

500 miles of history

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Southeast Alaska stretches some 500 miles from Ketchikan to Yakutat. It would take months to explore it all. But here are a few suggestions for taking in some of the highlights -- glaciers, wildlife, history and, of course, fish.

For glaciers, you have several options. One of the simplest, if you're in the state capital of Juneau, is to drive or take a cab or city bus to the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center. The glacier and Mendenhall Lake, which may have icebergs floating in it, are right in front of you.

Another obvious place to see glaciers is Glacier Bay National Park. There are several ways to experience Glacier Bay. "We've got everything from cruise ship travel to kayaking or hiking under your own power," said Rosemary Salazar, a Glacier Bay park ranger.

You can sail through as part of a multiday cruise on a large cruise ship holding thousands of passengers or a smaller tour vessel carrying up to a few hundred passengers. Or you can take a day boat, which holds about 170 passengers. The most intimate way to experience the park is to paddle around on your own or with a guided kayak group.

A flightseeing trip can provide a different perspective on glaciers. "The whole idea of a glacier being a river of ice really comes true when you actually see them from the air," Salazar said.

Not only will you see glaciers and icebergs on a trip to Glacier Bay; you may also spot whales and other wildlife. People are almost certain to see some type of wildlife -- such as eagles, seals, sea otters or puffins -- on a trip into the bay, said Salazar, who has worked in the park for 20 years.

"It's not a guarantee, but yes, you're going to see something," Salazar said. "Even on really foggy, low-visibility days, you will see something."

Humpback whales are most often seen in June and July. Killer whales are transient, so rangers can't predict when they will be seen. There are also minke whales in the bay, but they are shy and not often seen.

There are plenty of other options for seeing wildlife in Southeast. In larger communities, you'll find businesses offering whale-watching tours, which will probably also bring you into contact with a variety of birds and other sea mammals. From a boat, you may also see brown bears, black bears, deer or other animals on the shore.

If you're especially interested in seeing bears, a trip to a supervised bear-viewing site is one of the surest, and safest, bets. The U.S. Forest Service maintains four Southeast Alaska bear-viewing facilities. These are places along salmon streams where bears eating fish have become accustomed to humans watching them from viewing platforms.

Options include Pack Creek Brown Bear Viewing Area on Admiralty Island; Anan Wildlife Observatory, which is about 30 miles southeast of Wrangell; Fish Creek Wildlife Observation Site near the tiny border town of Hyder; and Margaret Creek Fish Ladder, about 26 miles north of Ketchikan. Permits are required to visit Pack Creek and Anan Creek during the peak bear-viewing season (July 5 to Aug. 25). Hyder, which is just across the border from Stewart, British Columbia, is an experience in itself, says Caroline Stewart, owner of Boundary Gallery in Hyder. It's a scenic spot with "bears thicker than mosquitoes," Stewart said.

"I have sat on my front porch and seen as many as nine bears in an hour," she said. The Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development lists Hyder's population as 91.

Stewart said by her last count 81 people and 28 dogs were living there.

In Sitka, the Alaska Raptor Center provides an opportunity to see birds of prey up close. Injured raptors and other migratory birds are cared for here, and when possible, released back into the wild. Visitors can watch through one-way glass as rehabilitating birds spread their wings again in the "flight training center," said Forrest Wentzel, the center's avian program coordinator. They can also watch the "permanent residents" of the raptor center, those who will not recover enough to survive again in the wild.

A few of these birds are trained to allow a handler to use them in educational programs. Watching a handler work with a bald eagle can be fascinating, especially for people from outside Alaska who aren't accustomed to routinely seeing eagles, Wentzel said.

"When you can walk up to within five feet of a bald eagle ... I think that is pretty mind-boggling for people, pretty surprising," he said.

In January the center held 21 permanent resident birds representing 11 species, including great-horned owls, red-tailed hawks, a peregrine falcon, crows and a raven, he said.

Many Southeast communities also display the history of the region and the culture of the Alaska Native people who live here. The Sitka National Historical Park, for instance, includes Tlingit Indian and Russian artifacts, a collection of Haida and Tlingit totem poles and an active Tlingit arts studio where visitors can talk to local artists.

Other displays of Southeast Alaska's history and culture include Totem Bight State Park and the Totem Heritage Center in downtown Ketchikan and the Alaska State Museum in Juneau.

In Skagway, visitors can experience history by taking a ride into Canada on the White Pass and Yukon Route Railroad, a narrow-gauge railroad built in 1898 during the Klondike Gold Rush.

Those with more time and energy can follow in the prospectors' footsteps with a three- to five-day hike along the Chilkoot Trail. "It's a 33-mile-long museum," said Jeff Brady, editor and publisher of the local newspaper, The Skagway News.

There are lots of other things to do in Skagway if you don't have the time or energy for a three-day hike. Brady suggests starting out by watching a 30-minute film about the town's history at the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. That will help you appreciate the sights you'll see.

Cruise ships are in port from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, so people not traveling on a cruise may want to time their trip to avoid the crush of visitors during those times, Brady said.

As for fishing, you can do this all over the region. "Southeast is well known for having great fishing," Wentzel said.

You'll find people willing to guide you -- for a price -- nearly anywhere you go, whether you stop in large communities such as Ketchikan (which bills itself as Salmon Capital of the World) or a tiny place like Elfin Cove, population 29.

Freelance writer Cathy Brown lives in Soldotna.

What locals say

"It's not the Disneyland of the North that some people say it is. It's a real town."

-- Jeff Brady, editor and publisher of the Skagway News

Editor's picks

* Little town, big memories: When I first visited Alaska, back in 1998, our small excursion cruise stopped at Elfin Cove, population 29. Strolling on the boardwalks, talking with the locals and watching a floatplane take off is still a favorite experience.

* Whales galore: One thing cruise-ship visitors want to see on a trip to Alaska is whales. On the same '98 trip, we awoke at Icy Strait, just outside Glacier Bay. And then we watched humpback whales for about four hours. Simply amazing.

* The birds: The Alaska Raptor Center in Sitka cares for injured bald eagles and other birds. It will be difficult to find a better place to look at raptors.