauce. The dining room is light and clean, decorated with modern art. Service is highly professional, with each formally attired waiter assigned to just a few tables.

701 W. 36th Ave. ✆ **907/561-5367.** www.jensrestaurant.com. Reservations recommended. Lunch $9–$17; dinner $18–$28. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11:30am–2pm; Tues–Sat 6–10pm. Closed Jan.

MODERATE

Bear Tooth Grill & Theatre Pub ★ Value SOUTHWESTERN You can't get food of this quality for prices this low anywhere else in Anchorage. Dishes such as the soy grilled halibut are sophisticated and nicely done, and the menu goes on and on with Mexican choices, sandwiches and other selections that are inexpensive enough to make the restaurant fit for an after-work impulse—most main courses are under $11. The restaurant's partners started by making beer and then opened a pizzeria to sell the beer (see the Moose's Tooth, below). Next, they opened a theater-pub (see "Anchorage Nightlife," below) across town, finally adding the grill in the same building. You can eat tacos and wraps while watching a movie or in the movie theater lobby, a loud, free-flowing setting

that's good for kids. The grill is in a separate, calmer and more confined dining room, best for couples and parties of four or less. The food is served more slowly here, as befits the atmosphere. Tables are more comfortable than booths, but at peak times you have to take what you can get, often with a wait, so try to dine here early or late. Besides the beer, they have a full bar serving many margaritas.

1230 W. 27th Ave. ✆ **907/276-4200.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses $6–$20. DC, DISC, MC, V. Summer Sun–Thurs 4–11:30pm, Fri–Sat 4pm–12:30am. Winter Sun–Thurs 4–10:30pm, Fri–Sat 4pm–midnight.

Campobello Bistro ★★ NORTHERN ITALIAN/BISTRO This quiet little midtown restaurant is like stepping into northern Italy, except for the Alaska seafood. Even the service has the quality of jocular professionalism I remember from Italy. Unlike most of Anchorage's best restaurants, the bistro doesn't try to reinvent the cookbook. Most of the menu consists of recognizable dishes, such as veal Marsala or Italian sausage and polenta. Meals are bold, highly flavored, and entirely satisfying. The seafood crepe is fantastic. Those seeking the bland tomatoes and cheese of a typical Italian family restaurant should go elsewhere (Sorrento's and Romano's, both on Fireweed Lane, each do that tried-and-true formula well). The wine and food are reasonably priced.

661 W. 36th, Ste 10. ✆ **907/563-2040.** Lunch $8–$13; dinner $13–$23. DC, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11am–2:30pm; Tues–Sat 5–9pm.

INEXPENSIVE

The Lucky Wishbone ★ *Finds* DINER This Anchorage institution (in high school we called it "The Bone") is where the real pioneer Alaska meets families out for a delicious, not-too-greasy fried chicken dinner and famous milkshakes (try the hot fudge) and other delights from the fountain. It is our children's favorite. One section of the counter is reserved for discussion of aviation and golf. When the beloved owners outlawed smoking years ago, it made the front page of the newspaper. You'll see few other tourists, as the location, among the car dealerships at the extreme east end of downtown, is too far to walk to from the hotels, but I ran into Alaska's powerful senior U.S. senator, Ted Stevens. They have a drive-in.

1033 E. 5th Ave. ✆ **907/272-3454.** Main courses $3–$9.25. MC, V. Summer daily 10am–11pm; winter daily 10am–10pm.

The Moose's Tooth Pub and Pizzeria ★★ *Kids* PIZZA The best pizza and beer in Anchorage undoubtedly come from this fun and friendly place. The microbrewery came first, but the pizza is the greater accomplishment. It has a soft, light crust like Italian pizza, with the oomph of American pizza. They offer many ingenious toppings and the combinations of toppings really work. Dine inside (perhaps in the "hippie pad"), or at picnic tables outside in a tent that's open year-round. This is the best place in town to take kids for dinner. The only drawback is the restaurant's popularity, which can make for long waits at peak times.

3300 Old Seward Hwy. ✆ **907/258-2537.** www.moosestooth.net. Large pizza $13–$25. DC, DISC, MC, V. Summer Sun noon–midnight; Mon–Thurs 11am–midnight; Fri–Sat 11am–1am. Winter Sun noon–11pm; Mon 11am–11pm; Tues–Thurs 11am–midnight; Fri–Sat 11am–1am.

4 What to See & Do

I've arranged this section starting with a self-guided walking tour through downtown Anchorage, followed by details on the downtown museums and on attractions that are farther afield.

Tips Helper Bees

The people you see downtown on bikes and on foot in bright yellow-and-black outfits are the Anchorage Downtown Partnership Security Ambassadors, sometimes known as the "bumblebees" for their color scheme. They are around to help visitors and are funded by a self-imposed levy on downtown property owners. Stop one to ask a question or report a problem.

The best **guided tour** of the historic downtown area is given by **Anchorage Historic Properties,** 645 W. 3rd Ave. (✆ **907/274-3600;** www.anchorage historic.org), a city-endowed historic preservation group that offers 2-hour, 2-mile walks from June to August, Monday through Friday at 1pm. The volunteer guides are fun and knowledgeable. Meet at the lobby of Old City Hall, 524 W. 4th Ave., next door to the Log Cabin Visitor Information Center. Tickets cost $5 for adults, $1 for children.

Motorized city tours can get you beyond downtown without a rental car and without much effort. You will see some of the same sights covered in these pages with narration and at a group's pace. Here are motorized tour choices of increasing depth and time commitment (tours down the Seward Highway to Portage are covered in section 8):

City Trolley Tours (www.alaskatravel.com/anchorage/trolley-city-tour.html): For a quick look around, catch one of the City Trolley buses, which look like red trolley cars. The buses take visitors on 1-hour tours to Earthquake Park and the airport area's seaplane base. They leave many times a day from the 4th Avenue Theater at 600 W. 4th Ave. and cost $10.

Gray Line of Alaska City Tour (✆ **800/544-2206;** www.graylineofalaska.com): This 3-hour tour includes a visit to the Ship Creek area below downtown and the Alaska Native Heritage Center (though it spends only an hour there, not as much time as I like to stay). The tour costs $40 for adults, $20 children, including admission to the center.

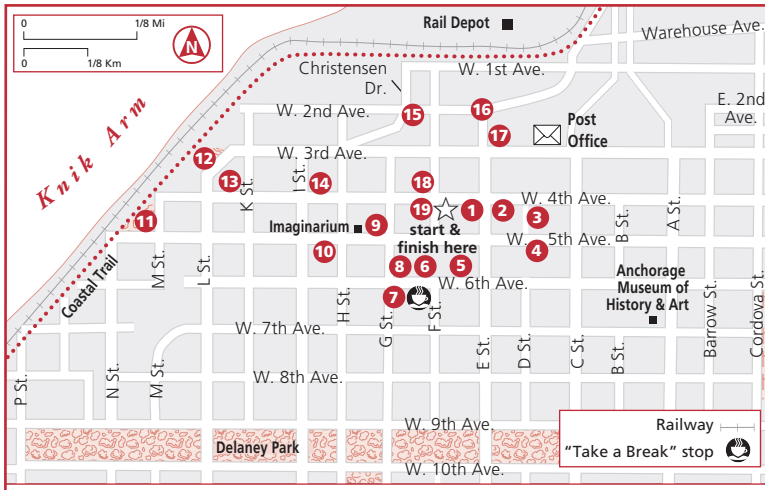
Alaska TourQuest (✆ **907/344-6667**): An all-day tour covers the same ground as the trolley tour at a slower pace and then goes all the way into the mountains at Glen Alps and partway down the Seward Highway to see the scenery there. Passengers get out and walk around at various stops and receive a picnic lunch. The Heritage Center is not included on the tour. The tour costs $39 adults, $34 for children and seniors.

WALKING TOUR DOWNTOWN ANCHORAGE

Start & Finish: 4th Avenue and F Street.
Time: 2 hours (use the shortcuts noted for a briefer tour).

Start at the **Log Cabin Visitor Information Center** at 4th Avenue and F Street. Outside is a sign that shows the distance to various cities and a 5,114-pound jade boulder put on display by Stewart's Photo Shop, an Anchorage institution that is just across the street.

Downtown Anchorage Walking Tour



1 Old City Hall
2 Wendler Building
3 D Street
4 The 5th Avenue Mall
5 Town square
6 Alaska Center for the Performing Arts
7 City Hall
8 Decker/Morris Gallery
9 Offbeat businesses
10 Holy Family Cathedral
11 Elderberry Park
12 Resolution Park
13 The Last Blue Whale
14 Totem poles
15 Historic houses
16 Ship Creek overlook
17 Saturday Market
18 Old federal building
19 4th Avenue Theater

Walk east, toward the mountains, to:

1 Old City Hall (1936)

This building is on the right of 4th Avenue as you approach E Street. The lobby contains a fun and illuminating free display on city history, including dioramas of the early streetscape, old photographs, and the fire bell and fire pole that once were used in this building.

Crossing E Street, notice that all the buildings are modern on the left side of 4th Avenue—everything on that side, from E Street east for several blocks, collapsed in the 1964 earthquake. The street split in half, lengthwise, with the left side ending up a dozen feet lower than the right. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers later reinforced the land with a gravel buttress, and the slope below was forever prohibited from construction because of the earthquake risk. This stretch of 4th Avenue is where the **Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race** and the **Anchorage Fur Rendezvous World Championship Sled Dog Race** start each year in March and February, respectively.

Continue walking east. At 4th Avenue and D Street is the:

2 Wendler Building (1915)

The old Club 25 is among the oldest buildings in Anchorage. The bronze statue of the dog commemorates the sled-dog races that start here. Across D Street is a mural that depicts a map of coastal Alaska and B.C., with the Iditarod Trail dimly marked.

Turn right, walking a block south on:

3 D Street

Several interesting little businesses and restaurants inhabit this block, sometimes joining together for a street fair.

First on the left is **Cyrano's Off-Center Playhouse** (✆ **907/274-2599;** www.cyranos.org), home to the Eccentric Theater Company. The company is really good; the tiny theater can cause quite a stir in town and has won many awards.

Cross 5th Avenue at the end of D Street and enter:

❹ The 5th Avenue Mall

This grand, four-story shopping center is Alaska's fanciest mall, with Nordstrom and JCPenney as its anchor stores. A large, airy food court is on the top floor. Take a look, or walk straight through to the doors on the opposite side. (Just a block east are the Anchorage Museum of History and Art and the Alaska State Troopers Museum, described below.)

Cross the mall to the doors opposite, exiting onto 6th Avenue, turn right and walk a block and cross E Street to:

❺ Town Square

The community raised money for improvements to the town square by collecting donations of $40 each for the granite bricks, with an inscription of the contributor's choosing. There are 13,344 bricks (bet you can't find mine). On the east side of the square, behind you, the huge whale mural was painted freehand by Wyland in 1994. He painted similar whale murals in cities all along the West Coast. The building on the northeast corner of the square is one of the city's oldest and was saved from demolition when the park was created; it contains a charming gift and candy shop.

On the west side of the square is the massive, highly decorated, dominating:

❻ Alaska Center for the Performing Arts

The center was completed in 1988 amid controversy over the high cost and a design that's either clever and bold or garish and busy—you decide. The lobby is usually open, and whatever your opinion of the decor, a look inside will spark a discussion. Alaskans have gotten used to it, and now we think of the building mostly as a focal point of our cultural life. Tours are held Wednesday at 1pm; a $1 donation is requested (reach the center's administrative offices at ✆ **907/263-2900;** www.alaskapac.org). Thespians believe that the ghost of painter Sydney Laurence haunts the building, making lights dim and brighten mysteriously and elevators go up and down with no one in them. An auditorium demolished to make room for the center was named for Laurence. Check the box office for current performances in the three theaters, Alaska's premier performance venues (and see "The Performing Arts," later).

TAKE A BREAK

From the performing arts center, cross 6th Avenue at the F Street light and turn right (west) to **Humpy's,** a popular tavern on the south side of 6th with a huge selection of microbrews, live music, and good casual meals. This book's editor highly recommends the halibut tacos here.

The square green office building next door to Humpy's is:

❼ City Hall

Turn left through the pedestrian walkway between Humpy's and City Hall. A large mural showing a timeline of the history of Anchorage faces the parking lot. An artistically superior mural, by Duke Russell, is on the wall in Humpy's outdoor seating area on the near side of the parking lot.

Walk west through the city hall parking lot to G Street, turn right, and proceed to 6th Avenue and G. On the northeast corner of 6th Avenue and G Street, in the corner of the Performing Arts Center, is the:

❽ Decker/Morris Gallery

This is one of Alaska's best and most uncompromising galleries.

Walk a block north to 5th Avenue. The west side of G Street between 4th and 5th avenues contains some of the downtown's best:

❾ Offbeat businesses

First comes **Aurora Fine Arts,** an attractively cluttered arts and craft shop with plenty to see. Next are: **Darwin's Theory,** a friendly, old-fashioned bar with character that shows up in an Indigo Girls song; **Suzi's Woollies** (www.suziswoollies.com), a Celtic shop carrying imported sweaters, jewelry, and CDs, and offering live Irish music on Saturday afternoons; **Denali Wear,** which is Tracy Anna Bader's studio and shop of bright, graphic, wearable art; **Side Street Espresso,** where you can get into a lively discussion on art or politics and make contact with thinking people; and **Charlie's Alaska Trains** (www.ptialaska.net/~aktrains), a retired couple's labor of love, which sells little other than Alaska Railroad models and memorabilia. On the opposite side of the street, at 423 G Street, the **Alaska Glass Gallery Downtown** shows fanciful and dramatic glass sculptures in a light-filled storefront.

Shortcut: You can cut an hour off the tour here by continuing north on G Street to 4th, then turning right and walking 1 block to the starting point at F Street.

Backtrack to 5th and G, then proceed west (away from the mountains) on 5th. The Imaginarium, described under "Downtown Museums," below, is on the right. Continuing west on 5th Avenue and crossing H Street, you'll see the:

❿ Holy Family Cathedral

This concrete Art Deco church is the seat of the Roman Catholic archbishop. The interior is unremarkable.

Keep going toward the water, crossing L Street and going down the hill to:

⓫ Elderberry Park

The yellow-and-brown house is the **Oscar Anderson House,** described under "Downtown Museums," below. Besides the good playground equipment, the park offers the easiest access point to the **Coastal Trail** (see "Walking & Biking," later). The trail tunnels under the Alaska Railroad tracks from the bottom of the park.

Now hike back up the hill to L Street and turn left. At 3rd Avenue is:

⓬ Resolution Park

The bronze **Captain Cook Monument** stands on a large wooden deck, but he's gazing out to sea—the opposite of the way he was facing when he explored Cook Inlet in 1778 aboard HMS *Resolution.* Cook didn't personally come as far as Anchorage, instead sending a boat with his ship's master, William Bligh (later the Captain Bligh who inspired mutiny aboard the HMS *Bounty*). Failing to find the Northwest Passage here, Cook considered his 2 weeks in Cook Inlet a waste of time, grousing in his journal, "Nothing but a trifling point in geography has been determined." The park's informative signs, powerful mounted binoculars, and commanding vantage point make this a rewarding stop for gazing out at the water and the mountains beyond. The waters you see are ferocious and wild, with whirlpool currents and a tidal range of almost 40 vertical feet. The shore across the inlet, about 2 miles away, is virtually uninhabited.

Follow 3rd Avenue east (back toward the mountains) 1 block and turn right on K Street. On the right is:

⓭ *The Last Blue Whale*

Joseph Princiotti's huge 1973 bronze of combat between a whale and whalers in small boats shows the whale's point of view.

Cross K Street to walk through the plaza toward the opposite Nesbett State Courthouse. The sinuous shapes of the concrete are supposed to suggest both the flow of people through the court system and a braided glacial river. At the courthouse, at 4th Avenue and I Street, take a look at the two:

⓮ Totem poles

Carved of red cedar by Lee Wallace of Ketchikan, and erected in 1997, they represent the eagle and raven moieties of the Tlingit people, intended to symbolize the balance of justice. A Tlingit creation story tells of how raven stole the moon and stars and brought them to mankind; here, the moon and stars are the stars of the Alaska flag.

Walk around past the courthouse on 4th Avenue and turn left onto H Street. Follow H as it crosses 3rd Avenue and becomes Christensen Drive. Descend the hill on Christensen and turn right on 2nd Avenue, toward the mountains and the:

⓯ Historic houses

The old wooden houses along 2nd are mostly attorneys' offices now, but this was once one of the better residential areas in town. Several houses are marked and a kiosk at 2nd and F relates some town history. If you imagine houses like this over much of downtown, you'll know what Anchorage looked like before oil.

Continue east on 2nd Avenue to E Street, where you will find:

⓰ A Ship Creek overlook with a monument to President Eisenhower

The bust commemorates Alaska's 1959 admission to the Union (in fact, Eisenhower was a major barrier to statehood). More interesting is the overlook. You can see the Alaska Railroad yards from here, and part of the port of Anchorage and the neighborhood of Government Hill, across the Ship Creek river bottom. This is where the tent city of Knik Anchorage, later shortened to Anchorage, was set up in 1914. An informative set of signs on the overlook explains the history of what you are looking at. The Alaska Railroad, which helped build Anchorage, still has its headquarters in a modern brick building that stands by the creek. The nearer concrete building is the railroad's stately depot. The beautifully restored steam engine on the pedestal in front was used on construction of the Panama Canal, then worked in the yard here as a switch engine. The creek itself is full of salmon in June and August (see "Fishing," later), and a walkway that crosses a dam just upstream from here is a good place to watch the fish and to feed ducks. The walk down the stairs to the river bottom and back is strenuous.

Walk up the hill on E Street to 3rd Avenue. Every Saturday from mid-May to mid-September, the extensively landscaped parking lot on the left becomes the:

⓱ Saturday Market

This street fair, held every Saturday from mid-May to mid-September, draws hundreds of vendors and thousands of shoppers. You can buy everything from local vegetables to handmade crafts to tourist junk. There are food booths and music, too.

Turn right on 3rd Avenue, then left on F Street. F Street Station, on the left, is a fun bar with an after-work crowd. Proceed to 4th Avenue, and you're back at the Log Cabin Visitor Information Center, but don't stop. Turn right on 4th Avenue. On the right side is the:

⓳ Old federal building

This grand, white, Depression-era structure now contains the Alaska Public Lands Information Center, with interesting displays and lots of information about the outdoors.

Cross the street to see Anchorage's most attractive historic building, the restored:

⓴ 4th Avenue Theater

This theater was built by Cap Lathrop, Alaska's first business magnate, who created it as a monument to the territory and the permanence of its new society. Today it's a gift store and dinner theater. Don't miss going in and looking at the bas-relief murals and the blinking Big Dipper on the ceiling, which during many a movie over the years was more entertaining than whatever was on the screen.

DOWNTOWN MUSEUMS

Alaska State Troopers Museum This charming little museum has more than one way into the heart, but it is certainly not an essential stop. For law enforcement people, the appeal is obvious. Others may also enjoy perusing a trove of law enforcement insignia, equipment, a 1952 Hudson Hornet patrol car, photographs, and other memorabilia, that all conveys the positive spirit of pioneer Alaska and the troopers' obvious pride.

245 W. 5th Avenue. ✆ **800/770-5050** or 907/279-5050. Admission free. Open year-round Mon–Fri 10am–5pm, Sat noon–4pm.

Anchorage Museum of History and Art ★★★ The state's largest museum doesn't have its largest collection, but unlike the Alaska State Museum in Juneau or the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks, the Anchorage museum has the room and staff to teach and to serve as a center of contemporary culture unmatched at this northern latitude, at least on this side of the globe. Most visitors tour the large Alaska Gallery, an informative and enjoyable walk through the history and some of the anthropology of the state. In the art galleries, you can see what's happening in art in Alaska today; Alaskan art isn't all scenery and walrus ivory, but the grandeur of the state does influence almost every work. The Anchorage museum also gets the best touring and temporary exhibits. It's the only museum in Alaska that can require more than one visit. The restaurant, operated by the excellent Marx Brothers Cafe (see p. 211), serves some of the best lunches to be had downtown. Call information on the lectures, openings, and jazz happenings that take place on many summer evenings.

121 W. 7th Ave. ✆ **907/343-4326.** www.anchoragemuseum.org. Admission $6.50 adults, $6 seniors 65 and older, free for children 17 and under. May 15–Sept 15 Fri–Wed 9am–6pm, Thurs 9am–9pm. Sept 16–May 14 Tues–Sat 10am–6pm, Sun 1–5pm.

The Imaginarium ★ *Kids* This science museum is one of my kids' favorite places. It's geared to children, with not many words and lots of fun learning experiences. The idea is that while they're running around having a great time, the kids may accidentally learn something or at least the displays will excite a sense of wonder that is the catalyst for scientific exploration. There's a strong Alaska theme to many of the displays. The saltwater touch tank is like an indoor tide pool.

737 W. 5th Ave., Ste. G. ✆ **907/276-3179.** www.imaginarium.org. Admission $5 ages 13–64, $4.50 ages 2–12 and 65 and older. Mon–Sat 10am–6pm; Sun noon–5pm.

The Oscar Anderson House Museum This house museum, moved to a beautiful site in Elderberry Park over the water, shows how an early Swedish butcher and entrepreneur lived. Although far from grand, the house is quaint, surrounded by a lovely little garden, and dates from the city's founding in 1915. The 45-minute guided tour provides a good explanation of Anchorage's short history. Anderson died in 1974, and the house contains many of the family's original belongings, including a working 1909 player piano around which the structure was built. If you come at Christmas, don't miss the Swedish Christmas tours, the first 2 weekends in December.

420 M St. ✆ **907/274-2336.** www.anchoragehistoric.org. Admission $3 adults, $1 children 5–12. Summer Mon–Fri noon–5pm. Closed in winter.

SIGHTS BEYOND DOWNTOWN

Besides the attractions listed in detail below, Anchorage is the home of the **Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum,** at the airport at 4721 Aircraft Dr.

Tips Big State, Big Movies

Two downtown theaters show large-format films aimed at visitors.

The Alaska Experience Center (✆ **907/272-9076;** www.alaskaexperiencetheatre.com) is on the northwest corner of Sixth Avenue and G Street, partly in a dome tent. A 40-minute Omnivision wraparound movie about Alaska costs $8 for adults, $4 for children, showing hourly. It's certainly spectacular—too much so for some people, who get motion sickness. Sit toward the center at the back. An Alaska Earthquake display that really shakes is $6 for adults and $4 for children ages 5 to 12. Combination tickets are discounted. The film shows in summer daily from 9am to 9pm; in winter noon to 6pm. The earthquake demonstration has slightly longer hours.

In the summer, large-format films often play at the **Alaska Center for the Performing Arts.** Recently they've shown *Alaska: Spirit of the Wild* and a film about bears, starting hourly from 9am to 9pm. There's no need to buy tickets in advance; just walk in and get your ticket for around $10 from a card table in the lobby.

(✆ **907/248-5325;** www.alaskaairmuseum.com). The museum has a wonderful topic, an impressive collection, and large buildings, but it is perennially short on money and has been closed for long, unpredictable periods. At this writing, summer hours were daily except Tuesday, 10am to 6pm, but it is wise to call in advance before heading to the museum.

Alaska Botanical Garden *Finds* The garden is young, and the volunteer staff has filled only 4 acres of its wooded, 110-acre site, but already this is a restful place to learn about native flora and see what grows in Alaska while sitting in peaceful shade on benches and watching birds and squirrels. They've done a good job of integrating the garden into its forest setting while adding four formal gardens and a wildflower trail. I don't know of many other botanical gardens where you're warned to watch out for moose and bear. A fine 1-mile nature trail with explanatory signs leaves from the garden and proceeds down to Campbell Creek, where you may see salmon swimming.

Campbell Airstrip Rd. (off Tudor Rd.). ✆ **907/770-3692.** www.alaskabg.org. Donation requested. Summer daily 9am–9pm. From downtown, drive out New Seward Hwy. (Gambell St.) to Tudor Rd., exit to the east (left), turn right off Tudor onto Campbell Airstrip Rd., and park at the Benny Benson School. It's 20 min. from downtown.

Alaska Native Heritage Center ★★★ Alaska Natives built this extraordinary center to bring their cultures to visitors. It's Alaska's best Native cultural attraction. What makes it so is not the graceful building or the professional and informative displays, but the Native people themselves, real village people who often create a personal connection with visitors and rarely come across as practiced or distant. The three main parts of the center take much of a day to absorb. First, there's a hall where storytellers and dancers perform, with two 30-minute programs rotating through the day. Second, there's a 10-minute film and a gallery of educational displays and a series of workshops where artisans practice and show off traditional crafts. Finally, there's a pond surrounded by five traditional Native dwellings representing each cultural group, each hosted by a member of that group. There's a snack bar for soup and sandwiches and a gift shop

where inexpensive items are mixed in with real Native art and crafts for sale by the center or on consignment from Native artisans. Getting to the center requires a car, a taxi, or bus trip. You can get here either via route 4 of the People Mover bus (described on p. 201) or on a shuttle operated by a tour company. Contact the center for the summer's current shuttle arrangements, which change from year to year, and add $10 to $12 per person to the price for the shuttle ride.

From the Glenn Hwy. take the North Muldoon exit. ✆ **800/315-6608** or 907/330-8000. www.alaskanative.net. Admission $21 adults, $19 seniors and military, $16 children 7–16. Alaska residents $9 adult, $6 children. Summer daily 9am–6pm. Winter at least Sat–Sun noon–5pm; call for additional hours and winter discounts.

The Alaska Zoo ★★ *Kids* If you're expecting a big-city zoo, you'll be disappointed, but the Alaska Zoo has a charm all its own. Anchorage residents have developed personal relationships with the animals, many of which are named. Watch Oreo and Ahpun, the brown and polar bear buddies, play and swim underwater (when you get home you can check them out via webcam on the zoo's website). Gravel paths meander through the woods past large enclosures with natural flora for bears, seals and otters, musk oxen, Dall sheep, moose, caribou, waterfowl—all the animals you were supposed to see in Alaska but may have missed. (Don't get the elephant, Siberian tigers, yaks, snow leopards or Bactrian camels in your snapshots—they'll blow your story.) You can easily spend half a day here. A snack bar serves basic meals and there is a large gift shop.

4731 O'Malley Rd. ✆ **907/346-3242.** www.alaskazoo.org. Admission $9 adults, $8 seniors, $5 children 12–17, $4 children 3–12, free under 3. May–Aug daily 9am–6pm, till 9pm Tues and Sat in June and July; summer educational programs Tues at 7pm, live music Friday at 7pm. Off-season open daily at 10am, closing time varies so call ahead. Drive out the New Seward Hwy. to O'Malley Rd., then turn left and go 2 miles; it's 20 min. from downtown, without traffic.

Earthquake Park The 1964 Good Friday earthquake was the biggest ever in North America, registering at 9.2 on the Richter Scale, killing 131 people, and flattening much of the region. Downtown Anchorage and the Turnagain residential area, near the park, suffered enormous slides that turned neighborhoods into chaotic ruins. A sculpture and excellent interpretive signs commemorate and explain the event, but you can't see much through the trees that have grown up since the quake. If you are up for a scramble, descend into the park itself, where you can still climb over the strange topography of hummocks and small ponds that were created when the ground went liquid. This also is a good access point to the Coastal Trail.

West end of Northern Lights Blvd. No admission. Open year-round. From downtown, take L St. (it becomes Minnesota Dr.) to Northern Lights Blvd. and turn right. The park is on your right after you cross Lakeshore Dr.

Eklutna Historical Park ★ The Native village of Eklutna has a fascinating old cemetery, still in use, in which each grave is enclosed by a highly decorated spirit house the size of a large dollhouse. These little shelters excite the imagination in a way no ordinary marker would. The unique practice evolved from a melding of Athabascan and Russian Orthodox beliefs. There are two small Russian Orthodox churches on the site, including the **St. Nicholas Orthodox Church.** Built north of here of logs sometime before 1870, it is among the oldest buildings in the Southcentral region. Walk through the church and grounds by yourself or take an informative 30-minute tour for the same price. Visitors are not allowed inside the low picket fence around the cemetery, but you can see well enough and you can enter the church. Wear mosquito repellent. If you come out this far, don't miss the Thunderbird Falls, described below under "Hiking & Mountain Biking."

About 25 miles out the Glenn Hwy. ✆ **907/688-6026**. www.eklutna.com. Admission $6 adult, $3 ages 6–17, free for children under 6. Summer Mon–Sat 10am–6pm. Take the Glenn Hwy. 26 miles to the Eklutna exit, then go left over the overpass.

SPECTATOR SPORTS

Most big events in Anchorage happen at the **Sullivan Arena,** at 16th Avenue and Gambell Street. The main ticket agency is California-based **Tickets.com** (✆ **800/478-7328**), operating locally under the name CarrsTix, with counters at most Carrs grocery stores. The same company also operates the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts box office.

BASEBALL Anchorage has two semipro baseball teams, the **Anchorage Glacier Pilots** (✆ **907/274-3627;** www.glacierpilots.com) and the **Anchorage Bucs** (✆ **907/561-2827;** www.anchoragebucs.com), made up of college athletes who play in a six-team Alaska league during June and July. Cool summer nights under the natural light at Mulcahy Stadium are among our family's favorite outings. You hear, smell, and feel the rhythm of the game when you sit so close in the tiny park. The quality may be uneven, but exceptional players grow up here: Among the famed alumni are Mark McGwire, Rick Aguilera, Tom Seaver, Dave Winfield, Barry Bonds, Wally Joyner, and Randy Johnson. Check the *Anchorage Daily News* or the websites above for game times. Mulcahy is at 16th Avenue and A Street, a long walk or a short drive from downtown. Tickets are around $5. Dress warmly for evening games; a blanket is rarely out of order. A weekend day game is warmer, but then you won't get to see baseball played at night without lights.

BASKETBALL The University of Alaska Anchorage basketball teams (www.goseawolves.com) host a major Division I preseason tournament, the **Great Alaska Shootout,** in late November. The men's games are over Thanksgiving weekend and the women's games are held on the days prior to Thanksgiving weekend. The Seawolves play the regular season at the Sullivan Arena and at the University Sports Center, on campus on Providence Drive.

HOCKEY The **Anchorage Aces** (✆ **907/258-2237;** www.anchorageaces.com) compete at the Sullivan Arena in national minor league hockey; the western division that Anchorage faces regularly includes cities such as Fresno, Las Vegas and San Diego. The **University of Alaska Anchorage** (www.goseawolves.com) plays NCAA Division I hockey and is the city's most ardently followed home team.

5 Getting Outside

Anchorage is unique in Alaska (and anywhere else I know) for the number of places right near town to hike, bike, ski, and otherwise get into the wild. I've broken the options down by activities below. In town, the city's bike trails connect through greenbelts that span the noisy, asphalt urban core and offer soothing creekside woods. Kincaid Park and Far North Bicentennial Park are both on the trail system within the city and encompass miles of trails for Nordic skiing, mountain biking, and horseback riding. The Chugach Mountains, which form the backdrop to the town, offer tundra hiking, backpacking, mountain biking, and climbs that range from easy to technical. More trails and streams, only slightly farther afield, are covered in the "Out from Anchorage" sections later in this chapter. Many cruises, tours, fishing charters, and sea-kayaking trips leave from nearby **Whittier,** easily managed as a day trip; see section 4 of chapter 7 for details.

INFORMATION The **Alaska Public Lands Information Center** (see p. 201; ✆ **907/271-2737;** www.nps.gov/aplic) offers guidance for outdoor activities all over Alaska.

For information on the bike trails, Nordic skiing parks, and other city recreation, contact **Anchorage Parks & Recreation** at ✆ **907/343-4474** (www.muni.org/parks).

Get information specific to **Chugach State Park** (including their *Ridgelines* newsprint guide) from the public lands center, or directly from the park at ✆ **907/345-5014** (www.alaskastateparks.org; click on "Individual Parks"). **Chugach National Forest** can be reached at ✆ **907/743-9500** or www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach.

The best trail guide to the entire region is Helen Nienhueser and John Wolfe Jr.'s ***55 Ways to the Wilderness*** (The Mountaineers, $16.95)**,** available in any bookstore in the area. The best trail map is the Chugach State Park topographic trail map published in 2000 by Imus Geographics and sold at either of the sporting-goods stores mentioned below.

EQUIPMENT You can rent most anything you need for outdoor activities in Anchorage. For bike rentals, see p. 201. Get advice and rent sea kayaks, cross-country skis, snowshoes, bear-proof containers, and mountaineering equipment at **Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking,** at 2633 Spenard Rd. (✆ **907/272-1811**). It's a small shop where the staff takes the time to help you plan a trip. A block away, at 1200 W. Northern Lights Blvd., **REI** has a large store (✆ **907/272-4565;** www.rei.com) that rents a wide range of gear, including lightweight canoes with car-top carriers, camping gear, packs, and cross-country skis (but not bikes, sleeping bags or ice climbing gear). It is the handiest place in town to buy outdoor athletic clothing as well. (For Arctic cold weather gear, see "What To Wear" in Chapter 2.)

WALKING & BIKING

Anchorage has an award-winning network of paved **bike trails** spanning the city along wooded greenbelts. You rarely see a building and almost always cross roads and rail lines through tunnels and over bridges, so you're never in traffic. Here are two of the best:

TONY KNOWLES COASTAL TRAIL ★★★ Leading 10 miles from the western end of 2nd Avenue along the shore to **Kincaid Park,** the coastal trail is among my favorite things about Anchorage. It's a unique pathway to the natural environment from the heart of downtown. I've ridden parallel to beluga whales swimming along the trail at high tide and encountered as many as six moose on a single ride. (Don't approach moose or bear or try to slip by; wait at a safe distance for them to go their own way.) The most popular entrance is at **Elderberry Park,** at the western end of 5th Avenue. **Westchester Lagoon** is 10 blocks south of Elderberry Park and is perfect for a lovely stroll and to picnic or feed the ducks and geese.

LANIE FLEISCHER CHESTER CREEK TRAIL ★ Starting at an intersection with the Coastal Trail at Westchester Lagoon, this trail runs about 4 miles east along the greenbelt to **Goose Lake,** where you can swim in a cool woodland pond at the end of a hot bike ride and buy snacks from a little cafe—still, improbably enough, in the middle of the city. South from the lake, a wooded trail leads partway through the university campus. The paved bike trails, including the Fleischer, stay well back in the trees, so you rarely see a building, and tunnels and bridges span all road and railroad crossings, so you're never in traffic.

HIKING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

KINCAID PARK ★★ Covered in more detail below, Kincaid Park is an idyllic summer setting for mountain biking and day hikes. Moose sightings are a daily occurrence on wide dirt trails that snake for about 30 miles through the birch and white spruce of the park's hilly 1,400 acres of boreal forest, often with views of the sea and mountains beyond. Trails open to bikes around June 1, or as soon as they dry, and a mountain bike race series runs through the summer. On the busiest summer day, however, there is plenty of room for relaxed, solitary rambling or cycling. Within the park, wooded Little Campbell Lake is a picturesque but little-used spot for family canoeing and fishing for stocked trout, salmon, and char; there is no lifeguard.

FAR NORTH BICENTENNIAL PARK ★ The 4,000-acre park, on the east side of town, is a unique patch of urban wilderness, a habitat for bears, moose, and spawning salmon. People use it for dog mushing and skiing in winter, and for exceptional mountain biking and day hiking in summer. The Alaska Botanical Garden, listed above, and the Hilltop Ski Area, below, are both within the park's boundaries. A good place to start a hike or ride through the woods is the **Campbell Creek Science Center** (✆ **907/267-1257;** www.ak.blm.gov/ado/ccscentr.html), an educational facility operated by the Bureau of Land Management. Staff are often on hand to answer questions, and you can consult books and maps and look at an aquarium of native fish. To get to the park and science center from downtown, take Gambell Street (it becomes New Seward Hwy.) south to Dowling Road, go east (toward the mountains), turn right on Lake Otis Road, turn left on 68th Avenue, and follow 68th to it's end at the park.

FLATTOP MOUNTAIN & THE GLEN ALPS TRAILHEAD ★★★ There are many ways to reach the alpine tundra, intoxicating fresh air, and cinematic views that the Chugach Mountains behind Anchorage offer, but the easiest and best developed routes begin at the Chugach State Park Glen Alps Trailhead. Even those who aren't up to hiking should go for the drive and a walk on a short, paved loop with incredible views and interpretive signs. If you are ready for a hike, you can start at the trailhead for trips of up to several days, following the network of trails or taking off across dry, alpine tundra by yourself, but usually within cellphone range. Camping is permitted anywhere off the trails.

Flattop Mountain is the most popular hike from the Glen Alps Trailhead. It's a great family climb, though it's a bit crowded on weekends. It's a steep afternoon hike, easy for fit adults and doable by school-age children. There's a bit of a scramble at the top, easiest if you stick to the painted markers on the rocks. Dress warmly and don't go in the rain.

For a longer or less steep hike or a mountain-biking trip, follow the broad gravel trail that leads up the valley from the Glen Alps Trailhead to several other great routes. Trails lead all the way over the mountains to Indian or Bird Creek, on Turnagain Arm, up some of the mountains along the way and to round alpine lakes in high, rocky valleys. You're always above the tree line, so you don't need to follow a trail if you have a good map. This is wonderful backpacking country.

To get to the trailhead, take New Seward Highway to O'Malley Road, head east toward the mountains, then turn right on Hillside Drive and left onto Upper Huffman Road. Finally, turn right on the narrow, twisting Toilsome Hill Drive. Don't forget to bring cash or a check for the self-service day-use fee of $5 (not required if you are going only to the overlook and park in the designated spaces).

Fun Fact Fun Fact

The glacial melt water from Eklutna Lake is where Anchorage gets most of its city water. You pass the water plant on the way up the road to the campground and trailhead. What most people don't know is that when they buy bottled "glacier water" in the store, it likely comes from a tap in this same plant.

EAGLE RIVER VALLEY & CROW PASS ★★ The **Eagle River Nature Center,** at the end of Eagle River Road, 12 miles up Eagle River Valley from the Glenn Highway exit (✆ **907/694-2108;** www.ernc.org), resembles a public wilderness lodge, with hands-on displays about the nature in the area, plus guided nature walks or talks daily in the summer and weekends year-round (2pm weekends, call for other times). Operated by a nonprofit concessionaire for Chugach State Park, it's open in summer Sunday through Thursday from 10am to 5pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am to 7pm; spring and fall from 10am to 5pm except Monday; winter Friday through Sunday from 10am to 5pm. There's a $5 parking fee.

The ¾-mile **Rodak Nature Trail,** with interpretive signs, leads to a viewing platform over a beaver pond. The **Albert Loop Trail** is a 3-mile route; a geology guide from the center matches with numbered posts on the way. Both trails have good bird and wildlife watching. The 25-mile **Crow Pass Trail,** a portion of the historic Iditarod Trail, continues up the valley into the mountains along the river. You can make a day-hike loop of 6 miles or less by returning on the new **Dew Mound Trail.** Continuing, the Crow Pass Trail eventually surmounts the Chugach in alpine terrain and passes near Raven Glacier before descending into Girdwood (see "Out from Anchorage: Turnagain Arm & Portage Glacier," later in this chapter). There are campsites with fire rings along the way, and a mile up the trail the center rents out a public-use cabin for $55 a night. A yurt on the Crow Pass Trail and another on the Albert Loop rent for the same price. Reserve well ahead for weekends. Availability is shown on the website.

THUNDERBIRD FALLS & EKLUTNA LAKE ★★ The hike to Thunderbird Falls is an easy, 1-mile forest walk with a good reward at the end; you can see the falls without the steep final descent to their foot. Take the Glenn Highway north to the Thunderbird Falls exit, 25 miles from Anchorage.

Continuing 10 miles up the gravel Eklutna Lake Road, you come to an appealing state parks campground ($10 a night, $5 day-use fee) and a glacial lake. The lake and the area surrounding it are great for canoeing, hiking, and exceptional mountain biking. The Lakeside Trail leads 14 miles to Eklutna Glacier; you can camp on the way, stay at the state park's Yuditna Creek Cabin at 3 miles, or stay in the communal Serenity Falls hut at 13 miles (advance reservations are required for the cabin or hut, and, for the hut can be made only in person at the state parks office, not by phone or fax—see "State Parks Cabin Reservations" in Chapter 7, Section 1).

Rental bikes, kayaks, and other equipment, plus guided kayak tours, are offered by **Lifetime Adventures,** with a booth at the trailhead for the Lakeside Trail (✆ **907/746-4644;** www.lifetimeadventures.net). For $70 you can kayak 8 miles to the other end of the lake and pick up a bike there to ride back.

BIRD-WATCHING

The Anchorage bowl contains varied bird habitats, easily accessible and close at hand: lakes, streams, lagoons, freshwater and salt marshes, seashore, woodlands, and so on. Visiting birders can see species they don't encounter at home (Pacific loons, Hudsonian godwits, boreal chickadees) and familiar birds in breeding plumage unique to these northern latitudes (a red-necked grebe with a red neck, for example). Local birders have recorded 229 species in the city. Bird self-guided with the help of a rental car or at least a bike. Potter Marsh is a superb fresh water area (see section 8, below) for birding. Other great birding spots are the salt marshes along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail near Kincaid Park (see above), and Ship Creek, a river habitat right near downtown. You can join field trips and network with local birders through the **Anchorage Audubon Society** (www.anchorageaudubon.org). Check their recorded hotline for verified recent sightings or report your own (✆ **907/338-BIRD**).

Success is more assured if you join a group. A team of experienced birders and science educators offers outings by van three times daily in the summer through **Bird Watching Tours of Anchorage Alaska** (✆ **888/334-7282** or 907/248-7283, www.anchoragebirding.com), picking up clients at the downtown hotels. Since they go birding every day, they know where to find interesting and unusual sightings. They teach beginners, and can also keep the interest of the advanced, $1000-binocular crowd. The 4-hour tour costs $75.

FISHING

There are hatchery salmon in many of Anchorage's streams, and stocked trout, salmon, or char in 28 lakes, so you need not leave town to catch a fish. The **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 333 Raspberry Rd., Anchorage, AK 99518-1599 (✆ **907/267-2218;** www.state.ak.us/adfg, click on "Sportfish"), publishes informative booklets on the Web and on paper. There's also a recorded information line (✆ **907/267-2503**) with all the details on what's hot and lots of other advice. See chapter 2 for general guidance and license information, and information for planning a fishing vacation, and see chapter 7 for the most famous fishing opportunities on the Kenai Peninsula.

ROADSIDE FISHING Although the setting (under a highway bridge in an industrial area) might not be the wilderness experience you've dreamed about, the 40-pound king salmon you pull from **Ship Creek** may make up for it. From downtown, just walk down the hill to the railroad yard. A couple of shacks sell and rent gear in the summer. Fishing for kings is best in June and for silvers in August and September. Fish only on the rising tide, when the fish come into the creek. Fishing near the end of the rising tide will mean crossing less mud, but one successful angler I know insists it's the start of the tide that's best. Either way, you'll need rubber boots, preferably neoprene chest waders, for the muddy banks, but don't go too far out, as the mud flats are dangerous and several times every summer the fire department has to rescue stuck fishermen.

Bird Creek, 25 miles south of Anchorage on the Seward Highway (see "Out from Anchorage: Turnagain Arm & Portage Glacier" later in this chapter), known for hot silver salmon fishing, will be in a down year in 2004. Anticipating construction to address the parking and access problems, biologists stopped releasing the hatchery fry that come back as adult fish. Assuming the ongoing construction doesn't block access completely in 2004, pinks and chums will still be in the creek, and then silvers will return again in August 2005 after the new facilities open. Pinks run from late June to early August. Other creeks along the Arm have similar but smaller runs.

FLY-IN FISHING ★★★ Serious anglers will use Anchorage as a base from which to fly to a remote lake or river with more fish and fewer people. Such a flight can be an unforgettable experience for those who are less than enthusiastic about fishing, too. The plane lifts off from Anchorage's Lake Hood floatplane base and within ½ an hour smoothly lands on a lake or river, often all alone. You climb out and watch as the plane lifts off and disappears, leaving behind the kind of silence unique to true wilderness. It's on these trips that avid anglers are made—or spoiled. I've heard people complain of how sore their arms got from pulling in too many salmon.

Several companies offer fly-in trips; among the best established is **Rust's Flying Service** (✆ **800/544-2299** or 907/243-1595; www.flyrusts.com). They can take you out guided or on your own, for the day or for a longer stay in a cabin or lodge. If you fly to a lake, they'll provide a boat. They can't make fish appear if none are running, but they will try to take you to the hot spots. You can bring your own gear, or they can provide it. Prices for an unguided day trip start at around $250 per person, with a two-person minimum.

OTHER SUMMER ACTIVITIES

FLIGHTSEEING Small planes are the blood cells of Alaska's circulatory system, and Anchorage its heart. There are several busy airports in Anchorage, and Lake Hood is the world's busiest floatplane base. More than two dozen operators want to take you on a flightseeing tour. If you will travel to Talkeetna, Denali National Park, Juneau, Glacier Bay National Park, or Ketchikan, it might be wise to save your flightseeing splurge for those extraordinary places. Likewise, for bear viewing flights, Katmai National Park, Homer, Kodiak, Juneau, and Wrangell are closer to the action. (All those places are covered in this guide, with the details for flights; check the table of contents or index.) On the other hand, if time is short, you can see some very impressive scenery and even, for a price, get to bears from Anchorage. Rust's Flying Service (see "Fly-In Fishing," directly above) is a reliable operator and can get you in the air for as little as $89. A flight to Mount McKinley is $259 and takes 3 hours; for another $40 you can land on the mountain (well worth the added cost). Helicopters cost more by the hour. **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/843-1947** or 907/266-8351; www.flightseeingtours.com) offers helicopter flightseeing from Anchorage. A 50-minute flight around the city and the Chugach Mountains is $245. A 90-minute flight with a glacier landing is $349.

RAFTING There are several white-water rivers within a 90-minute drive of Anchorage. **Nova Raft and Adventure Tours** (✆ **800/746-5753** or 907/745-5753; http://novalaska.com) has more than 25 years of experience offering multiday trips all over the state, and four different ½-day floats in the Anchorage area. Various rafting trips are available, ranging from trips down relatively easygoing Class II and III rapids on the Matanuska River to journeys on the Class IV and V white water of Six-Mile Creek. For the Class IV and V rafting trips, you may be required to prove your swimming ability before you can get in the boat. Self-paddling or hiking add-ons are options on some trips. White-water rafting always entails risk, but Nova's schedule allows you to calibrate how wild you want to get. The ½-day trips range in price from $65 to $125. Children 5 to 11 can go on the calmer Matanuska River float for $35. Other trips are suitable only for older children and adults. You'll need your own transportation to the river and may need to bring your own lunch. **Chugach Outdoor Center** (✆ **866/277-RAFT** or 907/277-RAFT; www.chugachoutdoorcenter.com) also offers Six-Mile Creek rides as well as longer trips on the Talkeetna River.

If you want to go rafting but don't mind a less exciting river, you can save a lot of time by going closer to town and riding the Eagle River, which runs past the Anchorage suburb of the same name. A whitewater ride is as little as $25 with **Lifetime Adventures** (✆ **907/746-4644;** www.lifetimeadventures.org) and they have longer floats that also include more smooth water. The rides go several times a day every day of the summer.

SEA KAYAKING Except at Eklutna Lake (see above), kayaking day trips from Anchorage go through Whittier, on Prince William Sound (see section 4 of chapter 7 for complete details).

SWIMMING I'm betting that most visitors from warmer climes won't be interested in chilly lake swimming in Anchorage (the best spot is Goose Lake, off Northern Lights Boulevard east of Lake Otis Road). If you have children and need to burn off some energy, however, you won't find a better spot than a new indoor waterpark, **H2Oasis** (✆ **888/H2OASIS** or 907/522-4420; www.h2oasis waterpark.com), near the intersection of O'Malley Road and the New Seward Highway. A big wave pool and a 500-foot "watercoaster" are the top attractions. Adults should bring earplugs, as the noise is unbearable, and a full wallet, as admission is $20 for ages 13 and older, $15 ages 2 to 12.

WINTER ACTIVITIES

DOG MUSHING Running sled dogs is a recreational sport as well as a method of utilitarian transportation (it originated as such in the Bush). It is also a professional sport. Keeping a dog team is more than a hobby—it is a lifestyle revolving around the feeding, care, and exercise of at least a dozen dogs (the pros sometimes have more than 100). Some mushers offset the great expense by offering rides. In the Anchorage area, among the best mushers are friendly and casual Angie and Tom Hamill, who keep around two dozen dogs at their home in the Chugiak area, ½ an hour north of downtown on the Glenn Highway, and run them on the wooded trails of the mushing park there. In winter only, they offer rides of various lengths, starting at 2 miles, with guests riding in the sled basket while they drive, for $35. That's really too short, however; you just get the idea of how powerful and intelligent the dogs are, as they speed along responding to voice commands to make turns and deal with unexpected situations on the trail. Choose one of the longer rides for a bit more money. If you want to try it yourself, the Hamills will teach you to mush in a 2½-hour session for $230; they make guests feel like friends—it won't be intimidating. They do overnight expeditions, too, and own a bed-and-breakfast. The business is called **Birch Trails Adventures,** 22719 Robinson Rd., Chugiak (✆ and fax **907/688-5713;** birchtrails@excite.com). The couple also has a B&B in their house with the dogs outside, charging $105 per double for country style rooms. For another great mushing option, see the section on Girdwood, later in this chapter.

ICE SKATING **Westchester Lagoon,** just 10 blocks from downtown (see "Walking & Biking," above), is a skating paradise in the winter. When the ice gets thick enough, usually by mid-December, the city clears a large rink and over a mile of wide paths that wind across the pond, mopping the ice regularly for a smooth surface. Skaters gather around burn barrels, well stocked with firewood, to socialize and warm their hands, and on weekends vendors often sell hot chocolate and coffee. Ice skates are for rent for $5 a day at **Champions Choice,** in the University Center Mall at Old Seward Highway and 36th Avenue (✆ **907/563-3503**). Not all sizes are available, so you may want to call ahead.

SKIING **Kincaid Park** is one of the best **cross-country skiing** areas in the country, with the first World Cup–certified trails in the U.S. More than 34 miles of trails are geared to every ability level, but mostly intermediate and expert. Besides the superb trails, it's a beautiful place to ski, with trails through rolling hills of birch and spruce, with views of the mountains and ocean. Most trails are expertly groomed for skating and classical techniques, with two loops reserved for classical only. Ten miles are lighted (an important feature on short winter days). The **Kincaid Park Outdoor Center** (✆ **907/343-6397**) is open Monday through Friday from 2 to 9:45pm and Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 9:45pm. The gate closes at 10pm, so park outside it if you will be skiing later. Skiing often lasts into March. Big end-of-season races come in late February and early March (see "Special Events," above). **Far North Bicentennial Park** also has some excellent trails—20 miles total, 4½ lighted—and a slightly longer season because of its hillside location. Start at Hilltop Ski Area. Many other parks and the bike trails have lengthy skiing routes, too, and many of them are lighted; ski right from downtown on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. See "Equipment" on p. 225 for information on where to rent skis.

Anchorage has several **downhill ski areas.** The best, **Alyeska Resort,** is described in the Girdwood section, later in this chapter. **Hilltop Ski Area,** in Bicentennial Park in town, is a great place to learn to ski, with one long beginner slope, at 7015 Abbott Rd. (✆ **907/346-1446;** www.hilltopskiarea.org).

6 Shopping

Some of the most interesting shops are mentioned earlier, in the walking tour of downtown. Most galleries and gift shops are located downtown.

NATIVE ARTS & CRAFTS A few shops in Anchorage carry Native Alaskan arts and crafts, but the city doesn't have a large gallery of such work, or the low prices you can find in the Bush. Before making major purchases, know what you're buying (see "Native Art: Finding the Real Thing," in chapter 2).

Nowhere else will you find another business like the **Oomingmak Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative** (✆ **888/360-9665** outside Alaska, or 907/272-9225; www.qiviut.com), located in the house with the musk ox on the side at 6th Avenue and H Street. Owned by 250 Alaska Native women in villages across the state, the co-op sells only scarves and other knit items made of *qiviut* (*ki*-vee-ute), the light, warm, silky underhair of the musk ox, which is collected from shedding animals. Each village has its own knitting pattern. They're expensive—adult caps start at $155—but the quality is extraordinary. The website contains the women's fascinating correspondence and links to two of the rural knitters' own pages.

As an aside, if you are driving north from Anchorage, you may also want to stop at the **Musk Ox Farm** (✆ **907/745-4151;** www.muskoxfarm.org) just north of Palmer on the Glenn Highway, where you can see the strange-looking creatures close up (open summer 10am–6pm daily; admission $8.50 adults, $7 seniors and ages 13–18, $5.50 ages 6–12). Musk oxen also are at the Alaska Zoo (covered earlier in this chapter) and are easy to see in the wild near Nome (Chapter 10).

Anchorage has several small shops and local secret places to find authentic work. In the downtown area, **The Rusty Harpoon,** at 411 W. 4th Ave., has authentic Native items, less expensive crafts, and reliable, longtime proprietors who only buy direct from Native artists they know. Likewise, the **Yankee**

Whaler, in the lobby of the Hotel Captain Cook, at 5th Avenue and I Street, is a small but well-regarded shop carrying Native arts. At the **Anchorage Museum of History and Art** at 7th and A streets (see earlier in this chapter under "What to See & Do"), check out the gift shop for a small but tastefully selected and beautifully displayed array of Alaska Native art.

If you can shop beyond the downtown area, you have two more good choices. The shop at the **Alaska Native Heritage Center** (see earlier in this chapter under "What to See & Do,") is known for a better selection and higher prices than some other shops, and you can have confidence in their claims of authenticity.

Probably the best place for Native crafts in Anchorage is the **Hospital Auxiliary Craft Shop** in the Alaska Native Medical Center, off Tudor east of Bragaw (✆ **907/729-1122**), where everything is made by those eligible to use the hospital. The work you find here is all authentic and entirely traditional. The shop is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and the first and third Saturday of each month from 11am to 2pm. They don't accept credit cards. There's exceptional Native art to see on the walls of the hospital, too.

FURS If you're in the market for a fur, Anchorage has a wide selection and no sales tax. **David Green Master Furrier,** at 130 W. 4th Ave. (www.davidgreenfurs.com), is an Anchorage institution. Others are nearby.

GIFTS There are lots of places to buy both mass-produced and inexpensive handmade crafts other than Alaska Native items. If you can be in town on a Saturday during the summer, be sure to visit the **Saturday Market** street fair, in the parking lot at 3rd Avenue and E Street, with food, music, and hundreds of miscellaneous crafts booths. You won't have any trouble finding gift shops on 4th. Our favorite is the relatively classy **Cabin Fever,** at 650 W. 4th. The **Kobuk Coffee Company,** at 5th Avenue and E Street, next to the town square, occupies one of Anchorage's earliest commercial buildings; it's a cozy candy, coffee, and collectibles shop. Midtown, on International Airport Road between the Old and New Seward highways, **Alaska Wild Berry Products** is a fun store to visit. There's a chocolate waterfall and a big window where you can watch the candy factory at work. The chocolate-covered berry jellies are simultaneously addictive and rich enough to make you dizzy if you eat more than a few.

FINE ART Downtown has several galleries. Openings at all the galleries happen on the first Friday of each month, allowing for an evening of party hopping. The **Decker/Morris Gallery,** at 6th Avenue and G Street, shows exciting and adventurous artists, even if they lack broad commercial appeal. **Artique,** 2 blocks north at 314 G St., is Anchorage's oldest gallery and has a much larger selection. Half of the gallery is given over to big oils and other gorgeous originals; the other half is chock-full of prints, less-expensive ceramics, and some mass-produced and/or corny stuff. At 5th and G, **Aurora Fine Arts** carries pottery, prints, and gifts. Directly across G is a gallery showing only glass sculpture.

7 Anchorage Nightlife

THE PERFORMING ARTS

The primary arts season begins in the fall and ends in the spring, but in the summer you can catch traveling performers, music festivals and live music at the nightclubs and coffee houses. To find out what's happening, pick up the free weekly *Anchorage Press,* which is given away in racks all over town. Their exhaustive event and music scene calendar is online, too, at **www.anchoragepress.**

com. Friday's edition of the *Anchorage Daily News* has a section called "8" that includes reviews and listing information in grid format (www.adn.com/weekend). You can also contact the **Anchorage Center for Performing Arts**, 631 W. 6th Ave. (✆ **907/263-2900**; www.alaskapac.org) for information on current theater, music and dance offerings. See "Special Events" above for some major happenings and another on-line calendar.

Tickets.com (✆ **800/478-7328**), of Concord, California, is the main ticket agency, selling tickets for almost every venue in town. They have box offices at the Anchorage Center for Performing Arts, 631 W. 6th Ave. (✆ **907/263-2900**; www.alaskapac.org), and at Carrs grocery stores under the name CarrsTix.

The **Anchorage Concert Association** (✆ **907/272-1471;** www.anchorageconcerts.org) offers a fall-through-spring schedule of classical music, theater, dance, and other performing arts. **Whistling Swan Productions** (www.whistlingswan.net) promotes folk and acoustic alternative performers in intimate venues. The **Anchorage Symphony** (✆ **907/274-8668;** www.anchorage symphony.org) performs during the winter season. Anchorage also has lots of community theater and opera, and limited professional theater, including the experimental **Out North Contemporary Art House** (✆ **907/279-8200;** www.outnorth.org), which produces local shows and imports avant-garde performers. Downtown, **Cyrano's Off Center Playhouse** (✆ **907/274-2599;** www.cyranos.org), at 4th Avenue and D Street, is a tiny theater with its own semiprofessional repertory company.

NIGHTCLUBS & BARS

For a fun, riotously funny night out, nothing in town compares to **Mr. Whitekeys' Fly By Night Club,** on Spenard Road south of Northern Lights Boulevard (✆ **907/279-SPAM**). The goateed proprietor, a consummate vulgarian, ridicules Anchorage in his crude, political, local-humor musical comedy shows, in which he costars with a fallen former Miss Anchorage. If you can laugh at dog poop, you'll love it. The summer show is at 8pm Tuesday through Saturday, with no smoking Tuesday through Thursday; live music follows on Friday and Saturday. Tickets are $12.50 to $20, and reservations are necessary well in advance. They serve good food, too—dine at the show, not before. (Believe me, I wrote this long before they started using a piece of my writing in one of their shows.)

Blues Central/Chef's Inn, 825 W. Northern Lights Blvd. (✆ **907/272-1341**), is dedicated to showcasing the best blues performers available, virtually every night. Major names come through on a regular basis. Shows start at 9:30pm. They also serve excellent beef.

The huge **Chilkoot Charlie's,** at Spenard Road and Fireweed Lane (✆ **907/272-1010;** www.koots.com), has two stages for rock and one for swing, and many bars on different themes. The place is huge and full of entertainment, like an adult Disneyland, but can be claustrophobic when crowded, with low ceilings and a dark roadhouse atmosphere.

THE MOVIES

The most fun place to see a movie is the **Bear Tooth Theatre Pub,** at 1230 W. 27th Ave. (✆ **907/276-4200;** www.beartooththeatre.net), where you can watch art films and second-run movies while sipping craft brews and eating gourmet tacos, pizzas, and the like. Arrive early, as they often sell out and parking is terrible. They also put on concerts monthly: check the website.

There are several multiplexes in Anchorage playing all the current Hollywood output; check the sources at the beginning of this section for listings and reviews. The closest larger theaters, the **Century 16,** 301 E. 36th Avenue (✆ **907/929-3456;** www.centurytheatres.com) and the **Fireweed 7 Theater,** 661 E. Fireweed Lane (✆ **907/566-3328;** www.regalcinemas.com), are in midtown.

8 Out from Anchorage: Turnagain Arm & Portage Glacier

One of the world's great drives starts in Anchorage and leads roughly 50 miles south on the Seward Highway to Portage Glacier. It's the trip, not the destination, that makes it worthwhile. The two-lane highway along Turnagain Arm, chipped from the foot of the rocky Chugach Mountains, provides a platform to see a magnificent, ever-changing, mostly untouched landscape full of wildlife. I've listed the sights in the style of a highway log, for there are interesting stops all the way along the road. It will take at least ½ a day round-trip, and there's plenty to do for an all-day excursion. Use your headlights for safety even in daylight and be patient if you get stuck behind a summertime line of cars—if you pass, you'll just come up behind another line ahead. Mileage markers count down from Anchorage. Car rental is covered in "Getting Around," earlier in this chapter.

Many bus tours follow the route and visit Portage Glacier (see "Getting There: By Bus" under "Essentials," earlier). **Gray Line of Alaska** (✆ **800/544-2206** or 907/277-5581; www.graylineofalaska.com) offers a 7-hour trip that includes a stop in Girdwood and a boat ride on Portage Lake for $60 adults, $30 ages 2 through 11, twice daily in summer.

POTTER MARSH (Mile 117) Heading south from Anchorage, the Seward Highway descends a bluff to cross a broad marsh formed by water impounded behind the tracks of the Alaska Railroad. The marsh has a boardwalk from which you can watch a huge variety of birds. Salad-green grasses grow from sparkling, pond-green water.

POTTER SECTION HOUSE (Mile 115) Located at the south end of Potter Marsh, the section house was an early maintenance station for the Alaska Railroad. Today it contains the offices of Chugach State Park, open during normal business hours, and, outside, a few old train cars and interpretive displays. Just across the road is the trailhead for the **Turnagain Arm Trail.** It's a mostly level path running down the arm well above the highway, with great views breaking now and then through the trees. Hike as far as you like and then backtrack to your car, or continue 9 miles to Windy Corner (if you can have a vehicle waiting for you there), or break off where the trail meets the McHugh Creek picnic area and trailhead, about 4 miles out.

McHUGH CREEK (Mile 111) Four miles south of Potter is an excellent state park picnic area and a challenging day hike with a 3,000-foot elevation gain to Rabbit Lake, which sits in a tundra mountain bowl, or to the top of 4,301-foot McHugh Peak. You don't have to climb all the way; there are spectacular views within an hour of the road. From this point onward, most of the stops are on the right or ocean side of the road: plan your stops on the outbound trip, not on the return when you would have to make left turns across traffic.

BELUGA POINT (Mile 110) The state highway department probably didn't need to put up scenic overlook signs on this pull-out, 1½ miles south of McHugh Creek—you would have figured it out on your own. The terrain is simply awesome, as the highway traces the edge of Turnagain Arm, below the

Tidal Wave

Tides in Turnagain Arm rise and fall over a greater range than anywhere else in the United States, with a difference between an extreme high and low of more than 41 feet. When the tide is rising, the water can grow deeper by as much as 7 feet an hour, or a foot of water every 8½ minutes. If your foot gets stuck in the mud, it takes less than an hour to drown (yes, that has really happened). Amazing as that speed is, the tide here can go even faster. A breathtaking wall of water up to 6 feet tall called a bore tide can roar up Turnagain Arm twice a day. To see the ocean do such a thing is so unfamiliar it looks almost like science fiction as the wide arc of foam rushes ahead of a noticeably deeper sea. You can (theoretically) predict the bore tide: it happens just after the time of low tide at sunrise (which comes 1 hr., 12 min. after low tide in Anchorage), which you can find in a tide book or at **http://co-ops.nos.noaa.gov** (click "Prediction" then "Alaska" then "Kenai Peninsula and Cook Inlet"). The wave moves faster than 10 miles per hour, but even at that speed it takes hours to make it all the way up the Arm, so to figure when it will pass your location requires knowing your distance from the mouth of the Arm as well as the time of the tide change. A set of signs at the Bird Point pull-out (on the next page) explain the tides and may have a table predicting their arrival and size (it was not up-to-date when I last checked).

towering cliffs of the Chugach Mountains. If the tide and salmon runs are right, you may see beluga whales, which chase the fish toward fresh water. Sometimes they overextend and strand themselves by the dozens in the receding tide, farther along, but they usually aren't harmed. The pull-out has spotting scopes to improve the viewing. The further right-hand pull-outs over the next few miles have interpretive signs about the 1895 gold rush in this area and other topics.

WINDY POINT (Mile 106) Be on the lookout on the mountain side of the road for Dall sheep picking their way along the cliffs. It's a unique spot, for the sheep get much closer to people here than is usual in the wild; apparently, they know they're safe. Windy Point is the prime spot, but you also have a good chance of seeing sheep virtually anywhere along this stretch of road. If cars are stopped, that's probably why; get well off the road and pay attention to traffic, which will still be passing at high speeds.

You may also see windsurfers in the gray, silty waters of the Arm. They're crazy. The water is a mixture of glacial runoff and the near-freezing ocean. Besides, the movement of water that creates the huge tides causes riverlike currents, with standing waves like rapids.

INDIAN VALLEY (Mile 104) Up the road by the Turnagain House restaurant is the **Indian Valley** trailhead, a gold rush–era trail that ultimately leads 24 miles to the other side of the mountains. The path, while often muddy, rises less steeply than other trails along the Arm.

BIRD CREEK & BIRD RIDGE TRAIL (Miles 102 and 100) The **Bird Ridge Trail** comes first, at mile 102, a lung-busting climb of 3,000 feet in a little over a mile. It starts with an easy, accessible trail, then rises steeply to views

that start at impressive and get more amazing as you climb. With the southern exposure, it's dry early in the year. The excellent state campground on the right side of the highway, over the water, costs $10 a night. There is also a short trail, interpretive signs, an overlook, and a platform that makes fishing easier for people with disabilities. Pink salmon run from late June to mid-August, silver salmon from mid-July to August.

BIRD POINT (Mile 96) The remarkable wayside here is not to be missed. A paved pathway rises up to a bedrock outcropping with a simply wonderful view—all the severity of the Turnagain Arm, but framed by the soft green of a freshwater wetland with a beaver lodge. Take a look at the fascinating interpretive signs on many subjects.

THE FLATS (Miles 96–90) At Bird Point the highway descends from the mountainside to the mud flats. A fragment of bike trail parallels the highway on the mountain for this 6 miles, with picnic sites along the way and great views. Several pull-outs on the right side of the highway have interpretive signs. At high tide, water comes right up to the road. At low tide, the whole Arm narrows to a thin, winding channel through the mud. The Arm is not practically navigable and navigational charts are not even available. Few have ever tried to navigate it other than gold prospectors in rowboats a century ago or today's occasional death-defying canoeist or kayaker. The first to try was Capt. James Cook, in 1778, as he was searching for the Northwest Passage on his final, fatal voyage of discovery (he was killed by Hawaiians later that year). He named this branch of Cook Inlet Turnagain Arm because the strength of the currents and shoals forced the boat he sent to keep turning around.

TURNOFF TO GIRDWOOD (Mile 90) The attractions of Girdwood, covered later in the chapter, are worth a visit, but the shopping center here at the intersection is not chief among them. Stop for a simple meal or a restroom break, or to fill your gas tank for the last time for many a mile.

OLD PORTAGE (Mile 80) All along the flats at the head of Turnagain Arm are large marshes full of what looks like standing driftwood. These are trees killed by salt water that flowed in when the 1964 quake lowered the land as much as 10 feet. On the right, 9 miles beyond the turnoff for Girdwood, across from the former rail depot, a few ruins of the abandoned town of Portage

Gone But Not Forgotten

The **Begich-Boggs Visitor Center** at Portage Glacier is named for Hale Boggs, who was U.S. House majority leader, and Rep. Nick Begich, then Alaska's lone congressmen, who disappeared together in a small plane during Begich's 1972 reelection bid. The most likely theory is that the small plane iced up in Portage Pass and then crashed into Prince William Sound near here. No trace was ever found, as with many other Alaskan planes that have simply flown off into oblivion. Begich was reelected anyway. His opponent, Republican Don Young, later won a special election and continues to serve as Alaska's only congressman. Boggs' wife, Lindy, went on to serve out his term and eight more. Boggs' daughter, Cokie Roberts, is the famous broadcast journalist.

are still visible, almost 40 years after the great earthquake. There is good bird-watching from the turnouts, but venturing out on Turnagain Arm's tidal mud carries the real risk of getting stuck in quicksand-like mud and drowning in the tide. ***Warning:*** Don't venture out on the mud flats unless you know for a fact that they are safe.

BIG GAME ALASKA WILDLIFE CENTER (Mile 79) Fenced enclosures on a 140-acre compound give shelter to injured and orphaned deer, moose, eagles, owls, elk, bison, musk ox, bear, and caribou (✆ **907/783-2025;** www.biggamealaska.com). One moose is a movie star, but mostly the animals will spend their lives on display for visitors, who drive a short course to see them in enclosures as large as 18 acres—at times, some animals are not visible among the natural vegetation in their pens. You can usually get closer to the animals at the Alaska Zoo and see a larger variety (it is covered earlier in this chapter), but the larger enclosures here are more natural. A large log gift shop and outdoor snack bar is at the end of the tour. Admission is $5 for adults; $3 for military, seniors, and children 4 to 12, with a maximum of $20 per vehicle. In summer, it's open daily from 8am to 8pm; in winter, daily from 10am to 6pm.

PORTAGE GLACIER (Take the 5½-mile spur road at Mile 78) The named attraction has largely melted, receding out of sight of the visitor center. (The glacier you can see is Burns.) When the center was built in 1985, it was predicted that Portage Glacier would keep floating on its 800-foot-deep lake until 2020. Instead, it withdrew to the far edge of the lake in 1995. Today the exhibits in the lakeside **Begich–Boggs Visitor Center** focus on the Chugach National Forest as a whole, rather than just the glacier, and they're worth an hour or two to become oriented to the area's nature, history, and lifestyles. Children and adults find much to hold their interest here.

Several short trails start near the center. Rangers lead nature walks on the ¼-mile, paved Moraine Trail up to six times a day. Another trail leads less than a mile to Byron Glacier, in case you're interested in getting up close to some ice. Always dress warmly, as cold winds are the rule in this funnel-like valley.

A **day boat** operated by **Gray Line of Alaska** (✆ **800/478-6388,** 907/277-5581 for reservations, or 907/783-2983 at the lake; www.graylineofalaska.com) traverses the lake right up to Portage Glacier on hour-long tours, ice conditions permitting. It costs $25 adults, $12.50 ages 2 to 12, and goes five times daily in summer, every 90 minutes starting at 10:30am.

If this is your only chance to see a glacier in Alaska, it's probably a good choice, but if your itinerary includes any of the great glaciers in Prince William Sound, Kenai Fjords National Park, or the like, you won't be as impressed by Portage. You can get a free view of the glacier by taking a left just before the visitor center and stopping at a pullout on the way to the Whittier Tunnel.

Sandwiches and other simple meals are sold at a cafeteria called the **Portage Glacier Lodge** (✆ **907/783-3117**), located near the visitor center.

There are no lodgings in Portage, but two **Forest Service campgrounds** are on the road to the visitor center, with 72 sites between them (more details are in the Chugach National Forest section in chapter 7). At the Williwaw Campground, there's also a place to watch red salmon spawning in mid-August, but no fishing.

9 Out from Anchorage: Girdwood & Mount Alyeska

Girdwood, 37 miles south of Anchorage, is proof that a charming little town can coexist with a major ski resort, as long as the resort goes undiscovered by the world's skiers. Girdwood still has a sleepy, offbeat character. Retired hippies, ski bums, a U.S. senator, and a few old-timers live in the houses and cabins among the big spruce trees in the valley below the Mount Alyeska lifts. They all expected a development explosion to follow the construction of an international resort here a few years ago, but it hasn't happened. That may not be good news for the Japanese investors in the resort, but it is for skiers and other visitors who discover this paradise. They find varied, uncrowded skiing through long winters, plus superb accommodations and an authentically funky community.

The primary summer attractions are the hiking trails, the tram to the top of Mount Alyeska, and the Crow Creek Mine, described below. In winter, it's skiing. Mount Alyeska doesn't have the size of the famous resorts in the Rockies, but it's more than large and steep enough. Better still, it's uncrowded, half the mountain is above the tree line, and the snow lasts a long time. Olympian Tommy Moe trained here. Skiers used to tamer, busier slopes rave about the skiing here, with long, challenging downhills, no lift lines, and stunning views of the Chugach Mountains and glistening Turnagain Arm below.

ESSENTIALS A **rental car** is the most practical way to get to Girdwood. If you will only ski, however, you may be able to take a shuttle; call the resort before you come, as these arrangements change frequently. The **Girdwood Resort Association** maintains an extensive website at **www.girdwoodalaska.com**. For general visitor information, check the Anchorage visitor information listed in section 1 of this chapter.

EXPLORING GIRDWOOD

Crow Creek Mine ★ This mine opened in 1898 and operated until 1940. The Toohey family has turned the paths and 14 small buildings into a charming tourist attraction where you can experience the frontier lifestyle and watch rabbits and ducks wandering around. A bag of dirt, guaranteed to have some gold in it, is provided for gold panning, and you can dig and pan to get more if you have the patience for it, which few people do. Crow Creek Road, off the Alyeska Highway, is quite rough and muddy in the spring. Camping is $5 a night, with portable toilets.

Crow Creek Rd. (off the Alyeska Hwy.), Girdwood, AK 99587. ✆ **907/278-8060.** $3 adults, free for children. Gold panning $5 adults, $4 children 11 and under. May 15–Sept 15 daily 9am–6pm; closed the rest of the year.

Mt. Alyeska Tram ★ The tram isn't cheap, but I think it's worth it for anyone who otherwise might not make it to high alpine tundra during an Alaska trip. (In winter, ride on your lift ticket; in summer, ride free with a meal at the Seven Glaciers Restaurant at the top, see p. 240.) The tram takes 7 minutes in summer to get to the 2,300-foot level, where it stops at a station with an attractive but overpriced cafeteria (not to be confused with the Seven Glaciers Restaurant). The tram presents an opportunity for everyone, no matter how young, old, or infirm, to experience the pure light, limitless views, and crystalline quiet of an Alaskan mountaintop. Take the opportunity to walk around and enjoy it. Dress very warmly.

At the Alyeska Prince Hotel (see below). $16 adults ($13 Alaska residents), $15 ages 55 and older, $12 ages 8–17, $7 ages 7 and under. Summer daily 10am–9:30pm; winter, when lifts operate (call to check as hours vary).

Tips Ski Conditions

The weather is often different in Girdwood (which is in a rainforest) than in dry Anchorage, so before heading down the road for a day of skiing you should check out the conditions. Snow conditions are at www.alyeskaresort.com/snow.html, or ✆ **907/SKI-SNOW.**

For visibility, check out the live cam at www.chairfive.com.

ACTIVITIES

For additional information about activities in this area, contact the **Alyeska Prince Hotel** (see "Where to Stay," below).

SKIING Mount Alyeska, at 3,939 feet, has 1,000 acres of skiing, beginning from a base elevation of only 250 feet and rising 2,500 feet. The normal season is from early November to April, and it's an exceptional year when there isn't plenty of snow all winter. Skiing on the upper mountain often lasts through Memorial Day weekend. The average snowfall is 721 inches, or 61 feet. Because it's near the water, the weather is rarely very cold. Light is more of an issue, with short days in midwinter.

There are 27 trails, covering 2,000 vertical feet, that are lit on Friday and Saturday evenings from mid-December to mid-March, but the best Alaska skiing is when the days get longer and warmer in the spring. There are nine lifts, including the tram. Two chairs serve beginners, with a vertical drop of around 300 feet. The other 89% of the mountain is geared to intermediate to expert skiers. It's a steep mountain, and the expert slopes are pretty extreme, but more than half are rated intermediate. Helicopter skiing goes right from the resort's hotel as well.

An all-day lift ticket costs $46 for adults ($40 for Alaska resident, $36 for hotel guests), $28 for ages 14 to 17, $21 for ages 8 to 13 or 60 to 69, and $8 for ages 7 and under or over 70. Discounts apply for families or for skiing the beginner lifts only. Private and group instruction are available and you can save a lot by buying your lessons, lift ticket, and equipment rental at the same time. The day lodge rents only basic gear and the hotel rents only high performance gear. A basic rental package costs $23 a day for adults, $13 for ages 13 and under or over 60; high performance $29 and $21 respectively.

There are groomed **cross-country trails** as well, and gear for rent, although the best Nordic skiing is in Anchorage.

A center operated by **Challenge Alaska** (✆ **907/783-2925** or 907/344-7399) allows skiers with disabilities to use the mountain, skiing down to the lift to start and back to the center at day's end. They rent the latest adaptive ski equipment, too.

A utilitarian **day lodge** with snack and rental counters is located at the front of the mountain, as is the **Sitzmark Bar,** a more comfortable place for a meal (burgers are around $8). The **Alyeska Prince Hotel** (see p. 240) is on the other side of the mountain, connected to the front by the tram to the top and beginner-level chair 7 (you can ski right from the door). It makes a quieter and more genteel starting point for day-trippers as well as guests, as it has its own day lockers and an equipment rental counter with higher quality equipment (and higher rates) than the day lodge. There are several dining choices here and at the top of the tram (see "Where to Stay," below).

SNOWMOBILING & DOG MUSHING **Alaska Snow Safaris** (✆ **907/783-7669;** www.snowmobile-alaska.com), in a cabin at the base of the mountain, offers snowmobile tours in Turnagain Pass for raw beginners, with everything provided. It's not the hand-holding experience you expect from a commercial tour: Guests are soon flying off through the snow in exciting style, using their own judgment. The guides are professional and the machines powerful. Three-hour trips are $125. A 5-hour tour to the Placer Glacier, for $185, is a better choice for sightseeing and exploring rather than just playing. Longer outings and overnights are available, too, as are rentals, although going unguided is advisable only if you have some experience and knowledge of where you can safely ride. The company also offers hour-long dog sled rides; you ride in the sled, then get to drive the dogs yourself, for $95 adults, $75 children. The same firm offers Sno-Cat skiing.

HIKING There are a couple of great trails starting in Girdwood. The Winner Creek Trail runs 5 miles through forest from behind the Alyeska Prince Hotel to a roaring gorge where Winner Creek and Glacier Creek meet; it's muddy and snowy in the spring. The winter ski trail takes a separate route, through a series of meadows, to the same destination. The Crow Pass Trail rises into the mountains and continues all the way over to Eagle River, after a 26-mile hike that you can do in a couple of days. But you can make a long day hike of it if you go just to the pass, where you can see the glaciers, wildflower meadows, and old mining equipment. The trailhead is up Crow Creek Road, off the Alyeska Highway.

WHERE TO STAY

Besides the resort hotel, there are plenty of condos and B&Bs in town. **Alyeska Accommodations,** on Olympic Circle (✆ **888/783-2001** or 907/783-2000; www.alyeskaaccommodations.com), offers condos and houses. The **Girdwood Bed and Breakfast Association** (✆ **907/222-4858;** www.gbba.org) networks B&Bs in the area.

Alyeska Prince Hotel ★★★ The Alyeska Resort's hotel is Alaska's best. The beauty of the building alone separates it from the competition, as does its location in an unspoiled mountain valley among huge spruce trees. Studded with dormers and turrets, it impresses on first sight. Inside, sumptuous cherrywood and rich colors unite the welcoming common rooms and elegant guest rooms. Although not large, rooms have every convenience, and the maintenance and housekeeping are exceptional. The swimming pool is magnificent, with a cathedral ceiling and windows by the spa overlooking the mountain. The location and activities alone make this hotel worth visiting. A few days spent here skiing and swimming make the rest of life seem too drab, though I'd see little reason to go if not for Girdwood's outdoors. One warning: On weekends, especially around holidays, families from Anchorage, like mine, descend on the hotel with noisy children. Couples would do well to come midweek.

Four restaurants vie for attention. **The Seven Glaciers,** 2,300 feet above the lobby by tram on Mount Alyeska, serves trendy and beautifully presented dinners in a sumptuous dining room floating above the clouds. It's expensive, especially since the small servings make it desirable to order several courses. A mountaintop cafeteria is right next door (great views, expensive snacks). At the base level, the hotel's Japanese cuisine has developed a good reputation. The hotel cafe is quite good and has a nice view.

1000 Arlberg Ave. (P.O. Box 249), Girdwood, AK 99587. ✆ **800/880-3880** or 907/754-1111. Fax 907/754-2200. www.alyeskaresort.com. 307 units. Summer and Christmas $195–$375 double; $750–$1,500 suite. Winter $145–$280 double; $600–$1,200 suite. Extra adult $25; children stay free in parents' room. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; indoor pool; health club; spa; bike rental; children's programs; concierge; tour desk; shopping arcade; limited room service; massage; babysitting. *In room:* TV w/pay movies, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, safe.

WHERE TO DINE

Also see the second paragraph of the Alyeska Prince Hotel review, under "Where to Stay," for more restaurant options.

Chair 5 Restaurant ★ *Kids* SEAFOOD/BURGERS/PIZZA This is where Girdwood locals meet their friends and take their families for dinner, and it's also one of our favorites after skiing. One afternoon, Bob Dylan music accompanied a friendly game of pool while men with ponytails and beards sipped microbrews. Another evening, a guy in the entryway entertained the children with magic tricks and the waitress asked them to draw pictures to enter into a contest. The menu offers choices pleasing to all ages, including pizza, burgers, fresh fish, and steaks.

5 Linblad Ave., in the New Girdwood Town Square. ✆ **907/783-2500.** www.chairfive.com. All meals $8–$20; large pizza $16–$20. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Double Musky Inn ★★ CAJUN The ski-bum-casual atmosphere and rambling, cluttered dining room among the trees match the wonderful Cajun and New Orleans food in a way that couldn't have been contrived—it's at once too improbable and too authentic. Service is relaxed to a fault, and food takes a long time to arrive, but when it does it's flawless. The place isn't to everyone's taste, however; your senses can feel raw after the extreme noise, highly spiced food, and crowds, and parking can be difficult. Loud groups will enjoy it more than couples, and families don't really fit. They have a full bar.

Mile 3, Crow Creek Rd., Girdwood. ✆ **907/783-2822.** www.doublemuskyinn.com. Main courses $18–$37. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Tues–Thurs 5–10pm; Fri–Sun 4:30–10pm. Closed Nov.

10 Out from Anchorage: The Matanuska & Susitna Valleys

On a longer visit to Anchorage, you may want to spend a day or two in the suburbs to the north, known as the Mat-Su Valley. Reached by the Glenn Highway about 40 miles from Anchorage, the area is both a bedroom community for the city and a former frontier farming region with its own quirky identity. If you are driving anywhere north from the city you will pass through this area and there are some interesting places to stop if you have the time. In this summary I've covered a few highlights in the central area (the whole thing is the size of West Virginia). Some of the best attractions are covered in other parts of this guide: **The Alaska State Fair,** held before Labor Day, is covered under "Special Events," near the beginning of this chapter. **The Musk Ox Farm** is under "Shopping," earlier in the chapter. Funky Talkeetna, a gateway to Denali National Park, is in chapter 8. The Matanuska Glacier area (on the Glenn Highway), with its great canyon views and late-season cross-country skiing and snowmobiling, is in chapter 9. You can learn more about the hiking, fishing, and skiing all over the Mat-Su Valley from the **Mat-Su Visitors Center,** Mile 35.5 Parks Hwy., HC 01 Box 6166J21, Palmer, AK 99645 (✆ **907/746-5000;** www.alaskavisit.com).

THROUGH HATCHER PASS

If you're headed north to Denali National Park or Fairbanks, the rough, winding gravel road through Hatcher Pass to Willow makes a glorious alpine detour around the least attractive part of your drive. Past the mine and skiing area, the road is open only in summer and is not suitable for large RVs. Just after the Parks Highway branches from the Glenn Highway, exit to the right on the Trunk Road and keep going north on Fishhook Road, which becomes Hatcher Pass Road. From the Glenn Highway near Palmer, take Palmer Fishhook just north of town.

Even if you're not headed north, a trip to Hatcher Pass combines one of the area's most beautiful drives, access to great hiking and Nordic skiing, and interesting old buildings to look at. The **Independence Mine State Historical Park** ★★ (✆ **907/745-2827** or 907/745-3975; www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks") takes in the remains of a hard-rock gold mine operation that closed down in 1951. Some buildings have been restored, including an assay office that's now a museum and a manager's house that's now a welcoming visitor center, while other structures sag and lean as picturesque ruins. A visit is interesting even if you don't go inside, and the setting, in a bowl of rock and alpine tundra, is spectacular. A guided tour is $5 ($2 seniors, free under 10) and leaves at 1:30pm and 3:30pm weekdays, plus 4:30pm weekends, or you can wander with the help of an excellent walking-tour map. The visitor center is open from 11am to 7pm daily in the summer, but closes the week after Labor Day. Details are changeable, however, so I recommend calling ahead if taking the tour is a priority.

Leave some time for a summer ramble in the heather if you visit the mine. In the winter, the Nordic or telemark skiing is exceptional, with a few kilometers of groomed trail and miles of open country to explore. (See the Hatcher Pass Lodge, below, for more details.) There are four hiking trails and two mountain-biking routes in the area—ask at the visitor center. One great hike is the 8-mile **Gold Mint Trail,** which starts across the road from the Motherlode Lodge on Hatcher Pass Road and ends at the Mint Glacier, where you have to turn around to hike back.

ON THE PARKS HIGHWAY

The Museum of Alaska Transportation and Industry ★, off the Parks Highway at Mile 47, west of Wasilla (✆ **907/376-1211;** www.alaska.net/~rmorris/mati1.htm), is a paradise for gearheads and tinkerers. The volunteers have gathered every conceivable machine and conveyance—13 fire trucks, 7 locomotives, and 2 steam cranes, for example—and fixed up to running order as many as they can. An indoor museum displays their finished masterpieces, while the 20 acres outside are crammed with future projects—trains, aircraft, tractors, fishing boats, and mining equipment—all grist for memories and imagination. It's open May 1 to September 30 from 9am to 6pm daily, winter Saturday from 9am to 5pm or by appointment. Admission is $8 for adults, $5 for students and seniors, $14 for families.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Three of the best places to eat in the Valley are at the three accommodations I have described below, which are broadly spaced, so you can find a place to eat on any route through on the highways. In addition, there are unlimited fast food spots and roadhouse burger places.

One other good choice for a relaxing but somewhat more formal meal in Wasilla is **Evangelo's Restaurant,** at Mile 40 of the Parks Highway as you pass through town (✆ **907/376-1212**). Lunch and dinner are served every day on linen tablecloths and locals come for anniversaries, but it is essentially a traditional Italian family restaurant where you can get veal Parmesan, pizza, lasagna and the like.

HATCHER PASS

Hatcher Pass Lodge ★ *Finds* A charming family runs this tiny mountain lodge in the treeless alpine bowl that houses the Independence Mine State Historic Park. The location is 3,000 feet above the sea, which glistens in a grand vista down below. Out on the open snowfield in winter, or the heather in summer, the nine cabins and A-frame lodge seem far more remote than they really are, just 90 minutes from Anchorage. Our family went for a glorious Nordic skiing vacation there, and the 12 of us, aged 2 through 75, all had a great time. A place with nothing to divert you but snow, a warm cabin and good meals brings a family closer (there is a phone in the main lodge for emergencies, but no TV). The cabins are clean and nicely set up, with no rustic edge except chemical toilets and the lack of running water. Showers are in the main lodge, and meals come from the main lodge restaurant and bar, where the family produces surprisingly professional meals in a warm, cozy environment. Stay in summer for a taste of the real Alaska, with doorstep access to wonderful alpine hiking.

P.O. Box 763, Palmer, AK 99645. ✆ **907/745-5897.** www.hatcherpasslodge.com. 9 cabins, 3 lodge rooms. $95–$125 cabin for 2. Extra person $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; sauna.

WASILLA

Best Western Lake Lucille Inn ★ This well-run, attractive lakeside hotel in Wasilla has the best standard rooms in the valley. They're large and well appointed, and those facing the lake have balconies and a grand, peaceful view. Flightseeing trips take off from the dock below the lawn and there is a small playground. The **restaurant** is one of the best in the area, with a light, quiet dining room looking out on the water. It's open for dinner only; with the beef and seafood menu ranging from $15 to $38.

1300 W. Lucille Dr., Wasilla, AK 99654. ✆ **800/897-1776** for reservations, or 907/373-1776. Fax 907/376-6199. www.bestwestern.com/lakelucilleinn. 54 units. High season $149 double; $219 suite. Low season $89 double; $175 suite. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; health club; Jacuzzi; sauna; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

PALMER

Colony Inn ★★ *Finds* This perfect country inn occupies a lovingly restored teacher's dormitory from the New Deal Colony Project, right in the middle of Palmer. The rooms are wonderfully old-fashioned, with rockers and comforters but also Jacuzzi bathtubs and big TVs with VCRs. A large sitting room and a dining room downstairs are decorated with historic photographs that help tell the building's story. Excellent and inexpensive meals are served here during the summer at the **Inn Cafe** (✆ **907/746-6118**).

325 E. Elmwood, Palmer, AK 99645. ✆ **907/745-3330.** Fax 907/746-3330. 12 units. $90 double; $162 suite. Extra person $5. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; free laundry machines. *In room:* TV /VCR, dataport.

7

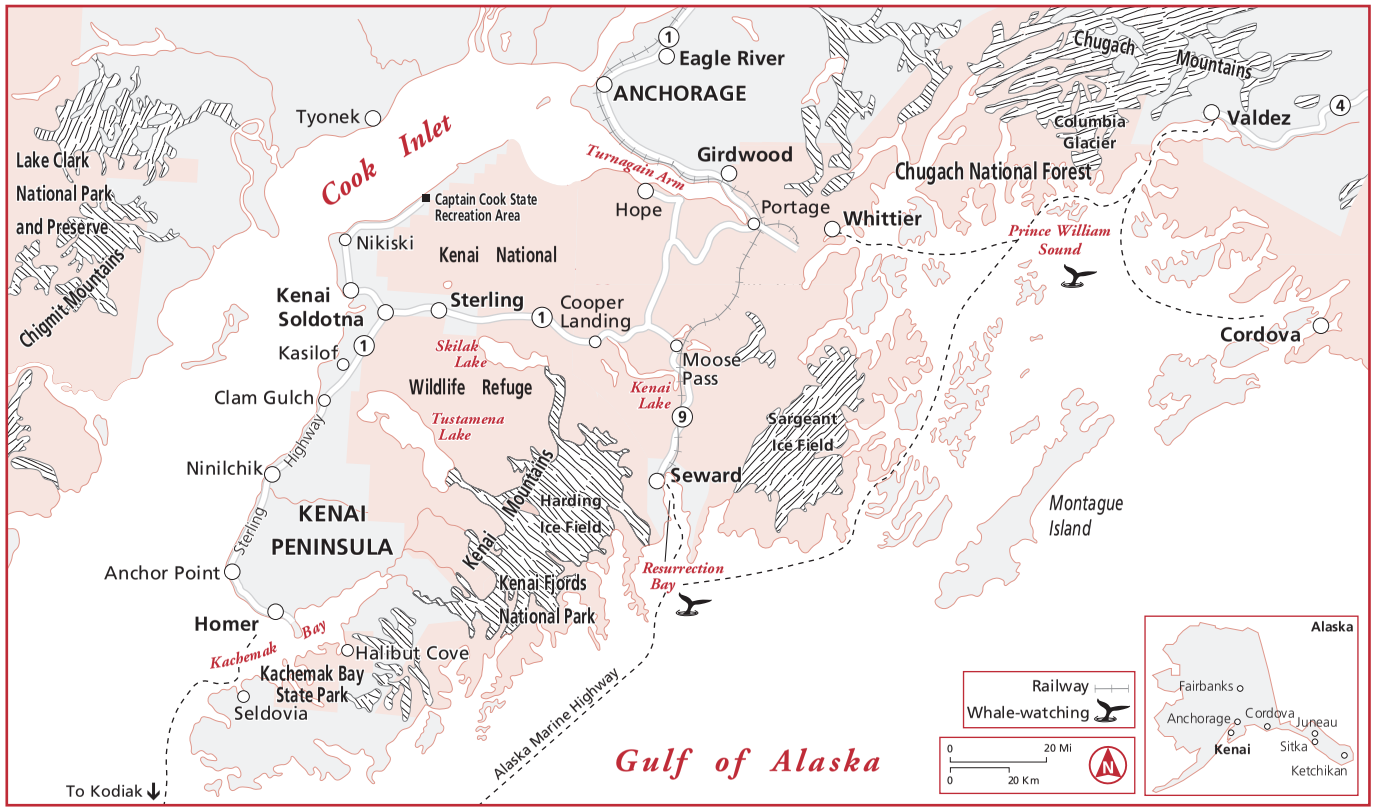
The Kenai Peninsula & Prince William Sound

The Gulf of Alaska arcs at its northern edge, forming the rounded northern shore of the Pacific Ocean, a zone of great collisions. This is where the earth's tectonic plates collide, spewing forth froths of hot lava from dozens of volcanoes, and fracturing and folding the earth with titanic earthquakes. Here, the ocean's wildest weather hits mountains jutting miles high from the sea, growing immense prehistoric ice sheets and glaciers that carve the rock into long, deep, intricate fjords. The sea proffers prodigious biological wealth on these shores, including the salmon it unleashes into the rivers in furious swarms of life that climb over the mountains and into the Interior to spawn. Nature seems giant and superabundant along this magnificent arc of land and water.

Geography endowed this stretch of coast with several of the world's great natural places. On the east, near Cordova, the **Copper River**'s immense, entirely unspoiled delta is the largest contiguous wetlands in the Western Hemisphere. On a day trip, you're immediately alone with flocks of rare, graceful waterfowl that congregate on shallow ponds surrounded by miles of waving grass. **Prince William Sound** is a vast protected area of wooded mountains and mammoth glaciers. This is our family's favorite place on earth, where we go each summer to camp among the otters and eagles on tiny islands out of contact with the rest of mankind. **Kenai Fjords National Park** encompasses bays off the open ocean where the mountains soar a mile straight up from the water. Boats travel here among humpback, gray, and orca whales; spot otters, seals, and sea lions; and visit swarming colonies of puffins and other seabirds. The **Kenai River,** on the western side of the Kenai Peninsula, harbors the world's biggest salmon. On the southern tip of the peninsula, **Kachemak Bay** is like a miniature Prince William Sound, but with people. The bay's shores are dotted with tiny towns that are home to lodges, art galleries on pilings, and some of Alaska's best restaurants.

The whole region is exceptionally accessible by Alaska standards. The Kenai (*keen*-eye) Peninsula, in particular, is easy to get to without the expense and exhausting travel that can make visiting much of the state difficult. Most of what you're looking for in Alaska lies along a few hundred miles of blacktop, within reach of a rental car and perhaps a tour boat ticket: glaciers, whales, legendary sportfishing, spectacular hiking trails, interesting little fishing towns, bears, moose, and high mountains.

People from Anchorage go to the peninsula for the weekend to fish, hike, dig clams, paddle kayaks, and so on, and certain places can get crowded. There's a special phrase for what happens when the red salmon are running in July on the Kenai and Russian rivers: *combat fishing*. At hot times in certain places, anglers stand elbow to elbow on the bank, each casting into his or her



The Kenai Peninsula & Prince William Sound

own 1-yard-wide slice of river—and still catch plenty of hefty salmon. The peninsula also exerts a powerful magnetic force on RVs, those road-whales that you find at the head of lines of cars on the two-lane highways. During the summer, the fishing rivers, creeks, and beaches on the west side of the peninsula and the end of the Homer Spit can become sheet-metal cities of hundreds of Winnebagos and Itascas parked side by side. Often, some local entrepreneur will be selling doughnuts or newspapers door-to-door.

The decision is yours as to whether you spend time in the company of other visitors. If the roadside fishing is hairy, hiking a little farther down the bank usually means you can be by yourself. In this chapter, I'll describe some towns with unspoiled charm, where you can kayak virtually from your room. Being alone is easy. You can paddle among otters in Resurrection Bay; tramp over the heather in Turnagain Pass; and hike, bike, or ski one of the many maintained trails in Chugach National Forest. And, when you're ready to come back to the comforts of civilization, you'll find that some of the state's best restaurants and most interesting lodgings are here, too.

1 Exploring the Kenai Peninsula & Prince William Sound

THE TOWNS

Kenai, on Cook Inlet on the west side of the Kenai Peninsula, is the largest town in the region. Ten miles up the Kenai River, **Soldotna** is Kenai's twin, and together they form a unit that holds a fourth of the Kenai Peninsula's population of 50,000. They're also the least interesting of the peninsula's communities. **Homer,** at the southern end of the peninsula, has wonderful art and character and lots of ways to get out on the water. **Seward,** on the east side, is smaller and quieter, but also charming and a gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park.

There are three towns on Prince William Sound. **Valdez** is an oil town at the southern terminus of the trans-Alaska pipeline, where tankers are loaded. **Cordova** is a more attractive and historic community on the eastern side of the Sound, with outdoor activities close at hand. **Whittier** is a grim former military outpost, but it's a convenient gateway to the protected fjords and glaciers of the western Sound.

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

BY CAR Highways connect the region's large towns, except Cordova, which is accessible only by air or water. Like all of Alaska's main highways, these are paved two-lane roads. The Seward Highway runs south from Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula. That route is described below. A road built in a railway tunnel connects Whittier, on Prince William Sound, to the Seward Highway. The Glenn and Richardson highways reach from Anchorage to Valdez through Alaska's Interior. Stops along that route are described in chapters 6 and 9, and all the highways are summarized in chapter 9.

BY FERRY The ferry system connects Whittier with Valdez and Cordova. Valdez serves as the hub; ferries run directly between Cordova and Whittier only once a week.

The ferry ***Tustumena*** (the *"Tusty"*) connects Homer and Seward to Kodiak Island and the Aleutian Archipelago (covered in chapter 10), and also runs from Homer to Seldovia and, less frequently, from Seward to Valdez in Prince William Sound (covered in subsequent sections of this chapter). The schedule is not convenient for Seldovia, however, and if traveling from Seward to Valdez, it is more practical to drive to Whittier and take the ferry from there. A U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service ranger offers programs on the *Tusty.* For more on the ferry system, see section 1 of chapter 5, call ✆ **800/642-0066,** or visit www.ferryalaska.com.

Private passenger ferries serve the towns and remote sites around Kachemak Bay from Homer, described in sections 10, 11, and 12.

BY AIR Commuter airlines fan out from Anchorage to Kenai, Homer, Valdez, and Cordova; their names and phone numbers are given in the relevant sections of this chapter. You can also fly an Alaska Airlines jet to Cordova, with one flight from Anchorage every day, and another daily flight coming northward from Yakutat, Juneau, and Seattle. Scheduled and air-taxi services use these smaller towns as bases for flights to smaller villages, carrying passengers, mail, and cargo, and flying to remote lodges and cabins for fishing or other outdoor activities. Valdez, Cordova, and Anchorage operators serve the Prince William Sound region. Kenai and Anchorage companies cover Cook Inlet and remote public lands such as Lake Clark National Park. Homer is the base for villages around Kachemak Bay and the lower Cook Inlet bear viewing sites.

BY TRAIN The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552** or 907/265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) runs from Anchorage south to Seward and Whittier daily in the summer.

VISITOR INFORMATION

For information on the peninsula as a whole, contact the **Kenai Peninsula Tourism Marketing Council,** 14896 Kenai Spur Hwy., Suite 106A, Kenai, AK 99611 (✆ **907/283-3850;** www.kenaipeninsula.org), which distributes a vacation planner with information on businesses in the area (order through the website). The staff will answer inquiries during normal business hours.

GETTING OUTSIDE

The towns in the region are like beads strung along the laces of the highways; everything else is wilderness. You can find all the activities and solitude you seek here, yet the presence of the towns means that comfort is closer at hand than in other parts of Alaska.

Chugach National Forest takes in all of Prince William Sound and most of the eastern Kenai Peninsula. At 5⅓ million acres, it's more than double the size of Yellowstone National Park. Anywhere else but Alaska it would be a national park, and one of the largest and most spectacular, with some of the best sea kayaking, hiking, backpacking, wildlife watching, and scenery anywhere. General information, camping, and ideas for visiting remote areas in the Chugach are covered in section 3, while details about National Forest areas near towns are in the appropriate town sections.

Kenai Fjords National Park (section 6)**,** protecting the outer edge and ice cap of the Kenai Peninsula's southern side, is incomparable in its remoteness, stark beauty, and abundance of marine wildlife. Access is though Seward (section 5).

On the peninsula's western side, **Kenai National Wildlife Refuge** (section 9) has Alaska's most accessible wilderness lake and river canoeing as well as extraordinary fishing, with access from roads near **Soldotna** (section 8).

Kachemak Bay State Park offers good sea-kayaking waters and wilderness hiking not connected to any road. The **Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge** protects the wildlife habitat of remote islands and seashores around the state. Both are covered in section 10 of this chapter, on Homer.

Tips Prince William Sound Cruises

For information on **Discovery Voyages,** which offers overnight cruises into Prince William Sound, see p. 74.

VISITOR INFORMATION The region's best and most central place to get outdoor information is the **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** 605 W. 4th Ave., Suite 105, Anchorage, AK 99501 (✆ **907/271-2737,** or 907/271-2738 TTY; www.nps.gov/aplic). Here, you'll be able to ask for guidance from residents who have spent time in the places you'll be visiting, and there are exhibits on the wildlife and outdoor opportunities in the region—even maps showing where to find various species of fish. Land agencies present information on the whole state. Pick up books and maps here (including ones you print off for specific areas from a cool machine) and buy tickets for the ferries. Summer hours are daily from 9am to 5pm, winter Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm.

Visitor centers for particular areas are covered in the appropriate sections.

2 The Seward Highway: A Road Guide

The Kenai Peninsula's main lifeline is the road down from Anchorage, a 127-mile drive to Seward on a good two-lane highway, most of it through public land without development or services. Highway 1, commonly known as the Seward Highway, is more than scenic—it's really a wonderful attraction in itself, designated a National Scenic Byway. There are excellent campgrounds and hiking trails all along the way in the Chugach National Forest, which I've covered in section 3 of this chapter.

The mileposts start in Seward. Here we count backward, since you'll likely start from Anchorage.

MILE 127–79 The highway begins at the south end of Anchorage, the only way out of town in that direction, and runs along Turnagain Arm 48 miles to the Portage Glacier. I've written about that spectacular portion of the drive in chapter 6 under section 8, "Out From Anchorage: Turnagain Arm & Portage Glacier."

MILE 79–75 Beyond the Portage Glacier turnoff, the road traverses the salt marshes to the south side of the Arm. These wetlands are good bird-watching grounds. The dead trees on the flats are left over from the 1964 earthquake. The area was inundated in the quake, when the entire region—the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound—sank 7 feet and moved several feet laterally. Besides being the second strongest earthquake ever recorded, the '64 quake moved more land than any other. People who were here tell of their surprise when the tide came far higher than they had ever seen it before in the days after the earthquake, until finally they realized that the land itself had sunk. The salt water killed these trees, which still stand, grey and weathered, 40 years later. Large parts of Homer, Hope, and Seldovia disappeared under the waves at high tide. Seward, Whittier, Valdez, and Kodiak were swept by destructive tsunami waves.

MILE 75–69 The highway steeply climbs through the spruce forest to the fresh, towering alpine terrain of the 1,000-foot-elevation **Turnagain Pass.** The vistas here are stupendous year-round.

Tips State Parks Cabin Reservations

Alaska's state parks rent remote public cabins like the famous Forest Service cabins (see section 3), but they're usually newer, larger, and easier to get to. Most are in Southcentral Alaska—in this chapter, they're mentioned near Homer, Seward, and Valdez. Like the Forest Service cabins, it takes a hike, boat ride, or air taxi to get to the cabins, and you need cabin equipment, such as a cookstove and sleeping bags, but once you're there you can experience the real Alaska all by yourself.

Some of these cabins are so popular they book up the minute they become available, 6 months before the date of the stay. If your reservation arrives early, the office staff will hold it until the appropriate day and then hold a lottery if more than one applicant wants that date. You can reserve only in person, by mail, or by fax (you can ask questions by phone, but not apply). For fax reservations, you will need to use a Visa or MasterCard. The staff is friendly and will guide you around the system, helping you find a cabin where you can get a permit, even if it's not your first choice. They're working on creating an online reservation system, but it was not clear if that would be in place in time for this edition.

The main information and reservations desk is the **Department of Natural Resources Public Information Center—Anchorage,** 550 W. 7th Ave., Suite 1260, Anchorage, AK 99501-3557 (✆ **907/269-8400,** or 907/269-8411 TDD; fax 907/269-8901; www.alaskastateparks.org). The website is the best source of information about the cabins, with a picture and descriptions of each, a reservation form, and a real-time availability calendar. The center is open Monday through Friday 10am to 5pm; if your application isn't there by 10 on the dot, you have no chance at a cabin sought by more than one applicant. Cabins rent for $25 to $65 a night. Most of the seaside cabins are $50.

MILE 69 If you find the meadow and tundra hard to resist for a walk, go ahead. Park at the pull-out with the toilets on the right side at the pass summit and amble off into the wildflowers (assuming the ground is dry when you're there). In the winter and spring, this is a backcountry skiing and snowmobiling paradise. Skiers go on the left side of the road and snowmobilers on the right. Always check with the Chugach National Forest (see section 3, below) for avalanche conditions first. An avalanche near here killed five riders in spring 1999.

MILE 69–57 The pass forms a divide, and now Granite Creek flows down toward the south. The road follows, falling back below the tree line of stunted spruce and then popping back up into sweeping views. Arcing to the northwest after the Granite Creek Campground, the highway follows another north-flowing river, Sixmile Creek.

MILE 57 & HOPE HIGHWAY The Hope Highway divides off to the north and west along Sixmile Creek while the Seward Highway continues south. Rafting companies based in Anchorage use this wild stretch of water for some of their most challenging rides (see chapter 6).

Why All the Dead Trees?

Whole mountainsides on the Kenai Peninsula and in Anchorage have turned brown. Thousands of dead trees topple in each windstorm. Fire danger is extreme. The spruce bark beetle is to blame. Although a natural part of the forest system, the beetles' population exploded in the last 2 decades and swept across Southcentral Alaska, wiping out 4 million acres of white and Sitka spruce, the biggest single insect kill of trees ever in North America. The beetles bore under the outer bark layer to eat the trees' phloem, the soft inner bark that carries food manufactured in the needles down to the roots. The beetles reproduce in the tree, sending the next generation to fly in May and June in search of more victims. Today, the blight has stopped spreading, largely because susceptible trees are already dead.

Scientists believe global climate change, which is especially pronounced in Alaska, allowed short, spotty beetle outbreaks to become a plague. Cool, damp springs usually stop the beetles in a year or two, but since 1987, the state has had a solid string of exceptionally warm, dry seasons. Ecologists have also noticed shrinking ponds, rising tree lines, and many other indicators of a changing climate on the Kenai Peninsula. In places, the ecological make-up of the forest appears to be transformed, but it will be decades before we learn if natural succession leads back to a new spruce forest, or if large tracts will become grassy parklike areas. In the meantime, be careful with fire.

A Side Trip to Hope If you take a break, you'll find **Hope** at the end of the 17-mile Hope Highway. It's a charming gold rush–era village with several hiking trails and a couple of campgrounds (see section 3 on Chugach National Forest). A few white frame buildings remain from the days when Hope was a gold-mining boomtown after a strike in 1894. Many of the newer buildings in the town center are quaint, too. Before the 1964 earthquake, the rest of the town used to stand where the creek gives way to a tidal meadow. Today, Hope's year-round population is about 137. For information, contact the **Hope-Sunrise Community Library** (✆ **907/782-3121**), which is open daily in summer from 11am to 4pm.

The **Hope and Sunrise Historical and Mining Museum** (✆ **907/782-3740**) is a one-room log cabin displaying historic objects and photographs, a barn, a blacksmith's shop and miner's bunkhouse. It's open from noon to 4pm Friday through Monday, Memorial Day to Labor Day.

The best place to eat in town is the **Discovery Café** (✆ **907/782-3274**), the community's hub and a place to get a generous burger and meet the beloved proprietor. The cafe burned to the ground in 1999 and was rebuilt almost entirely by volunteer labor, reopening in the summer of 2001.

MILE 57–46 The Seward Highway climbs steeply from the Hope Highway intersection up the canyon of Canyon Creek, before leveling out above the tree line at about 1,400 feet elevation. Next come a series of alpine lakes in a narrow mountain valley.

MILE 46 The first business since the Portage Glacier, and the last for many miles, is the **Summit Lake Lodge,** at Mile 45.5 (✆ **907/244-2031**) on Summit Lake. It's a traditional log roadhouse that's been updated to house a comfortable and modern restaurant, open April to October 8am to 10pm (plus an hour earlier and later in the peak summer season). The food is generally good, but service can suffer badly when weekend highway travelers overwhelm the staff. There's an ice-cream counter in the log gift shop by the lake. The six-room log motel has rooms for $80 double; they have private bathrooms but lack TVs or phones. The canoeing photo in the color section at the front of this book was taken in this area; beware, however, of very cold water and sudden winds.

MILE 46–38 The highway continues through similar mountain terrain before descending into the trees again and branching at **Tern Lake.** There's a bird-watching platform with interpretive signs on the lake and, on the west end, a picnic area. This is a stirringly beautiful spot year-round, and a good place to get out and taste the fresh mountain air. To the right at the intersection, the Sterling Highway leads to Cooper Landing, Kenai, Soldotna, and Homer.

MILE 38–18 Trail Lake Fish Hatchery, on Upper Trail Lake, is on the first of a string of sparkling mountain lakes that the road will follow for the next 15 miles.

MILE 30 The community of Moose Pass, with a population of about 200, sits on the shore of Upper Trail Lake.

MILE 18–0 Down among the big spruces of the coastal forest, the highway comes to Seward.

3 Chugach National Forest: Do-It-Yourself Wilderness

I've lived near the Chugach National Forest all my life, but it wasn't until well into adulthood that I had seen all its parts and appreciated its vastness and variety. Still, I doubt I'll ever really know this seemingly infinite land.

Prince William Sound is just one of the National Forest's three parts. The sound boasts 3,500 miles of shoreline among its folded islands and deeply penetrating fjords and passages. It would take a lifetime to really know all those cove beaches, climb all the island mountains, and explore to the head of every narrow bay under big rainforest trees. The **Copper River Delta** is another world entirely. Unlike the musty secrets of the Sound's obscure passages, the delta opens to the sky like a heavenly plain of wind and light, its waving green colors painted by the airiest brushstrokes. It's another huge area: Just driving across the delta and back from Cordova takes most of a day. Finally, there's the western part of the national forest, on the **Kenai Peninsula.** This is largely an alpine realm. The mountains are steep, their timber quickly giving way to rock, tundra, and wildflowers up above. It's got remote, unclimbed peaks, but also many miles of family hiking trails, accessible fishing streams, and superb campgrounds. This is where you go in Alaska for multiday trail hikes.

The Chugach is managed primarily for recreation and conservation, although there is some logging, too. Visitors today may see large tracts of dead spruce and sometimes may encounter areas of cut timber, but these mostly are caused by a blight, the spruce bark beetle (see the box on p. 250 for more information). The trees are cut in the forest and on private land to prevent fires in the standing deadwood. Logging in Prince William Sound was slowed by the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, when conservationists recognized the need to prevent further environmental damage in order to support recovery from the disaster. When Exxon was

forced to pay $1 billion to a recovery fund, government trustees spent much of the money to buy back timber rights in the Sound and beyond to protect the trees. They bought 1,419 miles of coastline and almost as much land as is in all of Yosemite National Park. Still, that was only a sixth of the area that the Chugach already encompassed.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND There are many ways to the Chugach National Forest. For Prince William Sound, use Whittier, Valdez, or Cordova as gateways; for the Copper River Delta, go through Cordova. Trails and campgrounds on the Kenai Peninsula generally meet the Seward or Sterling highways, or spur roads from the highways. The individual town listings later in this chapter provide details on how to get to the towns, and how to get from the towns into the national forest. Section 2, above, describes the Seward Highway.

VISITOR INFORMATION The most central place for information on the national forest is the Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Anchorage. See p. 201 for contact information and other information about the Public Lands Information Center.

For general forest inquiries, you can also contact the **forest headquarters,** 3301 C St., Suite 300, Anchorage, AK 99503 (✆ **907/743-9500;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach). The national forest also has three ranger district offices, where you can get up-to-date local information and personal advice: **Glacier Ranger District,** on Monarch Mine Road, near the Seward Highway off Alyeska Road, in Girdwood (✆ **907/783-3242**); **Seward Ranger District,** 4th Avenue and Jefferson Street, in Seward (✆ **907/224-3374**); and **Cordova Ranger District,** 2nd and Browning streets, in Cordova (✆ **907/424-7661**). You can't reserve campground sites and remote cabins through these local offices—for that you must use the national system listed below under "Where to Stay"—but you can call them with questions.

GETTING OUTSIDE

HIKING, MOUNTAIN BIKING & BACKPACKING

Alaska's best long trails lead through the mountain passes of Chugach National Forest, including historic gold rush trails and portions of the original Iditarod trail (the race doesn't use these southern portions). The Forest Service maintains **public cabins** on many of these trails, and in other remote spots reachable only with a boat or small plane. If the nights you need are available, you can use the cabins instead of a tent on a backpacking trip. Or make a cabin your destination and spend a few days there hiking or fishing.

I've covered trails near Cordova in section 14 of this chapter, and some shorter hikes are mentioned below with the campgrounds under "Where to Stay."

The best trail guide covering the peninsula is ***55 Ways to the Wilderness*** by Helen Nienhueser and John Wolfe (The Mountaineers, $17).

Trails Illustrated publishes excellent plastic maps of the region (see "Fast Facts: Alaska," in chapter 2).

RESURRECTION PASS TRAIL This gold rush trail begins 4 miles above the town of Hope (mentioned above in the preceding section on the Seward Hwy.) and runs over the top of the Kenai Peninsula to Cooper Landing (covered in section 7 of this chapter). It's a beautiful, remote, yet well-used trail for hiking, mountain biking, Nordic skiing, or snowshoeing; it rises through forest, crosses the alpine pass, and then descends to a highway trailhead where you'll

need to have transportation waiting. The 39-mile trail has eight public-use cabins, available for $35 to $45 a night. (See "Where to Stay," below, for reservation information.) The cabins are well spaced to cover the trail in an easy 5 days, and those on lakes have boats for fishing. Cabins are booked up well ahead in winter and summer, but there are lots of good camping spots, too. The **Devil's Pass and Summit Lake trails** cut off from the Resurrection to the Seward Highway south of Summit Lake, shortening the route. The difficulty of doing the whole trail, by any of the entrances, is that you either need two cars or someone willing to drive you back to your starting point.

RUSSIAN LAKES TRAIL This trail begins in Cooper Landing (covered in section 7 of this chapter), near the end of the Resurrection Pass Trail, and leads to three remote cabins and a series of lakes. There's excellent fishing and wildlife viewing (bears are common). It's less than 3 miles with little elevation gain to Lower Russian Lake and the cabin there, or make a backpacking trip over the entire 21 miles.

JOHNSON PASS TRAIL This 23-mile trail climbs to a pair of lakes above the tree line at the 1,450-foot Johnson Creek Summit, tracing impressively narrow mountain valleys. The route, part of the Iditarod National Historic Trail, leads from near the Trail Lake Fish Hatchery, at mile 32 of the Seward Highway, to near the Granite Creek Campground, on the highway at mile 63. You need transportation at each end, and all but the heartiest hikers should plan to do it as an overnight.

LOST LAKE TRAIL & PRIMROSE TRAIL With their fields of alpine wildflowers and small lakes, these connected trails offer one of the most beautiful hikes in the area. Snow lasts until late in the season up at the top. The upper, northern trailhead is at the 10-site Primrose Campground, on vast Kenai Lake, 17 miles from Seward off the Seward Highway on Primrose Road. The trail rises through hemlock past a waterfall about 2 miles up (look for the spur to the right when you hear water), past an old mining cabin, and then through ever smaller trees and above the tree line. A Forest Service cabin is on a 2-mile spur about 11 miles along the 16-mile route. Strong hikers can do the whole trail in a long day, but it makes more sense to hike in and out on the upper end, or to spend the night on the way. The southern Lost Lake trailhead is in a subdivision near Seward and, being lower, adds more work; ask for directions to find it at one of the visitor centers.

FISHING

The national forest contains some of the most famous, and crowded, fishing banks in Alaska, including the **Russian River,** near Cooper Landing, with its incredible run of red salmon in July and good fishing lasting into September. Easiest access is at the Russian River Campground, just west of the village. There are plenty of other roadside salmon streams, plus remote fishing rivers and lakes in the national forest where you can lose sight of other anglers. Some remote lakes have Forest Service cabins for rent on their shores, which come with rowboats. The Forest Service publishes information on these opportunities. See chapter 2 for other information sources.

SEA KAYAKING & BOATING

A variety of Prince William Sound tour boats are listed in the Whittier, Valdez, and Cordova sections of this chapter. Whittier is the best starting point, with the greatest number of choices.

All three communities also have operators offering sea-kayak rentals and guided outings of various lengths. The best sea kayaking is east of Whittier, an area of long fjords, calving glaciers, narrow passages, and Forest Service cabins, but to get out there you need a boat ride first—the waters right around Whittier aren't as interesting. The local sea-kayaking operators can help you arrange drop-off service. Cordova has interesting waters right near town, so you can paddle from the boat harbor. Those who haven't done much sea kayaking should consider only a guided trip; if you're a raw beginner, start with a day trip rather than an overnight.

For those who aren't up to paddling but don't want to ride a big tour boat, renting a skiff or chartering a small boat is a great alternative. Boat rental operators in the Valdez and Cordova harbors offer skiffs with fishing gear, and small-boat natural history tours depart from Whittier. Exploring the Sound in a small boat is our family's favorite activity.

WHERE TO STAY

REMOTE CABINS

There is no more authentic Alaska accommodation than a pioneer cabin with a woodstove—a place to give you a better feel for the soul of a wild place. Chugach National Forest maintains more than 40 remote recreation cabins for rent to the public. This is simple shelter: Cabins don't have electricity or plumbing; you bring your own sleeping bags, cooking equipment, and other gear; and the cabin is only as clean as the last user left it. But no other room you can rent has a better location or greater privacy. Some cabins are along hiking and skiing trails, others on shores where boats and kayaks can pull up, and others on remote fishing lakes accessible only by floatplane. You can stay up to a week in most, with a summer limit of 3 days in the Resurrection Trail cabins.

The Forest Service prints a free listing of the cabins with short descriptions of each. The maps are rudimentary, so you will need a detailed map such as the Trails Illustrated plastic map mentioned in "Fast Facts: Alaska" in chapter 2, which shows cabin locations and names. Cabins rent for $35 or $45 a night, with most priced at $45 a night. Typically, the price of the cabin itself is not your major expense: You'll need a way to get there, either by plane, by boat, or by having a vehicle to drive you to a trailhead and then hiking. If you're flying, contact flight services in the nearest town (listed in the sections below) to find out the cost *before* you book the cabin. Flight time is several hundred dollars an hour. You can rent the camping equipment you'll need at the businesses listed in the Anchorage chapter on p. 225, but you should talk to a ranger first to get details about access and what to gear take. And start planning early. For summer dates, many cabins book up the second they become available on the reservation system, 6 months prior. This is not an exaggeration.

The National Recreation Reservation Service (NRRS), operated by **Reserve America,** a company in upstate New York, handles the reservation system. Use them to book a cabin, but contact the ranger stations first (listed on p. 252) to choose a cabin that is right for you and to find out what to expect.

The easiest way to reserve a cabin is online at **www.reserveusa.com**, because you use its interactive maps and availability calendars to shop for open days at various cabins. To reserve by phone, call ✆ **877/444-6777,** 877/833-6777 TDD, or 518/885-3639 with toll from overseas. From April through Labor Day, the lines are open daily from 8am to midnight Eastern Standard Time; off-season hours are daily from 10am to 7pm. They take American Express, Discover, MasterCard, and Visa, or you can reserve on the phone and then pay by

certified check. Campsites can be reserved starting 240 days ahead, cabins 180 days ahead.

CAMPGROUNDS

Forest Service campgrounds mostly have pit toilets and water from hand pumps, and roads are usually not paved. But some of these places are truly spectacular. I've listed them in order of distance from Anchorage, counting in reverse direction on the Seward Highway mileposts. For information on campgrounds below mile 60, call the Seward Ranger District; for the others, call the Glacier Ranger District, in Girdwood (see p. 252 for phone numbers). Sites in a few of the following campgrounds, as noted, take reservations through the national system explained on p. 254. RVs and cars can access and park at all of the campgrounds, although Williwaw is the only campground intended primarily for RVs.

Williwaw & Black Bear These two campgrounds are next to each other near Portage Glacier, along a creek where you can watch spawning red salmon in mid-August (no fishing is allowed, though). Williwaw, one of the better-developed campgrounds in the national forest, with paved roads and pumped water, is intended primarily for RVs.

Mile 4, Portage Glacier Rd. (turn at mile 78.9 Seward Hwy.). Williwaw: 60 sites. $10 per night. Reservations accepted with additional fee. Black Bear: 12 sites. $9 per night.

Bertha Creek This one's in the high country.

Mile 65.5, Seward Hwy. 12 sites. $10 per night.

Granite Creek Near the Johnson Pass trail head.

Mile 63, Seward Hwy. 19 sites. $10 per night.

Porcupine This campground near the gold rush village of Hope is among the most beautiful in the Chugach National Forest. The sites are on a mountainside overlooking Turnagain Arm, and five have sweeping ocean views. The thick trees make for privacy, but also mosquitoes. Bring repellent. Two good day hikes leave from the campground: The level 5-mile trail to **Gull Rock** makes a good family ramble, and with some effort you can scramble down to remote beaches along the way, where we've enjoyed a picnic. The **Hope Point Trail** is a stiff climb that rises 3,600 feet to expansive views.

At the end of the Hope Hwy. 24 sites. $10 per night.

Tenderfoot Creek This pleasant campground lies across Summit Lake from the Seward Highway as it passes through a narrow mountain valley above the tree line. Campsites look out on the water from a peaceful, sunny hillside. The nearby Summit Lake Lodge, described in section 2 of this chapter, is on the Seward Highway and offers good meals. It's the only business for many a mile.

Mile 46, Seward Hwy. 27 sites. $10 per night.

Ptarmigan Creek & Trail River Near the tiny towns of Moose Pass and Crown Point, the Ptarmigan Creek campground is at the trailhead for the trail to Ptarmigan Lake, 4 miles away with only 500 feet in elevation gain—a good place for a picnic or fishing for Dolly Varden char and rainbow trout. Trail River campground is a mile away on the other side of the highway.

Mile 23, Seward Hwy. 16 and 63 sites, respectively. Reservations accepted for additional fee. $10 per night.

Primrose Another favorite, this lovely campground lies on the edge of Kenai Lake at the base of the Primrose Trail to Lost Lake, one of the area's most

beautiful trails (see "Getting Outside," above). This campground is the closest one to Seward that still has a sense of natural isolation.

Mile 17, Seward Hwy. 10 sites. $10 per night.

Russian River This large, well-developed campground mainly serves fishermen pursuing red salmon on the river. When the fishing is good, the campground overflows and can be noisy. Overnight parking is $6. Reserve ahead.

Mile 52, Sterling Hwy., just west of Cooper Landing. Reservations accepted for additional fee. 84 sites. 3-day limit. Flush toilets. $13 per night.

Cooper Creek This campground, located right in Cooper Landing, has two halves bisected by the highway. 10 sites are right on the Kenai River and others are across the road (the sites across the road are better screened and separated).

Mile 50.7, Sterling Hwy. Reservations accepted. 26 sites. $10 per night.

Quartz Creek These thickly wooded sites, located a bit off the highway, are well separated. Many are right on Kenai Lake and others have good mountain views. There is a boat ramp in the campground and a lodge nearby.

Quartz Creek Rd., at mile 45 Sterling Hwy. Reservations accepted. 45 sites. Flush toilets, boat launch. $13 per night.

Crescent Creek This campground is quieter and more secluded than others near Cooper Landing, at the Crescent Lake trailhead. The 6½-mile trail leads to the Crescent Lake Forest Service Cabin, where a boat is provided for grayling fishing.

Mile 3 Quartz Creek Rd., at mile 45 Sterling Hwy. 9 sites. $10 per night.

4 Whittier: Dock on the Sound

Whittier is Anchorage's portal to Prince William Sound. Although Anchorage itself is on Upper Cook Inlet, that muddy, fast-moving water is hardly ever used for recreational boating. Whittier, on the other hand, stands on the edge of a long fjord in the northwest corner of the Sound, whose clear waters are full of salmon, orcas, and otters, and are bounded by rocky shores, rainforests, and glaciers. In the past, getting to Whittier meant riding through a mountain by train. Now the railway tunnel is paved, creating North America's longest highway tunnel and, in theory, putting Whittier only an hour away from the city. But only in theory, because the tunnel is also among the most inconvenient to use in North America. The tunnel has only one lane, and traffic and trains in both directions must share that lane. In addition, the tunnel must often be aired out in between trips. A wait is almost assured.

Whittier certainly has major advantages for visitors seeking to get out on the water. The water is calmer here than on excursions to Kenai Fjords National Park, so seasickness is rare, and the glaciers are even more numerous here. One company's selling point is a "26-glacier cruise," all done in a day trip from Anchorage by rail and large tour boat (see below). Prince William Sound boats usually see otters and sometimes see whales, while Kenai Fjords tours more often see whales and also see more birds. Sea kayakers can take great excursions from Whittier. Almost all of Prince William Sound is in Chugach National Forest, with public-use cabins in lovely, remote spots on the shores (see the previous section).

There's little other reason to go to Whittier, unless you're on a quest to find the oddest towns in America. Most of the roughly 180 townspeople live in a

Tips Be Prepared

An **ATM** is located at the liquor store near the boat harbor, but Whittier lacks a bank and other services, so bring what you need.

single 14-story concrete building with dark, narrow hallways. The grocery store is on the first floor and the medical clinic is on the third. The rest of the people live in one other building. **The Begich Towers,** as the dominant structure is called, was built during the 1940s, when Whittier's strategic location on the Alaska Railroad and at the head of a deep Prince William Sound fjord made it a key port in the defense of Alaska. Today, with its barren gravel ground and ramshackle warehouses and boat sheds, the town maintains a stark military-industrial character. The pass above the town is a funnel for frequent whipping winds, it always seems to rain, and the glaciers above the town keep it cool even in summer. As one young town ambassador told me once when I was on a visit, "You're thinking, 'Thank God I don't live here,' right?" The official boosters look on the bright side: Having everyone live in one building saves on snow removal in a place that gets an average of 20 feet per winter. Plus, kids don't even have to go outside to get to school—a tunnel leads from the tower to the school.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car** Take the Seward Highway to the Portage Glacier Road, at mile 78.9 (48 miles from Anchorage). The road through the 2¾-mile-long World War II rail tunnel to Whittier is only one lane and also accommodates trains, so you'll have to wait your turn. Get the schedule through the tunnel's website (go to www.dot.state.ak.us and click "Traveler Info"), through its phone recording (✆ **877/611-2586** or 907/566-2244), or by tuning to 1610AM in Portage or 530AM in Whittier. Checking the schedule helps you avoid a wait of an hour or more if you miss the opening, although you can also wait if you arrive just on time, especially at 6pm during peak periods, when there may be too many vehicles in line to get through during one open period. Here's a valuable tip: Choose the shortest line, not the line marked with the lowest number, as each line gets equal time for driving through. The tunnel closes altogether at night. In summer the first opening from Whittier is at 6am and the last to Whittier is at 10:30pm. Winter hours are shorter and changeable, so check ahead. The toll is $12 for cars; $20 for RVs, cars with trailers, or large vans. It is charged only going toward Whittier. Special permits are required for really huge vehicles (over 14 ft. high or 10 ft. wide). Parking in Whittier is $5 a day. As I mentioned in the introduction, Whittier really isn't worth the trouble unless you are going out on the water.

By Train If you plan to take a day trip on the Sound from a base in Anchorage—the way most people use Whittier—you can leave the car behind and take the train straight from the Anchorage depot. The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552** or 907/265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) runs a daily train timed to match the schedules of Prince William Sound tour boats. Unless you have planned an activity or tour on the water, however, you'll find the 6-hour stay in Whittier is too long to just hang around. The round-trip fare is $55, one-way $45, half price ages 2 to 11. The train ride is scenic and fun, but if there is more than one of you along, a rental car will save you money. The large tour operators will book the train for you when you buy your boat ticket if you wish.

By Bus Boat tour operators have buses that can save time and money over the train. Reserve when you buy your boat cruise ticket.

By Ferry An **Alaska Marine Highway System** ferry (✆ **800/642-0066,** or 800/764-3779 TDD; www.ferryalaska.com) makes a 7-hour run from Whittier to Valdez several times a week, where you can drive north on the beautiful Richardson Highway, making a complete circle back to Anchorage in 2 days or more. The fare is $78 for a car up to 15 feet long plus $68 for the driver or adult passenger, with ages 2 to 11 roughly half price. The ferry also takes 7 hours to run once a week direct from Whittier to Cordova, or you can go by way of Valdez several times a week in roughly 15 hours. See section 1 of chapter 5 for more on the ferry system.

VISITOR INFORMATION There is no visitor center, but you can contact the city offices at ✆ **907/472-2327,** extension 101 (admin@ci.whittier.ak.us). The people at the harbormaster's office are also helpful and maintain public toilets and showers; it's the two-story building at the harbor (✆ **907/472-2327,** extension 110 or 115).

GETTING OUT ON THE SOUND

Whittier is the entrance to western Prince William Sound, at the end of one of many long, deep fjords where marine mammals and eagles are common. Glaciers at the heads of many of the fjords dump ice in the water. In addition to daylong tour boats excursions, some small-ship overnight cruises start in Whittier; see chapter 4.

LARGE TOUR BOATS

Several companies with offices in Anchorage compete for your business for day-trip tours to the Sound's western glaciers. Besides having incredible scenery, the water is calm, making seasickness unlikely—for the queasy, this is a much better choice than Kenai Fjords National Park. Each operator times departures to coordinate with the daily Alaska Railroad train from Anchorage, described above, which means they have up to 6 hours for the trip. Some try to see as much as possible, while others take it slower to savor the scenery and wildlife sightings. Between the train and boat fare, expect to spend $190 per person for this day's outing, leaving Anchorage at 10am and returning at 9:30pm. You can save $10 to $15 a person and up to 3 hours by taking a bus that the tour boat arranges instead of the train. If you have two or more people, you also can save by renting a car and driving. You will also have to buy some meals, although lunch is included in the price on some boats.

Phillips' Cruises and Tours The 26-glacier cruise travels the Sound on a fast three-deck catamaran, counting the glaciers as they go. The boat ride is 4½ hours, so if you use their bus you cut the total time from Anchorage to under 8½ hours. There is a snack bar on board.

519 W. 4th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/544-0529** or 907/276-8023. www.26glaciers.com. $129 adults, $69 children under 12 (food not included).

Major Marine Tours This company operates a smaller, 149-passenger vessel at a slower pace than Phillips—they hit a mere 10 glaciers, but spend more time waiting for them to calve. The route goes up Blackstone Bay. The boat is comfortable, with reserved table seating. They also put more emphasis on their food, which costs extra; the salmon and prime rib buffet is $12 for adults, $6 for children. Time on the water is 5 hours.

411 W. 4th Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501. ✆ **800/764-7300** or 907/274-7300. www.majormarine.com. $99 adults, $49 children under 12 (food not included).

SMALL BOAT TOURS

Instead of getting on a giant tour boat with a mob of people, you can go on a small boat with a local whom you'll get to know as he or she shows off favorite places and lands on beaches to picnic and walk. If you see a whale or other point of interest, you can stay as long or as short a time as you like. What you give up is the comfort of a large, tour-bus like vessel. You'll also pay more. Most small boats have a four-person minimum.

Sound Eco Adventures Gerry Sanger is a retired wildlife biologist who spent years researching the waterfowl and ecology of Prince William Sound. Now he carries up to six passengers at a time on wildlife, whale and glacier tours and does kayak drop-offs from his 30-foot aluminum boat, which has a landing-craft-like ramp perfect for pulling up on gravel beaches, and suitable for wheelchairs. Finding whales in the Sound takes skill and requires covering a lot of water; Gerry's success rate is better than 90% since 1999, and he has gone years without missing once. Prices listed are examples: you can customize and arrange discounts in certain circumstances. Lunch and snack are included in the price.

P.O. Box 707, Whittier, AK 99693. ✆ **888/471-2312** or 907/472-2312. www.soundecoadventure.com. 10-hr. whale and wildlife cruise $199 per person, 5-hr. sightseeing $149, boat charter $135-150/hr (lunch and snacks included).

Honey Charters This family runs small boats licensed for 6 to 10 passengers, specializing in personal tours, water transportation, and kayaker drop-offs. They operate with a minimum of four passengers; by paying the four-person minimum, you can have the boat to yourself. For larger groups, their *Qayaq Chief* can carry 18 kayakers or 22 visitors on a sightseeing cruise. Bring lunch and snacks with you, as no food is available on board.

On the Whittier waterfront (P.O. Box 708), Whittier, AK 99693. ✆ **888/477-2493** or 907/472-2493. www.honeycharters.com. 3-hr. cruise $89 per person, 6 hr. $139 per person, 11 hr. $189 person. No food available on board.

FISHING

More than a dozen charter fishing boats operate out of Whittier, the closest saltwater fishing to Anchorage, mostly targeting halibut but also getting salmon at certain times. The **Whittier Harbormaster** can give you a list of operators (✆ **907/472-2337,** extension 110 or 115). Equipment is always provided on these guided charters.

Bread-n-Butter Charters (✆ **888/472-2396** or 907/472-2396; www.breadnbuttercharters.com) has been around for many years. They charge $195 per person for a day of halibut fishing and have an office on the waterfront. Honey Charters, listed above under "Small Boat Tours," has a similar service.

SEA KAYAKING

Whittier is a popular starting point for kayak trips to beautiful and protected western Prince William Sound. Day trips for beginners paddle along the shore near Whittier, often visiting a bird rookery, or take a boat 5 miles from the harbor to Shotgun Cove and paddle back. Longer multiday trips go by boat to even more interesting waters where you can visit glaciated fjords and paddle narrow passages.

Several businesses compete in Whittier. **Alaska Sea-Kayakers** (✆ **877/472-2534** or 907/472-2534; www.alaskaseakayakers.com) offers 3- and 5-hour day trips, for $70 and $140, respectively; paddles at Blackstone Glacier that begin with a charter boat ride, for $250; and extended trips. Guides are well trained and they occasionally offer weekend instructional clinics (check the website for times). Offices are at each end of Whittier Harbor. They rent to experienced paddlers, too.

The **Prince William Sound Kayak Center** (✆ **877/472-2452** or 907/472-2452; www.pwskayakcenter.com) offers guided 3-hour trips starting at $55, and rents kayaks. They've been in business more than 20 years.

Most self-guided kayakers charter a boat to drop them off among the islands beyond the long, deep fjord in which Whittier is located. Honey Charters, listed above under "Small Boat Tours," offers a drop-off service. There are six Forest Service cabins in this idyllic area, which must be reserved 6 months ahead. Campsites are not plentiful on these rocky shores, which dropped in the 1964 earthquake, so do some research with the Forest Service or Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Anchorage before you go. For information and cabin reservations, see section 3, "Chugach National Forest: Do-It-Yourself Wilderness."

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Most meals served in Whittier are for people grabbing a sandwich while waiting for a boat or otherwise passing through. Several such restaurants are in the triangle at the east end of the harbor, including a good Chinese place, the Korean-owned **China Sea** (✆ **907/472-2222**). Lunch there is $8 or $9, dinner $12 to $19, and in the summer they serve specials such as kung pao halibut. Hours are 11am to 10pm daily.

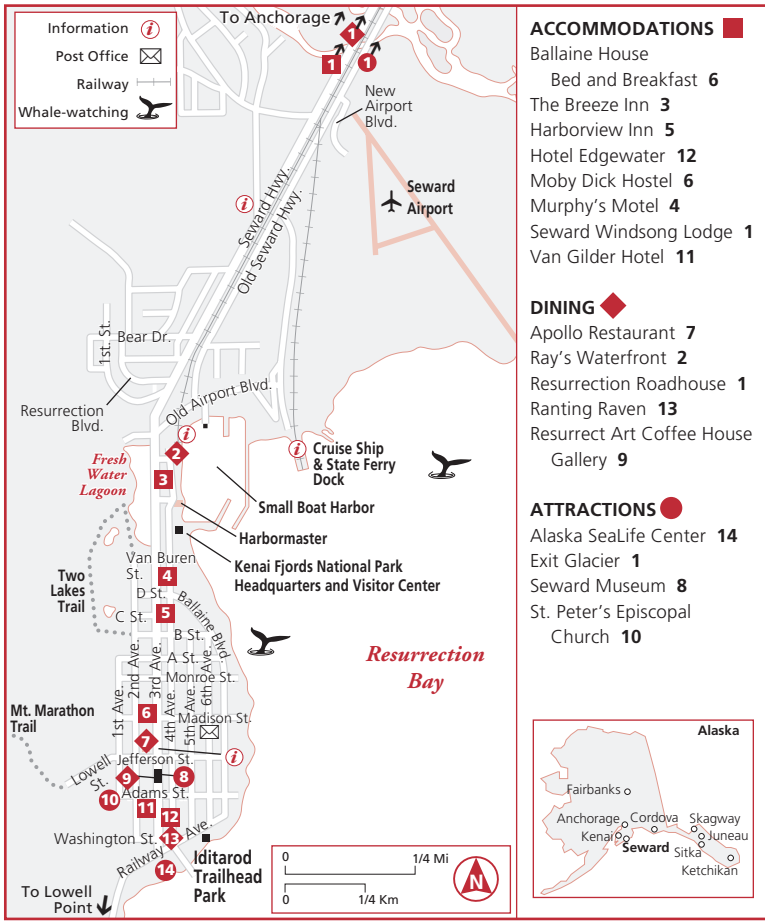
June's Whittier Bed and Breakfast Condo Suites Nine of these condo units are in the top two floors of the Begich Towers, the concrete building that dominates Whittier, allowing guests to live as Whittier people do, with great views and hummingbirds feeding at the high-rise windows. All have full kitchens. The friendly hostess, June Miller, and her husband, Ken, also have a fishing charter and sightseeing business, Bread-n-Butter Charters, listed above.

P.O. Box 715, Whittier, AK 99693. ✆ **888/472-2396** or 907/472-2396. Fax 907/472-2503. www.breadnbuttercharters.com. 10 units. $98–$225 double. Extra person over age 5 $15. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Harbor shuttle; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV/VCR, kitchen.

5 Seward: Gateway to Resurrection Bay & Kenai Fjords

The main reason to go to Seward has always been Resurrection Bay. This agreeable little town started life as a place to fish and to get off boats arriving in Alaska, then continued as a place for Alaskans and visitors to get *on* boats and see the bay and Kenai Fjords National Park (described in section 6 of this chapter). With the growth of the cruise industry, Seward again is a place to get off the boat. Most cruises that cross the Gulf of Alaska start or end here, with their passengers taking a bus to or from the airport in Anchorage. That flow of people has brought a lot of tourist development to town, mostly of a quality that hasn't damaged the town's character.

Located by the broad fjord of Resurrection Bay, Seward is a mountainside grid of streets lined with old wood-frame houses and newer fishermen's residences. It's long been the sort of place where pedestrians casually wander across the road, hardly glancing for cars, for there likely won't be any, or, if there are, they'll be ready to stop. The growing tourism industry is bringing more traffic, but most



of what's new has been good for the town. The largest addition, the Alaska SeaLife Center, is a research aquarium that's also open to the public. Combined with Seward's excellent ocean fishing, the national park, the wonderful hiking trails, and the unique and attractive town itself, the new center helps make Seward well worth a 2-day visit.

Seward's history is among the oldest in Alaska. The great Russian governor Alexander Baranof stopped here in 1793, named Resurrection Bay, and built a ship, which later sank, probably because Baranof's workers didn't have proper materials. Gold prospectors blazed trails from here to finds on Turnagain Arm starting in 1891, and in 1907, the army linked those trails with others all the way to Nome, finishing the Iditarod Trail. Today that route is discontinuous south of Anchorage, but you can follow it through Seward and hike a portion of it through the Johnson Pass north of town (described above in section 3 of this chapter on Chugach National Forest).

More relevant for current visitors and the local economy, the federal government took over a failed railroad-building effort in 1915, finishing the line to Fairbanks in 1923. Until the age of jet travel, most people coming to the main part

of Alaska arrived by steamer in Seward and then traveled north by rail. The train ride to and from Anchorage, daily during the summer, is supremely beautiful.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car** See section 2 of this chapter, on the Seward Highway, for how to make the spectacular 127-mile drive down from Anchorage. All major car-rental agencies are represented in Anchorage.

By Bus The **Seward Bus Line** (✆ **907/224-3608** in Seward or 907/563-0800 in Anchorage; www.homerstageline.com) makes two trips daily, year-round, one starting in Seward and going to Anchorage and one starting in Anchorage and going to Seward; the fare is $40 one-way, $75 round trip. They'll pick up and drop off passengers anywhere en route and, for an extra $5, take you to the airport. The same people operate the Homer Stage Line, and their ticket office in Anchorage is at 3335 Fairbanks St.

The Park Connection Motorcoach Service (✆ **800/266-8625** or 907/245-0200; www.alaskacoach.com) connects Seward with Anchorage and Denali National Park twice daily in summer in each direction. The fare is $49 from Anchorage, $118 from Denali, half off for kids under age 12.

By Train The train ride between Anchorage and Seward is one of miraculous beauty. The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552** or 907/265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) offers passenger service from Anchorage and back daily in summer. The route is even prettier than the highway, passing close by glaciers and following a ledge halfway up the narrow, vertical Placer River gorge, where it ducks into tunnels and pops out at bends in the river. The landscape looks just as it did when the first person beheld it. The railroad's young guides are well trained. The fare is $59 one-way, $98 round-trip; children ages 2 to 11 half price. A rental car will almost always be cheaper, but the train ride is unforgettable. The railroad also offers packages with lodging and activities in Seward. Don't try to do it in 1 day from Anchorage—the 16-hour marathon is too much.

By Air At this writing, Seward lacked scheduled air service.

By Ferry The ferry *Tustumena,* part of the Alaska Marine Highway System (✆ **800/642-0066,** Seward terminal at 907/224-5485; www.ferryalaska.com), calls on Seward a few times a month bound for Valdez to the east or Kodiak to the west. The adult walk-on fare to Valdez is $68, to Kodiak $64. Once a month in summer the *Kennicott* travels from Juneau across the Gulf of Alaska to Valdez and then to Seward. The fare from Juneau is $177 for an adult and the trip takes 50 hours. The terminal is at the cruise ship dock, on the outside of the small-boat harbor.

GETTING AROUND You can easily cover downtown Seward on foot, although a little help is handy to get back and forth from the boat harbor. If it's not raining, a bike may be the best way. **Seward Bike Shop** (✆ **907/224-2448**), in a railcar near the depot at the harbor, rents high-performance mountain bikes and bikes that are good for just getting around town, plus accessories. A cruiser is $12 half day, $19 full day.

The **Chamber of Commerce Trolley** runs every ½ hour from 10am to 7pm daily in summer; it goes south along 3rd Avenue and north on Ballaine Street, stopping at the railroad depot, the cruise-ship dock, the Alaska SeaLife Center, and the harbor visitor center. The fare is $2 per trip, or $5 to ride all day. It's a convenient, money-saving system.

Glacier Independent Taxi (✆ **907/224-5678**) is a cab company in Seward.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Seward Chamber of Commerce,** P.O. Box 749, Seward, AK 99664 (✆ **907/224-8051;** www.sewardak.org), has four visitor centers. The one on the right side of the Seward Highway as you enter town is open year-round (summer Mon–Fri 8am–5pm, Sat 9am–5pm, Sun 9am–4pm; winter closed weekends). Summer-only centers are at the Small-Boat Harbor, downtown in an old Alaska Railroad car at the corner of 3rd Avenue and Jefferson Street, and in a kiosk on the cruise-ship dock. They can give business information and last-minute help in finding a room.

In addition to these town information sources, the **Kenai Fjords National Park Visitor Center** is covered in section 6, later in this chapter. For contacts for the Chugach National Forest, see section 3.

SPECIAL EVENTS The **Fourth of July** is the biggest day of the year in Seward, when the whole town explodes with visitors, primarily from Anchorage. Besides the parade and many small-town festivities, the main attraction is the **Mount Marathon Race,** run every year since it started as a bar bet in 1915. The racers go from the middle of town straight up rocky Mount Marathon to its 3,022-foot peak, then tumble down again, arriving muddy and bloody at the finish line in town. Strong binoculars allow you to see the whole thing from town, including the pratfalls of the runners on their way down.

The **Silver Salmon Derby** starts the second Saturday of August, although the peak of silver season comes later. The chamber of commerce visitor centers can provide information.

FAST FACTS: Seward

Bank **Wells Fargo** is at 908 3rd Ave., with an ATM; other ATMs are at 303 4th Ave. and at the Eagle Quality Center grocery store at Seward Highway mile 2, and other places.

Hospital **Providence Seward Medical Center** is at 417 1st Ave. (✆ **907/224-5205**).

Internet Access Free at the **Seward Public Library,** 5th and Adams.

Police For nonemergency situations, call the **Seward Police Department** (✆ **907/224-3338**). Outside the city limits, call the **Alaska State Troopers** (✆ **907/224-3346**).

Post Office At 5th Avenue and Madison Street.

Taxes Sales tax is 5%. The room tax totals 9%.

GETTING OUTSIDE

Here I've described things to do out of Seward other than visiting the national park, which includes the fjords and Exit Glacier. See section 6, "Kenai Fjords National Park," later in this chapter, for that information.

BOATING & SEA KAYAKING

Miller's Landing, at Lowell Point, 3 miles south of town (✆ **866-541-5739** or 907/224-5739; www.millerslandingak.com) is a good place to know about if you intend to spend any time outdoors around Seward, especially if you like to do things on your own. They have a campground and cabins (described below), a boat launch with skiffs, sea kayaks for rent, and fishing charters with

experienced skippers. Skiffs rent for $65 for 4 hours; kayaks are $40 a day single, $50 double. Fishermen hang around the shop trading lies and advice (5¢, with a money-back guarantee). The staff will teach you how to fish for salmon and send you out on your own or on a guided charter. The water-taxi operation, landing craft with a bow ramp, charges flat rates to take travelers to remote beaches and public cabins around the bay or to the national park—great for sea kayakers or those who just want to get off on their own ($30 one-way to Caines Head, $250 round-trip to the park service cabin in Aialik Bay; half price children under 10).

If sea kayaking is your goal, contact **Sunny Cove Sea Kayaking** (✆ **800/770-9119** for reservations, or 907/224-8810; www.sunnycove.com), which offers day trips that are suitable for beginners as part of the Kenai Fjords Tours' boat trips to Fox Island, plus day trips and multi-day trips into the fjords themselves (see the Kenai Fjords National Park section later in this chapter). They've earned a good reputation. On a budget, you can take one of their tours right from Seward. They launch from Lowell Point, following the shore toward Caines Head State Recreation Area, where you can see sea otters, seabirds, intertidal creatures, and the salmon in Tonsina Creek. Three-hour paddles are $59; 8-hour trips are $99. A trip to Fox Island is more expensive but comes with a fjords boat tour and salmon bake.

DOG SLEDDING

The dog-driving Seavey family, including the four boys (one is a Junior Iditarod champ), show off their kennel on Old Exit Glacier Road off Herman Leirer Road, and offer summer rides in Seward and in winter in Sterling (near Soldotna). The summer ride uses a wheeled sled and a full 12-dog team—not the real thing (no snow), but you'll get a feeling for the dogs' power and intelligence. The 90-minute tour costs $39 for adults, $19 for children 11 and under. Husky puppies are available for cuddling, too. They call their company **IdidaRide** (✆ **800/478-3139** or 907/224-8607; www.ididaride.com).

For those with 10 times as much to spend, you can go mushing on snow at the height of summer by joining a helicopter tour to Godwin Glacier from the Seward Airport. A chopper lands at a camp of 50 dogs and guests take a ride. **Godwin Glacier Dog Sled Tours** (✆ **888/989-8239** or 907-224-8239; http://alaskadogsled.com) started these tours a few years ago. They charge $360 adult, $325 children. More recently, **Era Helicopters** (✆ **800/843-1947;** www.flightseeingtours.com) has begun offering similar dogsled tours on Godwin Glacier; they also offer flightseeing tours from the Seward Airport.

FISHING

Seward is renowned for its saltwater silver salmon fishing. The silvers start showing up in the bay in mid-July and last through September. You can catch the fish from shore—Lowell Point south of town or near the boat harbor are your best bets—but your chances of success are far greater from a boat. I prefer small, six-passenger boats because you can get to know the skipper better and learn more about fishing. If your party has the whole boat, you can control where it goes, perhaps adding whale-watching or sightseeing to the day. Larger boats add more comfort and stability in the waves. The going rate for a guided charter, with everything provided, is around $170 per person, or $225 to go for salmon and halibut on the same day. Andrew Mezirow, a marine biologist and diver for the SeaLife Center, operates two boats, including a fancy new twelve-passenger vessel; his business is **Crackerjack Sportfishing Charters** (✆ **907/224-2606;**

www.crackerjackcharters.com). You can make contact at a boardwalk office, Alaska Ocean Outfitters.

There are many other fishing charter companies, mostly booked through central charter agencies, which make life simpler for visitors. **The Fish House,** located at the Small-Boat Harbor, books charters, sells and rents ocean-fishing and spin-casting gear, and carries some fly-fishing supplies. Reserve charters ahead at P.O. Box 1209, Seward, AK 99664 (✆ **800/257-7760** or 907/224-3674; www.thefishhouse.net).

See "Boating & Sea Kayaking," above, for details on the much less expensive option of renting your own skiff and fishing without a guide.

HIKING

There are several excellent hiking trails near Seward. You can get a complete list and directions at the Kenai Fjords National Park Visitor Center (see section 6).

The **Mount Marathon Trail** is a tough hike to the top of a 3,022-foot mountain. The route of the famous Mount Marathon footrace is the more strenuous choice, basically going straight up from the end of Jefferson Street; the hikers' route starts at the corner of 1st Avenue and Monroe Street. Either trail rises steeply to the top of the rocky pinnacle and the incredible views there. Allow all day, unless you're a racer; in that case, expect to do it in less than 45 minutes.

The **Caines Head State Recreation Area** (www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks") has a 7-mile coastal trail south of town. Parts of the trail are accessible only at low tide, so it's best done either as an overnight or with someone picking you up or dropping you off in a boat at the far end—the Miller's Landing water taxi, mentioned under "Boating & Sea Kayaking," above, offers this service for $30 adults one-way, kids half price. The trail has some gorgeous views, rocky shores, and a fascinating destination at the end, a towering promontory with the concrete remains of Fort McGilvray, a World War II defensive emplacement. Take flashlights and you can poke around in the spooky, pitch dark underground corridors and rooms and imagine what each was used for (without lights, going in would be foolhardy). We've rarely enjoyed a hike more. Three campsites are at Tonsina Point, about 2 miles in, and a state park public-use cabin is 2 miles farther (see "Where to Stay," below; and "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1). At North Beach, 4½ miles from the trailhead, are two camping shelters, a ranger station, and the trails to the fort and South Beach. For an easy 2-mile hike to Fort McGilvray, start with a boat ride to North Beach. The main trailhead is south of town on Lowell Point Road; pull off in the lot right after the sewage plant, then cross the road through the gate and follow the dirt road a bit until it becomes the actual trail. Stop at the Kenai Fjords National Park Visitor Center at the boat harbor for tide conditions and advice.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

Besides the Alaska SeaLife Center (see below), most of Seward's attractions are of the modest, small-town variety. Explore downtown with the help of a **walking-tour map** provided by one of the visitor centers.

The **Iditarod Trailhead,** on the water just east of the SeaLife Center, is where pioneers entered Alaska. The broken concrete and twisted metal you see on the beach walking north are the last ruins of the Seward waterfront, which was destroyed by a tsunami wave in the 1964 earthquake. Sometimes you can see sea otters swimming just offshore. During silver salmon season, in August and September, it's possible to catch them by casting from shore here, although your chances are far better from a boat (see "Fishing," above).

The **Seward Museum,** at 3rd and Jefferson (✆ **907/224-3902**), is a charming grandma's attic of a place, with clippings, memorabilia, and curiosities recalling town history, painter Rockwell Kent, and the ways of the past. Admission is $3 for adults, 50¢ under age 18. It's open during the summer daily from 9am to 5pm, in winter usually weekends (call ahead).

The steep-roofed **St. Peter's Episcopal Church** is a delightful little chapel under the mountains at 1st Avenue and Adams Street. Go inside to see the mural in the front of the church, which shows what the Resurrection would have looked like if it had happened in front of Seward locals in the 1930s.

Alaska SeaLife Center ★★★ This center is a serious research institution and an interesting aquarium of creatures from the nearby Alaska waters. You may have seen puffins diving into the water from a tour boat; here you can see what they look like flying *under* the water. Seabirds, harbor seals, and sea lions reside in three large exhibits that you can see from above or below. There are some smaller tanks with fish, crab, and other creatures, a touch tank where you can handle starfish and other tide-pool animals, and a new exhibit on changes in the Bering Sea. An exhibit updates the status of *Exxon Valdez* spill damage to birds and marine mammals; Exxon settlement money made the center possible. The center is not as large as a big-city aquarium, however, and you're not likely to spend more than an hour or two here. Programs for kids and adults happen all day: To make the most of the admission price, call ahead so you can catch a program that interests you.

301 Railway Ave. (P.O. Box 1329), Seward, AK 99664. ✆ **800/224-2525** or 907/224-6300. www.alaskasealife.org. $12.50 adults, $10 children 7–12, free for children 6 and under. May–Aug daily 8am–8pm; Oct–Mar daily 10am–5pm; Sept and Apr daily 9am–6pm.

SHOPPING

Stop at the **Resurrect Art Coffee House Gallery,** at 320 3rd Ave., housed in an old church. It's a funky, comfortable coffeehouse and gathering place showing local fine art. The **Bardarson Studio,** 1317 4th Ave., at the boat harbor (✆ **800/354-0141;** www.bardarsonstudio.com), is a large gallery specializing in watercolor prints by Dot Bardarson and many other artists. The studio has a welcoming atmosphere and lots to look at. There's a children's cave under the stairs and places to sit outside or upstairs with videos and reading matter.

WHERE TO STAY

Alaska's Point of View Reservation Service (✆ **907/224-2323;** www.alaskasview.com) is a Seward lodging and tour booking agency. The website has an impressive search function for B&B lodgings. You can also get a list of B&Bs from the chamber of commerce visitor centers around town (see p. 263).

Seward has several hotels beyond those I can list here; in fact, I'm not aware of a bad hotel in Seward. The **Hotel Edgewater,** 200 5th Ave. (✆ **888/793-6800;** www.hoteledgewater.com) stands right across the street from the ocean and the SeaLife Center, and many of the upscale rooms have excellent views. **Murphy's Motel** (✆ **800/686-8191;** www.murphysmotel.com), near the boat harbor, has very good rooms with views in a new building for reasonable rates, and budget rooms in an older building.

A friendly family runs the **moby dick hostel & lodging,** at 432 3rd Ave. (✆ **907/224-7072;** www.mobydickhostel.com). They charge $17 for a bunk, $45 for private hostel rooms, and $60 for kitchenette rooms. The place is nicely renovated.

Ballaine House Bed and Breakfast *Finds* This 1905 house, situated near downtown, is a classic B&B, with wooden floors, a large living room, and tall, double-hung windows. It's on the National Historic Register and the town walking tour. The hostess, Marilee Koszewski, is accommodating and fun. She has decorated the house with antiques and handmade quilts and provides raincoats, binoculars, and other gear for outings, cooks breakfast to order, and will even do laundry. Guests can use the kitchen or the barbecue and freezer for their fish. The hostess also books activities and boats in Seward and some other towns, giving back the commission to guests; she doesn't make anything on it and guests save up to 20%. Rooms are not large, and all bathrooms are shared, but Marilee will often cut deals on additional rooms to make a family or group comfortable. Smoking is not permitted.

437 3rd Ave. (P.O. Box 2051), Seward, AK 99664-2051. ✆ **907/224-2362.** www.superpage.com/ballaine. 6 units, none with private bathroom. $82 double. Extra person $16. Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards. No children under 7. **Amenities:** Tour booking; laundry service; shared Internet access. *In room:* TV/VCR.

The Breeze Inn ★ Located right at the busy boat harbor, this large, three-story, motel-style building offers good standard accommodations, with the most convenient location in town for a fishing or Kenai Fjords boat trip. Rooms are frequently renovated. An annex building has excellent upscale rooms, some overlooking the harbor.

1306 Seward Hwy. (P.O. Box 2147), Seward, AK 99664-2147. ✆ **888/224-5237** or 907/224-5237. Fax 907/224-7024. www.breezeinn.com. 86 units. Summer $130–$188 double; winter $49 double. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; courtesy van. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Harborview Inn ★★ This inn grew from Jerry and Jolene King's bed-and-breakfast operation and still shows the taste and attention to detail that made the B&B such a success. The rooms are among the most attractive in town, with lots of light, Mission-style furniture, and Tlingit art based on Jolene's tribal crest. The rates are good by Seward standards, and the location, midway between the Small-Boat Harbor and downtown, puts both within long walking distance. Two two-bedroom apartments on the beach along Ballaine Avenue—perfect for families—rent for $159 a night. There's a nice one-bedroom apartment in the main section, too.

804 3rd Ave. (P.O. Box 1305), Seward, AK 99664. ✆ **888/324-3217** or 907/224-3217. Fax 907/224-3218. www.sewardhotel.com. 35 units, 3 apts. High season $139 double; off-season $59 double. Extra person $10. AE, DISC, MC, V. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Seward Windsong Lodge ★★ This hotel is the only one near Kenai Fjords National Park with a national park atmosphere. The big lobby, with its high ceiling, huge wood beams, fireplace and cedar shingles could be in a Yellowstone lodge. Moreover, the posh, solidly finished quality of the place puts it in first place among Seward's hotels. The location is out of town, among spruce trees, in the broad, unspoiled valley of the Resurrection River, and the collection of buildings goes on and on. Rooms are in separate lodges with entry from exterior porches. All rooms have a crisp feel and feature two queen beds, rustic-style furniture and good amenities. The hotel restaurant, the Resurrection Roadhouse, is reviewed below, under "Where to Dine."

½ Mile, Exit Glacier Rd., also known as Herman Leirer Rd. (Mailing address: 2525 C St., Ste. 405, Anchorage, AK 99503). ✆ **888/959-9590** or 907/265-4501 in Anchorage, or 907/224-7116 in Seward. www.sewardwindsong.com. 108 units. High season $189 double; low season $129 double. Extra person over age 11 $15. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed Oct–Apr. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; courtesy van. *In room:* TV/VCR, coffeemaker.

The Van Gilder Hotel *Value* This historic building, restored and decorated with the wallpaper of a century ago, has the small and oddly shaped rooms you would expect, but the style of the place and the quality of the management more than make up for it. Even the tiny bathrooms, mostly with shower stalls, not tubs, are tiled in an old-fashioned style and immaculately clean. Many rooms have queen beds and fold-down Murphy beds; a group of three could save a lot staying here. The location, right downtown, is prime.

308 Adams St. (P.O. Box 609), Seward, AK 99664. ✆ **800/204-6835** or 907/224-3079. Fax 907/224-3689. www.vangilderhotel.com. 24 units. High season $105 double shared bath, $135–$155 double private bath, $185 suite. Low season $55–$75 double shared bath, $65–$110 double private bath, $115 double, $115–$145 suite. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. *In room:* TV.

CAMPING & CABINS

The best campgrounds near Seward are those in Chugach National Forest, described above in section 3. The only campground in Kenai Fjords National Park, the **Exit Glacier Campground** at mile 8.5 of Herman Leirer Rd. (aka Exit Glacier Road), is near Seward. The campground is on willow-covered, gravel ground that plants haven't yet reclaimed from the retreating ice. Sites are far apart and almost completely private but lack any amenities—no picnic tables, fire grates, or anything. Use the food lockers and central cooking to keep bears away. Snow lingers into early June. There is no fee for the 10 sites, and reservations are not taken. It's open for tents only and has pit toilets and hand-pump water.

In the town of Seward itself, the seaside Waterfront Park on Ballaine Boulevard is acceptable for RV camping, but the tent sites are too noisy and exposed for my liking. Seward has tried to crack down on drinking and rowdiness in its campgrounds with partial success. The fee is $6 for tents, $10 for RVs plus $15 for a site with utilities, and showers are $2. The Waterfront Park is operated by the city parks and recreation department (✆ **907/224-4055**). A quieter town campground is **Forest Acres Park,** among the spruce trees at Hemlock and Sealion Boulevard, just off Seward Highway near the Army Recreation Center. Fees are the same. Neither campground accepts reservations and RVs are welcome, although there are no hook-ups.

More appealing is **Miller's Landing,** a homestead on Lowell Point Road south of town (✆ **866/541-5739** or 907/224-5739; www.millerslandingak.com). Sites are along the beach or among large spruce trees. Electric hookups are $25 to $27.50 a night, tent sites are $20; rustic sleeping-bag cabins are $35 to $55; and cabins with kitchens and bathrooms run $65 to $100. They also reserve the other cabin along the beach at Lowell Point. There's lots to do here; see "Boating & Sea Kayaking," above.

The Alaska State Division of Parks maintains two cabins for rent in the **Caines Head State Recreation Area,** south of town, and two in **Thumb Cove State Marine Park,** across the bay from Caines Head (see "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1 of this chapter). It's possible to hike to the Caines Head cabins (see "Hiking," above), but to get to Thumb Cove you need a boat. Water-taxi service is offered for $40 round-trip by Miller's Landing (see "Boating & Sea Kayaking," above). The Thumb Cove cabins lie in an impossibly steep bowl of mountains, a grand and lovely setting that, along with the excellent salmon fishing nearby, makes them popular and tough to reserve. However, camping is permitted along the same beach, with plenty of space and an outhouse for campers' use.

Cabins in Chugach National Forest and Kenai Fjords National Park are mentioned in those sections.

WHERE TO DINE

There are various places at the harbor to grab a sandwich or other quick meal on the way out to sea; they change too frequently for me to include here. Downtown, the **Ranting Raven,** at 228 4th Ave. (✆ **907/224-2228**), is a great little gift and coffee shop serving pastries, sandwiches, and soup, open April through Christmas. Also try the **Resurrect Art Coffee House Gallery** (see p. 266).

Apollo Restaurant ★ MEDITERRANEAN/SEAFOOD This is a surprisingly good small-town restaurant. Seward families come for a menu that includes anything they might want: Greek and southern Italian cuisine, seafood, pizza, and much more. The food, especially the seafood dishes, is far more sophisticated and expertly turned out than you expect in such a place, and the service is fast and professional. The dining room, with many booths, takes the Greek theme as far as it will go—I especially enjoyed the miniature Doric columns. The same folks own Apollo II, selling pizza, sandwiches and the like at the north end of the boat harbor.

229 4th Ave. ✆ **907/224-3092.** Main courses $10–$18. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Ray's Waterfront ★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This lively, noisy dining room has big windows that look out across the small-boat harbor, with tables on terraces so everyone gets a view. The atmosphere is fun, and the consistently good food is just right after a day on the water. While not perfect, it's more nuanced than the typical harborside place. The seafood chowder is great. Most important, they don't overcook the fresh local fish—and that's really all you can ask. On busy summer weekends, however, the place can be overrun, with long waits and harried servers. They have a full liquor license.

At the Small-Boat Harbor. ✆ **907/224-5606.** Lunch $6–$15; dinner $16–$25. AE, DISC, MC, V. 18% gratuity added for parties of 6 or more. Mid-Mar–Sept daily 11am–11pm. Closed Oct–mid-Mar.

Resurrection Roadhouse ★ ALASKAN SPECIALTIES/PIZZA This place sometimes sees an annual shift in quality that's typical of seasonal restaurants, but I've had wonderful food here. The menu includes fish, venison, and ribs smoked in-house. They also serve hand-thrown gourmet pizzas. The mountain view is great and there's plenty of space. It's a relaxing alternative to noisy Ray's. The bar's collection of Alaska craft brews on tap is exhaustive.

⅔ Mile, Exit Glacier Rd. ✆ **907/224-7116.** Lunch $9–$13; dinner $9–$24. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–2:30pm and 5–10pm. Closed mid-Oct–mid-Apr.

6 Kenai Fjords National Park

Kenai Fjords is all about remote rocks, mountains, and ice that meet the ocean, and the animals that live there. The park comprises 670,000 acres of the south coast and interior landmass of the Kenai Peninsula. The shore here is exposed to the Gulf of Alaska, whose wild, recurrent storms beat against the mountainous shore, unbuffered by any landmass in the vast expanse of the Pacific to the south. Wildlife thrives, but humans have never made a mark.

The geological events that formed this landscape are vast and ongoing. The steep, coastal mountains amount to a dent in the earth's crust where the northward-moving Pacific tectonic plate is colliding and adding land to the southern edge of Alaska. As the Pacific plate pushes under Alaska, it slams islands onto the Alaska coast, then pulls them under into the molten layer down below. These mountains are shrinking measurably as the earth swallows them up. The 1964 earthquake dropped them by 6 to 8 feet. As your boat passes the park's

small, sharp, bedrock islands, now populated by seabirds and marine mammals, you are seeing the tips of ancient peaks that once stood far above the shore, like today's coastal mountains.

The park's history has barely started. The fjords became a park only in 1980. In 1976, when the National Park Service explored more than 650 miles of coastline, including the park area, they didn't find a single human being. The same was true when geologists came in 1909. British explorer Capt. James Cook made the first maps of the fjords area in 1778, but the coast was too rugged and rocky for him to land. We don't know much about Native Americans who lived in the fjords. Scientists have found some areas where people lived, or at least had camps, but no one knows exactly who they were or what they were doing here. The earth, through earthquakes or glacial action, has erased most remains. Anthropologists call these people *Unegkurmiut* and believe they were Alutiiq Eskimos who lived on the Pacific coast, closely related to the Chugach people who live on Prince William Sound and the Koniag who live on Kodiak Island to the south. Scientists are studying the Unegkurmiut and what happened to them from the little evidence that they can find on the fjord's beaches.

The Natives probably never ventured inland over the impossibly rugged interior of the Kenai Peninsula, leaving its heart to be discovered in 1968, when the first mountain climbers crossed the Harding Ice Field, which covers most of the national park. **Exit Glacier** and all the glaciers of Kenai Fjords flow from this ice age leftover, which may be a mile thick. The ice field lies in a high bowl of mountains that jut straight out of the ocean to heights of 3,000 to 5,000 feet. When moisture-laden ocean clouds hit those mountains, they drop lots of rain and snow—40 to 80 feet of snow fall on the ice field each winter, with a water equivalent of 17 feet. Summer weather isn't warm enough to melt the snow at that elevation, so it packs down ever deeper until it turns into the hard, heavy ice of glaciers and flows downward to the sea.

The area's history finally got an ugly start in 1989, when the tanker *Exxon Valdez* crashed into a rock about 150 miles northeast of the park in Prince William Sound, spilling almost 11 million gallons of oil. Exxon did a poor job of catching the oil before it spread, and by the end of the summer the sticky, brownish-black muck had soiled beaches in the western Sound, across the fjords, and all the way to Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula. More than 1,000 miles of shoreline were oiled to some degree, 30 miles in the park. Hundreds of sea otters and hundreds of thousands of seabirds were killed in the Sound and on the islands near the fjords. Nature scrubbed the oil off the rocks, and you will see no evidence of it in the park today; but government scientists say most of the affected species of birds and animals haven't come back completely. Nonetheless, you'll still see more wildlife on a boat ride here than anywhere else I know.

Most of the park is remote and difficult to reach. A large vessel, such as a tour boat operating out of Seward, is the only practical way for most people to see the marine portion of the park. That's not cheap or quick, and there are better destinations for people subject to seasickness. The inland portion is accessible only at Exit Glacier, near Seward.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Seward is the threshold to the park. Exit Glacier is 13 miles from the town by road, the Kenai Fjords National Park Visitor Center is at the Seward Small-Boat Harbor, and the tour boats that visit the park leave from Seward. Many visitors try to see the park in a day, coming from Anchorage by train or road, touring the park by boat, then returning that evening. I do

not recommend this. To really get to the park, you need to be on an all-day boat trip—most ½-day trips barely leave Resurrection Bay and hardly see the park proper. More important, a lot of the visitors I saw riding the train back to Anchorage after a 16-hour marathon to Kenai Fjords were so tired they couldn't keep their eyes open for the extraordinary scenery passing by outside the train. A better plan is to spend a night in Seward and take in the full Kenai Fjords boat trip and Exit Glacier.

VISITOR INFORMATION At the **Kenai Fjords National Park Visitor Center,** Seward Small-Boat Harbor (P.O. Box 1727), Seward, AK 99664 (✆ **907/224-3175;** www.nps.gov/kefj), you will find rangers to answer questions about the park and provide information on the all-important tour boats, and a small but handy bookstore. Call or drop by here for advice on park service cabins for rent in the fjords, guidance on a sea-kayaking expedition there, or information on places in the area to hike and on trail conditions. They're open May through Labor Day daily from 9am to 6pm, off-season Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

ACCOMMODATIONS & CAMPING There are no hotels in the park; it's best to base yourself in Seward (see my recommendations earlier in this chapter). The **Exit Glacier Campground,** the only campground in the park, is listed on p. 268. A free park service map shows the location of food lockers and hanging cables to keep your stuff away from bears in the kayaking waters of Aialik Bay and Northwestern Fjord. You can camp anywhere if you observe correct backcountry precautions and obtain a free permit at the visitor center. When you get the permit, you have to specify your itinerary and an emergency contact phone number in case you don't return. Send away for a packet of information from the park. They also rent out four **public-use cabins,** three in the fjords, reachable only by boat or floatplane. One is a mile from Exit Glacier, but is open only during the winter, when the road is closed. It's accessible by ski, dog sled, or snow machine. Contact the park headquarters for a $35-a-day cabin permit. Cabins are open for reservations starting January 2 each year.

SEEING THE PARK

SIGHTSEEING & WILDLIFE CRUISES

Kenai Fjords is essentially a marine park. On a boat tour, you'll see its mountains, glaciers, and wildlife. On any of the tours you're sure to see sea otters and sea lions, and you have a good chance of seeing humpback whales, orcas, mountain goats, and black bears. I saw all those on one trip to Aialik Bay. Gray whales come in the early spring and huge fin whales show sometimes, too (but are hard to see). Porpoises also sometimes shoot by. Bird-watchers will see bald eagles, puffins (both tufted and horned), murrelets (marbled and Kittletz's), cormorants (red faced, pelagic, and double breasted), murres (common and thick billed), auklets (rhinoceros and parakeet), and various other sea ducks, alcids, and gulls.

The farther you go into the park, the more you'll see. If you really want to see Kenai Fjords National Park and glaciers that drop ice into the water, the boat has to go at least into **Aialik Bay** to **Holgate Glacier. Northwestern Glacier** is even deeper in the park. Half-day Resurrection Bay cruises offer plenty of impressive scenery but pass only one glacier, and that at a distance. They have less chance of seeing whales, and see fewer puffins and other birds. The longest trips into the heart of the park proper encounter the greatest variety and number of birds and animals. If you're lucky with the weather, you can make it to the exposed **Chiswell Islands,** which have some of the greatest bird rookeries in

Tips It's Not Easy Being Green

An important factor in choosing your boat tour is your susceptibility to **seasickness.** To reach the heart of the park, vessels must venture into the unprotected waters of the North Pacific. Large, rolling waves are inevitable on the passage from Resurrection Bay to the fjords themselves; although once you're in the fjords, the water is calm. On a rough day, most boats will turn back for the comfort of the passengers and change the full-day trip into a Resurrection Bay cruise, refunding the difference in fare. Of course, they'd rather not do that, and the decision may not be made until the vessel is out there, often after many of the passengers are already vomiting over the side. If you get seasick easily, my advice is to stick to the Resurrection Bay cruise, or take a boat tour in protected Prince William Sound out of Whittier (see section 4 in this chapter), where the water is smooth. In any event, ask about the tour company's policy on turning back and refunds, and take Dramamine *before* you leave the dock (once you're underway, it's probably too late to do any good).

Alaska, supporting more than 50,000 seabirds of 18 species. I've seen clouds of puffins swarm here. The daylong trips also allow you more time to linger and really see the behavior of the wildlife. Whatever your choice, binoculars are a necessity; you may be able to rent them on board but bring your own if you have a pair.

Prices are around $150 to go to Northwestern Glacier in Northwestern Fjord off Harris Bay, a 10-hour trip; $110 to go to Holgate Glacier in Holgate Arm off Aialik Bay, which takes 6 to 8 hours; and $60 to $70 for a 3- to 4-hour Resurrection Bay tour, which doesn't go to the national park at all. Children's prices are around half off. I have seen a lot of misleading publicity material from the tour operators, so ask exactly where the boat goes or get a map of the route. They sometimes brag about going to Bear Glacier, but that's a let-down because boats can't get close to it. You have to go at least to Holgate Glacier for a noteworthy glacier encounter.

Fares with each operator differ little, although you can sometimes get early season or Web specials. Instead of comparing fares, compare destination, length of trip, food service, interpretation, and size or intimacy of the boat. Ask how much deck space there is outside so you can really see. What is the seating arrangement inside? How many passengers will be on board and how many crewmembers to answer questions? Is lunch provided, and what does it consist of? Another important point of comparison is whether you have a ranger doing the commentary, or the captain—some of these captains don't know when to shut up, and they can give inaccurate information.

Try to schedule loosely so that if the weather is bad on the day you choose for your boat trip you can wait and go the next day. If the weather's bad, you'll be uncomfortable and the animals and birds won't be as evident, or the boat may not go out of the bay at all. If you pay up front to hold a reservation on a boat—probably a good idea in the busiest months—find out the company's refund and rescheduling policy.

Most operators offer packages with the Alaska Railroad and the SeaLife Center, which may save money, but make sure you have enough time to do everything you want to do in Seward. All operators have offices at the Small-Boat

Harbor in Seward. In addition to the large operators listed in full below, **Renown Charters and Tours** (✆ **907/272-1961;** www.renowncharters.com) has smaller vessels that carry up to 70 passengers and offers shorter, lower-priced cruises and year-round operations for off-season travelers. A 2½-hour bay cruise starts at $40, and their park tour is reasonably priced at $90.

Kenai Fjords Tours This is the dominant tour operator, with the most daily sailings and choices of destination. The main part of the operation uses 90- to 150-passenger vessels, some of which have forward-facing seats, like an airplane's. They're professionally staffed, but when the ships are crowded, the experience can be impersonal. The captain provides the commentary instead of a ranger. However, the same company also owns **Mariah Tours,** which operates 16-passenger vessels. Their trips are more spontaneous and go farther; the downside is that the smaller boats are less stable in the waves.

Most of the large Kenai Fjords vessels call on a lodge that the company owns on **Fox Island,** in Resurrection Bay. It sits on the long cobble beach of **Sunny Cove,** where painter Rockwell Kent lived in seclusion with his son in 1918 and 1919, producing the art that made him famous, as well as his classic book *Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska* (Wesleyan University Press). It is an inspiring spot. The lodge itself stands on a narrow strip of land between the beach and a pond, which visitors overlook from large wooden decks. Boats stop for lunch of grilled salmon or a family-style dinner, and some passengers spend the night. An overnight package on the island costs $329 per person, with the day cruise and meals included. Half-day sea-kayaking paddles from the island are offered for day-trippers or overnight guests: $79 to $89 per person as an add-on for overnighters; or $149 to $169, including a Resurrection Bay tour boat ride, for day-trippers.

At the Seward Small-Boat Harbor. ✆ **800/478-806** or 907/224-8068 in Seward, or 907/276-6249 in Anchorage. www.kenaifjords.com.

Major Marine Tours This company pioneered first-class onboard dining and, at this writing, is the only cruise that brings along a park ranger to assure high-quality commentary, a decisive advantage in my judgment (after all, you're here for the park). Their boats are slower than some of the competitors', so they don't make the long trip to Northwest Glacier; they either head into Aialik Bay to see Holgate Glacier (an hour tour costing $109 adults and $54 children 11 and under) or tour Resurrection Bay around Seward (a 4½-hour tour costing $69 adults and $34 kids children 11 and under). The company also offers 4-hour evening cruises ($54 adults; $27 children 11 and under). Instead of bringing sandwiches or stopping for a meal, all cruises serve a buffet of salmon and prime rib on board for $12 per person, $6 for children. The food is surprisingly good. While I like their table-seating arrangement with forward-facing seats, it can be an uncomfortable crush when the boat is crowded. Your seat is assigned, so there's no need to rush aboard or try to stake out your spot.

411 W. 4th Ave., Anchorage. ✆ **800/764-7300** or 907/274-7300, or 907/224-8030 in Seward. www.majormarine.com.

SEA KAYAKING

The fjords are calm yet rugged, intricate, and full of wildlife and soaring vistas. It's hard to imagine a better place for a sea-kayaking expedition. However, they are also are extremely remote and very rainy, so a trip there is a poor choice for your very first outing. Experienced cold-water paddlers can rent kayaks and explore on their own, using the park service cabins for shelter (see above under

"Accommodations & Camping"). I've listed the agencies that rent kayaks and offer guided trips and water taxis under "Boating & Sea Kayaking" in the Seward section on p. 263. **Sunny Cove Kayaking** offers a kayaking day trip to Aialik Bay. They take guests out on a small charter boat for a wildlife tour, then you launch and paddle in front of the glacier while the boat stands by. The price for the day trip is $325; expensive, but it is the best of the best. To get more of a feel for the place, spend a couple of days. Sunny Cove's 2-day, 3-night glacier trip costs $849.

EXIT GLACIER

When I visited Italy years ago, I got to the point where I thought I'd scream if I saw another painting of the Madonna. If your trip to Alaska is long, you may start to feel the same way about glaciers. But, although relatively small, Exit Glacier really is unique, and my family still enjoys visits there even as jaded lifelong Alaskans. (I've probably seen more glaciers than Madonnas.)

You can walk close to Exit Glacier, see its brittle texture, and feel the cold, dense spires of ice looming over you. Cold air breathes down on you like air from an open freezer door. Approaching the glacier, you can see the pattern of vegetation reclaiming the land that the melting ice has uncovered, a process well explained by interpretive signs and a nature trail. At the same time, the area remains refreshingly primitive. The National Park Service's low-key presentation of the site makes it a casual, pleasant visit for a couple of hours (longer if you do a hike).

The easiest way to get to the glacier is to drive. The clearly marked 9-mile road splits from the Seward Highway 3⅔ miles north of town. In winter, the road is closed to vehicles. If you don't have a car, van service is usually available; check with the park visitor center (p. 271) to see who is currently offering service.

Following the road along the broad bed of the wandering Resurrection River, you'll see in reverse order the succession of vegetation, from mature Sitka spruce and cottonwood trees down to smaller alders and shrubs. It takes time for nature to replace the soil on sterile ground left behind by a receding glacier. As you get closer, watch for signs with dates starting a couple of centuries in the past—they mark the retreat of the glacier through time.

At the end of the road an entrance booth charges a **user fee of $5 per vehicle.** A simple **ranger station** and pit toilets are near the parking lot; a new nature center, with flush toilets, had not yet opened at this writing. **Ranger-led nature walks** start here 11am and 3pm Memorial Day through Labor Day. The short **trail** to the glacier starts here. At the glacier, the trail splits: The steep route goes up along the side of the glacier, and the easy route runs on the flat gravel at its face.

One of the glacier's striking features is a high berm of gravel that fits around its leading edge like a necklace. This is a **moraine,** the glacier's refuse pile. The glacier gouges out the mountains with its immense, moving weight as new ice flows down from the ice field above and melts here. It carries along the rock and gravel torn from the mountain like a conveyor belt. This moraine is where the conveyor belt ends and the melting ice leaves the debris behind in a big pile. Probably without knowing it, you've seen hundreds of moraines all over North America, where the glaciers of the last ice age piled debris into hills, but this is the most obvious moraine I've ever seen, and it helps you understand how they work. Don't go beyond the warning signs; ice can fall off and crush you.

An all-day hike, 7 miles round-trip, climbs along the right side of the glacier to the **Harding Icefield**—the glacier gets its name for being an exit from that massive sheet. It's a challenging walk with a 3,000-foot elevation gain, but it's the easiest access I'm aware of to visit an ice field on foot. Because of snow, the trail doesn't open until late June or early July. The ice field itself is cold and dangerous, and there's an emergency shelter maintained by the park service. Don't trek out on the ice unless you know what you're doing. The park service guides hikes up the trail Saturdays in July and August, meeting at 9am in the new nature center.

The **Resurrection River Trail,** in Chugach National Forest, begins from the road just short of the last bridge to the glacier. It's a pleasant day-hike, with lots of wildflowers in the fall, and can also be the start of a long hike deep into the mountains.

7 Cooper Landing: Road Meets River

The little roadside community of Cooper Landing, in a wooded mountain valley along Kenai Lake and the Kenai River, begins about 8 miles west of Tern Lake, where the Sterling Highway splits from the Seward Highway, and continues sporadically along the highway for about 7 miles. (The Sterling runs generally west until Soldotna, where it heads south again.) The frothing upper **Kenai River** is the community's lifeline, each summer bringing the salmon that in turn draw visitors, who fill hotels, restaurants, and the date books of fishing guides. The **Russian River** meets the Kenai at the western edge of the community, where a mad fishing frenzy for the July red salmon season occurs. A ferry takes anglers across the river from the highway. For information on how to fish the Kenai, see "Fishing" in section 8 of this chapter on Kenai/Soldotna; there's additional information in chapter 2.

If you're not an angler, there's not much here except a couple of operators who do rafting trips, some trailheads, and some accommodations that could make a romantic mountain retreat. Cooper Landing is the starting or ending point for backpacking trips in the Chugach National Forest, described in section 3 of this chapter. Look there also for descriptions of several campgrounds for tents or RVs (there are also RV hookups at the Kenai Princess Lodge, reviewed below).

Cooper Landing has a post office, service stations, and small stores selling fishing gear and essentials, but it's not a real center of commerce. For banking or anything else not directly related to catching a salmon, you'll have to drive to Sterling, 30 miles away to the west, or Soldotna, 14 miles beyond that.

VISITOR INFORMATION At this writing a new visitor information booth was about to open at the day use area and boat ramp, known as "the landing," on the right side of the highway just after it crosses the source of the Kenai River at Kenai Lake. This area is a good place to stop anyway, with a pleasant boardwalk trail to stretch your legs (a $5 day-use fee applies), and a tackle shop and booking service nearby. The information booth is operated by the **Cooper Landing Chamber of Commerce** (✆ **907/595-8888;** www.cooperlandingchamber.com), and is open summer only.

FISHING LODGES

The three lodges below can take care of everything, so you can set up your fishing and other activities with a single phone call. If all you need is a simple, comfortable, inexpensive room, try **The Hutch Bed and Breakfast,** Mile 48.5, Sterling Highway (✆ **907/595-1270;** www.arctic.net/~hutch).

Gwin's Lodge This is the town's old original log roadhouse. Standing just a mile east of the Resurrection trailhead and the Russian River Campground, Gwin's is convenient and has loads of character. The owner, a dynamic former F-15 fighter pilot, keeps it open 24 hours a day all summer long as the nerve center for the 24-hour fishing on the Russian River. It includes an extensive tackle shop, liquor store, and clothing shops, and the lodge books fishing, rafting, and other activities, and operates a shuttle van through the community. Most of the cabins are new, trailer-sized units with kitchenettes, mock log exteriors, and sleeping lofts with tiny dormers. All have shower stalls, not tubs. The least expensive cabins are old log structures that are a bit grungy.

Over 50 years, the **restaurant** has welcomed many a tired angler or backpacker for a hearty meal, including me; after that, it's hard to be objective. Food in the seven-table dining room ranges from burgers to steaks and seafood. Meals generally are well above the greasy spoon tradition of such places. Both the restaurant and bar are open around the clock in summer.

14865 (Mile 52) Sterling Hwy., Cooper Landing, AK 99572. ✆ **907/595-1266.** www.gwinslodge.com. 13 cabins. High season $109–$159 double; low season $59–$89 double. Extra person over age 3 $10. DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; fishing rentals. *In room:* Coffeemaker.

Kenai Princess Lodge ★★★ This is the most luxurious choice on the Kenai Peninsula. Each room in the red-roofed buildings feels like a remote cabin, with balconies overlooking the wooded valley, woodstoves stocked with firewood, and many unique details; yet they're luxurious hotel rooms at a resort with a spa and fine restaurant. There are three classes of rooms with a $10 price difference between each. The middle, premium class, is halfway up the hill, with rooms separated by a divider into two parts, like a real cabin. At the top level the deluxe rooms, highest on the hill, have more of a clean, elegant feel. Bathrooms are surprisingly small in all the rooms. Anchorage couples use the hotel as a romantic getaway off-season, but in the summer most rooms are filled by Princess cruise ship passengers. The cycle of the ships determines if there are rooms open for independent travelers—in the past, Wednesday has been an open day. The lodge books guided fishing, horseback riding, tours, and other activities, and there are hiking trails nearby. An attractive 35-space RV park with full hookups is on-site, with access to the facilities.

The Eagle's Crest restaurant has a varied and sophisticated menu, with good use of Alaskan seafood, and the light dining room follows the hotel's generally rustic theme. Dinner main courses are $20 to $30. The lunch menu has the expected items, plus choices such as calamari and some unusual salads, generally under $10. Even if you have no reason to stay in Cooper Landing, consider planning your drive so you end up here for a meal—certainly several steps up from highway fare—and are able to enjoy the relaxing ambiance of the lodge.

Up Bean Creek Rd. above Cooper Landing (P.O. Box 676, Cooper Landing, AK 99572). ✆ **800/426-0500** or 907/595-1425. Fax 907/595-1424. www.princesslodges.com. 86 units. High season $239–$269 double; low season $79–$124 double. RV sites $30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; health club; Jacuzzi; tour desk; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker.

Kenai River Sportfishing Lodge/Kenai Riverside Lodge ★★ This compound lies between the highway and the river, but down among the trees it feels like a remote lodge. I'd call the cabins faux rustic—I've never seen real Bush cabins with smooth walls, wainscoting, and bright rag rugs, but these trim places still feel like the outdoorsy real thing, with no TVs or phones. The plumbing is in a central bathhouse. The location is the real advantage: Whitewater rafting rides and fishing floats leave right from the riverfront. The lodge also possesses

Tips Floating the Kenai River

The Kenai is more famous for fishing than rafting, but the area is beautiful and the Kenai Canyon, below Cooper Landing and above Skilak Lake, has frothy Class III water between vertical canyon walls. **Alaska Wildland Adventures,** at the Kenai Riverside Lodge (✆ **800/478-4100** or 907/595-1279), is the most established operator and has a great reputation. They offer a 7-hour float through the canyon for $110 adults, $89 children; and a placid 2½-hour float down the upper Kenai for $45 adults, $29 children. Their guided fishing is $195 for a full day.

Alaska Rivers Co., Mile 50, Cooper Landing (✆ **907/595-1226;** www.alaskariverscompany.com), has also been around a while. They offer scenic rafting ($42, children half price), canyon floats ($85), and guided fishing ($135 all day). They rent cabins, too.

a scarce resource in its coveted guide permits for the hot fishing river section that runs through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Everything is covered by one price: transportation from Anchorage, meals in a central lodge building, guided salmon fishing or fly-fishing for rainbow trout in drift or jet boats, and, on longer visits, halibut fishing (done from boats in salt water). You provide your own booze and fishing license and pay the tip. Many visitors come as part of a "safari" package that takes them to various outdoor activities and sites. One such package is the Alaska Wildland Adventures safari that's described in section 8 of chapter 2.

Alaska Wildland Adventures, Mile 50.1 Sterling Hwy. (P.O. Box 389, Girdwood, AK 99587-0389). ✆ **800/478-4100** or 907/783-2928. www.alaskasportfish.com. 16 cabins. 3-day, 4-night all-inclusive package $1,795. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (family style); sauna.

8 Kenai/Soldotna & Sterling: Giant Salmon

These quintessential western U.S. towns, dominated by shopping malls and fast-food franchises facing broad highways, have a single claim to fame, but it's a pretty good claim: The largest sport-caught king salmon in the world, almost 100 pounds, came from the Kenai River. The Kenai's kings run so large there's a different trophy class for the river—everywhere else in the state, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game will certify a 50-pounder as a trophy, but on the Kenai it has to be at least 75 pounds. That's because kings in the 60-pound class—with enough wild muscle to fight ferociously for hours—are just too common here. Anglers prepared to pay for a charter will be in their element on the river when the fish are running hot. Catching a big king is not easy or quick, however, and success rates vary greatly from year to year and week to week.

Those not interested in fishing will find less than a day's sightseeing in these towns. Instead, use the towns as a base for the outdoors. Kenai has a strangely beautiful ocean beach and the Kenai River mouth; both with exceptional bird-watching during migrations. Outside town, you'll find a wealth of outdoor activities, primarily in the lake-dotted **Kenai National Wildlife Refuge,** which has its headquarters in Soldotna. The refuge is covered in the next section.

Kenai came into being with the arrival of the Russians at the mouth of the Kenai River more than 200 years ago, but it came into its own only with the discovery of oil on the peninsula in 1957. Today, its economy relies on oil, commercial fishing, and, to a smaller extent, tourism. Soldotna, a smaller, newer, and

less attractive town, is the borough seat and the primary destination for sportfishermen. Sterling is just a wide place in the road—incredibly wide, as a matter of fact (no one is quite able to explain why such a small town needs such a big road).

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE From Anchorage, the drive on the Seward and Sterling highways to Soldotna is 147 miles. Allow 3 hours, without stops. In summer, traffic will slow you down; in winter, speeds are limited by ice and the fear of hitting moose. Kenai is 11 miles from Soldotna on the Kenai Spur Highway, the first major right as you enter Soldotna from the north on the Sterling Highway.

The **Homer Stage Line** (✆ **907/235-7009** or 907/399-1847 on the van; www.homerstageline.com) connects Anchorage, Homer, Seward, and points between with van service, 6 days a week from Anchorage and 3 from Seward in the summer (less frequently in winter). The fare from Anchorage to Soldotna is $40 one-way, $75 round-trip. Tickets are for sale in Soldotna at the Thompson's Corner gift store at 44224 Sterling Highway (✆ **907/262-9071**) or in Anchorage at the Seward Bus Line ticket office at 3335 Fairbanks St. (✆ **907/868-3914**).

Kenai receives very frequent flights from Anchorage on **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394;** www.flyera.com).

GETTING AROUND The area is so spread out that walking most places really isn't possible, and there's no public transportation. Everyone here owns or rents a car. Four rental companies operate at the Kenai airport: **Hertz, Avis, Budget** and **Payless.** If you plan only to fish, however, you may not need a car; instead get rides from your guide, your host, or a taxicab. Ask about transportation options when you reserve your rooms. There are several cab companies; try **Alaska Cab** (✆ **907/283-6000** in Kenai or 907/262-1555 in Soldotna).

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Soldotna Visitor Information Center,** 44790 Sterling Hwy., Soldotna, AK 99669 (✆ **907/262-9814** or 907/262-1337; www.soldotnachamber.com), is located on the south side of town; drive through the commercial strip and turn right after the Kenai River Bridge. It's open daily in summer from 9am to 7pm; in winter, Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. Besides the usual brochures and free maps, they maintain notebooks full of comparative information about lodgings, camping, and other services, and will help you find a room or charter. Anglers should stop in to see the world-record 97-pound King salmon and a 20-pound rainbow trout.

In Kenai, the **Kenai Visitors and Cultural Center** at 11471 Kenai Spur Hwy., Kenai, AK 99611 (✆ **907/283-1991;** www.visitkenai.com) is an attraction in itself. A museum here does a good job of using artifacts to explain the cultures that passed through the Kenai: the Natives, the Russians who settled in 1791, and the later pioneers and oil workers. Look for the "King of Snags," an immense conglomeration of lost fishing lures, rods and sticks from the bottom of the river. Superb temporary art exhibitions are mounted, too (see below). To get there, follow the Spur Highway past Main Street and look for the large, landscaped building on your left. In summer, admission to the museum portion is $3, free for students through high school; off-season, admission is free. They are open summer Monday through Friday from 9am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 7pm; and off-season Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm, Saturday from 10am to 4pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS Kenai Visitors and Cultural Center (see above) hosts invitational art shows each summer, which generally feature painting on a single

theme, such as wildlife art. Admission is $3 adults, free for children and high school students. **The Kenai River Festival** (✆ **907/260-5449**), over the second weekend of June, has food, music, crafts, and games. The **KDLL Art and Music Festival** (✆ **907/283-8433**) is a 12-hour outdoor concert on the Summer Solstice, June 21.

In Soldotna, the **Tustumena 200 Sled Dog Race** (✆ **907/262-3270**), held in late January, helps kick off the mushing season. **Progress Days** (✆ **907/262-9814**), in late July, offers a parade, rodeo, car shows, and other festival events commemorating the completion of a gas pipeline in 1960—that's the area in a nutshell.

In Ninilchik, the **Kenai Peninsula State Fair** (✆ **907/567-3670**), south at Mile 136 on the Sterling Highway, is held Friday through Sunday the third weekend in August, with a rodeo, music, crafts, games, agricultural and craft exhibits, and other country attractions, plus a few kids' rides. Admission is $7 adults, $5 seniors, $4 children ages 6 to 12.

FAST FACTS: Kenai & Soldotna

Banks You will find banks on the Kenai Spur Highway in the middle of Kenai; and in Soldotna, on the Sterling Highway commercial strip. In addition, ATMs are in grocery stores all over the area.

Hospital **Central Peninsula General** is in Soldotna at 250 Hospital Place (✆ **907/262-4404**); from the Sterling Highway, take Binkley Street to Marydale Avenue.

Internet Access Connect to the Web for free at the **Kenai Public Library,** 163 Main St. Loop (✆ **907/283-4378**), or at the **Soldotna Public Library,** 235 Binkley St. (✆ **907/262-4227**).

Police For nonemergencies in Kenai, call the Kenai Police Department (✆ **907/283-7879**); in Soldotna, call the Soldotna Police Department (✆ **907/262-4455**); outside city limits, call the Alaska State Troopers (✆ **907/262-4453**).

Taxes There's a 5% sales tax in Kenai and Soldotna, and 2% outside city limits.

FISHING

Fishing the Kenai River is the whole point of coming to the area for most visitors. Check at the visitor centers for information and regulation booklets. Or contact the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 43961 Kalifornsky Beach Rd., Suite B, Soldotna, AK 99669 (✆ **907/262-9368** or 907/262-2737 for a recorded fishing report; www.alaska.gov/adfg). Serious anglers shouldn't miss that website; navigate through to the Region 2 Sportfish Division and download their treatises on Kenai River biology and fishing techniques or check current fish counts and escapement goals. Licenses are for sale on the site and in virtually any sporting-goods store. Also, read "A Salmon Primer" and "Fishing" in chapter 2.

There are more than two dozen public-access fishing points over the 80 miles of the Kenai River. A **guide brochure** with a map is available from the state **Division of Parks,** P.O. Box 1247, Soldotna, AK 99669-1247 (✆ **907/262-5581;**

www.alaskastateparks.org); you can also pick up a copy at one of the visitor centers.

For anglers interested in less competition and more of a wilderness experience, Kenai is a gateway for vast wild lands accessible by air on the west side of Cook Inlet. There you can fish a stream packed with salmon with little competition. Among others, **High Adventure Air** (✆ **907/262-5237;** www.highadventureair.com) has day trips for $250 to $325 per person.

KINGS King salmon, the monsters of the river, come in two runs. The early run, which sometimes has been limited to catch-and-release, comes from late May to the end of June, peaking in mid-June. On average, it's less plentiful and smaller (in the 20- to 40-pound range), however the run did produce the sport caught world's record (97 pounds, 4 ounces). The second run comes during the month of July and includes more of the massive fish. Regulations usually allow only the use of artificial lures with a single hook. Most people fish kings from a boat, fishing certain holes. Boats hold stationary or back slowly down the river; or fishermen drift down river. Your chances from the bank are low; on average, with or without a boat, it takes 29 hours of fishing time to land a king (you'll likely get at least a dozen strikes for every fish that makes it into the boat). With a guide, the average time to land a fish is cut in half, but that still means that if you fish for only 1 day, chances are good that you'll get skunked. A boat of three anglers on a half-day guided charter has roughly a 50% chance of landing a king amongst them.

A guided charter averages $125 to $150 for a 6-hour, ½-day trip, $225 to $250 full day. There are dozens of guides. Contact the visitor center in Kenai or Soldotna (contact info. on p. 278) to get in touch with a guide; also, many hotels and lodges have their own. It's possible to rent a boat, but this is advisable only if you are experienced in boats and stay out of the hazardous, faster-flowing parts of the river. The **Sports Den,** at 44176 Sterling Hwy., in Soldotna (✆ **907/262-7491;** http://alaskasportsden.com), is one charter operator, with river and ocean trips for salmon or halibut, plus fly-in fishing and hunting trips. This outfitter also offers lodging packages with large units. I've found them friendly and helpful over the years.

REDS The area really goes crazy when the red (or "sockeye") salmon join the kings in the river, from mid-July to early August. You can fish reds from the bank or from a boat. Reds are plankton eaters; some say they won't strike a lure, some say they do. In the most popular fishing areas, near the confluence of the Russian River or Moose River with the Kenai, regulations allow only the use of flies. Most people around here cast the flies with spinning gear, weighting the line 18 inches from the fly so it bounces along the bottom. Cast upstream from shore and allow the fly to drift down, keeping it near the bank. While waiting for a strike, debate whether the fish really attack the flies, or if they get caught when they instinctively move their mouths in an eating motion, which they do in quick-moving water.

SILVERS Silvers come in two runs. The first, heavier run is from late July to August, and the lighter run arrives in September. They're easiest to catch anchored in a boat, but you can also do well from shore. Lures work well, as does bait of salmon eggs.

OTHER SPECIES Trophy-size rainbow trout and Dolly Varden char also come out of the river. Anglers using light tackle may also enjoy catching pink salmon, which is plentiful in the Kenai during even-numbered years. Most

Alaskans turn up their nose at this easy-to-catch 4-pound fish; just smile and keep hauling them in. Fresh, bright pinks taste great over a campfire.

EXPLORING THE TOWNS

Kenai's historic sites, beach walking, and bird-watching can occupy you for much of a day. Start at the visitor and cultural center mentioned above and get a copy of the *Old Town Kenai Walking Map;* follow the numbered markers. Not many of the simple, weathered buildings remain from Kenai's life before oil, but those that do are interesting and lie only a few blocks down Main Street from the center, along the Cook Inlet and Kenai River bluff. There's a cozy coffee shop on the way for a break.

The **Holy Assumption of the Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Church** is the area's most significant building. The parish was founded in 1845 and the present church was built in 1895. It's a quaint, clean, bright, onion-domed church that contains old icons. A donation is requested. Several nearby buildings are interesting for their interlocking log construction and weathered exteriors. Stop in at Veronica's Coffeehouse, across from the church. It's located in a charming historic building and is a good place for a light meal.

The bluff nearby overlooks the broad, sandy ocean beach. A dirt path runs down to the beach from Alaska Avenue between the apartment building and the houses that contain professional offices. To drive down, return to the Kenai Spur Highway, turn to the northwest (left), and then turn left on South Spruce Street. There's a big parking lot with a $5 fee, which seems strange on the deserted beach—until dipnetting season begins. At a certain point in the summer salmon run, Alaska residents can fish from this beach by scooping up passing fish with long-handled dipnets. At this time you can also see white beluga whales chasing salmon upriver, sometimes in great numbers. If you just want to watch, the viewpoint from the top of the bluff at Erik Hansen Scout Park, at Cook and Mission avenues, is a prime spot. The beach is a lovely place for a walk. On a calm day, the beach sand, the mud flats, and the Inlet's gray, glacial water (far too cold for swimming) seem to meld together into one vast shimmering plain. It's easy to imagine the Russians' first arrival here.

The mouth of the river and the wetlands of its delta make for fine **bird-watching,** especially during spring and fall migrations. One of the best places to get to the tidal Kenai River Flats is along Bridge Access Road, which branches from the Spur Highway. The state of Alaska has developed viewing areas at each end of the bridge.

A family looking for something to do while one parent is off fishing may enjoy the magnificent **North Peninsula Recreation Area Nikiski Pool** (✆ **907/776-8472**), 10 miles north of Kenai on the Kenai Spur Road. The facility occupies a large dome and has a 136-foot water slide, mushroom fountains of water, and a raised hot tub from which parents can watch their children play in the pool below. The water slide is open Tuesday through Sunday from 1 to 5pm and 6 to 9pm in the summer (swimming begins Tues–Sun at 7am); the winter hours are complicated, with the slide open only Friday through Sunday, so call for details. Pool admission is $3, or $6 to use the slide and pool. Weekends can be crowded.

WHERE TO STAY

Many hotels are on seasonal rate schedules, with three, four, or even more price levels linked to the salmon runs. I've listed the highest and lowest.

Aspen Hotel Soldotna ★★ This small chain of hotels was built in recent years by Alaska businessmen who found a niche in certain towns for up-to-date corporate-style accommodations with high-end amenities. These are the best rooms in town, housed in a building with high ceilings and a solid feeling of quality, if not much personality. It has the only hotel swimming pool on the whole Kenai Peninsula (small, but with a large spa beside it). Room choices include family suites featuring bunk beds, privacy between parents and kids, and PlayStation video games. Suites with cooking facilities are available, too. All rooms are decked out with lots of amenities, including DVD players and speakerphones. The hotel is behind Arby's on the commercial strip, but the view out the back is of a pond and the river.

326 Binkley Circle, Soldotna, AK 99669. ✆ **888/308-7848** or 907/260-7736. Fax 907/260-7786. www.aspenhotelsak.com. 63 units. High season $169 double, $199 suite. Low season $79 double, $99 suite. Extra person over age 17 $10. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Indoor pool; health club; spa; business center with computers; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV/DVD, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron ,microwave.

Daniels Lake Lodge Bed and Breakfast ★ *Finds* Located on peaceful and sparsely populated Daniels Lake, this lovely, relaxing place has a boat and canoe that you can rent for trout fishing right out the back door, among the resident ducks. Rooms are comfortable and thoughtfully decorated, with access to a shared kitchen. The cabins, with kitchens, are remarkable—just right for these 9 acres of woods, with choices for couples or big groups. The gregarious hosts, Jim and Karen Burris, share their Christian faith with guests, and the couple and their dogs and rabbits are extremely friendly. This is not a 1-night stopover; instead, it's a place to stay for a couple of days of relaxation. The B&B is closer to the Nikiski Pool and the outlet of the Swanson River Canoe route of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge than to any town. No smoking is permitted on the premises.

21 miles north of Kenai (P.O. Box 1444), Kenai, AK 99611. ✆ **800/774-5578** or 907/776-5578. www.danielslakelodge.com. 4 units, 3 cabins. High season $95–$130 double, $150–$250 cabin. Extra adult $20, extra child under age 12 $10. 2-night minimum in cabins. Low season $50–$120 any unit. Extra person $15. AE, DISC, MC, V. Deposits by check only. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi; Internet access; boat or canoe rental; babysitting; free laundry machines. *In room:* TV.

Great Alaska Adventure Lodge ★★ For anglers, it's location that counts, and this lodge has it in spades. The lodge is located on a ⅓ of a mile of river frontage, where the Moose and Kenai rivers converge, which has been a hot fishing spot since time immemorial, as an ancient Native site attests. In the evening, the lodge keeps a guide and campfire on the beach so you can keep casting in the midnight sun. The newly remodeled lodge rooms are spacious, with gas fireplaces and private bathrooms, and they overlook the river in Sterling. Unfortunately, the site suffers from vehicle noise from the adjacent Sterling Highway. For guests interested in seeing wildlife and the glorious backcountry of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, add a side trip or make a destination of the cushy tent camps on the edge of the park, where you can live in the wilderness but sleep and eat in comfort. The lodge arranges day trips and overnights to watch three-dozen resident brown bear engaging in their natural behavior in a bear camp across Cook Inlet. Check the lodge's website for information on the many tours and wilderness safaris that they offer.

Moose River, 33881 Sterling Hwy., Sterling, AK 99672 (in winter, P.O. Box 2670, Poulsbo, WA 98370). ✆ **800/544-2261** or 907/262-4515. Fax 907/262-8797 in summer, 360/697-7850 in winter. www.greatalaska.com. 25 units. Rates from $175–$249 for a day trip without lodging to $3,495 for a 7-day package. Rates include all meals, guide service, transfers and travel from Anchorage. AE, MC, V. Closed Oct–mid-May.

Harborside Cottages Bed and Breakfast Situated on a grassy compound at the top of a bluff in Old Town, overlooking the mouth of the Kenai River, these little white cottages make the most of a perfect site. The view and quiet can keep you in a peaceful reverie all day. Inside, the cottages are immaculate enough to seem brand new, each with its own light country decoration. Cottages have either king-size beds or pairs of twin beds. There are no tubs, just shower stalls. The hostess stocks a self-serve breakfast the night before. Outside is a patio with a picnic table and gas barbecue.

13 Riverview Dr. (P.O. Box 942), Kenai, AK 99611. ✆ **907/283-6162.** www.harborsidecottages.com. 5 cottages. High season $150 double; low season $125 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed winter. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, iron, microwave.

Log Cabin Inn *Value* Ted and Carol Titus built this huge log house specifically as a B&B, but with its huge common room—with a fireplace and towering cathedral ceiling—it feels more like a wilderness lodge. Located off Kalifornsky Beach Road, a little south of the bridge in Kenai, the house stands over an active beaver pond, with a deck and lots of windows to watch the beavers. The upstairs rooms, which cost $10 more, are well worth it—they're large and airy. A room on the main floor has French doors to a deck over the pond. Several other rooms, in the half basement, are decorated in a cute country style. The rooms all have private bathrooms, but instead of doors they have curtains to separate them from the bedrooms. The 10pm to 7am quiet hours in the house—by which the hosts mean speaking only in whispers—make the cabins an attractive choice. They are large and comfortable, but authentic, with plank floors, rag rugs and rough-cut wood walls. Carol serves a full buffet breakfast, which she likes to clear up by 8am.

49860 Eider Rd. P.O. Box 2886, Kenai, AK 99611. ✆ and fax **907/283-3653.** www.acsalaska.net/~ted.titus. 9 units, 3 cabins. High season $90–$100 double; low season $70–$90 double. Extra adult $25; extra child under 12 $10. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi.

CAMPING

Soldotna's appealing **Centennial Park Campground** extends along a long section of the Kenai River bluff, among thick spruce and birch trees, with ramps down to fishing spots on the river. Although natural in its setting, it has a coffee stand and newspaper vending machine and is next door to the visitor center and close to stores. Turn right on Kalifornsky Beach Road just after the bridge on the Sterling Highway. Camping fees are $11 a night and day use is $5, payable at a manned entrance booth. The park is open May 1 to October 1. There's a dump station, usable for a $10 fee. **Swiftwater Park** is a similar city-operated riverside campground near the Fred Meyer grocery store and Taco Bell as you enter town from the north.

RV parks are scattered about. **Beluga Lookout Lodge and RV Park,** 929 Mission Ave. (✆ **907/283-5999;** belugarv@ptialaska.net), is in Kenai's Old Town, at bluff's edge over the inlet and the river's mouth. This is the best spot in town. Full hookups are $25 to $35 a night. They offer bike rentals and charters for salmon and halibut fishing, and bear or beluga watching.

WHERE TO DINE

Franchise fast-food and burger-steak-seafood places dominate in Kenai and Soldotna. **Paradisos,** at Main Street and Kenai Spur Highway in Kenai (✆ **907/283-2222**), is a good multiethnic family restaurant. **Louie's,** in the Uptown Motel at 47 Spur View Dr. (✆ **907/283-3660**), serves good, solid food in a

dining room and barroom that are reminiscent of the den of a maniacal sportsman—if the animal mounts came to life, you'd be crushed in a stampede.

Charlotte's Bakery, Café, Espresso ★ SANDWICHES Rich-textured bread from the bakery anchors the sandwiches, and lettuce from a nearby garden completes the large, filling salads, but the motherly owner doesn't make a point of reminding guests that many ingredients are local—hers is not a trendy or gimmicky place. Locals fill the big wooden chairs in the bright dining room because the food is wonderfully flavored, the service is sweetly attentive, and the prices are reasonable.

115 S. Willow, Kenai. ✆ **907/283-2777.** Main courses $5–$9. MC, V. Mon–Fri 7am–4pm.

Mykel's ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This is a traditional, dark fine dining restaurant that's good for a date or an especially relaxing evening. Located in a motel in Soldotna, the dining room is dated, with high-backed booths, and the easy-listening violin music gets on my nerves, but the food leaves nothing to be desired. In fact, this is the only restaurant in the area that serves this level of cuisine. Service is professional and more than friendly. The dinner menu contains many familiar beef and chicken dishes, but the kitchen also prepares local seafood in creative ways and serves several nightly specials that experiment with more adventurous flavors. Servings are large, so one course is plenty. At lunchtime, there are many salads to choose from, plus the expected sandwiches.

35041 Kenai Spur Hwy., Soldotna. ✆ **907/262-4305.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $8–$13, dinner $18–$27.50. V. High season daily 11am–10pm, low season Tues–Thurs and Sun 11am–9pm, Fri–Sat 11am–10pm.

Sal's Klondike Diner DINER It certainly looks corny and touristy from the outside, but Sal's turns out to be a classic Western highway diner, with huge portions, fast service, and nothing fancy that doesn't have to be. Our sandwiches, burgers, and halibut fish and chips were just what we wanted for a quick lunch, and our coffee cups stayed full. The children's menu is good and cheap.

44619 Sterling Hwy., Soldotna. ✆ **907/262-2220.** Lunch $4.50–$9; dinner $7–$10. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

9 Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

Floating through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in a canoe narrows the world into a circle of green water, spruce, and birch. You can paddle and hike for days without encountering more than a few other people, your only expense the cost of your canoe and the vehicle that carried you to the trailhead. Out there with my older son, I once noticed that, other than his voice, the only sounds I had heard in 2 days were the gurgling of the water and the wind shushing in the birch leaves. You rely on yourself, but your greatest tests are not overly taxing. Trail a line behind the canoe, and, when you catch a rainbow trout, land it and make a fire to cook it. Launch your body into the clear, frigid water to rinse off the sweat on a warm day. Float slowly, watching eagles circle the treetops and puffy clouds drift like ships past your little world.

Most of the western half of the Kenai Peninsula lies within the refuge—at 2 million acres, it's almost as large as Yellowstone National Park—and much of that land is impossibly remote and truly dedicated to the wildlife that inhabits it. The Kenai River flows through part of the refuge, and anglers eagerly pursue its salmon. (Information about fishing and rafting the river is given earlier in the chapter, in the Kenai/Soldotna and Cooper Landing sections.) Canoeists will be more interested in the lowlands on the west side, west of the Sterling Highway

and north of Kenai and Soldotna. The lakes there are as numerous as the speckles on a trout's back, or at least that's how they appear from the air. From the ground, the region is a maze of lakes connected by trails—more than 70 lakes you can reach on canoe routes stretching more than 150 miles. It's the easiest way to real Alaska wilderness that I know.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The refuge surrounds much of the land from Cooper Landing at the north to Homer at the south and Cook Inlet to the west. The Sterling Highway and roads that branch from it are the main ways to the lakes, trails, and rivers, and there is no practical way there without a vehicle.

VISITOR INFORMATION Stop in at the **Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center,** Ski Hill Road (P.O. Box 2139), Soldotna, AK 99669 (✆ **907/262-7021;** http://kenai.fws.gov), for guidance before plunging into the wilderness. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge, exhibits natural history displays here, shows a film each hour in the afternoon in the summer and maintains a mile-long nature trail. The staff offers advice and sells books and maps that you'll definitely need for a successful backcountry trip. To find the center, turn left just south of the Kenai River Bridge, taking the dirt road uphill from the building-supply store. It's open in summer, Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm, Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 6pm; winter, Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 5pm. The website also contains detailed trip-planning information for the canoe routes.

GETTING OUTSIDE

CANOEING

From 1941 to 1980 the refuge was known as the Kenai National Moose Range. Its brushy wetlands are paradise for **moose,** rich in their favorite foods of willow and birch shoots and pondweeds. Moose like to dine while wading. Waterfowl and other birds, beavers, muskrats, and other aquatic animals are common on the lakes. People also must be partly aquatic to explore the lakes, paddling canoes across their surfaces, pushing through lily pad passages between lakes, and frequently hiking in rubber boots between lakes while carrying the canoe and camping gear.

There are two main canoe routes, both reached from Swanson River and Swan Lake roads, north of the Sterling Highway from the town of Sterling. The **Swan Lake Canoe Route** is a 60-mile network of 30 connected lakes. It meets Swan Lake Road twice, allowing a loop of several days, and in between, adventurers can penetrate many lakes deep into the wilderness, visiting isolated, remote lakes. It's also possible to canoe through to the Moose River and ride its current 17 miles over a long day back to the Sterling Highway.

Getting anywhere requires frequent portages of a ¼ mile or so, and more ambitious routes have mile-long portages. You can skip all the portaging, however, by floating 2 days down the **Swanson River** to its mouth, at the Captain Cook State Recreation Area (see below), joining the river at a landing at Mile 17.5 of Swanson River Road. The water is slow and easy all the way.

The most challenging of the routes is the **Swanson River Canoe Route,** which connects to the river's headwaters through a series of lakes and longer portages. The route covers 80 miles, including 40 lakes and the river float. Both routes have many dozens of remote campsites—just lakeside areas of cleared

ground with fire rings—and most of the portages are well marked and maintained with wooden planking over the wet areas.

You can rent canoes near the intersection of Swanson River Road and the Sterling Highway in Sterling, where the Finch family operates **Alaska Canoe & Campground** (✆ **907/262-2331;** www.alaskacanoetrips.com). Coleman canoes rent for $40 for 24 hours and lighter, fiberglass canoes for a little more. They offer a shuttle service to carry canoeists from one entrance to another so you don't have to double back on your trip, and they can give valuable expert advice. Call ahead to check on equipment and to reserve. You can also rent camping equipment or lightweight canoes in Anchorage to bring with you (see chapter 6).

If you go, among your most important tools will be the book ***The Kenai Canoe Trails,*** by Daniel L. Quick, (Northlite Publishing, $19). This extraordinary guide contains superdetailed maps and directions, and advice on how to plan your trip and fish and camp on your way—I've never seen a trail guide like it. Guided canoe trips are available from **Blue Moose Lakeside Lodge** (✆ **877/256-6673** or 907/262-0669; www.blue-moose.com), but you don't need a guide if you know how to canoe and are prepared for wilderness. I haven't provided detailed driving instructions because you'll need detailed maps to go at all. **Trails Illustrated** produces a good detailed map of the whole area, printed on plastic (see "Fast Facts: Alaska," in chapter 2 for details). A serviceable free map is distributed by the refuge visitor center.

There's much more to do in the refuge too, including several upland hiking trails. The refuge visitor center provides guidance and maps.

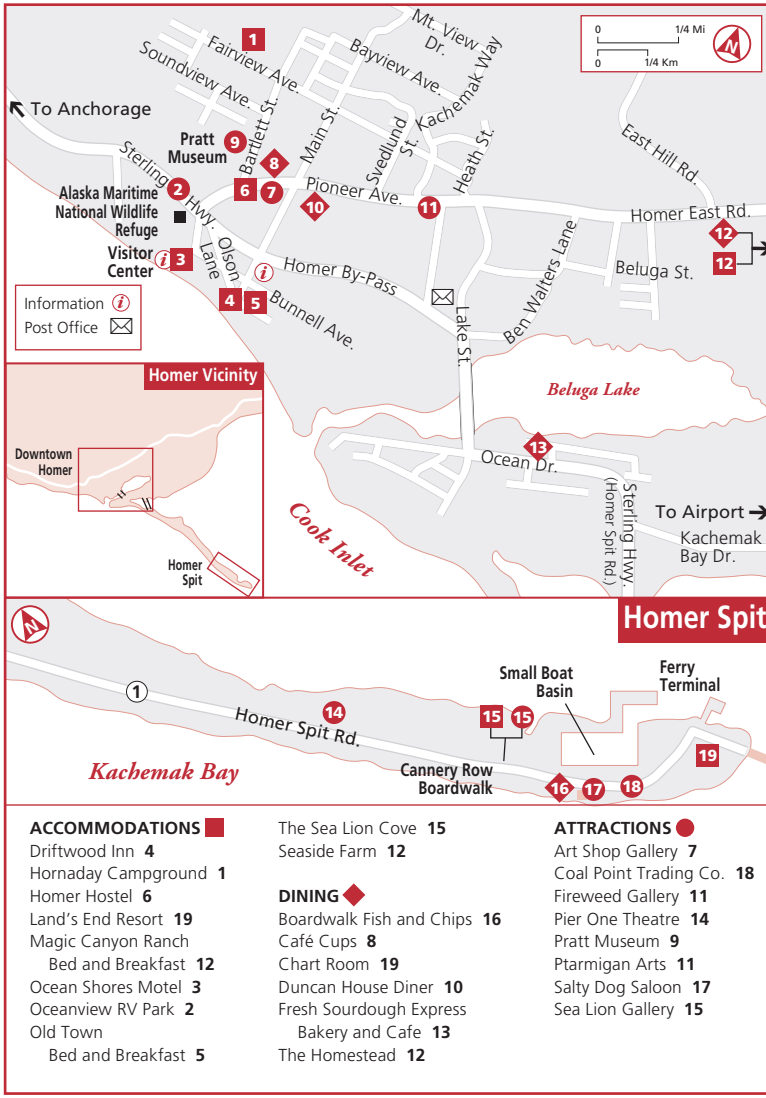
CAMPING

For car camping away from all the fishing mayhem, the **Captain Cook State Recreation Area** is a lovely and underused 3,460-acre seaside area on Cook Inlet, 25 miles north of Kenai on the North Kenai Road, at the mouth of the Swanson River. There are lots of attractive sites among large birches. The area offers trails, beach walking, a canoe landing at the end of the Swanson River Canoe Route, and lake swimming. The State Parks camping fee is $10. **Daniels Lake Lodge,** listed above in section 8 (on Kenai/Soldotna) of this chapter, is nearby.

There are many campgrounds within the refuge, too, some of them lovely, quiet spots on the edge of uninhabited lakes, such as the small **Rainbow Lake** and **Dolly Varden Lake campgrounds,** on Swanson River Road near the start of the canoe routes, and the **Watson Lake** and **Peterson Lake campgrounds** on the Sterling Highway between Sterling and Cooper Landing. Get a complete listing from the visitor center. Generally, there is no camping fee.

10 Homer: Cosmic Hamlet by the Sea

Homer's leading mystic, the late Brother Asaiah Bates, always maintained that a confluence of metaphysical forces causes a focus of powerful creative energy on this little seaside town. It's hard to argue. Homer is full of creative people: artists, eccentrics, and those who simply contribute to a quirky community in a beautiful place. Indeed, Brother Asaiah may have been the quintessential Homeroid, although perhaps an extreme example, with his gray ponytail, extraordinary openness and generosity, and flowery rhetoric about "the cosmic wheel of life." Homer is full of outspoken, unusual, and even odd individualists—people who make living in the town almost an act of belief. I can say this because I'm a former Homeroid myself.



ACCOMMODATIONS
Driftwood Inn **4**
Hornaday Campground **1**
Homer Hostel **6**
Land's End Resort **19**
Magic Canyon Ranch Bed and Breakfast **12**
Ocean Shores Motel **3**
Oceanview RV Park **2**
Old Town Bed and Breakfast **5**
The Sea Lion Cove **15**
Seaside Farm **12**

DINING
Boardwalk Fish and Chips **16**
Café Cups **8**
Chart Room **19**
Duncan House Diner **10**
Fresh Sourdough Express Bakery and Cafe **13**
The Homestead **12**

ATTRACTIONS
Art Shop Gallery **7**
Coal Point Trading Co. **18**
Fireweed Gallery **11**
Pier One Theatre **14**
Pratt Museum **9**
Ptarmigan Arts **11**
Salty Dog Saloon **17**
Sea Lion Gallery **15**

The geography of Homer—physical as well as metaphysical—has gathered certain people here the way currents gather driftwood on the town's pebble beaches. Homer is at the end of the road; the nation's paved highway system comes to an abrupt conclusion at the tip of the Homer Spit, almost 5 miles out in the middle of Kachemak Bay, and believers of one kind or another have washed up here for decades. There were the "barefooters," a communal group that eschewed shoes, even in the Alaska winter (Brother Asaiah came with them in the early 1950s). There are the Russian Old Believers, who organize their strictly traditional communities around their objection to Russian Orthodox church reforms made by Peter the Great. There are the former hippies who have

become successful commercial fishermen after flocking here in the late 1960s to camp as "spit rats" on the Homer Spit beach. And there are the current migrants—artists and retired people, fundamentalist preachers and New Age healers, wealthy North Slope oil workers and land-poor settlers with no visible means of support—all people who live here simply because they choose to.

The choice is understandable. Homer lies on the north side of Kachemak Bay, a branch of lower Cook Inlet that boasts extraordinary biological productivity. The halibut fishing, especially, is exceptional. The town has a breathtaking setting on the spit and on a wildflower-covered bench high above the bay. The outdoors, especially on the water and across the bay, contains wonderful opportunities. And the arts community has developed into an attraction of its own. There are several exceptional galleries and the Pratt Museum, which has a national reputation.

You'll be disappointed, however, if you expect a charming little fishing town. Poor community planning has created a town that doesn't live up to its setting. Homer Spit in summer is a traffic-choked jumble of cheap tourist development and RVs. Homer began to take its modern form after two events: In the 1950s, the Sterling Highway connected it to the rest of the world, and in 1964, the Good Friday earthquake sank the spit, narrowing a formerly much larger piece of land with a small forest into the tendril that now barely stands above the water. If not for constant reinforcement by the federal government, the spit long since would have become an island, and Homer would hardly exist. As long as it survives, however, the town makes the most of that unique finger into the sea. Whether or not it is a cosmic focal point, it certainly is an exceptional launching point to one of the world's great marine recreation areas.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car** At about 235 miles, Homer is roughly 4½ hours from Anchorage by car, if you don't stop at any of the interesting or beautiful places along the way. It's a scenic drive. If you take a rental car, drive it both ways, as the drop-off fees from Anchorage to Homer are high.

By Bus **Homer Stage Line** (✆ **907/235-7009** or 907/399-1847 on the van, www.homerstageline.com) runs to Anchorage and back six times a week during the height of summer, less frequently the rest of the year, and three times weekly to Seward. The Anchorage-Homer fare is $50 one-way, $90 round-trip. Tickets are for sale at **Quicky Mart,** 1242 Ocean Dr., in Homer (✆ **907/235-2252**). In Anchorage, buy tickets at **Seward Bus Line,** 3335 Fairbanks St. (✆ **907/868-3914**).

By Air **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394;** www.flyera.com) serves Homer from Anchorage several times a day, and vice versa. Small air-taxi operators use Homer as a hub for outlying villages and the outdoors.

By Ferry The **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com) connects Homer to Seldovia, Kodiak, and points west along the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Archipelago, and to Seward and Valdez to the east, with the ferry *Tustumena.* The run to Kodiak takes 9½ hours and costs $57 for an adult walk-on passenger (children half off). It's a long trip, but a memorable one. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service naturalist rides the ferry to present programs and answer questions.

VISITOR INFORMATION **The Homer Chamber of Commerce Visitor Information Center,** 201 Sterling Hwy. (P.O. Box 541), Homer, AK 99603 (✆ **907/235-7740;** www.homeralaska.org), is on the right as you enter town. In

summer, staff is on hand Monday through Friday from 9am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am to 6pm. Besides answering questions and handing out brochures on local businesses and public lands, they sell tickets for the halibut derby (see p. 290). Winter hours are Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. Get a copy of the ***Homer Tourism and Recreation Guide,*** published by the *Homer News,* at the center, or order it from the chamber's website. It includes a useful map.

On the highway as you arrive in town, the **Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center** (✆ **907/235-6961;** http://alaska.fws.gov, choose "Alaska Maritime"), is the place to stop for outdoors information wherever you go in the area. A new $16 million building was still under construction at this writing, with a theater showing a film about the refuge and exhibits about its wildlife and history. When completed it is supposed to be among the three largest refuge visitor centers in the nation. That should happen by the time you read this. Hours are summer daily from 9am to 6pm, winter Monday through Saturday 9am to 5pm. The refuge itself consists of islands off Alaska from the Arctic to near British Columbia. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages these lands for the benefit of birds and marine mammals, and people rarely set foot on their shores, but rangers in Homer offer bird and beach walks frequently in the summer, and give programs at the center. Call for times.

In season, call the **Kachemak Bay Bird Alert Information Line** (✆ **907/235-7337**) to find out about recent sightings and upcoming birder events, and to leave news of your own observations. It is operated by the wildlife refuge.

The **Kachemak Bay State Park District Office,** Mile 168.5 on the Sterling Hwy., 4 miles from town (✆ **907/235-7024;** www.alaskastateparks.org), can help answer questions about planning a trip to the trails and beaches across Kachemak Bay from Homer and give advice on renting remote cabins (although you make the reservation through the Anchorage office—see "State Parks Cabin Reservations," earlier in this chapter). Depending on staffing, the office should be open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

GETTING AROUND The best way to get to and around Homer is by car. If you didn't bring one, you can rent a car at the airport from **Hertz** (✆ **800/654-3131** or 907/235-0734; www.hertz.com) or one of three local firms. There are two taxi companies in town, **CHUX Cab** (✆ **907/235-CHUX**) and **KacheCab** (✆ **907/235-1950**).

For strong riders, a bike is a good way around town. You do have to dodge traffic in places downtown, but a trail parallels the road for the 5 miles of the spit. Some excellent mountain-biking routes are mentioned below. **Homer Saw and Cycle,** 1532 Ocean Dr. (✆ **907/235-8406;** homersaw@xyz.net), rents mountain bikes, street bikes, and trailers for $15 for a half day or $25 for a full day; keeps track of trail conditions; and offers gear and repairs. The shop is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5:30pm, Saturday from 11am to 5pm. They rent as well from Land's End Resort at the end of the spit, open every day. It's wise to reserve bikes 1 or 2 days ahead, especially if an outing depends on getting one.

SPECIAL EVENTS **Homer's Winter Carnival** (✆ **907/235-7740**), in mid-February, is an important community event—a small-town celebration with a beer-making contest, parade, and snow-sculpture competition, among other highlights.

The **Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival** (✆ **907/235-7740;** http://homeralaska.org/shorebird.htm), held in early May, includes guided bird-watching

hikes and boat excursions, natural history workshops, art shows and performances, and other events. It's organized by Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and the Homer Chamber of Commerce to mark the return of the annual migration. **The Kachemak Bay Wooden Boat Festival,** which takes place at the same time as the Shorebird Festival, displays handmade boats from around the region and presents workshops and films. **Kachemak Kayak Fest** (✆ **907/235-7740;** www.kachemakkayakfest.com) is a 10-day schedule of events, instruction and paddles in late May.

Concert on the Lawn, usually held the last Sunday in July by KBBI public radio (✆ **907/235-7721**), is a daylong outdoor music, crafts, and food festival that brings together the whole town.

The **Jackpot Halibut Derby** (✆ **907/235-7740;** http://homerhalibutderby.com), lasting the whole summer, has a top prize that has reached over $40,000 for the biggest fish of the summer, plus smaller monthly prizes and tagged fish prizes. Grand prize fish are usually 300 pounds or more. Of course, you must buy your $10 ticket before you fish.

FAST FACTS: Homer

Bank **Wells Fargo,** with an ATM, is on the Sterling Highway near Heath Street.

Hospital **South Peninsula Hospital** is at the top of Bartlett Street, off Pioneer Avenue (✆ **907/235-8101**).

Internet Access **Eagle Eye Photo and Communications,** 601 E. Pioneer Ave. (✆ **907/235-8525;** www.eagleeyephoto.com), offers Internet access, photo processing and business services.

Police For nonemergencies within the city limits, call the **Homer Police Department** (✆ **907/235-3150**); outside the city, phone the **Alaska State Troopers** (✆ **907/235-8239**). Both have offices located across Pioneer Avenue from the intersection with Heath Street.

Post Office Sterling Highway at Heath Street.

Taxes Sales tax in Homer is 5.5%. Outside the city, you pay 2%.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

The best activities here are on the beaches, in the hilltop meadows, and on Kachemak Bay, and the best man-made attractions all somehow relate to those natural attractions and the activities that take place on and in them. The art inspired by Homer's environment shows in more than a dozen galleries and studios in town, not including those across the bay in Halibut Cove (see below) and Seldovia. New shows open all over town on the first Friday of the month, when restaurants hold special evenings and the entire community comes out for an evening of gallery hopping.

A widely distributed brochure lists most of the galleries in town, with a map. Most are close together on Pioneer Avenue. You'll mostly find photography, prints, pottery, fabric, woodwork, and other crafts, but there is some expensive fine art, too.

In addition to the galleries and studios listed below, my favorites include **Ptarmigan Arts,** at 471 E. Pioneer Ave. (✆ **907/235-5345;** http://ptarmiganarts.com),

a cluttered artists' co-op showing a cross-section of what the area offers; the **Fireweed Gallery** (✆ **907/235-3411;** www.xyz.net/~homerart), located next door to Ptarmigan Arts and displaying true fine art in an elegant, airy new space; and the large, friendly, and well-stocked **Art Shop Gallery** (✆ **907/235-7076**), in the octagonal, cedar-sided building at 202 W. Pioneer Ave.

There are galleries on Homer Spit, too, among the gift shops, food stands, and fishing charters. My favorite there is Gary Lyon's **Sea Lion Gallery,** on the Central Charters Boardwalk at 4241 Homer Spit Rd. (✆ **907/235-3400).** Lyon's work captures Alaska wildlife in spectacular detail but also transforms his subjects with a distinctively dreamy vision. His gallery is a tiny jewel box of valuable works.

Bunnell Street Gallery ★★ This nonprofit gallery, located in a perfect space in an old hardware store near Bishop's Beach, at the lower end of Main Street, is my favorite in Alaska. Unlike most other Alaska galleries, which double as tourist gift shops, Bunnell was made by and for artists, and the experience of browsing and shopping here is noncommercial and often challenging. You may be tempted to become a member of the nonprofit corporation that runs the gallery, because membership comes with a one-of-a-kind plate made by one of the artists. As with all Homer art, the themes of the work tend to be fishy, and the medium and style can be anything. Invitational or juried art shows from beyond the community are mounted every May. The gallery also puts on summer folk and classical music concerts, poetry readings, and films.

106 W. Bunnell Ave. ✆ **907/235-2662.** www.xyz.net/~bunnell. Summer daily 10am–6pm; winter Mon–Sat 10am–6pm. Closed Jan.

Norman Lowell Studio & Gallery ★ *Finds* Lowell built his huge gallery on his homestead to display his life's work. The immense oils of Alaska landscapes, which are not for sale, hang in a building that counts as one of Alaska's larger art museums. Admission is free, and Lowell or his wife, Libby, often host guests who walk through the space. Their original 1958 homestead cabin is also a museum, showing pioneer life in Alaska as it was when they settled here. The studio/gallery also sells some of Lowell's paintings (though not the big oils). The paintings range in price from $750 to $30,000; prints start at $100. They don't take credit cards.

Sterling Hwy. Mile 160.9 (near Anchor Point, about 12 miles out the Sterling Hwy. from Homer). ✆ **907/235-7344.** May through August Mon–Sat 9am–7pm, Sun 1–5pm; Sept Mon–Sat 10am–5pm, Sun 1–5pm. Closed Oct through Apr.

Pratt Museum ★★★ The Homer Society of Natural History's museum is as good as any you'll find in a town of this size, and it has achieved a well-deserved national reputation. The Pratt displays art and explains local history, too, but it is strongest in its presentation of natural history. Volunteers pioneered new technology that allows visitors to watch birds inside nesting burrows on Gull Island (the Gullcam), and you can operate the controls in the museum. There is a saltwater aquarium housing local marine life, and if you're curious about all the fishing boats down in the harbor, you can find out about the different types of gear as well as the fish they catch. In the small botanical garden outside you can learn to identify all the local wildflowers, and a forest trail teaches about the ecology of the region. There's much more to see, too, including a good gift shop.

3779 Bartlett St. (at Pioneer Ave.). ✆ **907/235-8635.** www.prattmuseum.org. Admission $6 adults, $5.50 seniors, $3 children ages 6–18, $20 family rate. High season daily 10am–6pm; low season Tues–Sun noon–5pm. Closed Jan.

GETTING OUTSIDE

The best **map of the Kachemak Bay area** is produced by Alaska Road and Recreation Maps. Available all over town, it costs around $5, depending on where you buy it.

ON THE HOMER SIDE OF KACHEMAK BAY

TIDE POOLING Exploring Kachemak Bay's tide pools is the best way to really get to know the sea and meet the strange and wonderful animals that live in it. And it doesn't cost anything but the price of a pair of rubber boots! First, check a tide book, available for free in virtually any local store, or ask a local to check one for you. You need a low tide of -2 or lower, meaning that low water will be at least 2 feet below the normal low, some 25 feet below the high. Extra-low tides expose more of the lower intertidal zone that contains the most interesting creatures. At a -5 tide, you could find octopus and other oddities. Also, the lower the tide, the more time you'll have to look. Keep track of the time: The tide will come in faster than you imagine, and you could get stranded and drown in the cold water.

The best place to go tide pooling right in town is reached from Bishop's Beach Park, near the lower end of Main Street. Walk west on the beach toward the opening of the bay to Cook Inlet. It's at least a ½-hour brisk walk to the Coal Point area, where the sand and boulders end. This is where you'll find pools of water left behind by the receding tide, many full of life. Explore patiently and gently—look at the animals and touch them, but always put them back as they were and try not to crush them underfoot. Marine invertebrate identification keys and many other field guides are sold at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center, above under "Visitor Information," where rangers happily give advice. If you want to keep going, there's usually a sea otter raft offshore about 3 miles down the beach. Just continue walking, keeping your eyes on the water. As always with watching wildlife, binoculars will improve the experience.

HIKING There are trails on the bench of land above Homer as well as across the bay at Kachemak Bay State Park (see below). The 6-mile **Homestead Trail** is an old wagon road used by Homer's early settlers. The largely informal trail is lovely and peaceful, tunneling through alders, crossing fields of wildflowers, and passing old homestead cabins. From a hilltop meadow you can see all the way to the inlet and the volcanoes beyond. A trailhead is at the reservoir on Skyline Drive—drive up West Hill Road from the Sterling Highway, turn right, and

Tips Walk with an Expert

The **Wynn Nature Center,** operated by the nonprofit **Alaska Center for Coastal Studies** (✆ **907-235-6667;** www.akcoastalstudies.org) offers a chance to learn about the ecology of the area and see its birds and wildflowers on an easy walk. The center encompasses 130 acres of spruce forest and wildflower meadow off Skyline Drive, with an 800-foot boardwalk accessible to people with disabilities. It is open daily from 10am to 6pm from mid-June to Labor Day, with guided walks every 2 hours each day, starting at 10am. Fees are adults $5, seniors $4, under age 18 $3. Call about the various weekly summer programs, including family programs and naturalist lectures.

follow Skyline, turning left before the pond. A map and guide produced by the Kachemak Heritage Land Trust is available at the visitor center.

DRIVING OR MOUNTAIN BIKING Several gravel roads around Homer make for exquisite drives or bike rides. Mountain bikers can use the Homestead Trail (see the description under "Hiking") too. For another great tour, drive out **East End Road,** through lovely seaside pastures, a forest, and the village of Fritz Creek, then follow the bluff line through meadows toward the head of the bay. When the road gets too rough, explore onward on a mountain bike. **Skyline Drive** has extraordinary views of high canyons and Kachemak Bay; drive up East Hill Road just east of Homer. **Homer Saw and Cycle,** the bike shop listed above, under "Getting Around," can give you many more ideas. The great mountain biking across the bay is described below.

HORSEBACK RIDING Ranchers have worked around Kachemak Bay for decades. Drive east of town on East End Road and you will see pastures full of cattle overlooking views that anywhere else would be used for resort hotels. Mark Marette guides ½-day trail rides here to the head of Kachemak Bay, leading every group himself, as he has since 1986. His business is **Trails End Horse Adventures** (✆ **907/235-6393**), 11.2 miles out on East End. He charges $20 per hour for the first 2 hours and $15 an hour thereafter. He takes all ages and levels of experience, including raw beginners.

ON & ACROSS KACHEMAK BAY

Along the south side of the Kachemak Bay, glaciers, fjords, and little wooded islands are arrayed like a smorgasbord before Homer. A quick boat ride gets you there for sea kayaking, mountain biking on unconnected dirt roads, hiking in the mountains, or eating sushi in a top-flight restaurant on pilings. Or gallery hopping, or resting at a remote lodge, or studying at a nature center, or walking the streets of a forgotten fishing village. The far side of the bay has no road link to import the mundane, mass-produced world, but it does have people, and they make the landscape even richer and more enchanting than it would be alone. Underneath the water, there's a wealth of halibut and salmon.

There are two settlements across the bay, **Halibut Cove** and **Seldovia,** each with its own services and lodgings; **Halibut Cove** is described later in this chapter. Remote lodgings that aren't in either of these towns are described later under "Where to Stay." Here I've covered the many places you can go for a day trip or longer, away from towns or lodge.

PLANNING AN OUTING

Central Charters, 4241 Homer Spit Rd., Homer, AK 99603 (✆ **800/478-7847** or 907/235-7847; fax: 907/235-2895; www.centralcharter.com), is a long-established booking agent that represents businesses for many of the most popular activities, including halibut fishing, water taxis, boat tours to Seldovia and Halibut Cove, and even local theater. They have a ticket office on the right side of the spit as you drive out.

TRANSPORTATION ACROSS THE WATER Many water taxis operate from Homer to wilderness cabins, kayaking waters, hiking trails, and mountain biking roads accessible from the Jakolof Bay Dock, Seldovia, Halibut Cove, Kachemak Bay State Park, and other remote points. Rates vary little, around $50 to get to Kachemak Bay State Park, for example. All water taxis can be booked through Central Charters booking agency, mentioned above. **Mako's Water Taxi** (✆ **907/235-9055;** www.makoswatertaxi.com) has experience and a good

reputation. Mako Haggerty also rents sea kayaks and drops them off; with his advice, you can plan a one-way paddle, with the water taxi providing a lift at each end. **Bay Excursions Water Taxi and Tours** (✆ **907/235-7525;** www.bayexcursions.com) offers simple transportation, too, but specializes in hosting serious birders on birding tours. They also have a cabin for rent across the bay. The largest of the water taxi operations is **Jakolof Ferry Service** (✆ **907/235-2376** or 907/235-6384 summer only; www.jakolofferryservice.com). They can carry larger parties and have a boat with enclosed seating. They also rent several rough cabins across the bay.

Note: See the section on Halibut Cove and later in this chapter. This town is easily reached by water taxi and offers a wide array of activities, attractions, lodging and dining.

JAKOLOF BAY A state-maintained dock opens an area of gentle shorelines and abandoned roads to visitors who seek wilderness without paying to stay at a wilderness lodge. West of Kachemak Bay State Park and east of Seldovia, the lands have roads, but the roads aren't connected to anything and are used as much by mountain bikers as by anyone else. You can take a water taxi straight to the Jakolof dock. Lodgings are nearby at **Across the Bay Tent and Breakfast,** listed under "Wilderness Lodges" in the "Where to Stay" section later in this chapter.

There's plenty to do in the area. The waters of Jakolof, Little Jakolof, Kasitsna, and Little Tutka bays, and the tiny Herring Islands, are appealing and protected for sea kayaking. Excellent mountain biking trails lead along the shore and right across the peninsula through forest and meadows (which are perfect for berry picking). The Red Mountain and Rocky River roads are prime routes. They're different each year depending on washouts and intermittent maintenance—that's part of the adventure. A maintained 10-mile road west leads to the charming village of Seldovia.

KACHEMAK BAY STATE PARK This park comprises much of the land across the water that makes all those views from Homer so spectacular. For under $50 you can be dropped off here after breakfast, walk the beach, hike in those woods, climb the mountains, then meet your boat in time to be back in Homer for dinner and the first other people you've seen all day. This is heaven, as far as I'm concerned.

The park's main office is at the ranger station, listed under "Visitor Information" earlier in this chapter. Its center is the summer-only **ranger station** in Halibut Cove Lagoon, where there's a dock and mooring buoys for public use, three public rental cabins over the water, a campsite, and excellent king salmon fishing in mid-June.

The park has about 80 miles of trails, mostly linking at the ranger station; a free trail guide is available there, but you're well advised to get a good map before you leave Homer. The trails generally start at tidewater among a lush, mossy forest and rise into the craggy mountains—up sharp peaks to a glacier, or, if you don't want to climb, over the hills to the next secluded beach. Bring mosquito repellent and review bear avoidance skills (see "Outdoors Health & Safety," in chapter 2). You can hike to a public rental cabin on secluded China Poot Lake less than 3 miles from the Halibut Cove dock.

The park's fifth cabin is on Tutka Bay, off the Halibut Cove trail network. You can also use all of these cabins as bases for self-guided sea kayaking. Cabin permits are $50 a night and usually must be reserved 6 months in advance (see "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1 of this chapter).

GULL ISLAND This island, a rock across the bay from Homer Spit, is a busy bird colony in the summer. It's easy to get to and boats can edge close, as the water is deep all around. You can usually see tufted and horned puffins, black-legged kittiwakes, common murres, red-faced and pelagic cormorants, pigeon guillemots, and glaucus-winged gulls. Tour boats to Halibut Cove or Seldovia may cruise by the island, and if you are taking a water taxi to Halibut Cove Lagoon, ask to take a look on your way.

ACTIVITIES

FISHING Homer is known for **halibut**—those huge, flat bottom fish. The harbor is full of charter boats that will take you out for the day for around $180 per person in the high season. Every day, a few people catch fish that are larger than they are, and halibut over 50 pounds are common. Getting out to where the fish are plentiful requires an early start and a long ride to unprotected waters. People who get seasick easily shouldn't go, as the boat wallows on the waves during fishing. (Take Dramamine *before* you set out; if you wait, it probably won't do any good.) Using gear and lines that look strong enough to pick up the boat, you jig the bait (chunks of herring or cod) up and down on the bottom. Halibut aren't wily or acrobatic, and fighting one can be like pulling up a sunken Buick. One good, large operator is **Silver Fox Charters** (✆ **800/478-8792** or 907/235-8792; www.silverfoxcharters.com). Their website has a handy primer on fishing Kachemak Bay. Half day charters have less chance of getting way out to the biggest fish, but cost a lot less: $85 a day on the big boats operated by **Rainbow Tours** (✆ **907/235-7272;** www.rainbowtours.net). This makes good sense if you are not a fishing fanatic, as a full day halibut fishing is exhausting and can be tedious. Other charter boats can be booked through Central Charters, listed above under "Planning An Outing," or you can find one on the **Homer Charter Association** website, which has a list and links to dozens of boats, at **www.homercharterassociation.com**.

Salmon feed in Cook Inlet year-round, not only when they're running in the streams, and Homer anglers pursue them with trolling gear even in the dead of winter. The town has a Winter King Salmon Tournament in March (check with the chamber of commerce). But that's for the hardy and the lucky. Most people fish salmon in summer. Although without as many great road-accessible, streamside fishing spots as are found further north, the bay does have some good spots. A small lagoon called the Fishing Hole on the Spit is stocked with terminal run king and silver salmon by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Kings are in the lagoon from late May to the end of June. Silvers arrive in mid to late July, peaking in early August and finishing by mid-month. These salmon have nowhere to spawn, so all must be caught (some anglers scorn such "fish-in-a-barrel" fishing.). At the end of the runs, snagging is permitted, which is something like mugging salmon and can be a lot of fun, if not something you'll brag about later at the Rod and Gun Club. For salmon fishing in a more natural setting, you can surf cast for silvers from the end of the spit, head over to Halibut Cove Lagoon (see Kachemak Bay State Park, above) or Seldovia, or drive back up the Sterling Highway to the Anchor River, an excellent steelhead trout stream (catch-and-release only), and the other rivers that flow west into Cook Inlet. The **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** maintains a fishing hot line at ✆ **907/235-6930.** They're located at 3298 Douglas Place (✆ **907/235-8191**).

NATURAL HISTORY TOURS The nonprofit **Center for Alaska Coastal Studies** (✆ **907/235-6667;** www.akcoastalstudies.org) is dedicated to educating the public about the shore. They interpret Kachemak Bay for visitors on daily

Tips Getting Your Fish Home

A typical angler comes back from a halibut charter with around 50 pounds of fish that, when cleaned, will yield 30 pounds of filets. A hungry adult can eat half a pound of halibut at a sitting. Eat as much fresh as you can, as it will never be better, but be prepared for how you will deal with the rest of your bounty. The typical 30 pounds is worth more than $250 in the grocery store (it's illegal to sell sport-caught fish). If it is properly and quickly frozen, it will retain much of its quality for several months; if not, you waste this superb food. If you're lucky enough to catch that much salmon, the problem is even more immediate, as salmon is more sensitive to proper handling. Most fishing towns have a sport processor who can vacuum-pack and flash-freeze your catch for around $1 a pound. The best way to get it home is as checked baggage; the processor can provide sturdy fish boxes and cold packs. If you aren't leaving right away, processors will hold the fish, and many hotels have freezer facilities. If you have to ship it, use an overnight service (expensive) and make sure someone is there to put it in the freezer on the other end. Above all, keep the fish *hard frozen;* if it thaws, even only partially, refreezing will ruin it (especially salmon). Consider having some of your salmon smoked, making it a ready-to-eat delicacy that's very welcome as a homecoming gift. Halibut can be smoked, too, but because of its low fat content and delicate flavor it doesn't come out as well. In Homer, **Coal Point Trading Co.,** 4306 Homer Spit (✆ **907/235-3877;** www.welovefish.com), will process, pack, and ship your catch as ordered, including smoking it. Ask your charter captain.

explorations of the Peterson Bay and China Poot Bay area. At low tide they lead guests on a fascinating guided tide-pool walk. The center also has access to lovely woodlands where nature walks visit an archaeological site. Saltwater tanks at the lodge contain creatures from the intertidal zone and microscopes to inspect your finds. It's a relaxed and truly Alaskan outing. They also offer sea kayaking with hiking and overnights. Reserve through **Jakolof Ferry Service** (see "Transportation Across the Water," above). The day tour is $90 adults, $60 ages 3 to 11. Pack your own lunch or buy a light lunch there; bring footwear suitable for hiking and beach walks and warm clothing for the boat ride.

SEA KAYAKING Silence fell as the boat pulled away from the beach, leaving us behind with the kayaks and our guide. For the rest of the day my son and I absorbed the water-reflected sunlight and glided past fancifully shaped rocks and resident sea otters around Yukon Island. We explored beaches, picnicked, raced, and discovered tiny bays too small for any other craft. At the end of the day, we had a new friend in our quietly cheerful guide, Alison O'Hara, and discovered that she'd imperceptibly taught us a lot about sea kayaking. O'Hara runs **True North Kayak Adventures** (✆ **907/235-0708;** www.truenorthkayak.com) with Kevin Bell. Their 8-hour beginner day trips cost $135, including lunch and passage across the bay. Most kayaking day trips in Alaska towns barely get out of the small boat harbor. This trip doesn't feel so tame—it's more like a mini-expedition.

They also offer more challenging overnight and multiday trips to remote waters in the area, and a $235 package that includes the day tour, a night in the attractive Hesketh Island Cabins, and a second day of hiking.

Various other companies offer Kachemak Bay kayak trips. Make a choice through Central Charters (p. 293). The protected waters, tiny islands, and remote settlements are fascinating paddling no matter who you go with, or, for experienced paddlers, if you go on your own. Kayakers can take a water taxi across and explore at will, camping or staying in cabins along the bay. Check with Kachemak Bay State Park for guidance on where to camp and stay. **Mako's Water Taxi** (✆ **907/235-9055;** www.makoswatertaxi.com) offers rides, and rents and delivers kayaks. **True North Kayak Adventures** (see the previous paragraph) also rents kayaks to experienced paddlers and rents camping gear. For kayaks, expect to pay $65 a day for a double, $45 for a single. Also see the Halibut Cove section of this chapter (section 11) for other rental and guided opportunities.

FLIGHTSEEING & BEAR VIEWING There are several good air taxis in Homer, providing access to the very remote areas of the southern Kenai Peninsula and lower Cook Inlet that you can't easily reach by boat, but **Kachemak Bay Flying Service** (✆ **907/235-8924;** www.alaskaseaplanes.com) is really special. It offers spectacular scenic flights over the bay and glaciers starting at $120 per person. The personable Bill de Creeft, flying out of Homer since 1967, is experienced enough to qualify as a pioneer aviator, but the real old-timer is his favorite plane, a restored 1929 Travel Air S-6000-B, one of only six remaining examples of the executive aircraft, with mahogany trim and wicker seats. He'll also fly you into backcountry lakes.

Emerald Air Service (✆ **907/235-6993;** www.emeraldairservice.com), operated by de Creeft alumni Ken and Chris Day, offers saltwater landings, specializing in bear-viewing trips to remote shores. They even helped the National Wildlife Federation film an IMAX movie called "Bears," starring in it along with the title characters.

WHALE-WATCHING Whales can't be counted on to come into Kachemak Bay, but **Rainbow Tours** (✆ **907/235-7272;** www.rainbowtours.net), a long-established tour boat operator, found a few years ago that they could be found reliably in the waters at the entrance of Cook Inlet and in the Barren Islands. That's a long ride and the seas can be large, so these trips are not a good idea for those who get seasick, but the trip is a good chance to see humpback and orca whales and sometimes minke and fin whales. The trip takes all day, from 9am to 6pm, and includes lunch on board a comfortable, 100-passenger vessel, the *Rainbow Connection,* which also serves Seldovia as a passenger ferry. Trips are $125 for adults, $110 for seniors, and $85 for children.

WHERE TO STAY

Homer has many good B&Bs. The **Homer Chamber of Commerce** (www.homeralaska.org) has links to a prodigious number of them. In addition to the places I've listed in detail, **The Sea Lion Cove,** above the Sea Lion Gallery on Homer Spit (✆ **907/235-3400** in summer or 907/235-8767 in winter; www.alaskaone.com/sealion), has two comfortable rooms with kitchens and a deck right over the beach, where you can hear the waves roll in at night. **Cranes' Crest Bed and Breakfast,** 59830 Sanford Dr. (✆ **907/235-2969;** www.akms.com/cranes), 5 miles out atop the hillside behind the town, has nesting sandhill cranes that wander around like lawn ornaments, and sweeping, cinematic views that you can sit and watch all day.

Besides the hotels listed in detail below, you'll find good lodgings at the **Bay View Inn,** 2851 Sterling Hwy. (✆ **877/235-8485** or 907/235-8485; www.bayviewalaska.com), at the top of Baycrest Hill before you come into town on the Sterling Highway. The inn offers amazing views, attractive little rooms, peace, and reasonable prices.

Driftwood Inn *Value* This historic building, a block from Bishop's Beach and across from the Bunnell Gallery, resembles a lodge or B&B, with its large fireplace of rounded beach rock, its hot coffeepot, its inexpensive self-serve breakfast in the lobby, and its friendly attitude. There's a cozy feel that's enhanced by sloping floors and worn carpets and fixtures. Most of the rooms are like Pullman compartments in size and configuration, but they are cute and clean and have some real style. And they're inexpensive. Nine bedrooms share two bathrooms. Larger rooms have more amenities, but not as much charm. The walls are thin, so there's a no-noise policy during evening hours. There's also an appealing 22-site RV park. The inn has a fish cleaning and freezing facility. No smoking is permitted.

135 W. Bunnell Ave., Homer, AK 99603. ✆ and fax **907/235-8019.** http://thedriftwoodinn.com. 20 units, 11 with private bathroom. High season $65–$120 double; low season $45–$68 double. RV sites $26–$29, full hookup. Extra person $10. DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

Land's End Resort ★★★ Traditionally *the* place to stay in Homer, Land's End would be popular no matter what it was like inside because of its location at the tip of Homer Spit, the best spot in Homer and possibly the best spot for a hotel in all of Alaska. It's composed of a line of weathered buildings that straggle along the beach crest like driftwood logs. Inside, the local owners keep high standards in rooms and public areas decorated with town history and old photographs, nautical memorabilia and bold colors. The place has a lot of intentional charm. There are about a dozen different classes of rooms (and a complex rate scheme to match), ranging from cute shiplike compartments with fold-down Murphy beds to two-story affairs. They also own a series of town houses next door that you can reserve through the hotel. The hotel is near the boat harbor, and you can fish right from the beach in front.

The **Chart Room restaurant** makes good use of its wonderful location, looking out over the beach and bay from big windows. There's a casual, relaxing atmosphere in the long, wood-trimmed dining room. The deck outside has glass wind shields, making it a warm, satisfying place to sit over coffee on a sunny day. You can watch otters, eagles, and fishing boats while you eat. Excellent chefs have passed through from year to year, so it's hard to predict the quality of the cuisine—locals discuss the current food at Land's End the way some towns talk about their baseball players. I've had simply prepared fresh seafood there that couldn't have been better. The extensive appetizer and bar menu offers an inexpensive way to enjoy the atmosphere. Main courses are $16 to $38.

4786 Homer Spit Rd., Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **800/478-0400** or 907/235-0400. Fax 907/235-0420. www.lands-end-resort.com. 80 units. High season $119–$197 double; low season $76–$123 double. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; indoor lap pool; health club; outdoor Jacuzzi; sauna; tour desk; massage. *In room:* TV, coffeemaker.

Magic Canyon Ranch Bed and Breakfast ★ At the top of a canyon road off East End Road, the Webb family shares its charming home, 74 unspoiled acres, a tree house, and sweeping views with guests, a cat, and a herd of retired llamas. The air is mountain clear and quiet between the high canyon walls—you start to relax as soon as you get out of the car. The Webbs serve sherry in the

evening and a full breakfast in the morning. The four rooms, some nestled cozily under the eaves, are decorated in country and Victorian style, with some family antiques.

40015 Waterman Rd., Homer, AK 99603. ✆ and fax **907/235-6077.** http://magiccanyonranch.com. 4 units, 2 with private bathroom. High season $85–$100 double; low season $55–$70 double. Extra adult $25; extra child 12 and under $20. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V.

Ocean Shores Motel ★ Buildings on a grassy compound overlook Kachemak Bay, with a path leading down to Bishop's Beach, yet the location is right off the Sterling Highway as you enter town, within walking distance of downtown Homer. Rooms are fresh and bright, most with private balconies, refrigerators, and microwaves; four have full kitchens (one rents for only $99). The less expensive rooms lack the views and are older, but these are still modern and have cute touches. Smoking is allowed in only one room. The place is decorated with photographs and art collected over a family's five generations in Alaska.

451 Sterling Hwy. no. 1, Homer, AK 99603 ✆ **800/770-7775** or 907/235-7775. Fax 907/235-8639. http://oceanshoresalaska.com. 32 units. High season $99–$159 double; low season $59–$75 double. Extra person $5. AE, DISC, MC, V. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker.

Old Town Bed and Breakfast *Finds* These rooms combine the artiness of the excellent Bunnell Street Gallery downstairs (see "Exploring the Town," earlier) and the funky, historic feel of the old trading post/hardware store that the building used to house. The wood floors undulate with age and settling, and the tall, double-hung windows, looking out at Bishop's Beach, are slightly cockeyed. Antiques and handmade quilts complete the charming ambience. They serve a continental breakfast for two as part of the reasonable rates, and a cafe and deli are downstairs. Not a good choice for people who have trouble with stairs.

106 D W. Bunnell, Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **907/235-7558.** Fax 907/235-9427. www.xyz.net/~oldtown. 3 units, 1 with private bathroom. High season $60 double shared bathroom, $75 double private bathroom. Low season 25% discount. Extra person $15. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V.

Seaside Farm *Finds* Take a step back in time—all the way to the 1960s. Mairis Kilcher's farm is populated by Morgan horses, cows, chickens, latter-day hippies, and international backpackers, many of whom do chores in exchange for lodging: 2 hours of work equals a night in the hostel bunks, and 1 hour earns a campsite in the pasture above the bay. Campers have use of an outdoor cooking and washing area, fire pit and barbecue, and autumn raspberry picking. Some of the quaint, unpolished cabins sit in lovely, quiet places; two are right on the water. The farm, its meadows dotted with cottonwood trees, slopes spectacularly to Kachemak Bay. Homer's pioneering and beloved Kilcher family spawned the singer Jewel (rarely seen hereabouts any longer).

40904 Seaside Farm Rd. (5 miles from downtown off East End Rd.), Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **907/235-7850.** www.xyz.net/~seaside. 4 units, 4 cabins, 12 hostel beds (male and female dorms). $55 cabin for 2; $40 private room with shared bathroom; $15 per person hostel bunk; $6 campsite. Extra person in room or cabin $12. MC, V. **Amenities:** Kitchen in hostel.

HOSTELS & CAMPING

The most popular place to camp in Homer is out on the spit, amid the sand and pebbles. It can be windy and crowded, and toilet facilities are minimal; but waking up on a bright, pebbled beach makes up for much. The fee is $6 for tents, $10 for RVs, payable at a small log cabin on the spit across the road from the fishing hole. The city also operates the more protected Hornaday Campground near the hospital: from Pioneer Avenue, take Bartlett Street uphill; turn left on

Fairview and right on Campground Road. For information call **Homer Public Works** at ✆ **907/235-3170** (http://publicworks.ci.homer.ak.us, and click "Parks and Recreation"). Tent campers will find a natural, pastoral setting at Seaside Farm, mentioned above, which also has hostel beds. More conveniently located hostel rooms are at **Homer Hostel,** 304 W. Pioneer Ave. (✆ **907/235-1463,** www.homerhostel.com), charging $21 a night for beds in gender-separated or co-ed dorms. They also rent bikes and fishing rods and have a grill out back that guests can use.

If you want hookups for your RV, there are plenty of places to go off the spit, including the Driftwood Inn, above. **Oceanview RV Park,** 455 Sterling Hwy. (✆ **907/235-3951;** www.oceanview-rv.com), has 100 spaces near the downtown area overlooking the water, with a trail to the beach. Rates are $28 a night for full hookups, including cable TV and showers.

WILDERNESS LODGES

These four lodges are all based across Kachemak Bay from Homer, each in its own remote cove or bay, and each in its own market niche, from family-friendly lodgings to luxurious accommodations. It's wise to reserve rooms at any of these places months in advance (the preceding winter isn't too soon). I've also listed various remote cabin rentals: in Kachemak Bay State Park (p. 294), and rented by Jakolof Bay Ferry and True North Kayak Adventures (p. 296), and in the next section, on Halibut Cove.

Across the Bay Tent and Breakfast ★ *Value* Tony and Mary Jane Lastufka created this unique place, a spot where families can afford to live for a few days in a backwoods paradise, beachcombing by day and feasting on Tony's grilled seafood in the evening. It looks like a summer camp, with large canvas tents on wooden platforms that stand off by themselves on a steep hillside among towering spruce trees. There's a central house to relax in and engage in evening games or conversation, an organic garden that produces the food, two outhouses with stained-glass windows, a bathhouse with plumbing, and a forest volleyball court. A long beachfront faces placid Kasitsna Bay—that's where water taxis drop off visitors and where guided sea-kayaking excursions depart ($75 ½ day, $95 full day per person). Up the stairs to the road, mountain bikes are for rent ($15 ½ day, $25 full day) to explore the area's network of abandoned logging roads or to pedal to Seldovia. The tents have beds, but you sleep in your own bag. You can save further by cooking your own meals.

On Kasitsna Bay (P.O. Box 81), Seldovia, AK 99663 (winter P.O. Box 112054, Anchorage, AK 99511; ✆ 907/345-2571). ✆ **907/235-3633.** www.tentandbreakfastalaska.com. 6 tents. $63 per person with breakfast, $95 with all meals. Half price for children 6–11, free for children 5 and under. MC, V. Closed mid-Sept to Memorial Day.

Kachemak Bay Wilderness Lodge ★★★ I can think of no more idyllic way to become acquainted with Alaska's marine wilderness than by staying at this intimate, luxurious lodge, run for more than 25 years by hospitable and generous Mike and Diane McBride. I only wish it were affordable for more people, because it's a place of unforgettable experiences. The McBrides' meals are legendary, and their four cabins manage to seem rustic while having every comfort; it's easy to pretend you're the only guest. But their site, on China Poot Bay, is what's really special. The lodge sits on an isthmus, a peaceful and lovely setting with excellent tide pooling, kayaking, and good hiking trails nearby. Expert, environmentally conscious guides lead just a few guests at a time for sea kayaking, hiking, wildlife watching, and learning about nature; guests set the agenda,

and everything is included. In 2002, the lodge was named one of America's 10 best in *Outside Magazine* (over my byline). A 3-day add-on to the remote Loonsong Mountain Camp puts you in a lovely lodge on its own mountain lake reached by float plane, where the McBrides personally guide and cook for just two couples or one family at a time.

China Poot Bay (P.O. Box 956), Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **907/235-8910.** Fax 907/235-8911. www.alaskawildernesslodge.com. 5 cabins. $2,800 per person 5-day stay. $1,800 Loonsong 3-day add-on. Rates all-inclusive. Mon–Fri package only. No credit cards; checks accepted. Closed Oct 15–May 1. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi; sauna; boating, kayaking, and all guided tours included.

Sadie Cove Wilderness Lodge ★ This place reminds me of *Swiss Family Robinson.* Its weathered buildings of rough-cut lumber—owner Keith Iverson hauled and milled them of driftwood—climb the steep shore of the Sadie Cove fjord amid the sound of falling water from a creek that pushes a water wheel to provide all the electricity and fill the wood-fired hot tub, itself an old boat set into the ground. A fifth unit is a 45-foot ketch on the shore with an interior of teak, mahogany, and brass. Three of the cabins have flush toilets. It's a rough, rustic place, with lots of stairs to climb and loads of charm. Keith's wife, Randi, cooks the seafood dinners that complete the enchanting experience. Guests can use sea kayaks, shore fishing gear, and a hiking trail that penetrates 5 miles from the lodge to a secluded mountain valley with a pond and waterfall. Guided activities generally are booked separately, but the hosts can perform weddings.

P.O. Box 2265, Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **907/235-2350.** www.sadiecove.com. 5 units. $250 per person. Rates include all meals. MC, V. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi; sauna; laundry service.

Tutka Bay Wilderness Lodge ★★★ Jon and Nelda Osgood's personalities are reflected in the amazing place they've built—open and enthusiastic, perfectionist and safety conscious, clean-cut but truly Alaskan. On pilings on a narrow, grassy isthmus by the green water of the Tutka Bay fjord, they've put together what amounts to an upscale hotel in the wilderness, with cabins connected by long boardwalks, a deck large enough for a helicopter to land on, and a kitchen capable of producing gourmet meals. It's quite a feat—the water system alone is a wonder. There's plenty to do: guided tide-pool and forest walks, bird-watching, hiking, berry picking, and other activities around the lodge, and you can pay extra for guided fishing, kayaking, bear-viewing flights, fishing, and other outdoor experiences that go farther afield.

P.O. Box 960, Homer, AK 99603. ✆ **800/606-3909** or 907/235-3905. Fax 907/235-3909. www.tutkabaylodge.com. 5 cabins. $325–$350 per person. Rates include all meals. 2-night minimum stay. MC, V. Closed Oct–Apr. **Amenities:** Sauna. *In room:* TV/VCR, stocked fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

Besides those places listed here, don't miss the **Chart Room** at Land's End, described under "Where to Stay," above. For good local halibut, burgers, and milkshakes in an attractive beachfront dining room, try **Boardwalk Fish and Chips** (✆ **907/235-7749**), on the boardwalk across from the harbormaster's office on the spit. It's relaxed fast food, but the place is clean and grown-up. For a good, traditional diner meal, and maybe something a little bit fancier, try **Duncan House Diner** (✆ **907/235-5344**) downtown at 125 E. Pioneer Ave., where you can eat at a counter or in booths.

Café Cups ★★ SEAFOOD/SANDWICHES The facade of the yellow house on Pioneer Avenue is unmistakable, with its elaborate bas-relief sculpture. The small dining room is a work of art, too, a masterpiece of wood, light, and space. Jennifer Olsen seats guests, and her husband, David, is the chef. As the owners,

they've combined a love for good food with small town practicality: The menu contains many mainstream and inexpensive dishes as well as more ambitious specials and thoughtfully seasoned seafood. Sadly, gone is the amazing creativity of earlier years; most of the flavors I experienced were familiar, and the portions were a bit too large. Beer and wine are served.

162 W. Pioneer Ave. ✆ **907/235-8330.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $6–$10; dinner $16–$23. MC, V. High season Mon–Sat 11am–10pm; low season Mon–Sat 11am–9pm.

Fresh Sourdough Express Bakery and Cafe ★ BAKERY/CAFE Ebullient Donna and Kevin Maltz's organic eatery is quintessential Homer, starting with its motto: "Food for people and the planet." But there's no New Age dogma here. The Sourdough Express is fun and tasty, even as it grinds its own grain and recycles everything in sight. An inexpensive lunch menu includes many vegetarian choices as well as hearty sandwiches. The evening menu offers local seafood and inexpensive choices. Stop by on the way to a day on the water for a hearty breakfast or to pick up the brown bag lunch you will need for a charter fishing trip. Don't miss dessert from the made-from-scratch bakery.

1316 Ocean Dr. ✆ **907/235-7571.** www.freshsourdoughexpress.com. Breakfast $4–$8, lunch $5.50–$9; dinner $7.50–$18. MC, V. High season daily 7am–9pm; Spring and Fall daily 8am–3pm. Closed Oct through Mar.

The Homestead ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD The ambience is that of an old-fashioned Alaska roadhouse, in a large log building decorated with local art and warmed by lots of summer light. The food is wonderfully satisfying. After a day outdoors, it's a warm, exuberant place for dinner. Many menu items are char-broiled, but the cuisine is more thoughtful than you'd find in your typical steak-and-seafood place, including adventurous and creative concoctions along with the simple, perfectly broiled fish and meat. Service is cordial. Avoid this place if you are in a rush. They have a full bar.

Mile 8.2, East End Rd. ✆ **907/235-8723.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $17–$25. AE, MC, V. June, July & Aug daily 5–10pm. March–May and Sept–Dec Wed–Sat 5–9pm. Closed Jan & Feb.

HOMER NIGHTLIFE

The **Pier One Theatre** (✆ **907/235-7333;** www.xyz.net/~lance) is a strong community theater group housed in a small, corrugated-metal building on the spit, just short of the small-boat harbor on the left. Instead of the ubiquitous gold rush melodrama and Robert Service readings, Pier One often presents serious drama, musicals, and comedy—not just schlock. They also produce dance, classical music, and youth theater events during the summer. There's generally something playing Thursday through Sunday nights in the summer. Check the *Homer News* or the website for current listings. They strongly recommend making reservations by phone; they can be changed or canceled if necessary. Tickets may also be available at the door.

The landmark **Salty Dawg Saloon** is a small log cabin on the spit with a lighthouse on top. It's the place to swap fish stories after a day on the water.

11 Halibut Cove: Venice on Kachemak Bay

A visit to the close-knit, roadless community of Halibut Cove, across Kachemak Bay from Homer, encompasses all the best things about a visit to the bay: a boat ride, the chance of seeing otters or seals, a top-notch restaurant, several galleries and open studios with some of Alaska's best fishy fine art, and even cozy, welcoming accommodations. The settlement sits on either side of a narrow, peaceful channel between a small island and the mainland; the water in this

channel is the road. Boardwalks connect the buildings, and stairs reach down to the water from houses perched on pilings over the shore. The post office is on a floating dock. The pace of life runs no faster than the tide.

It's also an essentially private community. Unless you have your own boat, an excursion boat owned by the community's restaurant is the only way to get here. Once there, you have to leave according to plan, as there's no business district and everything is privately owned. You're really a guest the whole time you're in Halibut Cove—the community is open for visitors, however they arrive, only between 1 and 9pm, unless you're staying at the cabins mentioned below. Not all nearby lodges have privileges to take their guests to Halibut Cove, so make sure you ask before booking.

GETTING THERE

The classic wooden boat ***Danny J*** (book through Central Charters at ✆ **907/235-7847;** www.centralcharter.com) leaves Homer daily in the summer at noon, brings back day-trippers, and takes over guests to the Saltry Restaurant (see below) at 5pm, then brings back the diners later in the evening. The noon trip includes bird-watching at Gull Island. Seating is mostly outdoors, and I wouldn't take the trip in the rain. You also take the *Danny J* if you're spending the night in Halibut Cove. The noon trip is $45 for adults, $38 seniors, $22 children; the dinner trip is $22 for everyone, regardless of age, but to go you must have a dinner reservation at the Saltry (also made at Central Charters). When not everyone will fit on the *Danny J,* the steel *Storm Bird* goes, too. Reservations and fares on the *Storm Bird* are identical to those for the *Danny J.*

EXPLORING THE AREA

On an afternoon trip, you can bring lunch or eat at the Saltry, described below, and then explore the **boardwalk** that runs from the restaurant along Ismailof Island, past the galleries, boat shops, and houses. There's also a barnyard where kids, who already will be in heaven, can look at rabbits, pigs, chickens, ponies, and other animals. Trails branch from the boardwalk across the island to broad views of the bay or to the quiet opposite end of the island. Some find the time in Halibut Cove too brief (about 3 hours); bringing a sack lunch instead of eating at the Saltry will allow you more time to walk and saves money.

Fine art is the major industry in this community. The census lists only 35 residents, but there are 17 artists and two galleries (I suspect the population is several hundred in the summer). The summer-only **Halibut Cove's Experience Fine Art Gallery** (✆ **907/296-2215**) is first past the barnyard on the boardwalk, on pilings above the water. The airy room contains works by Halibut Cove artists only. Farther on, Diana Tillion, who, with her husband Clem, pioneered the community, opens her **Cove Gallery** (✆ **907/269-2207**) and studio to guests year round. Since the 1950s, she has worked almost exclusively in octopus ink, painstakingly extracted with a hypodermic needle.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Although it's mostly a day-trip destination, inexpensive housekeeping cabins rent in Halibut Cove. **Halibut Cove Cabins** (✆ **907/296-2214** in summer, or 808/322-4110 in winter) consists of two quaint cabins on a steep hill overlooking artist Sydney Bishop's private lagoon, at the opposite end of the island from the main part of town.

Saltry ★★ *Finds* SEAFOOD This restaurant operates in conjunction with the *Danny J* (see "Getting There," above). It sits on pilings in an idyllic setting over

the edge of the smooth, deep green of the cove's main watery avenue. You can sit back in the deck gazebo and sip microbrews and eat fresh baked bread, mussels, sushi, and locally grown salads, followed by fresh fish grilled over charcoal. For a basic lunch there are few choices other than fish chowder and bread. Those who don't eat seafood have few choices. You pay high prices for the privilege of eating in this incredible location. Make reservations with Central Charters at the same time that you reserve your *Danny J* tickets.

On the main channel, Halibut Cove. ✆ **907/235-7847.** Reservations required. Lunch $10–$18; dinner $18–$20. MC, V. Lunch and dinner seatings coordinate with daily *Danny J* schedule. Closed Labor Day to Memorial Day.

12 Valdez

Big events have shaped Valdez (val-*deez*). The deepwater port, at the head of a long, dramatic fjord, first developed with the 1898 Klondike gold rush and an ill-fated attempt to establish an alternative route to the gold fields from here. Later, the port and the Richardson Highway, which connected Valdez to the rest of the state, served a key role in supplying materials during World War II. On Good Friday, March 27, 1964, all of that was erased when North America's greatest recorded earthquake occurred under Miners Lake, west of town off a northern fjord of Prince William Sound. It set off an underwater landslide that caused a huge wave to sweep over the waterfront and kill 32 people. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers moved the town, rebuilding a drab replacement in a safer location that slowly filled with nondescript modern buildings. A printed walking tour available from the visitor center provides the locations of a few buildings that were actually moved from the original town.

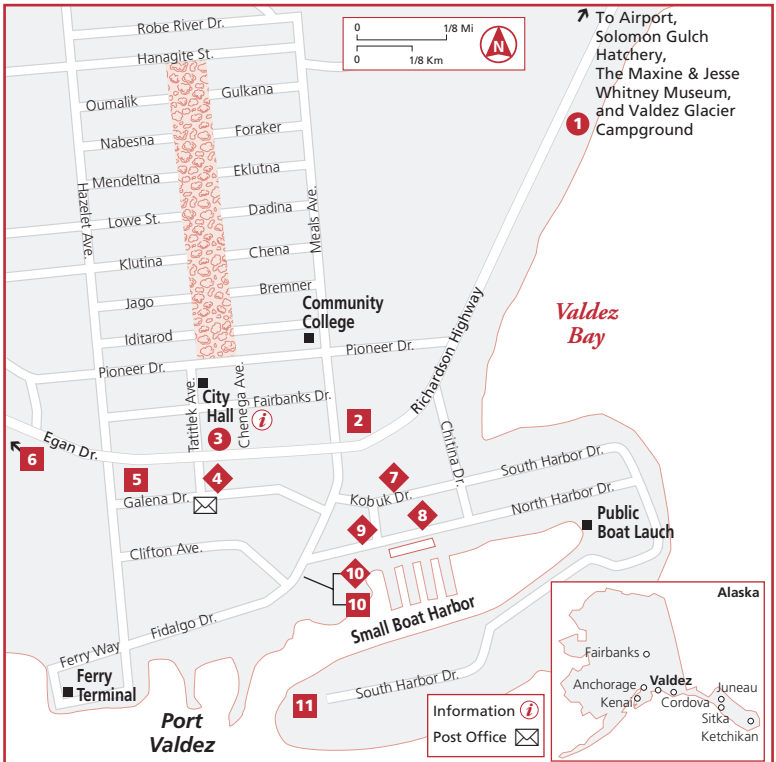
The construction of the trans-Alaska pipeline, completed in 1977, brought a new economic boom to Valdez, and economic prosperity prevailed as tankers came to fill up with oil. Then, on March 24, 1989, on Good Friday, 25 years after the earthquake, the tanker *Exxon Valdez,* on its way south, hit the clearly marked Bligh Reef, causing the largest and most environmentally costly oil spill ever in North America. The spill cleanup added another economic boom, with a rush of thousands of workers and billions in spending in the area. More than a decade later, some wildlife populations have recovered and some have not, although visible signs of the spill are difficult to find.

Today, Valdez is driven by industry but turns to the vast resources of Prince William Sound for outdoor recreation. In town, you can tour two small museums and the fish hatchery, and take a hike or a river float. The town has made major strides in improving its appearance, especially on the waterfront, but it isn't the sort of historic or charming fishing village that justifies a trip all by itself. Instead, come for the nature—the wildlife, fishing, and sightseeing in the Sound, and the spectacular drive down the Richardson Highway.

Because Valdez lies at the end of a funnel of steep mountains that catches moisture off the ocean, the weather tends to be overcast and rainy in summer and extremely snowy in winter.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE By Car The **Richardson Highway,** described on p. 397, dramatically crosses Thompson Pass and descends into the narrow valley where Valdez lies. Try to do the trip in daylight, in clear weather, and stop at the Worthington Glacier. This is the only road to Valdez. The drive from Anchorage is 6 hours without stops.



ACCOMMODATIONS
Aspen Hotel Valdez **2**
Blueberry Mary's Bed and Breakfast **6**
Keystone Hotel **5**
Sea Otter RV Park **11**
Valdez Harbor Inn **10**
Wild Roses by the Sea B&B Retreat **8**

DINING
Alaska's Bistro **10**
Fu King Chinese Restaurant **7**
Harbor's Edge Restaurant **9**
Mike's Palace Ristorante **8**
The Rose Cache **4**

ATTRACTIONS
Duck Flats **1**
The Valdez Museum and Historical Archive **3**

By Bus **Alaska Trails** (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com) connects Valdez to Fairbanks 6 days a week in the summer for $89 one-way. Reservations are required.

By Ferry The **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066** or 907/835-4436; www.ferryalaska.com) calls on Valdez daily in the summer with a ferry connecting Valdez, Whittier, and Cordova. One time-tested way to see the Sound is to put your vehicle on the ferry in Whittier for the 7-hour run to Valdez, then drive north on the Richardson Highway. A forest ranger rides on board to present programs. The fare is $78 for a car up to 15 feet long and $68 for an adult passenger (children half price). The *Tustumena* comes from Seward roughly once a week. The *Kennicott* runs across the Gulf of Alaska between Valdez and Juneau once a month May through September. The 40-hour run costs $108 for adults, $150 to $292 for a cabin (as low as $42 without linens). See section 1 in chapter 5 for information about the Marine Highway System.

By Air **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394** or 907/835-2636; www.flyera.com) flies two or three times a day each way between Anchorage and Valdez.

GETTING AROUND The main part of the town and boat harbor are compact enough to walk, but you will need wheels for the airport, the attractions on Dayville Road, and most of the hiking trails.

Rental car companies **Valdez-U-Drive** (✆ **907/835-4402**) and **Hertz** (✆ **800/654-3131** or 907/835-4378; www.hertz.com) are at the airport.

Taxis are available from **Valdez Yellow Cab** (✆ **907/835-2500**).

VISITOR INFORMATION The Valdez Convention and Visitors Bureau maintains a **Visitor Information Center** at 200 Fairbanks Dr., a block off Egan Drive (P.O. Box 1603), Valdez, AK 99686 (✆ **800/770-5954,** 907/835-4636, or 907/835-2984 in winter; www.valdezalaska.org). Pick up the free town map and useful *Vacation Planner.* They're open in summer daily from 8am to 8pm, and in the winter from 9am to 5pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS Two **summer fishing derbies** are organized by the visitors bureau (see above) and have substantial prizes. The **Halibut Derby** runs all summer and the **Silver Salmon Derby** runs during the month of August. Derby tickets are available all over town, including at the harbor boat-rental booth and the visitor center.

The Last Frontier Theater Conference (✆ **907/834-1612;** www.uaa.alaska.edu/pwscc) brings major playwrights, directors and actors to the community for seminars and performances in June. Recent guests included writers Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, August Wilson, Horton Foote and Terrence McNally and actors Anne Meara, Patricia Neal and John Heard. The public encounters these luminaries in intimate settings, asking questions one-on-one. In the decade that it's been in operation, the conference has become one of the most important of its kind. It's well worth arranging a trip based around the conference for those interested in literature and theater.

FAST FACTS: Valdez

Banks Two **banks** are on Egan Drive, both with ATMs.

Hospital **Valdez Community** (✆ **907/835-2249**) is at 911 Meals Avenue.

Internet Access An **Internet Café** (✆ **907/835-9000**) is at 321 Egan Drive. You can go online free at **Valdez Consortium Library** (✆ **907/835-4632**) at 260 Fairbanks St., but you may need to call ahead to reserve a time.

Police For nonemergencies phone the **Valdez Police Department** at ✆ **907/835-4560,** at 212 Chenega Avenue.

Post Office Galena Drive and Tatitlek Street, 1 block back from Egan Drive.

Taxes Valdez has no sales tax but does charge a 6% bed tax.

GETTING OUTSIDE

SIGHTSEEING & WILDLIFE TOURS

For most visitors, a daylong ride on a tour boat into the Sound is likely to be the most memorable part of a visit to Valdez. The main tour boat company in town is **Stan Stephens Glacier and Wildlife Cruises** (✆ **866/867-1297** or

Tips Columbia Glacier Pros & Cons

The Columbia Glacier is immense—3 miles across at its face and 30 miles long—and it is retreating at a catastrophic rate, dumping thousands of icebergs that float over miles of water in front. The smooth surface and weird white and blue shapes look like a vast Henry Moore sculpture garden that's been invaded by seals and other wildlife. The biggest drawback of visiting the Columbia is that you won't see it calve (when ice falls off the face) because boats can't get close enough through all the icebergs. For that you must go to glaciers in the western Sound, such as Meares. But those glaciers are easier to access from Whittier.

907/835-4731; www.stanstephenscruises.com). The office is on the dock at the end of the small boat harbor near the Valdez Harbor Inn. Stephens has been showing off the Sound and defending it from pollution for decades. After passing through the long fjord of Port Valdez, boats enter an ice-choked bay in front of **Columbia Glacier** on a 6-hour tour that often encounters seals, sea otters, and sea lions, and sometimes whales, for $80 adults. A light lunch is served on this trip. Going on to Meares Glacier, farther west, adds 4 hours to the round trip, but brings you to a glacier that you can get a better look at and that may drop ice into the water. That cruise is $119 and includes a lunch of seafood pasta. Prices for children 2 to 11 are half on either trip.

SEA KAYAKING & SAILING

Raven Charters, Slip C-25, Valdez Boat Harbor (✆ **907/835-5863;** www.alaska.net/~ravenchr), takes clients sailing and exploring the Sound. The company is run by the family that lives on this 50-foot boat. The wind tends to be light and changeable, but a sailboat makes a comfortable base for discovering interesting, isolated places. All-inclusive prices start at $750 per night for up to four passengers (that is the total fee, not per passenger), or $600 for a day charter, with discounts for longer trips.

Right around Valdez, short sea kayaking day trips see wildlife on the Duck Flats, but that's hardly wilderness, as it's also reached by road and is within sight of the oil facilities. Day trips to Shoup or Columbia glaciers get you into more of the beautiful, remote country that makes Prince William Sound so exceptional. Two companies offer guided sea kayaking from Valdez, or rentals for experienced paddlers (for whom the Sound is a paradise): **Anadyr Adventures** (✆ **800/TO-KAYAK** or 907/835-2814; http://anadyradventures.com), and **Pangaea Adventures** (✆ **800/660-9637** or 907/835-8442; www.alaskasummer.com). Both companies also offer multiday camping trips that venture deeper into the Sound, or, for those who prefer a bed, lodge and "mother ship" expeditions, where you go out kayaking each day and then return to the comforts of a charter boat or various lodges each evening.

FISHING & BOATING

The ocean waters around Valdez are rich in salmon and halibut. It's possible to fish for salmon from shore. Popular spots include Dayville Road west of the fish hatchery, the city dock near the ferry dock in town, and even the harbor floats. Except at the hatchery, you're hoping a fish swims by your lure or bait at the right moment: there isn't a fresh water destination to concentrate the fish. Chances, and the fishing experience, are improved if you get out on the water.

Many small **fishing charter** boats are available in the boat harbor. Halibut charters cost around $180 per person, as they have to go a long way. Half-day salmon charters are around $90, and troll right in Port Valdez. Get a referral from the Valdez Convention and Visitors Bureau (see above) or check the links on their website.

If you're up for running your own boat, they're for rent from **Valdez Harbor Boat and Tackle Rentals** (✆ **907/835-5002;** www.fishcentral.net/boatrentals.htm); a 16-foot boat costs $150 a day, plus fuel. You can get all the gear you need at the rental shop. Or use the boat to explore the area, perhaps with a visit to Shoup Glacier, 20 minutes west. Renting a boat overnight, you can pull up on an uninhabited shore and set up camp.

HIKING & MOUNTAIN BIKING

The Valdez Trails Association and other agencies have been busy in recent years, and now Valdez has a broad selection of good day hikes and an overnight hike. The visitor center can advise you on choices beyond those I list here.

The easiest hike is a pleasant forest and shore walk to **Dock Point,** starting at the east side of the boat harbor, at the end of North Harbor Drive. It's a peaceful, natural walk close to town, with boardwalks and overlooks and berries along the way in season.

For a longer hike and perhaps an overnight, the **Shoup Glacier Trail** runs 12 miles west from town along the shore of Port Valdez to the glacier. The going is generally flat and there are many places to get down to the beach, with wild iris and many other flowers. Cool yourself in a waterfall. Camping is unrestricted, but be sure to bring mosquito repellent and review bear avoidance techniques (see "Outdoors Health & Safety" in chapter 2). If you plan to go all the way to the end, reserve one of the three state parks cabins there, which cost $50 a night (see "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1 of this chapter). The trail starts at the end of West Egan Drive and ends at the cabins, across a lagoon from the glacier's face.

The **Solomon Gulch Trail** starts across from the fish hatchery on Dayville Road (see below) and goes steeply up to Solomon Lake, where locals swim. Be prepared for bears.

Trails off **Mineral Creek Road,** above town off Hanagita Street, are great for walking, mountain biking, or berry picking, and in winter there is a fine cross-country skiing trail network.

The new **Valdez Goat Trail** runs from the spectacular Bridal Veil Falls at mile 13.8 of the Richardson Highway for a distance of 2½ miles on an abandoned roadbed, past some great views.

RAFTING

Keystone Raft and Kayak Adventures (✆ **800/328-8460** or 907/835-2606; www.alaskawhitewater.com) takes five trips a day 4½ miles down the amazing Keystone Canyon, a virtual corridor of rock with a floor of frothing water, past the crashing tumult of the 900-foot Bridal Veil Falls. The whitewater is rated Class III, meaning it is not too wild for most people, but rafting is not without risk—serious mishaps do sometimes occur. They charge $35 per person. The company also has numerous longer trips, ranging from a day to 10 days, on many of the region's rivers.

FLIGHTSEEING

Besides several fixed-wing operators at the airport, **Era Helicopters** (✆ **800/843-1947** or 907/835-2595; www.flightseeingtours.com) offers a 1-hour, $229

trip that flies over Columbia Glacier and makes a glacier landing where you can get out and take a short walk.

HELI-SKIING

Valdez is a magnet for backcountry alpine and extreme skiing and snowboarding thanks to its prodigious snow and limitless steep mountains. A bunch of guide companies offer these trips, operating by helicopter or ski plane from the beginning of March to mid-May. One established operator is **Valdez Heli-Ski Guides** (✆ **907/835-4528;** www.valdezheliskiguides.com). Expect to pay around $500 a day.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

The community college's **Maxine & Jesse Whitney Museum,** at the airport (✆ **907/834-1615;** www.uaa.alaska.edu/pwscc), contains a large collection of Native Alaskan arts and crafts and animal mounts, which were accumulated by the couple over 50 years. It is open from May to mid-September Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm; admission is $4.

The Solomon Gulch Hatchery ★ When the pink salmon return from late June to early August, they swarm on the hatchery in a blizzard of fish. The hatchery releases more than 200 million pinks each year, as well as millions of chums and silvers (or coho). There is no stream for the salmon to return to, so they try to get back into the hatchery, crowding together in a solid sea of fighting muscle. Seals and birds come in to feed, and you can stand on shore and watch (and smell) the spectacle. Surefire fishing is allowed up the shore on Dayville Road. A self-guided walking tour leads around tanks and pools of fish, but it's the seasonal salmon run that makes the hatchery worth the trip.

On Dayville Rd. on the way to the tanker terminal. ✆ **907/835-1329.** Free self-guided tours. Summer daily 9am–9pm.

The Valdez Museum and Historical Archive ★★ The museum contains an exceptional history display that follows the story of the area from early white exploration through the oil spill. Among the most popular exhibits are the shiny old fire engines, dating back to 1886, and the annual summer show of local quilting and fiber crafts.

The museum also owns a remarkable 1/20–scale model of the old Valdez, as it looked at its former site, before the 1964 earthquake forced the town to move. Using photographs, records, and old timers' memories, they have brought that lost city back to life in 400 miniature buildings. The **Historical Old Town Valdez Model** ★ is at the museum annex at 436 S. Hazelet Ave., which also has an interactive earthquake exhibit, including a shaking table, seismograph, and children's activities. The annex is open summer only, 9am to 4pm, and admission is $1.50.

217 Egan Dr. ✆ **907/835-2764.** www.alaska.net/~vldzmuse. $3 adults, $2.50 over age 65, $2 ages 14–18, free for children under 14. Summer Mon–Sat 9am–6pm, Sun 8am–5pm. Winter Mon–Fri 1–5pm, Sat noon–4pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Aspen Hotel Valdez ★★ Stay here for excellent standard rooms at the level of quality you would find in a respected national business hotel. The homegrown Aspen chain took an old building, gutted and remodeled it, then added rooms and major amenities, including the town's only hotel swimming pool. The Aspen has wide halls and spacious rooms decorated in burgundy, hunter

green, and dark wood, with lots of amenities, large TVs, and mirrors. A continental breakfast is included in the room price. Ask about discounts you may qualify for.

100 Meals Ave., Valdez, AK 99686. ✆ **800/478-4445** or 907/835-4445. Fax 907/835-2437. www.aspenhotelsak.com. 104 units. High season $129–$149 double; low season $99 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Indoor pool; health club; spa; business center (computer, printer, copier, dataport); coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV/VCR, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron; microwave.

Blueberry Mary's Bed and Breakfast ★ *Value* A lucky few get to sleep under Mary Mehlberg's handmade quilts on her feather beds, gaze at the ocean views, bake in the sauna, and breakfast on her blueberry waffles made from wild berries that grow just outside the house. She only takes parties of two or less and sometimes closes for breaks. Those who do stay here get a terrific deal on immaculate, handcrafted rooms at a prime location.

Blueberry Hill Rd., off W. Egan Dr. (P.O. Box 1244), Valdez, AK 99686. ✆ **907/835-5015.** www.alaska.net/~bmary. 2 units. $90-$100 double, including tax. Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards. Closed Oct 1–June 1. **Amenities:** Sauna. *In room:* TV/VCR w/free movies, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, microwave.

Keystone Hotel *Value* This basic budget hotel, made of modular units, was built by Exxon to serve as its offices for the oil-spill cleanup operation, but wasn't completed until late summer 1989, so the company occupied it for only about a month. It stood vacant for 5 years before a new owner remodeled it into a hotel, with small rooms that mostly have two twin beds or one double bed, though some have two doubles. Select a room when you check in, as they vary in decor—some have dark paneling, some are more modern.

401 W. Egan Dr. (P.O. Box 2148), Valdez, AK 99686. ✆ **888/835-0665** or 907/835-3851. Fax 907/835-5322. www.alaskan.com/keystonehotel. 104 units. $95 double. Extra person over age 12 $10. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Closed in winter. **Amenities:** Restaurant (outdoor salmon bake); coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

Valdez Harbor Inn ★ This newly remodeled hotel possesses the best location in town, right on the harbor near the tour boats, although few rooms have views. The rooms are well equipped, set up to make snacks or breakfast and with DVD players connected to the big TVs to play movies rented at the front desk. A good restaurant on site is described below (Alaska's Bistro) and the lobby contains a hair salon and coffee shop.

100 Fidalgo Road (P.O. Box 468), Valdez, AK 99686. ✆ **888/222-3440** or 907/835-3434. Fax 907/835-2308. www.valdezharborinn.com. 88 units. High season $129-$139 double. Low season $69-$79. Extra person over age 12 $15. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; health club; salon; limited room service; coin-op laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hairdryer, iron, microwave.

Wild Roses by the Sea B&B Retreat ★★ Light pours into large, elegantly appointed rooms through bay windows that overlook the water and surrounding woods. Rooms, finished in light colors, have high ceilings and wood floors, and are decorated with Asian and contemporary art and Berber style carpets. The best of all the accommodations is the spacious and private "Ocean View Guesthouse," a downstairs suite with a kitchen, living room, and VCR. The hostess, Rose Fong, prepares elaborate breakfasts in the summer and feeds guests snacks and beverages all day.

620 Fiddlehead Lane (P.O. Box 3396), Valdez, AK 99686. ✆ **907/835-2930.** Fax 907/835-4966. www.bytheseaalaska.com. 3 units. Summer $125–$145 double; rates include full breakfast. Winter $89 double; rates include continental breakfast. Extra person $10. MC, V. *In room:* TV, dataport, hair dryer, iron.

CAMPING

The **Sea Otter RV Park,** P.O. Box 947, Valdez, AK 99686 (✆ **800/831-2787** in Alaska only, or 907/835-2787), sits on the outside of the boat harbor breakwater, a mosquito-free spot with views and beachfront where you can fish for salmon and watch the harbor sea otters. The RV park has a laundry and other facilities, and charges $25 for full hookups.

The town's **Valdez Glacier Campground** has 101 well-separated sites among alder and cottonwood trees near the airport, but the trees make it a mosquito haven. They have pit toilets and well water. The fee is $10 a night. To get to the campground, take Richardson Highway out of town to the north and turn left on Airport Road.

The best campground in the area is the state's **Blueberry Lake Campground,** 24 miles out of town on the Richardson Highway, just below Thompson Pass. The campground is above the tree line, with mountaintop views and access to limitless alpine hiking. It can be windy and cold. The small lake is stocked with trout. Fifteen well-screened sites are $12 on a self-serve system. There are pit toilets. They accept RVs, though they have no RV facilities.

WHERE TO DINE

Alaska's Bistro ★ MEDITERRANEAN/PIZZA A harborside dining room with big windows creates a suitable setting for a restaurant with fine dining aspirations. The food includes lots of local seafood prepared in Northern Italian and similar styles; the chicken, pork, and beef also get more than the typical small town treatment, although you can get a simple grilled steak if you wish. The pizza is European, too, with toppings such as pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, and feta cheese. All this is the work of a single mind: At this writing, the chef was even contributing the paintings on the walls as well as his special paella. They have a full bar.

102 N. Harbor Dr. ✆ **907/835-5688.** Reservations recommended. Lunch $7–$15, dinner $9–$30. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–1pm and 5pm–10pm.

Fu Kung Chinese Restaurant ★ CHINESE This long-established family restaurant in a Quonset hut near the harbor serves some of the best meals in town; in Valdez, that's not a huge claim to fame, but this place is good. The interior of the old metal building is clean and pleasant, with a fish tank, warm colors, and plenty of room. The food is plentiful and tasty, especially the gingery bean curd with vegetables, the hot-and-sour soup, and the kung pao chicken. The sushi is good, too. Service is fast and attentive. In winter, they often close earlier than the hours listed below.

207 Kobuk Dr. (1 block from the boat harbor). ✆ **907/835-5255.** Lunch $6.75–$8.75; dinner $11–$16. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

Harbor's Edge Restaurant ★ SEAFOOD/BARBECUE Perfectly situated on the boat harbor, this restaurant is clean and bright, with a patio that's pleasant on a sunny day. This is that rare local hangout that asks no compromise of visitors—it's not a greasy spoon. The menu offers typical waterfront restaurant choices, "BBQ" offerings in the $15 to $20 range, various selections for dinner around $10, and a full line-up of reasonably priced diner food for lunch. Service is efficient and the small dining room is decorated on a garden motif. On our visit the food was good but not exceptional. They serve beer and wine.

107 N. Harbor Drive. ✆ **907/835-5989.** Lunch $5–$9.50; dinner $10–$29. MC, V. Daily 11am–2pm and 5pm–10pm.

Mike's Palace Ristorante PIZZA/STEAK/SEAFOOD This is a good family pizza restaurant, a place where Valdez residents come for a casual evening out. The calzone is good, the service is skilled, and everything is consistent. It's a warm, cheerful place that's perfect after a day on the water—the boat harbor is right across the street. Mike's also has a place in history: Capt. Joseph Hazelwood was waiting for a take-out pizza here when he slipped next door to the Club Bar for his last drink before starting the fateful voyage of the *Exxon Valdez* that hit Bligh Reef. Mike also serves his national Greek cuisine and has a beer and wine license.

201 N. Harbor Dr. ✆ **907/835-2365.** Lunch $5–$9; dinner $9–$25. MC, V. Daily 11am–11pm.

The Rose Cache *Finds* ECLECTIC A local pastor and his wife, Dan and Nancy Bower, have created an extravaganza of faux Victorian decoration so alluring that little girls celebrate their birthdays with tea parties here. The menu includes a lot of comfort food, but also exotic items that the owners have picked up on their travels—they even do Ethiopian cuisine sometimes. Everything comes with a side salad and the desserts are famous. Prices are extremely reasonable.

321 Egan Dr. ✆ **907/835-8383.** Lunch $6–$9. MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–2pm. Closed Jan.

13 Cordova: Hidden Treasure

The first time I ever went to Cordova, my companion and I arrived at the Mudhole Smith Airport in a small plane and happened upon an old guy with a pickup truck who offered to let us ride in back with some boards for the 10 miles to town. The highway led out onto a broad, wetland plain—the largest contiguous wetland in the Western Hemisphere, as it happens. Our guide's voice, studded with profanity, boomed through the back window as he told us proudly about the diversity of the wildlife to be found out there. Then, absolutely bursting with enthusiasm, he leaned on the horn and bellowed, "Look at them f—-ing swans!" We looked; trumpeters paddling in the marsh looked back. He would have invited them along to the bar, too, if he'd known how.

Every time I've been to Cordova since, I've been taken under the wings of new friends. Although they usually don't express themselves the same way that the gentleman with the pickup truck did, they are just as enthusiastic about showing off the amazing natural riches of their little kingdom. Tourists are still something of a novelty here, for Cordova isn't just off the beaten track—it's not on the track at all. There's no road to the rest of the world, and the town is an afterthought on the ferry system. Boosters call their town "Alaska's Hidden Treasure." They're right.

Our family has had some of our happiest times in Cordova, visiting the **Childs Glacier** and seeing the swans and geese on the delta; hiking into the mountains behind town; boating on the Sound to meet the sea otters, sea lions, eagles, and spawning salmon; hiking and canoeing at a remote lake cabin—and meeting no other people at all. In town, we made new friends whenever we turned around, and received hearty greetings from old friends from previous visits. Leaving on the ferry for Valdez, I've watched Cordova shrinking behind us with a wistful hope that it would never change.

So far, I've gotten my wish. You can feel a bit like an anthropologist discovering a tribe lost to time, for Cordova has the qualities that small towns are supposed to have had but lost long ago in America (if they ever did have them).

Walking down 1st Street, you pass an old-fashioned independent grocery store, the fishermen's union hall, and Steen's gift shop, run by the same family since 1909—no chains or franchises. People leave their keys in the car and their doors unlocked at night. When a friend of mine bought one of the quaint, moss-roofed hillside houses a few years ago, he didn't receive a key—the simple reason was that the front door didn't have a lock.

The commercial fishermen who power the economy have fought to protect Cordova from change. They pushed for the oil industry to improve its shipping practices years before the 1989 oil spill and then, after the disaster (which hurt Cordova worst of all), lobbied for the money won from Exxon to be spent on the Sound's environment. They have resisted building a road to Cordova, as well. Another faction in town, the merchants and tourism workers, want a road. The debate is hot, and several local elections between the two camps have been decided by a single vote.

This controversy has been going on for 60 years. The town's heyday was in 1911, when the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad opened, carrying copper ore down from the mine at Kennecott; it hit a low when the mine closed in 1938. Since then, boosters have been trying to get a road built on the old rail line, north along the Copper River to Chitina (that fascinating area is covered in chapter 9, under "Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Kennecott"). The road

builders have made it only about 50 miles out of town so far. From Cordova, the **Copper River Highway** provides access to the best bird-watching and, in my judgment, the most impressive glacier in Alaska, as well as trails and magnificent vistas and areas to see wildlife. In town, the small-boat harbor is a doorway to Prince William Sound.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Ferry** Cordova is served twice a week from Valdez and once a week from Whittier, by an **Alaska Marine Highway System** ferry (✆ **800/642-0066** or 907/424-7333 local dock; www.ferryalaska.com). It's a spectacular ride, with a good chance of seeing wildlife. If you plan to make this trip, study the schedule carefully before planning the rest of your itinerary, as it can be a puzzle to do it both ways. The passenger fare for the 5½-hour run from Valdez is $36, while the 7-hour trip from Whittier is $68; children pay half. It may pay to bring a car, depending on how much time you want to spend out the road, on the delta, and at the glacier. Taking a vehicle under 15 feet one-way from Valdez to Cordova is $69. See section 1 of chapter 5 for information about the Marine Highway System.

By Air **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/426-0333,** www.alaskaair.com) flies daily each direction, from Anchorage to the west and Yakutat, Juneau, and Seattle to the southeast, with more flights from Anchorage operated by **Era Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394;** www.flyera.com).

Taxis are available from **Cordova Taxi** (✆ **907/424-5151**).

GETTING AROUND You can easily walk around downtown Cordova, but that's not where the most interesting sights are. To get out on the Copper River Highway, you'll need a car, bus, or, if you're vigorous, a bike.

Cordova Auto Rentals (✆ **907/424-5982;** www.ptialaska.net/~cars), at the airport, charges $70 a day for a car, $80 for an SUV or van, with unlimited mileage. They have canoes, too.

Rent bikes, kayaks, skiffs, canoes, and fishing and camping gear at **Cordova Coastal Outfitters,** at the boat harbor below the fishermen's memorial (✆ **800/357-5145** or 907/424-7424; www.cdvcoastal.com). They're described in full below.

To get to remote cabins and fly-in fishing, try **Fishing and Flying** (✆ **907/424-3324**), located at the airport; or **Cordova Air** (✆ **907/424-3289**), based on Eyak Lake.

VISITOR INFORMATION A **Cordova Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center** (✆ **907/424-7260;** www.cordovachamber.com) is at 404 1st St., north of Council Avenue (P.O. Box 99, Cordova, AK 99574). They're open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 3pm; summer hours are longer, but vary. Besides the usual information, the center has a 60-minute recorded walking tour that you can listen to as it guides you around town.

The **Cordova Ranger District** of the Chugach National Forest, upstairs in the old white courthouse at 2nd Street and Browning (P.O. Box 280), Cordova, AK 99574 (✆ **907/424-7661;** www.fs.fed.us/r10/chugach), has displays and provides maps and guide information that's indispensable for planning outdoor activities. The staff will sit down and help you figure out what you want to do.

SPECIAL EVENTS **The Cordova Ice Worm Festival** is a winter carnival the first full weekend in February; the big ice worm—or, to be precise, ice centipede—marches in a parade. **The Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival** (**907/424-7260;** www.cordovachamber.com) revolves around the coming of

dizzying swarms of millions of shorebirds that use the delta and beaches near the town as a migratory stopover in early May. The whole community gets involved to host bird-watchers and put on a full schedule of educational and outdoor activities that lasts 3 days.

FAST FACTS: Cordova

Banks There are two banks on 1st Street, with ATMs.

Hospital **Cordova Community Medical Center** is on Chase Street (✆ **907/424-8000**), off the Copper River Highway near the slough.

Internet Access Find it at the **Cordova Public Library** (✆ **907/424-6667**) and at **Laura's Liquor Shoppe** (✆ **907/424-3144**), both on 1st Street.

Police For nonemergency calls, call ✆ **907/424-6100.**

Post Office At Railroad Avenue and Council.

Taxes Sales tax is 6%; rooms and car rentals carry an additional 6%.

EXPLORING THE TOWN & HIKING NEAR TOWN

ATTRACTIONS The town of Cordova is mostly a good base for outdoor activities (covered below), but save some time to wander around town, make discoveries, and meet people, possibly with the help of the **historic walking tour booklet** produced by the historical society, available from the chamber of commerce.

The **Cordova Historical Museum,** at 622 1st St. (✆ **907/424-6665;** www.cordovamuseum.org), is a well-presented one-room display with some valuable artifacts reflecting Cordova's eventful past. The three-seat kayak and other artifacts of Prince William Sound Native peoples are of particular interest. Cordova is the home of the last few Eyak, a Native people whose language now has only one speaker left. There's also a historic lighthouse lens, a Linotype machine, the interior of a fishing boat, and photographs of fishing and historic scenes. The museum is open summer Monday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm, Sunday from 2 to 4pm; winter Tuesday through Friday from 1 to 5pm, Saturday from 2 to 4pm. Recommended donation is $1.

HIKING Cordova has more good hiking trails per capita than any place I know. The Cordova Ranger Station can provide you with a free trail-guide booklet with lots of ideas and maps. There are three hikes close to town (trails farther out are listed later in this chapter, in the section on the Copper River Delta).

The **Tripod Mountain Trail** begins right from town and climbs 1,255 feet over less than a mile up the first mountain back from the shore, a ½-day hike with views that present the Sound and Cordova like a map below you. The trail begins at the foot of the town ski lift on 6th Street—take Browning Street up the hill.

Partway up Tripod Mountain, near the middle drop-off of the ski lift, a 1-mile trail links to the **Crater Lake Trail,** which eventually joins the **Power Creek Trail** on a loop of 12 miles. An easier start for that route is the Power Creek Road—drive it along the north side of Eyak Lake to the end, 7 miles from town. The creek has spawning red salmon in July and attracts a lot of bears at the trailhead; watch, but don't get out of your car if you come upon one. The trail follows the creek through dramatic scenery 4¼ miles to the Power Creek Forest

Service cabin, with a great view (reserve the cabin for an overnight through the system described in section 3, Chugach National Forest, earlier).

THE COPPER RIVER DELTA

The delta and its star attraction, the **Childs Glacier,** make an unforgettable day trip by car or tour bus from Cordova, but if you have a couple of days, you can do a lot here. The backwaters, sloughs, and ponds beg to be explored by canoe. Bird-watchers will especially enjoy paddling around here and visiting the boardwalks and blinds set up by the Forest Service. You can raft the rivers. There are excellent hiking trails and mountain-biking routes branching from the road, and there are Forest Service cabins to stay in.

The delta seems to go on forever, a vast patchwork of marsh, pond, small hills of trees, and the huge, implacable gray river itself. The glacial silt it carries away—some 2 million tons a day—has built this 700,000-acre wetland. A well-maintained gravel road leads across it, all in Chugach National Forest, and rangers have done a good job of providing ways and places to enjoy and learn about the area. The road itself is the old bed of the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad. It leads 48 miles to the **Million Dollar Bridge.** Built by Michael Heney, a magician of a 19th-century railroad builder who also constructed the White Pass and Yukon Route in Skagway, the 200-mile Copper River line was an engineering triumph that brought the mind-boggling wealth of the Kennecott Copper Corporation to ships in Cordova (read more about the mine in the section on "Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Kennecott" in chapter 9). The bridge over the Copper River was constructed in a race against time, between two surging glaciers in 30-foot-deep, fast-flowing glacial water, in winter. The bridge stood for 56 years, until the 1964 earthquake knocked down one end of one of the spans, driving it into the riverbed. You can still drive across on a ramp and go a few miles farther on unmaintained road.

GETTING THERE

BY CAR Driving gives you the most freedom. The road is gravel, but it's wide and level. Beyond the Million Dollar Bridge, however, it's a rough four-wheel-drive track at best, and if you get stuck you'll be there for a long time. Check at the Forest Service Cordova Ranger Station for the latest news about the road, such as the washouts that have occurred in the last few years as the glacier advances. Also, pick up their Forest Service's road guide at the ranger station.

BY BIKE Mountain biking the highway is the adventurous way to travel, and you can camp or stay in a Forest Service cabin on the way. The drawbacks are the distances, the delta's strong winds, and a lot of road dust. Of course, you don't have to ride all the way to see lots of birds and wildlife, and there are good mountain biking routes on the delta away from the road. The 3-mile **Saddlebag Glacier Trail,** at mile 25 of the Copper River Highway, leads to a stunning vista of a glacial lake surrounded by rocky peaks. Bikes are for rent from Cordova Coastal Outfitters (see "Getting Out On the Sound," later in this section) for $15 a day.

ALONG THE ROAD

Keep your eyes scanning the wetlands and mountains around you as you drive out on the road. The **wildlife** you may see along the way includes black and brown bears, wolf, coyote, moose, and mountain goats. The entire world population of dusky Canadian geese nests on the delta, and you're likely to see eagles and trumpeter swans without really looking. The ranger station provides a wildlife-viewing guide and several places to stop along the way designed for

bird-watching. The first is a platform with interpretive signs as you leave town, a sort of introduction to the delta; this stretch of the road is fine for bird-watching.

Don't skip the **Alaganik Slough Boardwalk.** Take the 3¼-mile spur road to the right 17 miles out on the Copper River Highway; it's marked. The sky here is big and certain while the land is ambivalent—it doesn't know if it wants to be waving grass of green and gold or shallow, shimmering ponds and tendrils of water. The road leads to the start of the 1,000-foot boardwalk. One part leads to a large blind where you can watch the ponds and brush for birds. The other takes you above a large pond that reflects the sun and the colors of the marsh. We were speechless when we stood there one evening at sunset, even in the complete absence of birds. In the summer you can often see breeding trumpeter swans, ducks, and grebes, and in the spring and fall you can frequently observe migrating waterfowl and shorebirds.

The highway ends with the area's best attraction, the advancing **Childs Glacier.** This is the most amazing glacier I've ever seen and no one seems to know about it outside Cordova. The advancing wall of ice, 300 feet tall, comes right down to the ¼-mile-wide river, battling the flowing water for control of the land here. The glacier tries to divert the river while the river tries to cuts the glacier like a knife, eroding the base and bringing down huge ice chunks. As you sit on the opposite bank, the glacier on the opposite side is too large to see it all—it completely fills your field of vision, creating an eerie and hypnotic sense of scale. On a warm summer day, you can feel the glacier's thunder as the ice shifts, and see pieces fall off. A chunk the size of a car barely registers, but when a building–size hunk falls, there's a roar and gray breakers radiate out across the river. Falling glacier pieces have made waves large enough to uproot trees here, not to mention hurl a few fish around—at the Forest Service viewing and picnic area across the river, salmon have been found high up in the trees and boulders in odd places. Several years ago, such a wave injured some visitors, and now the Forest Service warns that anyone who can't run fast should stay in the observation tower. A bit farther from shore there's a campground with pit toilets.

A path leads less than a mile to the **Million Dollar Bridge** or drive by on your way out.

ACTIVITIES

CANOEING The delta's canoe routes are little used, leading to remote places where birds and aquatic animals rule. You can launch on Alaganik Slough at a picnic area at mile 22 on the Copper River Highway, paddling placid waters into stunningly beautiful marshlands. Taking the "Wrong Way" route that starts a couple of miles up the highway, you can float several miles of challenging water down to McKinley Lake, stay at the Forest Service cabin, then float downstream again to the slough launch, back at the road. It's ideal overnight, or you could do it in a day, or, as we did, spend an extra day and night at the cabin. The couple who runs **Cordova Coastal Outfitters** (see below, under "Getting Out on the Sound") rents canoes for $30 a day and drops them off, and will help you decide what route to take. You can ride out on one of their bicycles and pick up the canoe already at the launch site. They rent camping gear, too.

FISHING The delta's lakes and streams harbor all five species of Pacific salmon, as well as Dolly Varden char and rainbow and cutthroat trout. The Cordova Ranger Station can offer guidance, or contact the Cordova office of the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game** (✆ **907/424-3212;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click "Sportfish" then "Region II"). See "Fishing" in chapter 2 for general guidance.

HIKING The Forest Service maintains several trails on the delta. The **Alaganik Slough Boardwalk** and **Saddlebag Glacier Trail** are mentioned on p. 317 and 316, respectively.

The **Haystack Trail,** starting on the right just past the 19-mile marker on the highway, climbs through mossy rainforest from the delta's floor onto an odd little hill. The glaciers that once covered the delta spared this bedrock outcropping. The trail is steep in places but only ¾ mile in length, and it leads to an overlook.

The **McKinley Lake Trail,** at mile 21.6 on the highway, leads 2½ miles through rainforest vegetation to a lake with trout (although we got no bites), and a little further to the overgrown ruins of a gold mine. You can also get there by canoe (see below). There are two Forest Service cabins on the trail, the small **McKinley Trail Cabin** near the highway and the **McKinley Lake Cabin,** beautifully situated among big trees above the lake. Each costs $35 a night and can be reserved through the national system described in section 3 of this chapter, on the Chugach National Forest.

You can also join a guided nature hike of a few hours, or all day, with Alaska River Rafting (see "Rafting," directly below).

RAFTING The immense quantity of water draining the Wrangell–St. Elias Mountains through the Copper River Delta, and the Copper River Highway that provides river access, make this a perfect venue for rafting. **Alaska River Rafting** (✆ **800/776-1864** or 907/424-7238; www.alaskarafters.com) is well regarded by locals. The diverse territory means they can offer quite a range of trips, from easy floating to white water, or even rafting right in front of the Childs Glacier. Trips range in duration from half- to multiday. A 3½-hour trip is $65 adults, $45 ages 6 to 12; all day, with flightseeing, $250. They guide nature hikes, too.

GETTING OUT ON THE SOUND

The waters of Prince William Sound around Cordova, although lacking the tidewater glaciers found in the western Sound, are protected and rich in marine life. Sea otters don't receive a second glance from locals, congregating in rafts of many dozens or even hundreds. Sea lions can be found predictably, too, and orcas and humpback whales are not out of the ordinary. Bird-watchers can expect harlequin ducks and many other marine birds.

Cordova Coastal Outfitters is a good place to start for any outdoor activities (✆ **800/357-5145** or 907/424-7424; www.cdvcoastal.com). Andy Craig and Seawan Gehlbach know the equipment, the skills, and the area, and they convey that knowledge with casual enthusiasm. Their booth is on the dock below the Alaska Commercial grocery store, on the south side of the boat harbor. They guide sea kayaking and rent kayaks and motorized boats. If your group isn't up to kayaking, **renting a boat** might be the way to go—you won't believe the sense of freedom you feel clearing the harbor breakwater to explore Orca Inlet and the bays of Hawkins Island, on the far side. Boats rent for $115 to $135 a day, fishing gear extra.

The **guided sea-kayaking trip** for beginners lasts 4 hours and costs $75, concentrating on wildlife sightings. A 4-hour trip for the same price paddles on Eyak Lake to see brown bears and great blue herons. They offer all-day and multiday trips, too. Single kayaks rent for $35 a day, doubles $50.

Dave Janka runs the classic wooden ***Auklet*** (✆ **907/424-3428;** www.auklet.com), a 58-foot former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service patrol boat, to carry scientific researchers and natural history excursions into the Sound from

Cordova, Valdez, and Whittier. You design your own trip with him, paying $215 per person per day, with an $860 minimum. The accommodations on board are nautical, not luxurious.

Several vessels are available for fishing charters or day trips to see whales and other wildlife. The chamber of commerce (p. 314) has links to other charter operators on its website, or call them for a referral.

WHERE TO STAY

The Northern Nights Inn ★ *Value* These large rooms, many with views and all loaded with amenities, are an almost unreal value. All but one has a full kitchen, and breakfast supplies are provided. They're upstairs in Becky Chapek and Bill Myers's historic 1906 house, a couple of blocks above the main street. The family is charming and will make you feel like a local. Each room has been lovingly renovated, with antiques and quilts. Two rooms are entire apartments. They rent cars, too, and will freeze fish that you catch.

500 3rd St. (P.O. Box 1564), Cordova, AK 99547. ✆ **907/424-5356.** Fax 907/424-3291. 5 units. $60–$75 double. Extra adult $5. Children 18 and under stay free in parents' room. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Free bike loan; car rental; babysitting; free laundry machines. *In room:* TV/VCR, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, microwave.

Prince William Motel *Value* A friendly, helpful family renovated this old building into a clean, comfortable, modern motel. The lower rooms look out onto an air shaft, but that may be an advantage if you're trying to get to sleep when it's still light out. Seven rooms have kitchenettes, with a $20 premium. Not a good choice if you have trouble with stairs. The motel has barbecues and offers fish freezing.

2nd St. and Council (P.O. Box 908), Cordova, AK 99574. ✆ **907/424-3201.** Fax 907/424-2260. www.ak-biz.com/princewilliammotel. 16 units. Summer $100–$120 double. Extra adult $10. Children 11 and under stay free in parents' room. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, microwave.

WHERE TO DINE

Some of Cordova's best lunches come from **Baja Taco** (✆ **907/424-5599**), with a bus and a building at the boat harbor at Nicholoff St. The proprietor, who lives in Baja in the winter, specializes in salmon tacos and operates here May through September.

Ambrosia ITALIAN This is a comfortable family restaurant with an extensive menu, including pizza. It's the kind of place that stays in business in a small town: The food is reliable and the portions large, but there's nothing too challenging or unusual. They serve beer and wine.

410 1st St. ✆ **907/424-7175.** Main courses $9.75–$21. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 11am–10pm, Sat–Sun 5–10pm.

Killer Whale Café CAFE This cafe is worth a stop if only for the atmosphere. The dining area is in two lofts above a bookstore that is a nexus of local eco-people. Oil-spill hero Kelly Weaverling owns Orca Book and Sound, and was the only member of the Green Party to hold elected office in the United States when he was Cordova's mayor a few years ago. The cafe serves a full breakfast menu in the morning, soups, sandwiches, and daily specials for lunch; and fresh baked goods all day. They also make smoothies and espresso.

In Orca Book and Sound, 507 1st St. ✆ **907/424-7733.** All items $3.50–$9.75. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 7am–3pm; Sat 8am–2pm.

8

The Denali National Park Region

Denali (den-*al*-ee) stands alone among the nation's parks: It gives regular people easy access to real wilderness, with sweeping tundra vistas, abundant wildlife, and North America's tallest mountain. Other wilderness areas in Alaska may have equally inspiring scenery and even more animals, but Denali is unique because of its accessibility to visitors—and because that accessibility hasn't spoiled the natural experience, as it has at so many other parks.

It's a sad truth that even the largest national parks in the Lower 48 are too small to comprise complete ecosystems. The dream of leaving nature undisturbed is essentially lost in those places, and only through human intervention do the natural systems within the parks stay as close to their primeval state as they do (this is demonstrated by the efforts of Yellowstone rangers to drive bison back within park boundaries so they won't come to harm outside). Millions of cars driving through the parks further interfere with nature. At Rocky Mountain National Park, there's a crossing guard for bighorn sheep. Yosemite Valley and Grand Canyon Village can be choked with cars in summer, yet attempts to get rid of the cars have so far been thwarted.

On the other end of the spectrum, Alaska has many parks with immense, intact ecosystems that have remained unchanged, still existing as they did before the first white contact. More than two-thirds of America's national park acreage is in Alaska, taking in inconceivably huge swaths of land without roads, buildings, or landing strips. They're natural, all right, but almost no one goes there. Some of these parks receive a few hundred visitors a year—only the indigenous people of the surrounding villages and the hardiest and wealthiest outdoors people. Just chartering a plane to get to some of these places can cost as much as most people spend on their entire vacations. With so many people on the earth, wilderness survives only when it's rationed somehow. In most of Alaska, the rationing system is simply the expense and difficulty of getting to the wilds.

At Denali, on the other hand, you can see the heart of the park for little more than it would cost you to visit Yellowstone. And when you get there, it's a pristine natural environment where truly wild animals live in a nearly complete ecosystem pretty much without human interference. A single National Park Service decision makes this possible: The only road through the park is closed to the public. This means that to get into the park, you must ride a bus over a dusty gravel road hour after hour, but it also means that the animals are still there to watch and their behavior remains essentially normal. From the window of the bus, you're likely to see grizzly bears doing what they would be doing even if you weren't there. It may be the only $30 safari in the world.

What's even more unique is that you can get off the bus pretty much

Tips Construction Ahead at the Park Entrance

Massive changes to the main Denali National Park visitor area are taking place through the 2004 season. The disruptions and noise of heavy equipment and truck operations are inevitable; it may make sense to plan your trip so as not to spend much time in the park entrance area where most of the work is taking place. Here are some of the major changes:

- The old Park Hotel is gone. On its site, the new Denali Science and Learning Center and the Visitor Center Campus are due for completion during the 2004 season. The center will have programs, exhibits, a theater, food courts, dorms, a bookstore, parking, and so on—a much needed improvement.
- The existing Visitor Access Center will become a transit center, just for boarding buses and getting tickets and permits for the buses, campgrounds, and backcountry.
- The Morino Backpacker Campground is gone.
- The Alaska Railroad's new passenger facilities at the park should be complete by 2004.
- The Riley Creek Campground expansion is complete with the new park store (renamed The Riley Creek Mercantile), which has shower and laundry facilities accessible to people with disabilities.

whenever you want to, walk across the tundra, out of sight of the road, and be alone in this primeval wilderness. Unfortunately, many Denali visitors never take the opportunity, which normally would cost a lot of money or require a lot of muscle and outdoor skill. Being alone under the big sky makes many people nervous. Most people have never been entirely away from other people, much less apart from anything people have made. But that's the essence of Alaska—learning, deep down, how big creation is and how small you are, one more mammal on the tundra under the broad sky. At Denali, you can experience that wonder, and then, when you're ready to return to civilization, you can just walk to the road and catch the next bus—they come every ½ hour.

The Denali experience spreads beyond the park. After all, the park boundary is an artificial line—the wildlife and the scenery of the Alaska Range don't observe its significance. Several outstanding fly-in wilderness lodges bracket the park in country that's just as beautiful as the park's landscape, where you can explore open land on foot, horseback, or dog sled. To the east, the **Denali Highway** runs through the same extraordinary terrain, with opportunities for hiking over the tundra and canoeing on the lakes managed by the Bureau of Land Management. To the south, **Denali State Park** and the town of **Talkeetna** provide another vantage on Mount McKinley, with the advantage of salmon fishing in the rivers. The construction of comfortable new lodges and a variety of good outdoor guides have helped make Talkeetna a popular alternative gateway to Denali. Even though it's 150 miles from the park entrance by car, Talkeetna is physically closer to the mountain than the park headquarters is.

Visitors often skip all the area's other attractions, however, and focus on **Mount McKinley,** which, at 20,320 feet, is the tallest mountain in North America. It is an impressive peak, but you don't need to go to the park to see it—in fact, most people

who do go *don't* see it. Summer weather patterns usually sock in the mountain by mid-afternoon, at least as seen from the ground in the park.

Denali has become a thing people feel they must do, and seeing Mount McKinley is a thing they must do when they visit Denali. Many package tours rush through the park so quickly it becomes a blur outside a window rather than an experience. If they miss the mountain, passengers may wonder why they traveled so far to stay at the ticky-tacky roadside development at the park's entrance and then ride on a bus over a bumpy road. A friend swears she overheard a tourist ask, as she boarded the train leaving Denali, "Why did they put the park way out here in the boondocks?"

The answer is there for you to find, at the bottom of the steps of the shuttle bus door.

1 Planning a Visit to the Park

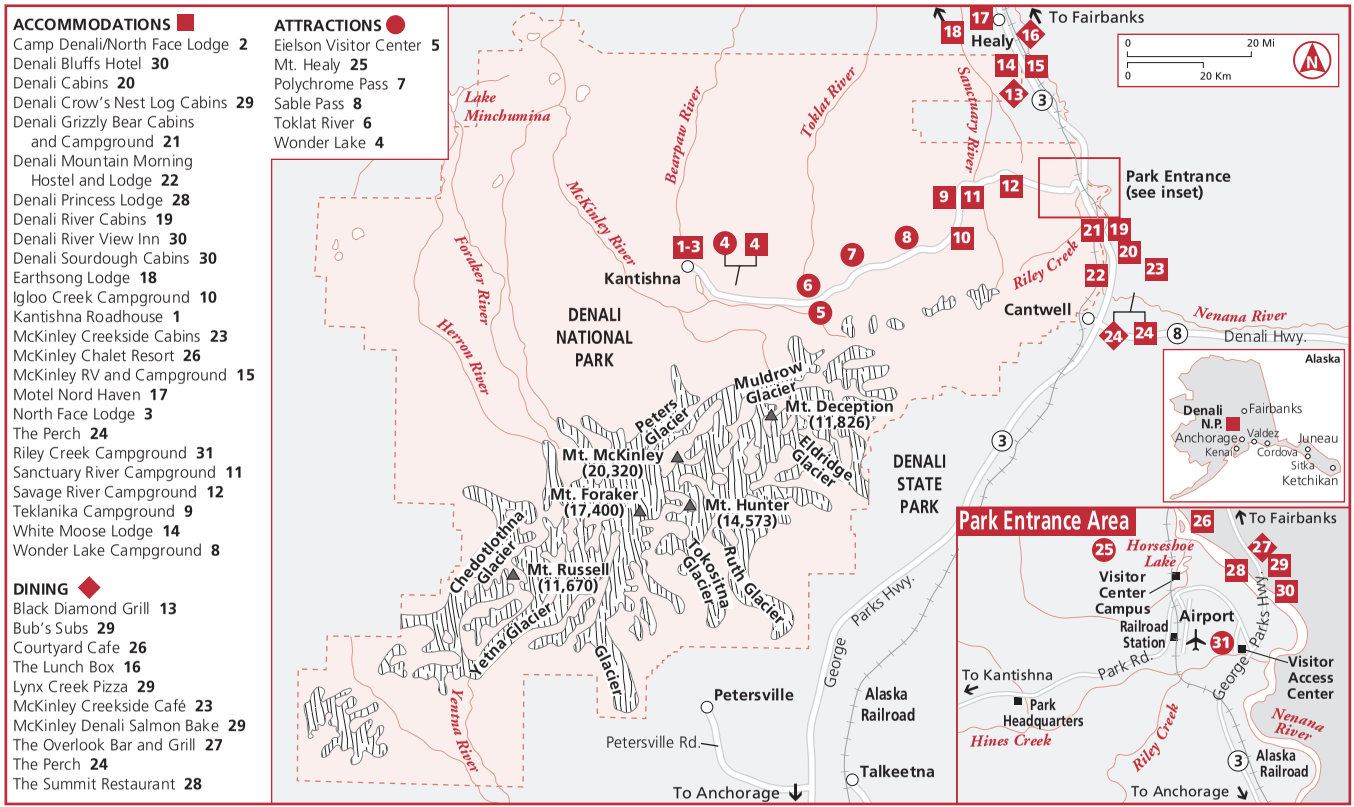
ORIENTATION

Denali National Park and Preserve is rock and ice robed in tundra and peppered with stunted black spruce. It's a huge slice of the Alaska Range that stands like a pivot in the center of Alaska. It encompasses 6 million acres, a roughly triangular polygon about 20% larger than Massachusetts. The only park entrance is 237 miles north of Anchorage and 120 miles south of Fairbanks on the paved George Parks Highway or the Alaska Railroad. Although **Mount McKinley** is visible from as far away as Anchorage, you can't see it at all from the park entrance (where you will find the railroad depot and all services accessible by private vehicle), because it's on the far side of the park. A mile north of the park entrance on the Parks Highway, along a cliff-sided canyon of the Nenana River, is **Glitter Gulch,** the local term for the seasonal roadside strip that's home to hotels and restaurants (boosters call it the **Nenana Canyon Area**). Other services are at **Carlo Creek,** 13 miles south on the Parks Highway; at another roadside development 7 miles south of the park entrance; and in the year-round town of **Healy,** 12 miles north of the park entrance. From the park entrance, a road accessible only by shuttle bus leads west 89 miles through the park, past a series of campgrounds and a visitor center, and ends at the **Kantishna district,** a patch of park-surrounded private land inholdings with wilderness lodges.

WHEN TO GO & HOW FAR AHEAD TO PLAN

Crowding is relative. Once you're out in the park, Denali is never crowded. The shuttle and tour bus system (no private cars are allowed to go more than 14 miles past the entrance) protects the park from overuse. What makes July to mid-August the busy season difficult is getting through the bottleneck from the crowded park entrance into the wilderness. At that time, travelers who just show up at the visitor center without any reservations often have to spend a day or two outside the park before they can get a desirable shuttle bus seat, a campground site, or a backcountry permit.

The flow of visitors varies greatly from year to year and has been dropping the last four years. Some years, you needed to make **reservations** by March for a July visit; other years, a few weeks of advance planning has been enough. To be on the safe side, get your shuttle tickets and campsites as soon as you know the dates of your visit. Lodgings also get tight in July, but are not as critical to the success of your visit. Reserve as far ahead as you can, but don't worry about getting stuck in a dive if you don't get your first choice of rooms or cabins, as there are few really bad places near the park.



Denali National Park

The Denali Highway: The Drivable Denali

From Cantwell, 27 miles south of the Denali National Park entrance, the Denali Highway leads 133 miles east to another tiny village, Paxson, on the Richardson Highway. The little-known road is a lesson in how labels influence people. It runs due east from the Denali National Park border, a natural extension of the park over the Alaska Range, with scenery that's equal to and in some ways more impressive than the park's. Yet without the national park name, the terrain along the Denali Highway is comparatively little used.

The Bureau of Land Management controls the land along the Denali Highway, and it's pretty much open for any recreational activity. The **Tangle Lakes** start a 3-day, 35-mile float trip (for experienced paddlers) to the Richardson Highway and host fine lake canoeing, where you can see an extraordinary variety of waterfowl, including trumpeter swans, sandhill cranes, and loons. Much of the highway passes through high, alpine terrain, with views that extend infinitely and good chances of seeing caribou, moose, and black and grizzly bear. At **Maclaren Pass,** at 4,086 feet, you stand in a high Alaska Range terrain of tundra and rock, with views of Maclaren Glacier. The land invites you to walk at least a little way out across it.

Simply driving the road is an experience. If you're traveling to Denali National Park from Anchorage or Fairbanks, consider making a return trip via the Denali Highway and Richardson Highway. But check out road conditions first. The road is gravel and state budget cuts sometimes leave it in poor condition. Check with the Alaska Department of Transportation's road condition hot line (✆ **511,** 511.alaska.gov) or call ✆ **907/835-4242.** When the road is good, you can cover its length in less than 4 hours. (Agencies that rent cars and RVs for these gravel highways are listed under "Equipped for the Backroads" on page 371; most other

Summer residents come to the park beginning in mid-May, when snow remains; they migrate south again in mid- to late September, when winter is closing in. In the off season, fewer than 200 residents stay in the area, and sled-dog-driving rangers patrol the backcountry. The visitor season gets into high gear in mid-June and starts to wind down in mid-August, providing relative quiet and often reduced prices at the end of the season (bus access within Denali doesn't begin until Memorial Day, so May is out). Reservations are easy to come by in the fall.

Fall is a wonderful time to go to Denali. The weather gets nippy at night, and there can be surprise snowfalls, but rain is less likely, and the trees and tundra turn wonderful colors. By early September, visitors are so few that the park no longer takes telephone reservations. By mid-September, private cars can drive on the park road for a few days—the park service holds a lottery in July to determine who will get that treat.

Another way to avoid the crowds is to book a stay in a **wilderness lodge.** Two lodges in Kantishna, listed in section 11 of this chapter, have the right to carry clients to their businesses over the park road in buses and vans, avoiding the

companies don't allow their vehicles on the Denali.) Small roadhouses are along the way. **Biking** the road is one of the best ways to see it. Trails and remote roads from the highway offer some exceptional mountain biking and hiking routes, especially in the Tangle Lakes National Register Archaeological District. There are **Bureau of Land Management campgrounds** along the highway at Brushkana Creek and Tangle Lakes, and you can actually camp anywhere on the land—just plop down your tent when you're tired.

Be sure to get the BLM's *Denali Highway Points of Interest* road guide and *Trail Map and Guide to the Tangle Lakes National Register District.* They're available at the Alaska Public Lands Information Centers in Fairbanks, Anchorage, or Tok, or directly from the **Bureau of Land Management.** Their Glennallen Field Office, P.O. Box 147, Glennallen, AK 99588 (✆ **907/822-3217;** www.glennallen.ak.blm.gov; open Mon–Fri 8am–4:30pm), manages the area, and rangers there can give you guidance on where to go.

Alaska Bicycle Adventures (described in chapter 2; ✆ **800/770-7242** or 907/243-2329; www.alaskabike.com) leads a variety of bike tours that include the Denali Highway, generally starting from Anchorage, looping up the Parks Highway, and returning south on the Richardson and Glenn highways. They provide the bikes and all the gear, as well as a van and trailer that carries the gear and baggage to make the trip comfortable. **CampAlaska Tours** (also described in chapter 2; ✆ **800/376-9438** or 907/376-9438; www.campalaska.com) covers this ground, too, with group camping excursions that use a van to get from destination to destination, and camps each night at a different campground. Some of these tours emphasize hiking, while other have a more diverse range of activities.

bottleneck. Also in section 11 are reviews of three more remote lodges outside the park's boundaries that you can reach by air.

SAMPLE ITINERARIES

The more you're willing to rough it, the closer you can get to the real Denali. There are no hotels inside the park.

THE HOTEL-STAY ITINERARY

Drive to the park or arrive by train and choose accommodations near the park—shuttles and courtesy vans can get you around. Attend a ranger talk, the *Cabin Nite* dinner-theater show, or go on a short **nature walk** around the park hotel in the evening. Get to bed early, and the next morning take a shuttle bus before 7am into the park, riding to the **Eielson Visitor Center** to see the terrain and animals, and possibly to get a view of the mountain. You'll arrive there in late morning. Now ride partway back toward the entrance before getting off the bus at a place of your choosing for a walk and to eat the bag lunch you've brought along with you (pack out all trash, of course), or take one of the **park service guided walks.** After enjoying the wilderness for a few hours, head back on the

bus, finishing a long day back at the hotel. The next day, try a rafting ride, a flightseeing trip, or another activity near the park entrance before driving onward or reboarding the train.

THE FAMILY CAMPING ITINERARY

Arrive at the park entrance by car with your camping gear and food for a couple of nights. (You can rent the camping gear and car in Anchorage or Fairbanks.) Camp that evening at the **Riley Creek Campground** near the visitor center and enjoy the evening ranger program or a nature walk, or go straight to a campsite farther within the park (either way, you'll need to reserve well ahead). The next day, catch a shuttle bus or camper bus to get deeper into the park for sightseeing and **hiking.** If you have another day after that within the park, you can do more hikes and have the cushion of a weather day. Add a rafting excursion at the park entrance before driving on, if you like, and possibly a night at a hotel to get washed up.

THE BACKCOUNTRY CAMPING ITINERARY

Arrive by train, bus, or car with your backpack, camping gear, and food for at least the first few days of hiking (or for the whole trip, of course, if you don't plan on buying food at the park). Go immediately to the visitor center to orient yourself to the backcountry permit process, buy the information you need for your trek (see section 4 of this chapter), and choose the unit area that looks most promising. **Backcountry permits** cannot be reserved in advance; you can only apply for them in person for the next day, and they go fast. If you're lucky, permits will be left for the day after you arrive; more likely, you'll need to camp for a night nearby and arrive at the visitor center by the 7am opening (in high season) to get your permit for the following day. Now you've got another day to wait; if you've reserved a shuttle-bus seat, you can get a preview of the park and see some wildlife or, outside the park, go on a rafting trip. The next morning you can start your backcountry hike, taking the camper bus to your unit, then traveling for up to 2 weeks in a huge area of wilderness reserved almost exclusively for your use.

THE WILDERNESS LODGE ITINERARY

For those who can afford it, this may be the best way to see Denali. The lodge will fly you in—or, if it's in Kantishna, drive you through the park—and you'll immediately be away from the crowds in remote territory. The lodges all have activities and guides to get you out into the wilderness. If you're not staying in Kantishna, you may want to schedule a day to ride the shuttle bus into the park to see the mountains and wildlife, with an evening in a hotel near the park or in Healy.

THE TALKEETNA OPTION

Drive only as far as Talkeetna, about 110 miles north of Anchorage, and board a flightseeing plane from there to the park, perhaps landing on a glacier on Mount McKinley. You'll stand a better chance of seeing the mountain than anyone else, since the weather tends to be better on the south side and you can fly above most clouds. You'll also save yourself hours of driving to the park and the bus ride into the park, and you'll have the pleasure of staying in a town with some character, unlike the park entrance area. If you want the on-the-ground wildlife-viewing opportunities that can be had only in the park, you can fly from Talkeetna for the day, for a price. (See section 10 of this chapter for more information.)

2 Park Essentials

VISITOR INFORMATION

Getting the information you need to plan your visit is especially important at Denali because of the need for advance reservations.

The most important resource for setting up a trip is the concessionaire: **Denali Park Resorts,** 241 W. Ship Creek Ave., Anchorage, AK 99501 (✆ **800/622-7275** or 907/272-7275; fax 907/264-4684; at Denali, from May 15 through the visitor season, the number is ✆ 907/683-8200; www.denaliparkresorts.com). The concession is operated by a joint venture of ARAMARK and the Doyon Native corporation; for the purposes of visitors, any of those names refer to the same outfit. They handle the reservations system for the campgrounds and shuttle buses, as well as two hotels, bus tours, a rafting operation, and a dinner theater that you can reserve.

The easiest place to make in-person contact with the concessionaire or the park service itself is the **Denali National Park Visitor Center,** also known as the Visitor Access Center, on Denali Park Road, a ½ mile from the park entrance (P.O. Box 9), Denali National Park, AK 99755 (✆ **907/683-2294;** fax 907/683-9612; www.nps.gov/dena). The visitor center is open from June to mid-September daily from 7am to 8pm, and May and late September daily from 10am to 4pm. It's closed October through April. Here you will find the Denali Park Resorts reservation and ticketing desks and the park backcountry desk: basically, everything is covered in one room. Since there's no park entrance station, this center is also the stop for the park map, a copy of the *Alpenglow* park newspaper, and other handouts. A small bookstore offers a limited selection on the area, and films and programs take place in an auditorium. ***Note:*** The plan is that some of these services will move to the new visitor center campus up the road at some point in the 2004 season; see "Construction Ahead at the Park Entrance," earlier in this chapter.)

Besides the centers at the park, you can stop by for park area information at the interagency **Alaska Public Lands Information Center;** there are locations in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Tok, all listed in chapters 6 and 9. The park website (www.nps.gov/dena) is handy too. The park's nonprofit publishing arm is the **Alaska Natural History Association,** Denali Branch, P.O. Box 230, Denali National Park, AK 99755 (✆ **907/683-1272** summer, 907/683-1258 off season; www.alaskanha.org). They operate the shops in the park visitor centers, and you can use their website to order books and maps before coming.

At the **Eielson Visitor Center,** on Denali Park Road, more than 60 miles inside the park (accessible only on the shuttle bus), rangers answer questions about Mount McKinley, which on clear days presents a dramatic view from the center. There are displays on wildlife and geology. You can stay at the visitor center for as long as you like on the same day that you rode in—a dispatcher allocates open seats on buses to passengers who want to return on a bus different than the one they rode into the park. Picnic tables outside make a good place to eat your sack lunch before you board the bus back. Open June 1 to mid-September, weather permitting.

THE RESERVATIONS SYSTEM

Here's the system for reserving shuttle-bus tickets and spots at the developed campgrounds. This section may look long, but paying attention to the details of the reservations system greatly improves your chances of a good visit to the park. (The backcountry permit system is covered in section 4 of this chapter.)

FOR ADVANCE RESERVATIONS

Sixty-five percent of shuttle-bus seats and all campground sites (except Sanctuary and Igloo, if open) are offered for booking by telephone, fax, or mail; the balance are held back for walk-ins.

Reservations by mail or fax open for the whole summer on December 1 of the preceding year. Reservations by phone open in mid-February. After that date, lines are answered daily from 7am to 5pm Alaska time (remember, that's 4 hr. earlier than Eastern Standard Time). By faxing, you can get in before the phone lines open. Reservation forms to fax or mail are available on the park's website (www.nps.gov, click "Visitor Information," then "Camping" or "Shuttle Bus Info," then "Reservations"). You will need to include the dates, times of the bus or names of campgrounds you want, plus alternate dates; the names and ages of the people in your party; and the number of your Visa, MasterCard, American Express, or Discover Card, with expiration date and signature. They will add entrance and reservation fees (see "Fees," below) and figure the total. You can also pay by check if you're reserving by mail. But don't use the mail unless you write several months ahead, as you could miss getting a reservation at all. Mail to Alaska takes about 5 days from the U.S. East Coast.

A **confirmation** should be sent out by mail or fax within 2 days of receipt. Take the confirmation to the "will call" desk at the visitor center when you arrive to exchange it for a camping permit and bus ticket. If you'll be arriving after the center closes at 8pm, you must call ✆ **907/683-1266** in advance to avoid losing your site or shuttle seat.

FOR WALK-INS

Phone, mail, and fax orders are not accepted the day before the visit starts, but walk-in reservations begin 2 days out, offering the remaining 35% of the shuttle-bus seats and any leftover car-camping sites, and all sites in two primitive backcountry campgrounds, Igloo and Sanctuary. If it's a busy time of year, desirable shuttle reservations are snapped up early in the day. That means you may not get a good reservation for the day of your arrival or even the day after, only the next day after that. That's why it's so critical to reserve in advance.

On the other hand, don't despair if you arrive without reservations, as the flow of visitors rises and falls unpredictably. It's perfectly possible that you'll walk into the visitor center and get a shuttle seat on the same day.

FEES

The **park entrance fees** are $10 per family (up to 8) or $5 per person, good for 7 days; changes for 2004 are possible, but were not decided by our press time. There is no entrance station to collect the fee, but it is automatically added to your bill when you make shuttle or campground reservations. If you have a National Parks Pass or a Golden Age or Golden Access pass (see p. 46 for more information on these passes), mention it when you call in your order to get your discount.

Campground fees are $16 to $18 per night for car or RV camping (cars and RVs are permitted a short distance into the park for people who will be camping), $12 for walk-in tent camping at Riley Creek Campground, and $9 in the primitive campgrounds. A reservation fee of $4 is charged for the first night of stays in campgrounds other than Riley Creek and Savage River. (See "Where to Stay" later in the chapter for more particulars.)

Another $4 fee is charged for canceling or changing a campsite or bus ticket, except for free children's tickets. You can cancel until 6pm for campground reservations, or 2 hours before departure for bus tickets.

Tips Train Choices

Alaska Railroad executives know that their fares are high for a simple ride to Denali. As one told me, "We're selling entertainment," and that's how you should judge your choices. So, to review the entertainment: All the cars are luxurious, and some are grand and highly memorable; the rail line follows a historic, unspoiled route through beautiful countryside; there's a good chance of seeing moose and caribou; the commentary by well-trained Alaska high school students is fresh and engaging; and the food is good—you can dine in a beautiful bistro car or in a truly extraordinary white-tablecloth dining car. There are disadvantages, too. The train is very expensive. You can rent a small car for a week for the same price as one round-trip on the train. It's slow, adding 3 hours to a trip from Anchorage to the park, and when it's late, it can be very late. And, once you arrive, you have to rely on shuttles and courtesy vans to get around outside the park.

After you decide to ride the train, you have to choose which part of the train. One set of Alaska Railroad locomotives pulls the Alaska Railroad cars and three other sets of cars with full domes owned by cruise lines, two of which have seats for independent travelers (although 90% or more are filled with their older cruise-ship customers). **Princess Cruises and Tours** (✆ **800/PRINCESS;** www.princesslodges.com/rail.htm) has tall all-dome cars with table seating upstairs and dining rooms downstairs; there's plenty of head room and you can see a long way. Their special advantage is large balconies at the ends of the cars where you can ride outdoors. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served at set seatings in each dining car. Best of all are brand new cars on line in 2003, with more due in 2004, from **Holland America Tours** (✆ **800/544-2206** or 907/277-5581; www.hollandamerica.com). They're huge and comfortable, with all seats facing forward upstairs—an advantage over table seating—and dining rooms below that are large. Like Princess, Holland America Tours has set seating for meals in the dining sections of the cars. Small outdoor and lounge areas are at the rear of each pair of cars for passengers to stretch out, and there are elevators and accessible restrooms. The Alaska Railroad cars are more traditional, with all seats facing forward, and you have more freedom to get up and wander around and choose among the two dining options—not just march from one assigned seat to another. However, there is a 20-minute limit to sitting in the dome seats. Seating on all three offerings is assigned; you can't walk from one to the other, but you can walk between cars in your own train section. Fares on the cruise-line operations run even higher than the railroad's fares, but they're mainly sold (and much more advantageously priced) as parts of lodging packages with the companies' Denali hotels.

Personally, I would choose the Alaska Railroad experience because I love trains, and their cars feel more authentic and less controlled than the cruise-line offerings. All provide superb service, however, as a sort of Orient Express of the north that's as much about the ride as the destination.

Bus fees are listed in the chart "Denali Park Road Bus Facts," in section 3 of this chapter.

GETTING THERE

BY TRAIN

The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552** or 907/265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) pioneered tourism to the park before the George Parks Highway was built in 1972. In summer, trains leave both Anchorage and Fairbanks daily at 8:15am, arriving at the park from Anchorage at 3:45pm and from Fairbanks at noon, crossing and going on to the opposite city for arrival at 8:15pm in each. The fare from Anchorage to Denali is $125 one-way for adults, half price for children. The full train runs only from mid-May to mid-September, with somewhat lower fares in the first and last few weeks of the season. During the winter, the Alaska Railroad runs a single passenger car from Anchorage to Fairbanks and back once a week—a truly spectacular, truly Alaskan experience.

BY CAR

Renting a car and driving from Anchorage or Fairbanks is far cheaper and far faster than taking the train. The drive is about 4½ hours from Anchorage and 2½ hours from Fairbanks, on a good two-lane highway. Many of the views along the **Parks Highway** are equal to the views on the train, but large stretches, especially in the Matanuska and Susitna valleys, near Anchorage, have been spoiled by ugly roadside development (which you don't see from the train). A long but spectacular detour around the mess leads through **Hatcher Pass** on a mountainous gravel road open only in the summer. See "Through Hatcher Pass" in section 10 of chapter 6. Farther north from Anchorage, the Parks Highway passes through Denali State Park. If the weather's clear, you can see Mount McKinley from the pull-outs there. The state park also contains several campgrounds, hiking trails, a lake with canoe rental and a veterans' memorial.

From Fairbanks, the drive is pleasant but rarely spectacular. Allow an hour to stop in the quaint, riverside town of Nenana, where you can see an old railroad depot museum.

BY BUS

Several van and bus services inexpensively connect Anchorage and Fairbanks to Denali. Most will carry bikes and other gear for an additional fee.

Alaska Trails (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com) offers daily service between Anchorage and Fairbanks, with one bus each way, stopping at Denali, Talkeetna, and any other point on the way. In Anchorage, it leaves from the

Tips Driving Times

It isn't as far from Anchorage to Denali or Fairbanks as you might guess from looking at the train schedule, it's just that the train averages less than 40 miles per hour. The speed limit on the two-lane Parks Highway is 65 miles per hour, and traffic often goes faster. It is Alaska's fastest extended highway. A car gets from Anchorage to Fairbanks in less than 7 hours and from Anchorage to Denali in less than 5 (as opposed to 12 and 7½ hr. by rail, respectively). A road mileage chart is shown with the map on p. 6.

downtown Anchorage Youth Hostel, and in Fairbanks, from the visitor center. The one-way fare is $59 from Anchorage, $39 from Fairbanks.

The Park Connection Motorcoach Service (✆ **800/266-8625,** or 907/245-0200; www.alaskacoach.com) runs to Seward and Anchorage, with two buses daily in each direction. The fare is $69 to Anchorage, $118 to Seward. Children ride for half price.

BY AIR

The only scheduled air service to Denali is from Talkeetna, summer only (see section 10 below).

GETTING AROUND

If you take the train or bus, you'll find that most accommodations have arrangements to get you around, although this becomes less convenient as you get farther from the park entrance. Ask how courtesy transportation works when you book your room. There are cabs available, too, but they have been a poor option because of sky-high rates. If you must rely on cabs, get a firm quote when you call. One company is **Caribou Cab** (✆ **907/683-1377**). You can also take the train to Denali, rent a car there, and drop it in Fairbanks or Anchorage. You can rent a car in Healy from **Teresa's Alaska Car Rentals** (✆ **907/683-1377;** www.denalicarrental.com). A new car rental firm is located north of the park's entrance in Glitter Gulch (also known as the Nenana Canyon Area): **Drive Denali** (✆ **907/683-2237,** www.drivedenali.com).

If you drive to the park, you'll still need to take the shuttle bus, described below, to get into its heart, except under certain circumstances. You can drive past mile 14 on the park road only if you have a 3-day camping permit at Teklanika Campground, 29 miles in; then your vehicle must remain parked at the campground for the entire 3 days. The rules loosen at the end of the season, when winners of a drawing can drive the road for a few days in late September (check with the park service for lottery details). After the permit driving is over, the road is open to anyone as far as mile 30 until the snow flies; then it's maintained only as far as the headquarters, 3 miles from the entrance.

Bicycles have free access to the park road. For that option, see section 5 of this chapter.

FAST FACTS: Denali National Park

Banks A couple of ATMs are in the Glitter Gulch (Nenana Canyon) area, including one at the Lynx Creek Store and Deli. A couple more are at gas stations in Healy, 12 miles north of the park. Do your banking before leaving Anchorage or Fairbanks.

Emergencies ✆ **911** will work inside the park, but be sure to tell the operator you are within Denali National Park.

Gear Rental **Denali Mountain Morning Hostel and Lodge** (✆ **907/683-7503**), listed in full under "Where to Stay," later, rents camping gear; a complete kit is $30 for the first day, $7 each additional day. Bikes are for rent at **Denali Outdoor Center** (✆ **888/303-1925** or 907/683-1925; www.denalioutdoorcenter.com); see section 5, later in this chapter.

Hospital A **health clinic (✆ 907/683-2211)** is located in Healy, 12 miles north of the park entrance; it's open 24 hours a day for emergencies, or normal office hours for nonemergencies.

Police The **Alaska State Troopers (✆ 907/683-2232** or 907/768-2202) have a post in Healy, 12 miles north of the park, and in Cantwell, 28 miles south.

Post Office The post office is just within the park entrance, right before the Riley Creek Campground.

Stores **Riley Creek Mercantile (✆ 907/683-9246)** is at the Riley Creek Campground, near the park entrance. It's open daily from 5am to 11pm in the summer. It's an invaluable stop. Besides convenience groceries, they have firewood, some basic camping supplies, RV supplies, made-to-order sandwiches, postal services, Internet access, fax and copy service, binocular rentals, showers and laundry. A convenience store and gas station, the **Lynx Creek Store and Deli (✆ 907/683-2548)**, is on the Parks Highway in the Glitter Gulch (Nenana Canyon) area, just north of the park entrance. Do major shopping before coming to the park.

Taxes The local bed tax is 7%. There is no sales tax.

3 Denali by Shuttle Bus

Your visit to Denali will likely revolve around a ride on the shuttle bus into the park to see the wildlife and to stop for a walk in the wilderness. Some planning will make it a more successful trip.

CHOOSING YOUR DESTINATION

You can buy shuttle tickets to the Toklat (*toe*-klat) River, 53 miles into the park; the Eielson (*aisle*-son) Visitor Center at 66 miles; Wonder Lake at 85 miles; or Kantishna, at 89 miles (fares are listed in the "Denali Park Road Bus Facts" chart that accompanies this section). On any day trip, you have to go both ways, so you're in for a long drive. If you don't get off the bus along the way, the round-trip takes 6½ hours to Toklat, 8 hours to Eielson, 11 hours to Wonder Lake, and 12 hours to Kantishna.

In choosing your destination, you need to balance your stamina, your desire to save time for a day hike, and your desire to see wildlife. There are no firm rules about where wildlife shows up, but my own observations are that in the early morning, you can often see moose on the first part of the road; in midsummer, brown (grizzly) bears seem to appear most in the higher country, beyond Toklat, which also is the best area for caribou; and in the fall berry season, the grizzlies show up all along the drive.

The best views of Mount McKinley show up after mile 61, also beyond Toklat. The mountain is most likely to be visible in the morning, as clouds often pile up during the day. Going beyond Eielson to Wonder Lake provides more amazing views, including the land-covered Muldrow Glacier and many classic images of Mount McKinley. There's really no reason to go as far as Kantishna unless you are headed to a lodge there (see "Wilderness Lodges" in section 11 of this chapter). In general, I think **Eielson** is the best destination for most people, offering them the chance to see the mountain and some wildlife while leaving them some time to get out and walk (I've included ideas on where to hike later).

The Alaska-Ohio Name Game, Round 4

We've long been taught that the Athabascans of Interior Alaska named the mountain *Denali,* "the high one," or "the great one." But at least one historian contends that the word *Denal'iy* actually referred to a mountain near Anchorage, now known as Pioneer Peak, and means "one that watches," and that the word for McKinley, "the high one," is actually *Doleika.* In any event, Alaska Natives made little use of the area, as it produced little fish or game, and white men came only in search of gold. In 1896, a prospector named the mountain after William McKinley of Ohio, who was elected president of the United States that year.

All well and good, except that most Alaskans prefer the name Denali and since 1975 have petitioned to change it officially back. Ohio won't allow it. Although congressmen from Alaska and Ohio compromised on the issue in 1980, changing the name of the national park to Denali and leaving the mountain named McKinley, Alaskans have kept pushing for Denali. But the U.S. Board on Geographical Names has refused to take up the issue. It seems that the board has a rule against considering an issue that is also before Congress, and Rep. Ralph Regula of Ohio repeatedly introduces a one-paragraph bill stating that the name should stay the same. His bill never goes anywhere, but just having it introduced has been enough to stop the name board. In 1999, Alaska representative Don Young brought the issue back to life with an opposing bill to change the mountain's name to Denali, saying that Regula should name something in Ohio for McKinley. Young's bill also died quietly.

You won't be able to time your trip for good weather, as you need to book ahead. But don't despair if it rains—the sun may be out at the other end of the park. The best weather for wildlife sightings is cool, overcast skies without rain. One trick of the system that allows visitors to wait for sun is to stay at Teklanika Campground. If you drive to a campsite there, agreeing to stay for 3 days, you're eligible to buy a special shuttle ticket for $22.50 that is good for rides deeper into the park during the entire time you're staying at the campground. Wherever you stay, you can buy a three-trip pass for the price of two.

Denali can be a challenge for families. Young children will go nuts on an 8-hour bus ride, and often can't pick out the wildlife—this isn't a zoo, and most animals blend in with their surroundings. Older children also have a hard time keeping their patience on these trips, as do many adults. The only solution is to get off the bus and turn your trip into a romp in the heather. When you've had a chance to revive, catch the next bus. Besides, just because you buy a ticket to Eielson doesn't mean that you have to go that far. Keep in mind, too, that if your child normally needs a car seat, you must bring it along on the bus, or arrange to borrow one when you reserve your seats.

Denali Park Resorts also operates narrated bus tours, booked mostly as part of package tours. The **Natural History Tour** provides just a taste of the park, going 17 miles down the park road. The **Wilderness Tour** goes to Toklat when the mountain is hidden by clouds, and 8 miles farther, across Highway Pass to

Tips Bus Concerns & Complaints

The Denali concessionaire uses only school bus–type vehicles over the park road. We've received complaints from readers who allegedly were stuck on these buses while other visitors toured the park in luxury motor coaches, but this just isn't so: Only these tough, lightweight buses are allowed on the narrow, gravel park road. I've also heard from visitors complaining of white knuckles on the ride. It's true the buses act a bit like mountain goats on the heights of Polychrome Pass and near Eielson Visitor Center. The road climbs without guardrails, and if you're afraid of heights, it might not be to your liking.

Stony Hill, when it is visible. Food is provided, but you can't get off the bus along the way, and the route skips the beautiful grizzly and caribou habitat toward the Eielson Visitor Center. The **Kantishna Roadhouse** (listed in section 11 of this chapter) offers a 190-mile, 13-hour marathon with lunch and a dog sled and gold-panning program at the halfway mark, at the lodge. It's well done, with commentary, but you can't get off the bus along the way, and the return trip may be too rushed to stop for all wildlife sightings. The cost is $115.

GETTING READY

Reserve your shuttle ticket for as early as you can stand to get up in the morning. This strategy will give you more time for day hikes and enhance your chances of seeing the mountain and wildlife. Many animals are more active in the morning, especially on hot days. During peak season, the first bus leaves the visitor center at 5:15am and then one bus leaves roughly every 15 to 30 minutes after that in the morning. A few buses leave in the afternoon, mostly to pick up stragglers on the way back, returning late under the midnight sun.

By taking an early bus, you have more time to get off along the way for a hike, walking back to the road and getting the next bus that comes along with a spare seat. Time it right, and you could have more than 8 hours for hiking plus a tour of most of the park road before returning on a late bus. (To be on the safe side, don't push it to the very last bus.) The sun won't set until after 11pm May through July and it will be light all night. If you need to get back to the park entrance at a certain time, leave yourself plenty of time, because after getting off your westbound bus, you can't reserve seats going back the other way, and you may have to wait an hour for a bus with room to take you.

Before you leave for the visitor center to get on your shuttle bus, you'll need a packed lunch and plenty of water. You should wear sturdy walking shoes and layers of warm and lighter clothing with rain gear packed; you should have binoculars or a spotting scope at the ready; and you should have insect repellent. You may also want a copy of Kim Heacox's worthwhile booklet ***Denali Road Guide,*** available for $6 at the visitor center bookstore and published by the Alaska Natural History Association (listed in section 2 under "Visitor Information"). It provides a milepost commentary you can follow as you ride. ANHA also publishes guides to Denali birds, mammals, geology, and trails. If you'll be doing any extensive day hiking, you may also want to bring a detailed topographic map printed on waterproof plastic (published by Trails Illustrated and sold for $9.95 from the visitor center or by ordering from ANHA) as well as a compass; if you're just going to walk a short distance off the road, you won't need such preparations.

Denali Park Road Bus Facts

Bus		Purpose	Route	Frequency	Fare
DPR courtesy shuttle	Links Denali Park Resorts hotels to park entrance	Hotels 1 mile north and 7 miles south	Continuous loop	Free, even if not staying within park at a DPR hotel	
Riley Creek Loop	Links facilities within park entrance area	Visitor center, Riley Creek Campground, rail depot	Continuous loop	Free	
Savage River shuttle	Public transport to hiking near the Savage River, which can also be reached by car	From visitor center to Savage River Day use area, about 14 miles into the park	Every 1 to 2 hours	Free	
Camper shuttle (Green Bus)	Access to campgrounds beyond the park entrance	From the visitor center to Wonder Lake, Campground, 85 miles into the park	Several times a day	$22.50 adults, half price ages 15–17, free 14 and younger	
Backcountry shuttle (or just "the shuttle") (Green bus)	General access to the park and wildlife viewing; limited commentary, depending on the driver; no food service	From the visitor center as far as Kantishna, 89 miles away through the park	Every 30 minutes to Eielson Visitor Center, every hour to Wonder Lake, once daily to Kantishna	$17.50 to Toklat, $22.50 to Eielson, $31 to Wonder Lake, $33.75 to Kantishna; half price ages 15–17, free 14 and younger	
Tundra Wilderness Tour (Tan bus)	6- to 8-hour guided bus tour with lunch provided; passengers may not get off en route	From the visitor center to the Toklat River or Highway Pass, 53 to 61 miles into the park	Twice daily	$75.50 adults, half price ages 14 and younger (includes park entrance fee)	
Natural History Tour (Tan bus)	3-hour guided bus tour at the edge of the park	From the visitor center 17 miles into the park	Three times daily	$41 adults, half price ages 14 and younger (includes park entrance fee)	
Kantishna Roadhouse bus	All-day bus tour to a lodge in Kantishna and back (see section 11 of this chapter)	From the park entrance 95 miles to Kantishna	Once a day	$115, no discount for children, no children under 5	

ON YOUR WAY

There are no reserved seats on the bus, but if you arrive early you can find a place on the left side, which has the best views on the way out. Most bus riders will see grizzly bears, caribou, Dall sheep, and moose, and occasionally wolves, but, as one driver said, the animals aren't union workers, and it's possible that you won't see any at all. Of course, you have to stay on the bus when animals are present.

The shuttle-bus drivers generally offer commentary about the sights on the road, but they aren't required to do so. Some do a great job and some don't say much. The tour bus drivers do a running commentary.

A ROAD LOG

Here are some of the highlights along the road (check the visitor center or the park service information handouts to confirm times of the guided walks):

MILE 9 In clear weather, this is the closest spot to the park entrance with a view of Mount McKinley. This section also is a likely place to see moose, especially in the fall rutting season.

MILE 14 At the end of the paved road at the Savage River Bridge, this is generally as far as private vehicles can go. A park service checkpoint stops anyone who doesn't have a proper permit. From the parking lot by the bridge, a simple climb over dry tundra leads to Primrose Ridge, also known as Mount Wright.

MILE 17 The portable toilets here are as far as the Natural History Tour bus goes.

MILE 29 An hour and 10 minutes into the drive, a large rest stop overlooks the Teklanika River, with flush toilets, the last plumbing until the Eielson Visitor Center. The Teklanika, like many other rivers on Alaska's glacier-carved terrain, is a braided river—a stream wandering in a massive gravel streambed that's much too big for it. The braided riverbeds, sometimes miles wide, were created by water from fast-melting glaciers at the end of the last ice age. Each is kept free of vegetation by its river, which constantly changes course as it spreads the debris of rock and dust from the glaciers. Flat plains in glacial terrain usually are laid down by this mechanism.

MILE 34 Craggy Igloo Mountain is a likely place to see Dall sheep. Without binoculars, they'll just look like white dots. Manageable climbs on Igloo, Cathedral, and Sable mountains start along the road in the section from Igloo Creek to Sable Pass.

MILE 38–43 Sable Pass, a critical habitat area for bears, is closed to people. A half-eaten sign helps explain why. Bears show up here mostly in the fall. This is the start of the road's broad alpine vistas.

Tips Shuttle-Bus Etiquette

It's common courtesy on the shuttle bus to yell out when you see wildlife so others can see it, too. The driver will stop and everyone will rush to your side of the bus. After you've had a look give someone else a chance to look out your window or get a picture. Try to be quiet and don't stick yourself, your camera, or anything else out of the bus. You will scare away the animals or, worse, help habituate them to humans.

MILE 46 Here you'll find the top of 5-mile-wide Polychrome Pass, the most scenic point on the ride, and a toilet break, 2 hours and 25 minutes into the trip. Caribou look like specks when they pass in the great valley below you, known as the Plain of Murie after Adolph Murie, a biologist who pioneered study here and helped develop the park service's scientific ethic (the name does not always appear on maps, however). Note how the mountains of colored rock on either side of the plain match up—they once were connected before glacial ice carved this valley. Huge rocks on its floor are glacial erratics, plucked from the bedrock by moving ice and left behind when the ice melted.

MILE 53 The Toklat River, another braided river, is a flat plain of gravel with easy walking. The glaciers that feed the river are 10 miles upstream; the river bottom is habitat for bears, caribou, and wolves, and a good place for picnics.

MILE 58 Highway Pass is the highest point on the road. In good weather, dramatic views of Mount McKinley start here. The alpine tundra from here to the Eielson Visitor Center is inviting for walking, but beware: Tundra is soft underfoot and can conceal holes and declivities that can twist an ankle.

MILE 64 Thorofare Pass, where the road becomes narrow and winding, is a good area to look for bears and caribou. Bus drivers know best where the animals are on any particular day, since they talk to fellow drivers.

MILE 66 The **Eielson Visitor Center,** the end of most bus trips, has flush toilets, a covered picnic area, and a small area of displays where rangers answer questions. Among the exhibits is one explaining why you probably can't see the mountain from this best of vantage points, just 33 miles from its summit (Mount McKinley creates its own weather and is visible only about a third of the time in the summer). There has been a seismograph on display (it may be removed) registering the frequent small earthquakes that accompany McKinley's prodigious growth—about an inch every 3 years. This region is a jumble of rocks pushed together by the expanding Pacific tectonic plate; the mountain, and the whole Alaska Range, are folding upward in that great collision. Starting in mid-June, a ranger-guided tundra walk occurs daily at 1pm, lasting no more than an hour; take a 9am or earlier bus to be there on time. If you leave the bus here for a hike, you can get a ride back later by signing up on the standby list kept by a ranger.

MILE 68.5 The incredibly rugged terrain to the north is the earth and vegetation covering Muldrow Glacier. The ice extends to McKinley's peak and was an early and arduous route for climbers; these days, they fly to a base camp at 7,200-feet elevation on the Kahiltna Glacier, on the south side. McKinley's glaciers, falling 15,000 vertical feet and extending up to 45 miles in length, are among the world's greatest. The Ruth Glacier has carved the Great Gorge on the south side, which is almost 6,000 feet deep above the ice and another 4,000 below—almost twice the depth of the Grand Canyon. The park road comes within a mile of the Muldrow's face, then continues through wet, rolling terrain past beaver ponds, and finally descends into a small spruce patch near mile 82.

MILE 86 Wonder Lake campground is the closest road point to Mount McKinley, 27 miles away. Some buses continue another ½ hour to Kantishna. The fact that McKinley looks so massive from this considerable distance, dominating the sky, is testament to its stupendous size. You'll likely never see a larger object on this planet. From its base (your elevation here is only 2,000 ft.) to its top is an elevation gain greater than that of any other mountain on earth. Other mountains are taller overall, but they stand on higher ground.

4 Denali on Foot: Day Hiking & Backpacking

DAY HIKING IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

One of the unique aspects of Denali is the lack of developed trails—you really can take off in any direction. I've covered some of the best hiking areas above, in "A Road Log," including Primrose Ridge, Teklanika River, Igloo and Sable mountains, and the Toklat River. The park service long resisted building any trails, but finally gave in and recognized some trails visitors had created, including those at Eielson Visitor Center and the new 2-mile path that leads from the Wonder Lake Campground to the McKinley River Bar, which extends far to the east and west. You can drive or take a free shuttle to the Savage River Day Use Area, at mile 15, which has a 1-mile loop trail and longer, informal routes for great alpine tundra hiking. No permit is needed for day hiking.

The broad, hard gravel flats of the **braided riverbeds,** such as the McKinley, Toklat, Teklanika, and Savage, are among the best routes for hiking in the park. **Stony Creek,** leading up a gorge to the north from the road at mile 60, is an excellent walk into the mountains. You can also hike on the tundra, of which there are two varieties: The **wet tundra** lies on top of permanently frozen ground called permafrost; it's mushy at best, like hiking on foam rubber laid over bowling balls. At worst, it's swamp. **Dry tundra** clothes the mountainsides, and generally makes for firmer footing and easier walking. The brush and stunted forest of the region are virtually impenetrable.

The major risks of hiking here relate to the weather and rivers. It can get cold and wet in midsummer, and if you're not prepared with warm, waterproof clothing, you could suffer the spiraling chill of hypothermia. The rivers are dangerous because of their fast flow and icy cold water. Experienced backcountry trekkers plan their routes to avoid crossing sizable rivers. See the notes on river crossings, hypothermia, and getting lost in the "Outdoors Health & Safety" section of chapter 2. Bears, which people worry most about, have never killed a Denali visitor. Tips on avoiding them are in chapter 2, and are widely distributed at the park.

For a first foray beyond the trails, consider joining one of the park service guided hikes. There are two daily **Discovery Hikes,** one explores near the Eielson Visitor Center and another takes place nearer to the entrance end of the park. The ranger takes only 15 hikers, leading them into wilderness while teaching them about the nature of the places they visit. Plan a 5- to 11-hour day, including the shuttle ride; actual hiking time is about 4 hours. The hikes generally are not too strenuous for families with school-age children, although it is wise to inquire how steep it will be if you have any doubts. They cost no more than the price of your shuttle ticket. You need to wear hiking shoes or boots and bring food, water, and rain gear. Reserve a place in advance, as hikes fill up in July and you'll need to know when and where to catch the special bus. Rangers also lead walks on the short Savage River Loop, 15 miles into the park. The **Eielson Stroll,** at 1pm daily starting in early June, is a short, guided walk from the

Tips Ranger Programs in the Park

Check the park newspaper, *The Alpenglow,* for ranger talks and slide shows that happen as often as several times a day around the entrance ("front-country") area and at the Riley Creek, Savage River, and Teklanika campgrounds.

Eielson Visitor Center, at mile 66 on the park road. Check in at the visitor center for late word on all the hikes before heading out on a long bus trip.

DAY HIKING IN THE PARK ENTRANCE AREA

There are several trails at the park entrance, weaving through the boreal forest around small lakes, and a new one, not completed at this writing, to connect the area to Glitter Gulch. This new trail, called the Jonesville Trail, is free of barriers to people with disabilities, and crosses the Nenana River on a footbridge to run from the south end of the commercial area to Riley Creek Mercantile Road, providing the first access into the Park for pedestrians without going along the highway. Three new interpretive trails are also planned for completion in time for the 2004 season. Only one strenuous trail leads from the entrance area, but it is a gem. The steep and spectacular hike to the **Mount Healy overlook** is a 5-mile round-trip. That trail breaks through the tree line to slopes of tundra and rock outcroppings, where you can see just how tiny the pocket of human development at the park entrance area is: The Alaska Range and its foothills extend far into the distance. If you continue on an all-day hike right to the top of Mount Healy, you can see all the way to McKinley on a clear day. The *Alpenglow* park newspaper contains a brief guide for the trails and may be the best source of up-to-date information on the new trails.

BACKPACKING

Imagine backpacking over your own area of wilderness, without trails, limits, or the chance of seeing other people. And there's no need to retrace all of your route by foot to get back to civilization: Anywhere you meet the 89-mile Denali Park Road you can catch a bus back to the world of people. Any experienced backpacker should consider a backcountry trek at Denali.

Yes, it can be challenging. Hiking on the tundra, broken-rock mountainsides, and braided rivers is tiring, and it's easy to fall or turn an ankle. You must be prepared for river crossings and cold weather, know how to find your way with a map and compass, and know how to avoid attracting bears. But if you've done a backpacking trip in a less challenging area, you surely can manage it here, so long as you prepare and don't underestimate the additional time you'll need in trail-less terrain. Nor do you need to trek far—you can camp just a few miles off the road and still be in a place that looks like no one has ever been there before.

You must be flexible about where you're going and be prepared for any kind of terrain, because you can't choose the **backcountry unit** you will explore until you arrive at the backcountry desk at the visitor center and find out what's available. This information, and a map of the units, is posted on a board behind the desk. Groups of four or more may have a hard time finding a place to hike, but there's almost always *somewhere* to go. You can reserve permits only 1 day in advance, so you're unlikely to get one for the day you arrive, but you can reserve permits for continuation of your trip for up to 14 days at the same time. The first night of a trip is the hard one to get—for one thing, you can reserve only units that are contiguous to the park road for the first night—but after that, each night gets progressively easier. A couple of rangers are there to help you through the process.

Buy the ***Denali National Park and Preserve*** **topographical map,** published by Trails Illustrated, available for $9.95 from the Alaska Natural History Association, listed earlier under "Visitor Information." Printed on plastic, the map includes the boundaries of the 43 backcountry units and much other valuable information. You'll also want a copy of ***Backcountry Companion,*** by Jon Nierenberg, which describes conditions and routes in each area and is published

and sold by ANHA for $8.95. You'll find it at the visitor center, or you can glance at a well-thumbed copy kept at the backcountry desk.

The alpine units from the Toklat River to Eielson Visitor Center are the most popular. That's where you get broad views and can walk across heathery dry tundra in any direction. But to travel far, even there, you may have to climb over rugged, rocky terrain, and the tundra can be deceptively difficult to walk on—it's soft and hides ankle-turning holes. The wooded units are the least popular, since bushwhacking through overgrown land is anything but fun. The best routes for making time here (and anywhere in the Alaska Bush) are along the braided river valleys and streambeds. Be ready to walk in water. You'll have to take the **camper bus** to get to your backcountry unit, at a cost of $22.50 for each adult.

Before venturing into the backcountry, everyone is required to watch an **orientation film** called *Hiking the Denali Wilderness.* Among its goals is to teach you how not to attract bears, but some people find that intimidating. Don't worry, just follow the instructions and you will be OK. The park service provides bear-resistant food containers in which you are required to carry all your food. Guns are not permitted in the park; carrying a pepper spray such as Counter Assault for self-defense from bears is allowed. Bear safety is covered in chapter 2 under "Outdoors Health & Safety."

Before you decide to go backpacking at Denali, however, you may want to broaden your thinking—if you're up to a cross-country hike without a trail, there are tens of millions of acres in Alaska available for backpacking that don't require a permit. Check with the Alaska Public Lands Information Center in Anchorage or Fairbanks for ideas about road-accessible dry tundra and other suitable areas on the Denali Highway (see earlier), and on the Dalton Highways and in Wrangell–St. Elias National Park (in chapter 9). I've listed some great trail hikes in chapter 7, under Chugach National Forest, and in chapter 9, in the sections on Chena Hot Springs Road and the Steese Highway.

5 Activities Within the Park

MOUNTAIN BIKING

A bicycle provides special freedom in the park. Bicyclists can ride past the checkpoint where cars have to turn back, at mile 14 on the park road. Park campgrounds have bike stands, and you can take a bike on the shuttle or camper bus, so you can get a lift when you need one, or ride one way. The longest stretch on the park road between campgrounds is 52 miles. On the downside, the buses kick up a lot of dust, and bikes are not permitted off-road. Pick up a copy of the bicycle rules from the backcountry desk before you start. **Denali Outdoor Center** (✆ **888/303-1925** or 907/683-1925; www.denalioutdoorcenter.com), located just north of the overlook in the Nenana Canyon (Glitter Gulch) area, rents front-suspension bikes for $40 for 24 hours, $25 for 6 hours, with discounts for longer rentals.

SLED DOG DEMONSTRATIONS

In the winter, rangers patrol the park by dog sled, as they have for decades. In the summer, to keep the dogs active and amuse visitors, they run a sled on wheels around the kennel, and a ranger gives a talk, normally at 10am, 2pm, and 4pm. Although it's no substitute for seeing dogs run on snow, you can get a sense of their speed and enthusiasm from the show. It was the highlight of my older son's trip to Denali when he was 3 years old. There's no parking at the kennels,

near the headquarters at mile 3.4 on the park road, so take a free bus from the visitor center that leaves 40 minutes before each show. Times are listed in the *Alpenglow* park newspaper.

FISHING

Fishing is poor at Denali. There are grayling in some rivers, but the water is too cold and silty for most fish. Those who don't care if they catch anything, however, do enjoy fishing in this wonderful scenery. You don't need a fishing license within park boundaries, but you do have to throw back everything you catch. Bring your own gear.

CLIMBING MOUNT MCKINLEY

Because of its altitude and weather, Mount McKinley is among the world's most challenging climbs. Summer temperatures at the high camp average 20° to 40°F below zero (–28°C to –40°C). If you're looking here for advice, you're certainly not up to an **unguided climb.** A **guided climb** is a challenging and expensive endeavor requiring months of conditioning and most of a month on the mountain. Get names of guides from the park service's **Talkeetna Ranger Station,** P.O. Box 588, Talkeetna, AK 99676 (✆ **907/733-2231**). The climbing season lasts from late April or early May until the snow gets too soft, in late June or early July. Climbers fly from Talkeetna to a 7,200-foot base camp on Kahiltna Glacier. About 1,200 climbers attempt the mountain annually in about 300 parties; about half typically make it to the top each year, and usually a few die trying.

6 Attractions & Activities Outside the Park

FLIGHTSEEING

Getting a good, close look at Mount McKinley itself is best accomplished by air. Frequently you can see McKinley from above the clouds even when you can't see it from the ground. Best of all, some Talkeetna operators that fly mountaineers also land visitors on the mountain, a unique and unforgettable experience (see section 10 of this chapter). Regardless of how close you approach the mountain, a flight shows how incredibly rugged the Alaska Range is.

Small planes and helicopters fly from the park airstrip, from private heliports and airstrips along the Parks Highway, and from the Healy airstrip. **Denali Air** (✆ **907/683-2261;** www.denaliair.com) has an office in the Nenana Canyon area, and operates flights at mile 229.5 of the Parks Highway. An hour-long flight going within a mile of the mountain costs $220 for adults, $110 for children ages 2 to 12. **Era Helicopters** (✆ **800/843-1947** or 907/683-2574; www.flightseeingtours.com), with bases in Denali and Talkeetna, has 50-minute flights for $245, including van pickup from hotels in the area. Their heli-hikes land for a 4-hour walk on a mountain ridgeline, the difficulty tailored to the customers' ability. They also offer a 75-minute glacier-landing flight. Both tours cost $339 per person.

RAFTING

Rafting on the Nenana River, bordering the park along the Parks Highway, is fun and popular. Several commercial guides float two stretches of the river: an upper portion, where the water is smoother and the guides explain passing scenery; and the lower portion, where the river roars through the rock-walled Nenana Canyon, and rafts take on huge splashes of silty, glacial water through Class III and IV rapids. Guides take children as young as 5 on the slow trip (although I wouldn't let my kid go at that age); the youngest accepted for the fast portion is

First to the Top of Mount McKinley

It's the biggest. That's why climbers risk their lives on Mount McKinley. You can see the mountain from Anchorage, more than 100 miles away. On a flight across Alaska, McKinley stands out grandly over waves of other mountains. It's more than a mile taller than the tallest peak in the other 49 states. It's a great white triangle, always covered in snow, tall but also massive and strong.

The first group to try to climb Mount McKinley came in 1903, led by Judge James Wickersham, who also helped explore Washington's Olympic Peninsula before it became a national park. His group made it less than halfway up, but on the trip they found gold in the Kantishna Hills, setting off a small gold rush that led to the first permanent human settlement in the park area. Wickersham later became the Alaska Territory's nonvoting delegate to Congress and introduced the bill that created the national park, but the government was never able to get back land in the Kantishna area from the gold miners. Today, that land is the site of four luxurious wilderness lodges, right in the middle of the park.

On September 27, 1906, renowned world explorer Dr. Frederick Cook announced to the world by telegraph that he had reached the summit of Mount McKinley after a lightning-fast climb, covering more than 85 miles and 19,000 vertical feet in 13 days with one other man, a blacksmith, at his side. On his return to New York, Cook was lionized as a conquering explorer and published a popular book of his summit diary and photographs.

In 1909, Cook again made history, announcing that he had beat Robert Peary to the North Pole. Both returned to civilization from their competing treks at about the same time. Again, Cook was the toast of the town. His story began to fall apart, however, when his Eskimo companions mentioned that he'd never been out of sight of land. After being paid by Peary to come forward, Cook's McKinley companion also recanted. A year later, Cook's famous summit photograph was re-created—on a peak 19 miles away and 15,000 feet lower than the real summit.

In 1910, disgusted with Cook, four prospectors from Fairbanks took a more Alaskan approach to the task. Without fanfare or special supplies—they carried doughnuts and hot chocolate on their incredible final ascent—they marched up the mountain carrying a large wooden flagpole they could plant on top to prove they'd made it. But on arriving at the summit, they realized that they'd climbed the slightly shorter

age 12. White-water rafting carries risks you shouldn't discount just because a lot of people do it, as a fatal accident on the supposedly easy tour confirmed in 1999. Each session takes 2 to 2½ hours, including safety briefings, suiting up, and riding to and from the put-in and take-out points. Prices vary from $60 to $90 for adults, with discounted rates for children (from $10 less to half off).

Denali Outdoor Center (✆ **888/303-1925** or 907/683-1925; www.denalioutdoorcenter.com) is a professional operation, offering rafting trips and

north peak. Weather closed in, so they set up the pole there and descended without attempting the south peak. Then, when they got back to Fairbanks, no one could see the pole, and they were accused of trying to pull off another hoax.

In 1913, Episcopal archdeacon Hudson Stuck organized the first successful climb to reach the *real* summit—and reported he saw the pole on the other peak. Harry Karstens led the climb (he would become the park's first superintendent in 1917), and the first person to stand at the summit was an Alaska Native, Walter Harper.

Although McKinley remains one of the world's most difficult climbs, about 10,000 people have made it to the top since Hudson Stuck's party. Since 1980 the number of climbers has boomed. Garbage and human waste disposal are a major problem. One recent June day, 69 climbers made it to the summit. In 1970, only 124 made the attempt all year; now more than 1,200 try to climb the peak each year, with about half making it to the summit. The cold, fast-changing weather is what usually stops people. From late April into early July, climbers fly from the town of Talkeetna to a base camp at 7,200 feet elevation on the Kahiltna Glacier. From there, it takes an average of about 18 days to get to the top, through temperatures as cold as –40°F (–40°C).

Climbers lose fingers, toes, and other parts to frostbite, or suffer other, more severe injuries. More than 90 climbers have died on the mountain, not counting plane crashes. During the season, the park service stations a number of rescue rangers and an emergency medical clinic at the 14,200-foot level of the mountain, and keeps a high-altitude helicopter ready to go after climbers in trouble. In 2002, under pressure from Congress, the park service started charging climbers a $150-a-head rescue fee before they began their climb to offset rescue costs. They and the military spend about half a million dollars a year rescuing climbers, and sometimes much more. In 1998, a volunteer ranger lost his life trying to save a Canadian who had fallen; he was one of three people who died that year. In 2000, three volunteer rangers and their pilot died trying to fly into the Kahiltna Glacier base camp. In 2002, a Canadian climber fell to his death on McKinley and three brothers died on nearby Mount Foraker. The 2003 season began tragically with another plane crash. Most of the climbing deaths are from falls, but cold and altitude also take many and may contribute to the falls. Monuments to those who never returned are in the cemetery near the airstrip in Talkeetna.

instruction in river techniques. Although several other firms compete and you can shop around, DOC's strong safety ethic would be the decisive factor in my choice. Moreover, they provide specialized dry suits that keep passengers comfortable, not just Mustang flotation suits that allow you to get drenched. DOC also offers self-paddled inflatable kayaks, popular with those who want to take an active hand in their float. In any event, plan a shower afterward—the silt in the river water will stick to your skin and hair.

HORSEBACK RIDING

There is no riding in the park itself, but various companies offer rides in similar terrain outside the Park's boundaries. One- to two-hour rides cost from $65 to $95. Among the operators are **Denali Saddle Safaris** (✆ **907/683-1200;** www.denalisaddlesafaris.com), which also offers pack trips and extended journeys; and **Tumbling B Ranch** (✆ **907/683-6000;** www.tumblingbranch.com).

7 Where to Stay

PARK SERVICE CAMPGROUNDS

I've explained how to make camping reservations in section 2 of this chapter, under "The Reservations System." Note that reservation fees may be added to camping fees.

Only Riley Creek Campground is open after September (water is off in winter). The rest reopen when the snow is gone in May, except Wonder Lake, which opens in June.

CAR-ACCESSIBLE CAMPGROUNDS

In addition to these, see **Teklanika River campground** under "Bus-Accessible Campgrounds," below; you can drive to it as long as your stay is at least 3 nights.

Riley Creek ★ This large campground right across the road from the visitor center is best for those who want to be in the middle of things. It's near the Riley Creek Mercantile, with its showers, laundry, Internet access, and a sewage dump station, and a free shuttle comes to the campground to provide transportation to other facilities. Reservations are relatively easy to get. Sites are wooded with small birch and spruce, and they're adequately separated, but this isn't exactly wilderness camping. Twenty-seven walk-in sites are for tents only.

Near the visitor center. 147 sites; RVs or tents. $18 vehicle sites, $12 walk-in sites. Campfires allowed; flush toilets.

Savage River ★★ On the taiga—the thin spruce forest and tundra—this is a wonderful campground with unforgettable views. Campers can wander from their sites on some of the park's best hikes. This is the only campground you can readily drive to that's away from the activity at the park entrance. There is no telephone. You can drive in and out whenever you wish.

On Denali Park Rd., 13 miles from entrance. 33 sites; RVs and cars or tents. $12 per site. Campfires allowed; flush toilets.

BUS-ACCESSIBLE CAMPGROUNDS

To use these campgrounds, you'll need a camper ticket on the shuttle bus, which costs $22.50 for adults, half price ages 15 to 17, free ages 14 and under. There

Tips Keeping Clean at Denali

The only showers within the park are at **Riley Creek Mercantile,** a store near the Riley Creek Campground. You pay by the shower, so there's no coin-operated timer to feed. This new facility also has laundry machines and other services (see "Fast Facts," earlier in this chapter). You can also wash your clothes and shower outside of the park boundaries at **McKinley RV and Campground** in Healy, covered below under "Commercial Campgrounds." The larger park campgrounds have the typical cold-water bathrooms found in the national parks, while others have vault toilets.

are no businesses and no phones beyond the park entrance area; you must bring in everything you need. Wildlife management concerns sometimes close these campgrounds unexpectedly.

Igloo Creek & Sanctuary River ★ These two primitive campgrounds, each with seven tent sites, offer a backcountry experience away from cars. There's a $9 camping fee and no campfires are allowed, only stoves, so bring a camping stove. You can't reserve sites in advance; you can only reserve in person at the visitor center when you arrive. Both campgrounds have only chemical toilets. In 2003, Igloo was closed temporarily due to wolf activity.

On Denali Park Rd., 23 miles and 34 miles from park entrance, respectively. 14 sites; tents only. $9 per site. No campfires; stoves permitted; chemical toilets.

Teklanika River ★★ This is the only car campground beyond the checkpoint on the Park Road. To hold down traffic, the park service has allowed campers to drive in only if they won't move their vehicle for 3 days. In the past, visitors for shorter times had arrived and departed on the camper bus and camped in tents, but in 2003 tent camping was disallowed at Teklanika because wolves in the area were showing too much interest in the tents. The situation in 2004 is hard to predict. Sites are among the small trees of the boreal forest. The big advantage of staying here is that you begin the morning much closer to the heart of the park, cutting the time you have to spend on the bus. Plus, you can buy one bus ticket for the regular price and use it as many times as you wish during your whole 3-day stay. Using this base for 3 days, you can really explore different areas of the park in varying kinds of weather.

On Denali Park Rd., 29 miles from entrance; access by camper bus, or drive in with a minimum 3-night stay. 53 sites; RVs allowed, tents may be allowed. $16 per site. Campfires allowed; flush toilets.

Wonder Lake ★★★ It takes almost 6 hours to get here on the bus, but this campground by placid Wonder Lake, at the foot of Mount McKinley, puts you in the most beautiful and coveted area of the park. Set among a patch of spruce trees on the mountain side of the lake, the sites can be tough to get because this area is so popular. On the other hand, the mosquitoes can be horrendous. Bring a camping stove as campfires are not permitted.

On Denali Park Rd., 85 miles from entrance. 28 sites; tents only. $16 per site. No campfires, stoves permitted; flush toilets.

COMMERCIAL CAMPGROUNDS

There are a number of commercial campgrounds in the area directly outside of the park.

Denali Grizzly Bear Cabins and Campground (✆ **907/683-2696;** www.alaskaone.com/dengrzly) is about 7 miles south of the park entrance at mile 231.1 on the Parks Highway. The establishment has some exposed sites and others on a hillside among small trees. Small cabins and tent cabins dot the property as well; they range from $49 without a bathroom to $168 for a unit with a kitchen and full bathroom. There is a coin-operated shower. Tent sites are $17.50 for up to four people, with electrical and water hookups $6 more.

A campground with birch trees and attractive sites is 10 miles north of the park, in Healy. **McKinley RV and Campground,** at mile 248.5 on the Parks Highway (✆ **800/478-2562** or 907/683-2379; www.mtaonline.net/~rvcampak), has a deli and espresso bar, a gas station, token-operated laundry, and hot showers. Basic tent sites are $16.25, full hookups $27.

HOTELS

Patterns of land ownership and the uncontrolled development around Denali have led to a hodgepodge of roadside hotels, cabins, lodges, campgrounds, and restaurants in pockets arrayed along more than 20 miles of the Parks Highway. There are rooms of good quality in each of the pockets, but the going rates vary widely.

The most expensive rooms, and the first booked, are in the immediate vicinity of the park entrance. Next are the hotels south of the park. Both these areas are entirely seasonal. The best deals are in **Healy,** 12 miles north of the park, where you can find a room for $50 less than a comparable room near the park entrance or south of the park entrance. You can find a few links to Healy B&B websites through the **Healy Chamber of Commerce** (www.denalichamber.com, click "Directory"). Of course, if you don't have a car, it's most convenient to stay in or near the park.

The other choices are **Talkeetna,** the back door to the park (described in section 10 of this chapter); or a wilderness lodge in the **Kantishna** area or outside the park (see section 11 of this chapter).

Despite their high prices, rooms can be hard to find in the high season, and it's wise to book well ahead.

NEAR THE PARK

This area, known formally as Nenana Canyon or more commonly as "Glitter Gulch," extends about a mile north of the park entrance on the Parks Highway. Two huge hotels that primarily serve package-tour passengers dominate the area. These are the **Denali Princess Lodge,** Mile 238.5, Parks Hwy. (✆ **800/426-0500** reservations, 907/683-2282 local; fax 907/683-1307; www.princesslodges.com), and the **McKinley Chalet Resort,** Mile 239.1, Parks Hwy. (book through Denali Park Resorts, under "Visitor Information," earlier). Rack rates are high at each of these places, but you can stay for much less if you arrive on one of the days when the flow of cruise-ship passengers is down, or early or late in the season, or if you book one of the hotel's packages. McKinley Chalet Resort remodeled its public spaces in grand style in 2003 and it is now an excellent hotel. Good deals are to be had there as packages with the Alaska Railroad, or out of peak season.

Since most readers of this book are independent travelers, I've concentrated on smaller lodgings that cater to individual bookings. In addition to those described in full below, you'll find good standard rooms at **Denali River View Inn,** Mile 238.4, Parks Hwy. (✆ **866/683-2663** or 907/683-2663; www.denaliriverviewinn.com), for $144 double; and at **Denali Sourdough Cabins,** Mile 238.5, Parks Hwy. (✆ **800/544-0970** or 907/683-2773; www.denalisourdoughcabins.com), which has comfortable little cabins in the woods below the highway for around $150. Each cabin has a private bathroom.

All of the hotels in this area are open only during the tourist season, roughly from May 15 to September 15.

Denali Bluffs Hotel ★★ A series of 12 buildings on a steep mountainside looks down on the Nenana Canyon area from above the highway. The light, tastefully decorated rooms have two double beds and good amenities, and those on the upper floor have vaulted ceilings and balconies with great views. The courtesy van will take you anywhere in the area. The same people own the **Grande Denali Lodge,** which perches impossibly high above the Nenana Canyon and charges a bit more for the view: $199 double in the high season. Use caution and observe the mirrors at the switchbacks on the gravel road up

from the highway. Contact information is for Denali Bluffs, but the toll free number and website are good for both the Denali Bluffs Hotel and the Grande Denali Lodge.

Mile 238.4, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 72460, Fairbanks, AK 99707). ✆ **866/683-8500** or 907/683-8500. Fax 907/683-8599. www.denalialaska.com. 112 units. High season $185 double; low season $132 double. Extra person $15. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker.

Denali Crow's Nest Log Cabins Perched in five tiers on the side of Sugarloaf Mountain above the Nenana Canyon area, these cabins look down on Horseshoe Lake and the other, larger hotels. The regularly updated cabins are roomy and comfortable, especially those on the 100 and 200 level. All cabins have private bathrooms. The log cabins and the warmth of the Crowfoot family create a truer Alaskan atmosphere than the modern, standard rooms that fill the canyon. You spend a lot of time climbing stairs, however; and the rooms have shower enclosures, not tubs. All rooms are nonsmoking. The restaurant, **The Overlook,** is recommended separately under "Where to Dine," later in this chapter.

Mile 238.5, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 70), Denali National Park, AK 99755. ✆ **888/917-8130** or 907/683-2723. Fax 907/683-2323. www.denalicrowsnest.com. 39 cabins. High season $162 cabin for 2; low season $79 cabin for 2. Extra person $10. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; tour desk; courtesy van.

IN HEALY

Healy is 10 miles north of the park entrance, but a world away. It's a year-round community with an economy based partly on a coal mine. It sits in a large, windy valley with a few patches of stunted trees and big, open spaces of tundra. There are many hotels and B&Bs with rooms that cost from $20 to $90 less than those near the park. They say the water tastes better, too. On the downside, you need a car to stay in Healy.

Earthsong Lodge This place is well off the beaten path, but it's worth the trip to stay in an authentically Alaskan dwelling and meet the interesting owners—year-round residents Jon and Karin Nierenberg. The main lodge building, which has a coffeehouse for meals, and the individual cabins are all solid log construction. The cabins, with one or two bedrooms, have quilts on the beds and other cozy features, as well as private bathrooms (these are operational only in the summer; in the off season, guests use a shower house). Outside is the windy open tundra, with sweeping views of the Alaska Range and Mount McKinley. In the evening, Jon puts on slide shows of his Alaska life and adventures. In the winter they offer dog sledding, and in the summer they offer rides in a wheeled cart pulled by the dogs. The lodge is 17 miles north of Denali National Park, 4 miles down the scenic Stampede Trail road.

Stampede Trail, Parks Hwy., Mile 251 (P.O. Box 89), Healy, AK 99743. ✆ **907/683-2863.** Fax: 907/683-2868. www.earthsonglodge.com. 10 cabins. Summer $115–$135 double, winter $75–$85 double. Extra person over age 12 $10. DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* Coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Motel Nord Haven *Value* This fresh little gray hotel with a red roof has large, immaculate rooms, each with one or two queen-size beds. They're equal to the best standard rooms in the Denali Park area and a lot less expensive. Bill and Patsy Nordmark offer free continental breakfast in the summer, plus newspapers, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, extra phone lines for the Internet, and a sitting room with a collection of Alaska books. The rooms, decorated with Alaska art and oak trim, all have interior entrances and have been smoke-free since their construction. Up to four people can stay in the rooms with two beds for the

price of a double. There are three kitchenette units. The Nordmarks pack sack lunches for $8.

Mile 249.5, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 458), Healy, AK 99743. ✆ **800/683-4501** or 907/683-4500. Fax 907/683-4503. www.motelnordhaven.com. 28 units. Summer $117–$140; spring and fall $75–$94; winter $70. AE, MC, V. *In room:* TV, dataport.

White Moose Lodge *Value* This old, low-slung building among stunted black spruce contains an unlikely find—comfortable, cheerfully decorated rooms with flower boxes, and a small greenhouse. All rooms have two double beds and private bathrooms. The breakfast served in the small lobby consists of coffee, tea, orange juice, and pastries.

Mile 248, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 68), Healy, AK 99743. ✆ **800/481-1232** or 907/683-1231. Fax 907/683-1232. www.whitemooselodge.com. 12 units. High season $95 double; low season $75 double. Extra adult $10, extra child 2–12 $5, children under 2 stay free. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Closed Oct–mid-May. *In room:* TV.

LODGINGS SOUTH OF THE PARK

Lodgings south of the park are in widely separated pockets of private land concentrated 7 and 14 miles south of the park. (Anything south of that is covered with Talkeetna, in section 10 of this chapter.) I've listed just a few in detail below, but you may also want to try these others that may be just as good: **McKinley Creekside Cabins,** 13 miles south at Mile 224, Parks Hwy. (✆ **888/5DENALI** or 907/683-2277; www.mckinleycabins.com), which offers comfortable, carpeted cabins, all with small private bathrooms, for reasonable prices (starting at $79 double, or $149 for a six-guest family suite with a kitchenette); or, 5 miles closer to the park, **Denali Cabins,** Mile 229, Parks Hwy. (✆ **888/560-2489** or 907/683-2643, 907/783-8448 in winter; www.denali-cabins.com).

Denali Mountain Morning Hostel and Lodge ★ *Value* This extraordinary hostel is operated by energetic outdoors people who offer a cozy place to stay in an octagonal log building, plus rental of the equipment you'll need for an adventure in the park. Accommodations include hostel bunks, private rooms, or separate private cabins, all advantageously priced. All use the shared bathhouse. Guests have access to a fully equipped kitchen; Internet access and rides on the scheduled shuttle service carry an additional fee. The establishment is located near McKinley Creekside Café and the Perch.

Mile 224, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 208), Denali National Park, AK 99755. ✆ **907/683-7503.** Fax 907/683-7504. www.hostelalaska.com. 3 private rooms, 3 private cabins. Bunk $23 adult, $17 child ages 5–12. Private room $65 double; cabin $75–$100 double; Extra person over age 12 $10, extra person over age 4 $5. 2-night minimum in private rooms and cabins. DISC, MC, V.

Denali River Cabins ★★ These cedar cabins arrayed on a maze of boardwalks above the Nenana River are fresh and well appointed. Unlike most accommodations outside Denali, they have an outdoorsy, national park feel, lent in part by the riverside location. They have shower stalls, not tubs, and lack closets. They do have phones. Those cabins on the river, with decks over the water, are $30 more. The sauna has a picture window on the river. Ride the free Denali Park Resorts shuttle to the park entrance and rail depot. Don't confuse this place with Denali Cabins.

Mile 231, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 210), Denali National Park, 99755. (Winter mailing address: 1 Doyon Place, Ste. 200, Fairbanks, AK 99701.) ✆ **800/230-7275** or 907/683-8000. Fax 907/683-8040. (Winter ✆ 907/459-2121; fax 907/459-2160.) www.seedenali.com. 54 cabins. High season $139–$169 cabin for 2; low season $99–$119 cabin for 2. Extra person over age 12$10. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; sauna; tour desk; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

The Perch ★ *Value* In the trees along rushing Carlo Creek, 13 miles south of the park entrance, cabins range from large, modern units with private bathrooms to adorable if spartan A-frames with lofts that share a bathhouse. There's a sense of privacy and of being out in the woods along the wooden and gravel walkways. The Perch is an exceptional value, open year-round. You will need a car to stay here. **The Perch** restaurant and bar, set atop a steep hill, are described below under "Where to Dine."

Mile 224, Parks Hwy. (P.O. Box 53), Denali National Park, AK 99755. ✆ **888/322-2523,** or phone/fax 907/683-2523. www.denaliperchresort.com. 20 cabins, 14 with private bathroom. $65–$95 cabin for 2. Extra adult $10. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar.

WILDERNESS LODGES

For those who can afford it, a lodge allows you to experience real wilderness in complete comfort. For understandable reasons, lodges with any view of Mount McKinley or proximity to the park call themselves Denali lodges. Some are actually within the park's boundaries in the old gold-mining inholding of the Kantishna District, while others are reached only by air and lie well outside the park. In either case, a wilderness lodge experience revolves around the lodge and its immediate surroundings, not the park activities described above, so I've grouped them in section 11, below.

8 Where to Dine

Since Denali is entirely seasonal, it lacks the range of inexpensive family restaurants that develop in year-round communities. While you may find reasonably priced food in Healy, to the north, or Carlo Creek, to the south (see below), near the park most meals are overpriced by 25% to 50% due to the short season and captive audience.

NEAR THE PARK ENTRANCE

You'll have no trouble finding an espresso in this area. The large hotels in the canyon each have fine dining and casual restaurants; I've described the best in detail below. Here are some spots for a low-key meal or take-out. The **Courtyard Cafe** at the McKinley Chalet Resort serves good meals in a large, light room (a burger is $11). You can't miss the tacky highway frontage of the **McKinley Denali Salmon Bake** in Glitter Gulch (mile 238.5 of the Parks Hwy.). Although casual to the point of indifference, it can be a fun place to eat in a picnic setting, and the food is adequate and relatively inexpensive. **Lynx Creek Pizza** (mile 238.6 of the Parks Hwy.) is something of a tradition but terribly inconsistent from year to year. For take-out sandwiches and a great Greek salad, it's hard to beat **Bub's Subs** (mile 238.5 of the Parks Hwy.), next to Denali Outdoor Center (✆ **907/683-7827**); call ahead to avoid waiting for your order. They have no seating.

The Overlook Bar and Grill ★ BURGERS/STEAK/SEAFOOD This fun, noisy place has the feel of a classic bar and grill, with a vaulted ceiling of rough-cut lumber and a spectacular view of the Nenana Canyon. There are two dining rooms, one with a bar, and another, behind a glass partition, which is quieter and has tablecloths. A huge variety of craft beers is available, with several on tap. At times I've gotten superb fare here, but at other times it has been merely acceptable. The prices are high. Call ✆ **907/683-2723** for courtesy transportation from all area hotels.

Mile 238.5, Parks Hwy., up the hill above the Denali Canyon area. ✆ **907/683-2641.** Lunch $9–$15; dinner $16–$30. MC, V. Summer daily 11am–11pm. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May.

The Summit Restaurant ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This is a terrific place for a special night of dining out right near the park. First, there's the dining room, perched on the edge of the Nenana Canyon, where you can watch rafters float by during your meal. Then there's the food and service, which are up to Princess Tours' excellent standards. They serve steak and salmon, the usual choices for Alaska tourists, but the food is prepared well.

In the Denali Princess Lodge, Mile 238.5, Parks Hwy. ✆ **907/683-2282.** Reservations not required. Lunch $7–$12, dinner $15–$30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. May–Sept daily 5am–10:30am, 11am–2pm, and 5:00–10:00pm. Closed the rest of the year.

IN HEALY

These places are 12 miles north of the park, so you will need a car to reach them.

The Lunch Box *Value* TAKEOUT This trailer produces good, inexpensive food in Asian, Italian, Mexican, and deli styles to take on a picnic or eat back in your room or car. The teriyaki rice bowl is delicious and costs only $7. They're also famous for their ribs, which are made and served on Saturdays only. A hearty box lunch is $8, and they'll bring it to your hotel the night before so you can catch an early park bus.

Healy Spur Rd. (just off the Parks Hwy. across the street from the Mountain View Store). ✆ **907/683-6833.** Lunch $3–$8. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 11am–7pm; Sat 11am–2pm. Closed Sun and off season.

Black Diamond Grill ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD/ITALIAN A unique nine-hole golf course lies amid the mountains and rolling taiga north of the park. The associated restaurant brings a new class of food to the area with a menu that's mostly influenced by Northern Italian cookery. For lunch, sandwich choices include a pesto chicken hoagie for $7.50, and for dinner there is halibut in parchment with fresh rosemary and garlic for $20. Although not as perfect as at the best restaurants in Anchorage, the cuisine is really something for the Denali area. The dining room is light and cheery, with pine furniture and flowers on the table. Children will enjoy the mini-golf course and the wagon rides offered here. The wagon rides start with an hour-long meal at the grill followed by a 90-minute ride; prices are $65 breakfast, $70 lunch and $79 dinner, half off ages 5 to 11, free under 5. They pick up at hotels for the rides.

Mile 247, Parks Hwy. (take the hwy. north 10 miles, then turn left at Otto Lake Rd.). ✆ **907/683-4653.** www.blackdiamondgolf.com. Lunch $7.50–$9, dinner $14–$24. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm. Closed off season.

SOUTH OF THE PARK

McKinley Creekside Café ★ *Kids* STEAK/SEAFOOD/SANDWICHES This cozy and friendly spot in the Carlo Creek area, south of the park, is a favorite of the locals. You can dine on a dinner of steak or baked salmon with brown sugar, apples, and toasted almonds for around $20, or order a main-course salad or burger for around $8. The food is consistently good, including breakfast, and craft brews and wine are served. There is a playground outside and a kid's menu. They also pack substantial sack lunches for the park shuttle-bus ride. Stop in on Tuesday nights for live acoustic music.

Mile 224, Parks Hwy. ✆ **907/683-2277.** www.mckinleycabins.com. Lunch $6–$10, dinner $8–$21. DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 6am–10pm. Closed off season.

The Perch STEAK/SEAFOOD The odd, knoblike hill that the restaurant stands on provides the reason for the name (the attractive cabins described on p. 348 sit below the restaurant). It's a friendly, family-run place serving a straightforward steak and seafood menu—they don't try anything fancy. The

home-baked bread is noteworthy. The dining room is light, with well-spaced tables, and makes up for a somewhat stark quality with big picture windows on three sides. Their bakery/deli on the highway packs lunches in cloth tote bags for the park bus.

Mile 224, Parks Hwy., 13 miles south of the park. ✆ **888/322-2523** or 907/683-2523. www.denaliperchresort.com. Lunch $4.50–$15, dinner $14–$40. AE, DISC, MC, V. Summer daily 6am–10pm. Winter hr. vary, call ahead.

9 Denali Nightlife

The main evening event is the concessionaire's **Cabin Nite Dinner Theater,** at the McKinley Chalet Resort (✆ **800/276-7234** or 907/683-8200), a professionally produced musical revue about a gold rush–era woman who ran a roadhouse in Kantishna. You can buy the $48 tickets (half price ages 2–12) virtually anywhere in the area. The actors, singing throughout the evening, stay in character to serve big platters of food to diners sitting at long tables, doing a good job of building a rowdy, happy atmosphere for adults and kids.

Princess Cruises and Tours puts on its own evening show, **The Music of Denali,** at the Denali Princess Lodge. The performance lasts an hour; with dinner, it lasts 2 hours. Tickets are for sale at the hotel's tour desk (✆ **800/426-0500** or 907/683-2282) for $42 (half price ages 6–12); for the show without the meal, it's $14 adults and $8 children.

10 Talkeetna: Back Door to Denali

Talkeetna, a historic and funky little town with a sense of humor but not much happening, slept soundly from its decline around World War I until just a few years ago. Now there are paved streets (both of them), a fancy National Park Service building, a new railroad depot, and two large luxury lodges. It seems that while Talkeetna slumbered in a time capsule, an explosion of visitors was visiting Denali National Park. Now, not entirely voluntarily, Talkeetna finds itself enveloped in that boom.

As a threshold to the park, Talkeetna has significant pros and cons that you should take into account. On the positive side, it's closer to Anchorage; the town is much more interesting and authentic than the development at the park entrance; there's lots to do outdoors; and great views of the mountain are less frequently obscured by clouds. On the negative side, a big minus: You can't get into the park from here without a long drive or a flight. That means you miss the dramatic scenery, easy backcountry access, and unique wildlife viewing on the park road.

The town dates from the gold rush, and has many charming log and clapboard buildings. With 15 sites of historic note, the entire downtown area has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. You can spend several hours looking at two small museums and meeting people in the 2-block main street, then go out on the Talkeetna or Susitna rivers for rafting, a jet-boat ride, or fishing, or take a flightseeing trip to the national park.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Talkeetna lies on a 13-mile spur road that branches from the Parks Highway 99 miles north of Anchorage and 138 miles south of the park entrance.

The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552** or 907/265-2494; www.alaskarailroad.com) serves Talkeetna daily on its runs to Denali National Park during

the summer, and weekly in the winter. (See section 2 of this chapter for additional details.) The summer fare from Anchorage to Talkeetna is $78 one-way for adults, half price for children.

The **Talkeetna Shuttle Service** (✆ **888/288-6008** or 907/733-1725 office, or 907/373-8548 cellular) runs to and from Anchorage for $50 one-way, $90 round-trip. **Alaska Trails** (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com), listed earlier in section 2, serves Talkeetna from Anchorage or Fairbanks.

It's possible to stay in Talkeetna and do the Denali National Park shuttle bus ride and other park activities by flying there for the day. **Talkeetna Aero Services** (✆ **800/660-2688** or 907/733-2688; www.talkeetna-aero.com) offers daily round trips for this purpose during the summer. They charge $215 round trip, $250 as a package with ground transfers, a bus tour and a box lunch.

VISITOR INFORMATION Built to serve people aiming to climb Mount McKinley, the **Denali National Park Talkeetna Ranger Station,** downtown Talkeetna (P.O. Box 588), Talkeetna, AK 99676 (✆ **907/733-2231;** www.nps.gov/dena), makes a fascinating stop for anyone curious about mountaineering. Inside the handsome structure, a large sitting room contains a river rock fireplace, climbing books, and pictures of the mountain—it's like an old-fashioned explorers' club. Fascinating records open for inspection cover the history of McKinley climbs. Rangers are on hand to answer questions, too. It's open May through August daily from 8am to 6pm; winter, Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm.

The **Talkeetna/Denali Visitor Center,** located in a tiny cabin at the intersection of the Parks Highway and Talkeetna Spur Road (P.O. Box 688), Talkeetna, AK 99676 (✆ **800/660-2688** or 907/733-2688; www.alaskan.com/talkeetnadenali), is a commercial center belonging to a local flight service and providing brochures, information, and advice while earning commissions from bookings. It's the handiest commercial information stop in the region. The center is open daily from 8am to 8pm in summer, and they respond to phone and e-mail inquiries year-round with free trip-planning help—leave a message and they will call back.

Like several small towns around Alaska, Talkeetna has a neat little online newspaper (there's also a printed version) that lets anyone eavesdrop on the community as well as gather information for a visit. You can visit the *Talkeetna Good Times Newspaper* at **www.talkeetnanews.com**.

FAST FACTS: Talkeetna

Bank There is none, but ATMs are on Main Street at Nagley's General Store and at the coin-operated laundry and store at the Three Rivers gas station.

Hospital Go to **Sunshine Community Health Center,** Mile 4.4 on the Talkeetna Spur Road (✆ **907/733-2273**).

Internet Access Free at the **Talkeetna Public Library,** at Mile 13 of the Spur Road, just across the tracks.

Police For non-emergencies, call the **Alaska State Troopers** at ✆ **907/733-3513.** They are based on the grounds of the Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge on the Talkeetna Spur Road just out of town.

Post Office In the town center, near the intersection of Talkeetna Spur Road and Main Street.

Taxes There is no sales tax. Bed tax in the area is 5%.

SPECIAL EVENTS **The Talkeetna Moose Dropping Festival,** held over the second weekend in July, is the big event of the year, a community fair finishing its third decade as a fundraiser for the **Talkeetna Historical Society** (✆ **907/733-2487**). The named event doesn't involve dropping moose, as an aggrieved animal lover once complained, but dropping moose droppings. They bomb them from an aircraft. Another part of the event, the Mountain Mother contest, open only to mothers, is a race of Bush skills, including crossing a stream, splitting wood, and diapering a baby.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

Talkeetna is famous for its laid-back atmosphere and its outdoor opportunities, not for its "attractions," but there are several places to stop in to get the sense of the place. One is the ranger station mentioned earlier in this section under "Visitor Information." If you come in May or June, you're sure to meet many international mountain climbers; you'll have no difficulty picking them out (see "Climbing Mount McKinley" in section 5 of this chapter). The **Fairview Inn** is a historic bar with the rough edges still in place. Along Main Street are shops where artists and craftspeople can often be found at work.

The **Talkeetna Historical Society Museum,** in four buildings on the Village Airstrip a ½ block south of Main Street (✆ **907/733-2487**), is well worth a stop. The first building contains artifacts and displays on local mining history, including engaging photographs and biographies of individual characters. The second is an attempt to re-create the old railroad depot. The third holds climbing displays and a huge scale model of Mount McKinley and the nearby mountains (don't miss it if you will fly over the mountain). The fourth is a 1916 trapper's cabin. The museum is also a handy information stop. It is open daily in summer from 10:30am to 6:30pm; in winter it's open weekends only. Admission is $3, free for children 12 and under.

I've found the most affecting site in town to be the **mountain climbers' memorial** at the town cemetery, near the airstrip on the east side of the railroad tracks. Besides a granite memorial of plaques for lost mountaineers, there is a small garden of monuments to many individual climbers, some in Japanese. The bodies of 34 climbers who died on the mountain have never been recovered.

GETTING OUTSIDE

FLIGHTSEEING

The only way you'll get into the park from Talkeetna is by flying with one of the glacier pilots who support McKinley climbs, which typically begin with a flight from here to the 7,200-foot level of the Kahiltna Glacier. There is no more dramatic or memorable experience available to the typical tourist in Alaska. These immense mountains grow ever larger as you fly toward them until, like a tiny insect, you fly among their miles-tall folds, watching the climbers toiling on the ice below you. I was simply speechless.

Several operators with long experience offer the flights. The least expensive excursions cost around $125 (if the plane is full) and approach McKinley's south face. Rates often depend on how many are going, so if you can put together a

group of four or five, or if the operator can add you to a group, you can save as much as half. One good way to save money is to call ahead, if only the day before, and ask for a reservation at a guaranteed price, which an operator will often do during the high season if they know you are coming. If at all possible—and if the weather is good—buy an extended tour that circles the mountain and flies over its glaciers, for $180 to $205 with a full plane. Best of all, in early summer and in the fall you can arrange a landing on the mountain itself, just as the climbers do (the snow is too soft starting in mid-July). The **Don Sheldon Amphitheater** on the Ruth Glacier is a stunning spot high on McKinley; only after you stand there do you realize the incredible scale of what you have seen from above. These landings are usually treated as add-ons to the tours mentioned above, for an additional price of around $60 per person.

A number of air taxi companies offer these flights, all operating out of the Talkeetna airport, including these two: **Talkeetna Air Taxi** (✆ **800/533-2219** or 907/733-2218; www.talkeetnaair.com), and **Talkeetna Aero Services** (✆ **800/660-2688** or 907/733-2688; www.talkeetna-aero.com).

FISHING & JET BOAT TOURS

Talkeetna is at the confluence of the big Talkeetna and Susitna rivers. **Mahay's Riverboat Service** (✆ **800/736-2210** or 907/733-2223; www.mahaysriverboat.com) is a large guide service, with 2-hour tours on a unique 51-foot jet boat for $50 per person, operating several times a day from a dock near the public boat launch on the Talkeetna River. Owner Steve Mahay is legendary—the only person ever to shoot Devil's Canyon in a jet boat. He offers fishing charters as well.

RAFTING

Talkeetna River Guides, on Main Street (✆ **800/353-2677** or 907/733-2677; www.talkeetnariverguides.com), offers a 2-hour wildlife river-rafting tour, without white water, over 9 miles of the Talkeetna three times a day for $55 adults, $22 children under 12. They also offer guided fishing and longer rafting outings and overnights by air, including the wild and hazardous class IV whitewater of the Talkeetna Canyon.

WINTER ACTIVITIES

Flightseeing can be better in winter than summer. Talkeetna's ski club grooms 1⅘ miles of good, hilly **cross-country ski trails** for skate or classical techniques across the road from the Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge, and the lodge itself has a mile or two of ungroomed trails; but that's hardly enough to make the trip—instead, bring backcountry skis and explore boundless country in the open, boreal forest.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

There are good restaurants at each of the lodgings listed here. In addition, **Café Michele,** in a quaint little house at the corner of Talkeetna Spur Road and 2nd Street (✆ **907/733-5300**) stands out. It's a classy little bistro, serving sandwiches on homemade focaccia bread for lunch, and dinner entrees under $25. It's easy to find a burger or sandwich on Main Street.

A large campground is at the boat launch (cross the railroad tracks to the airport, then turn left).

Mt. McKinley Princess Lodge ★★ The Princess Cruise Line built the main lodge building here to take advantage of a striking view of the mountain, only 42 miles away as the crow flies. The property isn't really near anything—100 miles south of the park entrance and about 45 road miles from Talkeetna—but, like a resort, they offer everything you need on-site, including a full set of

activities and a short network of trails. The design and decoration are an inspired modernization of the classic national park style.

Mile 133.1, Parks Hwy., Denali State Park, AK 99683 ✆ **800/426-0500** or 907/733-2900. Fax 907/733-2922. www.princesslodges.com. 238 units. Summer $189 double; $289 suite. Spring and fall $99 double; $199 suite. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; health club; tour desk; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Swiss-Alaska Inn *Finds* This is the essence of Talkeetna: a family business in the same hands for decades where guests are made to feel like old friends among the real old friends often found sipping coffee with the proprietor in the small restaurant. They serve good, familiar American meals, plus a few German dishes. Most of the rooms are recently renewed in light colors and, although small, are clean, comfortable, and reasonably priced.

F St., near the boat launch (P.O. Box 565), Talkeetna, AK 99676. ✆ **907/733-2424.** Fax 907/733-2425. www.swissalaska.com. 20 units. $110 double. Extra person $10. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; courtesy car (to railroad station). *In room:* TV/VCR, hair dryer.

Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge ★★ The Cook Inlet Region Native corporation spared no expense building this magnificent hotel of big timbers and river rock, but it's authentic, not a gaudy showplace. Trim of regionally harvested birch finishes rooms and hallways in understated geometric designs, hung with Native art by the shareholders who own the hotel. The view certainly couldn't be faked. Every common room and many guest rooms orient to a broad-canvas masterpiece view of the Alaska Range, with McKinley towering in the center. The hotel gets this incredible vista because of its location atop a high river bluff. Although just 2 miles from the town, the hotel feels like it's out in the wilderness (see "Winter Activities," above, for information about the ski trails). Rooms in the main building are preferable. They're somewhat larger and have either one king-size bed or two queen-size beds, and the hallways connect to several sumptuous lobbies with reading areas. Dining has been excellent, with a top-flight chef on staff; but recently the hotel began seasonal closures, and my experience is that establishments that are not open year round have a harder time maintaining superior quality in their restaurants.

Mile 12.5, Talkeetna Spur Rd. (P.O. Box 93330, Anchorage, AK 99509-3330). ✆ **888/959-9590** or 907/265-4501 reservations; 907/733-9500 at lodge. Fax 907/263-5559. www.talkeetnalodge.com. 200 units. Summer $229 double; off season $149 double. Extra person $12. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed Oct–Apr. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; tour desk; courtesy van. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

11 Denali Wilderness Lodges

Staying in a wilderness lodge is expensive and requires a significant time commitment. It doesn't make sense to spend less than 3 days at a lodge, and some lodges require longer minimum stays. You need some time to slow down and feel the pace of the Bush at these places. Here I've listed the best lodges in the Denali region; see chapter 7 for lodges on Kachemak Bay, near Homer.

KANTISHNA DISTRICT

The Kantishna district is an inholding of private land within Denali National Park where gold miners staked claims before the park was created. The lodge operators who later obtained this land gained something more valuable than gold: the opportunity to bring visitors to the far end of the park from the entrance, as near as a vehicle can get to Mount McKinley. Hosts drive visitors to Kantishna in private buses or vans over the 89-mile park road. These two lodges are open only in summer.

Camp Denali/North Face Lodge ★★★ At this pioneering eco-tourism establishment, you can wake to the white monolith of Mount McKinley filling your window. The naturalist guides here have the right to use the park road without using the park's shuttle system for hikes, biking, lake canoeing, bird-watching, photography sessions, and other outdoor learning activities, which are all included in the substantial price. All arrivals and departures are on fixed "sessions" of 3, 4 or 7 days and start with a picnic on the park road on the way out to the lodges. During some of the sessions, nationally reputed academics and other experts lead programs at the lodge. Each of the Camp Denali cabins has its own outhouse, and all share a central bathhouse and wonderful lodge common rooms. The cabins have the best views and would be my first choice for anyone who can get by without his or her own flush toilet. North Face Lodge has smallish traditional rooms with private bathrooms. The cabins and the lodge both have their own dining rooms that serve family-style meals. A conservation ethic pervades the operation, from the homegrown vegetables to the proprietors' efforts to preserve the natural values of private land in the park. No smoking is permitted in buildings or vehicles.

Kantishna District (P.O. Box 67), Denali National Park, AK 99755. ✆ **907/683-2290.** www.campdenali.com. 17 cabins, none with private bathroom (Camp Denali); 15 units with bathroom (North Face Lodge). $400 per person per night, double occupancy. Rates include all meals and guided activities. Minimum stay 3 nights. No credit cards.

Kantishna Roadhouse ★★ This well-kept property of many buildings along Moose Creek in the old Kantishna Mining District does such good business both because of the mining history of the area and the outdoor opportunities that surround the lodge. Some rooms, in a variety of buildings, are large and luxurious, while others are in smaller single cabins with lofts. The log central lodge has an attractive lobby with people coming and going. Overall, this place has more of a hotel feel than the other lodges in the Kantishna District and might be more attractive to an older, less active set or to families. It's also somewhat less expensive, has a bar, and accommodates 2-night stays. Guided hikes, wagon rides, mountain bike use, gold panning and the bus ride from the park entrance (called "Kantishna Wilderness Trails"; see next paragraph) are included in the rate. A sled dog demonstration coincides with the arrival of the bus.

As mentioned above, the lodge offers a bus trip, called the "Kantishna Wilderness Trails," that covers the entire park road. For those staying at the lodge it is necessary to take this trip to get to the premises. Daytrippers can take it both ways for the scenery. This bus trip is the only choice in the park for a narrated day tour that covers the entire park road. At 13 hours, it's a marathon, and not suitable for children. The fare, including lunch at the lodge, is $115. Advance reservations for the tour are required. Call for reservations at the lodge telephone numbers below; they will tell you where and when to meet the bus.

Kantishna District, Denali National Park (mailing address: 1 Doyon Place, Ste. 200, Fairbanks, AK 99701). ✆ **800/942-7420** or 907/683-1475. Fax 907/683-1449. (Winter: ✆ 907/459-2120; fax 907/459-2160.) www.seedenali.com. 32 units. $335 per person per night, double occupancy; Extra person over age 2 $250. Rates include all meals and guided activities. 2-night minimum. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; sauna; free mountain bike use.

FLY-IN LODGES

These lodges are outside the park proper, but share the same kind of terrain and some of the same vistas. Each offers its own version of the real wilderness lodge experience—far from roads, accessible only by small aircraft, and located in places where wildlife far outnumbers people.

Caribou Lodge ★★ There's a lot to love about this place: the location above tree line, on its own alpine lake, miles from any other structure; the unlimited dry tundra hiking and views along the rounded ridge tops; the wildlife and the quiet. But what I love best, and what I suspect will matter most to visitors, is that it's real. This is home to Mike and Pam Nickols, the couple who personally host just three parties at a time, and for a decade they've lived out here in true Bush style, year-round, far off the grid. They guide hiking, canoeing on the lake, and watching the wildlife; in the winter, they teach guests to drive a dog team over endlessly rolling hills of snow. A visit here is a chance to experience another way of life, one that exists in few places. The accommodations are simple but comfortable. Guest stays in cabins with their own outhouses and a shared shower facility. Access is by small aircraft only, on skis in winter or floats in summer; in spring and fall, when the ice on the lake is soft, it's just about impossible to get there. For rough figuring, a plane from Talkeetna costs $135 to $180 per person, but inquire to get a more exact cost.

20 miles east of Talkeetna (P.O. Box 706), Talkeetna, AK 99676. ✆ and fax **907/733-2163.** www.cariboulodgealaska.com. 3 cabins. Summer $265 per person per, night double occupancy. Winter $210 per person per night, double occupancy. Rates include all meals and guided tours. 2-day minimum. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Restaurant; guided activities; sauna.

Denali West Lodge ★★★ From the log buildings here, you can look down through birch trees onto the shore of huge Lake Minchumina. This place is far out in the Bush, west of Denali National Park. The lodge balances authenticity and comfort so you can sit at the bar and munch on great food while feeling like an adventurer. The real log cabins are cozy, with quilts and barrel stoves that the staff lights when they bring your coffee in the morning; each has its own outhouse, and there are shared showers. But what's truly unique are the activities, included in the price and led by guides who are assigned one to each party (the lodge has a 10-guest summer maximum, 6 in winter). In summer, there's canoeing, hiking, and lake fishing. In the winter, go on dog mushing expeditions unlike any other in Alaska: Guests are met at the landing strip across the lake and drive their own teams to the lodge. The 9-day stay takes off on an expedition to McKinley, with participants sleeping in heated tents at night and mushing during the day; few people will ever live such an adventure in such comfort and safety. Fly in from Fairbanks for $280 round-trip per person.

P.O. Box 40, Lake Minchumina, AK 99757. ✆ **888/607-5566** or 907/674-3112. Fax 907/674-3112. www.denaliwest.com. 5 cabins. Summer $1,440 3-night stay, $1,800 4 nights, per person. Winter $3,450 6-day mushing at lodge, $6,550 9-day mushing expedition, per person. Half price for children 12 and under. Rates include all meals, guided tours, and flightseeing. 3-night minimum. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; guided activities; flightseeing; sauna.

9

The Alaskan Interior

A warm summer evening in a campground; a slight breeze rustling the leaves of ghostly paper birches, barely keeping the mosquitoes at bay; the sounds of children playing; a perpetual sunset rolling slowly along the northern horizon—this is Interior Alaska. You know it's time to gather up the kids, separate them according to who belongs to whom, and put them to bed; it's 11 o'clock, for heaven's sake. But it's too difficult to feel that matters, or to alter the pace of a sun-baked day that never ends, meandering on like the broad, silty rivers and empty two-lane highways. Down by the boat landing, some college kids are getting ready to start on a float in the morning. An old, white-bearded prospector wanders out of the bar and, offering his flask to the strangers, tries out a joke while swatting the bugs. "There's not a single mosquito in Alaska," he declares. Waits for the loud, jocular objections. Then adds, "They're all married with big, big families." Easy laughter; then they talk about outboard motors, road work, why so many rabbits live along a certain stretch of highway. Eventually, you have to go to bed and leave the world to its pointless turning as the sun rotates back around to the east. You know it'll all be there tomorrow, just the same—the same slow-flowing rivers, the same long highways, the same vast space that can never be filled.

Interior Alaska is so large—it basically includes everything that's not on the coasts or in the Arctic—you can spend a week of hard driving and not explore it all. Or you can spend all summer floating the rivers and still have years of floating left to do before you see all the riverbanks. It's something like what the great mass of America's Midwest once must have been, perhaps a century and a half ago, when the great flatlands had been explored but not completely civilized, and Huckleberry Finn could float downriver into a wilderness of adventures. As it happens, I have a friend who grew up on a homestead in the Interior and ran away from home at age 15 in that exact same fashion, floating hundreds of miles on a handmade raft, past the little river villages, cargo barges, and fishermen. During an Interior summer, nature combines its immensity with a rare sense of gentleness, patiently awaiting the next thunderstorm.

Winter is another matter. Without the regulating influence of the ocean—the same reason summers are hot—winter temperatures can often drop to –30°F or –40°F (–34°C or –40°C), and during exceptional cold snaps, even lower. Now the earth is wobbling over in the other direction, away from the sun. The long, black nights sometimes make Fairbanks, the region's dominant city, feel like an outpost on a barren planet, far off in outer space. That's when the northern lights come, spewing swirls of color across the entire dome of the sky and crackling with electricity. Neighbors get on the phone to wake each other and, rising from bed to put on their warmest parkas

and insulated boots, stand in the street, gazing straight up. Visitors lucky enough to come at such times may be watching from a steaming hot-spring tub. During the short days, they can bundle up and watch sled-dog racing or race across the wilderness themselves on snowmobiles.

Fairbanks stands second in Alaska in population, with over 80,000 in the greater area, but otherwise, the Interior is without any settlements large enough to be called cities. Instead, it's defined by roads, both paved and gravel, which are strands of civilization through sparsely settled, often swampy land. Before the roads, development occurred only on the rivers, which still serve as thoroughfares for the Athabascan villages of the region. In the summer, villagers travel by boat. In the winter, the frozen rivers become highways for snowmobiles and sled-dog teams. White homesteaders and gold miners live back in the woods, too. Gold rush history is written on the land in piles of old gravel tailings and abandoned equipment, as well as in the prettier tourist attractions and historic sites. Gold mining goes on today, in small one-man operations and huge industrial works employing hundreds.

1 Exploring the Interior

More than anywhere else in Alaska, the Interior is the place where having your own car provides you with the freedom to find the out-of-the-way places that give the region its character. Trains and buses run between Fairbanks and Anchorage, but that approach will show you only the larger, tourist-oriented destinations.

If you have the time and money, you may enjoy driving one of the remote gravel highways, or just poking along on the paved highways between the larger towns, ready to stop and investigate the roadhouses and meet the people who live out in the middle of nowhere. You'll find them mostly friendly and often downright odd—*colorful,* to use the polite term. As I drove an abandoned highway a few years ago, I saw a hand-lettered sign advertising coffee. It wasn't your typical espresso stand, just a log cabin dozens of miles from the next nearest building. A squinting high plains drifter stepped out of the cabin, wearing a cowboy hat on his head and a huge revolver on his hip, and asked, "Yeah?" The coffee came from a percolator warming on the woodstove, and the proprietor and I struck up a good conversation in his dark little dwelling. He was living the life of the old-time frontier. Another favorite roadside sign, sighted on the Alaska Highway, in spray paint on plywood: SALE—EEL SKINS—ANVILS—BAIT.

Finds Rollin' on the River

Floating any of the thousands of miles of the Interior's rivers opens great swaths of wilderness. Beginners will want to take a guided trip before venturing out on their own. (See the lists of operators in chapter 2.) To plan your own trip, get Karen Jettmar's *The Alaska River Guide* (Alaska Northwest Books, $17), which includes details on more than 100 river trips across the state. Also, check with the **Alaska Public Lands Information Center** in Fairbanks (see p. 364), Tok (see p. 391), or Anchorage (see p. 201) for guidance on setting up your trip. Among the most accessible and historic rivers in the region are the Chena, Chatanika, and Yukon (see the sections on Chena Hot Springs Road and on the Steese and Dalton highways in this chapter).

Alaska's Highways a la Carte

You won't need a detailed highway map of Alaska, because Alaska doesn't have detailed highways. A single triangle of paved two-lane highways connects Tok, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. From this triangle, a few routes reach to discrete destinations, and gravel roads penetrate the periphery of the Bush. Beyond a few miles of freeway around Fairbanks and Anchorage, highways are all narrow strips of asphalt or gravel through the wilderness. A new, centralized report on road conditions, construction and weather is operated by the Alaska Department of Transportation (✆ **511**; 511.alaska.gov).

MAIN HIGHWAYS

Alaska Highway (Rte. 2 from the border to Delta Junction) Running nearly 1,400 miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, which is a couple of hours east of Fairbanks on the Richardson Highway, this World War II road is paved, but that doesn't mean it's always smooth. Like other northern highways, it's subject to bone-jarring frost heaves and spring potholes. Two tiny towns lie on the Alaska portion of the road, Delta Junction and Tok. The prettiest part is on the Canadian side, in the Kluane Lake area. See section 6, later in this chapter.

Glenn Highway (Rte. 1 from Anchorage to Tok) From the Alaska Highway, this is how you get to Southcentral Alaska, including Anchorage, 330 miles southwest of Tok. The northern section, from Tok to Glennallen (sometimes called the "Tok Cut-Off"), borders Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, with broad tundra and taiga broken by high, craggy peaks. Glennallen to Anchorage is even more spectacular, as the road passes through high alpine terrain and then close by the Matanuska Glacier, where it winds through a deep canyon valley carved by the glacier's river. See section 7, later in this chapter.

Parks Highway (Rte. 3) The George Parks Highway is a straight line from Anchorage to Fairbanks, 358 miles north, providing access to Denali National Park. There are some vistas of Mount McKinley from south of the park, but the Parks Highway is mostly just a transportation route, less scenic than the Richardson or Glenn highways. From the northern (Fairbanks) end, the highway passes Nenana (chapter 8), then Denali and Talkeetna (chapter 8), and finally the towns of the Matanuska and Susitna valleys (chapter 6).

Richardson Highway (Rte. 4 from Valdez to Delta Junction, Rte. 2 from Delta Junction to Fairbanks) The state's first highway, leading 364 miles from tidewater in Valdez to Fairbanks, lost much of its traffic to the Parks Highway, which saves more than 90 miles between Anchorage and Fairbanks, and to the Glenn Highway, which saves about 120 miles from Glennallen to Tok. But it's still the most beautiful paved drive in the Interior. From the south, the road begins with a magnificent climb through Keystone Canyon and steep Thompson Pass, just out of Valdez (see chapter 7), and then passes the huge, distant peaks of southern Wrangell–St. Elias National Park. North of Glennallen, the road climbs into the Alaska Range, snaking along the shores of long alpine lakes.

The road descends again to the forested area around Delta Junction and meets the Alaska Highway before arriving in Fairbanks.

Seward Highway (Rte. 1 from Anchorage to Tern Lake, Rte. 9 from Tern Lake to Seward) This highway leaves Anchorage on a 127-mile drive to Seward following the rocky edge of mountain peaks above a surging ocean fjord. Abundant wildlife and unfolding views often slow cars. Later, the road climbs through high mountain passes above the tree line, tracing sparkling alpine lakes. Alaska's best trail hikes are here. The section from Anchorage 50 miles south to Portage Glacier is covered in chapter 6; the remainder, to Seward, in chapter 7.

Sterling Highway (Rte. 1 from Tern Lake to Homer) Leading 142 miles from the Seward Highway to the tip of the Kenai Peninsula, this highway has some scenic spots but is mostly a way to get to the Kenai River, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Kachemak Bay, and the towns of Cooper Landing, Soldotna, Kenai, and Homer.

RURAL ROADS

Each of these mostly gravel roads is covered in detail later in this chapter.

Chena Hot Springs Road A relatively civilized road into the outdoors, this paved 57-mile highway east of Fairbanks meets hiking and river routes on the way to Chena Hot Springs.

Dalton Highway (Rte. 11) Built to haul equipment to the Prudhoe Bay oil fields, about 500 miles north of Fairbanks, the supremely scenic Dalton reaches the heart of the wilderness, crossing the Brooks Range and the North Slope.

Denali Highway (Rte. 8) This 133-mile gravel road connects the midpoints of the Parks and Richardson highways and has stunning alpine vistas high in the Alaska Range that rival those within Denali National Park. Along the way are a rich network of trails and mountain lakes, and a good chance of seeing caribou, bear, moose, and waterfowl. See chapter 8.

Edgerton Highway & McCarthy Road (Rte. 10) Running east from the Richardson Highway south of Glennallen, the Edgerton leads to the tiny town of Chitina, where the McCarthy Road, a muddy one-lane track, penetrates Wrangell–St. Elias National Park to the historic sites at McCarthy and Kennecott. The journey of 93 miles takes half a day.

Steese Highway (Rte. 6) This gravel road climbs the rounded tundra mountains 162 miles east of Fairbanks to the Native village of Circle, on the Yukon River. It's a route to the real rural Alaska.

Taylor Highway (Rte. 5) At times rough, narrow, and a little scary, this dirt road leads 161 miles from a junction on the Alaska Highway east of Tok to the fascinating Yukon River village of Eagle, a town preserved in history.

Top of the World Highway (Yukon Rte. 9) Connecting to the Taylor Highway and crossing the Canadian border to Dawson City, a distance of 79 miles, the road rides mountaintop to mountaintop, above the tree line nearly the entire way.

I've always wished I'd stopped in to window-shop and meet the person who came up with that business plan.

Of course, not every mile of back road is scenic, nor are all the stops interesting. Driving a car through Alaska takes a long time, including many hours spent in dull, brushy forest, and calls for a high tolerance for greasy hamburgers. Paved highway sections can develop frost heaves in this often-frozen land—backbreaking dips and humps caused by the freeze and thaw of the road base and ground underneath. The gravel roads generate clouds of dust and quickly fatigue drivers, and windshields and headlights often succumb to their flying rocks. For information on renting a vehicle to drive on gravel roads, see "Equipped for the Backroads," on p. 371.

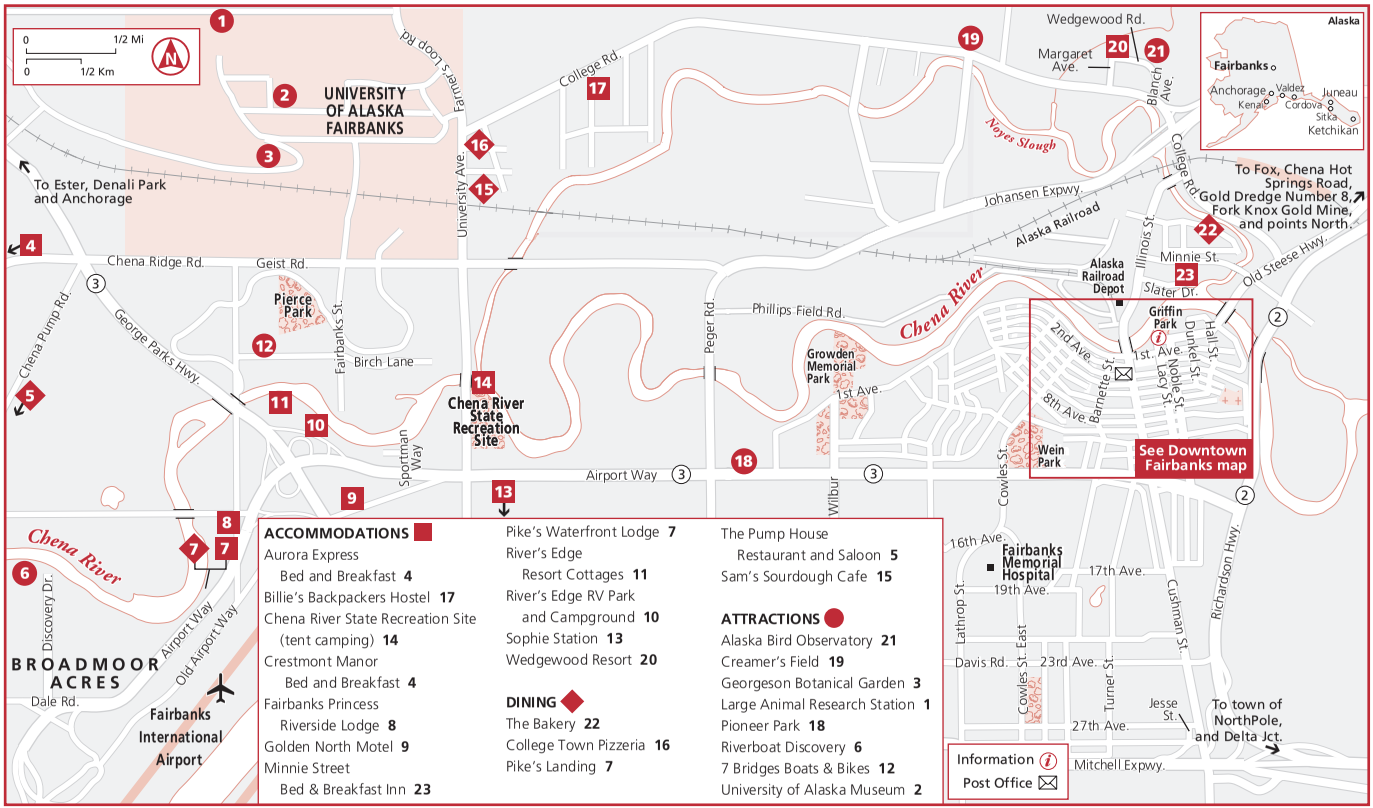
2 Fairbanks: Alaska Heartland

If the story of the founding of Fairbanks had happened anywhere else, it wouldn't be told so proudly, for the city's father was a swindler, and its undignified birth contained an element of chance not usually admitted in polite society. As the popular story goes (and the historians' version is fairly close), it seems that in 1901, E. T. Barnette decided to get rich by starting a gold-mining boomtown like the others that had sprouted from Dawson City to Nome as the stampeders of 1898 sloshed back and forth across the territory from one gold find to the next. He booked passage on a riverboat going up the Tanana with his supplies to build the town, having made an understanding with the captain that, should the vessel get stuck, he would lighten the load by getting off with the materials on the nearest bank. Unfortunately, the captain got lost. Thinking he was heading up a slough on the Tanana, he got sidetracked into the relatively small Chena River. That was where the boat got stuck and where Barnette got left, and that was where he founded Fairbanks.

Fortunately for Barnette, an Italian prospector named Felix Pedro had been looking for gold in the hills in the area and made a strike on the Tanana. On that news, Barnette dispatched his Chinese cook off to Dawson City to spread the word. The cook's story showed up in a newspaper that winter, and a stampede of hundreds of miners ensued, heading toward Fairbanks in weather as cold as –50°F (–46°C). Barnette's town was a success, but the cook nearly got lynched when the stampeders found out how far he'd exaggerated the truth. Much more gold was found later, however, and half the population of Dawson City came downriver to Fairbanks. Barnette had made it big.

The town's future was ensured thanks to a political deal. Barnette did a favor for the territory's judge, James Wickersham, by naming the settlement for Wickersham's ally in Congress, Sen. Charles Fairbanks of Indiana, who later became vice president. Wickersham then moved the federal courthouse to Fairbanks from Eagle—he loaded his records on his dog sled and mushed here, establishing the camp as the region's hub. Wickersham's story is interesting, too. He was a notable explorer, Alaska's first real statesman as a nonvoting delegate to Congress, and father of the Alaska Railroad. Houses he lived in are preserved at Pioneer Park (formerly known as Alaskaland) in Fairbanks and in Juneau, just up the hill from the capitol building. Barnette didn't do as well in history's eyes: He was run out of the town he founded for bank fraud.

Fairbanks is Alaska's second-largest city now, with a population of about 30,000 in the city limits and 82,000 in the greater metropolitan area, but it has never put on airs. It sprawls, broad and flat, along big highways and the Chena



ACCOMMODATIONS
- Aurora Express Bed and Breakfast **4**
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- Alaska Bird Observatory **21**
- Creamer's Field **19**
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River. It's a friendly, easygoing town, but one where people still take gold and their independence seriously. They're still prospecting and mining around here, fighting off environmental regulations and maintaining a traditional Alaskan attitude that "it's us against the world." Fairbanks is the birthplace of strange political movements, including the secessionist Alaskan Independence Party. It's an adamant, loopy, affable place; it doesn't seem to mind being a little bizarre or residing far from the center of things. And that makes it an intensely Alaskan city, for those are the qualities Alaskans most cherish in their myth of themselves.

Fairbanks can strike a visitor a couple of ways, depending on what you expect and what you like. Fairbanks can come across as a provincial outpost, a touristy cross between Kansas and Siberia. Driving one of the franchise-choked commercial strips, you can wonder why you went out of your way to come here. Or you can relax and take Fairbanks on its own terms, as a fun, unpretentious town that never lost its sense of being on the frontier.

My children love it here. There's plenty for families to do in Fairbanks, much of it at least a little corny and requiring drives to widespread sites at the university, on the Chena River, in the gold mining area north of town, and at Pioneer Park. You *must* have wheels in Fairbanks. There are good opportunities for hiking and mountain biking, and great opportunities for canoeing and slow river-float trips.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car or RV** Fairbanks is a transportation hub. From here, the Richardson Highway heads east 98 miles to Delta Junction, the end point of the Alaska Highway, then south to Glennallen and Valdez. The Parks Highway heads due south from Fairbanks to Denali National Park, 120 miles away, and Anchorage, 358 miles south.

By Bus **Alaska Trails** (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com) offers daily service in summer (twice weekly in winter) to and from Denali National Park and Anchorage (one-way fares are $39 and $79, respectively), and less frequent summer-only service to and from Valdez and Dawson City and spots along the way.

By Train The **Alaska Railroad** (✆ **800/544-0552;** www.alaskarailroad.com) links Fairbanks with Denali National Park and Anchorage, with tour commentary provided along the way. The high-season one-way fare is $50 to Denali and $175 to Anchorage (almost twice the cost of flying between the cities).

By Air **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) connects Fairbanks to Anchorage. Round-trip fares are under $200. The airport is a hub for various small carriers to Alaska's Interior and Arctic communities.

A cab downtown from the airport is $16 to $18 with **Yellow Cab** (✆ **907/455-5555**).

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Fairbanks Log Cabin Visitor Information Center** is in a large log building at 550 1st Ave., on the Chena River at the center of town, at Cushman Street, Fairbanks, AK 99701 (✆ **800/327-5774** or 907/456-5774; fax 907/452-2867; www.explorefairbanks.com). The staff provides a road map and detailed walking and driving tour maps, and will help you find a room with their daily vacancy listing. The center is open summer daily 8am to 7pm; in winter, Monday to Friday from 10am to 5pm. They also have desks at the airport and train depot.

The **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** down the stairs at 3rd and Cushman streets (✆ **907/456-0527;** www.nps.gov/aplic), is an indispensable stop for anyone planning to spend time in the outdoors, and an interesting one

even if you're not. The staff is remarkably knowledgeable and can tell you about trips and activities based on first-hand experience. Besides providing maps and other details, the center houses a small museum about the state's regions and the gear needed to explore them. Daily free films and naturalist programs are presented in a small auditorium. Open in summer daily from 9am to 6pm, in winter Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm.

GETTING AROUND Fairbanks is designed around the car, and that's the practical way to get around. Without one, you will have to stick around downtown and you may leave with a low opinion of the place. The city is too spread out to use taxis much.

You'll find **Avis, Hertz, Dollar, Budget Payless** and **National** located at the airport. **National,** with locations downtown and at the airport, rents vehicles for gravel roads (see, "Equipped for the Back Roads" on p. 371) along with other "regular" vehicles. Several local firms rent RVs in Fairbanks, including **Diamond Willow RV Rentals,** 350 Old Steese Hwy. N. (✆ **888/724-7373** or 907/457-2814), charging $160 a day for a 29-foot unit.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough's **MACS bus system** (✆ **907/459-1011;** www.co.fairbanks.ak.us) links the university, downtown, the nearby North Pole community, shopping areas, and some hotels. Service is every 30 minutes, at best, worse Saturday, and nonexistent Sunday. Pick up timetables at the visitor center. All buses connect at the transit park downtown, at 5th Avenue and Cushman Street. The fare is $1.50.

Fairbanks's car-oriented layout does not lend itself to using bikes as the primary means of transportation, but there are great mountain biking opportunities (see "Getting Outside," below). Downtown, you can rent bikes for $6 an hour around the clock (in winter, with studded tires) at the **Fairbanks Hotel,** 517 3rd Ave. (✆ **888/329-4685** or 907/456-6411).

FAST FACTS: Fairbanks

Banks Fairbanks has numerous banks with ATMs in the downtown area and along the commercial strips. **Key Bank** is at 100 Cushman.

Business Services **Kinko's Copy Center** is at 418 3rd St. (✆ **907/456-7348**).

Hospital **Fairbanks Memorial** is at 1650 Cowles St. (✆ **907/452-8181**).

Internet Access **College Coffee House** is in the Campus Corner Mall at the intersection of College and University roads (✆ **907/374-0468**).

Police In an emergency call ✆ **911.** For nonemergency police business, call the **Alaska State Troopers** (✆ **907/451-5100**) or, within city limits, the **Fairbanks Police Department** (✆ **907/459-6500**).

Post Office At 315 Barnette St.

Taxes Fairbanks has no sales tax. North Pole charges 3% with a cap of $6 in tax on any one purchase. Bed tax is 8%.

SPECIAL EVENTS A recording of current local happenings can be reached at ✆ **907/456-INFO,** maintained by the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau, which also posts an event calendar at **www.explorefairbanks.com**.

The **Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race** (✆ **907/452-7954;** www.yukonquest.org) starts February 14, 2004, in Fairbanks, and ends in Whitehorse (in odd-numbered years, the direction is reversed). Mushers say this rugged 1,000-mile race is even tougher than the Iditarod.

The **Nenana Ice Classic** (✆ **907/832-5446;** www.nenanaakiceclassic.com) is a sweepstakes held annually since 1917 based on who can guess closest to the exact minute when the ice will go out on the Tanana River. The classic starts with Tripod Days, the first weekend in March, when they set up the so-called four-legged "tripod"; when it moves 100 feet, it trips a clock, determining the winner. The Tripod Days celebration includes dance performances, dog mushing, and other activities.

Later in March, the **World Ice Art Championships** (✆ **907/451-8250;** www.icealaska.com) brings carvers from all over the world to sculpt immense sculptures in clear chunks cut from a Fairbanks pond. Ice sculptures stand in an Ice Park at the corner of Peger and Phillips Field roads, and in front of businesses for weeks after. Carving will be March 4 to 5 and 8 to 14 in 2004, with the best viewing from March 14 to 21, 2004. Among ice carvers, Fairbanks' ice is famous for its clarity and the great size of the chunks. Some spectacular ice sculptures stand as tall as two-story buildings, and you can play and slide on some of the creations. Check the website for pictures of past winners.

The **North American Sled Dog Championships** (✆ **907/457-MUSH;** www.sleddog.org) take place over 2 weekends in mid-March. Sprint mushers from all over the world compete with teams of as many as 24 dogs, streaking away from the starting line on 2nd Avenue or the Chena River.

Lots of events happen around the **summer solstice,** usually June 21, including a big 10K race also open to walkers and people in funny costumes, sponsored by the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* (✆ **907/452-6661**). The **Midnight Sun Baseball Game**, hosted by the semipro Fairbanks Goldpanners (✆ **907/451-0095;** www.goldpanners.com), begins at 10:30pm; the game is played with no artificial lights.

Also in June, the free **Fairbanks Summer Folk Fest** (✆ **907/488-0556;** www.alaskafolkmusic.org) fills a Pioneer Park lawn with music, food, and art booths; live music starts at noon and lasts late into the night.

Golden Days, over 4 days in late July, includes crafts fairs, festivals, concerts, and a parade (✆ **907/452-1105**).

The Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival, held on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus (✆ **907/474-8869;** www.fsaf.org), brings artists of international reputation for workshops and performances in music, dance, theater, opera, and the visual arts over the last 2 weeks in late July (July 18–Aug 1, 2004).

The **Tanana Valley State Fair** (✆ **907/452-3750;** www.tananavalleyfair.org), in early August, shows off the area's agricultural production, arts and crafts, businesses, and entertainment, and includes rides, competitive exhibits and a rodeo.

The last week of August, Friends of Creamer's Field (✆ **907/459-7307**) hosts an annual **Sandhill Crane Festival,** with nature walks, lectures, and other activities, mostly at Creamer's Field (see "Special Places," later).

The **BP Top of the World Classic,** Nov 18–21, 2004, brings NCAA Division I basketball teams to the University of Alaska–Fairbanks for a weekend tournament (✆ **907/474-6830;** www.towc.com).

EXPLORING THE TOWN

STROLLING AROUND DOWNTOWN

If you want to explore downtown for an hour or two, pick up the walking tour map available at the log cabin visitor center at 550 1st Ave., on the Chena River

Moments Seeing the Aurora Borealis

One fall evening I left the house of friends in Fairbanks to the sight of a swirling green glow that filled the dark sky. I knocked on the door and brought them out to see, only to have my friends laugh in my face. They informed me, with mock contempt for my Anchorage home, that in Fairbanks they don't even bother to bend their necks back for northern lights as dim as these. It's true—a bright aurora borealis is routine in Fairbanks. Some of the world's top experts on the phenomenon work here, at the University of Alaska's Geophysical Institute (their aurora predictions, in season, and extensive background on the aurora are posted at **www.gi.alaska.edu**). Hours-long displays can be incredibly spectacular and even moving.

Unfortunately, few visitors see these wild strands of bright colors whipping across the sky, because when most visitors come, the sky is never dark. Alaskans rarely see the stars from late May to early August, and, to see the aurora well, you need an especially dark night sky. To improve your chances, plan your trip in the fall or winter. An early September trip offers brilliant fall foliage, dark night skies, and the remnants of summer weather. In midwinter, the sky is dark all night and most of the day. Many hotels near Fairbanks cater to travelers coming to see the aurora in winter, as well as visitors who come for such winter sports as dog mushing and snowmobiling; the best lodging for that kind of trip is Chena Hot Springs Resort, covered in the next section.

at the center of town, at Cushman Street. Among the highlights on the walk is the **Golden Heart Park,** a waterfront plaza with a fountain and a bronze of a Native family. Community events often occur here.

The town's most interesting building is the Roman Catholic **Church of the Immaculate Conception,** across the river on Cushman Street. The white clapboard structure, built in 1904, has ornate gold-rush decoration inside, rare for its authenticity, including a pressed-tin ceiling and stained-glass windows—an appealing if incongruous mix of gold rush and sacred decor.

At 1st Avenue near Kellum Street, east from the visitor center, **St. Matthew's Episcopal Church** is a cute old log church with a working rope-pull bell. It was founded by missionary and dog-sled explorer Hudson Stuck in 1904. Stuck organized the first successful climb of Mount McKinley. The original church burned; the present structure dates from 1948.

At 500 2nd Avenue, the **Fairbanks Ice Museum** ★ (✆ **907/451-8222;** www.icemuseum.com) aims to show summer visitors what winter is like, with seven large ice displays and a freezer you can enter to feel –20°F. A big-screen, high-tech slide show plays hourly, explaining the annual World Ice Art Championships (see "Special Events," above), and the freezers contain impressive ice tableaux. Admission is $10 for adults, $6 ages 6 to 12. It's open from 10am to 7pm daily from June to mid-September.

At 410 Cushman St., the former city hall contains the volunteer-operated **Fairbanks Community Museum** (✆ **907/452-8671**), which shares quarters with the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race (see "Special Events," above)

and displays dog-mushing material, a miner's cabin, and old Fairbanks photographs. Open summer Monday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm, winter the same hours Tuesday through Saturday.

PIONEER PARK ★★

Built for the Alaska purchase centennial in 1967, **Pioneer Park** (formerly **Alaskaland**) is the boiled-down essence of Fairbanks on grounds at the intersection of Airport Way and Peger Road (✆ **907/459-1087;** www.co.fairbanks.ak.us, click "Pioneer Park" under "Directory"). It's called a theme park, but don't expect Disneyland or anything like it. Instead, Pioneer Park is a city park with a theme. It's relaxing and low-key, entrancing for young children and interesting for adults if you can give in to the charm of the place. Admission to the park is free and the tours and activities are generally inexpensive. The park is open year-round, but the attractions operate only Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day, daily from 11am to 9pm. Pick up a map and schedule when you arrive; I've listed the highlights here, but there is more to see. Depending on the pace you like to keep and the age level of your group, you can spend anything from a couple of hours to most of a day here.

The **SS *Nenana*** ★★ (✆ **907/456-8848**) is the park's centerpiece. Commissioned by the federally owned Alaska Railroad in 1933, the large sternwheeler plied the Yukon and Tanana rivers until 1952. In 1967, the *Nenana* came to what was then Alaskaland but was not maintained well and had nearly collapsed from rot when it was saved by a community restoration effort, completed in 1992. There are two decks of sumptuous mahogany, brass, and white-painted promenades to explore, plus the wheelhouse, well-preserved engine room and the like. Self-guided entry to the entire boat is $3 (free for ages 5 and younger), or for $2 you can see the ground-floor cargo deck with its engaging set of dioramas showing all the riverside towns and villages where the boat called, modeled as they looked in its heyday.

Many of Fairbanks's historical structures have been moved to Pioneer Park. A village of log cabins contains shops and restaurants, each marked with its original location and place in town history. **Judge Wickersham's house,** built around 1904, is kept as a museum, decorated appropriately according to the period of the town's founding. The house is less than grand, but it's worth a stop to strike up a conversation with the historical society volunteers who keep it open. **Pres. Warren Harding's railcar,** from which he stepped to drive the golden spike on the Alaska Railroad, sits near the park entrance. The **Pioneer Air Museum** (✆ **907/451-0037**) is housed in a geodesic dome toward the back of the park. Besides the aircraft, there are displays and artifacts from crashes of Alaska's aviation pioneers. Admission is $2 adults, free 12 and under with parent. Other attractions include a gold rush museum, a narrated gold rush show, kayak and bike rentals, a dance hall, and an art gallery.

If you have children, you certainly won't escape Pioneer Park without a ride on the **Crooked Creek and Whiskey Island Railroad** that circles the park twice, with a tour guide pointing out the sights; rides cost $2 for adults, $1 for children, free for seniors and babies. Kids also will enjoy the large **playground,** with equipment for toddlers and older children, where lots of local families come to play, and the 36-hole miniature golf course. The only carnival ride is a nice old **merry-go-round,** which costs $1.

Tour groups generally come to Pioneer Park in the evening from mid-May to mid-September for the **Alaska Salmon Bake,** at the mining valley area

(✆ **907/452-7274**), and the **Golden Heart Revue,** at the Palace Theatre (✆ **907/456-5960;** www.akvisit.com for both). Cost for the halibut, cod, or salmon is $23, prime rib $26. Beer and wine are available. The seating area is pleasant, with indoor or outdoor dining. The revue, nightly at 8:15pm from mid-May to mid-September, tells the amusing story of the founding of Fairbanks with comedy and song in a nightclub setting; admission is $15 for adults.

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

The state university's main campus contains several interesting attractions and makes a point of serving tourists. The campus is on the west side of town; look for University Avenue. A widely distributed brochure lists tours, hours, and fees. A free 2-hour **walking tour,** led by students, meets at the museum Monday through Friday at 10am, June through August except July 5 and 6. Call ahead (✆ **907/474-7581**) to confirm the time and any weather cancellations. (See www.uaf.edu and click "Information for Visitors" for maps and links to all campus attractions and tours. The University's ski trails are covered below under "Winter Recreation.")

University of Alaska Museum ★★★ This rich, interdisciplinary museum explains the nature and culture of each of the state's regions. It's Alaska's best natural history museum and its most scholarly, with information presented at advanced as well as elementary levels. Some of the objects have a real wow factor, such as Blue Babe, a mummified steppe bison; a 5,400-pound copper nugget; and the state's largest collection of gold. Use an audio tour guide, or, in the summer, join free 20-minute talks offered through the day on the university's specialties, including wildlife, the aurora, Alaska art and culture, and so on. Despite the museum's small size, a curious person can spend much of a day here. The only major weakness is that it tries to do too much in such a small space and seems cluttered, but that will be addressed by the $31-million expansion that is currently taking place to double the museum's size, adding an art gallery and auditorium. While the work is going on, the museum's acclaimed theater presentations on the northern lights and Alaska Native culture will be moved; call for details.

907 Yukon Dr. (P.O. Box 756960), Fairbanks, AK 99775-6960. ✆ **907/474-7505.** www.uaf.edu/museum. Admission $5 adults, $4.50 ages 60 and older, $3 ages 7–17, free ages 6 and under. Summer daily 9am–7pm; winter Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat–Sun noon–5pm.

Georgeson Botanical Garden ★ I really enjoy the mix of science and peace I find at this relaxed working garden. Plots are laid out to compare seeds and cultivation techniques, and are usually well posted with explanatory information on the experiment; but at the same time the flowers and vegetables are spectacular, and there are peaceful memorials and places to picnic. You don't need a tour to enjoy the garden. Nearby, the barn of the university's experimental farm is open for visitors to wander through and view the reindeer.

W. Tanana Dr. ✆ **907/474-1744.** www.uaf.edu/salrm/gbg. Admission $1. Open daylight hours; store open May 15–Labor Day daily 10am–6pm; free guided tours Fri at 2pm.

Large Animal Research Station The university studies captive musk ox, reindeer and caribou here, on a property more commonly known as the musk ox farm. Hour-long tours are given daily in the high season, but just walking along the fence in the cool morning or evening hours with binoculars, you can see the animals in the large pastures.

Yankovich Rd. (drive north from campus, turn left on Ballaine Rd., left again on Yankovich). ✆ **907/474-7207.** www.uaf.edu/lars. Tour $10 adults, $9 seniors, $6 students, free ages 6 and under. Tours June–Aug daily 1:30pm; late May and early September Tues and Sat 1:30pm.

COMMERCIAL TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AROUND FAIRBANKS

Three major for-profit attractions around Fairbanks pack in visitors by the hundreds of thousands, most of them on group tours. These places are educational and fun, as I've described below, but I think they all charge excessive prices. Whether they're worth your money depends on how much you've got and your level of interest, however, I doubt most independent budget travelers would feel they got their money's worth.

A fourth option is new and unique: a real, operating mine that takes visitors. The **Fort Knox Gold Mine** (**907/488-GOLD**), an open pit mine, is Alaska's largest gold mine and operates the largest mill in the U.S., recovering 1,200 ounces of gold a day. It's a heavy industry site, and the attraction is immense equipment and machinery. Boulders the size of cars are smashed to the size of headlights in a matter of seconds, and then further smashed into sand. At the end of the tour, guests can heft a $70,000 gold bar. The mine is 25 miles north of town on the Steese Highway. Admission is $21 adults, $17 children. Call a day or two ahead for reservations. The tour is not a good choice for people with mobility problems. Children under 8 are not allowed.

The Riverboat Discovery ★★ The *Discovery* belongs to the pioneering Binkley family, which has been in the riverboat business since the Klondike gold rush and have run this attraction since 1950. The *Discovery* is a real sternwheeler—a 156-foot steel vessel carrying 700 passengers on as many as three trips a day. There's nothing intimate or spontaneous about the 3½-hour ride, which mostly carries package-tour passengers off fleets of buses, but the Binkleys provide a diverting outing that doesn't feel cheap or phony. After loading at a landing with shops off Dale Road, near the airport, the boat cruises down the Chena and up the Tanana past demonstrations on shore—among others, a bush plane taking off and landing, fish cutting at a Native fish camp, and a musher's dog yard (in recent years, it was four-time Iditarod champion Susan Butcher's yard, and she'd often show off the dogs herself). Finally, the vessel pulls up at the bank for an hour-long tour of a mock Athabascan village.

1975 Discovery Dr., Fairbanks, AK 99709. ✆ **866/479-6673** or 907/479-6673. www.riverboatdiscovery.com. Tours $45 adults, $30 ages 3–12, free ages 2 and under. Sailings mid-May–mid-Sept daily at 8:45am and 2pm.

The El Dorado Gold Mine ★ A train like those you would find at an amusement park carries visitors though an impressively staged educational tour, including a trip through a tunnel in the permafrost. This is like a land version of the riverboat tour that's operated by the same family, the Binkleys. But the gold miners who act as hosts are the real attraction here. Visitors gather around a sluice to hear the amusing and authentic Dexter and Lynette (aka Yukon Yonda) Clark and watch a swoosh of water and gold-bearing gravel rush by. You pan the resulting pay dirt, and everyone goes home with enough gold dust to fill a plastic locket—typically $5 to $35 worth. Drive out to the mine after making reservations, or take a free shuttle.

Off the Elliott Hwy., 9 miles north of town. ✆ **866/479-6673** or 907/479-6673. www.eldoradogoldmine.com. Tours $28 adults, $20 ages 3–12, free ages 2 and under. Tours daily; call for times.

Gold Dredge Number 8 ★ Authenticity makes this the area's best historic gold-mining site. The centerpiece is a 1928 gold dredge, similar to machines in Dawson City and Nome, standing five decks tall on a barge in a pond it created. When it operated, huge scoops would dig from one end, the mechanism inside

would digest the gold from the gravel, and then it would dump the spoils out the back—in this way, the pond and the dredge it supports crept 3½ miles across the frozen ground north of Fairbanks. Many sterile areas you see in this area were created by these earth-eaters—nothing grows on their tailings for decades after. The tour company that bought the historic site added to the dredge with museums housed in relocated gold camp buildings, showing the drab life lived by the miners. A 90-minute tour starts with a film, then a ½ hour on the dredge, and finally a chance to pan for gold yourself, with success assured. It's a fascinating machine, but, as noted above, the price is high for what is essentially a single-subject museum.

1755 Old Steese Hwy., Fairbanks, AK 99712. ✆ **907/457-6058**. www.golddredgeno8.com. Admission $18 tour only, $23 with gold panning, $32.50 with cafeteria lunch. Mid-May–mid-Sept tours hourly 9:30am–3:30pm. To get there, go north on the Steese Expressway from town, turn left on Goldstream Rd., turn left again on the Old Steese Hwy.

GETTING OUTSIDE

In this section, I describe the outdoor opportunities around Fairbanks. Some other choices are barely farther afield: Check out sections 3 and 4 of this chapter, covering Chena Hot Springs Road and the Steese Highway.

The **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** 250 Cushman St. (at 3rd Ave.), (✆ **907/456-0527;** www.nps.gov/aplic), is a great resource. The staff will advise you on outings, outfitters, and where to find rental equipment.

SPECIAL PLACES

CREAMER'S FIELD At 1300 College Rd., right in Fairbanks, this migratory waterfowl refuge is a 1,800-acre former dairy farm that was saved from development in 1966 by a community fund drive. The pastures are a prime stopover point for Canada geese, pintails, and golden plovers in the spring and fall. Sandhill cranes, shovelers, and mallards show up all summer. The **Friends of Creamer's Field** (✆ **907/459-7307;** www.creamersfield.org) operates a small visitor center in the old farmhouse with displays on birds, wildlife, and history, open June through August daily from 10am to 5pm. They also offer guided nature walks in summer on Saturdays and Wednesdays at 9am and on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7pm.

Tips Equipped for the Backroads

Exploring Alaska's gravel highways—camping and fishing along the way, perhaps launching a canoe in a remote lake—has been tough for visitors to arrange because of the policies of most rental car agencies, which don't allow clients to drive off the pavement. An exception has long been the **National** franchise in Fairbanks, with locations at the airport and downtown at 1246 Noble St. (✆ **800/227-7368** or 907/451-7368; www.nationalcar.com). They rent SUVs and will allow some vehicles to go on gravel roads such as the Dalton, Steese, and Denali highways.

GoNorth Alaska Adventure Travel Center, at 3500 Davis Rd. (✆ **866/236-7272** or 907/479-7272, www.paratours.net) even rents campers on four-wheel-drive pickup trucks, perfect for exploring gravel roads. This is a new outfit with a new concept: they run a nice tent-camp hostel; arrange self-guided outdoor trips; rent canoes, bikes and camping gear; drive a shuttle for canoeists and hikers; and offer these truck campers. With required insurance and unlimited mileage, a pickup camper is about $160 a day.

You don't need a guide, however, to explore the 3 miles of trails through forest, field and wetland. I especially enjoyed the boreal forest nature walk, interpreted by an excellent booklet that you can pick up at the visitor center or from a kiosk at the trailhead if the visitor center is closed. The **Alaska Bird Observatory**, 418 Wedgewood Drive (✆ **907/451-7159;** www.alaskabird.org) conducts research and educational programs on the Creamer's Field refuge, including bird walks, daily bird banding that visitors can observe, and special events such as the Sandhill Crane Festival celebrating the migration of the Sandhill Cranes. This is the farthest north facility of its kind in North America. They have a satellite office in the visitor center and their new main office is just west of the refuge on the grounds of the Wedgewood Resort (see below).

CHENA LAKES RECREATION AREA This is a wonderful and unique place for a family camping trip. A birch-rimmed lake created for a flood-control project has been developed by the local government to provide lots of recreational possibilities: flat walking and bike trails; a swimming beach; fishing; a place to rent canoes and paddleboats; a self-guided 2½-mile nature trail; a playground; big lawns; and a terrific campground, with 80 camping sites, from pull-throughs for RVs to tent sites on a little island you can reach only by boat. In the winter, it's a popular area for cross-country skiing, ice fishing, and dog mushing. Camping costs $10; day use is $3. Drive 17 miles east of Fairbanks on the Richardson Highway and turn left on Laurance Road as you leave North Pole. For information, contact **Fairbanks North Star Borough Chena Lakes Recreation Area** (✆ **907/488-1655**). Follow the same directions (then drive along the dam past the recreation area) to the **Moose Creek Dam Salmon Watch,** a picnic and viewing area built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers atop the flood control project, to watch spawning salmon in crystal-clear water from late June to the end of July. Use of the salmon watch is free, so tell the recreation area gatehouse you are going there.

ACTIVITIES

CANOEING The Chena River is slow and meandering as it flows through Fairbanks, and you have your pick of restaurants on the bank. Farther upriver, the canoeing passes wilder shores, and near the river's headwaters becomes more challenging (covered in the "Chena Hot Springs Road" section, later). For beginners, try the wilderness section from the Chena Lakes Recreation Area downstream (see the description of this area above). It's 12 to 16 hours from there all the way into town, or you can take out at one of the roads crossing the river along the way. The **U.S. Army Corp of Engineers** (✆ **907/488-2748**) produces a float map with put-in and take-out points and float times, available at the Alaska Public Lands Information Center (see "Visitor Information," earlier). The Public Lands Center can provide guidance for all the trips and a list of companies that rent equipment.

Alaska Outdoor Rentals & Guides, located on the river bank at Pioneer Park (✆ **907/457-BIKE;** www.akbike.com) rents canoes and offers pickup or drop off along the river for flat rates. For example, to float from the park to Pike's Landing is $29 for the canoe and $15 for the pick up. They also offer lessons. You can rent canoes from **7 Bridges Boats and Bikes,** 7 Gables Inn, 4312 Birch Lane (✆ **907/479-0751;** www.7gablesinn.com/7bbb) for $35 per day or $100 per week, and they will drop you off at the river and pick you up at your destination for $1.50 per mile out of town, with a $15 minimum. Guests at the inn where the company is headquartered get free rentals.

BIKING & HIKING Both outfits mentioned for canoeing rental also rent bikes. Larry Katkin at Alaska Outdoor Rentals & Guides is quite knowledgeable about local mountain biking trails and has good bikes renting for $27 for an 8-hour day in summer. He also handles rentals at several hotels in town. Street and mountain bikes rent from 7 Bridges Boats and Bikes (see contact info above) for $20 a day. Traffic goes fast in Fairbanks and the separated bike trails are few, but strong cyclists can get by. Mountain biking and hiking are good in many places: at Birch Hill Recreation Area (see "Winter Recreation," below) in town, and, farther afield, on the trails off Chena Hot Spring Road and the Steese Highway, described in the following chapter sections. Inquire at the Alaska Public Lands Information Center for more ideas (p. 371).

FISHING Salmon season here is brief and the fish are not as good as they are nearer to the coast. Most fishing is in the streams for Arctic grayling, Northern pike, and burbot, and in stocked lakes for rainbow trout, Arctic char, and silver salmon. You can fish right in the Chena as it flows through town, although getting out of town and hiking away from a road yields better results. Fly-in fishing will further increase your chances and add sheefish and Dolly Varden char to your list, but the expense of around $300 a day is easier to justify from Anchorage, where you can target salmon as well as freshwater fish. The Alaska Public Lands Information Center (p. 371) offers guidance, or contact the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** at Creamer's Field, 1300 College Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99701 (✆ **907/459-7207;** sport fish information recording 907/459-7385; www.alaska.gov/adfg, click on "Sportfish," then "Region 3," then "Lower Tanana Drainage").

WINTER RECREATION Fairbanks has real Jack London winters. The visitor bureau guarantees it. For the growing number of visitors who want to experience real cold, see the aurora borealis, and ride a dog sled, Fairbanks is the place. Chena Hot Springs Resort, covered in the next section of this chapter, is the best destination for winter immersion, but you can also have a good time in town, especially in March, when the days lighten up, the temperatures are moderate, and the town gets busy with dog mushing and the ice carving contest (see "Special Events," earlier in this chapter).

DOG MUSHING The long winters and vast wild lands make the Fairbanks area a center of dog sledding, both for those who race and those who enjoy mushing as recreation, and there are plenty of people willing to take you for a lift, which is really an experience not to be missed. I've heard good things about **Sun Dog Express Dog Sled Tours** (✆ **907/479-6983;** www.mosquitonet.com/~sleddog), which charges $25 for a quick spin, up to $250 to learn to drive a team in a ½ day. They also have summer cart tours. Two local accommodations include mushing in their offerings; A Taste of Alaska Lodge and Chena Hot Springs Resort. The Denali West Lodge, covered in chapter 8, offers real mushing expeditions.

CROSS COUNTRY SKIING **The Birch Hill Recreation Area,** off the Steese Expressway just north of town, has about 25km of good cross-country ski trails, most groomed for classical or skate skiing, and a warm-up building in which to change clothes. Several loops of a couple of miles each offer advanced skiing on the steep southern side of the hill; loops of up to 6⅕ miles provide more level terrain to the north. There is a lighted loop, too. At the **University of Alaska Fairbanks,** Nordic trails start from the west end of Koyukuk Drive, near the satellite dishes. Although not as extensive or as well groomed as Birch

Hill, they're well worth a try. Diagonal striders can go quite a distance, while skaters have a shorter network to use. You will have to bring your own skis.

DOWNHILL SKIING Fairbanks has several community-sized downhill skiing areas, including the relatively large **Moose Mountain Ski Resort** (✆ **907/479-4732;** www.shredthemoose.com), with 1,300 vertical feet of skiing. Instead of freezing on a lift, you ride back up the hill and socialize in heated buses. The resort rents skis, boots and poles for $20. You can also ski and rent downhill skis ($20) or cross country skis ($20 half day; $30 full day) at the Mount Aurora Skiland Lodge (✆ **907/389-3624**).

SHOPPING

Fairbanks has a few good shops downtown. **New Horizons Gallery,** at 519 1st Ave. (✆ **907/456-2063**), occupies a large space, with a combination of large oils by Alaska's best serious artists, inexpensive prints, and gifts. It's open every day. The **Arctic Travelers Gift Shop,** at 201 Cushman St. (✆ **907/456-7080**), specializes in Native crafts, carrying both valuable art and affordable but authentically Alaskan gifts.

Near the airport, at 4630 Old Airport Rd., the **Great Alaskan Bowl Company** (✆ **907/474-9663;** www.woodbowl.com) makes and sells bowls of native birch—salad bowls, of course, but also bowls for many other purposes. They can carve up to eight nested bowls from one piece of wood and even laser-engrave a photo inside one. Through a glass wall looking into the shop, you can see workers cutting the bowls from raw logs.

WHERE TO STAY

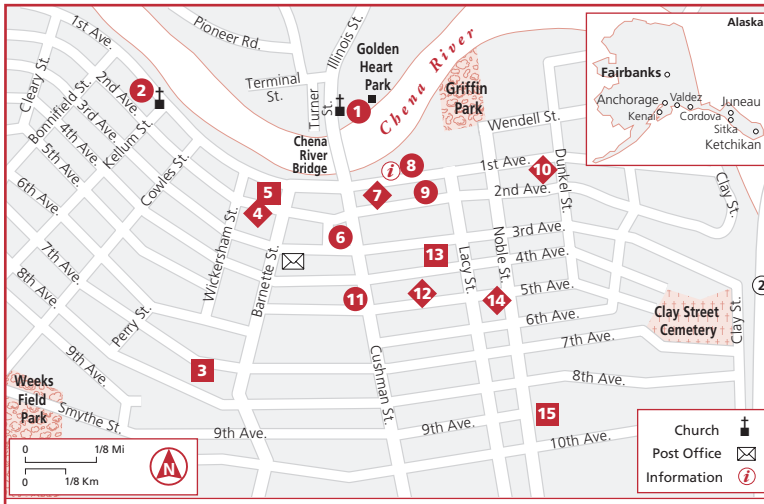
Going the bed-and-breakfast route is a good choice in Fairbanks, where good budget motel rooms are few. At the B&Bs I've listed below, you can save money over a hotel and get a private room that's just as good as a hotel room, while staying in a unique place with interesting people. The **Fairbanks Association of Bed and Breakfasts** lists about 20 more B&Bs on its website at **www.ptialaska.net/~fabb**. You also can get B&B information at the **Fairbanks Log Cabin Visitor Information Center** (see p. 364).

EXPENSIVE

Fairbanks Princess Riverside Lodge ★★ This enormous cruise-line-operated hotel extends in three long wings of gray clapboard on the banks of the Chena River. Rooms and common areas are decorated opulently in lavish colors and prints, with a pleasing mish-mash of faux-rustic Alaskan touches and gold rush excess. Rooms are not large but are well turned out, and many have river views (commanding a $10 premium). Business travelers will like the airport location and crisp, efficient service. Food is from a bar and grill, or, in the summer, a riverfront cafe with outdoor dining.

4477 Pikes Landing Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99709. ✆ **800/426-0500** or 907/455-4477. Fax 907/455-4476. www.princessalaskalodges.com. 325 units. High season $199 double, $289–$499 suites; low season $109 double, $199–$349 suites. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; bar; health club; steam room; tour desk; courtesy van; business center; laundry service. *In room*: A/C, TV, dataport, hair dryer, iron.

Pike's Waterfront Lodge ★ The owners packed this riverside airport hotel with every amenity they could think of, and the overall feeling is of pampered hospitality, despite a building and exterior that are rather ordinary. The lobby is done up like a lodge, with wildlife mounts and enormous oil paintings—wildlife



ACCOMMODATIONS
All Seasons Inn **3**
Bridgewater Hotel **5**
Fairbanks Hotel **13**
Westmark Fairbanks **15**

DINING
Café Alex Wine Bar **10**
Desserts First Bakery **14**
Gambardella's Italian Cafe **4**
Lavelle's Bistro **7**
Thai House **12**

ATTRACTIONS
Alaska Public Lands Information Center **6**
Church of the Immaculate Conception **1**
Fairbanks Community Museum **11**
Fairbanks Ice Museum **9**
Golden Heart Park **8**
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church **2**

fine art is found through the hotel, and an artist is often working there in the summer. Rooms are crisp and simply decorated, with smallish bathrooms and good views on the water side. A continental breakfast is included and other light meals are served in the dining room in summer. Pikes Landing restaurant is across the parking lot.

1850 Hoselton Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99709. ✆ **877/774-2400** or 907/456-4500. Fax 907/456-4515. www.pikeslodge.com. 180 units. Summer $190–$215 double; winter $71–$94 double. Rates include continental breakfast in winter, but not in summer. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; health club; sauna; steam room; courtesy van; business center, coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV w/pay movies, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, Nintendo.

River's Edge Resort Cottages ★★ *Kids* This place is built around the knowledge that an afternoon on a sunny riverbank shows off the best of Interior Alaska. Trim little cottages stand in a grassy compound along the gentle Chena River, where guests can fish for grayling. Inside, each light, airy cottage is an excellent standard hotel room, with high ceilings and two queen beds. Outside, they're like a little village, where guests can sit on the patio, watch the river go by, and socialize. The owners got the idea for the place from their RV park next door, when they noticed how their guests enjoyed visiting together in the open with their own private units to retreat to. It's perfect for families, as the outdoor areas are safe for playing and noise inside won't bother the neighbors. A large, summer-only restaurant sits at river's edge, with dining on a deck or inside at round, oak tables. Dinner—steak, seafood, and down-home cooking entrees—ranges up to $30; a burger is $8.

Tips Brand New Downtown Lodgings

Downtown's big, grand hotel, the **Westmark Fairbanks** (✆ **800/544-0970** reservations, or 907/456-7722; www.westmarkhotels.com), was largely being demolished as this was written to clear the way for an eight-story, 265-room addition planned to be completed in time for the 2004 season. The new structure will bring the hotel to 400 rooms, more than half of them suites. Of course, the construction site wasn't enough on which to base a full review. Rates will fall in the expensive category.

4200 Boat St., Fairbanks, AK 99709. Take Sportsman Way off Airport Way to Boat St. ✆ **800/770-3343** or 907/474-0286. Fax 907/474-3665. www.riversedge.net. 86 cottages, 8 suites. High season $173 double; low season $89 double. Extra person over age 11 $10. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tour desk; courtesy van; laundry service. *In room:* TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Sophie Station ★★ This all-suite hotel, near the University and airport, is well equipped for business travelers or longer stays, with fully equipped kitchens, sitting rooms, and separate bedrooms in every suite. The decoration is muted and even dated, but everything is very clean, well maintained, and comfortable. Bathrooms and closets are quite large. I was startled by the quality of the food and service in the hotel restaurant, called **Zack's,** which looks like it would produce typical, unmemorable hotel cafe dining. Each dish I selected was perfectly seasoned and done to a turn, servers were attentive without being annoying, and the meals came quickly. The cuisine includes Alaska seafood and familiar American dishes. Prices are reasonable—dinner main courses top out at $23—and they're open year round.

1717 University Avenue, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709. ✆ **800/528-4916** reservations or 907/479-3650. Fax 907/479-7951. www.fountainheadhotels.com. 148 units. High season $139–$180 double. Low season $83–$110. Extra person $10 in high and low seasons. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, kitchen, hair dryer, iron.

Wedgewood Resort ★★ Off College Road near the Creamer's Field Refuge, this well-kept hotel sprawls across a grassy, 23-acre area in eight large buildings. Seven of the buildings are converted three-story apartment buildings, which are regularly refitted, without elevators but with large living rooms, separate dining areas, fully equipped kitchens, air conditioners, two TVs, balconies, and phones with voice mail in both the living room and bedroom. The main difference from home is that someone else cleans up after you. Another 157 standard hotel units are large and thoughtfully designed but mostly house package tour groups in summer and are closed in winter. A scheduled courtesy van runs to the airport and train depot and various tourist sites in the summer. A footbridge now connects the hotel to Creamer's Field, and the Alaska Bird Observatory has opened its research and educational center on the grounds (see p. 372), so lectures and bird walks are right at hand.

212 Wedgewood Dr., Fairbanks, AK 99701. ✆ **800/528-4916** reservations or 907/452-1442. Fax 907/451-6376. www.fountainheadhotels.com. 157 units, 294 apts. High season $185 double; $125–$185 apt for 2. Low season $75–$120 apt, regular double rooms not offered. Extra person in apt $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants (summer only); bar; tour desk; courtesy van; coin-op laundry; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

MODERATE

All Seasons Inn ★★ This charming, comfortable country inn stands on a pleasant residential street a couple of blocks from the downtown core. Each cozy

room has its own inspired decorative details in bold colors, and the housekeeping has always been perfect on our many visits. The TVs are small. A series of large, elegant common rooms connect downstairs, where you can socialize with the personable hostess or other guests. Here, you'll find a bar with hot drinks and a sun porch with books and games. Complimentary newspapers come with the full breakfast. Shoes are removed at the front door in winter. No smoking permitted.

763 7th Ave., Fairbanks, AK 99701. ✆ **888/451-6649** or 907/451-6649. Fax 907/474-8448. www.allseasonsinn.com. 8 units. High season $135 double; low season $75 double. Extra person $25. Rates include full breakfast. DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, hair dryer, iron.

Aurora Express Bed and Breakfast ★★ *Finds* Susan Wilson's late grandmother appeared to her in a dream and told her there would be a train on a bank below her house, on the family's 15 acres, which are high in the hills south of Fairbanks. So Wilson went out and got a train—a still-growing collection that includes a pair of 1956 Pullman sleepers, a dining car, a locomotive, a caboose, and a World War II hospital car—and her husband, Mike, brought it all up the mountain to install below the house, right in the spot indicated. Some cars are close to their original form, and Susan says older guests sometimes weep over the memories they bring back. Others were elaborately remodeled into small rooms on themes related to Fairbanks history. A full breakfast is served in the dining car, which also houses the common area, TV, and phone. One 85-foot-long car is meant for families, with railroad-theme decor, puzzles, and toy trains. Then there's the incredible caboose, dedicated to Grandma. They're located 6½ miles out of town, so you will need your own car if you stay here. No smoking permitted.

1540 Chena Ridge Rd. (P.O. Box 80128), Fairbanks, AK 99708. ✆ **800/221-0073** or 907/474-0949. Fax 907/474-8173. www.aurora-express.com. 7 units. $115–$150 double. Extra person $15–$25. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May.

Bridgewater Hotel *Value* ★ This older building, in a prime downtown location near the river, contains comfortable, immaculate rooms that sacrifice little of substance to places charging as much as $50 a night more. Decoration in pastels creates a feminine, boutique tone in common areas. Rooms are bright and airy and those on the corners have exceptional views. All have shower stalls only, not tubs. A cafe serves breakfast and one of Fairbanks' best restaurants, Gambardella's, is just steps away and allows guests to charge meals to the rooms. This is a great choice for summertime travelers who like staying in a traditional downtown hotel but don't need luxury hotel trappings.

723 1st Ave, Fairbanks, AK 99701. ✆ **800/528-4916** or 907/452-6661. Fax 907/452-6126. www.fountainheadhotels.com. 94 units. $110–$140 double. Extra person $10. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May. **Amenities:** Tour desk; courtesy van; laundry service. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Minnie Street Bed & Breakfast Inn ★★ Just across the river from the center of downtown, near the rail depot, two buildings around a garden courtyard contain clean, large, brightly decorated rooms with many amenities, custom-designed carpeting, handmade quilts, and stylish furniture. There's an air of perfection to the place. A full breakfast is served in a dining room with a high vaulted ceiling. Huge one- and two-bedroom suites have kitchens, one guest room has a Jacuzzi, and the common area has a guest computer.

345 Minnie St., Fairbanks, AK 99701. ✆ **888/456-1849** or 907/456-1802. Fax 907/451-1751. www.minniestreetbandb.com. 10 units, 6 with private bathroom. High season $100–$130 double; $145–$195 suite. Low season $60–$75 double; $100 suite. Extra person $25. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Business center; massage; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, CD player.

A Taste of Alaska Lodge ★★ Situated atop a grassy slope on 280 acres, facing Mount McKinley, this hand-crafted log main building feels like a wilderness lodge but is less than half an hour from Fairbanks. They maintain a team of huskies for winter and summer dog sled rides and have just built a pond. Rooms are decorated with handmade quilts, brass beds, and other reproductions, plus an incredible array of knickknacks and collectibles. Each room has a door straight onto the grounds, where moose often wander. The cabins are large and especially luxurious. Breakfast is served at 8am on the dot, and guests have to remove their shoes at the door. No smoking is permitted.

551 Eberhardt Rd. (turn right 5⅓ miles out Chena Hot Springs Rd.), Fairbanks, AK 99712. ✆ **907/488-7855.** Fax 907/488-3772. www.atasteofalaska.com. 8 units, 2 cabins. $150 double; $175–$200 cabin. Extra person $25. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi. *In room:* TV.

INEXPENSIVE

Besides the other inexpensive places listed below, **Cloudberry Lookout Bed and Breakfast,** located out of the downtown area off Goldhill Rd., at 351 Cloudberry Lane, Fairbanks, AK 99709 (✆ **907/479-7334;** fax 907/479-7134; www.mosquitonet.com/~cloudberry), is an exceptional place—a handcrafted house with a spiral staircase leading up to a 60-foot tower in the woods west of town, with an eco-couple as hosts.

Crestmont Manor Bed and Breakfast ★ Phil and Connie Horton built this masterpiece of pale custom woodwork to be their home and inn (Phil is a builder), and filled it with handmade quilts (Connie is a quilter), splashes of bright colors, warm decorative themes, and huge impressionistic oil paintings (their son is an artist). The feel is crisp and airy. The house sits on the side of Chena Ridge, overlooking the west side of town, near the university and the best restaurants. One small room with two twin beds and a separated bathroom rents for $85 in summer; the rest are typically sized with attached bathrooms with shower stalls.

510 Crestmont Dr., Fairbanks, AK 99709. ✆ **907/456-3831.** Fax 907/456-3841. www.mosquitonet.com/~crestmnt. 5 units. High season $85–$110 unit; low season $55–$75 unit. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. *In room:* TV.

Fairbanks Hotel *Value* Four women transformed a notorious flophouse into a trim Art Deco–style historic hotel in the core of downtown. The proprietors aim for the feel of a small European hotel. Although quite small, the rooms are light and attractively decorated, including brass beds and other period touches. A few rooms that are just big enough for one person rent for only $55 a night. The neighborhood remains gritty, however. The building has quirks, so it's wise to choose your room when checking in. Five rooms share a bathroom if you don't get your own. Only the bottom floor of three is nonsmoking. In the winter, the hosts rent Arctic parkas, boots, hats, and mittens for $5 a day for guests, $20 non-guests.

517 3rd Ave., Fairbanks, AK 99701. ✆ **888/329-4685** or 907/456-6411. Fax 907/456-1792. www.fbxhotl.com. 35 units, 11 with private bathroom. High season $85–$109 double; low season $40–$59 double. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Bike rental; courtesy van. *In room:* TV.

Golden North Motel *Value* The Baer family, owners since 1971, keep the rooms in this two-story motel in good shape, making it a good bargain favored by Alaskans who've come to town from the Bush to shop or just visit by car. They're always replacing something, and where carpets and furniture are worn they're still quite clean. You have a choice of small rooms and units that combine

two of the smaller rooms; although spare and strictly functional, they're very reasonably priced and perfectly acceptable. The building is a nondescript brown rectangle brightened by flower boxes on the outdoor walkways. The location is near the airport. The motel provides free pastries and coffee in the office.

4888 Old Airport Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99709. ✆ **800/447-1910** or 907/479-6201. Fax 907/479-5766. www.goldennorthmotel.com. 62 units. Summer $69–$119 double. Winter $49-$59 double. Extra person in summer $10. Children 12 and under stay free. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy van. *In room:* TV.

A HOSTEL & CAMPING

There are several hostels in Fairbanks. Among the best is the homey **Billie's Backpackers Hostel,** off College Road near the university, at 2895 Mack Blvd. (✆ **907/479-2034;** www.alaskahostel.com), charging $22 a night.

Tent camping is a good way to go in Fairbanks, with its mild summers and ample public lands, but stock up on the mosquito repellent. Right in town, the **Chena River State Recreation Site** (not to be confused with the recreation "area" of the same name described in the next section of this chapter), is located where University Avenue crosses the river. Sites are surrounded by birch, and some are near the river. There are flush toilets here. Arrive early to get a site close to the river instead of one of the noisier sites near the road. The self-service fee for 56 drive-in sites is $15, for five tent-only sites $10. Getting a bit out of town, there are superb public campgrounds at Chena Lakes Recreation Area (see "Special Places," earlier in this chapter) and along Chena Hot Springs Road (covered in section 3 of this chapter).

Fairbanks has plenty of RV parks, some with full service and then some. Pick up a list at the visitor center. Among the best is **River's Edge RV Park and Campground,** at a wooded riverside bend of the Chena at 4140 Boat St., off Airport Way and Sportsman Way (✆ **800/770-3343** or 907/474-0286; www.riversedge.net), with lots of services, including free shuttles and organized tours. Full hookups are $27 and tent camping is $16. The same people operate the cottage resort and restaurant next door.

WHERE TO DINE

DOWNTOWN

Besides the more formal restaurants detailed below, **Desserts First Bakery,** in a brick building painted blue at 412 5th Ave. (✆ **907/451-5537**), serves breakfast and lunch in a relaxed setting that's reminiscent of an eatery in Seattle—a far cry from the diners and greasy spoon places common in Fairbanks. We were pleased with a feta, spinach and bacon omelet for $7; sandwiches and salads are $7 to $9.

Gambardella's Italian Cafe ★★ ITALIAN This warm, charming restaurant is right in the center of things. The chicken rustico (which sits on polenta), the halibut (served on pasta), and the lasagna are all tasty and reasonably priced. Dining rooms are narrow and segmented, so you always seem to be sitting with just a few other people. Elaborate decoration adds to a pleasingly busy feeling. Unlike the synthetic ambience of some of Fairbanks's other fine dining places, Gambardella's feels real, a place where the family that owns it has worn down the wood floor over many years. On a sunny day, eat on the patio among the hanging flowers. They serve beer and wine.

706 2nd Ave. ✆ **907/456-3417.** www.nvo.com/gambardellas. Lunch $6–$10; dinner $9.50–$20. 15% gratuity added for parties of 5 or more, or for split checks. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–10pm; Sun 4:30–10pm; closing an hr. earlier off season.

Lavelle's Bistro ★★★ ECLECTIC Housed in a big room decorated with chrome, stone and glass, Lavelle's has a grown-up, cosmopolitan feel that is quite welcome when you tire of the Alaskan rustic or gold rush themes of many of the area's restaurants. Located right downtown (at the base of the Marriott SpringHill Suites), it's also got the advantage of consistently superb food that's ambitious in conception and fine in execution, plus expert service. The cuisine is difficult to categorize, as southwest and Italian influences might be brought to a single dish, and Northwest, Asian and French influences turn up variously. Main courses are mostly over $20, but you can dine economically on the ample appetizers and salads, or choose a vegetarian lasagna that for only $15 comes with soup or a salad and side dishes. The wine list is impressive and the 3,000-bottle cellar is behind glass in the middle of the dining room.

575 1st Ave. ✆ **907/450-0555.** www.lavellesbistro.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $15–$30. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 4:30–10pm, Sun 4:30–9pm.

Thai House ★★ THAI In a small, brightly lit storefront in the downtown area, this is a simple, family-run restaurant with authentic Thai cuisine. Every time we've dined here the food came quickly and was deftly seasoned and cooked beautifully. You can rely on the servers, beautifully attired in national costumes, to help you order; just believe that when they say "hot" they really mean it. The first time I ate here, I rechecked the bill because it seemed too small. Such gems may be common in cities with large ethnic communities, but in Fairbanks, this place stands out.

526 5th Ave. ✆ **907/452-6123.** Lunch items $6.75–$8; dinner $9–$12. MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–4pm and 5–10pm.

WITHIN DRIVING DISTANCE

Besides the restaurants listed here, there's the salmon bake at Pioneer Park, described earlier, and the buffet at Ester Gold Camp, below. Also, in town, near the University at 3702 Cameron St. off University Road, **Sam's Sourdough Cafe** (✆ **907/479-0523**) is a masterpiece in the art of the greasy spoon, with quick, friendly service, good burgers, great milkshakes, and breakfast all day. They're open from 6am to 10pm.

Some of the best pizza in town comes from **College Town Pizzeria,** near the intersection of College and University roads (✆ **907/457-2200**), an east coast, order-at-the-counter, family place. The crust is wonderful—crisp yet chewy—and they prepare it either in the American style or as Italian gourmet pizza with pesto, spinach and the like—without tomato sauce. A large combo is $19.75. They don't deliver and are closed Sunday.

The Bakery ★ *Finds* DINER There are an infinite number of old-fashioned coffee shops in and around Fairbanks—the kind of place where a truck driver or gold miner can find a hearty, down-home meal, a motherly waitress, and a bottomless cup of coffee. This is the best of the lot, which is really saying something. The sourdough pancakes are memorable, the menu is long and inexpensive, portions are huge (sometimes they require two plates), the service is fast and friendly, and the quality of the baked goods is testified to by the number of police cars always in the parking lot. You can get breakfast all day (of course). They have no liquor license.

69 College Rd. ✆ **907/456-8600.** Lunch items $5.50–$9; dinner $8–$16. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6am–9pm; Sun 7am–4pm.

Pike's Landing ★ STEAK/SEAFOOD The dining room of the fine dining section here, overlooking the Chena River near the airport, is Fairbanks's most

formal (not *such* a high standard) dining spot, and comes across as a little pretentious. But the food is good and the service professional. The menu includes a nice range of simple to more ambitious selections; the highlight I found was the appetizer of spicy crab-stuffed mushrooms with a thick, chowder-like sauce. Main courses come with a choice of three salads, including a flavorful Caesar. Portions are quite large. Sunday brunch is big and delicious. For an inexpensive meal, the bar serves basic food on the deck over the river from 2:30pm to 10pm. It's a pleasant choice on a sunny day, less so in cool or rainy weather, when it remains in operation behind plastic.

4438 Airport Way. ✆ **907/479-6500.** Lunch items $7.50–$10.75; dinner $22–$33. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–2pm and 5–9pm; Sun 10am–2pm and 5–9pm.

The Pump House Restaurant and Saloon ★★ STEAK/SEAFOOD This historic, rambling, corrugated tin building on the Chena River is elaborately decorated and landscaped with authentic gold rush relics. Sitting on the deck, you can watch the riverboat paddle by or a group in canoes stop for appetizers and drinks from the full bar. For dinner, the cuisine is a cut above the area's typical steaks and seafood. Dishes such as the smoked salmon salad and the fish chowder—hearty, creamy, and flavorful—make the most of the regional ingredients without trying to get too fancy. Portions are ample—save room for one of the exceptional desserts. They serve a big Sunday brunch, too.

Mile 1.3, Chena Pump Rd. ✆ **907/479-8452.** www.pumphouse.com. Main courses $15.50–$30. AE, DISC, MC, V. Summer Mon–Sat 11:30am–2pm and 5–10pm, Sun 10am–2pm and 5–10pm. Winter Mon–Sat 5–9pm, Sun 10am–2pm and 5–9pm.

The Turtle Club *Finds* ★ BEEF/SEAFOOD Locals pack into this squat, windowless building, with its vinyl tablecloths and stackable metal chairs, for a menu with a few famous selections: prime rib, barbecue ribs, king crab, and prawns. The servings are enormous, the meat is tender and the atmosphere is noisy, fun and super-casual. You won't run into many other tourists here, north

Finds Nenana: Tom Sawyer's Alaska

If you are driving south from Fairbanks toward Denali National Park or Anchorage, plan a short stop in the town of Nenana, about 60 miles along your way. It's a town out of a Mark Twain novel—a sleepy, dusty riverside barge stop left over from the past. Here, Pres. Warren Harding drove the golden spike on the Alaska Railroad in 1923; it is still on display outside the memory-stirring old depot museum, although the train hasn't stopped regularly in 20 years. On the waterfront, riverboats are still loaded with cargo for villages up and down the Tanana River. The waterfront is also home to cultural center of town, with a little museum and a Native craft shop. The oldest building in town is the picturesque 1905 log cabin church on Front Street. Stop in at the visitor center on the Parks Highway to learn more and to see the big book of guesses from the Nenana Ice Classic (www.nenanaakiceclassic.com). The contest is a drawing to guess the exact minute that the ice on the Tanana River will collapse, with a jackpot over $300,000. Thanks to the game, this is one of the most carefully kept climate measurements in the north; scientists are using it to demonstrate long-term warming of the weather. See "Special Events," earlier in the chapter, to learn about ice classic festivities.

of the city in Fox, but you do need reservations, as waits can extend to hours even on weeknights.

Mile 10, Old Steese Hwy., Fox. ✆ **907/457-3883.** Reservations highly recommended. Main courses $19–$29. AE, DISC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6–10pm; Sun 5–9pm.

FAIRBANKS NIGHTLIFE

Fairbanks has a lot of tourist-oriented evening activities, as well as entertainment that's attended by locals. Call the 24-hour event recording of what's playing currently (✆ **907/456-INFO**) or get a copy of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner.* A large multiplex **movie theater** is located on Airport Way. The evening show at the **Palace Theatre** is discussed earlier under "Pioneer Park."

The Ester Gold Camp (✆ **800/676-6925** or 907/479-2500; www.akvisit.com) is an 11-building historic site—an old mining town that's been turned into an evening tourist attraction. The main event is a gold rush theme show at the Malamute Saloon, with singing and Robert Service poetry, nightly at 9pm; admission is $15, half price age 12 and under. A "photosymphony" slide show about the aurora takes place a couple of times a night in the summer and costs $8. There's also a restaurant that serves a buffet 5 to 9pm with mess-hall seating; it costs $18, or $30 if you have crab, kids half off. The gift shop is open in the evening, and there are simple, inexpensive rooms in the old gold mine bunkhouse and a campground.

Here are a couple of places to go out in the evening without having to hear about the gold rush (in other words, places real locals go). Downtown, **Café Alex Wine Bar,** at 310 1st Ave. (✆ **907/452-2539**), is a trendy and popular place, featuring a pianist. You can sip wine and nosh on shared plates from an all-appetizer menu of truly delicious food. Three miles south of town on the Parks Highway, **The Blue Loon** (✆ **907/457-5666;** www.theblueloon.com) has live music—both local and famous imported acts, plus lots of beers on tap, good burgers, and a volleyball court outside. They even show movies and call themselves the "cultural epicenter of Fairbanks."

3 Chena Hot Springs Road

The 57-mile paved road east from Fairbanks is an avenue to everything from an enjoyable day trip to up to a week's outdoor activities and hot-spring swimming. Of all the roads radiating from Fairbanks, this short highway will be most rewarding to outdoors people. The road also provides some of the best remote lodgings accessible on the Interior road system.

The road travels through the Chena River State Recreation Area, with spectacular hikes and float trips and well-maintained riverside campgrounds, and leads to the Chena Hot Springs, where there's a year-round resort that's perfect for soaking in hot mineral springs and for use as a base for summer or winter wilderness day trips. The resort is open to people who want to rent one of the comfortable rooms or to campers and day-trippers, and it's equally popular in the winter as in the summer (the slow seasons are spring and fall).

The paved road leads through a forest of birch, spruce, and cottonwood, first passing an area of scattered roadside development and then following the Chena River through the state recreation area. On a sunny summer weekend, the people of Fairbanks migrate to the riverside and the hiking trails; on a sunny winter weekend, they take to the hills on snowmobiles, cross-country skis, or dog sleds. It's a pleasant drive at any time, around 1¼ hours each way from Fairbanks, but not particularly scenic.

A pair of prospectors, the Swan brothers, discovered the hot springs in 1905, having heard that a U.S. Geological Survey crew had seen steam in a valley on the upper Chena. Thomas Swan suffered from rheumatism; incredibly, he and his brother poled up the Chena River from Fairbanks, found the hot springs, built a cabin and rock-floored pool, and spent the summer soaking. He was cured! More visitors followed, drawn by stories that whole groups of cripples were able to dance all night after soaking in the pools—by 1915 a resort was in operation, drawing worn-out miners and gold-rush stampeders, and many others as well. The resort has been in constant use ever since.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The Chena Hot Springs Road meets the Steese Expressway about 10 miles north of downtown Fairbanks. (Details on renting a car in Fairbanks can be found at the beginning of section 2 of this chapter.) The resort offers rides from anywhere in Fairbanks for $80 round-trip for one or two people, $40 for each additional person.

VISITOR INFORMATION For outdoors information, check the Fairbanks **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** 250 Cushman St. (at 3rd Ave.), (✆ **907/456-0527;** www.nps.gov/aplic).

The **Alaska Division of Parks,** at 3700 Airport Way, Fairbanks, AK 99709 (✆ **907/451-2695;** www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks"), manages the area and produces trail, river, and road guides, which are available at trailhead kiosks, from the public lands center (above), on the website, or in their *Trailmaker* newspaper, which you can also order from the Web. Contact them, also, with questions about the public cabins in the area (see "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1 of chapter 7, for how to reserve).

THE CHENA RIVER STATE RECREATION AREA

The recreation area takes in 254,000 acres along the river valley and over the rolling mountains of heather around it. Some of Interior Alaska's best hiking and floating are found here. As everywhere in the Interior, the mosquitoes are brutal.

ACTIVITIES

HIKING & BACKPACKING The best trail hikes in the Fairbanks area are in the Chena Hot Springs State Recreation Area. Backcountry camping does not require a permit, and many of the trails go above the tree line, so it's a good area for backpackers to get into the wilderness.

The **Angel Rocks Trail** is a sometimes steep 3½-mile loop to a large granite outcropping—an impressive destination with good views of the valley below. The trail mostly stays below the tree line; the blackened areas you see are from a 22,000-acre fire in 2002. The trailhead is well marked, at mile 48.9 of Chena Hot Springs Road.

The 15-mile loop that composes the **Granite Tors Trail,** starting at mile 39 of the road, is a challenging day hike, rising through forest to rolling alpine terrain, but the towering tors more than reward the effort. Like surrealist experiments in perspective, these monolithic granite sentinels stand at random spots on the broad Plain of Monuments, at first confounding the eye's attempts to gauge their distance and size. Like the Angel Rocks, they were created when upwelling rock solidified in cracks in the surrounding earth, which then eroded away. Water is scarce, so bring along plenty. This is an excellent overnight hike, with the driest ground for camping right around the tors. There is also a public shelter for camping halfway along the trail.

For a longer backpacking trip, the **Chena Dome Trail** makes a 30-mile loop, beginning at mile 50.5 and ending at mile 49. The 3 miles nearest the road at either end pass through forest, but the remaining miles are above the tree line, marked with cairns, with expansive views. You will summit 4,421-foot Chena Dome after the 10-mile mark. The trail can be quite wet and muddy in parts and quite steep and rocky in others. You must bring water with you. A public shelter for camping is on the trail.

RIVER FLOATING The Chena is a lovely river, growing from a clear, frothy creek near the end of the road to a lazy, brown Class I river as it flows off toward Fairbanks, several days downstream. Where you choose to start depends on your expertise. Easier water is downstream from Rosehip Campground (mile 27), with the slowest of all nearer Fairbanks, but the upper portion is more popular if you are up for something a bit more challenging. The road crosses the river several times, and the state park system has developed other access points, so it's possible to plan a float that exactly matches your time and abilities. Use the river guide from the **Alaska Division of Parks,** at 3700 Airport Way, Fairbanks, AK 99709 (✆ **907/451-2695;** www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks" then "River Guide"), to choose your route.

Canoe Alaska (✆ **907/883-2628;** www.canoealaska.net) specializes in white-water canoe instruction for beginners and intermediate paddlers and leads guided canoe and raft outings and expeditions; a guided trip is around $100 a day. They also rent canoes and offer shuttle service. Other agencies offering such services are covered in the Fairbanks section of this chapter (two are under "Canoeing" and one in the feature "Equipped for the Backroads").

FISHING Several of ponds along the road are stocked with rainbow trout, which you can keep subject to harvest limits. Signs on the road mark access points. You can catch and release Arctic grayling in the Chena, depending on the current regulations and bait restrictions. Check with the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 1300 College Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99701 (✆ **907/459-7207;** www.alaska.gov/adfg, click on "Sportfish," then "Region 3," then "Lower Tanana Drainage").

CAMPING & CABINS

Three beautiful campgrounds with water and pit toilets lie along the road by the Chena River, managed by the Alaska Division of Parks (see "Visitor Information," above). Although they can't be reserved ahead, the campgrounds are unlikely to be full. The **Rosehip Campground,** at Mile 27, has 37 sites, well separated by spruce and birch, with six suitable for RVs. Some sites are right on the river, while others are set up for more private tent camping in the woods. Float trips often start here. The **Granite Tors Campground** is across from the trailhead at Mile 39; it has 24 sites, seven suitable for RVs. Some sites have river frontage, and, as at Rosehip, float trips start there. The **Red Squirrel Campground,** at Mile 42.8, has 12 sites and a pleasant picnic area on the grassy edge of a small, placid pond, where swimming is permitted. Camping is $10 a night at each of these campgrounds.

There are several public-use cabins in the recreation area, two of them easily accessible to summer visitors and not hard to book a month or two ahead. (See "State Parks Cabin Reservations" on p. 249 for information on how to reserve these cabins.) These are primitive cabins; you must bring your own sleeping bags, lights, and cooking gear. The **North Fork Cabin** is at Mile 47.7 of the road, and the **Chena River Cabin** faces the river at Mile 32.2. You can get to either by car or canoe, and each costs $40 a night. Other public cabins in the area primarily serve winter visitors and are difficult to reach when the ground thaws.

THE HOT SPRINGS

Our family has enjoyed wonderful days here swimming and exploring, but this is not a sophisticated resort. It's a place to romp in the pool, hike through the woods, and enjoy the sound of the wind in the trees. The hot springs heat the buildings and, mixed with cold water, supply an indoor pool, a series of indoor and outdoor hot tubs and spas, and an extraordinary rock-lined outdoor hot pond (100–104°F/38–40°C), with evaporative cooling by a fountain and waterfall. Kids are limited to the indoor swimming pool, which is kept cool enough to swim, allowing adults to escape the noise outside. The locker rooms are undersized, so guests will want to change in their rooms. The various hot tubs and spas allow you to soak at your chosen temperature, inside or outside. The tubs, spas, pond and pool are open daily from 9am to midnight. Hot springs passes come with your room if you're staying at the resort; for campers or day-trippers, a day pass is $10 adults, $7 ages 6 to 13, free children 5 and under; a 10-punch pass is $60 for all ages.

WHERE TO STAY

The hot springs resort has an RV parking area without hookups, and two primitive campgrounds. A tent campground with outhouses wraps itself around the bends in a creek. All sites are $20 per night. Campers can use a dump station for free.

The Chena Hot Springs Resort ★★ Set on 440 acres of land in a bowl of mountains, the resort invites a slow pace, with plenty of time spent soaking or in the woods. Families love it, while couples may prefer to go during school days when the pool is quieter. Winter is the high season, when the aurora viewing is exceptional (especially away from city lights), and you can enjoy cross-country skiing groomed for classical or skating techniques, Sno-Cat and snow-machine tours, ice skating, sled-dog rides, winter biking and more. An aurora viewing station, with a warm-up lodge, is on a hilltop, where guests can flop back in the snow under a dizzying dome of stars and colors. In the summer, you can go horseback riding, rafting, canoeing, hiking, gold-panning, flightseeing, and mountain biking from here. All activities are guided and carry extra fees; they leave from a large activity building that also has indoor diversions, such as virtual golf games. There are no rentals, except for bikes and cold weather clothing. A 6-mile alpine ridge trail links to the Angel Rocks trail described on p. 383.

The accommodations here range from crude, original cabins built by the prospectors who discovered the area, to large new hotel rooms with televisions, phones, and coffeemakers. The newest rooms, in the Moose building, are large and nicely decorated, but noise can be a problem at night; light sleepers might prefer the smaller but still comfortable older buildings. The larger cabins—not the prospectors' originals—are crude but adequate for a family or a group that's looking for inexpensive lodgings and is not particular about indoor plumbing. The main lodge building contains the restaurant and bar, with a brief but sufficiently varied menu that carries prices only slightly above those in town. Overall, this is a good place to have fun in the real Alaska, but be ready for some rough spots—it's a sprawling, old-fashioned resort owned and operated by locals.

Mile 56.5, Chena Hot Springs Rd. (P.O. Box 58740), Fairbanks, AK 99711. ✆ **800/478-4681** or 907/451-8104. Fax 907/451-5181. www.chenahotsprings.com. 80 units, 11 cabins. $105–$200 double. Extra person $20. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; indoor and outdoor pools; hot tubs and Jacuzzis; guided activities; tour desk; massage; coin-op laundry. *In room* (excluding cabins): TV, coffeemakers in some rooms.

4 The Dalton Highway

The original purpose was utilitarian: To haul equipment north from Fairbanks for the trans-Alaska oil pipeline, which runs from Prudhoe Bay, on the Arctic Ocean, to Valdez, on the Pacific. But for a traveler, the experience of driving the Dalton Highway is so far beyond the ordinary as to require a whole new frame of reference to take it all in. The road is so very long, so remote, and so free of traffic, and the scenery is so mind-boggling in its grandeur and repetition, that after a time it feels like you're living in a dream. At some point you have to swallow and say to yourself, "I guess I didn't know that much about the world after all."

Part of the wonder comes in the difficulty of the drive. There are extreme sports—throwing yourself off the side of a mountain and so forth—and this is an extreme road trip, one that dives into deep wilderness as far from help as most people ever get. In 500 miles there are only two service stations. Driving the Dalton is not to be taken lightly or done on a whim. You need to prepare and you need to know you want to do it, because you will be rumbling over gravel for many, many hours, breathing dust, and beating the crud out of your car.

The drive starts in Fairbanks (officially, you drive parts of the Steese Highway and Elliot Highway before the real Dalton Highway begins), winding through the rounded hills and low forest of that region before crossing the Yukon River on a high, wood-decked bridge. Over the miles that follow trees grow sparser and the road crosses some spectacular alpine plateaus until, entering the Brooks Range, Arctic vegetation and the mountains' rocky ferocity take over. Beyond towering Atigun Pass, the Arctic Slope extends 170 miles, first through tundra foothills, then over the broad, lake-dotted flatlands that extend to the Arctic Ocean. Arrival at the oil facilities can be a let down, especially if you haven't made arrangements for the tour that is the only way through to the shore. More on that below.

Wildlife shows up all along the road: moose, caribou, and grizzly bears, and sport fish and songbirds. Animals far outnumber people. A highway business is next to the Yukon River bridge, and at Coldfoot there is a truck stop. Wiseman is 15 miles up the road from Coldfoot, where the 2000 census counted 21 people. And that's it for another 240 miles of gravel to Prudhoe Bay. There are no ATMs, no grocery stores, no cell phone coverage, no medical facilities—civilization just isn't here. Drive carefully.

DALTON HIGHWAY ESSENTIALS

PRACTICAL TIPS You can drive the highway yourself, staying in the few motels along the way or in a tent or motor home. From Fairbanks, take the Steese Highway north to the Elliot Highway. The total road distance from Fairbanks to the Arctic Ocean is 497 miles. Road conditions are notorious on the gravel-and-dirt Dalton, but much of it is kept in good condition these days, with pavement working its way steadily north. Speeds of 50 miles per hour are possible on some parts of the road, while doing 35 will keep you in one piece on rougher spots. The drive takes 12 hours each way, without stops. It's dusty, shoulders are soft, and flat tires are common. In the Fairbanks section I have listed a business that rents SUVs for the highway and another that rents campers on four-wheel-drive pickups (See "Equipped for the Backroads," on p. 371). Generally, other rental companies don't allow their vehicles on the Dalton.

Preparing for the drive is essential. Pick up the road guide produced by the BLM and get first-hand, personal advice (see "Visitor Information," below). Check road conditions, construction and weather with the Alaska Department of Transportation (✆ **511,** 511.alaska.gov). Bring at least one full-sized spare tire and

extra gasoline in jugs. Most vehicles can make it from one gas station to the next, but what if the station is closed or you have to turn around short of a refill? Insect repellent is an absolute necessity. (For further suggestions on preparing for rural highways, see "Driving Safety" on p. 34). Drive with your headlights on at all times. Truck traffic is dominant. Slow down or even stop to allow trucks to pass you either way, and be careful on bridges, as some are narrow. Also, pull off for views or pictures—don't just stop in the middle of the road, as some people do.

For those who want to let someone else do the driving, a bus package is listed in section 9 of chapter 10, on Prudhoe Bay.

VISITOR INFORMATION Getting up-to-date advice is critical before heading off, and the best place to do that is at the Fairbanks' **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** at 250 Cushman St. (at 3rd Ave.), Fairbanks, AK 99701 (✆ **907/456-0527;** www.nps.gov/aplic). Staffers there drive the road annually to stay on top of current conditions.

Much of the road runs through land managed by the **Bureau of Land Management,** 1150 University Ave., Fairbanks, AK 99709 (✆ **907/474-2200;** http://aurora.ak.blm.gov/dalton). They publish information on driving, recreation and natural history on their Web page and in the very handy free guide ***The Dalton Highway,*** which you can get at the public lands center or from any of the BLM information centers by mail or in person. Two BLM information centers are along the highway, both open summer only. The first is the **contact station** at the Yukon crossing, which is staffed by BLM volunteers and open daily in summer from 9am to 6pm. It has no phone. The second is a larger, **interagency center** in Coldfoot (✆ **907/678-5209**), open from 10am to 10pm daily. This center has maps and books for sale and a staff person to ask questions; even if you don't have any questions, it is tempting to stop after so many hours without seeing anyone.

ON THE ROAD

The bridge over the Yukon River at mile 56 is the only crossing in Alaska, and many people drive the Dalton just to get to the **Arctic Circle** at mile 115, where you'll find a sign for pictures as well as a crude camping area. A number of places along the highway have incredible views, including Finger Mountain at mile 98; Gobbler's Knob at mile 132, which offers the first view of the Brooks Range; and 4,739-foot Atigun Pass at mile 245, where the road crosses the Brooks Range, winding through impossibly rugged country. The pass is the highest point on the Alaska road system, and you may find summer snow. All along the highway are opportunities to see birds and animals, including rabbits, foxes, wolves, moose, Dall sheep, bears, and caribou. Sit still if you want to see the skittish caribou, as they may wander closer to an unmoving vehicle.

The road parallels the 4-foot-wide **trans-Alaska pipeline.** The line, completed in 1977, serves America's largest and second-largest oil fields, Prudhoe Bay and Kuparuk, carrying the hot crude oil 900 miles from the Arctic Ocean to docks in Valdez, where tankers pick it up for shipment primarily to the West Coast. The public road ends before reaching the Prudhoe Bay complex and the Arctic Ocean. The only way through the gate is with a tour operator, and you must make arrangements at least 24 hours ahead to clear security. Call the **Arctic Caribou Inn** (✆ **877/658-2368** or 907/659-2368; www.arcticcaribouinn.com). See section 9 of chapter 10, on Prudhoe Bay, for more details.

HIGHWAY SERVICES: FOOD, FUEL & LODGINGS

Among the three places offering services along the 414 miles of the Dalton, you won't find anything luxurious, or even approaching budget chains.

Yukon River Camp, with a motel, a restaurant, a gift shop, fuel, and tire repair, is at Mile 56, just past the Yukon River Bridge (✆ **907/655-9001**). The motel is a former pipeline construction camp.

The **Coldfoot Camp** truck stop at Mile 175 (✆ **866/474-3400** or 907/474-3500; www.coldfootcamp.com) is the one big stopping place along the road. After the endless wilderness miles on the road, no one could stand to pass it by. The camp includes several buildings on a large gravel pad. Most important are the gas pumps and the 24-hour restaurant where you pay for the fuel—a typical but friendly highway diner. Across the lot, the hotel, known as the Slate Creek Inn, is built of leftover construction camp modular units. The small rooms with low ceilings are perfectly comfortable, with private bathrooms, but far from grand. The camp also offers minor vehicle repairs, towing, RV hookup, laundry, a post office, and a gift shop. They guide rafting on the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River. An air taxi, **Coyote Air** (✆ **800/252-0603** or 907/678-5995), can show you this amazing country from the air. The interagency visitor center is on the northern driveway, and worth a stop; the pleasant BLM Marion Creek Campground is 5 miles north.

After Coldfoot, the next service area is **Deadhorse,** at the end of the road 240 miles north, with rooms, fuel, restaurants, a post office, vehicle maintenance, a general store, and an airport. See the Prudhoe Bay section in chapter 10.

GETTING OUT OF THE CAR

ACTIVITIES

FISHING The streams and lakes of the Arctic are poor in nutrients, and cold and frozen much of the year; fishing is not a reason to drive the Dalton. However, if you are taking the adventure anyway, there are fish in streams from July to mid-September and in lakes that don't freeze solid year-round. Many of the streams have Arctic grayling, but you'll want to hike farther than a ¼ mile from the road to increase your chances. A good bet is the **Jim River area** between miles 140 and 144, where the river follows the road and fishing pressure is more spread out. Most North Slope rivers have good Dolly Varden fishing in late August and early September. Many of the lakes along the road have grayling, and the deeper ones north of the Brooks Range have lake trout. For detailed information, contact the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 1300 College Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99701 (✆ **907/459-7207**); they produce a booklet called *Sportfishing Along the Dalton Highway.*

HIKING The road has no established hiking trails, but most of the area is open to self-reliant hikers who know how to pick their own route. Hiking brushy or marshy Interior country isn't fun, but the dry tundra of the ridgetops and mountains creates a wonderful sense of freedom. The country opens up north of the Chandalar Shelf at mile 237. The best hiking area is the zone of dry tundra in the foothills north of the Brooks Range. But even at upper elevations you still run into tussocks, wet ground and stream crossings. Topographical maps and advice on hiking the Brooks Range are available at the sources listed under "Visitor Information," above. Remember, this is remote wilderness; do your research, be prepared, and tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back.

CAMPING

The Bureau of Land Management has a few campgrounds along the road, but there seems little reason to wait to reach them, as there are any number of places to pull off the road on a spot of gravel and spend the night, often in places of stunning beauty. Here are the BLM's developed areas along the road, which include campgrounds and spots where you can park for a while and obtain water

(add 83 miles to the mileposts to get the distance from Fairbanks). Unless the description mentions a formal campground, these are just pull-outs where you can park and camp or sleep in your car:

- **Mile 60:** Artesian well, outhouses, and dump station.
- **Mile 98** (Finger Mountain): Nice views, outhouse, and wheelchair-accessible trail with interpretive signs.
- **Mile 115** (Arctic Circle): Outhouses and picnic tables, an interpretive display, and an undeveloped campground without water.
- **Mile 150** (Grayling Lake): Pull-out with outhouse.
- **Mile 175** (Coldfoot): A private campground with hookups is part of the truck stop described above.
- **Mile 180** (Marion Creek): A developed BLM campground with 27 campsites, 11 of them for large RVs (no hookups). The campground has a well and outhouses; the fee is $8.
- **Mile 235** (Arctic tree line): No improvements, heavily used by truckers.
- **Mile 275** (Galbraith Lake): Undeveloped campground with outhouses about 4 miles off-road; state-operated landing strip.

5 The Alaska Highway

Detailed coverage of the entire 2,400-mile drive to Alaska is beyond our scope, but chapter 2's "Getting There" section provides the planning basics. Here I've covered the Alaska portion of the road, the 200 miles of the Alaska Highway that run from the border with Canada to the terminus in Delta Junction. This is mostly boring driving, miles of stunted black spruce and brush, either living or burned out. It's a relief when you hit the first major town, **Tok** (rhymes with smoke), 100 miles along. But don't get your hopes up. This is the only place where I've ever walked into a visitor center and asked what there is to do in town, only to have the host hold up her fingers in the shape of a goose egg and say, "Nothing." Another 100 miles (I hope you brought plenty of cassette tapes, because no radio station reaches out here) and you've made it to **Delta Junction.** There's a little more to do here, but it's still not a destination. Another 100 miles and you're in Fairbanks.

The main sources of information for the drive are based in Tok, the first town you hit after you cross the border. It acts as a threshold for the entire state. To plan the journey ahead, contact them, and see "Exploring the Interior," at the beginning of this chapter. If you're headed to Anchorage or other points south, see the sections on the Glenn and Richardson highways later in this chapter; those roads branch from the Alaska Highway at Tok and Delta, respectively.

I've arranged this section in order from the border with Canada heading west.

CROSSING THE BORDER

Remember to set your watch back an hour when crossing the border in Alaska—it's an hour later in Yukon Territory. Also, if you make significant purchases or rent rooms in Canada, you may be able to get a refund on the 7% goods and services tax (GST). Ask at the border station.

CUSTOMS Crossing the U.S./Canadian border requires a little preparation, even for U.S. citizens, to make sure you have the necessary identification. Canadian authorities now require American citizens to produce a piece of photo identification, such as a driver's license, combined with either a birth certificate or a passport. **Children** with their parents may need a birth certificate; children or

Dawson City & Eagle: Detour Into History

Instead of taking the Alaska Highway directly from Whitehorse, Yukon, to Tok, consider driving north on the Klondike Highway (Yukon Hwy. 2) to Dawson City, then west and south over the Top of the World Highway and unpaved Taylor Highway to rejoin the Alaska Highway just east of Tok. This represents 502 miles of driving, about 127 miles more than if you just stay on the Alaska Highway, and includes 43 miles of sometimes rough dirt road, but it's worth doing at least one way to see historic Dawson City and the fabulous mountain scenery of the Top of the World Highway.

Dawson City was the destination of the 1898 gold rush; the bed of the Klondike River near here contained thick slabs of gold. The town maintains the look of those days, when it was the second largest city on the west coast, after San Francisco. Many buildings, a gold dredge, and a riverboat were restored as part of the Klondike National Historic Sites, managed by **Parks Canada.** Besides the buildings and their setting, there are museums, a working non-profit casino, a vaudeville show, and other attractions—easily enough for two days of sightseeing. The **Klondike Visitor Association** (P.O. Box 389, Dawson City, YT, Canada Y0B 1G0; ✆ **867/993-5575;** fax 867/993-6415; www.dawsoncity.ca), offers information on local businesses, accommodations, and community events. For more information contact Parks Canada at P.O. Box 390, Dawson City, YT, Canada Y0B 1G0 (✆ **867/993-7200;** www.parkscanada.gc.ca, click on "National Historic Sites," then "Yukon").

After passing into the United States on the Top of the World Highway (***Important note:*** this border crossing is open only during the day, and only during the summer), a further detour leads north on the Taylor Highway to the forgotten town of Eagle (going south on the Taylor leads you back to the Alaska Hwy.). The trip to Eagle adds 66 miles each way on a winding, narrow dirt road; allow 2 hours each way. But, if you have the time, the destination more than rewards the effort. Eagle is lost in time, a treasure of a gold rush river town with many original buildings full of original artifacts from a century ago. It's entirely authentic and non-commercial: There are few businesses other than a store, cafe, and motel. The **Eagle Historical Society and Museums** (✆ **907/547-2325;** www.eagleak.org) shows off the buildings and objects left behind in this eddy in the stream of history. Their 3-hour walking tour starts once a day at 9am daily from Memorial Day to Labor Day and costs $5. To plan a float trip on the Yukon River from Eagle, or for other outdoor information, contact the Eagle Field Office of the **Yukon–Charley Rivers National Preserve,** P.O. Box 167, Eagle, AK 99738 (✆ **907/547-2233;** www.nps.gov/yuch). The office lies on the far side of the airstrip from the main part of the village.

youths under 18 unaccompanied by parents may need a letter from a parent or guardian; and children with a single parent should carry a letter from the other

parent. Both U.S. and Canadian citizens should carry **proof of citizenship** and **proof of residence.** (Citizens of other countries probably need passports, and those from some countries may need visas; see chapter 3.) There are no duties on products made in the United States or Canada. For duties on items that you buy that originated in other countries or on alcohol or smoking supplies, see chapter 3. Products you buy in Alaska made of **ivory, fur, or other wildlife** will probably require special permits to be taken out of the United States, and it's easiest to have the store where you bought the item take care of it (see chapter 3 for details). U.S. authorities no longer let non-citizens into the country with firearms except for permanent resident aliens or foreigners holding both a special permit from the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms and a non-resident hunting license (see chapter 3). Going into Canada, **firearms** other than hunting rifles or shotguns generally are not allowed, and you need to fill out a form and pay a $50 fee for guns that are allowed; contact the **Canadian Firearms Center** (✆ **800/731-4000;** www.cfc.gc.ca) before you go to avoid problems. **Dogs and cats** require rabies certificates. If in doubt about any of these issues, call before you go, as the border is a long way from anywhere: **Canadian Customs** in Whitehorse (✆ **867/667-3943**) or **U.S. Customs** in Anchorage (✆ **907/271-2675**).

FROM THE BORDER TO TOK

The road borders the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge for the first 60 miles after entering the United States. These broad wetlands and low forests are a migratory stop-over in May for thousands of songbirds, birds of prey, and swans and other waterfowl, and are the summer home of lesser sandhill cranes, among 143 other species. Caribou show up along the road, especially in the early spring and fall. A **Fish and Wildlife Service Visitor Center,** 8 miles past the border, at Mile 1,229 (✆ **907/774-2245** or 907/883-5312 headquarters; http://tetlin.fws.gov), is open May 15 to September 15 daily from 8am to 5pm. There are exhibits and there is a great view from the observation deck. The refuge also has two small lakeside campgrounds over the next 27 miles: **Deadman,** at Mile 1,249, with 16 sites (RVs can park here); and **Lakeview,** at Mile 1,256, with eight sites (RVs can't fit here). Rangers give evening campground programs in the summer. The campgrounds do not have water.

TOK

Originally called Tokyo Camp, when the area was a construction station on the highway, the name was shortened to Tok after Pearl Harbor. Since then, Tok's role in the world hasn't expanded much beyond being a stop on the road. With its location at the intersection of the Alaska Highway and the Glenn Highway to Anchorage and Prince William Sound (see the next section), the town has built an economy of gas stations, gift stores, cafes, and hotels to serve highway travelers.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE You're surely passing through Tok with your own set of wheels. If you get stuck for some reason, one bus service or another can get you to Fairbanks, Anchorage, Whitehorse, or even Dawson City. Call **Alaska Trails** (✆ **888/600-6001;** www.alaskashuttle.com).

VISITOR INFORMATION Public land agencies jointly operate an informative visitor center to introduce highway travelers to Alaska's outdoors. The **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** P.O. Box 359, Tok, AK 99780 (✆ **907/883-5667;** www.nps.gov/aplic), is on the right (north) side of the road

coming from the direction of Canada on the Alaska Highway. It is open daily from 8am to 7pm in summer and from 8am to 4:30pm in winter. Besides answering questions, rangers offer talks and nature walks in the summer, and you can make ferry reservations on the Alaska Marine Highway System.

A few doors down at the intersection of the Alaska Highway and Tok Cut-Off (also known as the Glenn Highway), the town's **Main Street Visitor Center** is operated by the Tok Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 389, Tok, AK 99780 (✆ **907/883-5775;** www.tokalaskainfo.com). They provide information on Tok and anywhere else you may be bound on the highway, and are open from May 1 to September 15 daily from 8am to 7pm.

FAST FACTS: Tok

Bank **Denali State Bank** (with ATMs) is in the Three Bears Store; ATMs are also at the Texaco station across the road from Fast Eddy's restaurant.

Hospital **Tok Clinic** is on the Tok Cut-Off across from the fire station (✆ **907/883-5855**).

Police Call ✆ 911 in emergencies. Contact the **Alaska State Troopers** (✆ **907/883-5111**), near the intersection of the Alaska Highway and Glenn Highway.

Post Office At the highway junction next to the Westmark Hotel.

WHERE TO STAY

The motels are numerous and competitive in Tok. There also are many B&Bs; check at the visitor center.

The **Tok International Youth Hostel** (✆ **907/883-3745;** stout@aptalaska.net) occupies a MASH tent a mile off Mile 1322.5 Alaska Highway, 8 miles west of town, on Pringle Drive. Guests use an outhouse and need mosquito repellent. The hostel offers a shower and cooking facilities. Beds are $10 apiece; reservations are not necessary. It's closed from September 15 to May 15.

Be sure to get the 25¢ state highway and campground map from the Public Lands Center (listed under "Visitor Information'), which includes all the public campgrounds in Alaska. Three attractive state park campgrounds lie near Tok on the three highway links that radiate from the town. Each has a $10 self-service fee.

There are lots of competitive RV parks in Tok, too. One that has wooded sites suitable for tent camping as well is the **Sourdough Campground,** 1½ miles south of town on the Glenn Highway (✆ **800/789-5543** Alaska and Yukon only, or 907/883-5543). They charge $24 for full hookups, $16 dry.

Snowshoe Motel & Fine Arts and Gifts *Value* The 10 newer nonsmoking rooms near the front are a real bargain. Each is divided into two sections by the bathroom, providing two separate bedrooms—great for families. The housekeeping was quite good when I visited, and the outside walkways were decorated with flowers. The gift shop carries some authentic Native art as well as highway kitsch.

Across the highway from the information center (P.O. Box 559), Tok, AK 99789. ✆ **800/478-4511** in Alaska, Yukon, and part of B.C.; or 907/883-4511. Fax 907/883-4512. snowshoe@aptalaska.net. 24 units. High season

$72 double; low season $57 double. Rates include continental breakfast in summer. Extra person $5. MC, V. *In room:* TV.

Westmark Tok The central hotel in town is closed in the winter, as its clientele is primarily the package tour bus trade. It's made up of several buildings connected by boardwalks. The older rooms are narrow, without enough room at the foot of the bed for the TV, but they're comfortable and up-to-date. The new section has larger, higher-priced rooms. There's a "factory outlet" gift store in the lobby that sells remainders from Westmark's other shops for lower prices. A greenhouse grows huge vegetables. The restaurant serves three meals a day, with dinners in the $14-to-$20 range.

Intersection of Alaska and Glenn highways (P.O. Box 130), Tok, AK 99780-0130. ✆ **800/544-0970** (reservations) or 907/883-5174. Fax 907/883-5178. www.westmarkhotels.com. 93 units. $89–$129 double. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Closed Sept 16–May 15. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* TV, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Young's Motel Good standard motel rooms occupy three one-story structures on the parking lot behind Fast Eddy's restaurant (described below), where you check in. Eighteen newer, smoke-free rooms are the pick of the litter, but all are acceptable.

Behind Fast Eddy's Restaurant on the Alaska Hwy. (P.O. Box 482), Tok, AK 99780. ✆ **907/883-4411.** Fax 907/883-5023. edyoung@aptalaska.net. 43 units. High season $79 double; low season $67 double. Extra person $5. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* TV, dataport.

WHERE TO DINE

The only noteworthy restaurant in town is **Fast Eddy's** (✆ **907/883-4411**), on the right as you enter town from the east. Begun as a typical roadside cafe, it has developed into a place where a wine list and fine-dining entrees don't seem out of place. Yet the proprietor knows that most highway travelers just want a simple, relaxing meal, and the varied menu offers anything they might have in mind. I relish the salad bar and light dishes that offer a break from the usually carnivorous greasy-spoon choices found elsewhere along the highway. The dining room is decorated in maroon, dark wood and brass. They're open in summer from 6am to 11pm, in winter from 6am to 10pm.

DELTA JUNCTION

This intersection with the Richardson Highway, which runs from Valdez to Fairbanks, is the official end of the Alaska Highway. It's an earnest little roadside town set in a broad plain between the Delta and Tanana rivers. People make their livings from farming and tourism, by working at a trans-Alaska pipeline pump station south of town, and from construction at Fort Greely, a defunct Army base recently reborn as the "test bed" for President Bush's missile defense system. For visitors, there are two historic roadhouse museums, several good campgrounds, and an unpredictable chance to spy a herd of bison—not enough to hold most travelers' attention for more than a few hours.

ESSENTIALS

VISITOR INFORMATION A helpful **visitor center** run by the Delta Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 987, Delta Junction, AK 99737 (✆ **877/895-5068** or 907/895-5068, 907/895-5069 summer only; www.deltachamber.org), stands at the intersection of the Alaska and Richardson highways, in the middle of town; it's open from mid-May to mid-September.

FAST FACTS: Delta Junction

Bank **Wells Fargo** is on the Richardson Highway at the center of town, with an ATM.

Hospital The **Family Medical Center** is at Mile 267.2 Richardson Highway, 2 miles north of the visitor center (✆ **907/895-4879** or 907/895-5100).

Police The **Alaska State Troopers'** emergency number is ✆ **907/895-4800.** For nonemergencies, call ✆ **907/895-4344.**

Post Office On the Richardson, 2 blocks north of the visitor center.

EXPLORING THE AREA

Before construction of the first road to Fairbanks in 1917 (today's Richardson Hwy.), travelers to the Interior followed a trail on basically the same route by horse in summer and dog sled in winter, stopping at roadhouses that provided food and shelter a day apart on the 2-week trip. Two well-preserved examples of the roadhouse system survive near Delta Junction.

In 1996, the Army saved the 1905 **Sullivan Roadhouse** (✆ **907/895-4415**), which had stood abandoned since 1922 on what became an Army bombing range. Today the log building stands next to the town visitor center and is open in summer Monday through Friday 9am to 5pm. Many of the Sullivans' original belongings have been set back in their original places, giving a strong feel for frontier life, but the heart of the restoration is the authentic hospitality of the local volunteers who show off the place with great pride.

The next stop on the trail was 16 miles toward Fairbanks. **Rika's Roadhouse and Landing,** 10 miles northwest of Delta at Mile 275 on the Richardson Highway (✆ **907/895-4201;** www.rikas.com), still makes a pleasant stop on your drive. This roadhouse lasted later than the Sullivans' because drivers had to board a ferry here to cross the Tanana River until the 1940s, and the shore was the end of the line for Tanana sternwheelers. The 1906 log building has been altered too much to feel real, but the grassy 10-acre compound completes a vivid scene of Alaska pioneer life, with surviving outbuildings, including a telegraph office and museum, a gorgeous vegetable garden, and livestock pens. A concessionaire manages the site for the Big Delta State Historical Park, with a restaurant serving soups, salads, and sandwiches daily from 9am to 5pm; the grounds and museum are open from 8am to 8pm from May 15 to September 15. An impressive suspension bridge carries the trans-Alaska pipeline over the Tanana River, and boaters use the shoreline, at the confluence of the Tanana and Delta rivers, as a landing.

WHERE TO STAY

The cute, funny, and hospitable **Kelly's Alaska Country Inn,** at the intersection of Richardson and Alaska highways (✆ **907/895-4667;** www.kellysalaskacountryinn.com), has rooms for $89 to $109 (double) right in the middle of town. You'll find basic rooms with refrigerators and satellite TV for $75 (double) at **Alaska 7 Motel,** 3548 Richardson Hwy. (✆ **907/895-4848;** www.alaska7motel.com). Check at the visitor center for a referral to one of the many B&Bs.

CAMPING

Alaska State Parks maintains five campgrounds on the rivers and lakes in and around Delta Junction, plus a couple of public cabins. Right on the highway

near town, the **Delta State Recreation Area campground** lies among large spruce and birch trees. The sites well separated, some with walk-in privacy. It is among the most attractive campgrounds on the highway. The **Quartz Lake State Recreation Area,** 11 miles northwest of town on the Richardson Highway and down a 3-mile turnoff, has an 80-site campground on the shallow fishing lake. The camping fee at both sites is $10. For information, contact the **Department of Natural Resources Public Information Center,** 3700 Airport Way, Fairbanks, AK 99709 (✆ **907/451-2705;** www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks").

To park an RV, or if you're tent camping and need a shower, **Smith's Green Acres RV Park and Campground,** 1½ miles north on the Richardson Highway from the visitor center (✆ **800/895-4369** or 907/895-4369), has grassy RV sites and tent sites among the trees. It also has cabins, a small playground, and laundry facilities. Full hook-up sites are $22.50, tent sites $11.

WHERE TO DINE

Buffalo Center Diner DINER The locals eat here, for good reason. The dining room is light and clean and the menu covers everything you would hope for in a simple family restaurant—plus a seasonal list of buffalo dinners in "honor" of the Delta herd. Each time I've stopped, the food has been good, the atmosphere has been relaxing, service has been friendly and quick, and the waitress called me Hon.

1680 Richardson Hwy. ✆ **907/895-5089.** Lunch $4.75–$12; dinner $8–$27. MC, V. Summer daily 6am–10pm, winter daily 6am–9pm.

6 The Glenn Highway

The Glenn Highway, Alaska Route 1, leads from the Alaska Highway at Tok to Anchorage (the section from Tok to Glennallen is also called the Tok Cut-Off). It connects the most populous part of the state to the outside world, growing larger like a river along its 328 miles; at Tok it is a rural two-lane road, in urban downtown Anchorage it is a six-lane freeway. In this section, I cover the stretch from Glennallen to Palmer. From Tok to Glennallen, the road passes through wilderness. The portion from Palmer to downtown Anchorage is part of the greater city of Anchorage and is covered in chapter 6.

GLENNALLEN

This little town, really just a wide place in the road, is the commercial hub for the Copper River Country, as this great, thinly settled region is known. Other than Wrangell–St. Elias National Park, most of the public land in the Copper River Country is managed by the **Bureau of Land Management Glennallen Field Office,** with a log cabin office in town on the north side of the Glenn Highway, P.O. Box 147, Glennallen, AK 99588 (✆ **907/822-3217;** www.glennallen.ak.blm.gov), open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm. Information is also available from the public land information centers in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Tok. This huge area, about as large as a midsize eastern U.S. state, is more accessible than the park—an advantage for outdoor recreation, but it's still a rough, remote land with few high-quality visitor facilities. There are several large alpine lakes, two National Wild Rivers, many hiking trails, and five campgrounds (including the State Parks campground just north of Glennallen), all reached on the Richardson, Glenn, and Denali highways. Guides are available for rafting and fishing in the rivers. Check at the visitor center or BLM office for referrals.

For commercial information, the volunteer-run **Copper River Visitor Center** is in a gray building at the intersection of the highways (P.O. Box 469, Glennallen, AK 99588; ✆ **907/822-5555;** www.traveltoalaska.com); May 15 to September 15 it's open daily 8am to 7pm. Glennallen has a bank with an ATM (Mile 187.5 on the Glenn Highway), a post office, a medical center (Mile 187 on the Glenn Highway), and government offices.

Good standard accommodations are at the **New Caribou Hotel,** in town at Mile 187 of the Glenn Highway (✆ **800/478-3302** or 907/822-3302; www.caribouhotel.com). The rooms are what you'd expect at a good chain hotel, and are the best for many a mile either way on the Glenn Highway. A double is $139 in the summer. They book up in the summer, so reservations are important. Their **Caribou Restaurant** is inexpensive and good for comfort food—meatloaf, pork chops, steak, and salmon.

THE MATANUSKA GLACIER AREA

From Glennallen, the highway traverses a broad tundra area where there's a good chance of seeing caribou and other wildlife from a distance. The highway then climbs between two mountain ranges—the coastal Chugach Mountains that hold the glaciers around Prince William Sound, and the craggy old Talkeetna Mountains to the north. The road winds through steep, rocky terrain with wonderful, scary views, including a good look at the Matanuska Glacier. In the fall, when the tundra and the birches, aspens, and cottonwoods turn yellow and red, this drive is dizzying in its beauty. **The Matanuska Glacier State Recreation Area** overlooks the glacier and has a 1-mile interpretive nature trail and a good campground (sites are $10). To get closer to the glacier, you have to take a rough side road and pay a fee to the person who owns the land in front of it.

Two exceptionally good remote lodges lie along the highway near the glacier, about 70 miles from Glennallen or 115 miles from Anchorage. In this remote area, there is no TV and phones are in common rooms.

Majestic Valley Wilderness Lodge ★ This friendly lodge offers basic rooms with private bathrooms, and serves excellent family-style meals to guests and others who reserve in advance. Dining is in a large, log lodge building with wonderful mountain views. While most of the rooms are small and basic, they're set out of sight of the highway. A 19-mile network of superb cross-country skiing trails is groomed for diagonal or skate skiing—we enjoy going there for spring skiing weekends on the spectacular terrain. The lodge also offers guided skiing, snowmobiling, and hiking.

Mile 114.9, Glenn Hwy., HC03, Box 8514, Palmer, AK 99645. ✆ **907/746-2930.** Fax 907/746-2931. www.majesticvalleylodge.com. 10 units, 2 cabins. $89 double; $110 cabin double. Extra person over age 12 $10; extra person over age 3$5. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; sauna; activity desk.

Sheep Mountain Lodge ★ A well-loved couple, Zack and Anjanette Steer, preside at this historic roadside log lodge. The lodge is located on a mountainside that they have transformed into a center for cross-country skiing, with more than 9 miles of groomed trails. In the summer, you can hike and mountain bike over tundra mountains. Ten up-to-date log cabins with country decoration and sitting porches are arrayed on the hillside. They rent a sleeping-bag bunkhouse, too. The little cafe serves basic meals—mostly soup, sandwiches and salads, all under $10. Service is very friendly.

Mile 113.5, Glenn Hwy., HC 03, Box 8490, Palmer, AK 99645. ✆ **877/645-5121** or 907/745-5121. Fax 907/745-5120. www.sheepmountain.net. 10 cabins. Summer $125 double, extra person $15. Winter $115

double, extra person $10. Bunkhouse $60 for 4, extra person $5. DISC, MC, V. Closed one month each in spring and fall (call to ask which month). **Amenities:** Restaurant; Jacuzzi; sauna.

CHICKALOON & SUTTON

More country-style development crops up along the road as you approach urban Alaska. Chickaloon is the base of Nova Raft and Adventure Tours, the river riding company listed in the Anchorage chapter; if you're already passing through here, you may want to arrange a float. Sutton is a little town left behind by a coal mine that once operated in these mountains. The charming little historic park there is worthy of a stop to stretch your legs.

7 Copper Center & the Richardson Highway

The 364-mile drive from Fairbanks to Valdez unfolds as a grand cross-section of Alaska. It begins in the broad Interior valleys at the north, rises to the tundra and lakes of the Alaska Range, descends back down to the Copper River Country, and finally climbs over the steep coastal mountains into the Prince William Sound fjord where Valdez resides. This was the first route into Alaska, but today it is little traveled and mostly free of development, an opportunity to see real wilderness by car on paved road.

Delta Junction is covered in section 6, on the Alaska Highway. The intersection with the Denali Highway (see chapter 8) comes 81 miles south of there. The section around the Denali Highway intersection has the most extraordinary scenery—broad vistas, the Delta River, amazing alpine lakes including long Summit Lake, and many views of the trans-Alaska pipeline. Don't plan on stops or services, although there are a few widely scattered campgrounds and seasonal businesses. The spot on the map known as Paxson, the intersection with the Denali Highway, has one main business, the Paxson Inn. You can fill your tanks there 24 hours a day or buy a snack, but I wouldn't recommend the restaurant based on my last visit. The views on the segment south from Paxson to Glennallen are lovely, with more lakes. Surroundings include more and more trees as latitude and elevation decrease going into the Copper River Valley and the town of Glennallen, which is covered earlier in the chapter, in section 7.

Fourteen miles south of Glennallen, **Copper Center** is a tiny Athabascan community on the old Richardson Highway. There is one country-road attraction: a big model train diorama of the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad and Kennecott Mine (see the next section), showing McCarthy, Chitina, and the Motherlode Mine. Ron Simpson built this diorama in his bar, **The Copper Rail Depot** (✆ **907/822-3522;** www.crnwrailway.com). It's on the loop road off the Old Richardson Highway, near the Copper Center Lodge.

A historic roadhouse, the **Copper Center Lodge** (✆ **907/822-3245**) has long been worthy of a stop for a dinner of steak and seafood, and even for an overnight. The history of the lodge dates from the bizarre gold rush origins of Copper Center and Valdez, when about 4,000 stampeders to the Klondike tried a virtually impossible all-American route from Valdez over the glaciers of the Wrangell–St. Elias region. Few made it, and hundreds who died are buried in Copper Center. The original lodge was built of the stuff they left behind. The existing building dates from 1932. A double room is $109, and they're open year round.

Copper River Princess Wilderness Lodge ★★ Completed in 2002, this first-class lodge, built by the Princess Cruise Line, brings a whole different world to a formerly rough and isolated corner of the planet. Where once a room with its own phone or toilet was a rarity, now you can get one with a dataport, a hair dryer,

and a fine restaurant down the hall. Princess builds beautiful hotels. Here they've tried to capture the trim, red-and-white look of the historic Kennecott mining district. Inside, common areas are spacious and warm, with a big slate fireplace in the lobby. Rooms, with king- or queen-size beds, are decorated in earth tones and feature faux rustic furniture and art reflecting the region's mining history. The restaurant serves three meals a day, including sophisticated cuisine for dinner. The dinner menu is not just another league, but a completely different ball game than anything else found in the region. Main courses are $16 to $29.

Mile 102, Richardson Hwy. (P.O. Box 422), Copper Center, AK 99573. ✆ **800/426-0500** or 907/822-4000. Fax 907/822-4044. www.princesslodges.com. 85 units. High season $189 double; low season $99 double. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; courtesy van to Gulkana airport. *In room:* TV, dataport, hair dryer.

8 Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Kennecott

Looking at a relief map of Alaska, you'd think the portion drained by the Copper River was so overweighted with mountains that it might topple the whole state into the Pacific. The Alaska Range, in the center of the state, has the tallest mountain, but this Gulf of Alaska region, straddling the Alaska-Yukon border, has more mass—the second- and fourth-tallest mountains in North America (Logan and St. Elias), plus 9 of the tallest 16 peaks in the United States. Four mountain ranges intersect, creating a mad jumble of terrain covering tens of millions of acres—a trackless chaos of unnamed, unconquered peaks. The Copper River and its raging tributaries slice through it all, swallowing the gray melt of innumerable glaciers that flow from the largest ice field in North America. Everything here is the largest, most rugged, most remote; words quickly fall short of the measure. But where words fail, commerce gives a little help: These mountains are so numerous and remote that one guide service makes a business of taking visitors to mountains and valleys that no one has ever explored before.

Ironically for such a wild land, the area's main attraction for visitors is its history. The richest copper deposit in the world was found here in 1900 by a group of prospectors who mistook a green mountaintop for a patch of green grass where they could feed their horses. It was a mountain of almost pure copper, with metallic nuggets the size of desks (one is at the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks). The deposit produced trainloads of 70% pure copper. The first ore was so rich it required no processing before shipping, then came lots more copper that did need minimal processing. Much more lower-grade ore still lies underground. The Alaska Syndicate, an investment group that included J. P. Morgan and Daniel Guggenheim, built the Kennecott Copper Corporation from this wealth (its name was a misspelling of the Kennicott River and Glacier, where the copper was found). To get the copper out, they paid for an incredible 196-mile rail line up from Cordova (see chapter 7), and created a self-contained company town deep in the wilderness, called **Kennecott.** When the high-grade ore was gone, in 1938, they pulled the plug, leaving a ghost town of extraordinary beauty that still contains machinery and even documents they left behind.

Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve now owns Kennecott and more than 13 million acres across this region of Alaska. It's the largest national park in the United States by a long shot—six times the size of Yellowstone and about 25% larger than the entire country of Switzerland. The protected land continues across the border in Canada, in **Kluane National Park,** which is similarly massive. Most of that land is impossibly remote, but Wrangell–St. Elias has two rough gravel roads that allow travelers to see the mountains from a car. The main route is the abandoned roadbed of the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad

leading to Kennecott and the historic sites there. It's an arduous but rewarding journey by car, requiring at least 2 days to do it right. Air taxis, river guides, and remote lodges offer other ways into the park's untouched wilderness, mostly starting from **McCarthy,** a historic village near Kennecott. There are a few trails near Kennecott, but only for day hikes. This is a country where experienced outdoors people can get away from any trace of humans for weeks on end.

THE KENNECOTT & MCCARTHY AREA

This historic copper mining area is the only part of the park that most visitors see, as it's the most accessible and has the most services, interesting sites, and paths to explore. It's still not easy to get to, however—that's why it's still so appealing—and there's little point in going without adequate time. You can hit the highlights at Kennecott and McCarthy in 1 full day, but just getting there takes time. My family and I spent 3 nights on our last visit and could have stayed longer.

The main event is the ghost town at **Kennecott,** whose red buildings gaze from a mountainside across the Kennicott Glacier, which is in the valley below. Now owned by the park service, the buildings made up an isolated company town until 1938, when it abruptly shut down. Tourists coming here as late as the 1960s saw it as if frozen in time, with breakfast dishes still on the tables from the day the last train left. Most of that was looted and destroyed in the 1970s, but when I toured the company store a few years ago, old documents still remained, and the powerhouse and 14-story mill buildings still had their heavy iron and wood equipment. Besides the buildings, there are excellent hiking trails, including one that traverses the glacier. The town now has only a few year-round residents, but in summer is busy with a lodge, a couple of bed-and-breakfasts, guide services and park rangers.

Five miles down the road, Kennecott's twin town of **McCarthy** served the miners as a place to drink, gamble, and hire prostitutes on their rare days off—the company didn't allow any frivolity in Kennecott or in the bunkhouses high up on the mountain. McCarthy retains the relaxed atmosphere of its past, with businesses and residents living in false-front buildings that haven't changed much since the Wild West days. A bit more of a year-round community, McCarthy has restaurants, lodging, flight services, and other businesses.

Yet even this most populous part of the park is isolated and sparsely inhabited, with few services. Only 42 people live in the greater area year-round. You will find no banking services, general stores, gas stations, clinics, police, or anything else you're used to relying on. Phones came to McCarthy and Kennecott only in the late 1990s and still are few. Bring what you need.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **By Car** The **Edgerton Highway** starts 17 miles south of Copper Center on the Richardson Highway, then runs east for 33 miles to the tiny, dried-up former railroad town of **Chitina** (*chit*-na), the last reliable stop for groceries, gas, and other necessities until you return here. Do fill your tank; prudence also demands a full-sized spare tire.

Heading east, into the park, the **McCarthy Road** continues along the roadbed of the Copper River and Northwestern Railway. It's 60 miles of narrow dirt road, rutted and prone to mud holes in wet weather and clouded with dust when it's dry, but the drive is a fun adventure. The road passes through tunnels of alders and crosses rivers on some of the original wooden railroad trestles; one wood-decked bridge spans a canyon more than 200 feet deep. There are virtually no services, very few buildings and little traffic on the 3-hour drive. The

road ends at a parking lot and collection of temporary businesses on the banks of the Kennicott River. You can drive no further. A fee applies to park at the riverside lot, but you can park free for the day a little way off at Glacier View Campground (detailed later on in this section).

Next, you walk across a footbridge or two. Late in the summer, the Kennicott Glacier releases a flood from a glacier-dammed lake, but at other times the second channel is a dry wash and the second bridge isn't needed. Handcarts are available to move your luggage across, and on the other side you can catch a van. The place where you are staying will send one, or you ride the **van** operated by **Wrangell Mountain Air** (✆ **907/554-4411,** see below), $2 to McCarthy or $5 per person, one-way, to Kennecott. A public telephone is near the bridge; use the phone to call the van or your lodgings.

By Bus The **Backcountry Connection** (✆ **866/582-5292** in Alaska only, or 907/822-5292; www.alaska-backcountry-tours.com) runs a van from Glennallen and Chitina to the footbridge daily in summer, leaving at 7am from Glennallen and at 8:30am from Chitina, arriving at the bridge at 11:30am. The trip departs from the bridge at 4pm, getting back to Chitina at 7pm and Glennallen at 8:30pm. The fare is $80 round-trip from Chitina, $99 from Glennallen; if the return trip is on a different day, the fare goes up to $100 from Chitina, $115 from Glennallen. Take a couple of days: a 4-hour stay is too brief. The bus company also offers narrated tours around Glennallen, Chitina, and Copper Center.

By Air The simplest way to Kennecott and McCarthy is to fly there on one of the air taxis, then get around on one of the vans that shuttles back and forth over 5 miles of dirt road. **Wrangell Mountain Air** (✆ **800/478-1160** or 907/554-4411; www.wrangellmountainair.com) offers twice-daily service from Chitina for $150 round-trip. Another reputable service operating on an on-demand basis is **McCarthy Air** (✆ **888/989-9891** or 907/554-4440; www.mccarthyair.com). You can charter from anywhere. A one-way charter with a three- to seven-passenger plane from Anchorage is $1,000 to $1,150, from Valdez $550 to $600. Both operators also offer charters to remote park valleys and glaciers for backcountry trips, covered later under "Getting Outside: Hiking & Backpacking."

Wednesday or Friday, it's possible to fly in a small prop plane carrying the mail from Anchorage to Gulkana and then from Gulkana to McCarthy for a total of about $250 one-way. **Security Aviation** (✆ **907/248-2677;** www.securityaviation.biz) flies from Anchorage to Gulkana, and **Ellis Air Taxi** (✆ **800/478-3368** in Alaska only or 907/822-3368; www.ellisair.com) flies from Gulkana to McCarthy.

VISITOR INFORMATION The main park visitor center is on the Richardson Highway near Copper Center (✆ **907/822-5234;** www.nps.gov/wrst). Stop in to buy maps and publications, watch a movie, or to get advice on outdoor activities from a ranger. Hours are Memorial Day to Labor Day daily from 8am to 6pm; in winter Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm. You can write for information to P.O. Box 439, Copper Center, AK 99573. The park service is developing visitor services in Kennecott itself. Usually you'll find a ranger there during the day, and rangers often give talks in the evening in the hall across the road from the Kennicott Glacier Lodge.

The **Kennicott-McCarthy Chamber of Commerce,** P.O. Box MXY, McCarthy, AK 99588, lacks a phone or office, but you can find lots of information about the area on the Web at **www.mccarthy-kennicott.com**, including the charming bimonthly newspaper, a link to the chamber, and an online visitor guide.

EXPLORING THE TOWNS

CHITINA Chitina lost its reason to exist in 1938, when the mines closed and the last train ran on the Copper River line, but it lives on with 123 residents supporting themselves largely with salmon from the river, produce from their gardens, berries from the forests, and the few tourists who stop. There's a general store and a couple of gas stations (the last gas for many a mile), a wayside interpretive area at the site of the old depot, a pond where you can often see trumpeter swans, and, down by the river, lazily rotating fish wheels plucking fish from the river. The Copper River is too turbid for angling, but clear water tributaries and stocked lakes in the area have fish. You can also explore south on the old Copper River rail line and even through the tunnels; check with a local or the park headquarters for advice and current conditions before trying it, as landslides sometimes block the way. The best stop in town is **Spirit Mountain Artworks** (✆ **907/823-2222;** Spirit Mountain@starband.net), an old building that has been lovingly restored and is now a historic landmark that houses fine art and crafts.

MCCARTHY McCarthy feels authentic as soon as you walk down the dirt main street between the false fronts. There are flight service offices to arrange trips, a couple of restaurants, and a lodge. Then, a street beyond, there's unbroken wilderness for hundreds and perhaps thousands of miles. On a summer evening, young backpackers and locals stand in the road—there is no traffic, since there are almost no vehicles—meeting and talking, laughing loudly, walking around dogs having their own parties. Visitors quickly mix in, as everyone seems eager to talk about the town and its history and their own wilderness lives. The people here know it's unique, and everyone hopes it doesn't change. No one wants a big flood of tour-bus visitors—that's why they fought the state government when it wanted to build a road bridge over the Kennicott; they prefer to have the McCarthy Road rough instead of smooth. The footbridge should keep casual visitors at bay. Those who do make it here are treated like one of the community.

KENNECOTT This has got to be one of the world's greatest ghost towns, with some 40 buildings, mostly in good enough condition to be reused today—indeed, until the current park service restoration project began, the community still played basketball in one structure. Some historic buildings have become lodgings, and the park service plans to eventually move into the store. Locals still pick rhubarb and chives from the company garden. History has the same kind of immediacy here that you get from holding an old diary in your hand, quite different from the sanitized history-through-glass that you're used to at more accessible sites.

The park service bought most of the buildings a few years ago and has closed everything up while they are stabilized and made safer. When we walked through, on the eve of the takeover, items remained out on the ground or on store shelves that would be in museums in many places. If Kennecott were an ordinary industrial site, that would be interesting enough, but this place was something well out of the ordinary: an outpost beyond the edge of the world where men built a self-contained city almost a century ago. The hardship of the miners' lives and the ease of the managerial families' lives presents a fascinating contrast.

You can take in some of the town and history by wandering around with a walking tour booklet available from the Park Service and reading signs, but it would be a mistake to miss going inside the building, and to do that you need to join a **guided tour.** Contact **St. Elias Alpine Guides** (✆ **888/933-5427** or 907/544-4445 in season; full listing later under "Getting Outside: Hiking & Backpacking"), which has an office in the old Chinese laundry right in the ghost town. Tours, which depart twice a day, last much of the morning or afternoon

and go into real depth on the geology and history, climbing to the perilous 14th floor of the mill building. They operate mid-May to mid-September and charge $25 per person. The guides will arrange custom tours, too.

GETTING OUTSIDE

HIKING & BACKPACKING There are a few trails radiating from Kennecott, for which crude maps are available from the rangers and others around town; or buy the **Trails Illustrated** topographic map, printed on plastic, for sale from some local businesses, or order ahead (see "Fast Facts: Alaska" in chapter 2). An impressive walk continues through the ghost town up the valley, paralleling the Kennicott Glacier and then its tributary, the Root Glacier. You can either climb along the Root's edge to a towering icefall, or traverse the glacial ice on a trail branch. It's wise to join a group if you want to walk on the glacier (rather than along the edge), as it can be dangerous. St. Elias Alpine Guides, listed below, accepts walk-ins for daily glacier day hikes and other hikes and tours. A ½ day on the glacier goes for $50 a person, while all-day hikes are $95 and ice-climbing lessons are $100.

Another fascinating hike that you can do on your own leads straight up the mountain behind the Kennecott buildings to the old Bonanza Mine and bunkhouses, 3,000 feet higher on the alpine tundra.

Beyond the trails, the park is endless miles of trackless wilderness—one of earth's last few places that really deserves that name. Fit hikers without the backcountry experience to mount their own expedition should join one of the guides who work in the area. **St. Elias Alpine Guides** (✆ **888/933-5427** or 907/554-4445; winter 907/345-9048; www.steliasguides.com) offers day hikes, rafting, backpacking trips, and alpine ascents, but specializes in guiding extended trips to unexplored territory. Bob Jacobs, president of the company, stopped guiding on Mount McKinley years ago because of the crowds. He claims never to have seen another party in more than 25 years of guiding expeditions in Wrangell–St. Elias, and has led more than 45 parties of customers up previously unclimbed peaks. You can't get farther from civilization. A 2-week trek and climb, including 4 days of mountaineering instruction, is a big commitment and costs $3,000 and up, but then, first ascents are a finite resource. The St. Elias catalog will make anyone who loves backpacking drool. Trips begin at $775 for a 4-day Donoho Peak trek. They are all-inclusive, but not without hardship and risk—nothing can take away from the severity of this wild country.

Hiking on your own in a wilderness largely without trails is a whole new kind of experience for seasoned backpackers and outdoors people who are used to more crowded parts of the planet. You feel like an explorer rather than a follower. At times, there's a fairy-tale sense of the world unfolding around you, as fresh as creation. If you're not prepared to select your own route—a task only for those already experienced in trackless, backcountry traveling—there are various established ways through the park that you can follow with a topographic map. You can get a trip synopsis from the visitor center or ranger station, or download from their website (www.nps.gov/wrst). Rangers can help you choose a route to suit your party, although none are easy.

Some routes start from the roads, but a better way to go is to charter a flight into a remote valley from one of the two **air services** in McCarthy, with Wrangell Mountain Air or McCarthy Air (see p. 400). The planes land on gravel strips, river bars, glaciers, alpine tundra, or any other flat place that the pilots know about. These companies make a business of flying out backpackers, and have established rates for different landing sites and can help you determine a route that's right for you, as well as provide a list of supplies. Wrangell

Mountain Air rents bear-proof containers and two-way radios, and McCarthy Air and the Park Service lends bear-proof containers. You can charter a flight for $70 to $300 per person, with at least two passengers. Or fly in to a lake or river for fishing and exploring from a base camp, eliminating some of the worry about how much to pack.

Note: I wouldn't want to scare off anyone who would really be able to manage one of these trips, but people do get into trouble in the Alaska wilderness every year, and some of them don't come back. Before you head out into the backcountry, you must know how to take care of yourself where help is unavailable; this includes handling river crossings, bear avoidance, preventing hypothermia, basic first aid, and other issues. Unless you have plenty of backpacking experience in less remote areas, I don't recommend starting here.

MOUNTAIN BIKING The 60-mile road that leads to this area makes a great mountain-biking trail. You also can also make good use of bikes between McCarthy, Kennecott, and the footbridge. An old **wagon road** parallels the main road that connects the two towns, 4½ miles each way; the road itself is a one-lane dirt track. Advanced cyclists can also ride the trails around Kennecott described above under "Hiking & Backpacking."

RAFTING Many great, wild rivers drain these huge mountains, which are still being carved by enormous glaciers. The **Kennicott River,** starting at the glacier of the same name, boils with Class III rapids for some 40 minutes, starting right from the footbridge at the end of the McCarthy Road. As the area lacks roads, however, most trips must include a plane ride at least one-way, and that makes white-water rafting day trips here more expensive than outings near Anchorage or Valdez. At times, hour-long, drive-back floats have been available on a walk-in basis at the footbridge, but most trips punch deeper into the backcountry. The Kennicott River meets the Nizina, passing through a deep, dramatic canyon; then the Nizina River flows into the Chitina River, which meets the Copper River near the town of Chitina, 60 miles from the starting point. The Copper River flows to the ocean. A float from the footbridge through the Nizina Canyon takes all day, with lunch and bush plane flightseeing trip back, which could include a glacier fly-over. St. Elias Alpine Guides (see "Hiking & Backpacking," above) charges $235 for this experience. Other trips continue for 3 or 4 days to Chitina, for $575 to $850 per person; or for 10 to 13 days, 180 miles all the way to the Copper River Delta and the sea (see "Cordova" in chapter 7), for $2,500 to $2,900 per person. This is Alaska on its largest and most grandiose scale, accessible only from the banks of these great rivers.

WHERE TO STAY

There closest standard hotel room is in **Copper Center** (see p. 397). In the Kennecott–McCarthy area itself there are several attractive places to stay, all thick with the history that the towns represent. These are unlike ordinary American lodgings.

CAMPING & HOSTELLING There is no campground on the Kennecott–McCarthy side of the Kennicott River footbridge. The park service allows camping anywhere in the park without a permit, but there are few handy spots on public land (remember, much of the land along the roads is private).

A couple of primitive private campgrounds, and a hostel, are at the end of the McCarthy Road. **Glacier View Campground** (✆ **907/554-4490,** 907/243-6677 off season) charges $10 a night for camping and has a cabin for rent. The campground also features a cafe, serving barbecue for lunch and dinner, mountain bike rentals, and showers and free day parking.

Besides the backpacker's hotel mentioned in the review of the McCarthy Lodge (see below), **Kennicott River Lodge and Hostel** (✆ **907/554-4441** summer, 907/479-6822 winter; www.kennicottriverlodge.com), located at the end of the road 400 feet from the footbridge, offers bunks for $28 per person and cabins for $100 double plus $25 for each additional person. Bedding costs extra in the hostel. They have a common kitchen, lounge, sauna and free showers.

There are three campgrounds on the way to the footbridge. The most attractive is the state parks' **Liberty Falls Campground,** at Mile 23 on the Edgerton Highway, which is set among big trees at the foot of a crashing waterfall. Many of the sites are walk-ins, with wooden tent platforms and lots of privacy. The self-service camping fee is $10 per vehicle; the day use fee is $1. There are pit toilets and no running water. RVs can use this campground, though there are no RV facilities.

Historic Kennicott Bed and Breakfast ★ The family that lives here year-round hosts guests in a house next door to their own—a historic, unspoiled residence in the woods behind the ghost town, once the home of the family of a Kennecott Copper manager. Their warmth is infectious, giving guests a chance to get to know people living a real pioneer lifestyle. The rental unit even has indoor plumbing. Whether you rent one room or two, you get the whole house and bathroom to yourself. Cook your own meals in the full kitchen.

Silk Stocking Row, Kennecott. (McCarthy no. 4, P.O. Box MXY, Glennallen, AK 99588). ✆ **907/554-4469.** Fax 907/554-4469. www.historickennicottbb.com. 2 units. $175 for 2, $250 for 4. Extra person over age 11 $25, extra person over age 3 $15. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Courtesy transportation between towns.

Kennicott Glacier Lodge ★★ This is the largest and most comfortable accommodation in the Kennecott-McCarthy area, taking the edges off the isolation. The lodge accurately re-creates an old Kennecott building, with the same red-and-white color scheme, and is located right among the historic structures of the ghost town. Guests can sip drinks on a long front porch overlooking the glacier, or relax on a lawn with the same view. The rooms are not large, and most have bathrooms down the hall, but all were quite clean each time we visited. New rooms with private bathrooms are planned and may be ready in 2004.

Filling dinners are served family style, at long tables, with a fixed menu for a fixed price (a turkey dinner was $26, for example). Breakfast and lunch are a la carte. There's nowhere else to eat right in Kennecott, so plan to spend about $50 per person on food, or book the package that includes meals for $265 per person for two. A brief tour of the ghost town is included.

P.O. Box 103940, Anchorage, AK 99510. ✆ **800/582-5128** or 907/258-2350. In season only, 907/554-4477. Fax 907/248-7975. www.kennicottlodge.com. 25 units. $179 double shared bathroom, $229 double private bathroom. AE, DISC, MC, V. Closed mid-Sept–mid-May. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; courtesy van.

McCarthy Lodge This lodge, open year round, is in the center of the relaxed village of McCarthy, 5 miles from the historically more buttoned-up Kennecott. The small rooms are in a false-front building of the kind that you might see in an old Western movie. New owners recently restored the rooms and lobby, filling them with relics found in the area. Bathrooms are shared.

The lodge is an authentic Bush roadhouse, serving dinner from 6 to 9pm nightly in the $22-to-$28 range and full breakfast for guests, included in the room rate. The same owners operate Lancaster's Backpacker's Hotel, with double rooms for $60.

P.O. Box MXY, McCarthy, AK 99588. ✆ **907/554-4402.** Fax 907/554-4404. www.mccarthylodge.com. 20 units, none with private bathroom. $149 double year-round. MC, V. Rate includes full breakfast. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; courtesy van.

WHERE TO DINE

The main restaurants in the Kennecott area are at the **Kennicott Glacier Lodge** and **McCarthy Lodge,** described above. Both require reservations for dinner, but you can walk in for breakfast or lunch at Kennicott Glacier Lodge. I also enjoyed pizza and beer on a screened porch at **Taylor-Made Pizza** in McCarthy (✆ **907/554-4455**). It's open in summer daily noon to 9pm.

10

The Bush

The Bush is most of Alaska. On a map of the state, the portion with roads and cities is a smallish corner. Yet most visitors—and, indeed, most Alaskans—never make it beyond that relatively populated corner. Several years ago, a lifelong Anchorage resident was elected to the legislature and appointed chair of its rural issues committee, only to admit he had never been to the Bush. It's common for children to grow to adulthood in Anchorage, Fairbanks, or Southeast Alaska without traveling to the Arctic, the Aleutians, or the vast wetlands of western Alaska. It happens for the same reason most tourists don't go to Bush Alaska—getting there is expensive, and there's not much in the way of human activity once you arrive. Bush Alaska is one of the planet's last barely inhabited areas. But that's a reason to go, not a reason to stay away. You can meet indigenous people who still interact with the environment in their traditional way and see virgin places that remain to be explored by self-reliant outdoors people.

Although there are few people in the Bush, the hospitality of those you do meet is special and warming. In Bush Alaska, where the population is overwhelmingly Alaska Native, it's not uncommon to be befriended by total strangers simply because you've taken the trouble to come to their community and are, therefore, an honored guest. Even in the larger towns, people smile as you pass in the street. If you have a questioning look on your face, they'll stop to help. Living in a small place where people know each other and have to work together against the elements makes for a tight, friendly community.

Alaska's Native culture is based more on cooperative than competitive impulses. Respect and consensus carry great weight. Cooperation requires slowing down, listening, not taking the lead. People from our fast-paced culture can leave a village after a visit wondering why no one spoke to them, not realizing that they never shut up long enough to give anyone a chance. The cultural differences here are real, unlike the shadows of past differences we celebrate in most regions of the homogenous United States. Long pauses in conversation are normal, looking down while addressing a person demonstrates respect, punctuality is highly relative, child care is a community function, and when gifts are offered, people really mean it—turning down even a cup of coffee is gauche. (For more on the culture of Alaska's Native peoples, see the "Alaska in Depth" appendix.)

The Native people of the Bush also have terrible problems trying to live in two worlds. There's too much alcohol and too many drugs in the Bush, and too much TV, but not enough of an economic base to provide safe drinking water or plumbing in many villages. Even in some of the relatively prosperous village hubs described in this chapter, visitors will glimpse a kind of rural poverty they may not have seen before—where prices are extremely high and steady jobs scarce

and difficult to hold while pursuing traditional hunting and food gathering. But if you ask why Natives stay, you're missing something. In a world where so few indigenous cultures survive, people here are working to retain traditions that give their lives meaning—a sense of place and a depth of belonging that most of us can only envy. It's a work in progress, this combination of tradition and modernity, but there's no question that Alaska's Native peoples are slowly succeeding in keep the old alive while embracing positive aspects of the new. They control their own land, they're building an economic base, and Native ways are being passed on to younger generations.

The Natives' physical environment is extreme in every respect—the weather, the land, even the geography. There's a special feeling that comes over a person as they walk along or upon the Arctic Ocean, the virtual edge of the earth. The quantity and accessibility of wildlife is extreme, too, as is the solitude and the uniqueness of the outdoor activities that you can engage in here. Unfortunately, the prices also are extreme. Getting to a Bush hub from Anchorage costs more than getting to Anchorage from Seattle; it can be cheaper to get to Europe from Anchorage than to the Aleutians. And once you're at the hub, you're not done. Getting into the outdoors can cost as much again. Many travelers can't afford a Bush sojourn, instead satisfying their curiosity about the state's unpopulated areas on Alaska's rural highways. Most who can afford the trip usually make the most of their time and money with brief prearranged tours or trips directly to wilderness lodges. Only a few explorers head for the Bush unguided, although there are some good places to visit that way—Nome, Barrow, Kodiak, and Unalaska among them.

Covering the Bush is also a challenge for the writer of a book like this one. There are more than 200 Alaska villages; many lodges, camps, and guides; and a vast, undefined territory to describe. All that information alone would fill a larger book than this one. I've chosen to provide information on those few Bush hubs that are most accessible and popular with visitors—those that have modern facilities and can be used as gateways to more of the state for visitors who want to venture beyond the fringe of civilization.

1 Exploring the Bush

Alaska's Bush is better defined by what it's like than by where it is. The most common and convenient conception says the Bush is everything beyond the road system. On a map, everything north and west of Fairbanks obviously meets that definition, but many Bush villages lie elsewhere in the Interior, in Southcentral, and in Southeast Alaska. In fact, there are some Bush villages you can drive to. No simple definition works. You know a Bush community by how it feels. It's a place where the wilderness is closer than the civilization, where people still live off the land and age-old traditions survive, and where you have to make a particular effort to get in or out.

THE REGIONS

THE ARCTIC The Arctic Circle is the official boundary of the Arctic. The line, at 66° 33' north latitude, is the southern limit of true midnight sun—south

Map Pointer

To locate these towns and regions, refer to the "Alaska" map on p. 6.

of it, at sea level, the sun rises and sets, at least a little, every day of the year. But in Alaska, people think of the Arctic as beginning at the **Brooks Range,** which is a bit north of the circle, including **Barrow** and **Prudhoe Bay.** The northwest Alaska region, which includes **Kotzebue** and **Nome** (which is slightly south of the Arctic Circle), is also Arctic in climate, culture, and topography. The biggest geographic feature in Alaska's Arctic is the broad **North Slope,** the plain of tundra that stretches from the northern side of the Brooks Range to the Arctic Ocean. It's a swampy desert, with little rain or snowfall, frozen solid all but a few months a year.

WESTERN ALASKA This is the land of the massive, wet **Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta** and the fish-rich waters of Bristol Bay. The Y-K Delta, as it's known, was never really exploited by white explorers, and the Yupik people who live there have maintained some of the most culturally traditional villages. In some, Yupik is still the dominant language. **Bethel** is the main hub city of the delta but holds little attraction for visitors. **Bristol Bay** is known for massive salmon runs, and avid anglers may be interested in its wilderness lodges, using **Dillingham** as a hub.

SOUTHWEST ALASKA Stretching from the Aleutians—really a region of their own—to the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Island, and the southern part of the mountainous west side of Cook Inlet, this is a maritime region, like Southeast, but far more remote. The hub of the wet, windy **Aleutians** is **Unalaska** and its port of **Dutch Harbor. Katmai National Park** and the adjoining wild lands are the main attraction of the Alaska Peninsula, although there are also fishing lodges on the salmon-rich rivers and on the lakes to the north, including areas in **Lake Clark National Park** and **Iliamna Lake.** The lakes and west side of **Cook Inlet** are reached primarily by Kenai, Homer, and Anchorage flight services for fishermen and hunters. **Kodiak** is hardly a Bush community, but it fits better in this chapter than anywhere else, and the town is a hub for villages and bear viewing on Kodiak Island.

GETTING AROUND

With a few exceptions for strongly motivated travelers, who can take the ferry to Kodiak and Unalaska or drive to Prudhoe Bay, getting to each town in this chapter will require flying. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) offers the only jet service to Bush hubs. Other, smaller operators serve these towns with prop aircraft. Throughout the chapter, I've listed the plane fare to various communities from Anchorage, based on flying coach and getting a significant discount for advance purchase, weekend stay over, and some restrictions. Full Y-class fares cost more. With the way airfares fluctuate, it would be unwise to use these numbers as anything more than rough guides. To get the current best fare, use a travel agent or the Internet.

Kodiak, which barely fits the descriptions of a Bush community, is the most accessible of the villages in this chapter, but it still requires either a 10-hour ferry ride from Homer or a $275 round-trip plane ticket from Anchorage. This charming, historic town is similar to towns in Southeast Alaska or Prince William Sound, but it is also a hub for Native villages on the island and is a gateway to remote wilderness. **Unalaska/Dutch Harbor,** in the Aleutian Islands, is an interesting place to go way off the beaten path while staying in complete comfort. A visit requires an $800 round-trip plane ticket from Anchorage. **Kotzebue** and **Barrow** are the most purely Native of the communities in the chapter. **Nome** has the advantages of Arctic surroundings that are easily accessible on gravel roads, but is

more of a gold rush town than a Native village. **Prudhoe Bay,** at the end of the Dalton Highway, is an industrial complex without a real town associated with it. Fares range from $400 to $700 round-trip for a trip to these communities from Anchorage. Buying an **Alaska Airlines package tour** saves you a lot of money to Nome, Kotzebue, or Barrow, and gives you something to do when you arrive.

2 Kodiak: Wild Island

The habitat that makes Kodiak Island a perfect place for bears also makes it perfect for people. Runs of salmon clog unpopulated bays and innumerable, unfished rivers; the rounded green mountains seem to beg for someone to cross them; and the gravel beaches and protected rocky inlets are free of people but full of promise. But bears seem smarter than people when choosing their habitat. Brown bears own the island, growing to prodigious size and abundant numbers, but Kodiak is as yet undiscovered by human visitors. That's part of the wonder of the place. I'll never forget flying over the luxuriant verdure of Kodiak's mountains and the narrow, glassy Raspberry Strait on a rare sunny day, seeing no sign of human presence in the most beautiful landscape I had ever beheld.

The narrow streets of the town of Kodiak are a discovery, too. Twisting over the hills in little discernible order, they were the original stomping grounds of **Lord Alexander Baranof,** the first Russian ruler of Alaska, who arrived here in 1790. Kodiak has the oldest Russian building in North America. It was nearly lost in the 1964 Good Friday earthquake, which destroyed most of the town, explaining the general lack of old buildings. The quake brought a 30-foot wave that washed to the building's doorstep. A marker near the police station on Mill Bay Road shows the wave's incredible high-water point. Before the Russians, the **Koniag** people lived off the incomparable riches of the island. They're still here, recovering and exhibiting their past in a fascinating little research museum.

The town looks to the sea. Along with the Coast Guard base, fishing makes Kodiak prosperous, creating a friendly, energetic, unpolished community. Kodiak is separate from the rest of Alaska, living its own commercial fishing life without often thinking of what's going on in Anchorage or anywhere else. It's off the beaten path because it doesn't really need anything that the path provides.

For the visitor, Kodiak is an undiscovered gem. A visit of a few days just scratches the surface of the charming, vibrant town and the easily accessible wild places around it, yet, even in midsummer, you will see few if any other tourists.

There are six **Native villages** on the island. A flight to one of them and back on a clear day is a wonderful, low-cost way to see remote areas of the island and to get a taste of how Alaska Natives live. It's also popular to fly out to see the famous bears on a day trip, or stay at one of several **wilderness lodges** for wildlife watching, fishing, sea kayaking, and hunting, or even participating in a Native-led archaeological dig.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE It's a 1-hour flight from Anchorage to Kodiak on **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com). **ERA Aviation** (✆ **800/866-8394;** www.flyera.com) also serves the route. A round-trip ticket from Anchorage costs $275 and up, depending on the deal you get. A **cab,** from **A and B Taxi** (✆ **907/486-4343**), runs about $15 from the airport.

The ferry *Tustumena,* of the **Alaska Marine Highway System** (✆ **800/642-0066** or 907/486-3800; www.ferryalaska.com), serves Kodiak from Homer and Seward. If you have the time for the 10-hour run from Homer—the closest

port with a road—this boat ride is truly memorable. The vessel leaves land behind and threads through the strange and exposed Barren Islands. The ocean can be quite rough, and when it is, lots of passengers get seasick; take Dramamine *before* boarding. A cabin is a good idea for an overnight run. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staffs the trips with a naturalist. The adult passenger fare is $57 one way, children half price. The Kodiak terminal is in the same building as the visitor center.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Kodiak Island Convention and Visitors Bureau,** 100 Marine Way, Ste. 200, Kodiak, AK 99615 (✆ **907/486-4782;** fax 907/486-6545; www.kodiak.org), occupies a small building on the ferry dock. Hours vary according to the ferry schedule, but essentially follow this pattern: summer Monday from 8am to 8:30pm, Tuesday through Friday 8am to 5pm, Saturday from 10am to 4pm, Sunday from 1 to 8:30pm; winter Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm, closed for lunch.

The **Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Visitors Center,** Buskin River Road, near the airport 4 miles south of town (✆ **907/487-2600;** http://alaska.fws.gov, choose "Refuges" then "Home" the "Kodiak"), is headquarters for a refuge that covers most of the island and is home to the famous Kodiak brown bear. There are remote public-use cabins all over the refuge, reachable by chartered plane. Cabin use permits are $30 a night, available though a quarterly drawing of names (Jan. 2 for Apr–June, April 1 for July–Sept). The center has exhibits and is a good place to stop for outdoors information. They're open from mid-June to August daily from 8am to 4:30pm; the balance of the year Monday through Friday only.

ORIENTATION The Kodiak Archipelago contains Kodiak, Shuyak, and Afognak islands, and many other smaller islands. Kodiak is the nation's second-largest island (after Hawaii's Big Island). The city of Kodiak is on a narrow point on the northeast side of Kodiak Island, surrounded by tiny islands. There are six Native villages on other parts of the island. The airport and Coast Guard base are several miles southwest of town on **Rezanof Drive,** which runs through town and comes out on the other side. The center of Kodiak is a hopeless tangle of steep, narrow streets—you need the excellent map given away by the visitor center. The town is completely walkable. The ferry dock is on **Marine Way,** and most of the in-town sights are right nearby. Several gravel roads, totaling 100 miles, make for wonderful exploring and stretch from Kodiak to deserted shorelines, with gorgeous views, pastures, recreation areas, and salmon streams along the way. The visitors guide contains a mile-by-mile guide to each drive.

GETTING AROUND Several companies rent cars, including **Budget** (✆ **800/527-0700** or 907/487-2220; www.budget.com), which has offices at the airport or downtown.

If it's not raining, a bike is a great way to get around Kodiak, and strong riders will enjoy touring the roads out of town. Bikes are for rent at **Fifty-Eight Degrees North,** a full-service bike shop at 1231 Mill Bay Rd. (✆ **907/486-6249**). Front-suspension mountain bikes rent for $30 for 24 hours.

FAST FACTS: Kodiak

Banks Several banks downtown have ATMs, including **Key Bank** on the mall at the waterfront.

Hospital **Providence Kodiak Island Medical Center** is at 1915 E. Rezanof Dr. (✆ **907/486-3281**).

Internet Access **Office Express** is at 202 Center St. (✆ **907/486-8780**).

Police Call ✆ **911** in an emergency or contact the **Kodiak Police Department** at ✆ **907/486-8000.**

Post Office Near Lower Mill Bay Road and Hemlock Street.

Taxes Sales tax is 6% within city limits. The room tax inside the Kodiak city limits totals 11%, while outside the city it's 5%.

SPECIAL EVENTS **Russian Orthodox Christmas,** January 7, includes the **Starring Ceremony.** This ceremony earned its name because the choir follows a parishioner carrying a star as they make the rounds to sing at the homes of church members in the evening.

The late-March **Pillar Mountain Golf Classic** (✆ **907/486-2931,** organizer's home phone) is played on a one-hole par-70 course that climbs 1,400 feet from tee to flag; dogs, chain saws, two-way radios, and tracking devices are prohibited, and cursing the officials carries a $25 fine. Handsaws and hatchets are allowed. March 26 through 28, 2004.

The 5-day **Koniag's Kodiak Crab Festival** (✆ **907/486-5557;** www.kodiak.org/crabfest.html), on Memorial Day weekend, is a big event, including many fun events and the solemn blessing of the fleet and a memorial service for lost fishermen.

The **Bear Country Music Festival,** over 2 days in mid-July, includes many styles of popular and folk music (✆ **907/486-8766**).

In early September, the **Kodiak State Fair and Rodeo** (✆ **907/486-4488**) has all kinds of small-town contests.

The **Harbor Stars** (✆ **907/486-8080**), in mid-December, is a fleet parade of vessels decorated for Christmas.

The visitor bureau maintains a complete community calendar online at **www.kodiak.org/calendar.html**.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

The highlights downtown include the **Fishermen's Memorial,** near the harbormaster's office at the head of the St. Paul Harbor, where a soberingly long list of Kodiak fishermen who have lost their lives at sea is posted on plaques. The warship set in concrete on Mission Way is the ***Kodiak Star,*** the last World War II Liberty Ship built. It came here as a fish processor after the 1964 earthquake destroyed the canneries and is still in use. At Kashevarof and Mission streets, the **Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church** was founded in 1794, although the present building dates only to 1945, when it was built after a fire destroyed the original. Along Shelikof Avenue, overlooking St. Paul Harbor, the **Kodiak Maritime Museum** has mounted eight attractive and interesting signs explaining the parts of a boat, North Pacific crabbing and geography, and other nautical topics.

Half-hour **Native dance performances** take place from June to mid-September at 2:30pm daily at the Kodiak Tribal Council Barabara, at 312 W. Marine Way (✆ **907/486-4449**). Admission is $15 adults, $7.50 children.

Alutiiq Museum ★ This exceptional museum, funded and governed by Natives, seeks to document and restore the Koniag Alutiiq people's culture,

which the Russians virtually wiped out in the 18th century. Besides teaching about Alutiiq culture in a gallery, the museum manages its own archaeological digs (see "Getting Outside," later in this section) and repatriates Native remains and artifacts, which researchers removed by the thousands in the 1930s. The archaeological repository now includes 100,000 objects.

215 Mission Rd. ✆ **907/486-7004.** www.alutiiqmuseum.com. Admission $2 adults, free for children 12 and under. Summer Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat 10am–5pm. Winter Tues–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat 10:30am–4:30pm.

The Baranov Museum ★ This museum occupies the oldest Russian building in North America; it was built in 1808 by Alexander Baranof as a magazine and strong house for valuable sea otter pelts. It stands in a grassy park across from the ferry dock, overlooking the water. Inside is a little museum rich with Russian and early Native artifacts. The guides know a lot about the history of this area and are eager to show 30 photo albums organized by various topics. The gift store is exceptional, selling antique Russian items and authentic Native crafts.

101 Marine Way. ✆ **907/486-5920.** www.ptialaska.net/~baranov/. Admission $3; free for children 12 and under. Summer Mon–Sat 10am–4pm. Winter Tues–Sat 10am–3pm. Closed Feb.

GETTING OUTSIDE

TWO RECREATION AREAS

A couple of miles north of town on Rezanof Drive, the **Fort Abercrombie State Historical Park** encompasses World War II ruins set on coastal cliffs amid huge trees. Paths lead to beaches and good tide-pool walking, a swimming lake, and lots of other discoveries. The gun emplacements, bunkers, and other concrete buildings defended against the Japanese, who had seized islands in the outer Aleutians and were expected to come this way. A group of local World War II buffs have built a museum of war artifacts from Alaska's military operations in the ammunition bunker at Miller Point. Hours change annually, but will be posted at www.kadiak.org, and the curators will open it any time by appointment (✆ **907/486-7015**). The website is extensive. A wonderful 13-site campground sits atop the cliffs among the trees and ruins. Camping is $10. The **Alaska Division of State Parks,** Kodiak District Office, 1400 Abercrombie Dr., Kodiak, AK 99615 (✆ **907/486-6339;** fax 907/486-3320; www.alaskastateparks.org, click on "Individual Parks," then "Kodiak Islands"), maintains an office here where you can pick up a walking-tour brochure or, during the summer, join the Saturday-night interpretive program or a guided tide-pool walk, scheduled to coincide with the low tides. Or investigate the tide pools on your own, picking up an identification guide at the park's natural history bookstore.

The **Buskin River State Recreation Site,** 4 miles south of town off Rezanof Drive near the Fish and Wildlife Service visitor center, has 15 campsites, a hiking trail, and access to fishing. Camping is $10.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

ARCHAEOLOGY **Dig Afognak,** 215 Mission Rd., Suite 212 (✆ **800/770-6014** or 907/486-6014; www.afognak.com/dig), operated by the Afognak Native Corporation, offers visitors a chance to help in scientific excavations of Koniag sites on Afognak Island, an effort by the Native group to reassemble their cultural heritage. Visitors are instructed in archaeology and in the natural history of the beautiful area, but they're also expected to work, doing digging and other tasks in a remote lab. Each weeklong session has a different educational emphasis, with scientists or elders on hand to enrich the learning. Accommodations are in heated tents, and you have to bring your own sleeping bag. Dinner

is often seafood caught in nets at the beach. A 7-day session is $1,650, including transportation from Kodiak.

BROWN BEAR VIEWING To see Kodiak's famous bears, you need to get out on a plane or boat. The easiest way is a Kodiak-based floatplane; expect to pay at least $400 per person, with a two- or three-person minimum for a ½-day trip (larger groups can get discounts). Landing on the water, you can occasionally watch bears from the dry platform of the plane's floats, but it's usually necessary to put on rubber boots (provided) and walk for up to ½ an hour to get to where bears congregate. Binoculars and telephoto camera lenses are essential, as no responsible guide would crowd Kodiak brown bears so closely that such lenses become unnecessary (although the bears could choose to approach within 50 yards of you). Bears congregate only when salmon are running, so the timing of your visit is critical. From early July to mid-August you have a good chance of seeing bears fishing in streams on Kodiak, sometimes in numbers. In June, Kodiak air services fly to the east coast of the Alaska Peninsula to watch bears digging clams from the tidal flats and eating grass and greens on the coastal meadows. That's interesting to see, and the flight is spectacular, but the viewing may be from a greater distance and the bears will more likely be on their own. Generally, the flight services charge their standard bear viewing seat rate regardless of how far they have to fly to find bears; if you charter, it may cost much more, but you will have freedom to determine where the plane goes for added sightseeing. If bears are your primary interest, however, additional money might be better spent on a longer outing rather than a charter: the flight services can leave you at a lodge for a full day of viewing or an overnight, away from the daytrippers. For more advice, and particulars on where the bear viewing is hot, contact the **Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge** (✆ **907/487-2600;** see "Visitor Information," above). If bear viewing is the whole reason you're going to Kodiak, consider saving money and using Homer as your base (see chapter 7), or spending more money to go to Katmai National Park to see bears really close (see section 3 of this chapter).

Several small flight services offer bear viewing, including **Sea Hawk Air** (✆ **800/770-4295** or 907/486-8282; www.seahawkair.com).

FISHING The 70 miles of road leading from Kodiak reach eight good-sized rivers with good fishing for salmon and Dolly Varden char. You can drive to places that are almost as lightly fished as some fly-in locations on the mainland. Going beyond the road network gives you some of the best and least used fishing opportunities in Alaska. The visitor center provides a list of where to fish and the names and addresses of guides for remote fishing. You can also seek advice and regulations from the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** 211 Mission Rd., Kodiak, AK 99615 (✆ **907/486-1880;** www.alaska.gov/adfg; click on "Sportfish," then "Region 2," then "Kodiak"). To fish the remote areas, you'll need to charter a plane, going for a day or staying at a remote public-use cabin or wilderness lodge. About 50 boats are available for ocean salmon, halibut, and rockfish fishing. Check with the visitor center.

HIKING & BIRD-WATCHING There aren't a lot of trails on Kodiak, but there are some good day hikes. Pick up a copy of the *Kodiak Hiking Guide* at the visitor center for a variety of mountain climbs and day hikes from the road system. Also at the visitor center, the **Kodiak Audubon Society** offers guided hikes and bird-watching trips.

SEA KAYAKING The Kodiak Archipelago, with its many folded, rocky shorelines and abundant marine life, is a perfect place for sea kayaking. Kayaks were invented here and on the Aleutian Islands to the west. Several operators offer kayaking services and tours around Kodiak and on the shore of Katmai National Park. **Mythos Expeditions** (✆ **907/486-5536;** www.mythos-expeditions.com) takes kayakers along the Katmai coast for multiday bear-viewing trips; guests paddle by day and sleep and eat aboard a converted commercial fishing boat. They also go to **Shuyak Island State Park,** 54 miles north of Kodiak and rent kayaks for use there. The park is a honeycomb of islands and narrow passages in virgin Sitka spruce coastal forest.

The Division of State Parks (see addresses under "Two Recreation Areas," above) distributes a free kayaking guide with route descriptions and maintains four public-use cabins, which rent for $65 a night. These cabins can be quite hard to get in August. See "State Parks Cabin Reservations," in section 1 of chapter 7, and read up on the special rules for Shuyak Island on **www.alaskastateparks.org**.

For a simple beginner's day trip near town, there are fewer choices at Kodiak and the options have been changeable; however, checking at the visitor center should turn up someone who wants to take you. It is a lovely spot for a short paddle.

WHERE TO STAY

I've listed places in town, but there are also more than two dozen wilderness lodges on and around Kodiak Island. You can get a list from the visitor center, and their website contains links to most of them.

Best Western Kodiak Inn ★ This is the best hotel in downtown Kodiak, with attractive, up-to-date rooms perched on a hill overlooking the boat harbor, right in the center of things. Rooms in the wooden building vary in size and views, but all are acceptable standard rooms with good amenities.

The **Chart Room** restaurant, specializing in seafood and with a great view of the water, is a good choice for a nice dinner out, with entrees in the $15 to $25 range.

236 W. Rezanof Dr., Kodiak, AK 99615. ✆ **888/563-4254** or 907/486-5712. Fax 907/486-3430. www.kodiakinn.com. 81 units. High season $149 double; low season $99 double. Extra person over age 12 $15. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; tour desk; courtesy van. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron, microwave.

Buskin River Inn ★ This quiet, well-kept hotel with standard rooms is near the airport rather than the downtown sights, so you will need a rental car if you stay here. Rooms on one side look out on the river, while rooms on the other side have a view of the parking lot. It's near the wildlife refuge visitor center, a hiking trail, and the nine-hole golf course at the Coast Guard base. The **Eagle's Nest Restaurant** has a complete beef and seafood menu and a pleasant setting.

1395 Airport Way, Kodiak, AK 99615. ✆ **800/544-2202** or 907/487-2700. www.kodiakadventure.com. 50 units. High season $145 per unit; low season $125; no charge for additional person, $15 charge for roll-away bed. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; tour desk; courtesy van; business center; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

Kodiak Bed and Breakfast Hospitable, active Mary Monroe runs this comfortable, homey place with a friendly retriever, Kody. There is a porch where you can eat breakfast on sunny mornings, overlooking the harbor (fish is often on the morning menu). It's conveniently located right downtown, and the entry for the bedrooms and shared sitting room downstairs doesn't require you to walk through Monroe's own living quarters. Monroe offers fish freezing here.

308 Cope St., Kodiak, AK 99615. ✆ **907/486-5367.** Fax 907/486-6567. www.ptialaska.net/~monroe. 2 units, both with shared bathroom. $105 double. Rate includes full breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** TV and phone in common room.

Wintels Bed and Breakfast A long walk from downtown (you'll need a car if you stay here), this house stands with the ocean on one side and a lake on the other, so all rooms have water views. The owners, a family of longtime residents, can tell you a lot about Alaska and show off their mounted sea ducks and furs. The rooms are attractive and the breakfasts are large. They will freeze any fish that you catch.

1723 Mission Rd. (P.O. Box 2812), Kodiak, AK 99615. ✆ and fax **907/486-6935.** www.wintels.com. 3 units, 1 with private bathroom. $90–$110 double. Extra person $35. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Jacuzzi; sauna; laundry service. *In room:* Hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

Besides the hotel restaurants listed above at the Best Western Kodiak Inn and Buskin River Inn, Kodiak has a selection of family restaurants.

Downtown, **El Chicano,** at 103 Center St. (✆ **907/486-6116**), is a Mexican place with friendly service and reasonable prices.

Eugene's Restaurant, upstairs at 202 E, Rezanof Dr. (✆ **907/486-2625**), is the same kind of place, but with Chinese and American food—big portions, a pleasant family running things, and a comfortable dining room. We enjoyed the curried chicken and kung pao shrimp.

Harborside Coffee and Goods, at 210 B, Shelikof St. (✆ **907/486-5862**), on the south side of the boat harbor, is a comfortable coffeehouse with soup, bagels and fresh pastries, popular with commercial fishermen and young people.

Henry's Great Alaskan Restaurant, at 512 Marine Way (✆ **907/486-8844**), on the waterfront mall, is a popular but very smoky bar and grill.

3 Katmai National Park

Most of the land of the Alaska Peninsula, pointing out to the Aleutian Archipelago, is in one federally protected area or another, centering on Katmai National Park. The park, pronounced "*cat*-my," lies just west of Kodiak Island, across the storm-laced Shelikof Strait. Bear and salmon are the main attractions here. **Brooks Camp,** with a campground and lodge within Katmai, is probably the most comfortable place for foolproof bear viewing in Alaska. Here, in July and September only, you can sit back on a deck and watch 900-pound brown bears walk by, going about their business of devouring the spawning salmon that contribute to their awesome size. (A brown bear is the genetic twin of the grizzly, but generally larger due to its coastal diet of salmon.) Staying the night will require you to reserve a place in the 16-space campground the previous winter or stay in the pricey lodge, where rooms can book up over a year ahead for the bear season. You can go for a day trip with less planning if you can stand to pay around $500 round-trip airfare from Anchorage for 2 or 3 hours at the camp (this information is covered in "Getting There," below).

Katmai was set aside in 1918 for entirely different reasons than bear viewing. The area exploded into world consciousness in 1912 with the most destructive volcanic eruption to shake the earth in 3,400 years. When Katmai's Novarupta blew, it released ten times more energy than Mount St. Helen's eruption of 1980 and displaced twice as much matter as 1883's Krakatoa. In Kodiak, the sky was black for 3 days and 2 feet of ash crushed houses and choked rivers. People could clearly hear the blast in Juneau; acid rain melted fabric in Vancouver, British

Columbia; and the skies darkened over most of the Northern Hemisphere. At the blast site, all life within a 40-square-mile area was wiped out and buried as deep as 700 feet. But so remote was the area, then still unnamed, that not a single human being was killed. The **Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes,** the vast wasteland created by the blast, belched steam for decades after. Today, Novarupta is dormant and the steam is gone, but the area is still a barren moonscape, making a fascinating day tour or hiking trip.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Most people fly to Katmai from Anchorage by way of the village of **King Salmon,** which lies just west of the park. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) flies to King Salmon twice a day in the summer, charging around $350 round-trip. Air taxis carry visitors the last leg from King Salmon to **Brooks Camp** for a fare of around $160, round-trip. **Katmai Air,** operated by park concessionaire Katmailand (✆ **800/544-0551** or 907/243-5448; www.katmaiair.com), does these flights, and offers round-trip airfare packages from Anchorage that can save a little money (total around $500) and add simplicity to your planning.

As an alternative to Brooks Camp, more and more visitors are exploring the supremely rugged wilderness on the east side of the park from the beaches along **Shelikof Strait.** Air-taxi operators make drop-offs and do bear-viewing day trips from Homer or Kodiak (see section 2 of this chapter, above, on Kodiak, or see the Homer section in chapter 7), and boats out of Kodiak go across for extended cruising and kayak expeditions. With more than 2,000 brown bears in residence in the park (the world's largest protected population), it's easy for pilots to find them digging clams on the tidal marshes, and then land on floats for a good, close look.

RESERVATIONS & FEES No entry fee or permit applies for day trips to Katmai, but once you're there you have to sign up for an hour on the bear-viewing platforms (see below) if you want to observe bears (which you probably will if you've come all this way). Camping costs $8 per person per night. There are only 16 sites, and they are in very high demand during the bear season in July. The crowds are smaller in September, but the bears are not quite as numerous. All sites become available for the entire summer on January 15. To reserve, call or log on to the **park service national reservation system** (✆ **800/365-2267** or 301/722-1257; http://reservations.nps.gov). If you're using the phone system, enter **KAT#** at the prompt.

VISITOR INFORMATION In addition to the **Katmai National Park Headquarters,** P.O. Box 7, King Salmon, AK 99613 (✆ **907/246-3305;** www.nps.gov/katm), there's also a **visitor center** at the airport in King Salmon (✆ **907/246-4250**), staffed jointly by the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local governments. It is open 8am to 5pm daily in the high season, Monday through Friday in winter. At Brooks Camp, the park service has a center where all visitors are required to attend a 20-minute orientation called "The Brooks Camp School of Bear Etiquette," designed to train visitors (not bears) and keep them out of trouble. In Anchorage, you can get information at the **Alaska Public Lands Information Center,** at 4th Avenue and F Street (✆ **907/271-2737;** see the complete listing in section 1 of chapter 6).

GETTING AROUND Once you've made it to Brooks Camp, a **bus** carries visitors to the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, 23 miles by gravel road from the camp. The park concessionaire, **Katmailand,** charges $81 per person, round-trip, for the all-day excursion, plus $8 more for lunch. One-way transfers for hikers are $48.

FAST FACTS: Katmai

Bank **Wells Fargo,** with an ATM, is on King Salmon Highway.

Hospital The **Camai Clinic,** in Naknek (✆ **907/246-6155**), is open during normal business hours; calls to the number go to emergency dispatchers after hours.

Police In **King Salmon,** call ✆ **907/246-4222;** elsewhere, call **Alaska State Troopers** at ✆ **907/246-3346** or 907/246-3464. There are no phones or cellular service out in the park.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

Katmai's famous bear viewing occurs at **Brooks Camp** when the bears congregate near the Brooks River to catch salmon during July and September, and maybe the last week of June or the first week of August. This is when you're assured of seeing bears from the elevated platforms near the Brooks River falls, ½ a mile from Brooks Camp, even on a day trip. Forty to sixty bears feed here. Rangers escort visitors to the platforms to keep them separate from the bears, but you do get quite close to them. The park service recommends that people with mobility problems avoid this trail when bears are present, which pretty much means you shouldn't go to Brooks Camp if you have trouble getting around. Due to the popularity of the experience, there is a 1-hour limit on the platforms. After your turn is up, you can sign up on a waiting list to get another chance. Outside of the short salmon run, there are better places to see bear, so don't spend the money to come to Brooks Camp if you won't be here when the salmon are running. Bears feed all summer on clams on Katmai's east shore. See "Getting There," above.

The Brooks Camp area has a small park service campground, visitor center, and lodge, located where the Brooks River flows into Naknek Lake. When the area was first developed for fishing in the 1950s, the camp was built in the middle of a major bear corridor, where it never would be allowed today, creating a unique opportunity to stay right in some of the most concentrated bear habitat on the globe. The most comfortable lodging is at the **Brooks Lodge,** operated by Katmailand (✆ **800/544-0551** or 907/243-5448; www.katmainationalpark.com). The lodge has 16 units, with private bathrooms with shower stalls. To save money, book the lodge rooms as packages with air travel. The least expensive, 1-night visit is $736 per person, double occupancy, meals not included; 3 nights is $1,252. A double room without airfare is $560. Peak dates (when the bears are around) book up 12 months out or earlier; for your choice, call as soon as the reservation system opens 18 months ahead, January of the year before the visit. Three buffet-style meals are served daily for guests and visitors who aren't staying in the lodge. Breakfast is $12, lunch $18, and dinner $26. For food, they take MasterCard and Visa at the lodge. Also at Brooks Camp, there's a small store, the park service visitor center, and the 16-site campground. See "Reservations & Fees," above, for info on campground reservations, which should be made 6 months in advance. The rangers require special precautions to keep bears away from campers.

The rivers and lakes of Katmai lure human anglers as well as ursine ones. Katmailand operates two lodges within the park other than Brooks Lodge for remote fishing, the **Kulik** and **Grosvenor lodges.** Check their website at

www.katmailand.com for fishing details. The park service also has a list of dozens of fishing, hiking, and air guides. There is no central clearinghouse for remote fishing, but you can find and book a good place through an agency such as **Sport Fishing Alaska,** 9310 Shorecrest Dr., Anchorage, AK 99502 (✆ **888/552-8674** or 907/344-8674; www.alaskatripplanners.com), listed in full under "Planning an Outdoor Vacation" in chapter 2.

Backcountry hiking in Katmai means crossing a wilderness without trails, and only experienced backpackers should plan extended trips. The park service asks hikers to obtain a voluntary permit for backcountry travel, thereby clueing them in to your plans in case you need to be rescued. Anyone can walk for the day without such precautions in the desolate **Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes.** This 40-square-mile plain remains a moonscape 90 years after the titanic volcanic blast that buried it. It's little changed except that the famous plumes of smoke are gone and rivers have sliced through the debris in places to create narrow, white-walled canyons. Although it looks like a desert and is subject to dust storms, rain is common and temperatures rarely go higher than 65°F (18°C). Katmailand operates a tour bus from Brooks Camp, mentioned above under "Getting Around." The visitors on those tours usually stay on a short trail on the valley's rim. Longer hikes into the valley bring you into contact with more of the bizarre landforms created by the eruption.

4 Unalaska/Dutch Harbor: Aleutian Boomtown

After a lifetime of hearing how desolate the Aleutians (uh-*loo*-shens) were, I felt like I was leaving the edge of the earth the first time I traveled to Unalaska (oon-ah-*las*-ka). Shortly after I arrived, a storm started slinging huge raindrops horizontally through the air so hard that they stung as they splattered on my face. People went on about their business as if nothing special was happening—stormy weather constantly batters these rocks that pop up from the empty North Pacific. My expectations seemed justified.

But the next day, the storm cleared like a curtain opening on a rich operatic scene—simultaneously opening the curtain to flood light on my dark expectations. Unalaska may lack trees, but it's not a barren rock. The island is covered with heather and wildflowers. Rounded mountains that invite wandering exploration rise from the ocean like the backs of huge beasts. For sightseeing, it has barely a day's attractions, but for outdoor exploring, bird-watching, and halibut fishing, few places come close.

With the protected port of Dutch Harbor so far out in a ferocious ocean habitat rich in crab and bottom fish, Unalaska has grown in 3 decades from a tiny, forgotten Native village to the nation's largest fishing port. The pattern of growth followed the form of the early gold rushes. There was a wild, lawless time in the 1970s when crab fishermen got rich quick and partied like Old West cowboys. Then the overfished crab stocks crashed, only to be replaced, starting in the mid-1980s, by an even bigger boom, when waters within 200 miles of the U.S. shore were rid of foreign vessels and American bottom fishing took off. Big factory ships began unloading here and huge fish plants were built on flat ground chipped from the rock. Today that expansion has reached a steady state and women and families have come to town—another part of the gold rush pattern. But domestication isn't done yet. Most of the population lives in bunkhouses and flies back to Seattle, Mexico, and the Philippines when the processing plants close for the season. Unalaska may be the best current example of the American cultural phenomenon of the frontier boomtown.

Ironically, Unalaska is Alaska's oldest town as well as its newest city. The Aleuts recognized the value of a good port out in the middle of the ocean. In 1759, the Russians began trading here, and fought a war with the Aleuts from 1763 to 1766, the outcome of which was slavery for the Aleut hunters and the massacre of their people. The Russians built a permanent settlement here in 1792, their first in Alaska. Unalaska was a key refueling stop for steamers carrying gold rush stampeders to Nome a century ago, which brought an epidemic that killed a third of the indigenous population. In 1940, Dutch Harbor—the seaport on Amaknak Island associated with the town and island of Unalaska—was taken over by the U.S. Navy to defend against Japanese attack. That attack came: In June 1942, Japanese planes bombed Unalaska, killing 43. The Aleut people were removed from the islands for the duration of the war and interned in inadequate housing in Southeast Alaska, where many died of disease. The military pulled out in 1947, but the remains of their defenses are interesting to explore—part of a unique unit of the national park system. Thanks to a 1971 act of Congress settling Native claims, the Aleut-owned Ounalashka Corporation owns much of the land around town. But the National Park Service protects and interprets the World War II historic sites on Native-owned land.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Several operators fly to Dutch Harbor from Anchorage, including jet service on **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com). You're likely to pay $800 round-trip. An air/hotel package makes sense and saves money—see the Grand Aleutian Hotel, described under "Where to Stay," below for details on a package.

The **Alaska Marine Highway System** ferry *Tustumena* (✆ **800/642-0066;** www.ferryalaska.com) runs once a month from Homer, leaving Tuesday and arriving in Unalaska on Saturday after stopping in Kodiak and the villages along the way. The passenger fare is $285, and a cabin with facilities is $385 more. I'm told this open sea adventure is a great way to see beautiful country and encounter the people of the villages along the way. Of course, unless you want to spend only 5 hours on a Saturday morning in Unalaska and then make the long return trip, you'll need to fly back.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Unalaska/Port of Dutch Harbor Convention and Visitors Bureau,** P.O. Box 545, Unalaska, AK 99685 (✆ **877/581-2612** or 907/581-2612; www.unalaska.info), is at 5th Street and Broadway, in the old part of town.

A new visitor center for the **Aleutian WW II National Historic Area** (✆ **907/581-1276;** www.nps.gov/aleu) opened in a war-era building at the airport in 2002. The historic area encompasses World War II ruins on the island that, like the center, stand on Native-owned lands. The National Park Service helped fund the improvements and they interpret the history. A $4 entry fee at the visitor center also covers the permit to hike to the ruins (see "Exploring the Town," below). The website is interesting, too (click on "In Depth").

GETTING AROUND The main historic part of the town is a tiny street grid on a narrow peninsula facing Iliuliuk Bay. The **Bridge to the Other Side** (that's the official name) leads to Amaknak Island, the site of the airport, the Grand Aleutian Hotel, and the industrial fishing area of Dutch Harbor. Traveling down the road in the other direction leads a little way up into the mountains, a starting point for walks.

Van taxis are the main way of getting around town for the hordes of fishermen. One company is **Blue Checker Taxi** (✆ **907/581-2186**).

You can rent a car, truck, or forklift from **North Port Rentals** (✆ **907/581-3880**) or a couple of other companies. Small cars rent for $40 a day.

FAST FACTS: Unalaska/Dutch Harbor

Bank **Key Bank** is attached to the Alaska Commercial Store and has an ATM.

Hospital **Iliuliuk Family and Health Services** (✆ **907/581-1202**) offers clinic services.

Internet Access Free at the **public library** (✆ **907/581-5060**).

Police **Unalaska Department of Public Safety** (✆ **907/581-1233**) is just above the bridge on the Unalaska side.

Taxes Sales tax is 3%; the total tax on rooms is 8%.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

Unalaska's most significant historic site is the **Holy Ascension Cathedral.** Completed in 1896 on the site of churches that had stood since 1808, the white church with green onion-shaped domes contains 697 icons, artifacts, and artworks—a significant collection that has been continuously in use by the Aleut congregation. The congregation was founded by Father Ivan Veniaminov, who translated the Gospel into Aleut and has been canonized as St. Innocent. A $1.3-million restoration saved the church from collapse in 1996. It is a dignified, geometric counterpoint to the soft edge of sparkling Iliuliuk Bay.

The professionally curated **Museum of the Aleutians,** next door to the Ounalashka Corporation on Margaret Bay in Dutch Harbor (✆ **907/581-5150;** www.aleutians.org), contains some of the region's best artifacts, including some from North America's oldest coastal sites on Umnak and Unalaska islands. Exhibits also cover the town's history, with World War II artifacts and other items left behind by the successive waves of occupiers. Every summer the museum mounts archaeological digs on the island, inviting visitors to join in the digs (some colleges offer college credit for digging), clean the artifacts in the museum, and attend evening lectures. Contact them for information on the program. Admission is $4. It's open summer Monday through Saturday from 10am to 5pm, Sunday from noon to 5pm; in winter Tuesday through Saturday from 11am to 4pm.

There are several **World War II military ruins** around town, including some that are still in use, such as the submarine dry dock that today fixes fishing boats. Trails lead over the island to other sites included in the Aleutian World War II National Historic Area, which preserves this evidence of war on American soil and helps tell the story of the Native people who were interned by both the Japanese and Americans during the war. U.S. Army Fort Schwatka, on Mount Ballyhoo, is about an hour's hike from the airport. The fort once had over 100 buildings. Many remain, including the best-preserved gun mounts and lookouts of all the nation's coastal defenses from the war. It's a spectacular site where you can see the ships returning. Stop by the new historic site visitor center at the airport first; besides learning the context of the park, your $4 admission fee is your permit for access to the ruins, which belong to the Native-owned Ounalashka Corp. (All use on their land requires a permit; see "Hiking," below).

That's about it for sightseeing in Unalaska, unless you take a walk in the port. The port is interesting for the size of the vessels and fish harvest, and the incredible investment in buildings and equipment.

GETTING OUTSIDE

BIRD-WATCHING Flip through the crisp, unused pages of your bird book to find out what you may see in the Aleutians. Several rare bird species nest in the area, and Asian birds occasionally drop in as accidentals. The whiskered auklet and red-legged kittiwake are among the birds commonly found around Unalaska that you probably haven't seen. You'll have the greatest success taking a boat to a seabird colony. The Grand Aleutian Hotel (under "Where to Stay") offers packages; it's also possible to combine halibut fishing and bird-watching on your own chartered boat (see "Fishing"). You're also likely to encounter sea lions and other marine mammals on boat trips.

FISHING You can fly out to fish for salmon from black-sand beaches, but Unalaska has become more famous for huge **halibut.** In 1995, a local sport fisherman caught a 395-pound halibut from an 18-foot skiff within a ½ mile of town; to kill the behemoth he had to beach it and beat it over the head with a rock. The next year, Fairbanks angler Jack Tragis landed the world record halibut here, which weighed 459 pounds. If you're having trouble imagining a fish that big, drop by City Hall, where a replica hangs stuffed in the lobby. If you plan to fish, buy a $10 derby ticket from the visitor center; it's not at all required, but if you break the world record, you could win $100,000. The convention and visitor bureau can refer you to a charter boat operator and has a few links to them on its website (see above), or make the arrangements through the Grand Aleutian Hotel (under "Where to Stay").

HIKING The island's green heather and rounded mountains of wildflowers are inviting for a walk. You can walk pretty much in any direction. Look at the abandoned World War II defenses; walk to a beach or one of the small peaks around the town; or, for the ambitious, head to the top of an active volcano, Mount Makushin. There are no bears and not many bugs, but there's great berry picking and beachcombing. The weather can be a threat, however, and foxholes can trip you up. As always, in remote outdoor areas, you must be suitably dressed and leave word of where you're going and when you'll be back.

Hikers beyond the World War II historic area have to pay a fee directly to the **Ounalashka Corp.,** at 400 Salmon Way near the Grand Aleutian Hotel (✆ **907/581-1276;** www.ounalashka.com), the Native village corporation that owns much of the land around town. Hiking is $6 per person or $10 per family. They're open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm; if you arrive when they are closed, you can get a permit from OC Security (the guys driving around town in the white pickup trucks with SECURITY written on the side in blue). For extended treks, also go to the Department of Public Safety (see "Fast Facts: Dutch Harbor/Unalaska," above) for a travel-planning guide and to report your route on a travel plan that will assist with a search if you don't come back (not necessary if you're just going for a short ramble in the hills around town).

WHERE TO STAY

Carl's Bayview Inn This building, in town on Iliuliuk Bay, looks a bit like a Dutch Harbor warehouse from the outside, but the eight kitchenette units and six suites inside are comfortable and attractive, with many amenities, pastel colors, and sweeping views. The double rooms, although clean, showed more signs

of wear. Only four rooms are reserved for nonsmokers. They will freeze fish for you here.

606 Bayview (P.O. Box 730), Unalaska, AK 99685. ✆ **800/581-1230** or 907/581-1230. Fax 907/581-1880. bayview@arctic.net. 30 units. $110 double, $125 double with kitchenette; $150–$175 suite. Extra person $20. AE, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; courtesy van; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV.

Grand Aleutian Hotel ★★★ It's almost unreal to arrive at this big, luxurious hotel in a hard-driving Alaska Bush community. The Grand Aleutian is among the best hotels in Alaska, to say nothing of the Bush. You'd pay considerably more for the same room in Anchorage, yet here you are minutes away from some of the best halibut fishing and bird-watching anywhere. The rooms are well-designed and comfortable, many with good water views; the lobby is grand, with a huge stone fireplace; and there's a piano bar. As you walk outside into a driving gale, it's like teleporting from a big city hotel back to an exposed rock out in the North Pacific.

The **Chart Room** restaurant, on the second floor, allows bird-watchers to see waterfowl in the bay while dining on steak, seafood, or pasta. The menu, although brief, is Unalaska's most sophisticated. Dinner entrees range from $13 to $37. The **Margaret Bay Cafe,** downstairs, also has a good view, with grilled sandwiches and some lighter fare. A hamburger is $8.

The Japanese-owned UniSea fish-processing company (which built the hotel) has developed a full scope of sportfishing and birding packages to entice visitors. A 2-night package, which includes a boat visit to the Baby Islands bird colony to see the whiskered auklet, tufted and horned puffin, albatross, and other creatures, starts at about $570 per person, double occupancy, not including air fare. Longer packages with more birding trips are available, as well as fishing packages at about the same price.

The hotel will freeze any fish that you catch.

498 Salmon Way (P.O. Box 921169), Dutch Harbor, AK 99692. ✆ **888/581-3844** or 907/581-3844. Fax 907/581-7150. www.grandaleutian.com. 112 units. $179 double; $249 suite. Extra person $20. Packages available (see review). AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; tour desk; courtesy van; limited room service; laundry service. *In room:* TV, coffeemaker, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

Two of the town's best restaurants are at the **Grand Aleutian Hotel,** described above. Here's the other contender.

Tino's Steak House AMERICAN This restaurant packs in the commercial fishermen and other locals by serving huge portions of authentic Mexican food fast, along with steaks, a few seafood items, and lots of sandwiches and burgers. I'm told you save money but get virtually the same meal by ordering from the lunch menu—the dinner prices are on the Unalaska scale, with most over $20.

11 N. 2nd St. at Broadway. ✆ **907/581-4288.** Lunch $7–$14; dinner $15–$40. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

5 The Pribilof Islands: Birder's Paradise

The Pribilof Islands of St. Paul and St. George sit out in the middle of the Bering Sea, due north of Unalaska, teeming with marine mammals and seabirds. Some 600,000 fur seals meet at the breeding rookeries in the summer, and two million birds of more than 200 species use the rocks. Bird-watchers should visit St. Paul for one of the most exotic and productive birding and wildlife-viewing opportunities anywhere. It's best during the spring migration, from mid-May to

mid-June, when great numbers of birds show up, including rare Asian accidental species; the fall migration comes in late July and August. You can count on making rare sightings any time during the summer. Indeed, the National Audubon Society's *Field Guide to North American Birds* calls this "perhaps the most spectacular seabird colony in the world."

The islands are extremely remote, however, and the accommodations simple; if you're not interested in birding or in spending a lot of time watching wildlife, it's probably too much money and trouble. There is only one hotel, the **King Eider,** which has basic rooms and shared bathrooms. There is one restaurant on the island, open only at lunch for soup and sandwiches, so guests are issued food vouchers for the mess hall at the Trident Seafoods fish-processing plant, near the hotel. Three meals a day come from a buffet there, and cost $9 for breakfast, $13 for lunch, and $16 for dinner; you settle up at the end of your stay depending on how many vouchers you've used. There is also a grocery store across from the hotel.

Visitors generally come on tours, which are sold as a package with airfare and guiding by Aleuts and expert birders. With the guides' help and radio communication, your chances of seeing exotic species are much enhanced. The tours are offered by **Tanadguix Corp.,** 4300 B St., Suite 402, Anchorage, AK 99503 (✆ **877/424-5637;** www.alaskabirding.com). Check the website for birding news and species details. Packages from Anchorage start at $1,361 for a 2-night visit and operate from mid-May to mid-August. Travelers can choose to ride on a bus as a group or hike on their own. Permanent blinds are in place for watching birds and seals. The weather is always cool and damp.

6 Nome: Arctic Frontier Town

The accidents of history deposited the streets and buildings of this lusty little town on the shore of Norton Sound, just south of the Arctic Circle in Northwest Alaska, and gave it qualities that make Nome an exceptionally attractive place for a visitor. For once, the local boosters' motto—in this case, "There's no place like Nome"—is entirely accurate, and that's because Nome, although itself nothing special to look at, combines a sense of history, a hospitable and somewhat silly attitude, and an exceptional location on the water in front of a tundra wilderness that's crossed by 250 miles of road. Those roads are the truly unique thing, for Nome is the only place in Arctic Alaska where a visitor can drive or bike deep into the open country, coming across musk oxen, reindeer, rarely seen birds, Native villages, undeveloped hot springs, and even an abandoned 1881 elevated train from New York City. Elsewhere, you're obliged to fly from rural hubs to get so far into the Bush, a more expensive and ambitious undertaking for casual explorers.

The accidents of history have been rather frequent in Nome. History has been downright sloppy. Start with the name. It's essentially a clerical error, caused by a British naval officer who, in 1850, was presumably in a creative dry spell when he wrote "? Name" on a diagram rather than name the cape he was sailing past. A mapmaker interpreted that as "Cape Nome." Or so goes one widely accepted explanation. The original gold rush of 1898 was caused by prospectors in the usual way, but a much larger 1899 population explosion happened after one of the '98 stampeders, left behind in a camp on the beach because of an injury, panned the sand outside the tent—and found that it was full of gold dust. By 1900, a fourth of Alaska's white population was in Nome sifting the sand. Small-time operators and tourists are still at it. A huge floating gold dredge of the kind

that makes for major historic sites in Fairbanks and Dawson City sits idle on the edge of town. In Nome, it stopped operation only in recent years. There are two smaller dredges in town, too. Historic structures are few, however, as fires and storms have destroyed the town several times since the gold rush.

Nome has a particular, broad sense of humor. It shows up in the *Nome Nugget* newspaper and in silly traditions like the Labor Day bathtub race, the pack-ice golf tournament, and the polar bear swim. The population is half white and half Native, and the town is run largely by the white group. Some see Nome as a tolerant mixing place of different peoples, while the town strikes others as a bit colonial. Booze is outlawed in Kotzebue (the Native-dominated city to the north), but in Nome there is still a sloppy, gold-rush–style saloon scene. That sort of thing is prettier as historic kitsch than when it shows up in the form of drunks staggering down Front Street.

But you can ignore that, instead taking advantage of the great bargains to be had on Inupiaq arts and crafts. And, most important, you can use one of the pleasant little inns or bed-and-breakfasts as a base to get into the countryside that beckons you down one of the gravel roads. Nome is popular with bird-watchers, who find the roads especially useful.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Flying is the only way to get to Nome. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) flies 90 minutes by jet either direct from Anchorage or with a brief hop from Kotzebue. Prices are around $400 round trip. Many visitors come on escorted tour packages sold by **Alaska Airlines Vacations** (✆ **800/468-2248**); a day trip a tour package costs $369; an overnight in Kotzebue followed by a day in Nome costs $499 per person, double occupancy. Unlike some other Arctic communities, however, I think Nome is a better destination to be on your own, especially if you rent a car. "Which Arctic Destination to Choose," later in this chapter, summarizes the choices of easily accessibly Arctic destinations and their pros and cons.

All taxis operate according to a standard price sheet that you can get from the visitor center. A ride to town from the airport is $5. There are three companies, one of which is **Checker Cab** (✆ **907/443-5211**).

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Nome Convention and Visitors Bureau,** Front and Division streets (P.O. Box 240), Nome, AK 99762 (✆ **907/443-6624;** www.nomealaska.org/vc), provides maps and detailed information for diverse interests. The office is open from late May to mid-September daily from 9am to 9pm, the balance of the year Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm.

The **Bering Land Bridge National Preserve Headquarters,** Front Street (P.O. Box 220), Nome, AK 99762 (✆ **907/443-2522;** www.nps.gov/bela), is a good source of outdoors information from the rangers who staff a desk and are responsible for a rarely visited 2.3-million-acre national park unit, which covers much of the Seward Peninsula north of the Nome road system.

Also check the *Nome Nugget* website, at **www.nomenugget.com**, a real window into the community.

GETTING AROUND The town is a street grid along the ocean. **Front Street** follows the sea wall, **1st Avenue** is a block back, and so on. A harbor is at the north end of town, and the gold-bearing beach is to the south. You can mostly walk to see this area. Three roads branch out from Nome. I've described them below, under "Venturing Beyond Town, On the Road." To get out on the roads, you need to take a tour, rent a car, or bring a bike with you.

Several local car-rental agencies operate in town; the visitor center maintains a list, with rates. **Stampede Rent-A-Car,** 302 E. Front St. (✆ **800/354-4606** or 907/443-3838), charges $90 to $115 for SUVs and vans. The same people operate the Aurora Inn (see "Where to Stay," below).

FAST FACTS: Nome

Bank **Wells Fargo,** with an ATM, is at 250 Front St.

Hospital **Norton Sound Regional** is at 5th Avenue and Bering Street (✆ **907/443-3311**).

Internet Access **Nome Public Library** is at 200 Front St. (✆ **907/443-6626**).

Police At Bering Street and 4th Avenue (✆ **907/443-7766**).

Post Office At Front Street and Federal Way.

Taxes The sales tax is 4%; the tax on rooms totals 8%.

SPECIAL EVENTS The **Tesoro Iron Dog Snowmachine Race** (✆ **907/563-4414;** www.irondog.org), in mid-February, is the world's longest, at over 2,000 miles, running between Wasilla and Fairbanks by way of Nome, with the course periodically reversing in different years.

The biggest event of the year is the **Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race** (✆ **907/376-5155;** www.iditarod.com), a marathon of more than 1,000 miles that ends in Nome in mid-March. The sled dog racers and world media descend on the town for a few days of madness, with lots of community events planned. The activities last most of the month; contact the Nome visitor center, or download the calendar from **www.nomealaska.org/vc**. Among the most exciting vacations you could plan would be to volunteer to help put on the Iditarod; check their website (see above) for information or an application, or call. They receive more volunteers than they can use, so apply early.

One of the March Iditarod events, showcasing Nome's well-developed sense of humor, is the **Bering Sea Ice Golf Classic** (✆ **907/443-6624**)—six holes are set up on the sea ice. The pressure ridges constitute a bad lie. Various similar silly events take place all year (see www.nomealaska.org/vc), including the **Polar Bear Swim** which happens around June 21 (ice permitting) as part of the **Midnight Sun Festival** (✆ **907/443-5535**). The festival celebrates the summer solstice, when Nome gets more than 22 hours of direct sunlight. A parade, hand-made raft race, folk festival, faux bank holdup, and other events headline the festival. Winners of the raft race get possession for a year of the fur-lined honey bucket (known in some places as a chamber pot).

EXPLORING THE TOWN

Most of Nome's original buildings were wiped out by fires or by the storms off Norton Sound that tore across the beach and washed away major portions of the business district. A sea wall, completed in 1951, now protects the town. Among the few historic sites that survive are the gold rush–era Board of Trade Saloon, a church, and a bust of Roald Amundsen, who landed near Nome, in Teller, after crossing the North Pole from Norway in a dirigible in 1926. Below the library, at Front Street and Lanes Way, the small **Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum** (✆ **907/443-6630**) contains an exhibit on the town's gold rush. The

museum is free and open summer daily from noon to 8pm, winter Tuesday through Saturday from noon to 6pm.

In good weather, a pleasant walk is to be had southeast of town, along the **beach.** Small-time miners may be camped there, but the gold-bearing sand extends for miles more of solitary walking. You can buy a gold pan in town and try your luck, but the sand has been sifted for nearly 100 years, so don't expect to gather any significant amount of gold. The **Swanberg Dredge** that you can see from here operated until the 1950s; a large dredge north of town worked into the mid-1990s. The 38 gold dredges that once operated on the Seward Peninsula crept across the tundra, creating their own ponds to float in as they went. The **cemetery,** with white wooden crosses on top of a little hill just out of town, is also worth a look.

Several companies offer **organized tours. Nome Discovery Tours** (✆ **907/443-2814;** discover@gci.net) has the asset of talented professional actor Richard Beneville as the van driver and tour guide. He'll pick you up and drive you anywhere in the area, sharing his quirky enthusiasm and extensive knowledge of the surroundings and culture. The highlight is the wildlife and scenery on the roads out of town, and he also visits an ivory carver and working gold mine. Half days are $45 per person, full days $85.

If you're in the market for walrus ivory carvings and other **Inupiaq arts and crafts,** you'll find low prices and an extraordinary selection in Nome. Jim West has a legendary collection for sale, assembled in the bar room of the historic **Board of Trade Saloon** that is attached to a shop on Front Street. The **Arctic Trading Post** is more of a traditional gift shop and also has a good ivory collection. **Chukotka-Alaska,** at 514 Lomen St., is an importer of art and other goods from the Russian Far East, and is really worth a look. Alaska Native art that you find in Nome is likely to be authentic, but still ask; see "Native Art: Finding the Real Thing" in chapter 2. International visitors should see chapter 3 to find out about the special permit you need to carry ivory out of the United States.

VENTURING BEYOND TOWN ON THE ROAD

The modest attractions downtown would hardly justify a trip to Nome, but the city's surroundings do. The roads provide unique access to a large stretch of the Seward Peninsula. Unlike other Arctic Bush areas, where someone has to take you where you want to go, in Nome all you have to do is rent a car and go. There are few cars in Nome (they have to be flown in or shipped by barge), so you won't see many other vehicles on the huge expanse of spectacular territory, which has wildlife-viewing opportunities as good as anywhere in the state. The **Alaska Department of Transportation** (✆ **907/443-3444**) can provide current information on road conditions.

You have a good chance of seeing moose, reindeer, owls, foxes, bears, and musk ox anywhere you drive, but check in with the visitor center or the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game,** at Front and Steadman streets (✆ **907/443-2271**), to find out the best locales to see animals. They can also give you guidance on fishing along the roads and a "Nome Roadside Fishing Guide." You can also download the guide from **www.state.ak.us/adfg** (click on "sportfish," then "region 3," then "northwest"). Check "Getting Around," above, to find a mode of transportation to get out on the road.

ROAD HIGHLIGHTS None of the three roads radiating from Nome have services of any kind—just small Native villages, a few dwellings, and some reindeer herders—so you must be prepared and bring what you need with you,

including insect repellent and a good spare tire. The visitor center provides a road guide. Here are some highlights:

The **Nome-Council road** heads 72 miles to the east, about half of that on the shoreline. It turns inland at the ghost town of Solomon, an old mining town with an abandoned railroad train known locally as the Last Train to Nowhere. The engines were originally used on the New York City elevated lines in 1881, then were shipped to Alaska in 1903 to serve the miners along this line to Nome. This is a scenic spot for bird-watching, and fishing is good in the Solomon River, all along the road. Council, near the end of the road, has a couple of dozen families in the summer. A 3-foot-deep river separates the road from the village.

The **Nome-Taylor road,** also known as the Kougarok Road, runs north of town into the Kigluaik Mountains, 85 miles from Nome, eventually petering out and becoming impassable. About 40 miles out, you reach lovely Salmon Lake, with a lakeshore campground with picnic tables, grills, and outhouses. A few miles farther, a road to the left leads to the 125°F Pilgrim Hot Springs, near a Catholic church. Access is limited to when the caretaker is on hand, so check with the visitor center before going.

The **Nome-Teller road** leads 73 miles to the village of Teller, which has 266 residents and a store. It's an opportunity to see an authentic Arctic Native village.

MOUNTAIN BIKING The roads of Nome are one of the world's great undiscovered mountain biking destinations—where else can you bike past musk oxen and reindeer? There is no bike rental in town, but there is a bike shop, Keith Conger's **Bering C Bikes** (✆ **907/443-4994**), and Keith offers guided bike day trips and van-supported multiday camping expeditions. For bike enthusiasts, it may be worth renting a bike in Anchorage or bringing yours from home.

BIRD-WATCHING Bird-watchers will make many discoveries out on the Nome roads, ticking off new sighting in their bird books. A bird list is available at the visitor center, and they can tell you where to look—each of the three roads has a different habitat. The best times to visit for birding are right around Memorial Day, and from July to mid-August. There's a chance to see Siberian birds, and you can count on bluethroats, yellow wagtails, wheatears, Arctic warblers, and Aleutian and Arctic terns. Nome is the only place to see a bristle-thighed curlew without chartering a plane. You don't need a guide, although guided field trips do come to Nome (see "Bird Watching" in chapter 2).

SEEING THE SIGHTS IN THE AIR

Nome is a hub for Bush plane operators. Flightseeing charters are available, or you can fly on one of the scheduled routes out to the villages and spend a couple of hours touring. The way to do it is to contact a flight service, explain what you have in mind, and follow their advice. Expect to pay around $160. Don't plan to stay overnight in a village without advance arrangements and don't go in bad weather—you'll see little and may get stuck in a tiny village. Among the operators is **Cape Smythe Air** (✆ **800/478-5125** in Alaska only, or 907/443-2414; www.capesmythe.com).

Bering Air (✆ **800/478-5464** in Alaska only, or 907/443-5464; www.beringair.com) is a good company offering flightseeing trips by fixed-wing aircraft or helicopter on hourly charter rates (expensive if there are just one or two of you along). Or they will sell you a seat on a scheduled loop flight that visits various villages, charging the fare only to the closest village on the trip while you enjoy the entire round trip.

WHERE TO STAY

There are several good B&Bs and motel rooms besides those listed in full below. The **Nanuaq Manor** (✆ **907/443-5296**), **Nugget Inn** (✆ **877/443-2323** or 907/443-2323), and **Ponderosa Inn** (✆ **907/443-5737**) all have decent rooms, in decreasing order of cost. **Ocean View Bed and Breakfast** (✆ **907/443-2133**) is nice. Staying at a B&B makes sense, as your host can introduce you to the community in a less contrived way than a formal tour company. The visitor center and their website can provide information on them. I do not recommend the Polaris Inn.

Aurora Inn Suites ★ Choose between these two comfortable buildings with different styles of accommodations under the same ownership (they are the same price). The Aurora Inn offers the best traditional hotel rooms in town in a mock country inn on the town's main street. The Executive Suites has a dozen apartment-like units, ranging from rooms with kitchenettes to two-bedroom apartments with full kitchens and living areas. Both buildings are only a few of years old. Uniquely in town, they have lots of nonsmoking rooms. Don't put too much faith in the rates listed here; instead, call and see what kind of deal you can work out.

Inn is located at 302 E. Front St.; Executive Suites are located at 226 W. D St. (P.O. Box 1008), Nome, AK 99762. ✆ **800/354-4606** or 907/443-3838. Fax 907/443-6380. www.aurorainnome.com. 68 units. Summer $130 double; $185–$225 suite. Extra person over age 15 $10. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Sauna; car rental; coin-op laundry. *In room:* TV, dataport, hair dryer.

Sweet Dreams B&B It's the host who makes this place special. Nome Mayor Leo Rasmussen, a personable and funny man and a deep well of Nome history and local knowledge, runs the B&B. The two-story house has a rustic, old-fashioned feel, with lots of Alaskan memorabilia and a sunroom on top.

406 W. 4th St. (P.O. Box 2), Nome, AK 99762. ✆ **907/443-2919.** leaknome@nook.net. 3 units, none with private bathroom. $85 double. Rate includes full breakfast. MC, V.

WHERE TO DINE

There are no places you'd go out of your way to dine in, but you can find an adequate family meal at various establishments in Nome, all along Front Street.

Immigrant families operate several restaurants, offering their national cuisine along with standard American-style fare. There is sometimes a language barrier with the servers. **Milano's Pizzeria** (✆ **907/443-2924**), at 503 Front St., the Old Federal Building, serves Italian and Japanese meals; its pizza is highly recommended by the locals. **Twin Dragons,** on Front Street near Steadman Street (✆ **907/443-5552**), has made it for years with Chinese food alone, which is consistently good; it's probably the best you can reliably get in Nome. Both of these take Visa and MasterCard.

The other flavor of restaurant in Nome, and the most popular locally, is the classic American greasy spoon. The ethnic restaurants mentioned above all have a way to escape the smoke; these burger habitats tend to be smoky throughout. Both of the following take all major credit cards. The **Polar Cub Restaurant,** at 225 Front St. (✆ **907/443-5191**), has an extensive dinner menu and prices that are reasonable for the Alaska Bush. **Fat Freddy's Restaurant,** attached to the Nugget Inn (✆ **907/443-5899**), serves more expensive fare in the evening, such as steaks and fried fish, in addition to the usual sandwiches.

7 Kotzebue: Big Village

Although its 3,082 residents make Kotzebue (*kotz*-eh-biew) a good-sized town, with a bank, a hospital, and a couple of grocery stores, I've heard it called a village

instead. A "village," in Alaskan parlance, is a remote Native settlement in the Bush, generally with less than a few hundred residents, where people live in a way that's relatively close to the traditional lifestyle of their indigenous ancestors. Kotzebue is a support hub for the villages of the Northwest Arctic, with jet service and a booming cash economy, but it's populated and run by the Inupiat—fish-drying racks and old dog sleds are scattered along the streets, and Native culture is thriving. It does feel like a village.

For visitors, these characteristics make Kotzebue unique because you can see real Eskimo culture without leaving the comforts of jet travel and standard hotel rooms behind. Or, if you don't mind giving up some of those comforts, you can get even closer to the Inupiat way of life. For adventurous outdoors people, Kotzebue offers access to huge areas of remote public land through which you can float on a raft or canoe. **Kobuk Valley National Park,** with its bizarre sand dunes; **Noatak National Preserve;** and **Cape Krusenstern National Monument** are among the largest national park units in the country, and among the least visited.

It's important to realize from the outset, however, that outside of an organized bus tour, there's absolutely nothing to do in Kotzebue. As I was told, "You have to shoot something or burn a lot of gas to have any fun around here." Kotzebue is not set up for independent travelers except those of the most intrepid ilk, and most of the independent travelers will most likely use the town as a way to get into the remote public lands. See "Which Arctic Destination to Choose," later in the chapter.

The dominant business in town is the **NANA Corporation,** a regional Native corporation representing the roughly 7,000 Inupiat who live in this Northwest Arctic region the size of Indiana. NANA, which stands for Northwest Arctic Native Association, is a successful example of how the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act gave the indigenous people control over their own destiny. With huge land and resource holdings and the cash to develop them, NANA is making money for its Inupiat shareholders and providing them with jobs in institutional catering and oil drilling and at the Red Dog zinc mine near Kotzebue, which is the world's most productive zinc mine. More relevant for visitors, NANA also owns the main hotel and tourist businesses in Kotzebue.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE The only way to Kotzebue is by air. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) has several daily jets from Anchorage in the summer. You'll pay around $400 round-trip from Anchorage. They also fly from Kotzebue to Nome. The cheapest and really the only sensible way for most tourists to go to Kotzebue is to take a package offered by **Tour Arctic** and **Alaska Airlines Vacations,** described under "Exploring the Town," below.

VISITOR INFORMATION There is no town visitor center. The National Park Service staffs the **Iññaigvik Education and Information Center** at 2nd Avenue and Lake Street (P.O. Box 1029), Kotzebue, AK 99752 (✆ **907/442-3760;** www.nps.gov/nwak), providing information and displays on the immense area of protected land in the region and offering classes in topics such as basket weaving and medicinal plants. Employees will answer questions about the town as well. It's open in summer daily from 8am to 6pm, by appointment in winter. The local **headquarters of the National Park Service**, open during normal business hours all year, is in the Eskimo Building with the post office on Shore Avenue (✆ **907/442-8300**).

Even if you won't be going to Kotzebue, you can still get lost in the city's charming website, full of pictures and community communications, at **www.cityofkotzebue.com**.

GETTING AROUND Kotzebue is 26 miles north of the Arctic Circle on the Chukchi Sea. About a mile by 2 miles in size, it sits on a low spit of land extending into the shallow Kotzebue Sound. You can walk pretty much everywhere you need to go or take a cab if you have luggage. The main hotel is a 15-minute walk from the airport, and taxis are available from three companies, including **City Cab** (✆ **907/442-2229**). If you're on the Tour Arctic package, buses will pick you up at the plane and deliver you and your luggage to the hotel. The gravel streets are on a warped grid radiating from **Shore Avenue,** also known as **Front Street,** which runs along the water. Roads extend only a few miles out of town.

FAST FACTS: Kotzebue

Alcohol The sale of alcohol is illegal in Kotzebue, but possession for personal use is permitted.

Bank **Wells Fargo,** with an ATM, is at the corner of Lagoon Street and 2nd Avenue.

Hospital The **Maniilaq Medical Center,** with a 24-hour emergency room, is at 5th Avenue and Ted Stevens Way (✆ **907/442-3321**).

Police For nonemergency calls, contact the **Kotzebue Police Department** at ✆ **907/442-3351** or the **Alaska State Troopers** at ✆ **907/442-3222.**

Post Office You'll find it at Shore Avenue and Tundra Way.

Taxes Sales tax is 6%; the tax on rooms totals 12%.

EXPLORING THE TOWN

There is only one activity in town, and it's part of an organized tour. **Tour Arctic** (✆ **800/523-7405** or 907/442-3441; www.tour-arctic.com) hosts visitors in its cultural- and natural-history program, the centerpiece of which is the seasonal **NANA Museum of the Arctic,** across from the airport. For most people, the packages, also sold through **Alaska Airlines Vacations** (✆ **800/468-2248;** www.alaskaair.com), are the only sensible way to go to Kotzebue. You'll learn about the Arctic and Native culture, but the tour is scripted and there are no spectacular sights on the way. Owned and operated by the Inupiat, the company employs Eskimo guides who offer commentary for about 5 hours while keeping customers comfortable, mostly in buses and indoors. A show at the museum includes children dancing, a blanket toss, and a high-tech slide show about the struggle to save Inupiat culture. The tour includes a talk and demonstration in a tent about the clothing and survival techniques of the Eskimos. There's also a brief opportunity to walk on the tundra.

Day-trip packages are $369 from Anchorage, less than a full-fare ticket. The same tour with an overnight stay at NANA's comfortable Nullagvik Hotel is $399 per person, double occupancy (why not stay?). The prices to add Nome to the tour are also reasonable, compared to the cost of a plane ticket alone.

Tips Which Arctic Destination to Choose

Your choices are Nome, Kotzebue, or Barrow. Each has strengths for different kinds of travelers.

- Nome: Easy self-guided outdoors exploration on the roads around town. Opportunities for bird–watching and to see musk oxen and caribou. Not much to see in town.
- Kotzebue: Good escorted tour to learn about Inupiaq culture. Noth ing to see or do besides structured group touring. Not much wildlife viewing.
- Barrow: Opportunities for self-guided encounters with Native culture; some wildlife viewing; farthest north point; good for independent or escorted trips.

GETTING OUTSIDE

A FISH CAMP Some rugged and curious travelers may want something a bit less pampered and scripted than the Tour Arctic program. **Arctic Circle Educational Adventures** (✆ **907/442-6013** in summer, 907/276-0976 in winter; http://fishcamp.org) offers a chance to stay at a camp similar to the fish camps where Native people spend the summer gathering food for the winter—and to participate in set-net fishing, fish cutting, food gathering, and other traditional subsistence activities as well as hiking, town tours, and bird-watching. You are a participant rather than an observer, and spend real, unmediated time with Native people. The camp on the beach 5 miles south of town is as simple and rough as Bush life; guest stay in plywood cabins without plumbing. Elderhostel groups sometimes come for a week. Rates are $150 to $250 a day for the tour activities plus $95 per person per day for lodgings and meals. The season is from late June to mid-August.

FLIGHTSEEING Flying in a small plane can give you an idea of what Native villages look like. The **Kobuk Valley National Park,** including the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes, a desertlike area of shifting 100-foot dunes, is very interesting from the air. If your group is small, you may be able to save by going on a scheduled flight rather than chartering the whole plane. **Cape Smythe Air** (✆ **907/442-3020**) is one operator flying to the surrounding villages. They fly twice daily to Noatak and Kivalina, over the **Cape Krusenstern National Monument,** for $141.

FLOAT TRIPS There are several remote rivers near Kotzebue with easy self-guided floating for experienced outdoors people. This is the best chance to get deep into the Arctic on your own. The great Noatak River originates in the Brooks Range and flows 450 miles through America's largest undisturbed wilderness with the impressive scenery of the Noatak National Preserve surrounding the river. The Selawik, Squirrel, and Kobuk rivers all have long sections of easy water. **Alaska Discovery,** and **Equinox Wilderness Expeditions,** listed in chapter 2 under section 6, "Planning an Outdoor Vacation," have float trips in the area, although not necessarily every year. Expect to pay $3,500 per person, including air travel.

Most river running in the region is self-guided. Get details from ***The Alaska River Guide,*** by Karen Jettmar, director of Equinox (Alaska Northwest Books). Obviously you should be experienced in the outdoors and in river floating

before heading out for a multiday trip in the Arctic. And plan ahead, arranging details well in advance with the park service and your pilot. Most visitors bring all their gear from Anchorage, but Buck Maxson of **Arctic Air Guides** (✆ **907/442-3030**) rents rafts and canoes for $35 a day. An experienced bush pilot, he can fly you wherever you want to go, charging $320 an hour. You can minimize your costs by putting in or taking out at villages along the river and using scheduled air services (see "Flightseeing," directly above).

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Dining options in Kotzebue are limited. Besides the hotel restaurant listed below, you'll find good breakfasts and great burgers at the **Bayside Inn,** right next door (✆ **907/442-3600**). I cannot recommend their rooms, however. There is also **Mario's Pizza and Deli,** at 606 Bison St. (✆ **907/442-2666**), a Japanese-Chinese-pizza-burger-sushi takeout or eat-in place.

To save some money and meet friendly local people, stay at **Lagoon Bed and Breakfast,** 227 Lagoon St. (✆ **907/442-3723;** mar81996@otz.net).

Nullagvik Hotel ★ The NANA-owned hotel is thoughtfully designed and comfortably furnished. The modern rooms have all the features of a chain hotel. Their windows angle out from the building so that all get at least some ocean view. It can be startling to see Eskimo women wearing summer parkas called *kuspuks* cleaning in the halls; they certainly do a thorough job. By booking with an Alaska Airlines Vacations package, you save considerable money on stays here. The **restaurant** is clean and nicely decorated, with a good view. It is closed from October to mid-May.

Shore Ave. and Tundra Way (P.O. Box 336), Kotzebue, AK 99752. ✆ **907/442-3331.** Fax 907/442-3340. www.nullagvik.com. 73 units. High season $144 double; low season $121 double. Extra person $10. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV.

8 Barrow: Way North

Half-liquid land comes to an arbitrary point at the northern tip of Alaska. This is Point Barrow, a long tendril reaching into the Arctic Ocean, where bowhead whales pass close to shore during their annual migrations. The Inupiat settled here more than a thousand years ago because it is such a good whale hunting spot, and that is still why they live here, dragging their skin boats miles out on the frozen ocean to wait for whales along the cracks in the ice pack. And, according to age-old tradition, they still share the whales they catch among the entire community. Indeed, even visitors who show up on a Saturday in late June, during the Nalukataq, may be offered a piece of maktak (whale blubber and skin) and a chance to bounce high in the air in the blanket toss.

Barrow is the northernmost settlement on the North American continent, above the 71st parallel, but that's not all that makes it unique. The town of 4,581 is a cultural treasure. It's ancient, but it's also the seat of the North Slope Borough, a county government encompassing an area larger than the state of Nebraska, in which lies North America's largest oil field. The borough has everything money can buy for a local government, yet the people still must contend with crushing ice, snooping polar bears, and utter isolation. From these ingredients, they have concocted an extraordinary mixture of sophisticated modernity and wise tradition. Alaska's largest corporation is based here; its top executives are also subsistence hunters. At the Inupiat Heritage Center you could see, on successive nights, traditional dance and then avant-garde theater in the Inupiaq language.

Geography and the natural environment also make the place interesting. This is the most heavily instrumented and intensively studied scientific site anywhere in the Arctic. At the labs north of town, cutting-edge work on climate change takes place that could affect the whole world. The tundra around Barrow is dotted with lakes divided by tendrils of swampy tundra no more substantial than the edges of fine lace. On this haven for migratory waterfowl, the flat, wet land and the ocean seem to merge. Indeed, for all but a few months, it's a flat, frozen plain of ocean and land. For 65 days in the winter, the sun never rises. In the summer, it doesn't set. Ice recedes from the shore only for a few brief months. Such extreme geography is a magnet for visitors—people want to stand here, perhaps dip a toe in the Arctic Ocean.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) flies to Barrow daily from Anchorage and Fairbanks, and offers 1-day and overnight tour packages, described in "Exploring the Town & Getting Outside," below. The packages are a good deal, competitive with round-trip tickets alone from Anchorage, which are around $475. Book them through **Alaska Airlines Vacations** (✆ **800/468-2248**).

VISITOR INFORMATION The City of Barrow's **visitor center,** at Momegana and Ahkovak streets, near the airport and Wiley Post & Will Rogers Monument, operates in the summer only from 10am to 1pm, with a guide to talk to, maps (including a numbered walking tour map), and other publications. To obtain advance information, contact the City of Barrow, Office of the Mayor, P.O. Box 629, Barrow, AK 99723 (✆ **907/852-5211;** fax 907/852-5871; barrowmayor@nuvuk.net).

GETTING AROUND Facing the Chukchi Sea, Barrow has two sections, lying on each side of Isatkoak Lagoon. **Browerville,** to the east, has the Inupiat Heritage Center and the Stuaqpak, or big store, which contains a small food court and many services. The old part of **Barrow,** with the hotels and airport, is to the west. The northern tip of Alaska, **Point Barrow,** is north of the town on a spit. The road leads 6 miles in that direction, but the absolute end is farther out, beyond the road. Other gravel roads lead about 10 miles out of town on the tundra.

Taxis are handy and come quickly, charging a flat $5 anywhere in town, $10 beyond town, plus $1 for each additional passenger. **Arcticab** (✆ **907/852-2227**) is one cab service.

Fun Fact Bush Softball

Barrow is mad for the game. You can hear the play-by-play on the radio, but to attend you will need a car: that's how the spectators watch on the chilly Arctic evenings, honking for good plays. And remember: If a ball disappears completely from view in a puddle, runners can advance no more than two bases.

On the rocky, mountainous Aleutian island of Unalaska, the problem was too small a field, so home runs carried heavy penalties. Hit three in a season and you were permanently expelled from the league. But that's all in the past: They recently built a new, larger field, at a cost of nearly $3 million, including the cost of bringing nine shipping-van containers of sod out from Palmer.

SPECIAL EVENTS The return of the sun after 2 months below the horizon is met by traditional celebrations on **January 21.** The **Piuraagiaqt,** a spring festival, takes place in mid-April and includes many fun events, such as the tea-making contest, in which couples race to set up a camp stove and melt ice to make tea. If the traditional bowhead whaling season is a success, the **Nalukataq** takes place on a Saturday or more than one Saturday in late June, depending on the preference of the successful captain. It is his responsibility to feed the entire community. The Eskimo blanket toss is also a traditional element of the event. In the fall, generally from early to mid-October, the whale hunt launches from the beaches of town (rather than the ice, as in spring). If you're lucky, you can be on hand as a whale is pulled ashore and butchered by the community. This usually occurs at the NARL runway, north of town; ask around, as everyone will know if a whale has been landed.

FAST FACTS: Barrow

Alcohol The sale of alcohol is illegal in Barrow and importation for personal use in your luggage is limited and controlled by a permit system. If it's an issue, call ahead to the **Barrow Alcohol Delivery Site** (✆ **907/852-2337**) or the **Office of the Mayor** (✆ **907/852-5211**). Bootlegging is a serious crime.

Bank **Wells Fargo** is at 1078 Kiogak St., with an ATM.

Hospital **Samuel Simmonds Memorial Hospital** is at 1296 Agvik St. (✆ **907/852-4611**).

Internet Access Free at the **Tuzzy Library,** at the Inupiat Heritage Center in Browerville.

Police Contact the borough **Department of Public Safety,** 1068 Kiogak St. (✆ **907/852-6111**).

EXPLORING THE TOWN & GETTING OUTSIDE

The **Inupiat Heritage Center** (✆ **907/852-4594**) is the town's main attraction. It is part museum, part gathering center, and part venue for living culture. Inside is a workshop for craftspeople and a performance space for storytellers and dancers. In the museum area, displays of Inupiat artifacts change regularly, while a permanent exhibit covers Eskimo whaling and the influence of Yankee whaling on it. Inupiaq dancing and drumming performances happen every afternoon in the summer from 3 to 5pm, included in the admission price; these are the same performances attended by the escorted tour passengers. The center is open from May 15 to September 15 Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm (to see the dancing on weekends, call ahead); if you show up in the winter, they'll happily show you anything you want to see, as well. Admission is $5 17 to 55, $2 ages 6 to 17, free ages 5 or younger or over age 55.

The Arctic Slope Regional Corp., a Native corporation covering the region, owns the main tourism business in town, Native-owned **Tundra Tours** (✆ **800/882-8478** or 907/852-3900; www.tundratours.com), along with the Top of the World Hotel. Their tour (the same one sold through Alaska Airlines Vacations) introduces the town to visitors who arrive with little idea of what to expect. The 6-hour summer tour, in a small bus, drives around the town to show off the

modest sights, including an Eskimo skin boat, the cemetery, and a stop for a dip of toes in the Arctic Ocean. The highlight is a visit to the Heritage Center with a cultural presentation, including Eskimo dance and a chance to buy crafts made by Native artists. The day-trip tour is $399 from Fairbanks, or $450 per person, double occupancy, for the tour and a night in Barrow at the Top of the World Hotel, giving you time on your own without the tour group; both prices include airfare and save over buying a plane ticket alone. Book the tour through Alaska Airlines Vacations or with Tundra Tours at the numbers listed above. If you buy the tour separately when you are already in Barrow, it's $70. They also offer a winter tour for seeing the Aurora ($85 separately), which does not include the cultural elements.

Jim Vordestrasse (✆ **907/852-2010**) offers a decidedly less conventional tour by bicycle. If you don't want to peddle your own bike, you can be a passenger on Jim's tandem recumbent bicycle. He has given Inupiat elders their first bike ride on this contraption. Jim's a fascinating guy, a former mayor, well loved in Barrow, and positive and full of knowledge. The tour is $50. He also rents bicycles for $20 a day.

Barrow has been the only place in the U.S. with commercial polar bear viewing tours, but when the bears became too numerous in the winter of 2002-2003 the authorities cut off access to the best viewing site because of safety concerns. At this writing, it is unclear when and if these trips will resume. The bears are always around when the ice is in; they're dangerous and people take extreme care to avoid them. Barrow and other North Slope communities have minimized the danger of bears in town by setting up sites outside of the villages to dispose of gut piles and other hunting waste. It's a way of bribing the bears to leave the town alone. In Barrow, heavy equipment hauls the leftovers from fall whale butchering—bones and a few non-edible organs—out to the very end of the point. Polar bears come for an easy meal whenever the pack ice is close to shore, which is October through June, although fewer bears are present at the point in April and May, perhaps diverted by the spring whale hunt taking place on the ice. Commercial tours take visitors out to the point in all-terrain vans or Humvees that can drive on the beach gravel. You will have to do some research to find out if that practice has started again. My best advice is to contact one of the hotels listed below for the latest; you can also try the sources listed under "Visitor Information," above.

WHERE TO STAY

If you spend the night on the package tour, you'll stay at the **Top of the World Hotel** (✆ **907/852-3900;** www.topoftheworldhotel.com), which has good, modern hotel rooms, some overlooking the water. It's the biggest hotel in town, with a large lobby with a free Internet access terminal; a double room is $165 summer, $150 winter.

Barrow Airport Inn *Value* This is the most economical place to stay, a block from the airport terminal. New owners promised to update the rooms, which were worn but serviceable when I last saw them. Nine have full kitchens for the same price.

1815 Momegana St. (P.O. Box 933), Barrow, AK 99723. ✆ **800-375-2527** in Alaska only or 907/852-2525. Fax 907/852-2528. 16 units. $115 double. Rate includes continental breakfast. AE, DISC, DC, MC, V. *In room:* TV, fridge, coffeemaker, microwave.

King Eider Inn ★ The best rooms in town are found in this like-new building near the airport. They're crisp and airy and kept up so well it's as if no one

has stayed there before. It probably helps that shoes are not allowed in the hotel—you have to take them off at the front door. Nor is smoking permitted, creating a rare nonsmokers' oasis in Barrow. The lobby is comfortable, with a stone fireplace. Bathrooms have showers only, not tubs.

1752 Ahkovak St. (P.O. Box 1283), Barrow, AK 99723. ✆ **888/303-4337** reservations or 907/852-4700. Fax 907/852-2025. www.kingeider.net. 19 units. Summer $195 double; winter $175 double. Extra person $25. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Sauna; car rental. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

There are several decent restaurants in Barrow. Generally, they stay open very late, always have a TV on, offer free delivery, and don't brew decaffeinated coffee—people around here run on lots of caffeine and sugar.

Adjoining the Top of the World Hotel, **Pepe's North of the Border,** 1204 Agvik St. (✆ **907/852-8200**), is the most famous place in town thanks to an appearance owner Fran Tate made with Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show* some 20 years ago. They serve large portions of familiar American-style Mexican food, steak, and seafood. The bus tours come here for lunch and Tate hands out souvenirs.

Brower's Restaurant, just off Hopson Street at the west end of Browerville (✆ **907/852-5800**), occupies an important historic structure, the whaling station and later store owned by Charles Brower, a Yankee whaler who became father of one of the community's largest and most successful Inupiat families. His memoir, *50 Years Below Zero* (University of Alaska Press, $25), is utterly gripping and packed with amazing stories. The restaurant has booths with big windows right on the beach. Service is fast and respectful, and the diner food solid and tasty (although I would steer clear of some of the fancier selections).

Arctic Pizza, 125 Apayauq St. (✆ **907/852-4222**), has the best fine dining in town, as well as the standard pizza and burgers that are available everywhere. The broccoli soup is highly flavored and the steak is done just right; servings are huge. The same menu is offered in the elegant upstairs dining room, which has a great view over ancient village ruins to the ocean, and in the light downstairs dining room where the TV is on and children and teens are allowed.

Northern Lights Restaurant, in Browerville at 5122 Herman St. (✆ **907/852-3300**), is reputed to have the best pizza in town and serves the owner's own Chinese food.

Sam and Lee's Restaurant, at Kogiak and Nachik streets (✆ **907/852-5555**), has a very long Chinese menu and diner food; there is a fancy upstairs dining room and an elbows-on-the-table room downstairs. They are open from 6am to 2am daily.

Shogun Oriental Cuisine, near the airport at 1906 Takpuk St. (✆ **907/852-2276**), serves good Japanese food as well as the Chinese and American dishes you can get almost anywhere in Barrow.

9 Prudhoe Bay: Arctic Industry

The Prudhoe (*prew*-dough) Bay complex is more than a huge oil field, it's an amazing achievement. Massive, complex machinery must operate in winter's deep, dark cold and in summer must avoid harm to a critical habitat for migrating caribou and waterfowl, on wet, fragile tundra that permanently shows any mark made by vehicles. Workers are forbidden even to set foot on the tundra. As you look from the edge of one of the gravel pads, the heathery ground looks as undisturbed as a calm sea.

But that doesn't make it a good place to go on your vacation. The grim town of **Deadhorse,** which serves the oil facility, is really more of an industrial yard, barely deserving to be called a town; it certainly isn't anything you'd travel to see. To get beyond it to see Prudhoe Bay, you have to sign up for a tour. The tour has never gone inside the buildings, and under post–September 11, 2001 security measures it doesn't even go close to the most interesting areas. Visitors do get to stop at the Arctic Ocean, the only way to get to the water for those who drive up on the Dalton Highway. That hardly justifies the trip, however, unless you are bent on driving the highway anyway (it is covered in chapter 9, section 5). Frankly, I can't recommend spending the time and expense required for a Prudhoe tour. If you're curious about the Arctic, a trip to Barrow, Kotzebue, or Nome makes more sense.

If you do go, you must reserve at least 24 hours ahead to clear security. Tours are operated by the **Arctic Caribou Inn,** P.O. Box 340111, Prudhoe Bay, AK 99734 (✆ **877/658-2368** or 907/659-2368; www.arcticcaribouinn.com). They will need your name and an identification number that British Petroleum can use to run a background check before allowing you on the oil field: a driver's license, passport, or Social Security number will work. The inn also offers the area's visitor services, including a hotel and cafeteria, open in the summer only. Rooms start at $125 double. The restaurant has a buffet for breakfast ($10.50) and dinner ($18), and menu service for lunch. The hotel is near the airport in Deadhorse and serves as the starting point for the tours. The tour itself lasts 2 hours, including a 20-minute video. Visitors are carried by bus among oil field buildings (which look a lot like industrial buildings anywhere) and then stop for 15 minutes at the Arctic Ocean. It costs $37 per person. There is no other way to get from the end of the road to the water.

Alaska Airlines (✆ **800/252-7522;** www.alaskaair.com) serves Prudhoe Bay daily from Anchorage and Fairbanks. A round-trip ticket costs around $700 from Anchorage.

Several companies drive bus tours up the Dalton Highway all the way to Prudhoe, flying the other way. **Northern Alaska Tour Company** (✆ **800/474-1986** or 907/474-8600; www.northernalaska.com) offers these trips, with add-ons to make it more interesting: flightseeing stops, dayhikes, village visits and other choices. The basic 3-day, 2-night tour is $749.

Appendix: Alaska in Depth

An old photo album opens, emitting a scent of dust and dried glue. Inside, pale images speak wanly of shrunken mountains and glaciers, a huge blue sky, water, and trees, a moose standing way off in the background. No family photographer can resist the urge to capture Alaska's vastness in the little box of a camera, and none, it seems, has ever managed it. Then, turning the page, there it is—not in another picture of the landscape, but reflected in a small face at the bottom of the frame: my own face, as a child. For anyone who hasn't experienced that moment, the expression is merely enigmatic—slightly dazed, happy, but abstracted. But if you've been to Alaska, that photograph captures something familiar: It's an image of discovery. I've seen it on the fresh, pale faces in photographs stamped with the dates of my family's first explorations of Alaska 35 years ago. And then, researching this book, I got to see it once again, on my own young son's face. And I knew that, like me, he had discovered something important.

So what, exactly, am I talking about? Like anything worth experiencing, it's not simple to explain.

Tour guides try to get it across with statistics. Not much hope of that, although some of the numbers do give you a general idea of scale. Once you've driven across the continental United States and know how big that is, seeing a map of Alaska placed on top of the area you crossed, just about spanning it, provides some notion of size. Alaskans always like to threaten Texans with the statement that we could split in half and make their state the third largest. Alaska has 627,000 residents. If you placed them an equal distance apart, each would be almost a mile from any other. Of course, that couldn't happen. No one has ever been to some parts of Alaska.

But none of that expresses what really matters. It's not just a matter of how big Alaska is or how few people it contains. It's not an intellectual conception at all. None of that crosses your mind when you see a chunk of ice the size of a building fall from a glacier and send up a huge splash and wave surging outward, or when you feel a wave lift your sea kayak from the fall of a breaching humpback whale. Or when you hike for a couple of days to stand on top of a mountain, and from there see more mountaintops, layered off as far as the horizon, in unnamed, seemingly infinite multiplicity. A realization of what Alaska means can also come in a simple moment. It can come at the end of a long day driving an Interior Alaska highway, as your car climbs into yet another mountain range, the sun still hanging high in what should be night, storm systems arranged before you across the landscape, when you realize that you haven't seen another car in an hour. Or standing on an Arctic Ocean beach, it can happen when you look around at the sea of empty tundra behind you, the sea of green water before you, and your own place on what seems to be the edge of the world. Or you might simply be sitting on the sun-warmed rocks of a beach in Southeast or Southcentral Alaska when you discover that you're occupying only one of many worlds—a world of intermediate size, lying in magnitude between the tiny tide-pool universes of life all around you and the larger world seen by an eagle gliding through the air high above.

What's the soul alchemy of such a moment? I suppose it's different for each person, but for me it has something to do with realizing my actual size in the world, how I fit in, what it means to be just another medium-sized mammal, no longer armed with the illusions supplied by civilization. On returning to the city from the wilderness, there's a re-entry process, like walking from a vivid movie to the mundane, gray street outside—it's the movie that seems more real. For a while, it's hard to take human institutions seriously after you've been deep into Alaska.

Some people never do step back across that boundary. They live their lives out in the wilderness, away from people. Others compromise, living in Alaskan cities and walking out into the mountains when they can, the rest of the time just maintaining a prickly notion of their own independence. But anyone with the courage to come to Alaska—and the time to let the place sink in—can make the same discovery. You don't have to be an outdoors enthusiast or a young person. You only have to be open to wonder and able to slow down long enough to see it. Then, in a quiet moment when you least expect it, things may suddenly seem very clear and all that you left behind oddly irrelevant.

How you find your way back to where you started is your affair.

1 Natural History: Rough Drafts & Erasures

THE SURGING ICE

In 1986, Hubbard Glacier, north of Yakutat, suddenly decided to surge forward, cutting Russell Fjord off from the rest of the Pacific Ocean. A group of warm-hearted but ill-advised wildlife lovers set out to save the marine mammals that had been trapped behind the glacier. Catching a dolphin from an inflatable boat isn't that easy—they didn't accomplish much, but they provided a lot of entertainment for the locals. Then the water burst through the dam of ice and the lake became a fjord again, releasing the animals anyway. In 2002 it happened again (no rescue this time). Ships were warned away as the 70-square-mile lake, having risen 61 feet above sea level, quickly drained through a 300-foot-wide channel with a whoosh.

Bering Glacier, the largest in North America (about 30×145 miles in area), can't decide which way to go. Surging and retreating on a 20-year cycle, it reversed course in 1995 after bulldozing a wetland migratory bird stopover, and speedily contracted back up toward the mountains. Yanert Glacier surged 100 yards a day in 2000 after moving 100 yards a year since 1942. The next year Tokositna Glacier started galloping after 50 years of quiet. In 1937, surging Black Rapids glacier almost ate the Richardson Highway. In Prince William Sound, Meares Glacier has plowed through old-growth forest. On the other hand, some glaciers are so stable they gather a layer of dirt where trees and brush grow to maturity. When Malspina Glacier retreated, the trees on its back toppled. And on a larger scale, all the land of Glacier Bay—mountains, forests, sea floor—is rising 1½ inches a year as it rebounds from the weight of melted glaciers that 100 years ago were a mile thick and 65 miles longer than they are today.

Yet these new and erased lands are just small corrections around the margins compared to all the earth has done in setting down, wiping out, and rewriting the natural history of Alaska. In the last Ice Age, 15,000 years ago, much of what is Alaska today was one huge glacier. Looking up at the tops of granite mountains in Southeast Alaska, especially in the Lynn Canal, you can see a sort of high-water mark—the highest point to which the glaciers came in the Ice Age. Even looking from the deck of a boat, thousands of feet below the upper reaches of the mountains, you can see that many mountain shoulders were rounded by

the passage of ice, and thus are much smoother than the sharp, craggy peaks just above, which stuck out of that incredible sheet of ice.

Some 7-year-old children worry about the bogeyman or being caught in a house fire. When I was that age, living with my family in Juneau, I was worried about glacier ice. I had learned how Gastineau Channel was formed, I had seen Mendenhall Glacier, and I had heard how it was really a river of ice, advancing and retreating. I came to fear that while I slept another Ice Age would come and grind away the city of Juneau.

It's possible that a glacier *could* get Juneau—the city fronts on the huge Juneau Ice Field—but there would be at least a few centuries' warning before it hit. Glaciers are essentially just snow that doesn't get a chance to melt. The snow accumulates at higher elevations until it gets deep enough to compress into ice and starts oozing down the mountainside. When the ice reaches the ocean, or before, the melt and calving of icebergs at the leading edge attains a point of equilibrium with the snow that's still being added at the top. The glacier stops advancing, becoming a true river of ice, moving a snowflake from the top of the mountain to the bottom in a few hundred years. When conditions change—more snow or colder long-term weather, for example—the glacier gets bigger; which is called "advancing"; when there is less snow and warmer weather, the glacier gets smaller, which is known as "retreating." Sometimes, something strange will happen under the glacier and it will surge. Bering Glacier started to float on a cushion of water, and Yanert Glacier slid on a cushion of mud. But most of the time, the advance or retreat is measured in inches or feet a year.

It took some time to figure out how glaciers work. The living glaciers of Alaska, like living fossils from the last Ice Age, helped show the way. In the 1830s, scientists in Switzerland found huge rocks (now called glacial erratics) that appeared to have moved miles from where they had once been a part of similar bedrock. Scientists theorized that ancient glaciers shaping the Alps must have moved the rocks. **John Muir,** the famous writer and naturalist, maintained in the 1870s that the granite mountains of Yosemite National Park had been rounded and polished by the passing of glaciers that melted long ago (he was only partly right). He traveled to Alaska to prove it. Here, glaciers were still carving the land—they had never finished melting at the end of the last glacial period—and Muir could see shapes like those at Yosemite in the act of being created. Glacier Bay, which Muir "discovered" when guided there by his Alaska Native friends, was a glacial work in progress, as it still is today.

When you visit, you can see for yourself how the heavy blue ice and white snow are streaked with black rock and dust that were obviously gouged from mountains and left in hills at the faces and along the flanks of the glaciers, in debris piles called moraines. At Exit Glacier, in Kenai Fjords National Park, you can stand on a moraine that wraps the leading edge of the glacier like a scarf, and feel the cold streaming off spires of clicking ice—like standing in front of a freezer with the door open. Find another hill like that, no matter where it is, and you can be pretty sure a glacier once came that way. Likewise, you can see today's glaciers scooping out valleys in the mountains.

Today, Alaska's 100,000 glaciers cover about 5% of its landmass, mostly on the southern coast. There are no glaciers in the Arctic—the climate is too dry to produce enough snow. The northernmost large glaciers are in the Alaska Range, such as those carving great chasms in the side of Mount McKinley. At that height, the mountain creates its own weather, wringing moisture out of the atmosphere and feeding its glaciers. The Kahiltna Glacier flows 45 miles from the mountain,

going 15,000 feet downhill over its course. The Ruth Glacier has dug a canyon twice as deep as the Grand Canyon, half filled with mile-deep ice. The glaciers of the 50 ice ages that have covered North America in the last 2.5 million years are the most likely explanation for the fjords and valleys the appear all over Alaska. It's still not known exactly why glacial periods come and go. The best theory to date holds that the wobbles and imperfections in the earth's spin and orbit around the sun alter energy flow into the global ecosystem, which in turn changes the balance of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide traps heat on the earth. The earth is warming today in time with its normal cycles of cold and warm, but the warmth may also be accelerated by human release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels. Those effects are felt more strongly in the Arctic than anywhere else on earth. Forests are moving north, wetlands are drying, sea ice is thinning and withdrawing, and permanently frozen ground is warming. Glaciers are shrinking. I've written a book on this subject, *The Whale and the Supercomputer; Climate Change Comes to the North,* due to be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in April, 2004.

THE TREMBLING EARTH

Despite my early glacier phobia, I never had a similar fear of earthquakes. Living in Anchorage, I'd been through enough of them that, as early as I can remember, I generally didn't bother to get out of bed when they hit. Alaska has an average of 13 earthquakes a day, or 11% of all the earthquakes in the world, including three of the six largest ever recorded. On November 3, 2002, Alaska felt the world's largest earthquake of the year and one of the largest ever in the United States. My car rocked as I drove in Anchorage and waves slopped across the bayous of Louisiana. No one died and few people were injured because the quake occurred in such a sparsely populated area, the region between Anchorage and Fairbanks in the Alaska Range east of Mount McKinley. A 140-mile-long crack appeared right across the middle of Alaska, running over mountains and through glaciers. The land on each side moved laterally as much as 22 feet and vertically up to 6 feet. The Glenn Highway section known as the Tok Cut-off, between Glennallen to Tok, broke into many deep cracks. A tractor-trailer fell into one of them. Where the Interior highways crossed the big fault-line crack, lanes no longer line up; now the road jogs where it used to be straight.

It's all part of living in a place that isn't quite done yet. Any part of Alaska could have an earthquake, but the Pacific Rim from Southcentral Alaska to the Aleutians is the shakiest. This is where Alaska is still under construction. The very rocks that make up the state are something of an ad hoc conglomeration, still in the process of being assembled. The floor of the Pacific Ocean is moving north, and as it moves, it carries islands and mountains with it. When they hit the Alaska plate, these pieces of land, called **terranes,** dock like ships arriving, but slowly—an island moving an inch a year takes a long time to travel thousands of miles. Geologists studying rocks near Mount McKinley have found a terrane that used to be tropical islands. In Kenai Fjords National Park, fossils have turned up that are otherwise found only in Afghanistan and China. The slowly moving crust of the earth brought them here on a terrane that makes up a large part of the south coast of Alaska.

The earth's crust is paper thin compared to the globe's forces, and, like paper, it folds where the two edges meet. Alaska's coast is bending down; and farther inshore, where McKinley stands, it is bowing up. At Kenai Fjords National Park you can see steep little rock islands filled with birds: they are old mountaintops,

shrinking down into the earth. The monolith of McKinley is a brand new one growing higher.

Living in such an unsettled land is a matter of more than abstract interest. The Mount Spurr volcano, which erupted most recently in 1992, turned day to night in Anchorage, dropping a blanket of ash all over the region. More than 80 volcanoes have been active in Alaska in the last 200 years. Earthquakes between 7 and 8 on the Richter scale—larger than the 1994 Los Angeles quake—occur once a year on average, and huge quakes over 8 averaged every 13 years over the last century. The worst of the quakes, on March 27, 1964, was the strongest ever to hit North America. It ranked 9.2 on the Richter scale, lowering an entire region of the state some 10 feet and moving it even farther laterally. No other earthquake has ever moved so much land.

The earthquake destroyed much of Anchorage and several smaller towns, and killed about 131 people, mostly in sea waves created by underwater landslides. In Valdez, the waterfront was swept clean of people. In the Prince William Sound village of Chenega, built on a hill along the water, people started running for higher ground when the wave came. About half made it. But the earthquake could have been much worse. It occurred in the early evening, on Good Friday, when most public buildings were empty. An elementary school in Anchorage that broke in half and fell into a hole had no one inside at the time.

But even that huge earthquake wasn't an unusual occurrence, at least in the earth's terms. Geologists believe the same Alaska coast sank 6 feet in an earthquake in the year 1090.

THE FROZEN TUNDRA

The northern Interior and Arctic parts of the state are less susceptible to earthquakes and, since they receive little precipitation, they don't have glaciers, either. But there's still a sense of living on a land that's not permanent, since most of northern Alaska is solid only by virtue of being frozen. When it thaws, it turns to mush. The phenomenon is caused by **permafrost,** a layer of earth a little below the surface that never thaws—or at least, you'd better hope it doesn't. Buildings erected on permafrost without some mechanism for dispersing their own heat—pilings, a gravel pad, or even refrigerator coils—thaw the ground below and sink into a self-made quicksand. You occasionally run across such structures. There's one in Dawson City, Yukon Territory, still left from the gold rush, which leans at an alarming angle with thresholds and lower tiers of siding disappearing into the ground.

Building sewer and water systems in such conditions is a challenge still unmet in much of Alaska's Bush, where village toilets are often "honey buckets" and the septic systems are sewage lagoons on the edge of town where the buckets are dumped. Disease caused by the unsanitary conditions sweeps the villages as if rural Alaska were a Third World country. Large state and federal appropriations are resolving the problem one village at a time, but years of work are left.

Permafrost makes the land do other strange things. On a steep slope, the thawed earth on top of the ice can begin to slowly slide downhill like a blanket sliding off the side of a bed, setting the trees at crazy angles. These groves of black spruce—the only conifer that grows on this kind of ground—are called drunken forests, and you can see them in Denali National Park and elsewhere in the Interior. Permafrost can also create weird ground, with shaky tussocks the size of basketballs that sit a foot or two apart on a wet, muddy flat. From a distance it looks smooth, but walking on real basketballs might be easier.

The Arctic and much of the Interior are a swampy desert. Annual precipitation measured in Barrow is the same as in Las Vegas. Most of the time, the tundra is frozen in white; snow blows around, but not much falls. It melts in the summer, but it can't sink into the ground, which remains frozen. Liquid water on top of the permafrost layer creates huge, shallow ponds. Alaska is a land of 10 million lakes, with 3 million larger than 20 acres. Birds arrive to feed and paddle around those circles and polygons of deep green and sky blue. Flying over the Arctic in a small plane is disorienting, for little pattern emerges from the flat green tundra and the irregularly shaped patches of water that stretch as far as the eye can see. Pilots can find their way by following landmarks like tractor tracks etched into the tundra. Although few and far between, the tracks remain clearly delineated for decades after they're made, appearing as narrow, parallel ponds reaching from one horizon to the other.

Sea ice is the frozen ocean that extends from northern Alaska to the other side of the world. For a few months of summer it pulls away from the shore. Then, in September or October, icebergs float in toward land, cemented by new ice forming along the beach. But even when the ice covers the whole ocean it still moves under the immense pressure of wind and current. The clash creates towering pressure ridges—piles of broken ice that look like small mountain ranges and are about as difficult to cross. At its extreme, in March, the ice normally extends all the way south to the Pribilof Islands. Then it is possible to drive a dog team across the Bering Sea to Siberia.

The National Weather Service keeps track of the ice pack and issues maps and predictions you can find on the Internet (www.arh.noaa.gov). Eskimo hunters traveling on the ice by snow machine need this information, as do crab fishermen who like to tempt the south-moving edge in the fall, and shippers looking for the right moment in the summer to venture north with barges of fuel and other supplies for the coast of the Arctic Ocean. There is barely time in the summer to get there and back before the ice closes in again in the fall.

The land of the Arctic and Interior are relatively barren biologically compared with the southern coastal areas of the state. Polar bears wander the Arctic ice pack, but they, like the Eskimos, feed more on marine mammals than on anything found on the shore. A 1,200-pound adult polar bear can make a meal of a walrus, and they're expert at hunting seal. The Inupiat diet includes those foods, plus polar bear and bowhead whale, which the they still hunt from small open boats. The people of this region also eat fish and waterfowl from the streams and lakes, as well as caribou that graze the tundra. In the summer, herds of caribou in the tens of thousands come north to their Arctic calving grounds. I was fortunate enough to spend much of the last 2 years with Inupiat people in Barrow, and to be present on their whale hunts.

In Barrow, the sun doesn't rise for more than 65 days in the winter. In February, the average daily high temperature is –12°F (–24 °C), and the average low is –24°F (–31°C). The Inupiat people learned to survive in this climate for millennia, but life was short and terribly hard. Today they've made some sensible allowances while holding onto many cultural traditions. For example, Ipalook Elementary School, in Barrow, has wide, light hallways and a large indoor playground.

THE RAINFOREST

By comparison, southern coastal Alaska is warm and biologically rich. Temperate rainforest ranges up the coast from Southeast Alaska into Prince William Sound, with bears, deer, moose, wolves, and even big cats living among the massive western hemlock, Sitka spruce, and cedar. This old-growth forest, too wet to burn in

forest fires, is the last vestige of the virgin, primeval woods that seemed so limitless to the first white settlers who arrived on the east coast of the continent in the 17th century. The trees grow on and on, sometimes rising more than 200 feet high, with diameters of 10 feet, and falling only after hundreds or even 1,000 years. When they fall, the trees rot on the damp moss of the forest floor and return to soil to feed more trees, which grow in rows upon their nursery trunks.

Here at least, Alaska *does* seem permanent. That sense helps explain why logging the rainforest is so controversial. Just one of these trees contains thousands of dollars' worth of wood, a prize that drives logging as voraciously as the federal government, which owns most of the coastal forest, may choose to allow. Already, vast Southeast lands owned by Alaska Native corporations have been stripped of their old trees.

The rivers of the great coastal forests bring home runs of big **salmon** that clog the rivers in spawning season like a busy sidewalk at rush hour. The fish spawn only once, returning by a precisely tuned sense of smell to the streams where they were hatched as many as 7 years before. When the fertilized eggs have been left in the stream gravel, the fish conveniently die on the beach, making a smorgasbord for bears and other forest animals. The huge **Kodiak brown bear,** topping 1,000 pounds, owes everything to the millions of salmon that return to Kodiak Island each summer. By comparison, the grizzly bears of the Interior—the same species as browns, but living on grass, berries, and an occasional ground squirrel—are mere midgets, their weight counted in the hundreds of pounds. Forest-dwelling black bears grow to only a few hundred pounds.

TAIGA & FIRE

Rainforest covers only a small fraction of Alaska. In fact, only a third of Alaska is forested at all, and most of the forests are the boreal forests that cover the central part of the state, behind the rain shadow of coastal mountains that intercept moist clouds off the oceans. Ranging from the Kenai Peninsula, south of Anchorage, to the Brooks Range, where the Arctic begins, you'll find **taiga**—a moist, sub-arctic forest of smaller, slower-growing, hardier trees that leave plenty of open sky between their branches. In well-drained areas, on hillsides, and on southern land (which is less susceptible to permafrost), the boreal forest is a lovely, broadly spaced combination of straight, proud white spruce and pale, spectral paper birch. Along the rivers, cottonwoods grow, with deep-grained bark and branches that spread in an oaklike matrix—if they could speak, it would be as wise old men. Where it's wet and swampy, over more and more land as you go north, all that will grow are low, brushy willow and the glum black spruce, which struggles to become a gnarled stick a mere 3 inches thick in 100 years, if it doesn't burn first. As the elevation grows, the spruce shrink, turning into weirdly bent, ancient shrubs just before the tree line and the open alpine tundra.

Forest fires tear through as much as a million acres of Alaska's boreal forest each summer. In most cases, forest managers do no more than note the occurrence on a map. There's little commercially valuable timber in these thin stands, and, anyway, it isn't possible to halt the process of nature's self-immolation over the broad expanse of Alaska. The boreal forest regenerates through fire—it was made to burn. The wildlife that lives and eats in these woods needs new growth from the burns as well as the shelter of older trees. When the forest is healthiest and most productive, streaks and patches of light-green new brush break up the dark green of the spruce in an ever-changing succession.This is the land of the **moose.**

THE LIGHT & THE DARKNESS

There's no escaping the stress of winter in Alaska—not for moose or people—and there's no shield from the exhilaration of the summer. In summer it never really gets dark at night. In Fairbanks in June, the sun sets in the north around midnight, but it doesn't go down far enough for real darkness to settle, instead rising again 2 hours later. It's always light enough to keep hiking or fishing, and, in clear weather, always light enough to read by. You may not see the stars from early May until sometime in August (the climate chart in chapter 2 gives seasonal daylight for various towns). Visitors have trouble getting used to it: Falling asleep in broad daylight is hard. Alaskans deal with it by staying up late and being active outdoors.

In the winter, on the other hand, you forget what the sun looks like. Kids go to school in the dark and come home in the dark. The sun rises in the middle of the morning and sets after lunch. At high noon in December, the sun hangs just above the southern horizon with a weak, orange light—a constant sunset. Animals and people go into hibernation.

As you go north, the changes in the length of the days throughout the year get larger. In Ketchikan, on the summer solstice (the longest day of the year), direct sunlight lasts 17 hours, 28 minutes; in Fairbanks, 21 hours, 48 minutes; and in Barrow, the longest day is more than 2 months. In contrast, in Seattle the longest day is 16 hours, and in Los Angeles 14 hours, 26 minutes. On the equator, days are always the same length: 12 hours. At the North and South poles, the sun is up half the year and down the other half.

In the North, on a long, summer evening, you can almost feel the planet leaning toward the sun. Come feel it for yourself.

2 Politics & History: Living a Frontier Myth

The occupations of prospector, trapper, and homesteader—rugged individualists relying only on themselves in a limitless land—would dominate Alaska's economy if the state's image of itself were accurate. Alaskans talk a lot about the Alaskan spirit of independence, yearn for freedom from government, and declare that people from "Outside" just don't understand Alaskans when they insist on locking up Alaska's lands in parks and wilderness status. The bumper sticker says, simply, "We don't give a damn how they do it Outside." A state full of self-reliant frontiersmen can't be tied down and deterred from their manifest destiny by a bunch of Washington bureaucrats. At the extreme, there has even been a movement to declare independence as a separate nation so Alaskans can extend the frontier, extracting its natural resources unfettered by bunny-hugging Easterners.

But just because you wear a cowboy hat doesn't mean you know how to ride a horse. In Las Vegas you find a lot more hats than horsemen, and Alaska is full of self-reliant pioneers who spend rush hour in traffic jams and worry more about urban drug dealing and air pollution than where to catch their next meal or dig the mother lode. As for self-reliance and independence from government, Alaska has the highest per capita state spending of any state in the nation, with no state income or sales taxes and an annual payment of about $1,500 a year to every man, woman, and child just for living here. The state government provides retirement homes; it owns various businesses, including a dairy, a railroad, and a subsidized mortgage lender; it has built schools in the smallest communities; it operates a state ferry system and a radio and television network; and it owns nearly a third of the landmass of Alaska. And although the oil production that

funds state government has been in decline in recent years, forcing the legislature to dig into savings to balance its books, the independent, self-reliant citizens have successfully resisted having to pay any taxes.

That conflict between perception and reality grows out of the story of a century of development of Alaska. The state is a great storehouse of minerals, oil, timber, and fish. A lot of wealth has been extracted, and many people have gotten rich. But it has always been because the federal government let them do it. Every acre of Alaska belonged to the U.S. government from the day Secretary of State William Seward bought Alaska from Russia in 1867. Since then, the frontier has never been broader than Uncle Sam made it.

Yet the whole concept of ownership didn't fit Alaska well from the first. Did the Russians really own what they sold? Alaska Natives didn't think so. They'd been living on this land for more than 100 centuries, and at the time of the purchase, most had never seen a white face. How could Russia hold title to land that no Russian had so much as explored? As Americans flooded into Alaska to search for gold at the turn of the 20th century, this conflict became obvious. Alaska Natives, never conquered by war or treaty, began their legal and political fight to recover their land—a fight they would eventually win.

The concept of ownership has changed in other ways, too. For the first 100 years after the United States bought Alaska, it maintained the vast majority of the territory as "public domain," with federal land and its mineral resources free for the taking as in the Old West of frontier lore. Each piece of Alaska belonged to everyone until someone showed up to lay private claim. Today, amid deep conflict over whether to develop such areas as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (known as ANWR), federal control stands out far more clearly than it did during the gold rush, when the land's wealth was free to anyone with strength enough to take it. Alaskans who want to keep receiving the good things that a rich state government brings equate the frontier spirit of the past with their own financial well-being, whether that means working at a mining claim or at a desk in a glass office tower. But other Americans feel they own Alaska, too, and they don't necessarily believe in exploiting its resource treasure. They may want the frontier to stay alive in another sense—unconquered and still wild.

White colonization of the territory came in boom-and-bust waves of migrants arriving with the goal of making a quick buck and then clearing out—without worrying about the people who already lived there. Although the gold rush pioneers are celebrated today, the Klondike rush of 1898 that opened up and populated the territory was motivated by greed and was a mass importer of crime, inhumanity, and, for the Native people, terrible epidemics of new diseases that killed off whole villages. Like the Russians 150 years before, who had made slaves of the Natives, the new white population behaved as if the indigenous people were less than human. Until Franklin Roosevelt became president, federal policy was to suppress Alaska Native cultures. Protestant missionaries had the authority of law to forbid Native people from telling their old stories or even speaking their own languages. Segregation ended only after World War II. Meanwhile, the salmon that fed the people of the territory were overfished by a powerful, outside-owned canning industry with friends in Washington, D.C. Their abuses destroyed salmon runs. Formerly rich Native villages faced famine when their primary food source was taken away.

It was only with World War II, and the Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands, that Alaska developed an industry that was not based on exploitation of natural resources: the military industry. The war brought the construction of the

territory's first road to the outside world, the Alaska Highway. After the war, military activity dropped off, but only briefly. By the late 1940s, Alaska was on the front line of the Cold War. Huge Air Force and Army bases were built and remote radar stations were installed to detect and repel Soviet bombers and missiles. To this day, the federal government remains a key industry whose removal would deal the economy a grievous blow.

The fight for Alaska statehood also began after World War II. Alaskans argued that they needed local, independent control of natural resources, pointing to the example of overfishing in the federally managed salmon industry. Opponents said that Alaska would never be able to support itself, would always require large subsidies from the federal government, and therefore should not be a state. But the advocates pointed out that Alaska's lack of self-sufficiency came about because its citizens did not control the resources—Alaska was a colony, with decisions and profits taken away by the mother country. If Alaskans could control their own land, they could use the resources to fund government. The discovery of oil on the Swanson River on the Kenai Peninsula in 1957 helped win that argument. Here was real money that could fund a state government. In 1959, Alaska finally became the 49th state. Along with the rights of entering the Union, Alaska received a dowry—an endowment of land to develop and pay for future government. The Statehood Act gave the new state the right to select 103 million acres from a total landmass of 365 million acres. Indeed, that land does pay for state government in Alaska, in the form of oil royalties and taxes—but, to this day, the federal government still spends a lot more in Alaska than it receives.

Oil revenues supported the new state as it began to extend services to the vast, undeveloped expanse of Alaska. Anchorage boomed in the 1960s in a period of buoyant optimism. Leaders believed that the age-old problems of the wide-open frontier—poverty, lack of basic services, impenetrable remoteness—would succumb to the new government and new money, while the land would remain wide open. The pace of change redoubled in 1968 with the discovery of the largest oil field in North America at Prudhoe Bay, on land that had been a wise state selection in the federal land-grant entitlement. The state government received as much money in a single oil lease sale auction as it had spent in total for the previous 6 years. This was going to be the boom of all booms.

The oil bonanza on the North Slope would change Alaska more than any other event since the gold rush. Once, opening the frontier meant letting a few prospectors scratch the dirt in search of a poke of gold. But getting this immense pool of oil to the markets from one of the most remote spots on the globe would require allowing the world's largest companies to build a pipeline across Alaska that, when completed, could credibly claim to be the largest privately financed construction project in world history. With the stakes suddenly so much higher, it came time to figure out exactly who owned which parts of Alaska. The land couldn't just be public domain any longer.

That division wouldn't be easy. Much of the state had never even been mapped, much less surveyed, and there were some large outstanding claims that had to be settled. Alaska Natives, who had lost land, culture, and health in 2 centuries of white invasion, finally saw their luck start to turn. It wouldn't be possible to resolve the land issues surrounding the pipeline until their claims to land and compensation were answered. Native leaders cannily used that leverage to assure that they got what they wanted.

In the early 1970s, America had a new awareness of the way its first people had been treated in the settlement of the West. When white frontiers expanded, Native traditional homelands were stolen. In Alaska, with the powerful lure of all that oil providing the impetus, Native people were able to insist on a fairer resolution. In 1971, with the support of white Alaskans, the oil companies, and Pres. Richard Nixon, who threatened to veto any settlement that Natives did not support, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, called ANCSA. The act transferred 44 million acres of land and $962.5 million to corporations whose shareholders were all the Native people of Alaska. The new Native corporations would be able to exploit their own land for their shareholders' profit. In later legislation, Natives also won guaranteed subsistence hunting and fishing rights on federal land. Some Natives complained that they'd received only an eighth of the land they had owned before white contact, but it was still by far the richest settlement any of the world's indigenous people had received at that time. Today, the Native corporations are Alaska's largest and most powerful homegrown businesses.

It was a political deal on a grand scale. It's unlikely that Natives would have gotten their land at all if whites hadn't had such a desire to get at the oil and hadn't had such a need for Native support in the endeavor. Nor could the pipeline have overcome environmental challenges without the Natives' dropping their objections. Even with Native support in place, legislation authorizing the pipeline passed the U.S. Senate by only one vote, cast by Vice Pres. Spiro Agnew.

But there were other side effects of the deal that white Alaskans didn't like so much. The state still hadn't received a large portion of its land entitlement, and now the Native corporations had a right to select the land they wanted. There still remained the question of who would get what. At this time Congress, influenced by a strong new environmental movement, wanted to maintain some of the wild lands as national parks and wilderness rather than giving them away to the Alaskans. That issue wasn't settled until 1980, when the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act passed, setting aside an additional 106 million acres for conservation, an area larger than California. Alaska's frontier-minded population screamed bloody murder over "the lockup of Alaska," but the act was only the last, tangible step in a process started by big oil and the need it created to draw lines on the map, tying up the frontier.

When construction of the $9 billion pipeline finally got underway in 1974, the huge influx of new residents chasing the high-paying jobs put any previous gold rush to shame. The newcomers were from a different part of the country than previously, too. Alaska had been a predominantly Democratic state, but oil workers from Texas, Oklahoma, and other Bible Belt states helped shift the balance of Alaska's politics, and now it's solidly Republican. In its frontier days, Alaska had a strong Libertarian streak, but now it became more influenced by fundamentalist Christian conservatism. A hippie-filled legislature of the early 1970s had legalized marijuana for home use. Conservatives at the time, who thought the government shouldn't butt into its citizens' private lives, went along with them. After the pipeline, times changed, and Alaska developed tough antidrug laws.

Growth also brought urban problems. As the pipeline construction boom waned in 1977, the boomtown atmosphere of gambling and street prostitution disappeared with it, but other big-city problems remained. No longer could residents of Anchorage and Fairbanks go to bed without locking their doors. Both cities were declared "nonattainment" areas by the Environmental Protection

Agency because of air pollution near the ground in cold winter weather, when people leave their cars running during the day to keep them from freezing.

But the pipeline seemed to provide limitless wealth to solve these problems. For fear that too much money would be wasted, the voters altered the state constitution to bank a large portion of the new riches. The new Permanent Fund would be off-limits to the politicians in Juneau, with half the annual earnings paid out to citizens as dividends. The fund now contains more than $20 billion in savings and has become one of the largest sectors of the economy simply by virtue of paying out $1 billion a year in dividends to everyone who lives at least a year in the state. All major state taxes on individuals were canceled at that time, and people got used to receiving everything free from the government.

Then, in 1985, oil prices dropped, deflating the overextended economy. Housing prices crashed and thousands of people simply walked away from their mortgages. All but a few of the banks in the state went broke. Condominiums that had sold for $100,000 went for $20,000 or less a year later. It was the bust that always goes with the boom, but it still came as a shock to many. The spending associated with the clean-up of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989 restarted the economy, which continued on an even keel for a decade after, but the wealth of the earlier oil years never returned.

Meanwhile, the oil from Prudhoe Bay started running out. Oil revenues, an irreplaceable 85% of the state budget, started an inexorable downward trend in the early 1990s. The oil companies downsized. Without another boom on the horizon, the question became how to avoid, or at least soften, the next bust. At this writing, that question remains unanswered, even as state savings run out. Each year the legislature has deadlocked as some legislators called for taxes or cuts to the Permanent Fund Dividend and others, seeing that as political suicide, hope for a miracle. Meanwhile, government spending for visitor facilities such as state parks has been cut every year. The disadvantages of individualism now seem apparent. Some suggest that Alaskans have lost their capacity for collective sacrifice. More ask when the next big project will get the good times rolling again, such as a natural gas pipeline from the North Slope to middle America or oil development in ANWR. Economic barriers and resistance in Congress make either possibility increasingly remote.

Culture moves slower than politics or economics, and Alaskans still see themselves as gold rush prospectors or wildcat oil drillers, adventuring in an open land and striking it rich by their own devices. Even as the economy blends ever more smoothly into the American corporate landscape, Alaskans' myth of themselves remains strong. Today, the state's future is as little in its own hands as it has ever been. Big petroleum projects will be decided in Congress and distant corporate boardrooms, not here. Ultimately, an economy based on exploiting natural resources is anything but independent.

3 The People: Three Ways to Win an Argument in Alaska

NUMBER ONE: WAIT UNTIL SPRING TO START THE ARGUMENT

Setting: a small town in Alaska in March. Each time it snows, you have to throw shovels of it higher over your head to dig out. The air in the house is stale and the view out the window is black, white, and gray. Everyone's going nuts with winter. It's time for a good political ruckus. No one can predict exactly what will set it off—it could just be an ill-considered letter to the editor in the local newspaper, or it could be something juicier, like a controversial development proposal.

At some point, when the cabin fever gets bad enough, it almost doesn't matter what sparks the inferno. Alaskans can generate outrage about almost anything, with a ritual of charges and countercharges, conspiracy theories, and impassioned public testimony.

It's particularly amusing when some outsider is involved, thinking he's at the town council meeting in a normal political process to get some project approved, only to wind up on the receiving end of a public hearing from hell. I'll never forget a sorry businessman who was trying to lease some land from the town of Homer. He endured hours of angry public testimony one night. He was sweating, the only person in the packed city hall meeting room wearing a tie, surrounded by flannel shirts, blue jeans, and angry faces. Finally, he stood up at his chair and, in a plaintive tone of frustration near tears, declared, "You're not very professional as a community!" For once, no one could disagree.

He gave up. He didn't know that if he had only waited a couple of months, the opposition would dry up when the salmon started running. Then most of the city council meetings are canceled, and the rest are brief and sparsely attended. If anything really important comes up, the council is smart enough to postpone it till fall. In the summer, Alaskans have more important things to attend to than government.

The sun shines deep into the night, so you can catch fish and tourists instead of sitting inside. It's the season when the money is made. The streets are full of new people, like a bird rookery refreshed by migrants. Everyone stays awake late pounding nails, playing softball, and fly-casting for reds. Office workers in Anchorage depart straight from work for a 3-hour drive down to the Kenai Peninsula, fish through the night, catch a quick nap in the car in the wee hours, and make it to work on time the next morning, with fish stories to share. Sleep is expendable—you don't seem to need it that much when the sky is light all night.

In the Native villages of the Bush, everyone has gone to fish camp. Families load everything in an aluminum riverboat and leave town, headed upriver. On the banks and beaches, they set up wall tents and spruce-log fish-drying racks, maybe a basketball hoop and campfire, too. Extended families work as a unit. Men gather in the salmon and the women gut them with a few lightning strokes of a knife and hang them to dry on the racks. Children run around in a countryside paradise, watched by whatever adults are near.

Suddenly, August comes. For the first time in months, you can see the stars. It comes as a shock the first time you have to use your car headlights. The mood gets even more frantic. There's never enough time in the summer to do everything that needs to get done. Construction crews can count the days now till snow and cold will shut them down. Anything that's not done now won't be done until next May. Labor Day approaches as fast as 5pm on a busy business day.

As September turns to October, the last tourists are gone, and T-shirt shops are closed for the season. The commercial fishing boats are tied up back in the harbor and the fishermen prepare for vacation. Cannery workers are already back at college. For the first time in months, people can slow down long enough to look at each other and remember where they left off in the spring. It's time to catch up on sleep, make big decisions. The hills of birch turn bright yellow, the tundra goes brick red, the sky turns gray, and there's the smell of wood smoke in the air. And then, one day, it starts to snow.

It's not the velvet darkness of midwinter that gets you. December is bearable, even if the sun rises after the kids get to school, barely cruises along the horizon, and sinks before they start for home. Nowhere is Christmas more real than in

Alaska, where carolers sing with cheeks tingling from the cold. January isn't so hard. You're still excited about the skiing. The phone rings in the middle of the night—it's a friend telling you to put on your boots and go outside to see the northern lights. February is a bit harder to take, but most towns have a winter carnival to divert your attention from the cold.

March is when bizarre things start to happen. People are just holding on for the end of winter and you never know what will set them off. This is when you hunker down and lay low, watch what you say, bite your tongue when your spouse lets hang a comment you'd like to jump on like a coho hitting fresh bait. Hold on—just until the icicles start to melt, the mud shows around the snowbanks, and the cycle starts fresh.

NUMBER TWO: BE HERE FIRST

There's a simple and effective way to win an argument in Alaska—state how long you've lived here. If it's longer than your adversary, he'll find it difficult to put up a fight. This is why, when speaking in public, people will often begin their remarks by stating how many years they've been in Alaska. It's a badge of authenticity and status in a place with a young, transient population that's

The Iditarod

Few things fire up Alaska's residents like the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, a 1,000-mile run from Anchorage to Nome that takes place in mid-March. Winners cover the distance in 9 or 10 days, which includes mandatory stopovers of up to 24 hours to rest the dogs. The race is big news—TV anchors speculate on the mushers' strategies at the top of the evening news and school children plot the progress of their favorite teams on maps. When the event hits Nome, the town overflows with visitors kept busy by the many local events and activities that coincide with the race. Even if the first team crosses the finish line at 3am in –30 degree weather, a huge crowd turns out to congratulate the winner.

Some animal-rights activists outside Alaska, currently led by a Miami, Florida–based group called the Sled Dog Action Coalition, oppose the race on the grounds that it's cruel to the dogs, and have organized boycotts against some race sponsors. Several sponsors defected from the race a decade ago. Professional Iditarod mushers insist, however, that the dogs, worth thousands of dollars apiece, receive veterinary care superior to the doctoring that most people get; they say it doesn't make sense to harm animals that can run races for years if well cared for; and they point out that mushers who violate the race's stringent dog care rules are ejected.

If you want to plan your trip to coincide with the race in March, plan well in advance, because the event is extremely popular and hotels (particularly in Nome) fill up quickly. For information, contact the Iditarod Trail Committee (✆ **907/376-5155;** www.iditarod.com). To find out more about the issue of sled dog racing, you can visit websites both for (http://sunhusky.com/Facts) and against (www.helpsleddogs.org, for the Sled Dog Action Coalition site) the practice.

grown fast. No one cares where you came from, or who you were back there, and there's no such thing as class in Alaska—anyone who tries to act superior will quickly find that no one else notices. But if you haven't made it through a few winters, you probably don't know what you're talking about.

It's also traditional—although, sadly, a fading tradition—to treat strangers as friends until they prove otherwise. The smaller the town you visit, the more strongly you'll find that hospitality is still alive. Visitors find it pleasantly disorienting to arrive in a small town and have everyone in the street greet them with a smile. These traditions of hospitality run deep in Alaska's Native people. (Alaskans use the word *Native* to mean all the indigenous peoples of Alaska.) But instead of beginning a conversation by stating how long they've lived here, Natives—who've always been here—try to find a relation with a new person by talking about where their families are from.

Theories differ about how North America was originally populated. The traditional notion is that the first people walked across a land bridge from Asia across the dry Bering Sea around 15,000 years ago, when glacial ice sequestered enough of the earth's water to lower the sea level. The bridge, up to 1,000 miles wide, included the entire west coast of Alaska at its largest size, and lasted longest in the area between Nome and Kotzebue.

But new archaeology and geology throw doubt on that theory, suggesting a migration story that's much more complex. People who know the Arctic know that the land bridge simply wasn't necessary for migration: In the winter you can walk between Siberia and Alaska even today, and the seafaring skills of Alaska's Aleuts and Eskimos would have enabled them to travel back and forth to Asia at any time. Siberian and Alaskan Natives share language, stories, and kin. Perhaps the connection across the north was continuous and followed many routes after northern people learned to sew skin boats and clothing about 15,000 years ago. Certainly, the idea that they walked seems increasingly questionable. Geologists now believe the route south was an impassable sheet of ice during the last glacial period; if migrants did use it, they could only have done so by making a tricky sea journey connecting coastal pockets that remained liquid.

However and whenever the first people arrived, they quickly spread through the Americas, creating cultures of incredible complexity and diversity. Most scientists believe that the migrants who came through Alaska were the ancestors of all the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere, from the Inca to the Algonquin. Those who stayed in Alaska became the Eskimos, who include the Inupiat of the Arctic, the Yupik of the Southwest, and the Alutiiq of the Gulf of Alaska coastline. They also became Indians: the Athabascans of the Interior and the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia. And seafaring people in the Aleutian Chain became the Aleuts, neither Eskimo nor Indian.

The Native groups of Alaska have a lot in common culturally, but before the white invasion they had well-defined boundaries and didn't mix much. They didn't farm, and the only animal they domesticated was the dog—dog teams and boats were the primary means of transportation and commerce. But they generally were not nomadic, and no one in Alaska lived in ice igloos (farther east, in Canada, igloos were used as winter dwellings on the ice pack). On the treeless Arctic coast, houses were built of sod atop supports of whalebone and driftwood; where wood was plentiful, in the rainforests, large and intricately carved houses sheltered entire villages. Typically, a family-connected tribal group would have a winter village and a summer fish camp for gathering and laying up food. Elders guided the community in important decisions. A gifted shaman led the

people in religious matters, relating to the spirits of ancestors, animals, trees, and even the ice that populated their world. Stories passed on through generations explained the universe.

Those oral traditions kept Native cultures alive. Twenty distinct Native languages were spoken. A few elders still speak only their Native language today, and only one language, Eyak, is essentially extinct. The languages break into four major families: Eskimo-Aleut, Athabascan-Eyak-Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian (the last two are primarily Canadian). The Eskimo-Aleut language group includes languages spoken by coastal people from the Arctic Ocean to the Gulf of Alaska, including Inupiaq in the Arctic, Yupik in the Yukon-Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay region, Aleut in the Aleutian Islands, and Alutiiq on the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak, and Prince William Sound. There are 12 Athabascan and Eyak languages in Alaska, and more Outside, including Apache and Navajo. In Southeast Alaska, Tlingit was spoken across most of the Panhandle. Haida was spoken on southern Prince of Wales Island and southward into what's now British Columbia, where Tsimshian also was spoken.

The first arrival of whites was often violent and destructive, spanning a 100-year period that started in the 1740s with the coming of the Russian fur traders, who enslaved the Aleuts, and continuing to the 1840s, when New England whalers first met the Inupiat of the Arctic. There were pitched battles, but disease and nonviolent destruction of oral traditions were more influential. Protestant missionaries, backed by government assimilation policy, drove the old stories and even Native languages underground. Lela Kiana Oman, who has published traditional Inupiat stories to preserve them, told me of her memories of her father secretly telling the ancient tales at night to his children. She was forbidden to speak Inupiaq in school and did not see her first traditional Native dance until age 18.

Oman's work is part of today's Native cultural renaissance. It's not a moment too soon. In some villages, children know more about Beverly Hills, which they see on television, than about their own culture. Some don't share a language with their own grandparents. But schools in many areas have begun requiring Native language classes, or even teach using language immersion techniques. For the Aleut, whose cultural traditions were almost completely wiped out, the process of renewal involves a certain amount of invention. On the other hand, some traditional villages remain, especially deep in the country of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, where Yupik is still the dominant language and most of the food comes from traditional subsistence hunting and gathering, altered only by the use of modern materials and guns.

Alaska Natives are also fighting destruction fueled by alcohol and other substance-abuse problems. Rates of suicide, accidents, and domestic violence are high in the Bush. Statistically, nearly every Alaska Native in prison is there because of alcohol. A sobriety movement is attacking the problem one person at a time. One of its goals is to use traditional Native culture to fill the void of rural despair where alcohol flows in. Politically, a "local option" law provides communities the choice of partial or total alcohol prohibition; it has been successfully used in many towns but remains controversial in others, where repeated local option elections sometimes divide Native and white residents, with whites more often voting against prohibition.

There are social and political tensions between Natives and whites on many levels and over many issues. The Alaskan city and Alaskan village have less in common than do most different nations. Although village Natives come to the

city to shop, get health care, or attend meetings, urban Alaskans have no reason to go to the villages, and most have never made the trip.

The most contentious rural-urban issue concerns allocation of fish and game. Some urban outdoorsmen feel they should have the same rights to hunt and fish that the Natives do, and the state Supreme Court has interpreted Alaska's constitution to say they're correct. But rural Natives have federal law on their side, which overrules the state. A decade of political stalemate over the issue divided Alaskans until, in 2000, the feds finally stepped in and took over fish and game management in the majority of the state to protect Native subsistence. Many Natives were glad to see it happen, as humiliating as the move was for independent-minded Alaskans. Natives feel subsistence hunting and fishing are an integral part of their cultural heritage, far more important than sport hunting and fishing, and should take priority. Darker conflicts exist, too, and it's impossible to discount the charges of racism that Native Alaskans raise in issues as diverse as school funding and public safety.

Alaska Natives have essentially become a minority in their own land. In 1880, Alaska contained 33,000 Natives and 430 whites. By 1900, with the gold rush, the numbers were roughly equal. Since then, whites have generally outnumbered Natives in ever growing ratios. Today there are about 98,000 Alaska Natives—27,000 of whom live in the cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks—out of a total state population of 627,000 people of all races. Consequently, Alaska Natives must learn to walk in two worlds. The North Slope's Inupiat, who hunt the bowhead whale from open boats as their forefathers did, must also know how to negotiate for their take in international diplomatic meetings. And they have to use the levers of government to protect the whale's environment from potential damage by the oil industry. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act created a new class, the corporate Native, responsible for representing rural needs but also obliged to function as an executive for large, far-reaching business concerns.

Non-Natives traveling to the Bush also walk in two worlds, but they may not even know it. In a Native village, a newly met friend will ask you in for a cup of coffee; it can be rude not to accept. Too much eye contact in conversation also can be rude—that's how Native elders look at younger people who owe them respect. If a Native person looks down, speaks slowly, and seems to mumble, that's not disrespect, but the reverse. Fast-talking non-Natives have to make a conscious effort to slow down and leave pauses in conversation, because Natives usually don't jump in or interrupt—they listen, consider, and then respond. Of course, most Native people won't take offense if you speak quickly. They're used to spanning cultures. When I was in a village recently, I looked in confusion at a clock that didn't seem right. "That's Indian time," my Athabascan companion said. Then, pointing to a clock that was working, "White man time is over there."

Urban visitors who miss cultural nuances rarely overlook the apparent poverty of many villages. Out on a remote landscape of windswept tundra, swampy in summer and frozen in winter, they may secretly wonder why Natives endure the hardships of rural Alaskan life when even the most remote villager can see on television how easy it is in Southern California. Save your pity. As Yupik social observer Harold Napoleon has said, "We're poor, all right, but we've got more than most people. Our most important asset is our land and our culture, and we want to protect it come hell or high water."

NUMBER THREE: BE A REAL ALASKAN

Alaska's history books are full of the stories of economic booms, the people who came, what kind of wealth they were after, and how they populated and developed

the land. In a largely empty place, you can make it into the history books just by showing up. But every wave is followed by a trough, the bust that comes after the boom when those who came just for the money go back where they came from. Those are the times when the real Alaskans—those who live here for the love of the place, not only the money—are divided from the rest. The real Alaskans stay; the others leave. It's the perfect way to settle an argument.

The non-Native part of Alaska, 100 years old with the anniversary of the gold rush in 1998, hasn't had time to develop an Alaskan accent. It's a melting pot of the melting pot, with a population made up of odds and ends from all over the United States. Everyone arrives with a clean slate and a chance to reinvent himself or herself. On occasion, that ability to start from scratch has created some embarrassing discoveries, when the past does become relevant. There have been a series of political scandals uncovered by reporters who checked the resumes of well-known politicians, only to find out they had concocted their previous lives out of thin air. One leading legislative candidate's husband found out about his wife's real background from such a news story.

Alaska's population is as mismatched and haphazard as a thrift store clothing rack, but we do have some cultural traditions, or at least accepted ways of thinking: tolerance and equality, hospitality, independence—and a propensity for violence. In the late 1980s in Homer, a gunfight over a horse left a man lying dead on a dirt road. In the newspaper the next week, the editorial called for people not to settle their differences with guns. A couple of letters to the editor shot back, on the theme, "Don't you tell *us* how to settle our differences." Many people believe guns are necessary tools in Alaska. They're also a religion. I have friends who actually exchanged handguns instead of rings when they got married.

The tradition of tolerance of newcomers has made Alaska a destination for oddballs, religious cults, hippies, and people who just can't make it in the mainstream. Perhaps the most interesting of the religious groups that formed its own community is the Old Believers, who in recent decades have built villages of brightly painted gingerbread-style houses around Kachemak Bay, near Homer. Their resistance to convention dates from Peter the Great's reforms to Russian Orthodoxy in the 18th century, which they reject. In Alaska they've found a place where they can live without interference—in fact, they've thrived as fishermen and boat builders. You see them around town, in their 18th-century Russian peasant attire. Until a few years ago, even the girls' high-school basketball team wore long dresses, with their numbers stitched to the bodice.

Nikolaevsk was the first of the Russian Old Believer villages. In the public school there, they don't teach about dinosaurs or men landing on the moon—that's considered heresy. Yet other Old Believers rebelled, convinced that Nikolaevsk was making too many compromises and was bound to lose the next generation to decadent American ways. They broke off and formed another village, farther up the bay, unreachable except by all-terrain vehicle, and adhered to stricter rules there. They, in turn, suffered another schism and another village was formed, farther up the bay, virtually inaccessible and with even stricter rules. The process continues. The fight against assimilation may be hopeless, as children will ultimately do as they please, but it's the Old Believers' own struggle. No one in Homer pushes them to change. No one pays any attention at all, except to buy their fish and their top-quality boats.

After several decades, it looks as if the Old Believers are here to stay. Whether they speak English or not, I'd say they're real Alaskans.

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