

## **Sidetripping Through Alaska**

Come here for the beauty. Then get out and trek, kayak, dog sled, fish or pan for gold.

*By Deborah Abrams Kaplan*

Go ahead – step out of the helicopter onto one of Juneau’s glaciers. Firmly planted on ice at least a mile thick, walk over to a shallow crevasse. While the top of the white ice is speckled with brown dirt, the crack peels open in a long wedge, revealing increasingly intense shades of blue. It looks exactly like Georgia O’Keefe’s Ice Cave painting.

Almost one million visitors cruised Alaska in 2006, many of them taking day trips, and additional tours, like a helicopter glacier trek. In less than a week, visitors can watch a whale breach, paddle a canoe between icebergs, sail past glacier-carved mountains and fly over the Tongass National Forest in a seaplane.

It’s hard to imagine a more beautiful 570,373 square miles than Alaska. Expect your experience to include glaciers and mountains — they can be seen from the water when sea kayaking, from a stream when panning for gold or fishing for salmon, or from behind a team of dogs, who willingly pull your sled through the valleys.

### **Glacier Trekking and Helicopter Touring**

You haven't climbed Mt. Everest? No problem. Many Alaskan glacier treks cater to travelers without mountaineering experience. Equipment, cold-weather outerwear and instruction are not only provided, they're taken very seriously. Choose the type of trek that suits you best—from an hour-long leisurely interpretive walk to a several hour hike, complete with ice axes, hands-on training and ice wall climbing with ropes.

Your trekking adventure usually begins with a helicopter ride to the glacier. Duck into the wind created by the whirring rotors as you walk toward the helicopter door, and take comfort in the fact that tourists don't only use Alaskan choppers. Locals across the state rely on them for logging, fire fighting and oil exploration.

If a trek isn't your speed, consider taking a helicopter tour, where you can spend a half hour walking around a glacier on your own. In the helicopter, it's easy to dip down, and get a bird's eye view of a glacier calving into the water. Alaska has more glaciers than any other inhabited place — more than 100,000 cover five percent of the state's land. A helicopter tour will provide you with a view of these impressive structures in Alaska's most remote areas.

### **Dog Sledding**

If you've heard of the Iditarod (Alaska's famed 1,150 mile dog sled race), you probably know that dog sledding is the state sport. Before it was a race, though, the Iditarod was just a network of trails used by dog sleds for winter transportation. Gold miners from the 1920s transported mail and provisions using the only available means: dog sleds. Made

famous in 1925, teams of huskies used the Iditarod trails from Seward to Nome, bringing Diphtheria serum to a threatened population.

Though airplane travel made Alaska more accessible, dog sledding is by no means an extinct sport. The dogs need to run year round, so by all means, find a dog sled team to take you for a ride. Even in summer, dog sledding operations run glacier tours, where you can see the scenery whiz by as you bump across a glacier in a sled. Tour operators that aren't near the snowfields offer wheeled cart rides, pulled by the huskies.

If you want to see the dogs, but aren't interested in the body jarring jaunt (alas, the sleds do not have shock absorbers), opt to visit the kennels and watch a demonstration. Uncommon Journeys in neighboring Canada's Yukon province, hosts two hour sessions where visitors learn about dogsledding and how the huskies are raised. Then it's time to play with their 50 friendly dogs. Or try just a short 30-minute excursion to feel the racing dogs' speed. If you have the time, immerse yourself in the sport, taking a winter or spring lodge-based trip, like the one offered at Denali West Lodge, with views of Mt. McKinley. Your mushing guide and huskies meet you at the Lake Minchumina airport, after you arrive by bush plane.

### **Whale Watching**

Alaska's Inside Passage hosts one of the top whale watching spots in the world, with up to 400 humpbacks residing during the May to October feeding season. Like cruise goers, the whales enjoy the 49th state's summer weather, feasting on Alaskan seafood. The buffet of shrimp, fish and krill fattens the humpbacks up for the year, since this is their

only feeding season. Filtering in the sea creatures, the humpbacks spit out 150 gallons of water at a stretch, trying to keep in only the nutrients.

During a whale watching trip, you may also see Orcas, or killer whales, dining on salmon, or larger sea animals like seals, sharks and porpoises. Have a camera ready for the moment someone shouts, and you spot a tail or an entire whale flinging itself in an arc back to the water.

### **Panning for Gold**

Alaska's population boomed in 1886 with the discovery of gold southeast of Anchorage. The precious metal was responsible for populating the state with prospectors. While Alaska didn't become a state until 1959, President Woodrow Wilson was authorizing funds by 1915, for the Alaska Railroad construction headquartered in Anchorage.

Crow Creek Mine, an hour south of Anchorage, produced more than 45,000 ounces of gold during its heyday. And it's far from depleted. Local miners frequent Crow Creek, panning, sluicing or searching for gold with metal detectors. Pay a small day fee and join them at this placer mine, where glacial movement slowly crushed the gold from the Rocky Mountains, carrying it downstream with the snow's melt off.

Set in the Chugash National Forest, take a break from panning at Crow Creek and hike the mountain trails, or look through the mine's restored mess hall, blacksmith shop, ice house and other buildings.

Use the Alyeska Hotel in nearby Girdwood as a hub — it's Alaska's only four diamond hotel. While there, take in the spectacular view from the top of the resort's Mt. Alyeska observation deck — the deck and ski tram here are open year-round.

Head north from Anchorage on the Glenn Highway to the Independence Mine State Historical Park. After gold was discovered in Willow Creek Valley in 1906, miners looked for its source. They found it on Granite Mountain, developing what is now the Independence Mine, a hard rock, or lode mine.

Open to visitors during the summer months, you can borrow equipment and try your hand gold panning in the nearby streams, and tour the restored mining buildings, which included a school for the miners' 15 to 20 children. While Independence Mine produced more than 34,000 ounces of gold in 1941, its peak year, most of the action took place inside the dozens of miles of tunnels, which aren't yet accessible to the public.

### **Salmon Fishing**

With much of today's grocery store salmon coming from farms, catching wild salmon at its source is a thrill. You'll find all five species of Pacific salmon here. Back-troll or drift for a 35–60 foot king salmon, or even catch sockeye salmon at the base of the riverfront Great Alaska Adventure Lodge, where the Kenai and Moose Rivers meet. Enjoy happy hour each evening after fishing, and a wake-up call that will have coffee waiting at your door.

The Kenai River is home to the world's largest king salmon, at 97.4 pounds, though with 50,000 to 80,000 passing through in July alone, chances are, you'll catch something worth bragging about at home. Salmon season runs from May to October, with

different runs for each species. Known as a trophy fish river, the Kenai's salmons average 30–40 pounds, and nine of the 10 largest king (or chinkook) salmons ever captured, were found here in the Kenai.

King salmons spawn and lay their eggs during two runs a year, both in summer. The second run, in July, generally has the larger fish. Copper River, with 300 miles of rugged water, produces some of the most flavorful fish, probably due to the extra fat and oil the fish must store to make it up the river.

### **Sea by Kayak**

Whether traveling by cruise ship or car, there's no more intimate way to see a glacier, than to paddle alongside it, parting the ice with your kayak. And while some of the icebergs look small, up to 90 percent of them are underwater. Ice is only slightly denser than water, so the icebergs barely float.

Guided kayaking trips run from half a day to a week, and similar to the trekking, you don't need to have prior experience or a master's skills.

Without the hum of boats nearby, you'll hear the calving glaciers and the waves lapping against the ice. Sitting close to the water in your kayak, you'll enjoy the tranquility of the vast expanse. You may even see otters, seals, sea birds, whales, black bears and deer, depending on your location. At home, you'd likely have to visit the zoo to see this much wildlife, but in Alaska, anything is possible.

### **Box**

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With up to 70 percent of Alaskan visitors taking a cruise, the cruise lines are smart, offering a comprehensive catalogue of excursions you can often book before leaving home. Large ocean liners offer not only noteworthy food, spas, gyms and nightly shows, but also trips ranging from floatplane tours to whale watching, zip lines to fly-fishing. Before you pick a cruise line, decide what size ship you want. While larger ships have more amenities, they'll float you around the Inside Passage rather than through it. This waterway, connecting Ketchikan with Skagway, is filled with fjords, islands and wildlife that are inaccessible to larger boats. ---DAK