



Aptly known as the Last Frontier, Alaska exerts a fascination that attracts visitors from all walks of life. With astonishing diversity, there is truly something for everyone.

Alaska is by far the largest US state at over 570,000 square miles and more shoreline than all other states combined. Home to three million lakes, it also boasts the largest collection of glaciers in North America, and with global warming, it will stay that way.

The breathtaking sights are brooding with a vast array of wildlife. There are more than 400 species of birds, including the majestic bald eagle. The most impressive mammals here include caribou, wolves, red foxes, moose and various bears. With so much shoreline, it's no wonder Alaska is

also extremely rich in sea life: bearded seals, walrus and killer, humpback and beluga whales.

Interestingly much of the territory and its accompanying wildlife are still yet to be explored. People often say that there are no more frontiers to explore, but Alaska proves to be the great exception.

Alaska's Native Cultures

Making up approximately 16% of the state's population, Alaska's native people are divided into 11 individual cultures with 20 different languages. Visiting an Alaska Native village is an educational experience for those interested in understanding a way of life much different from their own. However there must be respect for the Native's privacy; visitors should never treat this untouched way-of-



life as a “tourist attraction”. It is a great opportunity to learn how Natives really live, seeing how they preserve their way of life. Tours may include a Native language lesson, traditional dancing, singing and the chance to buy unique Native art.

Getting Around

Alaska actually has more transportation options than one might imagine. Many people opt for a cruise to make their travel effortless, while others prefer to explore on their own. Renting a car or motor home is a great option and you’ll find that the modern Alaska Highway has been greatly improved compared to past years. There are plenty of accommodations ranging from B&B’s to RV parks.

If driving isn’t your thing, you can always travel via rail. The Alaska Railroad provides service through

470 scenic miles. Regular or private seating is available. The private cars offer larger windows and dome cars with unrestricted landscape views. There’s a good chance of seeing Dall sheep, bear, moose and other wildlife. If you prefer to travel by air, there are many options including jets, floatplanes and helicopters. A fun choice is combining some of these options to maximize your experience.

Exploring Anchorage

As the largest city in Alaska, housing over 40% of the population, Anchorage is a great starting point for travelers. Weather-wise, Anchorage is considered mild by Alaskan standards, but it does still receive rain and snow.

Downtown Anchorage is bustling with unique shops and restaurants. Native crafts such as woven baskets, intricately carved masks and



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jewelry are abundant throughout the shops. To ensure you are purchasing authentic native art, look for the “Silver Hand” emblem. It’s a guarantee the item you purchased was made by an Alaskan native.

From Anchorage you can see the Aleutian, Kenai, Tordrillo, Chugach, Talkeetna and Alaska mountain ranges. Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America, can also be seen on very clear days. A great way to view these mountains is by taking a flight-seeing tour, which is sightseeing from the air. Small helicopters and planes offer amazing views of these mountains, along with glaciers and lakes. Some will even land directly on the glaciers.

Stunning scenery lies along the Seward Highway, just south of Anchorage. A favorite stop is Beluga Point where you can watch beluga whales chasing the salmon that come in with the tide. Killer

whales are sometimes seen here as well. The highway offers numerous stops with a great variety of things to see and do.

If you’re lucky, you may be able to view the Northern Lights, also known as Aurora Borealis. Bright lights ripple and pulse through the sky in a light show like no other. Alaska is the best place in the US to view the Northern Lights. The most common color is a yellow-green hue, but one may also see streaks of blue, purple and red. The most impressive displays tend to be accompanied by sub-zero temperatures and extremely dark, moonless skies. (This natural light show takes place in the earth’s upper atmosphere when charged particles from the sun collide with gas molecules.) Winter is typically the best time to view the lights, though they can also be seen in fall and spring. Many hotels offer a “Northern Lights wake-up call” for those who are willing to wake up at any hour to view this phenomenon.



Into the Wild

Brooks Camp is an incredible destination for those interested in viewing brown bears in their natural habitat. These coastal bears congregate here to feed on salmon,

with July being the peak season. Located in Katmai National Park, Brooks is accessible by floatplane. Here you have the option of staying in a private cabin (Brooks Lodge) or camping in the well-maintained campground, which overlooks Naknek Lake and is surrounded by an electric fence for safety. Besides bears, this area offers beautiful scenery and sunsets. There are many simple walking trails and two safe-viewing platforms, which give you the advantage of relaxing and enjoying a full view of the bears going about their daily activities. It's not uncommon to see a mother with cubs, males defending their territory or bears catching the jumping salmon at the falls. The bears are very comfortable in the water and may wait for hours at a time to dive on their prey. At Brooks, bears have the right of way and must be respected at all times.



Raingear and warm clothing are a must, with clear skies expected only 20% of the time. During the summer, the average daily temperature is 60 degrees Fahrenheit. There is also a basic buffet-style restaurant with a small bar complete with cozy fireplace, a real comfort after hours of bear viewing. Anyone interested in wildlife will enjoy this destination, but photographers and fishermen especially love it.

From Brooks, you can also take a tour via bus to the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. The tour leads you to a site of volcanic ruin that took place over 90 years ago. In 1918 it was dubbed a national monument in order to protect such an important area needed to further the study of volcanism. You can peer out at the valley from Overlook Cabin. Rangers lead simple hikes through the area, or the more adventurous, can explore on their own. The landscape looks akin to something from a science fiction movie with its rough pumice, rocks and ash. The harsh Alaskan weather has only helped mold this marvelously peculiar setting.

Breaking a Sweat

There are many sports to be enjoyed, with activity levels ranging from those who want to take it easy to more athletic types who want a workout.

With its dramatic and endless coastline, kayaking is the perfect way to explore the state's numerous islands and scenic coves. Kayak

tours are great for beginners and most find the activity easier than expected. While kayaking, you may encounter a wide range of wildlife including puffins, sea otters and orcas. You can also get a close-up view of glaciers.

Year round, you have the opportunity to experience a key part of traditional Alaskan culture: dog sledding AKA dog mushing, the official sport of Alaska. Alaskans began racing dogs in the early 1900's. Today the most famous race is the Iditarod, which takes place every March. Some tours offer you the opportunity to drive the dog sled team yourself. Of course you are always welcome to sit back and enjoy the ride.

Skiing is very popular in and around the major towns. Both cross-country and downhill skiing are possible when the snowfall permits.

While in Alaska, remember to tread lightly. The real beauty of Alaska lies in the fact it has remained wild. Its vastness and mystery help people truly get in tune with nature. It's important to help protect its beauty so it can be enjoyed by generations to come.

About the Author: Nicole Barton is a freelance writer and photographer with a strong passion for nature and wildlife. To view more of Nicole's work, visit www.nicolebarton.com.

Photos: Courtesy of Nicole Barton