

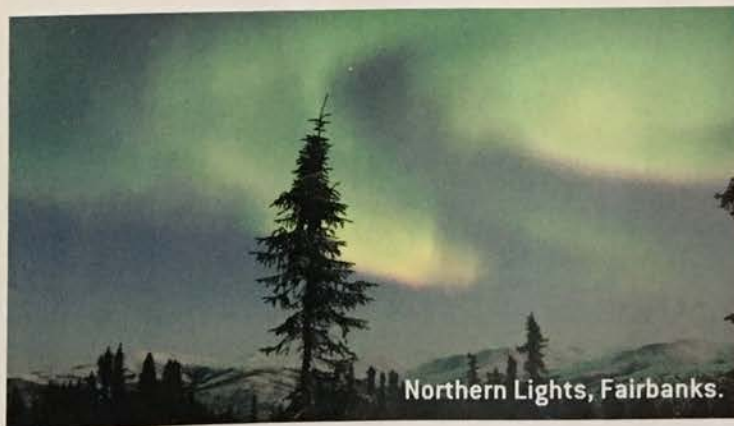


Alaska Zipline Adventures, Juneau

THE SUPERLATIVE STATE

The tallest peak, the largest forests and the biggest meetings—all in Alaska.

By Renee Brincks



Northern Lights, Fairbanks.

America's largest state sets many records. Alaska has the country's highest mountain (Mount McKinley), two largest national forests (the Tongass and Chugach) and greatest concentration of bald eagles (they converge near Haines late each autumn), plus more active glaciers than anywhere in the inhabited world.

According to planners, the state also draws record numbers for meetings. "For the majority of meetings and conventions that come to Alaska, attendance is higher than normal," says Toni Walker, president of **Logistics, LLC**, a convention and meeting management company based in Anchorage. "It's not just a meeting. It's a destination that people have on their bucket list. It's an opportunity for them to come with their family and spend pre- or post-days enjoying Alaska."

Citing research from the Alaska Travel Industry Association, Walker says that most visitors come to the Frontier State in search of three particular sights: mountains, glaciers and wildlife. The state offers much more, of

course—Native Alaskan culture, exotic culinary indulgences, historical attractions and recreational adventures, for starters.

When Walker plans meetings and incentives for clients, she aims to include it all. That means chartering helicopters to carry guests, gear and guides to remote riverfront lodges for white-water rafting trips and salmon bakes. Or flying tents and tables to the top of a glacier and hosting high-end luncheons followed by dog-sledding tours. Or reserving Alaska Railroad dome cars and transporting guests from Anchorage to Seward to catch a wildlife-watching cruise before cocktails and a crab dinner on Fox Island.

Whatever the audience and whatever the interest, Alaska has an option.

"Alaska has everything to offer for everyone, and I truly believe that," Walker says. "From adventure...to family-oriented activities, we have it all."

DENALI & FAIRBANKS ▼

Dynamic beauty and diverse wildlife make **Denali National Park and Preserve** one of Alaska's most treasured—and most visited—destinations. Stop at the visitor center for an introduction, and then head out to explore. With some 200 types of birds and mammals and more than 1,500 plant species, plus glaciers, forests and the magnificent Mount McKinley, the park is the highlight of many an Alaskan adventure.

Visitors often choose Denali as a pre- or post-trip addition to meetings in Alaska. Lodging inside the park is limited, but nearby campgrounds, cabins and resorts provide plenty of convenient options. Set on a ridge on the south side of Mount McKinley 113 miles north of Anchorage, the 212-room **Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge** has mountain-view outdoor venues and three indoor meeting spaces that accommodate up to 170 for receptions. From mid-May to mid-September, the **Denali Princess Wilderness Lodge** offers easy park access and several dining and entertainment choices.

Staying in Fairbanks, 120 miles north of Denali, is another option. From there, travelers take a four-hour **Alaska Railroad** journey to the park. Passing through deep canyons and dense forests, the train ride is an unforgettable experience. And Fairbanks welcomes guests with small-town friendliness and rustic charm.

"People choose to meet in Fairbanks when they want more of an authentically Alaskan experience," explains Helen Renfrew, meetings and conventions director at the **Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau**. She says the destination really suits groups with a connection to the landscape: sustainable energy and fossil fuel professionals, earthquake and volcano researchers, cold-weather growers and

those coming to view the aurora borealis.

Fairbanks also pleases planners looking for a bargain. Values abound in the fall, winter and spring, when prices for the city's 3,300 hotel rooms are sometimes 50% less than in the summer. Even the high season can be a steal for groups with flexibility.

"Our pattern in the summer generally leaves space available on Fridays and Saturdays," says Renfrew. "If it's the kind of meeting that's going to be here just a couple of days and they have enough flexibility, we're finding that Friday and Saturday nights offer some steep discounts on standard summer rates."

The **Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center** has introduced a new exhibit hall spotlighting life in the Alaska Interior, and the center's theater, classroom and conference spaces hold up to 350 for receptions. A fresh alternative for off-site events is the **Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum** at Wedgewood Resort. The 30,000-square-foot facility displays 60 vintage vehicles along with period fashions and historical artifacts.

SOUTH CENTRAL: ANCHORAGE & VALDEZ ▼

Because so many people dream of visiting Alaska, it makes sense to hold meetings here, says Julie Dodds, director of convention sales for the **Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau**. The destination has several distinct advantages.

"You have your meeting, and you offer delegates something different and exciting, while still being affordable and in the United States," she says. "We offer the best of both worlds."

In Anchorage, the best of both worlds also means big-city event facilities bordered by spectacular natural beauty. The 200,000-square-foot **Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center** opened in late 2008, and has floor-to-ceiling windows, skylights and views of the Chugach Mountains.



Alaska Railroad.

Alaska Native artwork and modern design distinguish three levels of ballrooms and meeting venues; a 50,000-square-foot exhibit hall holds nearly 300 trade-show booths or seats 5,000 theater-style. Recent interior renovations updated Anchorage's other main facility, the **William A. Egan Civic and Convention Center**, a venue with 45,000 sq. ft. of versatile function space.

Downtown Anchorage has more than 3,000 hotel rooms, many in the four main convention properties: the 547-room **Hotel Captain Cook**, 600-room **Hilton Anchorage**, 390-room **Anchorage Marriott Downtown** and 370-room **Sheraton Anchorage Hotel and Spa**. Steps away are endless cultural and recreational outings.

"What's nice about Anchorage is that you can

GETTING THERE

- **Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport**, Alaska's largest airport, is located four miles southwest of downtown Anchorage and is served by carriers who fly to the lower 48 states, international destinations and points throughout Alaska.
- **Juneau International Airport** is located seven miles northwest of the city's downtown. The airport serves as a regional hub for Alaska Airlines/Horizon Air, which flies from Juneau to Seattle, Anchorage and other points in Alaska, and a variety of hopper flights.
- **Fairbanks International Airport** is located three miles southwest of downtown Fairbanks. It is served by Alaska Airlines and Era Alaska year-round, and Delta and Frontier on a seasonal basis.
- The **Alaska Marine Highway** covers more than 3,500 miles of waterways, with ferry service through the Inside Passage, Prince William Sound and Aleutian Islands from as far south as Bellingham, Wash.

experience Alaska whether you have one day, three days, five days or seven days. It just depends on how far out you want to go," Dodds says.

For starters, the **Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center** opened its new Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center last year. It features 600 never-before-displayed artifacts. Nearby, the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail stretches 11 miles from downtown to Kincaid Park, and a new audio tour by **Lifetime Adventures Alaska** details sites along the way. **Salmon Berry Tours'** two-hour Chocolate City Circuit showcases the city's sweet side with a tour and truffle tastings. The company is also among several operating outdoor excursions in the area.

Attendees save by meeting in Anchorage in the off-season, Dodds says, and groups convening in March might catch the start of the famous **Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race**. Winter also attracts guests to **Alyeska Resort**, 40 miles from Anchorage, where 1,400 skiable acres, 304 guest rooms, a spa, several restaurants and 24,000 sq. ft. of meeting and event space await.

Valdez is tucked along a deepwater fjord in picturesque Prince William Sound, a 300-mile drive

east of Anchorage. Adventure tours keep visitors busy here, as do exhibits at the **Valdez Museum & Historical Archive**.

New theater seats were part of renovations completed at the 20,000-square-foot **Valdez Civic Center** in March. The facility seats up to 450 and has exhibit, ballroom and reception spaces. A covered outdoor venue at the city's **John Kelsey Municipal Dock** is also available for summer banquets and events.

SOUTHEAST: INSIDE PASSAGE (JUNEAU, SITKA & KETCHIKAN) ▼

Juneau is just a two-hour flight from Seattle, five hours from Chicago and seven hours from Orlando, and that makes Alaska's capital city a convenient point of entry for exploring.

"Groups that meet here have very easy access to all those iconic Alaskan experiences," says Ken Hill, convention sales manager for the **Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau**. "This is particularly important for people who are attending from out of state for national or regional events."

Surrounded by the Tongass National Forest and a 1,500-square-mile glacial ice field, Juneau earns headlines for its remarkable landscapes. The **Mendenhall Glacier** is a top stop, and guests take the **Mount Roberts Tramway** to private events at 1,800 feet. **Alaska Powder Descents'** winter heli-ski outings and **Alaska Zipline Adventures'** canopy tour are two of the area's most exciting new alternatives for team-building outings.

Juneau's downtown is friendly for those traveling on foot, and many whale-watching, dog-sledding and fishing tours depart from the docks here. **Centennial Hall Convention Center** is Juneau's major gathering point for groups. It has four meeting rooms, and its 12,389-square-foot Sheffield Ballroom can be divided into three separate venues.

Many inns and eateries have event space as well, including the **Hangar on the Wharf**, **Prospector Hotel** and **Westmark Baranof Hotel**, as do the **Alaska State Museum**, **Glacier Gardens** and other cultural favorites.

Hill dispels the myth that summer cruise ships mean a shortage of visitor opportunities in Juneau.

"The people who are on the cruise ships sleep on

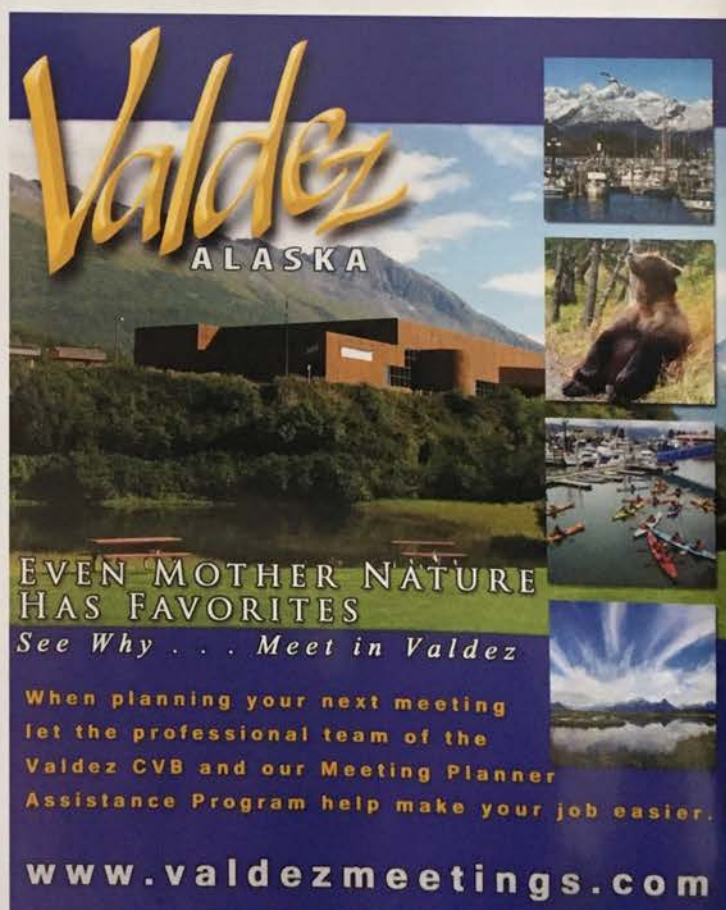


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[them], and they leave every night. A lot of people don't look at summer events here because they're concerned about access to hotel rooms, but that's not really a problem," he says, adding that discounted rates are common in September, October and November.

Nearby, the small towns of Skagway and Haines celebrate local culture, gold rush history and wildlife with an array of enticing tours and museums.

Sitka, also small and stunning, was once the capital of Russian America and retains that character in several of its architectural gems. Native Tlingit culture is evident in totem displays at Alaska's oldest national park, **Sitka National Historical Park**, and at the **Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi Community House**, which welcomes groups for dance performances and presentations.

Sitka is set along the Pacific Ocean side of the Inside Passage. The city's waterfront meeting facility, **Harrigan Centennial Hall**, has a 500-seat auditorium and several smaller venues for dinners and board retreats. Off-site alternatives include the **Alaska Raptor Center** and the **Sheldon Jackson Museum**.



Clockwise (from left): Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge, Denali; Westmark Baranof Hotel, Juneau; Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center, Anchorage.

Down south in the Inside Passage, the 4,500-square-foot **Ted Ferry Civic Center** in **Ketchikan** serves as a central meeting point for groups. Highlights include a stage overlooking 550 seats, plus conference and pre-function spaces with wide windows and high ceilings. Meeting delegates at the **Sunny Point Conference Center** in the **Best Western Landing Hotel** enjoy complimentary wireless Internet access and two on-site restaurants.

When business is done for the day, Ketchikan offers harbor tours, sea kayaking, floatplane trips to **Misty Fjords National Monument** and more. Fans



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Aleutian Ballard, Ketchikan.

WORTH THE JOURNEY: KODIAK ▼

For quintessential Alaska, complete with brown bears, stunning water vistas and beautiful wilderness, fly or ferry to picturesque Kodiak. The town is rich with Alutiiq, Russian and military history—all three of which you can explore at the **Baranov Museum**. Alaska's largest island is also an outdoor paradise for meetings.

"We're good for groups who like to have some extracurricular activities," says Susan Johnson, **Kodiak Island Convention & Visitors Bureau** board member and general manager of the **Best Western Kodiak Inn**.

Outdoor fun here includes kayaking local coves and channels, biking in Fort Abercrombie State Park, hiking, walking along the harbor, tidepooling, salt-water fishing and heading out on all-terrain vehicles. Several operators run bear-viewing trips to **Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge**, which covers two-thirds of the island and is home to more than 3,000 bears.

Back in town, several of Kodiak's community

venues accommodate groups of 100 people or fewer. For larger get-togethers, the 3,200-square-foot Harbor Pavilion Room at the **Kodiak Harbor Convention Center** holds up to 450 in theater-style setups or 270 at seated rounds. The facility, which opened next to the Kodiak Inn in 2009, also has two smaller venues and offers water and mountain views.

Johnson advises meeting planners to book Kodiak events at least a year in advance, and she recommends looking for budget-friendly rates between November and April. Depending on the day, skies during that season might be snowy, rainy, chilly or clear.

"There's definitely a mix of everything, but we're fairly temperate, so we stay warmer than other Alaskan communities," says Johnson. ☐

Freelance writer Renee Brincks lived in Iowa, Alaska, Australia and Spain before settling in California, where she writes for travel and lifestyle publications.

of the Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch* can climb aboard the *Aleutian Ballard*, a crab boat that appeared on the show, for a fishing trip off the Ketchikan coast. As they learn about the local fishing industry, participants might also spot whales, seals and bald eagles.

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For more information about properties, venues and attractions in Alaska, visit smartmeetings.com/event-planning/alaska.

CVB RESOURCES

- Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau
anchorage.net
- Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau
explorefairbanks.com
- Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau
traveljuneau.com
- Ketchikan Visitors Bureau
visitketchikan.com
- Kodiak Island Convention & Visitors Bureau
kodiakisland.org
- Nome Convention & Visitors Bureau
visitnomealaska.com
- Seward Chamber of Commerce and Conference & Visitors Bureau
seward.com
- Sitka Convention & Visitors Bureau
sitka.org
- Valdez Convention and Visitors Bureau
valdezalaska.org

FAIRBANKS		
Fairbanks Princess Riverside Lodge princesslodges.com	325 rms/9,135 sq. ft.	Hotel deck overlooks the Chena River. Facilities include 5 meeting rooms; largest seats 360 for banquets; outdoor event terrace.
Pike's Waterfront Lodge pikeslodge.com	208 rms/6,330 sq. ft.	Microwave and refrigerator in each room; steam room and sauna; summer concierge service; a 4,500-square-foot waterfront ballroom.
Wedgewood Resort fountainheadhotels.com	462 rms/32,000 sq. ft.	One- and 2-bedroom suites; on-site dining; 5 meeting rooms, plus expansive antique auto museum and outdoor venues.
Westmark Fairbanks Hotel and Conference Center westmarkhotels.com/fairbanks.php	400 rms/17,000 sq. ft.	Thirteen event spaces accommodate 10–400; 2 restaurants, fitness and dining facilities; free wireless Internet in public spaces.
DENALI		
McKinley Princess Wilderness Lodge princesslodges.com	460 rms/3 meeting rms	Located south of Denali on the Chulitna River. Three-story Great Room looks out over Mount McKinley; shuttle service to Talkeetna.
Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge talkeetnalodge.com	212 rms/1,900 sq. ft.	Set on 640 scenic acres; mile-and-a-half walking trail on property; jacuzzi suites; largest indoor venue holds 170 for receptions.
ANCHORAGE		
Anchorage Marriott Downtown marriott.com/anchorage	390 rms/14,000 sq. ft.	Convenient downtown location; indoor pool and workout room; full-service business center; 12 meeting rooms with maximum event seating of 888.
Hilton Anchorage hiltonanchorage.com	600 rms/20,000 sq. ft.	Most rooms have Chugach Mountain views; largest meeting room seats 720. On-site business center; walking distance to convention district.
Hotel Alyeska at Alyeska Resort alyeskaresort.com	304 rms/24,000 sq. ft.	Event venues feature floor-to-ceiling windows, mountain views and formal decor. Four-Diamond restaurant, full-service spa and a 60-person tram.
Hotel Captain Cook captaincook.com	547 rms/18,500 sq. ft.	Junior and executive suites. Fourteen meeting rooms, from 288-square-foot library to a 9,000-square-foot ballroom; athletic facilities and a pool.
Sheraton Anchorage Hotel and Spa sheratonanchoragehotel.com	370 rms/24,000 sq. ft.	Flat-screen TVs, refrigerator, 24-hour in-room dining and on-site spa; largest meeting room is 9,395 sq. ft.; local shuttle service; free Wi-Fi in lobby.
JUNEAU		
Aspen Suites Juneau aspenhotelsak.com	78 rms/2 meeting rms	Opens this month. Kitchenette suites with flat-screen TVs, desk and dining area; some rooms offer sleeper sofas and free Wi-Fi.
Prospector Hotel prospectorhotel.com	62 rms/1,745 sq. ft.	Close to Centennial Hall Convention Center. Spacious rooms with ergonomic desk chairs, microwave and refrigerator.
Westmark Baranof Hotel westmarkhotels.com	195 rms/5,102 sq. ft.	Channel views; close to downtown venues and shopping; restaurant, fitness center, free Internet access in the lobby and 7 meeting rooms.
SITKA		
Westmark Sitka westmarkhotels.com	105 rms/1,664 sq. ft.	Close to harbor, historical sites and Alaska Raptor Center; room service, restaurant, fitness center; council room seats 100 for banquets.
KETCHIKAN		
Cape Fox Lodge capefoxlodge.com	72 rms/1,800 sq. ft.	Ski lodge-style rooms with microwaves; mountain and water views; on-site dining, laundry facilities; accessible by car or by tram.
KODIAK		
Comfort Inn Kodiak comfortinn.com	50 rms/1 meeting rm	Located on the Buskin River, minutes from downtown; on-site dining, exercise room and sun deck; complimentary continental breakfast.