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Alaska, off the beaten path

Most take in America's last frontier from the deck of a cruise ship, but there are many other ways to enjoy the Frozen North up close and personal



Take a trip on the ZipRider, where you can travel as fast as 60 mph above the Tongass National Forest. (June 14, 2008)

By Jane Engle, Tribune Newspapers

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Sarah Palin may have put **Alaska** on the political map, but to many of her fellow citizens, the 49th state remains a formidable frontier.

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"Do you guys take American money?" is a question that Ron Peck, president of the Alaska Travel Industry Association,, says he gets from visitors.

Maybe that's why many travelers prefer to glide by Alaska's heart-stopping scenery from the confines of a cruise ship. In 2009, about a million of the state's 1.62 million summer visitors spent at least one night on a cruise ship.

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But you will find myriad other ways to experience America's last frontier. Here's a quirky sampling:

Surfboard: "People think, 'Oh, man, surfing in Alaska; that must be horrendously cold,'" said Jack

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Endicott, co-owner of Icy Waves Surf Shop in Yakutat, about halfway between **Juneau** and **Anchorage**. But at 50 to 60 degrees, the Pacific summer surf isn't much chillier there than in **Santa Cruz**, Calif., he said. And there are advantages.

"We don't have a lot of stuff that can eat you," Endicott said. "Sharks are few and far between."

So are fellow wave riders.

With a glacier as your backdrop, what's not to like? And you can't beat the bragging rights. Yakutat may be Alaska's best-known surfing destination, but you can also catch waves at Kodiak, Sitka and numerous spots along the state's 40,000-odd miles of coastline.

Dog sled: You can pay about \$100 to hitch a brief ride with the huskies on a cruise-ship excursion. But to really be top dog, learn to mush. All Alaska Tours in Anchorage will fly you 110 miles by ski plane to Winterlake Lodge, a checkpoint in the renowned **Iditarod race**, to attend dog-sledding school.

By Day 3, you're usually driving a team, "out in nature with nothing but the animals and you and a guide," said company owner Al Koch. The four-night trip costs \$3,752 per person, including airfare, gear, training and meals.

Zip line: If hurtling down a cable at 60 mph above dense forest sounds fun, strike out for Icy Strait Point, which claims its zip line is one of North America's longest (5,330 feet) and highest (1,330 feet above sea level). During your 90-second run, if you dare to look down, you will catch sweeping views of Port Frederick and Icy Strait, about 50 miles west of Juneau, before landing on the beach.

The six zip lines cater mostly to cruise passengers. The quick thrill is packaged with a 90-minute tour that includes nearby Hoonah village and costs about \$99 per person and up, depending on the ship, said Don Rosenberger, head of tourism development for Icy Strait Point.

Ferry: Sooner or later, if you spend much time in the Frozen North, you will find yourself on the Alaska Marine Highway System, whose routes stretch 3,500 miles from Bellingham, Wash., to Dutch Harbor near the tip of the Aleutian Islands.

Sometimes called "the poor man's Alaskan cruise," a ferry trip can cost less than a regular cruise or more, especially if you take your vehicle, which typically adds hundreds to the tab. But then, you can take wheels and stop whenever, wherever and as long you like. The ferry means freedom.

You will meet lots of Alaskans, too. They make up two-thirds of the 340,000 or so annual passengers on the system, which was designed to move goods and services, not tourists, to roadless towns. For overnights on bigger vessels, you can pitch a tent on deck, flop on a lounge chair in a heated solarium or spring for a spartan but comfy cabin.

Sample one-way fare: \$363 per adult from Bellingham to Skagway, Alaska, in July. Add \$337 total for a two-berth cabin (or \$84.25 per person for four to a cabin) and \$820 for a small vehicle.

Bicycle: "You have to be ready for anything," said Jeff Boudreau, general manager of Sockeye Cycle Co. in Haines. "It could be July and it's snowing, or it could be 90 degrees. And be prepared for some pretty phenomenal views."

Sockeye runs day trips and multiday tours, including a nine-day Golden Circle Tour between Haines and Skagway, which costs \$2,225 per person with a guide and \$850 without. As the crow flies, the towns are only 20 miles and a short ferry ride apart. But by road, it's about 360 miles, which is what you will bike, Boudreau said.

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Icy Waves Surf Shop, Yakutat, Alaska; 907-784-3226, icywaves.com

All Alaska Tours; 866-317-3325, alaskatours.com

Icy Strait Point; <http://www.icystraitpoint.com>

Alaska Marine Highway System; 800-642-0066, ferryalaska.com

Sockeye Cycle Co.; 877-292-4154, cyclealaska.com

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