

» THE LAST FRONTIER

FROM WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS TO HIGH-FLYING ADVENTURES TO RELAXING RETREATS, ALASKA PROMISES A FABULOUS GETAWAY FOR EVERY TASTE. BY DANA REBMANN



INTO THE WILD WITH WILDLIFE

Named for North America's tallest peak, Denali National Park and Preserve is much more than just one towering 20,310-foot mountain. Home to six million acres of wilderness, the park's immense landscape ranges from low-lying boreal forest to high alpine tundra and snow-topped mountains. The spectacular scenery is only bested, perhaps, by the wildlife that calls the preserve home.

The national park has just one road that extends 92 miles. The mostly gravel route is ordinarily accessible via a network of

transit and tour buses; however, in 2021, a landslide closed the artery at mile 43, isolating half of the park from nearly all visitors. The road is not expected to reopen until summer of 2027, so with the very rare exception of a hearty hiker or cyclist, the few people getting to enjoy the western half of the park are guests of Camp Denali. Set at the 89-mile marker in Denali National Park, the Historic Operator status of the 72-year-old property gives it exclusive permission to lead guided interpretive hikes and vehicle-based experiences in the

Life is better in the great outdoors, and perhaps no place understands that better than Alaska. Dazzling northern lights, awe-inspiring wildlife, and shimmering glaciers are just the beginning of the state's many enticements. While traveling by cruise ship may be the easiest way to visit—and a popular option for many California travelers—it limits what you'll see to mainly coastal areas. Flights from San Francisco Bay Oakland International Airport and San Francisco International Airport to various Alaskan cities offer the opportunity to explore staggeringly beautiful stretches of the state's interior. And at 586,000 square miles—it's the largest state in the United States and bigger than the next three largest states combined—Alaska is packed with moments of wonder and fascination.



backcountry, providing countless chances to spot grizzly bears, moose, porcupines, caribou, eagles, and more.

Operating as a fly-in lodge as long as the park road remains closed, Camp Denali gives incoming guests a flight-seeing tour of the park, the mountain, and mighty Alaska Range glaciers before settling into one of 19 rustically elegant cabins. While accommodations lack plumbing and electricity—a bathhouse holds showers and flush toilets, and most summer days come with round-the-clock sunlight—a stay here

promises world-class indulgence. For the next few years, visitors have a unique opportunity to view grizzlies claiming an abandoned roadway as their own, hike alpine tundra studded with wildflowers, or canoe in the company of busy beavers—all without busloads of people interrupting the solitude of the park.

» REINDEER CHECK

North of Fairbanks, about a two-hour drive from Denali National Park and Preserve, Running Reindeer Ranch offers

LEFT: DENALI, PART OF THE AMAZING LANDSCAPE FRAMING CAMP DENALI, IS THE HIGHEST MOUNTAIN PEAK IN NORTH AMERICA. **BELOW:** VISITORS CAN WALK WITH REINDEER THROUGH A SNOW-COVERED FOREST AT RUNNING REINDEER RANCH.



unconventional walking tours. Here guests can traipse through the forest with a herd of furry four-legged guides.

Reindeer strolls are offered year-round, but come summer, there are even more ways to play reindeer games with the addition of reindeer yoga. As students do their best to focus on the Hatha- or Vinyasa-style flow, reindeer weave their way between yoga mats.

» DEEP DIVES

Some of the 49th state's more intriguing residents live under the sea. One memorable way to make their acquaintance during the summer months is exploring the underwater landscape with Snorkel Alaska in Ketchikan.

Yes, snorkeling in Alaska sounds crazy, but water temperatures typically reach 65 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Instructors gear you up with top-of-the-line wet suits, hoods, boots, and gloves to help you stay warm. Along with colorful fish, sea stars, and sea cucumbers, lucky snorkelers sometimes catch sight of whales and bald eagles on the hunt for lunch.

RIGHT: START YOUR STAY WITH A FLOATPLANE RIDE TO TAKU GLACIER LODGE; THE ICE'S BLUE HUE IS CAUSED BY ABSORPTION AND TRANSMISSION OF COLORS IN THE VISIBLE LIGHT SPECTRUM. **BELOW:** TAKE A HELICOPTER RIDE TO THE TOP OF MENDENHALL GLACIER; THRILL TO SPECTACULAR VIEWS OF THE TERRAIN.



GOING TO EXTREMES

Stepping outside your comfort zone during a visit to the Last Frontier reaps indelible rewards, and the beauty of Alaska really comes into focus when you see it from above. Wings Airways operates floatplane sightseeing adventures over the Juneau Icefield from late April through September. Everyone gets a window seat on the 10-passenger, propeller-driven floatplanes, so you can thrill to the magnitude of a handful of glaciers. Then the floatplane touches down at century-old Taku Glacier Lodge, where

you'll feast on locally caught salmon in between walks and watching for meandering black bears.

» WALKING ON THICK ICE

One of the most accessible glaciers in Southeast Alaska, Mendenhall Glacier can get crowded, thanks to hiking trails providing up-close views. From May through September, however, you can avoid the crowds by opting for a trek atop the glacier, and thrill-seekers will love the helicopter ride that gets you there. After



FROM LEFT: TRAVEL JUNEAU; STATE OF ALASKA/MARK KELLEY

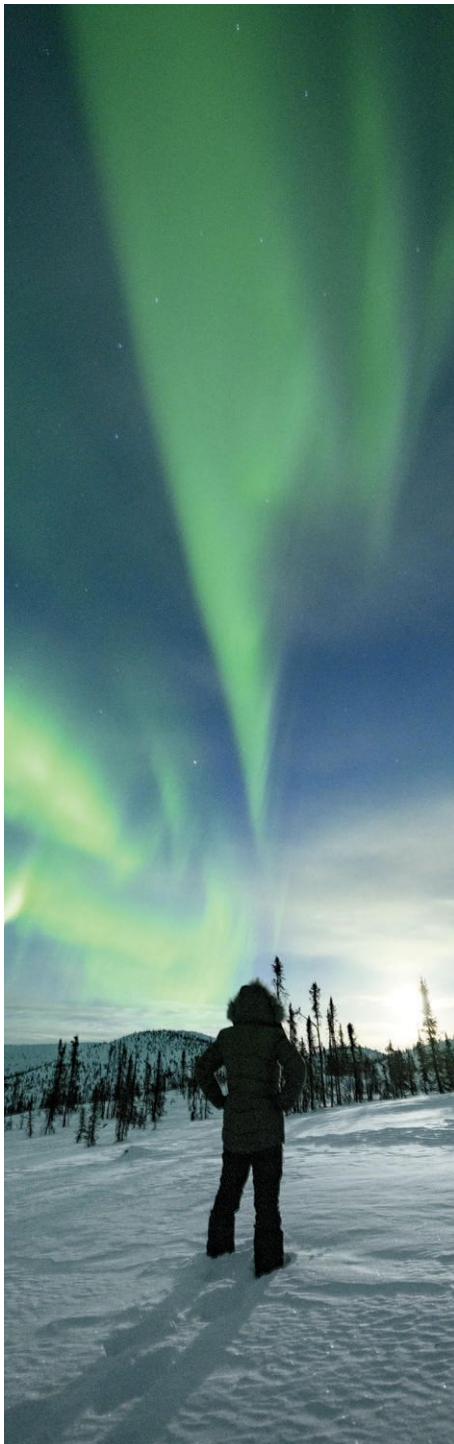
your pilot touches down at the basecamp on Mendenhall Glacier, guides with NorthStar Helicopters lead small groups on various jaunts across the ice. From rain pants, boots, and crampons to a hip pack with water and a granola bar, everything you'll need is provided. If conditions allow, you can dunk your hands in glacial water and enjoy an ice-cold drink.

» RAPIDS RESPONSE

Said to be the inspiration for the quirky community in the television show *Northern*

Exposure, the town of Talkeetna is the launching point for a singular whitewater experience. Using enclosed vessels, Mahay's Jet Boat Adventures navigates Class V rapids on the Susitna River in Denali State Park, neighbor to Denali National Park and Preserve. The Devil's Canyon Adventure tour offers the thrill of whitewater while staying dry; those seeking a shorter, calmer ride can opt for the Wilderness Excursion trip. Weather permitting, you'll catch multiple sights of Mt. Denali.





REJUVENATING RETREATS

Floating in mineral-rich geothermal waters while staring up at the stars will soothe your soul, but at Chena Hot Springs Resort, you can pair that serene dip with dazzling northern lights dancing across the sky. Aurora season isn't limited to winter; it spans all four seasons (though the lights are not visible during long summer days), stretching from August 21 through April 21.

A 70-plus-minute drive from Fairbanks, Chena Hot Springs offers lodging options that range from hotel rooms and cabins to

yurts and tent camping. When you aren't soaking in the 100-degree-Fahrenheit-plus hot springs or hanging out in the aurora viewing room that is open 24/7, consider exploring the miles of hiking trails, touring Chena's geothermal energy plant, or visiting the on-site Aurora Ice Museum where you can sip an appletini served in an ice glass, at a bar made from ice. It's a cool 25 degrees Fahrenheit inside; staff have parkas for guests, but it's a good idea to bring along gloves and a hat.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ARCTICHIVE.COM (2); TRAVEL ALASKA/CHRIS MCLENNAN ©2022

» ARCTIC AURORA RETREAT

Clear skies are a must when it comes to viewing the northern lights. At times, Mother Nature can make it an exercise in patience, but Alaska's Arctic region is one of the best spots to view the glowing sky, and aurora chasers who make the trip earn a variety of bragging rights, including crossing the Arctic Circle and a special opportunity for yoga lovers. Located outside of the tiny village of Wiseman (year-round population of 11),

Arctic Hive is said to be the northernmost yoga studio and retreat center in America.

Sandwiched between the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the property is owned by wife-and-husband team Mollie and Sean Busby; the dynamic duo introduce visitors to the wilderness through yoga, skiing, hiking, meditation, dog mushing, and aurora viewing. In December, you won't see the sun, but on some spring days, it's still light out after 10 p.m.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ALASKA IS ONE OF THE PREMIER PLACES IN THE WORLD TO VIEW THE NORTHERN LIGHTS. **THIS PAGE,** **CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** ARCTIC HIVE RECENTLY ADDED DOGSLEDDING LESSONS TO ITS OFFERINGS; SERENE SURROUNDINGS COMPLEMENT ARCTIC HIVE'S YOGA SESSIONS; SIP COOL COCKTAILS IN AN EVEN COOLER SETTING AT CHENA HOT SPRINGS RESORT'S AURORA ICE MUSEUM.



With just four cabins, Arctic Hive hosts an average of six to eight guests at a time. Solar panels and a generator produce enough power to charge small electronics like cell phones and cameras, but because the retreat was built on permafrost, or stretches of underground ice, there's no plumbing. (There is a posh outhouse.) Nordic oil stoves provide all the heat you'll need, however, and on clear nights, the aurora borealis offers stunning light when you fall into bed. ■