

Southeast Alaska (Juneau, Ketchikan, Haines, Skagway)

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Flightseeing aircraft often land for a short time on the Juneau Icefield in winter. (Claire Walter Photo)

NORTH TO ALASKA FOR WINTER ADVENTURE

By Claire Walter

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Think “Alaska,” and what comes to mind? The spectacular maritime highway called the Inside Passage? Native arts? The Midnight Sun? In short, the stuff of summer dream travels? But wait. It’s winter. It’s a different Alaska – some would say, the real Alaska. Snow. Dogsleds. Northern Lights. Community spirit.

Many Alaskans live off summer tourism, but they live *for* winter. Southeast Alaska is a particularly beguiling winter playground. In small towns that are spectacularly wedged in between the sea and steep spruce- and snow-covered slopes,

houses cling to hillsides. Streets are narrow. Boats bob in harbors. Shops, restaurants, bars and brewpubs are inviting, fun and filled with locals.

The weather can be capricious, with hard rain or snow one day and blue skies and sunshine the next. Temperatures are mild – usually near or above freezing by day – in short, perfect for winter sports.

During a peripatetic winter excursion of a week or so, you can hopscotch along such quirky and delightful communities as with such evocative names as Juneau, Haines, Ketchikan and Skagway. They are the real places that inspired the old TV hit, “Northern Exposure.” You can board an Alaska Marine Highway ferry from town to town, or take one of the ubiquitous air taxis.

Winter sightseeing is blissfully uncrowded. The March equinox is fast approaching, ushering in ever-longer days in a surprisingly mild coastal climate – the better to pursue an astonishing variety of outdoor pleasures, from snowshoeing to scuba diving.

It’s easy to find whatever outdoor pleasures interest you. Local visitor information offices, which aren’t at all busy in winter, can hook you up with outfitters, guides, sporting goods rental operations, whatever you need.

IF YOU KNEW JUNEAU

With just 30,000 residents, give or take, Juneau doesn’t really feel like a state capital – except for the compact domed capitol building up on the hill. Yet between January and May, when the legislature is in session, it hums. You can watch from the visitors’ gallery as legislators debate the issues that most concern Alaskans.

Put on a pair of comfortable shoes with good treads, pick up a walking tour map at the Davis Log Cabin Visitor Center, a replica of Juneau’s first public school, and stroll along the steep, narrow streets. The downtown area is a historic district, with architectural and historic attractions tucked here and there.

Don’t miss the small, octagonal St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church. It dates back to 1894 and is Southeast’s oldest church of that denomination. Noteworthy too are the Wickersham House, built in the early 20th century for a gold baron, and the Governor’s Mansion, a 1912 landmark.

Along the waterfront, you can refresh yourself or warm up, as generations of locals have done, at the Imperial Bar, Juneau’s oldest bar operating at the same location (since 1891), or the Red Dog Saloon, its most famous (great memorabilia). Stop too at the Alaska State Museum, with a noteworthy collection of Native arts, by both inland and coastal peoples, and nearby Juneau-Douglas City Museum, which documents the mining heyday

Mendenhall Glacier, 12 miles from town, is a must. This vast river of moving ice flows 12 miles from the Juneau Icefield to a frozen lake. Interpretive displays at the visitors’ center explain the glaciology. Large windows overlook awesome panoramas of white and blue ice, but a short walk along well-marked paths brings you closer and proffers even better views.

To see Mendenhall’s source, treat yourself to a helicopter or plane ride to the Juneau Icefield, 1,500 square miles of eternal white. Even though this mother of many glaciers snares 100 feet of snowfall a year, pilots land there on clear days.

Locals ski and snowshoe miles of trails near Mendenhall Glacier, and also on huge backcountry area called Spaulding Meadows. More trails skirt the valley at the base of the Eaglecrest Ski Area. It is Alaska's second-largest ski mountain, located on Douglas Island, a mountainous sliver of land between the Gastineau Channel and the Lynn Canal, across from downtown Juneau. At these latitudes, the treeline is low, so you can ski open Rockies-style bowls, as well as steep chutes, wide trails carved out of the forest and beguiling glades. No ski area in the land offers better views – jaw-dropping vistas of sea, sky and mountains.

If you are a strong skier or snowboarder, comfortable in the backcountry, sign on for a day of helicopter skiing, the ultimate snowsport adventure. Depending on snow and weather conditions, your group and your guide might be dropped somewhere north of Juneau or on Douglas Island. You'll make run after run through the steep and deep. If you like theater, spend an evening at the Perseverance Theater, also on Douglas Island.

Another kind of "deep" is scuba diving to the 15 shipwrecks in the waters around Juneau. Alaska is drysuit diving territory, and local dive shops rent suits and introduce you to the mysteries of nontropical diving. The water is astonishingly clear, the colors rich, the critters fantastic and the whole experience otherworldly, even for experienced divers.

OTHER SOUTHEAST HIGHLIGHTS

Each town in Southeast offers abundant activities and great off-season shopping. Hours may be curtailed from summer peak, but storekeepers and gallery owners are really thrilled to see you – and bargains abound.

Ketchikan is the first Alaskan port of call on the Inland Waterway – and what a port it is. It is unique even among Southeast's quirky communities. The harbor is one of the prettiest in all Southeast, with a sprightly waterfront shopping mall right on Thomas Basin.

The town is located on an island, while the airport is on another island, so leave time to catch the ferry if you're trying to make a flight. Followers of politics might recognize Ketchikan as the site of a controversial proposal for a federally funded \$315 million bridge to would eliminate the short ferry ride has been spotlighted as a particularly egregious example of pork barrel spending.

Visit the fish hatchery, which releases 350,000 salmon annually. They swim up the Ketchikan River to the hatchery to spawn, and you can rent a kayak and paddle up the river too. Picturesque buildings on stilts line Creek Street, a boardwalk that once was the town's red-light district. You can also paddle across the channel to explore other small islands.

All of February is Festival of the North Month, featuring local and visiting performers, the noteworthy Wearable Art Show, and a food fest called the Taste of Ketchikan and Edible Art Show. Fine dive sites just offshore make for walk-in scuba diving, while nearby trails offer hiking when they are snow-free or cross-country skiing or snowshoeing then there is cover.

Haines, north of Juneau on a slender spit of land between the Chilkat Inlet and the Chilkoot Inlet, is North America's bald eagle capital. Some 4,000 of these mighty birds – the very symbol of America – overwinter along a four-mile ice-free stretch of river. They

perch imperiously on bare cottonwood branches, as if posing for a photographer or sculptor. You can even see them from the road.

You'll find miles and miles and miles of cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and snowmobiling trails, as well as backcountry skiing and snowboarding, just up the road at Haines Pass. You can learn to drive a dogsled, and for some history and culture, visit Historic Fort Seward, which is a museum and also houses artisans' studios.

Hop over to Skagway, gateway to the fabulous, frantic Klondike gold rush of 1898. Prospectors set off from here, hefting their possessions up the steep Chilkoot Trail before dropping down into the Canada en route to the goldfields. Now, skiers, snowshoers and snowmobilers tackle the route that continues over White Pass.

White Pass's big, breezy landscape of snow-covered flats and bowls offers ample opportunities to slide on snow. The top draw is the Buckwheat Classic (Mar 23-25 [2005 date TK]), the centerpiece of a three-day community event that anyone capable of shuffling 10 kilometers on cross-country skis may enter. Founded by "Buckwheat" Donohue, who staked his claim in the Southeast mythbook by reading Robert Service poems to summer tourists, describes this as "a race for the lazy, the infirm and the few who are fast."

IF YOU GO

Where to Stay

Luxury

Goldbelt Hotel Juneau, 51 Egan Dr., Juneau. Phone (888) 478-6909 or (907) 586-6900; website www.goldbelttours.com. Rooms, \$169-\$179 double.

Hotel Westmark Baranof, 12 N. Franklin St., Juneau. Phone (800) 544-0970 or (907) 586-2660; website www.westmarkhotels.com. Rooms from \$169, single or double.

Pearson's Pond Luxury Suites & Adventure Spa, 4541 Sawa Circle, Juneau. Phone (888) 658-6328 or (907) 7893772. www.pearsonspound.com. Rooms from \$149, double.

Moderately Priced

Breakwater Inn, 1711 Glacier Ave., Juneau. Phone (800) 544-2250 or (907) 586-6303; website www.breakwaterinn.com; Rooms \$69-\$99, single or double.

Gilmore Hotel, 326 Front St., Ketchikan. Phone (800) 275-9423; website www.gilmorehotel.com. Rooms from \$50, single or double.

The Guardhouse Boarding House, P.O. Box 853, Haines; (907) 766-2566 or (866) 290-7445; Website www.alaska.guardhouse.com. [checking that they're open in winter]. Rooms \$75-\$95 double.

Historic Skagway Inn B&B, 7th & Broadway, Skagway. Phone (888) SKAGWAY or (907) 983-2289; website www.skagwayinn.com. \$99-\$119. [checking]

A Sheltered Harbor B&B, A Sheltered Harbor B&B, , 61 Beach Rd., Haines; Phone (907)766-2741; website www.sheltered-harbor.com. Rooms \$75-\$89 double.

Budget

Alaskan Sojourn Hostel, 488 Eighth Ave., Skagway; Phone (907) 983-2030; website www.alaskansojourn.com/ Bunks, \$20; double room \$50.

Juneau International Youth Hostel, 614 Harris St., Juneau. Phone (907) 586-9559; website www.juneauhostel.org. Bunks, \$10 per adult, \$5 per child..

For More Information:

Southeast Alaska Visitors Council, P.O. Box 20710, Juneau, AK 99802; (800) 423-0568; www.alaskainfo.org.

Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau, 369 S. Franklin St., Juneau, AK 99801; (800) 587-2201 or (907) 586-1737.

Haines Convention & Visitors Bureau, P.O. Box 530, Haines, AK 99827; (800) 458-3579 or (907) 776-2234; www.haines.ak.us.

Ketchikan Visitors Bureau, 131 Front St., Ketchikan, AK 99901; (800) 770-3300 or (907) 225-6166; www.visit-ketchikan.com.

Skagway Convention & Visitors Bureau, P.O. Box 1025, Skagway, AK 99840; (907) 983-2854; www.skagway.org.

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