

Up the Inside Passage

WHY GO Alaska is thousands of rugged miles from the Lower 48 – so remote and wild that it’s almost a mythical land. But there’s a link between dream and reality: every Friday the Alaska Ferry sets sail from Bellingham, Washington, tracing the Canadian coastline before slipping into the foggy emerald maze of Alaska’s Inside Passage.

Of the 27 All-American Roads, the Alaska Marine Highway is the only one that floats. Churning 3500 nautical miles from Bellingham and out to the far tendrils of the Aleutian Chain, some of the highway’s most dramatic scenes are pressed into the steep fjords and waterlogged fishing towns of the Inside Passage. A three-day trip on the ① **Alaska State Ferry** ends in Skagway, traveling through the US’s largest national forest, the Tongass, and stopping in several ports along the way. If you have more time, your options for detours are unlimited. A through-ticket will give you a small sample of time in each port, while point-to-point tickets let you decide how long to stay in each town.

In ② **Bellingham**, you can walk, bike or drive onto the vessel, which departs from brick-paved, historic ③ **Fairhaven District**. Make sure to give yourself at least an afternoon to explore this city neighborhood, stamped onto several blocks and crammed charmingly with flower shops, cafés and bookstores. Arrive the night before and sack out at the vintage-style ④ **Fairhaven Village Inn**. An excellent district-center option, the Inn is across the way from the Village Green Park’s farmer’s market and outdoor evening movies. Be sure to fill up with housemade desserts at the nearby ⑤ **Colophon Café & Deli**, and choose your reading material for your trip at the stacked Village Books, which mingles with the café.

TRIP
52



TIME
4 days

DISTANCE
1800km
(1119 miles)

BEST TIME TO GO
Jun – Sep

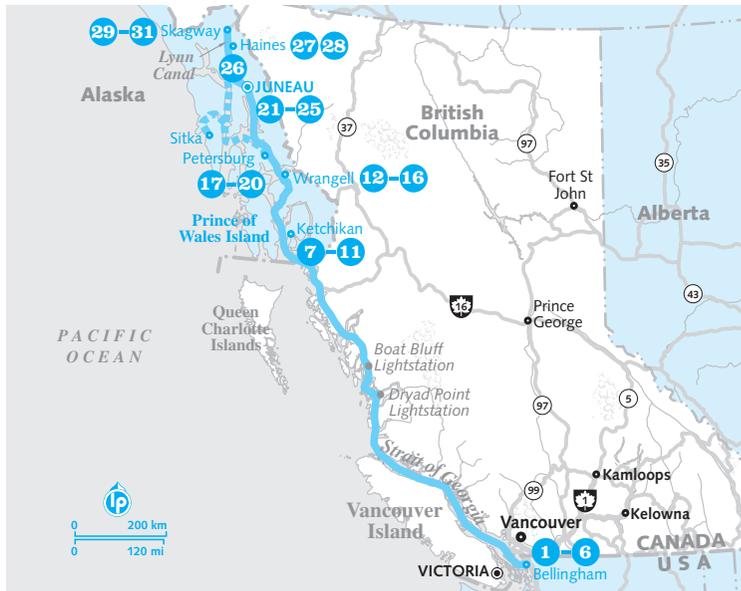
START
Bellingham,
WA

END
Skagway, AK

ALSO GOOD FOR



327



As the ferry slides out in to **6 Bellingham Bay**, you'll be treated to views of Mt Baker, sienna-colored brick buildings, and Victorian homes peering from the town's hillside. Not long after leaving port, the ferry squeezes between Canada's Vancouver Island and the mainland through the Strait of Georgia. This is the time to mix with the locals and travelers who share the ferry with you. This isn't a cruise ship, but that makes the experience all the more authentic. The solarium will be filled with the sleeping bags of adventurers hunkered down under heat lamps, while brightly colored tents flap in the wind on deck. The snack-bar fare is what you'd expect of public transportation, but warming up with a cup of coffee in a booth is a comfortable way to watch the coast pass by.

Thirty-six hours after departing Bellingham, the ferry makes its first stop in **7 Ketchikan**. Here you'll skim along the town's thin band of colorful buildings – with equally colorful histories – before docking north of the town center. The ferry stays in port long enough for you to explore the historic, albeit touristy, **8 Creek Street**. Though this boardwalk is now safe for families, in Ketchikan's early boom-town years the street was a clatter of brothels and bars. Pop into **9 Dolly's House Museum**, where you can get an insider's view of what was a working parlor. Namesake Dolly Arthur operated the brothel until prostitution was outlawed in the 1950s, and lived here until her death in the '70s.

A quality introduction to the Southeast region (simply called 'Southeast' by locals) is at the **10 Southeast Alaska Discovery Center**. Exhibits on South-



east's ecosystems and Native Alaskan traditions are showcased upstairs, while a re-created rain forest looms downstairs. It's a good place to help you identify what you're seeing from the windows of the ferry.

For some spiced-up local flavor head to **11 That One Place**, on the ground floor of the New York Hotel. This seafood-stuffed tapas restaurant is an inexpensive place to fill up on local fare before heading back to the boat.

After departing Ketchikan, the ferry hums through Clarence Strait before arriving at tiny, false-fronted **12 Wrangell** several hours later. You'll be greeted by the town's children, who set up folding tables (often in the rain) to sell their wares – deep-purple garnets that they've mined from the nearby Stikine River.

Wrangell practically spills over with historic, cultural and natural sights, including compelling **13 Petroglyph Beach**. Less than a mile from the ferry terminal, the beach is dotted with boulders depicting faces and figures that were carved thousands of years ago.

Lifelike whales and owls peer up at you, while some spirals eerily resemble crop circles. If you're just popping off the ferry during its quick stop, you can lace up your running shoes and jog there and back for a speedy examination of the stones. More recent Tlingit culture is showcased on the other side of town at **14 Chief Shakes Island & Tribal House**, an oddly peaceful site in the middle of the humming boat harbor. Here, six totem poles tower among pines, and eagles often congregate in the trees' branches. The island is always open to walking, though the tribal house usually only opens for cruise-ship groups.

BC'S STAFFED LIGHTHOUSES

The misty stretch of Canada between Washington and Alaska is home to 40 lighthouses, more than half of which require keepers. The ferry glides by picturesque **Dryad Point Lightstation**, which features an old-school style lighthouse perched on the northeastern tip of Campbell Island. Further north, **Boat Bluff Lightstation** is a simple aluminum skeleton, but the red-roofed outbuildings cling pleasantly to a small hillside and the keepers often emerge to wave to ferry passengers.

For an overnight stay – and Wrangell is certainly worth it – check out the **15 Alaskan Sourdough Lodge**. This family-owned lodge features a sauna, steam room and 16 spotless rooms, and it's a nice place to thaw out if you've been exploring in the rain.

Just after leaving Wrangell, the ferry enters the 22-mile long **16 Wrangell Narrows**. Too skinny and shallow for most large vessels, the Narrows (dubbed “Pinball Alley”) requires nearly 50 course corrections as boats thread between more than 70 green and red channel markers. The ferry *M/V Columbia* is the largest boat to navigate the Narrows, as water depth can get as shallow as 24ft at low tide.



At the end of the Narrows sits **17 Petersburg**, a fishing village with blond roots. Petersburg's thick Norwegian history is evident not just in the phonebook full of Scandinavian names, but also in the flowery rosemaling, a decorative Norwegian art form found on buildings throughout town. But to

really get into the heart of Petersburg, walk the docks of its **18 North Boat Harbor**. Here fisherfolk unload the day's catch from small purse seiners, distinguishable by the large nets piled in the stern. To sample locally caught seafood, plant yourself at a window seat at **19 Rooney's Northern Lights Restaurant**, where you can watch fisherman in the harbor unload your potential dinner.

MOUNTAIN BIKING POW ISLAND

The third-largest island in the US, mountainous Prince of Wales Island isn't a well-known mountain-biking destination, but that's due more to its remote location than its lack of spectacular terrain. Veined with over 1300 miles of mostly unpaved road and spotted with tiny villages, POW also has 21 public-use cabins scattered along its inlets and alpine lakes. There are dispiriting clear-cuts, but they're the reason for all those roads.

The Inter-Island Ferry (www.interislandferry.com) has service from Ketchikan, Wrangell and Petersburg.

Complement a layover in Petersburg with a kayak tour to **20 LeConte Glacier**, at the head of serpentine LeConte Bay. Constantly calving, the glacier is

somewhat infamous for icebergs that release under water and then shoot to the surface like icy torpedoes. If you're lucky you'll see one – from afar.

After brushing through quiet fishing towns, arriving to hustle of **21 Juneau** can be somewhat surprising. This is the only US capital with no road access, yet it still bustles with the importance of a government center. It's also postcard perfect, with massive green cliffs rising importantly above the city center. Be sure to stroll past the **22 Governor's Mansion**, its assertive columns and articulately landscaped shrubs a sharp contrast to the usual rain forest–rotted cabins of Southeast. If the political climate gets to be too much, head back toward the ferry terminal to the laid-back **23 Alaskan Brewing Company** for a tour and samples of beers that rival the Pacific Northwest's. The brewery is in the same neighborhood as the massive **24 Mendenhall Glacier**, which tumbles down from the Juneau Icefield and is one of the few glaciers in Southeast you can drive up to. The sleek visitors center offers a movie with the glacier as its star, as well as hiking trails and a salmon-viewing platform.

If your trip calls for a night in town, cozy up at the **25 Silverbow Inn**, where the smell of baking bread from the bakery downstairs wakes you in the morning. One of the amenities of this historic hotel is a bottomless cookie jar – at least it's easy to work them off on one of Juneau's many downtown hiking trails.

From Juneau, the ferry travels up the **26 Lynn Canal**, which is North America's longest (90 miles) and deepest (2000ft) fjord. The Canal is equally en-



dowed with glaciers and waterfalls, and it's hard not to stare at the scenery. Seventy-five miles from Juneau lies **27 Haines**, where most passengers with cars disembark as the town is the main link to the Alaska Hwy. Free from cruise-ship crowds, Haines has a laid-back vibe with almost extravagant scenery. Don't miss the **28 Hammer Museum**, which displays 1500 hammers and chronicles the history of man through them.

The ferry continues to **29 Skagway**, a gold-rush era town that revels in all its gaudy glory. The ferry deposits you about 100yd from the action of **30 Broadway Street**, where you'll find women dressed in feathered hats and bright satiny dresses vying for the attention of the many tourists wandering off cruise ships. Since Skagway is likely your last ferry stop, you'll have time to take the **31 White Pass & Yukon Railroad**, a narrated sightseeing tour aboard vintage parlor cars. This dramatic ride rumbles along a narrow-gauge line, through Glacier Gorge and over White Pass (a 2885ft climb), and also connects to the Yukon Territory. It's a refreshing change from the ferry, and, if you fly home, you'll be able to say you traveled by boat, rail and air.



Sitka is off the main route, but if you have some extra days or want to end your journey there, this town of 8800 people is well worth the extra time. The only city in Southeast that fronts the Pacific Ocean, Sitka looks out to the cone of Mt Edgecumbe as well as a clutter of small, treed islands. A hikers' and kayakers' delight, Sitka is a full day's journey from Juneau or Petersburg.

Whether you end your trip in Skagway or another port, you'll need to backtrack on the ferry, or fly south, to get home. There are few commercial flights from smaller towns, and to catch a major airline flight to Seattle you'll first need to fly to Juneau, Ketchikan or Sitka on a smaller carrier.

Catherine Bodry



TRIP INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

From Vancouver, drive south on Hwy 99 and I-5 53 miles to Exit 250 in Bellingham. From Seattle, take I-5 north 89 miles to Exit 250. Follow the signs to the Alaska Ferry Terminal.

DO

Alaska State Ferry

Ride from point to point, or one-way from Bellingham to Skagway (\$363). Accommodation includes camping on deck (no extra charge) or basic cabins (r from \$337).

☎ 907-465-3941, 800-642-0066; www.alaska.gov/ferry; terminal at end of Harris Ave, Bellingham, WA; ♿

Alaskan Brewing Company

The largest brewery in Alaska offers complimentary tours (and beer samples!). ☎ 907-780-5866; www.alaskanbeer.com; 5429 Shuane Dr, Juneau, AK; 🕒 11am-6pm

Dolly's House Museum

This was the home of Ketchikan's most famous madam. ☎ 907-225-6329; 24 Creek St, Ketchikan, AK; adult/child \$5/free; 🕒 8am-5pm

Hammer Museum

See 1500 hammers on display, from Roman relics to Tlingit artifacts. ☎ 907-766-2374; 108 Main St, Haines, AK; adult/child \$3/free; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri

Southeast Alaska Discovery Center

A great introduction to the great outdoors; in addition to cultural and natural exhibits, has spotting scopes for wildlife viewing. ☎ 907-228-6220; 50 Main St, Ketchikan, AK; adult/child \$5/free; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun, ♿

White Pass & Yukon Railroad

Several tours available; note that some cross into Canada so you'll need your passport. ☎ 907-983-2217, 800-343-7373; www

.whitepassrailroad.com; depot on 2nd Ave, Skagway, AK; Yukon Adventure adult/child \$165/82.50, White Pass Summit Excursion adult/child \$103/51.50

EAT

Colophon Café & Deli

Renowned for its African peanut soup and chocolate brandy cream pies, the café has an outside wine garden and is popular with local literati. ☎ 360-647-0092; 1208 11th St, Bellingham, WA; mains \$7-10; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sat

Rooney's Northern Lights Restaurant

Overlooks the bustling harbor; all the crab, halibut and shrimp on its seafood platter is locally caught. ☎ 907-772-2900; 203 Sing Lee Alley, Petersburg, AK; breakfast \$5-10, dinner \$16-30; 🕒 6am-9pm

SLEEP

Fairhaven Village Inn

A vintage hotel in the Fairhaven District that is a class above standard motel fare. ☎ 360-733-1311, 877-733-1100; www.fairhavenvillageinn.com; 1200 10th St, Bellingham, WA; r \$180-220

Alaskan Sourdough Lodge

Offers free shuttle from the ferry, and home-cooked meals are served family-style. ☎ 907-874-3613, 800-874-3613; www.akgateway.com; 1104 Peninsula St, Wrangell, AK; s/d \$105-115

Silverbow Inn

This artsy, six-room hotel has a rooftop hot tub and serves a full breakfast. ☎ 907-586-4146, 800-586-4146; www.silverbowinn.com; 120 2nd St, Juneau, AK; r \$170-210

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/
www.wingsofalaska.com

www.lonelyplanet.com/trip-planner

LINK YOUR TRIP

TRIP

20 Island & Orcas p147

51 Queen Charlotte Islands p323