

Alaska

by Dennis Goulet

Alaska is a premier location for nearly any photographic pursuit. Nature and wildlife, macro, landscape, travel, and native culture photography are all possible with some planning. Due to the short tourist season, traveling to Alaska is relatively expensive compared to many locations in the “lower 48”, but it is not as expensive as you may think. It’s a matter of how much planning you wish to do yourself. For those who are not comfortable planning an itinerary, making flight and hotel reservations, researching location information on the internet or by phone, or planning your trip nearly a year in advance, many professional tour leaders offer all inclusive trips to Alaska. These tours cost on the order of \$6000 for a two week tour not including airfare. However, if you do a little research and plan far enough in advance, you can save nearly half the cost of a professionally led trip; more if you stay at campsites or RV parks.

As you know from grade school geography, Alaska is a huge area and it is unlikely that you can plan a trip in which you will see ALL the best photographic locations in one visit. The most popular locations are the southeast coastal area, south central Alaska (Anchorage, Kenai peninsula, and Katmai National Park), and Central Alaska (Denali National Park, Fairbanks).

When to go

The travel season to Alaska is generally limited to the summer months. Mid-May to mid-September is the time period in which you will have access to the national parks and most tourist services such as hotels, restaurants, and tour boats. Keep in mind that there are some areas that are more productive early in the season, and others are more productive near the end of the season. Planning the locations and activities you wish to photograph will help you close in on a narrower time frame for your trip.

Getting there

While you can drive from the “lower 48” to Alaska, your travel time will be in the order of weeks just to get there. As I have no personal experience of traveling the Alaska Canada (ALCAN) Highway, I will leave that discussion to others. There are three other modes of transportation you can use to get to Alaska, the most popular being by air. Many airlines fly to the cities of Anchorage and Fairbanks from which you can arrange a rental car, or other ground transport such the train to Denali, or small aircraft to remote areas. Flights from Seattle and Anchorage to the southeast cities of Ketchikan, Juneau, Skagway, and Sitka are available from Alaska Airlines.

By far the most popular way to visit Southeast Alaska is by cruise ship, either starting or ending your trip at Seward on the Kenai Peninsula. A land itinerary can be scheduled either before or after your cruise, dependent on whether your cruise is northbound or southbound. The down side of cruising southeast Alaska is that each port visit last only six to eight hours, just enough time to take advantage of the cruise line’s optional excursions. An alternative method of sea travel is the Alaska State Ferry system. The benefit of this method is the option to stay in one city for several days, subject to the ferry schedule. Air travel to the cities of Southeast Alaska also offers this flexibility.

Where to go in Southeast Alaska

Ketchikan

Alaska's southernmost city, sits on stilts at the base of the Tongass National Forest. With 160 inches of rain a year, is also the wettest community in North America. Not far from the docks is Creek Street, once the site of a thriving red light district, it now contains shops, galleries and a museum. Helicopter and airplane sightseeing trips, and combination air and boat trips into the Misty Fjords National Monument originate in Ketchikan. A short walk from the center of Ketchikan, the Deer Mountain Salmon Hatchery and Eagle Center includes a landscaped enclosure with a small stream where the caretakers occasionally leave a whole salmon for the birds to eat. A tripod or image stabilized lens is helpful due to the low light levels in the enclosure. Contemporary totem poles are located at various locations in the city; however, the Totem Heritage Center, a short walk salmon hatchery, restores and displays 19th century totem poles gathered from throughout Alaska.

Juneau

Nestled between the mountains and the water, the state capitol is accessible by both air and sea. It's a great place to use as a base to venture out and take advantage of the numerous opportunities for photography. Good views of Juneau, the Gastineau Channel, and the surrounding mountain ranges can be seen from the top of Mount Roberts, which is accessed via cable car. Mendenhall glacier can be reached by rental car, by shuttle, or on an organized tour. Traveling there independently affords more time to explore the local trails leading up to the glacier. Several sightseeing boat trips leave from Juneau. One to Tracy Arm offers good glacier views and number of Whale Watch Tours head out from Juneau for morning, afternoon, or full-day trips. The areas around Juneau, Icy Straights and Lynn Canal, are feeding areas for marine mammals, offering good opportunities for humpback and killer whales. Naturalists on these boat tours provide insight into the life of the wildlife seen.

Glacier Bay National Park

Some cruise ships are permitted to enter the park, however, not all do. The park limits the number of ships in the bay at one time, so be sure to carefully check your cruise line's itinerary if you are interested in seeing this park. The park has a lodge available, and offers day-long tour boat cruises of Glacier Bay. These small boats access narrow bays and can get closer to the glaciers than the cruise ships can.

Skagway

Located at the northernmost end of the Lynn Canal, Skagway was the gateway to the gold fields of the Klondike gold rush. The Canadian government required each individual to bring some 2000 pounds of food and supplies before being allowed into Canada on the trail to the gold fields. A display at the Klondike Gold rush National Historical Park visitor center shows the amount of equipment and supplies a prospector of the day would require. The Trail of '98 Museum, located in Arctic Brotherhood Hall, offers a look into Alaskan History and native cultures thought artifacts and photographs. Several tours that include the White Pass Scenic Railroad are available; some include combinations of hiking, kayaking, bicycling, and motor coach sightseeing.

Sitka

Established in 1799, Sitka became the capital of the Russian colony in 1808. The seat of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska is located at St. Michael's Cathedral located in the middle of town. While visitors are encouraged into the church to learn of the church's role in early Alaska, no photos are allowed inside. The Alaska Raptor Rehabilitation Center not only cares for injured birds, but complete veterinarian hospital facilities are available to handle virtually any injury. The Sitka National Historic Park, also a short walk from town, has 2 miles of trails through a temperate rainforest and boasts a collection of 28 Tlingit and Haida totem poles, many of them over 100 years old. Sea Otter Watch tours also depart from Sitka.

Where to go in South Central Alaska

Anchorage

Situated on a high bluff between the two branches of the Cook Inlet and below the Chugach mountains, Anchorage has a moderate climate compared to the rest of Alaska. Half of the state's residents live here. Potter's Marsh is just south of the city along the Seward Highway, and offers refuge for migrating birds. Many opportunities for wildlife photography occur along the Seward Highway, including moose, mountain goats, eagles, and possibly beluga whales. Portage Glacier is an inland glacier with ice falling from the glacier into a lake. One hour boat tours bring visitors through floating ice to the face of the glacier.

Seward

The Sea Life Center in Seward has exhibits of marine mammals and aquariums of local sea life. The sea bird habitat has surface and underwater viewing areas to watch the behavior of the puffins, auklets and other sea birds. Located just six miles north of Seward, Exit Glacier is the most accessible of the Harding Icefield glaciers. A gravel road leads to a parking lot, and a half-mile walk leads you to the face of the glacier. Seward is also the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park. Several tour companies offer half-day and full day tours. The full day tours offer the best value, as they travel into more bays, and among offshore islands, offering good locations for marine mammal and seabird viewing.

Katmai National Park

Travel to Katmai National Park is by air. Commercial jet aircraft make multiple flights each day to King Salmon, a fishing village, where visitors transfer to small float planes. The best times to visit are mid-July for the early salmon run, and late-August and early-September for the late salmon run while the bears are taking advantage of any late arriving salmon to fatten up for their winter hibernation. Unless you plan to camp in a tent that you bring, this is an expensive location to visit. The cost for two people to stay three nights including round trip airfare from Anchorage is about \$2500, not including meals. Brooks Lodge offers cabins and motel like rooms, as well as a campground. The Lodge also offers buffet style meals at set prices. Park rangers brief each arriving visitor on bear safety and keep track of both bears and visitors to ensure the safety of the bears. Their techniques have been a great success; not one visitor has been injured by the bears of Katmai. A 300 mm lens is the shortest "long lens" you should bring and longer is certainly better. Teleconverters also help to get close up images. The Valley of 10,000 Smokes is a day trip offered by Brooks Lodge. The valley was

covered by 200-300 feet of hot ash from the eruption of Mount Katmai in 1912. Over the years, canyons have been carved by the many rivers which flow from the mountains. A hike down to the valley floor is included in the tour.

Central Alaska

Denali National Park

A visit to this park should be included in any trip to Alaska.

It is 240 miles from Anchorage and plan on a five to six hour drive, or more if you plan to stop along the way. You can also get here by the Alaska Railroad, or by small plane from Anchorage. One mile inside the park are the park hotel, the railroad station and the airport. Numerous hotels, motels and cabins are located just outside the park boundary offering a range of accommodation and dining choices.

The Denali Park road is 90 miles long; however, visitors are allowed access to the first 15 miles, which are paved. The first view of Mt McKinley from the park road occurs only ten miles into the park. Less than half the days of the season offer clear or partially clear views of the mountains. On average, only 11 days a season are cloudless. One third of the days are partially clear and 60 days a year offer this view. The park road is a great place to look for wildlife, with moose, caribou and bear common throughout the day. My strategy is to drive up and down the road in the early morning, late afternoon, and early evening when animals are more active. But anytime can yield results. The Savage River Bridge marks the beginning of the gravel park road, and the end of private vehicle access. Several species of wildlife can be found in the habitat near the Savage river. Wildlife easily found in the area at the Savage River Bridge include arctic ground squirrel, willow ptarmigan, and pika.

Travel further in to the park can be accomplished by riding the park shuttle system, taking an organized tour, or staying at one of the lodges at the end of the road in Kantishna. The park shuttle system allows riders to leave the bus anywhere along the road, and passing busses will pick up passengers in either direction when hailed. The park concessionaire offers several narrated wildlife tours that travel the park road as far as the Eilson visitor center, 66 miles into the park. The best bus tour offered is operated by Kantishna Roadhouse; it's a 13-hour narrated tour with a late lunch and gold panning at the roadhouse, and a return by early evening.

The seasons are short in Denali, and the time of year will yield different photographic opportunities. June is the time for young animals, birds and wildflowers, July provides bright green landscapes, the end of August offers a brief autumn colored landscape, and early September has animals in their winter coats, grizzly bears fattening up before hibernation, and occasionally snow.

Lodging can be arranged in the settlement of Kantishna, located at the end of the park road, ninety miles from the park entrance. Several lodges offer packages that typically include transportation, lodging, all meals, guided activities and use of equipment such as canoes or bicycles. A stay at these lodges are approximately \$340 per night per person, and advance reservations are strongly recommended.

Consider a flight seeing tour of Mt. McKinley. If the weather is clear and you have the time, the cost of a flight seeing trip to Mt. McKinley is well worth the money. Especially since conditions at the mountain can be determined just before you set out. Tour operators near the park entrance, or from Kantishna, can book scenic flights. If you are staying at a lodge in Kantsihna and have a tight travel schedule, a flight back to the park entrance reduces the possibility of delays along the park road. Since it may be difficult to operate the camera controls while in the aircraft, tape the focus ring at infinity, set exposure compensation for predominately white mountains, and have plenty of film available.

What to expect

From mid-June to mid-August heavy visitation at all tourist locations can be expected. Late August and early September are usually less crowded, the weather is cooler and the wildlife more easily found.

Come prepared for variable weather. Rain is more common in June and July, and overcast days can occur anytime. Early summer usually requires insect repellents and head nets, depending on where your travels take you. Inclement weather can often result in dynamic landscapes, and overcast skies provide even lighting for wildflower and macro photography. So be prepared with the right clothing, a variety of film, and a flexible frame of mind.