

48 HOURS IN ANCHORAGE

Vast green spaces, mountain scenery and rich culture make Anchorage a city worth exploring.

By Lisa Maloney

Sandwiched between the temperamental waters of Cook Inlet and an ever-present backdrop of mountains, Anchorage offers a superb blend of urban amenities, big adventure and natural beauty. Alaska's largest city is a surprisingly diverse haven, with roughly 100 different languages spoken by families in the school district and an impressive variety of restaurants serving tasty fare ranging from Ethiopian cuisine to ramen and Hawaiian malasadas.

Here, "come as you are" is the anthem of every day, and you can ditch dress codes in favor of exploring the city's expansive trail system and embarking on day trips to big adventure.

If you have a rental car, all of Anchorage is yours to explore. If you don't have a car, downtown is the place to be: It's the long-standing hub for visitor information and activities, all within easy walking distance of hotels that include the charming, and famously haunted, Historic Anchorage Hotel; the nautical-themed Hotel Captain Cook with its AAA Four Diamond restaurant, The Crow's Nest, perched on the top floor; and the AAA Three Diamond Sheraton Anchorage Hotel.



DAY ONE

Start your day at downtown Anchorage's Snow City Café, which is almost as famous for its waits to get a table as for its superb eggs Benedict, egg scrambles and stuffed French toast. Nowadays you can join an online waitlist through its website, setting yourself free to ramble through nearby gift shops until you near the front of the virtual queue.

You'd never guess it from the outside, but the ground floor of the Hotel Captain Cook—less than a block up the street—is a great place to start your browsing. It has a wide selection of gift shops, from local artist co-ops offering greeting cards, pottery, photo prints and paintings, to museum-quality art at Boreal Traditions, where you could even take home glass art created by famed Tlingit artist Preston Singletary.

After breakfast, turn the corner from the café and walk less than a block down L Street to Pablo's Bicycle Rentals. Choose a bike or e-bike and set off for the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, which runs 11 miles along the coast through cheerful, sun-dappled forest before ending with an epic hill climb in Kincaid Park, home to a lush mix of trees and brush. There's also a short walking trail to a sand beach. Just make sure to stay off the muddy flats exposed by the outgoing tide;

they turn to slippery quicksand as the fast-moving tide rushes back in.

Keep your eyes peeled as you pedal back downtown. You'll pass through Earthquake Park, where steep hills and interpretive signs show how the Great Alaska Earthquake in 1964 reshaped the land. During fall and spring migrations, sandhill cranes are frequent visitors to the oceanside flats along the trail, and if you're very lucky, you might see a black bear pop out of the trees.

After you turn in your bike, stop for a quick lunch at nearby Fire Island Rustic Bakeshop, where soup, sandwiches and baked treats, sweet and savory, await. Then, close out your afternoon with a visit to two of the city's premier cultural institutions: the nearby Anchorage Museum with its Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, and the Alaska Native Heritage Center, which celebrates Alaska Native culture. Reachable by free shuttle, it's well worth the trip to see demonstrations of traditional arts and to explore life-sized re-creations of traditional dwellings from around the state.

For dinner, it's an easy walk from almost any downtown hotel to the AAA Three Diamond restaurant Ginger, where you can enjoy Pacific Rim cuisine and tapas. Don't sleep on its drinks menu, which includes choice selections from classic martinis to a tasty selection of mocktails.

A biker in Kincaid Park



You can depart Anchorage on the Glacier Discovery Train for an exciting day trip to Spencer Glacier.

Inset photos, from top: Eggs Benedict at Snow City Café; a carving at the Alaska Native Heritage Center



PHOTO BY FRANK FLAVIN



PHOTO BY JUNO KIM/VISIT ANCHORAGE



PHOTO BY WAYDE CARROLL



PHOTO BY WAYDE CARROLL

DAY TWO

Today's a day for big adventure, so fuel up with an early breakfast at the White Spot Cafe, a slightly under-the-radar local favorite where you can get dishes ranging from French toast to chicken-fried steak—all of it good. From there, it's about a half-mile walk or a rideshare hop to the Alaska Railroad train depot, which sits near the shore of Ship Creek, a salmon-bearing stream that runs right through the city's commercial district.

From here you'll board the Glacier Discovery Train, which shuttles you out to Spencer Glacier—a stunning backcountry beauty accessible only by train or helicopter. Just taking the train out and exploring a hiking trail near the glacier makes for a memorable day, but don't miss out on add-on tours that you can book through the railroad. Options include hiking near the glacier, paddling among the icebergs or even rafting seven miles down the glacier-fed river to catch the train as it starts its return journey to Anchorage.

Most tour options include lunch, but if yours doesn't, bring a box lunch with you or buy a hot meal or snack from the train's Wilderness Café.

If you really want to go all-in on the Alaska experience, book a tour that includes a stop at the 200-acre Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, home to orphaned and rescued bears, wolves, moose, muskoxen, lynx, porcupines and more living in spacious, natural enclosures filled with native vegetation. A visit here guarantees wildlife sightings.

After your day's excursion, you'll return to downtown Anchorage just in time to catch a late dinner of hearty brewpub-style food at 49th State Brewing Company, a perennial favorite for locals and visitors alike. If it's summer and the roof deck is open, you can even watch the fabled midnight sun slowly fading into the pale summer night, setting the sky ablaze with one of Anchorage's famous sunsets of reds, oranges and pinks.

Clockwise from left: Ship Creek in downtown Anchorage; kayaking at Spencer Glacier; brown bear at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center; wild-caught king salmon at 49th State Brewing Company

ON THE PLUS SIDE

Your AAA travel advisor can help you book your dream trip to Alaska, whether that's an excursion by land, rail, cruise or a combination of them all. **Contact us at 888-AAA-TRIP (222-8747).**