The Southeast Alaska Towns of Juneau, Skagway, and Sitka
The southeast panhandle of Alaska differs sharply from the more northerly sections of the state. Precipitation here is high, comparing with Washington State, so the trees, such as Sitka spruce, grow to great heights and can be harvested for lumber or pulp.

The region is the most historic in Alaska. Sitka was the site of the major Russian colony during their fur-gathering era. At Juneau, prospectors made major Alaska gold discoveries. From Skagway, some 20,000 hardy miners, plus many women and children, climbed over the Chilkoot Pass to the Yukon Gold Rush of 1898.

The region is tied together by a Marine Highway ferry boat system operating between Seattle and Skagway. Waterways, shoreline, and boating are major aspects
of life here. Southeast Alaska has 33,000 miles of coastline, fully 68 percent of the Alaska coastline. One out of five people owns a boat. The weather is rainy, but the citizens compensate. If rain appears imminent on the Fourth of July festivities, they reschedule.

**Getting to Juneau, Sitka, and Skagway**

Air and sea transport are the primary ways to get to this region. There are no roads to the outside world from Juneau and Sitka.

Scheduled air flights from the lower 48, especially from Seattle, or from Anchorage to the north, regularly visit Juneau. The flow of travelers is assured because Juneau is the state capital, where lawmakers from around the state convene.

The flight from Anchorage or Fairbanks to Juneau on a clear day is one of the most spectacular flights on the planet. As you leave Fairbanks, you see the spine of the Alaska Range of mountains, the vast stretches of uninhabited and rugged land between cities. The snowy peak of Mt. McKinley, highest mountain in North America, stands out majestically. And finally, as the flight progresses, you get sweeping aerial views of the glaciers of southeastern Alaska as you approach Juneau. This terrain includes Glacier Bay National Park. From the air you get a clear sense of the glaciers as rivers of ice.

Skagway can be reached by smaller commuter aircraft from Juneau. The state ferry system reaches Skagway, as do many cruise ships.

Sitka is served by Alaska Airline jets, marine ferry, and cruise ships. The Alaska Marine Highway ferries visit each port as they ply their ways northward and southward.

Cruise ships take many passengers to these towns, including a stop to see the glaciers at Glacier Bay National Park.
Juneau began when Joe Juneau discovered gold there. It is said that Joe Juneau wept because he had made more money than he could ever spend in a lifetime. There were three major mines and a stamp mill. Juneau was selected as the state capital, historically, though it has been overshadowed by Anchorage as a developed area and a population base. There are about 300,000 Alaskans in metro Anchorage and only about 31,000 in Juneau, out of a total population in the state of only about 718,000. A move to change the capital to the town of Willow, west of Anchorage, was voted down because of the high cost of the move. Most of the people in Juneau work for the state or federal government.

Skagway boomed when miners seeking passage to the 1897 Klondike Gold Rush needed a staging area. Looking at the map, it was determined that traversing the Chilkoot Pass and then taking rivers downstream was the best way. Canadian authorities required that miners possess a year’s supply of provisions before they were allowed to proceed. Skagway booms again, today, in a sense. The community of about a thousand people gets about 300,000 summer visitors a year, over half from cruise ships.

Sitka was populated by Tlingit Indians, possibly for thousands of years. Russia watched the area with interest after Vitus Bering sighted the Alaskan coast in 1741. In 1799 Russian Alexander Baranov began construction of fortifications at Sitka. Baranov intended to colonize Alaska for Russia and develop the fur trade. The Tlingits resented Russian infringement, burning their fort and killing most of the people in 1802. Baranov returned in 1804 with the warship Neva and 1,000 men. He fought a decisive battle against 700 armed Tlingit. The Tlingit retreated and the Russians formally established their colony of New Archangel. Be sure to see St. Michael’s Russian Orthodox cathedral and its historic icons, some from the 14th century. The cathedral was built 1844-1848, burned in 1966, then rebuilt as an exact
replica.

Today no white Russians live in the Sitka area, although several Tlingit Indians with Russian names and some Russian blood do reside here. One bright aspect of the revived interest in the Russian heritage is the New Archangel Russian Folk Dancers, a group of talented women who entertain visitors with a repertoire of Russian folk dances. Be sure to catch their daily performance in the Centennial Building, which also houses a small Sitka City Museum. Because of the declining fur supply, the Crimean War, and Russia’s inability to defend Alaska, Russia eventually decided to sell Sitka and all of Alaska to the U.S., in 1867, for $7,200,000, about two cents per acre.

**Main Attractions of Juneau, Skagway, and Sitka**

Allowing a night or two in Juneau before or after embarkation can greatly add to the satisfaction of a trip. Juneau is far more than just a cruise ship terminal. It has many cultural and natural treasures to offer. Local tours or a guide-with-a-vehicle can be engaged. The downtown and the Mount Roberts tram can be done on your own by walking. For other suggestions, you’ll need local transportation. Here are my recommendations for time spent in Juneau:

*View the Mendenhall Glacier, outside of town. This is a massive glacier that you can drive right up to. In summer the meadows in front of it have brilliant fields of fireweed, a colorful wildflower. After viewing the glacier from afar, drive close in to the Visitor Center and hike toward the ice mass and the voluminous Nugget Falls pouring out near its side.

The Mendenhall Glacier illustrates the main phenomenon of most modern glaciers in Alaska. They are receding due to global warming. Snow melt now exceeds snow fall at Mendenhall. Mendenhall is retreating roughly 60 feet per year. (Conditions of glaciers are local, however. The Hubbard Glacier in Alaska is advancing.) Mendenhall is a relatively small but highly visible part of the vast 1,500 square miles of glacial activity known as the Juneau Ice Fields.
*Go on a wildlife tour emphasizing humpback whale watching on the Lynn Canal.

Chances are you’ll see a range of wildlife. Foremost are the endangered humpbacks, which are feeding furiously during summer on krill, a small shrimp-like food that grows abundantly here in the upwelling, cool, nutrient-rich ocean. The humpbacks put on quite a show, rolling their spiny backs out of the water and then showing their tail before plunging into deep dives. The non-breeding males and non-pregnant females remain here all year. The breeders swim out to Hawaii for the winter birthing and mating season.

Besides humpbacks, you are likely to see orcas or killer whales, Dall porpoises, sea lions, eagles, and plenty of waterfowl, such as scooters.

*Walk the historic downtown, visiting two museums. Downtown Juneau is compact but hilly. Good walking maps are free and available locally at your hotel.

Some buildings to see are the Russian Orthodox Church St. Nicholas, the columned Alaska legislature, the Governor’s house, and the original house of Judge Wickersham, a mover and shaker in the early history of Juneau.

There are also two small museums with major resources. The Alaska State Museum features Native People cultures, including many artifacts that are temporarily given back to tribes for occasional ceremonial use. Displays, especially of the hunting culture, make a traveler aware of the Eskimo, Athabaskan, Aleut, and Tlingit culture. A giant samovar used for tea service is a highlight of the Russian Alaska display. The Juneau-Douglas City Museum emphasizes the gold mining story that began in 1880. Gold discoveries brought Juneau into existence and thrust it into prominence as the logical choice for the state capitol.

In the downtown area along Franklin Street the main shopping occurs.

*Ride the Mount Roberts Tram to the 1800-foot top of the mountain and enjoy views of the Gastineau Channel, the body of water on whose banks Juneau rests.

There are 2.5 miles of hiking trails at the top of the tram, giving you a good sample of the roughly 120 miles of hiking trails in the immediate Juneau area. Juneau residents are proud of their hiking opportunities, emphasizing that the city area has
only 45 miles of roads, but far more miles of trails.

At the top of the tram you can savor the view, hike, dine, and shop.

*Visit the Gastineau Fish Hatchery, also called the Macaulay Fish Hatchery. As many as 170 million salmon fry are released from this small hatchery each year. Several years later those that survive, about two percent, return and are harvested for their sperm and eggs to replenish the cycle. The hatchery, which exists to enhance the commercial and sport fishing scene around Juneau, began in the 1970s at a time when Alaskan wild salmon were over-fished. Today the wild salmon fishery is flourishing. The site is fascinating to visit, with thousands of salmon “ripening” in concrete pens prior to their harvest for sperm and eggs. A small aquarium shows the range of fish and shellfish flourishing in the local waters.

There are five types of salmon in Alaska waters-the chum or dog, sockeye or red, king or Chinook, silver or coho, and pink or humpy. They run at different times of
the summer. The king and sockeye are especially prized for fine dining.

*Enjoy food and drink at the Hangar, a convivial downtown eatery favored by locals. The Hangar gives you a view of the water, glancing at the float planes coming and going, and the cruise ships lingering in the distance.

The Hangar is an historic place. This was the original airport when float planes were the only means of speedy transport. In 1935 the legendary pilot Wiley Post and his financial backer, humorist Will Rogers, stopped here enroute to Fairbanks and Barrow. The two were on a mission to show the practicality of an air mail route. They crashed fatally at Barrow.

At the Hangar you can enjoy the many culinary wonders of Alaska, such as grilled salmon, grilled halibut, king crab, and Dungeness crab. One item never on the menu is “farm raised” salmon, a hot button subject in Alaska, where no farm raising of salmon is allowed.

The beverage of choice would be the locally brewed beer, Alaskan, perhaps starting with their popular Amber and then moving boldly into their award-winning Smoked Porter. The Alaskan Brewing Company’s facility is in Juneau, can be toured, and has its own attractive tasting room.

Skagway’s main attractions amount to walking around the historic city, with a stop at the park service headquarters for a brochure on the Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park. There you’ll see photos and displays on this major historic event. Photos, for example, show how miners used fold-up canvas boats on the Yukon River to get their supplies northward. Most of the boats were abandoned when they were found to be too flimsy. The walls of the Park Service headquarters are covered with quotes from Robert Service’s poetry, with a constant theme: human perseverance in the face of crushing adversity.
For a short hike in the area, walk the nature trail near the park headquarters to the caves. More ambitious hikers use Skagway as a base for a hike of 3-5 days over the 33-mile Chilkoot Pass. The jumping off spot for the pass is near Skagway at Dyea, now a ghost town and a nature area noted for birds and wildlife. Each September some 700 runners in relay teams make a Klondike Relay through the pass. The photographic image of long lines of men, all chained together for safety, hiking in the middle of winter up the 45-degree grade of the Chilkoot Pass, is one of the most moving images of the Klondike rush. The weather here can be severe, earning for Skagway the meaning Tlingit Indians had for the word, skagua, home of the north wind.

Be sure to see the Skagway presentation, each afternoon and evening, of the Soapy Smith revue. In the revue you get a sense of the Gold Rush of 1898 and this consummate con man, who knew a thousand ways to separate a sourdough from his gold nuggets. The Red Onion saloon is a favorite bar, often with impromptu jam sessions led by musicians from the cruise ships. The town is compact and pleasant to walk around, examining the shops, such as Tresham Gregg’s gallery of his Tlingit Indian art creations. Gradually, many of the buildings are being restored to their 1898 appearance as the National Park applies its influence and funds. The photo shop Dedman’s, for example, was one of the original photo studios and still has glass plates from the gold era.

The Klondike Highway, finished in 1978, affected the White Pass Railroad, which competed with it for passengers and freight. The main freight items are lead, copper, zinc, and silver ores, mined in the Yukon, and brought to a loading shed in Skagway, where they are taken out weekly by Russian or Japanese freighters.

A short drive out of town on the Klondike Highway takes you up the White Pass, the famous trail and railroad bed, where signs alert you to the struggle to get to the Klondike. White Pass was an alternative to the Chilkoot Pass. The White Pass was longer, but less steep. Horses could be used, but one sign along the highway indicates, at Dead Horse Pass, where 3,000 horses met their deaths on the steep grade, losing their footing or dying of exhaustion.

Sitka is a picturesque town surrounded by islands and backed by Mt. Edgcumbe, an
extinct volcano. The main attraction here is a visit to the Russian Orthodox St. Michael’s Cathedral to see the icons, canvas walls, gold-thread vestments, and ornate bibles. Some of the icons date to the 14th Century.

The second major pleasure here, within a half-mile distance, is the National Historic Park, where you can see Tlingit Indians practicing carving, weaving, and jewelry-making. At the historic park, walk the oceanside path to the site where the great battle of 1804 pitted 1,000 Russians against 700 fortified Tlingits, who were eventually overcome because of the Russian firepower. Along the path you’ll see Tlingit and Haida totem poles. Today about a third of Sitka’s 8,200 people are Tlingit. Interpretive displays at the park headquarters describe how the Tlingit and Russians lived.

Then visit the Sheldon Jackson Museum, a missionary’s collection of artifacts gathered from the various native groups in Alaska. There you’ll see salmon-skin garments, masks, and many day-to-day artifacts of the Indian material culture, including the ceremonial eating bowls of the Tlingit.

Stop in at the Russian Bishop’s House, which the Park Service is now restoring. At the house you can buy books on the Russian presence in America. The Russians made Sitka briefly the “Paris of the Pacific.” Ships from 13 nations weighed anchors here. Trade goods ranged from Virginia tobacco to Flemish linens. The settlement included schools, a flour mill, a tannery, and a foundry that cast the bells for some of California’s Spanish missions.

Along the Sitka waterfront, the dominant structure is the Pioneer Home, a special Alaska institution. The Pioneer Homes are state-supported retirement homes, available to all residents who have lived in the state for 15 years. There are five pioneer homes in various areas of the state. The rationale of the Pioneer Home is partly to prevent the exodus of senior citizens by providing them with comfortable retirement accommodations. A landmark in Sitka, the Prospector Statue, stands in front of the Pioneer Home.

Sitka is a compact town, easy to walk around, with a sizable fishing fleet. If you walk beyond St. Michael’s Church, you’ll find Castle Hill, an easily-fortified position that was the Russian stronghold. Beyond that is the Tlingit Village.
Side Trips from Juneau, Skagway, and Sitka

There are few roads in the region so the major side trips involve airplanes or boats.

Helicopter or fixed wing air flights from Juneau and from Skagway can take you over the glaciers, sometimes landing on them. The air flight over these rivers of ice can be turbulent because cold air coming off the glacier tends to suck the air downward and create unsettling air currents.

An interesting air flight from Juneau or Skagway can take you to Haines, where you can raft the Chilkat Eagle Preserve along the Chilkat River near Haines. The eagles are so thick in this area that bush pilots must set down carefully to keep from running into them.

Sitka’s islands can be enjoyed from local excursion boats. All three towns offer charter fishing boats for the traveler wishing to catch salmon and halibut.

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Southeast Alaska: If You Go

For tourism information on Alaska, see the Alaska Travel Industry Association at [http://www.travelalaska.com](http://www.travelalaska.com).

More details for the towns come from:

