

An aerial photograph of a vast mountain range in Alaska, with numerous peaks covered in snow and partially shrouded in mist. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The mountains are rugged and layered, creating a sense of depth and scale.

**By GRETCHEN HEBER**

GateHouse Media

**N**ot only is Anchorage the gateway to the expansive beauty and wonder that define Alaska, this sparkling city near the Gulf of Alaska is a destination in its own right.

With nearly 300,000 residents, Anchorage is Alaska's biggest city. While it provides the expected amenities of a large city, it also has many features that make it a unique travel destination, including the glorious, snow-blanketed peaks of the Alaska Range, the chance to have closeup encounters with wildlife that delight and awe and glimpses into the lives of indigenous peoples who've called the region home for thousands of years.

"We encompass all of what Alaska has to offer," said Sarah Mattie, a spokeswoman for the city. "Anchorage is definitely a bucket-list destination for a lot of people."

The city sits in the south-central part of Alaska, on the Cook Inlet of the Gulf of Alaska. Anchorage, which was named after a hardware store operated off a boat in the early 20th century, is recognized as a portal to Alaska's glorious wilderness areas and mountain ranges.

Minutes from central Anchorage is the Chugach Mountains area, a 9,000-square-mile state park and national forest that's home to wildlife, glaciers and miles of hiking trails. "These mountains are key to many of the adventures Anchorage has to offer," said Mattie.

The city, too, is flush with acres of parkland and greenbelt areas along with plenty of trails that wind their way through and around the city. "We have hundreds of miles of multi-use trails," said Mattie. "They're perfect for hiking, biking and all sorts of adventures."

Anchorage is also home to the Alaska Native Heritage Center, which celebrates the original residents of the state with displays of traditional





OUT-OF-STATE TRIP

# ANCHORAGE **ALASKA**

All photos courtesy of Visit Anchorage

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Sarah Mattie, Anchorage spokesperson

arts and crafts, replicas of dwellings of indigenous groups and live performances exemplifying native culture.

The area is also known for its abundant wildlife, which includes bears, whales, puffins and otters, though moose are among the most well-known and most beloved. “They live right in the city. It’s not uncommon to see moose on a greenbelt, or just walking down the road,” said Mattie.

The city is a resting point for many bird species on their annual migrations, and salmon are plentiful in area rivers and streams in summer.

Visitors should also be on the lookout for the bright white fur of dall sheep, which stands in stark contrast to the steep, brown mountainsides where they browse for food and elude predators such as wolves and coyotes.

“If you drive south, just outside the city, you can glance to your left and see dall sheep on the mountainside. Look to your right, and you’ll see beluga whales swimming in the Cook Inlet,” said Mattie.

Anglers can try to land some of the salmon, as well as rainbow trout and other local species in dozens of area waterways, including Ship Creek, Sand Lake and Campbell Creek. And those who want to try their hand at competitive fishing might enjoy the mid-June Slam’n Salm’n Derby, where men, women and kids compete to land the biggest king salmon.

Many Anchorage tourists plan their visit around the summer solstice, when the city gets 22 hours of daylight and celebrates with a downtown festival featuring late-night baseball, music and general merriment.

Other visitors organize trips to coincide with the first Saturday in March to witness the launch of the classic Iditarod Sled Dog Race, the epic endurance contest that finds mushers and their teams of Siberian huskies and Alaskan malamutes racing 1,150 miles through snow and ice from Anchorage to Nome.



While there’s plenty to do around town, visitors might want to venture out a bit and explore the southern tip of the Denali Wilderness, a short drive or train ride away from the city center. True adventure seekers might want to climb Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), the highest peak in North America.

Visitors can also go for a hike, boat ride or hound-pulled sled ride on one of the 60 glaciers that are within an hour’s drive of the city. The thick, slow-moving ice masses are ancient marvels of nature that are lasting gifts from the most recent Ice

Age.

“The glaciers are pretty magnificent. They’re a vibrant blue,” said Mattie. “They’re made of thousands of pounds of compacted ice and snow. Many visitors enjoy a glacier cruise out of Prince William Sound and listen for a glacier calving — when a part of a glacier breaks off.”

Whether Anchorage is a final destination or an entry point to a larger exploration, it’s a city worth discovering.

“I’ve lived here 20 years,” said Mattie. “And I still can’t get over how breathtaking it is. It’s just so beautiful.”

