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## Jumping Juneau

In a state overflowing with options, Alaska's capital city has plenty to offer

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**BY DALE LEATHERMAN**

**FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH**

Known as North America's "Last Frontier," Alaska is also a vast frontier -- miles of glaciers, lakes, fjords and mountain wilderness.

It's so big that most visitors can experience only a small part of it during a weeklong vacation -- unless they go to Juneau.

The capital city is the state in microcosm, a primer on Alaska's defining elements.

It's a fishing village, a cruise port, an art colony, a party town -- and adrenaline central for outdoor sports and adventure. Though Juneau is the seat of state government, its atmosphere is small-town casual. You'll see more people in jeans and rubber boots than in suits and ties.

Juneau is a great destination for winter sports, but most visitors prefer spring and summer, when the days are long and the temperatures comfortable.

But it's important to know that the city is in the heart of a rain forest, so you'll want to wear layers, the top one waterproof. Locals don't use umbrellas.

### Sightseeing

When the skies are clear, hop on the Mount Roberts Tramway.

The cable cars rise from the center of town to an 1,800-foot-high vantage point with spectacular views



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**Juneau, the capital of Alaska, combines big-city pursuits with access to countless outdoor activities.**



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of Juneau and the Gastineau Channel.

Easy trails lead to more overlooks and fields of wildflowers, with interpretive signs and traditional live-tree totem carvings along the way.

In the Raven Eagle Gift Shop, you can watch native craftspeople carving wood and gems and creating beaded artwork on deerskin. The Timberline Bar & Grill serves sumptuous crab feeds in season. Back at sea level, you can get a clear idea of what goes on in the sea at the Macaulay Salmon Hatchery, home to Alaska's largest aquarium, where more than 100 species of marine life reside.

Elevated walkways overlook holding tanks where young Pacific salmon wait to be released into the sea (May through June) and fish ladders where thousands of salmon work their way up 450 feet to spawning areas (July through September).

On the outskirts of town is another of the area's main attractions. Filling a broad valley as far as the eye can see is the Mendenhall Glacier, 1 1/2 miles wide at its face and towering over Mendenhall Lake.

Booming like a cannon, house-size icebergs calve into the lake, sending waves rippling across the surface. Observation points on the near side of the lake are so close to the icebergs that you can hear the pop of trapped air being released from the ice. Overlooking the lake and glacier is the glass-fronted visitors center, which contains a mother lode of glacial lore.

Miles of hiking trails wind through the woods, offering different perspectives of the lake and the glacier -- and chances to spot beavers, porcupines, minks, weasels, bears and salmon.

In Juneau, almost every street ends at the water. Sooner or later, you'll end up in a vessel of some sort, whether it's a kayak, a raft, a fishing boat or an excursion craft for bear- or whale-watching.

This is the place to see humpback whales and black bears (and, sometimes, grizzlies) in abundance. On a wildlife tour you're also likely to spot mountain goats, deer, Dall's porpoises, sea lions, harbor seals, otters -- and lots of birds. The best view is from a helicopter or seaplane, both of which are plentiful in Juneau.

Seaplanes tie up at the city docks just like boats. Climb aboard and in minutes you can look down on the 1,500-square-mile expanse of



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the Juneau Icefield, which extends all the way to Canada and is the source of 38 major glaciers.

Helicopters land on the icecap year-round so that visitors can take dog-sled tours or hike the frozen terrain.

### **Active pursuits**

Hiking and biking are passions in Juneau. More than 250 miles of trails lace the city and fan out into the countryside. Hiking paths lead to mountain overlooks, waterfalls, wildlife-viewing areas and the ruins of gold-mining camps.

More than 280 species of birds nest in Juneau, including bald eagles. Even if you're not usually a bird-watcher, you're likely to be captivated by the sight of eagles nesting or snatching salmon from the water.

The city is bike-friendly, which you can discover on your own or during a Cycle Alaska escorted ride around scenic Auke Lake and through the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area. Rides end at the Alaskan Brewing Co. for a lively tour and tasting session.

An exciting way to explore the woods is zip-lining with Alaska Zipline Adventures at the nearby Eaglecrest Ski Area. Secure in a harness dangling from a cable, riders zip along from platform to platform high in the trees, with a hawk's-eye view of the forest.

Adventures on the water (or under it) include scuba diving, kayaking the Mendenhall River, rafting on the Tatshenshini River (a great way to see wildlife) and fishing.

The waters off Juneau are a fisherman's dream, with plentiful salmon (five species), halibut, lingcod and rockfish. Plan on sturdy tackle and a good fight.

### **Downtown**

You can get an eyeful on the streets of Juneau, whether people-watching (Alaskans revel in their own quirkiness) or window-shopping. Browsing the galleries and high-end specialty shops is an education in the creativity of the Tlingit and Haida natives and other Alaskans.

Finds include handcrafted silver jewelry; sculptures in jade, ivory and precious woods; and paintings. T-shirt stores are stocked with gifts for back home as well as the sweat shirts, fleeces and rain gear you forgot to pack.

### **Museums**

To fully appreciate Juneau, you'll want some grounding in its history. Start with the Alaska State Museum and the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, then tour the Alaska-Juneau Mine to get a feel for the industry that played such an important role in the city's past.

During your visit atop Mount Roberts, be sure to see the 18-minute film in the Chilkat Theater on the

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Tlingits, who lived in the area long before the first white settlers.

### **Performing arts**

The Perseverance Theatre, Juneau's professional playhouse, has shown premieres of more than 50 new plays, many by Alaskan playwrights.

You can also catch live performances at Theatre in the Rough, Opera to Go, the Juneau Lyric Opera and the Juneau Symphony.

The city hosts music festivals in spring and summer, and local musicians frequently perform at the Timberline Bar & Grill atop Mount Roberts.

### **Food and drink**

At one time, 30 saloons lined S. Franklin Street. There aren't as many now, but some of those that remain are historic gems with Victorian furnishings and memorabilia. Check out Wyatt Earp's revolver, on display in the Red Dog Saloon.

Dining options vary from fast food to elegant fare in the Gold Room of the historic Westmark Baranof Hotel. Juneau has a mix of cultures that equals international cities 10 times its size, so it's easy to find Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Filipino, Russian and Thai cuisine.

The Silverbow Bakery still uses its original 100-year-old sourdough starter.

On the opposite end of that spectrum is seafood served within hours of being plucked from the sea. Salmon and Alaskan king crab dishes ascend to a higher plane, and you won't find better fish and chips anywhere else.

### **Lodging**

Places to stay range from campgrounds and chain motels to upscale resorts and hotels. Near the airport is the Best Western Country Lane Inn, a homey place with comfortable rooms, an airport shuttle and bald eagles nesting in a tree out front.

Some of the most elegant accommodations are offered by the Goldbelt Hotel, downtown on the waterfront. A Tlingit village once occupied the site, and the hotel honors the native heritage with a display of museum-quality Alaskan art in the lobby.

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### **If you go**

Juneau has a little bit of everything.

### **Activities**

- Alaska Zipline Adventures, 907-321-0947, [www.alaskazip.com](http://www.alaskazip.com)
- Cycle Alaska, 907-780-2253, [www.cycleak.com](http://www.cycleak.com)

### **Lodging**

- Best Western Country Lane Inn, 1-888-781-5005, [www.countrylaneinn.com](http://www.countrylaneinn.com)
- Goldbelt Hotel, 1-888-478-6909, [www.goldbelthotel.com](http://www.goldbelthotel.com)

### **Downtown**

- Juneau Arts and Humanities Council, 907-586-2787, [www.jahc.org](http://www.jahc.org)
- Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1-888-581-2201, [www.traveljuneau.com](http://www.traveljuneau.com)
- Juneau Lyric Opera, 907-586-2742, [www.juneauopera.org](http://www.juneauopera.org)
- Juneau Symphony, 907-586-4676, [www.juneausymphony.org](http://www.juneausymphony.org)
- Opera to G, 907-586-2255, [www.operatogo.net](http://www.operatogo.net)
- Perseverance Theatre, 907-364-2421, [www.perserverance.theatre.org](http://www.perserverance.theatre.org)
- Theatre in the Rough (see Juneau Arts and Humanities Council)

### **Sightseeing**

- Macaulay Salmon Hatchery, 1-877-463-2486, [www.dipac.net](http://www.dipac.net)
- Mendenhall Glacier, 907-789-0097, [www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/mendenhall](http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/districts/mendenhall)
- Mount Roberts Tramway, 1-888-461-8726, [www.mountrobertstramway.com](http://www.mountrobertstramway.com)

### **DINING**

- Red Dog Saloon, 907-463-3658, [www.reddogsaloon.com](http://www.reddogsaloon.com)
- Timberline Bar & Grill, 1-888-461-8726, [www.goldbelttours.com](http://www.goldbelttours.com)

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