





## Just Juneau

*A 'dead-end' city turns out to be the ideal spot for sampling the nation's biggest state*

**A**ll roads end in Juneau. Do not take this as metaphor. It is not. Nestled on a strip of land between intercoastal waterways and towering mountains, the Alaskan capital can be reached only by air or sea. One main road extends out of Juneau for about 45 miles along the coast—and then stops. Locals call it “The Road.”

Most of us don't really know where Juneau is on a map relative to Fairbanks, Anchorage, Seward, Nome, Barrow, Sitka, etc. That whole panhandle thing along western Canada is confusing. In our mind, Alaska is north of the mainland United States, not west. (It's actually halfway to Hawaii, where many Alaskans hop down for winter break.) Juneau is only

a 4½-hour direct flight from Denver, but it's a world apart. We have more misconceptions about Alaska—the real Alaska—than about many foreign countries.

Alaska is massive—one-fifth the size of the entire lower 48—and it's impossible to see it all. But spend a week in Juneau and you can experience much of what makes Alaska

## A JUNEAU MUST-DO LIST

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### 01/ EXPLORE MENDENHALL GLACIER

This is one of the 38 big—and more than 100 small—glaciers that make up the Juneau Icefield. Up to 1½ miles wide and 1,500 feet thick, the Mendenhall is Alaska's only “drive-up” glacier. Plan a half-day minimum to walk the trails and explore every inch of the visitor center. From one raised walkway nature trail, you can sometimes see mother bears with cubs. The mother bears have recently discovered that they are safer from predatory male bears if they hang out by people—strange but true.

### 02/ TAKE A FULL-DAY BOAT TOUR THROUGH THE TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

Tour boats will take you through the forest and down to the Tracy Arm fjord (or Endicott Arm if Tracy is too full of icebergs). Thanks to the stark granite cliffs of the fjord, water in ever-changing shades from aquamarine to teal and icebergs with mama and baby seals, it seems every five minutes is another “ahhhh” moment.

### 03/ RIDE THE MOUNT ROBERTS TRAMWAY

Owned and operated by an Alaska Native corporation (the young woman who sold us our tickets was a student at Haskell!), the \$27 ride is pricey, but it gets you to fabulous views on alpine trails above the treeline without a killer hike. Pack a picnic, hike for a few hours, catch the short film on Alaska Native culture and then tram back down.

### 04/ SPEND SOME TIME AT GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

This park and the small community of Gustavus can be a day trip from Juneau by plane or boat. But after coming all this way, plan to stay a night or two at the park lodge or one of the local rustic lodgings. It's a wilderness experience that few get to fully appreciate.

### 05/ TAKE A HIKE

There are a few hundred miles of trails around Juneau, from easy to challenging. Get the “bear facts” before starting, and take the weather seriously. Fifteen minutes from downtown is true wilderness.

Surrounded by the sea, national parks and mountains, the Alaskan capital of Juneau offers an exciting and comfortable base to explore nearby wildlife.

unique without traversing thousands of miles. Juneau offers glaciers, fjords, whales, seals, eagles and bears. Pick your season for what you want to do: day cruise, flight-see, helicopter, kayak, fish, hunt, hike, bike, ski, snowboard, dogsled or zip-line, much in rugged wilderness.

Juneau is the nation's largest capital city by land mass (3,248 square miles) but has a population of only 32,000—and that's when the Legislature is in session. Smack in the middle of the Tongass National Forest—the largest temperate rainforest in the world—Juneau is rainy and snowy but never suffers the bone-cracking cold of interior Alaska. Summer afternoons can reach the mid-80s, while winter levels out at 25 to 35 degrees. It's a city that requires strong legs, with some streets so steep that you climb stairs instead of sidewalks. With such steep terrain, there's no room for expansive lawns. The Capitol looks like any other office building, and the backyard of the Governor's House (they say "house," not "mansion") was just big enough for Piper Palin's swing set.

Juneau's historic downtown has a frontier/gold rush theme. The Alaska State Museum is exceptional (I loved the up-close look at an eagle's nest at the top of the spiraling ramp), along with smaller venues like the Last Chance Mining Museum. Juneau is intellectual, artsy, political and literary—sometimes all in the same room. You'll find galleries, music—including a Lyric Opera and symphony—funky cafes, fine dining and numerous venues to explore Alaska Native culture. Juneau hosts a folk festival in April and a 10-day jazz festival in May. It's also a fine place to do nothing: The "gorgeousness" factor had me sitting on a deck, taking it all in.

Weather dictates dress, which is why you pack layers, even in summer. Good hiking shoes or sneakers, rain



gear and anything else goes. Leave the froufrou at home; "dressy" can mean no rubber boots. Whatever you need or forget to pack, you can find.

Juneau in June (I feel some lyrics coming on!) has about 18 hours of daylight, and "night" is more like dusk. It's invigorating: a shot in the arm of sunshine. Winter has limited daytime, but the skiing is great. May and late August to September have fewer tourists.

While cruise ships unload their passengers here, you can avoid the midday downtown crush because you'll be off having adventures. If you

stay in Juneau, you'll start to feel like a local within 72 hours, giving the cruise-tourists directions.

Alaska is amazing. Alaska is doable. You don't have to plan a budget-busting journey of a lifetime. It's not China. Just pack up and go. Tourism is hurting, and locals are open to "adjusting" advertised rates. Pick one location and take it all in. You'll get a much richer Alaskan experience than people on five-hour "quickies" from a cruise ship.

Next June in Juneau?

That does have a nice ring. *DM*

This view of Juneau, taken near the top of the Mount Roberts Tramway, illustrates just how remote the Alaskan capital is. Juneau can be reached by air or sea. But roads out of the wilderness city extend only to the immediate surroundings.



The glaciers outside Juneau are a must-see attraction for any visitor or Cheechako (in Alaska-speak, an outsider who has moved to the state).

## SALMON AND WHALES AND BEARS

...  
OH MY!

**S**almon rules here, and every kid knows the differences among varieties. Chinook salmon (king) average 20-40 pounds but can be double that. Coho (silver) average 8 to 12 pounds but can be above 30 pounds and jump the highest. Sockeye (red) is the one most often smoked, humpy (pink) ends up mostly in cans and chum (dog) is used as bait and fed to the dogs. The different salmon run at different times, and businesses can close shop when a run is good so that everyone can catch salmon.

The whales around Juneau are the humpbacks and orcas, who can carry off swimming moose and attack sharks.

Bears are black (only about 400-plus pounds) and brown (also called grizzly; these males can top 800 pounds). But don't rely on color alone, as black bears can have brown fur.

One extra note: There are no cows in Juneau. There used to be, but there are no more. For a Juneau kid, a cow is as rare as a camel.

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