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Seven Cannot Miss Alaska Day Trips

Sure-fire picks that will give your clients the Alaska adventure of a lifetime

By Christopher Batin
April 3, 2011



The Tundra Wilderness Tour is a top choice for wildlife viewing. // © 2011 bus: Kent Miller/NPS

People may visit Alaska for a variety of reasons, but it is the adventures they experience when they are there -- often in the form of day trips -- that are the lifeblood of tourism to the Great Land. Clients love these thrill-seeking dalliances with the final frontier, and it's easy to understand why: Such trips invigorate so intensely that they are known to produce a noticeable zest in the steps of even the most sedate tourists.

Yet good adventuring doesn't require clients to be adrenaline junkies hooked on whitewater rafting or rappelling down mountain cliffs. The same thrill can often be seen in the eyes of grandma as she holds a wiggling, four-foot-long, fresh-caught crab or the quickened breathing of a teenager as he explores the alien landscape of a glacier for the first time.

Such one-of-a-kind adventures may require a bit more work for travel agents to arrange, but they can also be sure winners for agents year after year. Over the last few months, I've sampled or investigated numerous "sure-thing" tours in Alaska -- including new offerings and some old favorites -- looking for the best of the best. Here are seven of my top picks.

1. Up Close With Alaska Wildlife

Denali Park Resorts offers the Tundra Wilderness Tour, a day-long adventure via bus that offers the best opportunity to see moose, sheep, wolf, bear and caribou along the system of roads that run through Denali National Park.

I have sent visiting relatives on this tour twice and, each time, they have returned with photos that were on par with professional wildlife photographers.

For clients who can stay a little longer, Camp Denali and Northface Lodge are my hands-down favorites. These family-owned properties offer great accommodations, superb meals, up-close views of Denali and in-depth seminars and excursions by visiting experts.

www.denaliparkresorts.com
www.campdenali.com

2. The Need for Speed

A full-size Zodiac powered by a 30-horsepower Honda outboard idles at the dock as I settle in behind the steering wheel and toss off the mooring line. I steer the boat toward the channel and reach my hand out to catch the chop of saltwater inches from my seat. I follow the lead boat out to our "track," the entire Alaska Inside Passage, dotted with the occasional cruise ship or floatplanes.

The guide in charge of this Ketchikan Outdoors Zodiac tour revs up the outboard and jettisons across the waves. The rest of our group follows, splitting up for the several-mile run to the first attraction. My boat vaults off a wave like being strapped onto the top of a skipped stone and, on the way down, I hit a wave and skip a few more times before I'm on plane again.

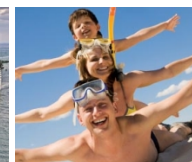
"I'm having way too much fun," I think.

For the rest of the tour, our group follows the guide around to local sights such as George Inlet Cannery, stopping along the way to view numerous orcas and humpback whales. At the end of the half-day tour, we ease into a secluded, rainforest cove, complete with a campfire, salmon dip, crackers and a hot beverage

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before the leisurely return to dock.
www.ketchikanoutdoors.com

3. An All-Wet Tour

Snorkel Alaska is definitely one of the most unusual excursions visitors can enjoy in an afternoon. Some of the marine life they will discover at owner Fred Drake's handpicked snorkeling sites include salmon, rockfish, eels and starfish hiding between layers of multi-colored bull kelp. In fact, I saw more marine life in the two hours I was snorkeling than I have on any previous Alaska wildlife tour. It's a solid five-star rating in my book.

The staff matches gear and wetsuits to each client. While clients don't need to be good swimmers to enjoy this tour, the better they are, the more fun they will have. Weaker swimmers are accompanied on a tour of the shoreline, while skilled snorkelers can explore the many drop-offs where big fish hide in the seaweed forests.
www.snorkelalaska.com

4. Alaska From Above

Glacier landings via helicopter are popular with cruise-ship passengers visiting Ketchikan, Skagway and Juneau. And the longer the actual time spent on the glacier, the better the adventure, which is why I prefer NorthStar Helicopters out of Juneau for the best heli-trekking adventure on a glacier.

Some helicopter tours require you to stay within sight of the helicopter and offer no crampons or glacier gear. NorthStar's five-hour X-Trek tour offers a guide, plus all equipment necessary to spend three hours exploring Mendenhall Glacier. Clients will have the opportunity to learn how to rappel 80 feet down an ice face or ice climb with crampons and axes.

Elsewhere, fixed-wing glacier landings in Denali National Park, on the Sheldon Amphitheatre or Ruth Glacier, are popular for those seeking to get close to one of the greatest mountain ranges in North America. Because of its close proximity to Denali, Talkeetna is the best place from which to plan a Denali flightseeing trip. K2 Aviation, in Talkeetna, offers a variety of Denali flightseeing and glacier-landing tours, while Denali Air, just outside Denali National Park, uses twin-engine Piper Navahos for some of the best flightseeing tours. The twin engines allow a smooth flight around the summit of Denali and, because of its speed, the tour takes in a variety of additional sights and attractions not often available when flying on smaller aircraft.
www.denali-air.com
www.northstartrekking.com
www.flyk2.com

5. Quite a Catch

Welcome aboard the Aleutian Ballad, a 107-foot-long crabbing boat, for the Bering Sea Crab Fishermen's Tour. This 3½-hour tour explores the life of a crabbing boat as seen on the hit television show, "The Deadliest Catch." In fact, the Aleutian Ballad was one of the ships featured on season two of the show.

During the excursion, clients relax in a comfortable theater-style seat while being treated to a variety of commercial crabbing displays, reenactments and captivating performances by its crew. To me, the best part of the excursion was cruising among the forested islands and checking the crab traps. The crew entertained passengers by telling stories and explaining how the gear is used, all the while pulling up a variety of crab and marine critters that they then display on stage. Meanwhile, "critter handlers" worked through the crowd with the catch, allowing everyone to take photos.
www.56degreesnorth.com

6. Waterfall Resort

Location plays a big factor in why Waterfall Resort is Alaska's premier saltwater fishing lodge. The resort, located on the outer edge of the Gulf of Alaska, benefits from the upwelling nutrients from the Continental Shelf that bring with it hungry sportfish. Guests not only intercept in-migrating salmon, but they can also target the feeding salmon that stay concentrated in this region year-round. All of this adds up to a sure-fire location for angler success throughout the summer.

Location, combined with personalized service, superb meals, knowledgeable guides and equipment -- as well as bonus halibut and cod fishing -- make this lodge a solid five-star option. Clients will especially like the way the resort staff fillet, custom pack, flash freeze and box up a client's fish and tag it directly to the final destination, eliminating the hassle of airport check-in. www.waterfallresort.com

7. Icy Strait Point: One Hot Destination

Here's some trivia for you: Most people don't know that Icy Strait Point, Alaska, is home to the ZipRider, one of the world's longest and highest zipline rides, measuring 5,300 feet in length with a 1,300-foot vertical drop. Each of the six, mile-long cables allow riders to reach speeds of up to 60 mph.

"A family can ride next to each other or race each other," said Icy Strait Point marketing manager Don Rosenberger. "It's a 90-second ride that is the culmination of a 90-minute tour. Guests start at sea level and are bused up the eight miles through rainforest to the top of the mountain where the zipline begins."

In addition, while fly-out bear tours in Alaska are very expensive and limited in capacity, Rosenberger said that Icy Strait offers great bear-viewing as a post-zipline bonus from platforms that can accommodate

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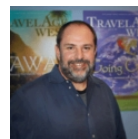
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Ken's Daily Muse



Trade Show Report
 At [Cruise Shipping Miami's](#) State of the Industry panel, executives discuss changes and challenges.

families or groups in complete safety. The bear-viewing tour at Icy Strait Point is available after a 20-minute bus ride and a quarter-mile walk to three platforms that overlook the bear-viewing area.

"We have an 84 percent sighting for bears and a 100 percent guarantee sighting for whales," Rosenberger said. "We offer \$100 to anyone who doesn't see a whale, and we haven't had to pay up yet." www.icystraitpoint.com

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