



These icons represent Alaska's natural beauty, deep-rooted history, thriving Native culture and other not-to-miss attractions. They all exist in Alaska, and all can be experienced in one trip. From the Inside Passage to Fairbanks to the tip of the Kenai Peninsula, here are 10 of Alaska's most impressive icons.

1. Totem Poles

The Inside Passage is home to the [Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian](#) people, whose history and culture are reflected in towering totem poles found in galleries, museums, as well as in parks and other outdoor settings.

Where to see them

Sitka National Historic Park boasts a collection of totems near its visitor center and along the park's walking trails. The pieces, primarily from Prince of Wales Island, were once displayed at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition.

The Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan is a national landmark and houses a collection of 19th century totems retrieved from uninhabited Tlingit and Haida villages near Ketchikan. It is the largest such collection in the United States. Ketchikan is also home to Totem Bight State Park, which features an authentic Tlingit "long house," or gathering place, and dozens of totems in a coastal setting.

On Chief Shakes Island in Wrangell, seven intricately carved totem poles surround a community house, which is the replica of an authentic Tlingit Indian structure. Chief Shakes Island is accessible via footbridge from Front Street in downtown Wrangell.

2. Wildlife

Whales, brown bears and moose, oh my! Alaska is home to an estimated 175,000 moose, 30,000 brown bear and nine different species of whales, along with numerous other species of wildlife.

Where to find them

Bears of all varieties – black, brown and polar – call Alaska home, but probably the most impressive and easiest to view are the brown bears. Katmai National Park and Preserve, Kodiak Island, Admiralty Island, Anan Bear and Wildlife

Observatory and Denali National Park and Preserve, among many other spots, are good places to watch bears in action from the safety of a tour or designated viewing area.

Moose can be found all along Alaska's highways, or in dense wooded areas from certain parts of the Inside Passage to the Colville River area in Alaska's Far North region. They are most abundant in areas that have been recently burned by forest fires with lots of tender new willow and birch shrubs, on timberline plateaus and along the major rivers of Southcentral and Interior Alaska. They are also commonly seen in cities like Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Whales are found throughout Alaska's coastal regions and there are several major species that call Alaska waters home for at least part of the year, including humpback, gray, bowhead, fin, killer (orca), minke, beaked, beluga, sperm and North Pacific right whales. Many whale species travel to Alaska during the summer months to feast on abundant marine life before migrating back to warmer waters in California, Mexico and Hawaii in winter to have babies. Day cruises or whale watching tours, which are usually on smaller boats that are more maneuverable than large ships, offer the best up-close viewing of whales. However, large-ship cruise passengers and ferry travelers frequently see whales, too, and whales can also be viewed from shore or during a kayaking trip. The entire Inside Passage region, Prince William Sound, the waters off the Kenai Peninsula and near Kodiak Island are all great places to experience whale watching.

3. America's most majestic symbol — the bald eagle

The bald eagle population in Alaska is estimated at 30,000 birds. Most visitors to Alaska will see a bald eagle before they leave the state. Anywhere fish are plentiful is a good place to look for eagles. When scanning the trees, look for something that looks like a golf ball and you're probably looking at an eagle's head. Although eagles can be seen almost anywhere in Alaska, here are a few special places to view them:

Where to spot them

The Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines was established in 1982 to protect one of the largest concentrations of bald eagles in North America. The 48,000-acre preserve winds along the Chilkat River where each year, between October and January, more than 3,000 eagles congregate along the river to feed on chum salmon. A similar gathering can be seen in the spring along the banks of the Stikine River near Wrangell, where eagles flock by the thousands to scoop salmon out of the river.

Sitka's Alaska Raptor Center borders the Tongass National Forest and has become Alaska's foremost bald eagle rescue and rehabilitation center. Each year the center provides medical treatment for 100-200 injured bald eagles and other

birds. The center receives up to 36,000 annual visitors, including 15,000 schoolchildren, who visit the center to take part in the Raptors-in-Residence and Adopt-A-Raptor educational programs.

4. Magnificent Mountains

Alaska is home to 17 of the nation's 20 highest peaks, including the legendary Denali, formerly Mount McKinley, North America's tallest peak. Hiking options are plentiful statewide, and many excellent guidebooks offer directions to trailheads and detailed descriptions of Alaska trails in each community or region. Hikers should always let someone know where they're going and when they plan to be back and pack more than enough water and food in case they get delayed due to weather or injury. Here are just a few recommendations for experiencing Alaska's backcountry:

Where to hike them

Located above the Arctic Circle, the Brooks Range is Alaska's northernmost mountain range and also one of the most isolated. To attempt these dramatic peaks, the novice hiker or climber should be accompanied by an experienced guide. Visitors can fly to wilderness lodges scattered throughout the Brooks Range for unparalleled backpacking, or river kayaking.

The Chugach Mountains are accessible from both Anchorage and Valdez and offer recreation for all levels, from a day hike up 3,550-foot Flattop Mountain to exploring the face of Valdez Glacier. Hikers can also attempt the North Face of Mount Alyeska at Alaska's most popular ski resort, where a four-diamond restaurant, Seven Glaciers, awaits to satisfy discerning appetites at the top.

The communities of the Inside Passage are hikers paradise, thanks in large part to being surrounded by the nation's largest national forest, the Tongass. The towering Sitka spruce, glaciers, rivers, waterfalls and steep fjords make for scenic and challenging hiking terrain. In most towns, stunning trails of all lengths and difficulty levels are as accessible as walking to the end of the street and proceeding up a mountain. Consider the Mount Roberts trail in Juneau, which can be combined with a one-way trip on the Mount Roberts Tramway for a fantastically scenic and enjoyable day. For a longer adventure, consider the Chilkoot Trail, which was hiked by prospectors to get from tidewater in Skagway, Alaska to the gold fields in Canada's Klondike.

5. Dog Mushing

Dog mushing is Alaska's official state sport with roots that go back 4,000 years in the northern regions of North America and Siberia. Visitors travel from around the world to witness a number of Alaska's famous sled dog races. Visitors can experience dog mushing through kennel tours or even ride on a dog sled across the face of a glacier.

Where to experience dog mushing

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, also known as “The Last Great Race,” is the longest dog mushing race in North America – nearly 1,000 miles from Anchorage to Nome. The first Saturday in March kicks off with the ceremonial start in Anchorage; spectators will also enjoy the excitement of the finish in Nome. Also in Anchorage, the annual Fur Rendezvous celebration in February features the world’s best sprint racing teams.

The other major long distance race is the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race that runs from Fairbanks to Whitehorse in Canada’s Yukon – a distance of 1,000 miles. Many Yukon Quest race checkpoints are road accessible, affording spectators lots of opportunities to watch the race. Also in Fairbanks, the Open North American and Limited North American championships are held in March and attract top sprint mushers from around the world.

In the summer, kennel tours are a great way to experience mushing and are available in many Alaska communities, especially in Southcentral and Interior Alaska, where dog mushing is a way of life. To experience the thrill of mushing for yourself, check out one of the many tour options that include a flight by helicopter to the face of a glacier for a ride across the icy expanse.

6. Glaciers

No trip to Alaska would be complete without glacier viewing. In fact, three of the top 10 most visited attractions in the state are glaciers.

Where to see them

Some of the best access to glaciers is found in Prince William Sound, accessed either in Whittier, Valdez or Cordova. Board the state ferry or private day excursion boats in any of these communities for up close and personal views of these magnificent rivers of ice.

Kenai Fjords National Park is home to Exit Glacier, a half-mile wide glacier easily accessible within the park. It is also home to Harding Icefield, one of only four remaining icefields in the United States and the largest icefield entirely within United States borders at 700 square miles.

Several of Alaska’s most accessible glaciers can also be reached by car including: Worthington Glacier on the Richardson Highway near Valdez; Matanuska Glacier on the Glenn Highway near Palmer; Exit Glacier, part of Kenai Fjords National Park near Seward on the Seward Highway; Portage Glacier near Girdwood on the Seward Highway; and Mendenhall Glacier on Glacier Highway in Juneau.

7. Historic Mining Towns

In just one year, 1897-98, more than 60,000 adventurers made their way north to the rich gold fields of the Klondike. The strike led to a new interest in Alaska and subsequent

strikes in communities all over the state. Today, Juneau, Nome, the Mat-Su Valley, Girdwood, Fairbanks and many other communities offer visitors a chance to experience their gold mining past.

Where to find gold

The Chilkoot Trail located outside of Skagway is a 33-mile trail on which visitors will find history at their feet. Old pick axes, wagon wheels, shovels and countless other items can be found along this historic trail.

Visitors to Juneau can experience the area's gold mining past in a number of ways, including a tour of the Alaska-Gastineau Mill and Gold Mine or a walk through what was once one of the largest gold mines in America, the Treadwell Mine on Douglas Island. To get the most out of the Treadwell Mine, stop by the Douglas Public Library, right across Gastineau Channel from downtown Juneau on Douglas Island, and pick up a free interpretive map that will guide you through the heavily forested walking trails, pointing out what remains of what was once the most productive gold mine in the world.

In Fairbanks, there are still several active mines in the area and older mines that have been converted for tours. Mining relics include the Chena Pump House, Ester Camp, Chatanika Camp, Gold Dredge No. 8 and the Davidson Ditch. The University of Alaska Museum of the North has mining exhibits as well.

8. Russian History & Culture

Although Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867, the Russian influence is still seen today in the communities of Sitka, Kodiak and Unalaska as well as on the Kenai Peninsula, where onion-domed Russian Orthodox churches are a visual reminder of Alaska's previous owners.

Where to experience it

Unalaska is home to the oldest standing Russian-built church in the country, dating back to 1825. It was built by the Russian American Fur Company, and is now a federally designated National Historic Landmark. The church was nearly destroyed during WWII, when the Japanese attacked Unalaska.

Kodiak Island was the first place in Alaska that the Russians settled. A walking tour of the city can include the Baranov Museum, Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church and the Saint Innocent Veniaminov Research Institute Museum.

Visitors can take in the Russian influence when visiting Sitka, including the old Russian cemetery, the Lutheran cemetery, where Russian Princess Maksoutoff is buried, and Saint Michael's Russian Orthodox Cathedral. Visitors can also view the Russian Bishop's House, part of Sitka National Historical Park, as well as

many historic houses that reflect Russian influence.

9. Northern Lights

More than 250,000 people visit Alaska each winter between October and April, most with hopes of catching a glimpse of the northern lights (also known as the aurora borealis).

Where to witness them

Fairbanks provides one of the best spots on earth to view the aurora. Its location and tendency to have clear night skies make this an unbeatable location for watching the lights dance. Hotels in Fairbanks offer aurora wake-up calls, where staff will gently awake visitors to let them know the aurora is active. The University of Alaska Fairbanks has an [online aurora forecast](#) that helps pinpoint the best time to watch the northern lights, which can range from a greenish, hazy cloud to an active and dancing display in green, red and purple. Visitors can experience the northern lights from a heated "aurorium" cabin, on an overnight dog sled trip, by snow cat tour to a panoramic vista, on a horse drawn sleigh or on a flight above the Arctic Circle – or simply by pulling over on the side of the road and looking up.

The Far North region of Alaska also offers ideal circumstances for northern lights viewing, which is known to be at its best the closer the viewer is to the North Pole. Bettles, located 180 air miles northwest of Fairbanks, offers accommodations built specifically for aurora viewing, where viewing is best mid-August through mid-April. Nome, Coldfoot and Barrow are just a few of the other Far North communities with excellent aurora viewing opportunities.

10. Unsurpassed sportfishing

Fishing in Alaska is an angler's dream. More than 30 species of game fish inhabit Alaska's fresh and salt waters, including five species of Pacific salmon and huge halibut.

Where to catch them

Alaska's Inside Passage, known for saltwater fishing, is famous for giant halibut and all five species of Pacific salmon, plus equally impressive opportunities for freshwater fishing. Ketchikan, Wrangell, Sitka, Petersburg, Haines, Skagway and Juneau are the key gateway cities to this wild coastal region. Guided tours are plentiful in this region.

Southcentral Alaska's Kenai Peninsula is home the world's largest king salmon and what are often described as "barn door" Pacific halibut – trophy halibut weigh in at over 350 pounds! Guided charters are available all along the length of the Kenai River, which are also the spawning grounds for kings. In Homer, guided fishing is focused on halibut, which are plentiful in the area. Visitors may also fly out to the Alaska Range in Southcentral Alaska for classic freshwater

fishing or participate in one of the local summer fishing derbies, which offer the chance to not only catch a trophy fish but also take home a giant cash prize.

Alaska's Far North and Interior Alaska are appealing to freshwater anglers for abundant salmon, trophy-size Northern pike, lake trout and Arctic char. In the Interior, popular fishing locations include the Charley River for king, chum and coho salmon, and Rainbow Lake, known for excellent rainbow trout fishing. While a little more challenging to access — primarily by air — the lakes within the Brooks Range in the Far North region are a popular spot, although they may not be ice-free until July.

Valdez, also in Southcentral Alaska, is also known for its excellent saltwater fishing. Trophy-size halibut are regularly fetched from the waters of Prince William Sound and a long running fishing derby offers some of the biggest and best cash prizes available in the state. Charters and plentiful and can be arranged through the local convention and visitors bureau.

If You Go

State of Alaska tourism office

<http://www.travelalaska.com/MediaCenter>

Phone: (800) 327-9372

Anan Wildlife Observatory

www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/recreation/wildlife_viewing/ananobservatory.shtml

Phone: (907) 225-3101

Admiralty Island National Monument

www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/admiralty

Phone: (907) 586-8800

Anchorage Fur Rendezvous Festival

www.furrondy.net

Phone: (907) 274-1177

Alaska Marine Highway System

<http://www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/pubs/>

Phone: (800) 642-0066

Baranov Museum

www.baranovmuseum.org

Phone: (907) 486-5920

Alaska Raptor Center

www.alaskaraptor.org

Phone: (800) 643-9425

The Pump House

www.pumphouse.com

Phone: (907) 479-8452

Alyeska Resort

www.alyeskaresort.com

Phone: (800) 880-3880

Chief Shakes Island

<http://shakesisland.com>

Phone: (907) 874-3097

Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve

<http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/eagleprv.htm>

Phone: (907) 465-4563

Cordova Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center

www.cordovachamber.com

Phone: (907) 424-7260

Denali National Park and Preserve

www.nps.gov/dena/index.htm

Phone: (907) 683-2294

Douglas Public Library

www.juneau.org/library

Phone: (907) 364-2378

Explore Fairbanks

www.explorefairbanks.com

Phone: (800) 327-5774

Gold Dredge No. 8

www.golddredgeno8.com

Phone: (907) 457-6058

Greater Whittier Chamber of Commerce

www.whittieralaskachamber.org

Phone: (907) 677-9448

Haines Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.haines.ak.us

Phone: (800) 458-3579

Homer Chamber of Commerce

www.homer.alaska.org

Phone: (907) 235-7740

Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race

www.iditarod.com

Phone: (907) 248-MUSH

Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.traveljuneau.com

Phone: (888) 581-2201

Katmai National Park and Preserve

<http://www.nps.gov/katm/index.htm>

Phone: (907) 246-3305

Kenai Fjords National Park

<http://www.nps.gov/kefj/index.htm>

Phone: (907) 422-0500

Kenai Peninsula Tourism Marketing Council

www.kenaipeninsula.org

Phone: (800) 535-3624

Ketchikan Visitors Bureau

<http://www.visit-ketchikan.com/>

Phone: (800) 770-3300

Discover Kodiak

<http://www.kodiak.org>

Phone: (800) 789-4782

Klondike Gold Rush National Park

www.nps.gov/klgo/index.htm

Phone: (907) 983-9200

Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.alaskavisit.com

Phone: (907) 746-5000

Mount Roberts Tramway

<http://mountrobertstramway.com/>

Phone: (888) 820-2628

Nome Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.nomealaska.org

Phone: (907) 443-6624

Petersburg Chamber of Commerce

www.petersburg.org

Phone: (907) 772-INF

Seward Chamber of Commerce

www.seward.com

Phone: (907) 224-8051

Sitka Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.sitka.org

Phone: (800) 557-4852

Sitka National Historic Park

www.nps.gov/sitk/index.htm

Phone: (907) 747-0107

Skagway Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.skagway.com

Phone: (888) 762-1898

Tongass National Forest

www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass

Phone: (907) 225-3101

Totem Bight State Park

<http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/totembgh.htm>

Phone: (907) 465-4563

Totem Heritage Center

<http://www.ktn-ak.us/totem-heritage-center>

Phone: (907) 225-5900

Unalaska/Port of Dutch Harbor

Convention & Visitors Bureau

<http://www.ci.unalaska.ak.us/community/page/convention-and-visitor-bureau>

Phone: (877) 581-2612

University of Alaska Museum of the North

www.uaf.edu/museum

Phone: (907) 474-7505

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Geophysical Institute

www.gi.alaska.edu

Phone: (907) 474-7558

Valdez Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.valdezalaska.org

Phone: (907) 835-2984

Visit Anchorage

www.anchorage.net

Phone: (907) 276-4118

Wrangell Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.wrangell.com

Phone: (800) 367-9745

Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race

www.yukonquest.com

Phone: (907) 452-7954