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Travel Report: **Kenai Peninsula**

Accommodations

Alyeska Prince Hotel

The **Alyeska Prince Hotel**, in Girdwood, is Alaska's largest year-round resort and the most enjoyable base from which to explore the Kenai Peninsula. Located at the base of Mount Alyeska's 3,900-foot aerial tramway, most of the hotel's 307 rooms have beautiful views of either that mountain or the surrounding Chugach mountain range. But make sure of the view before accepting anything as there are several dark, end-of-hall rooms that look out onto concrete structures. The rooms themselves, although not quite top luxe, are comfortable, nicely furnished and well maintained. If you plan to include some skiing during your stay on the peninsula, you'll appreciate the locking boot boxes in the hallways and the convenient ski stowage. Recreational facilities include an indoor pool, exercise room and sauna. There is a good Japanese restaurant in the hotel, with several prix fixe menus; and the Seven Glaciers room, at 2,300 feet up the tramway, has a menu that features Alaskan game, fish and shellfish, all nicely done. It's apparent that the hotel hires temporary help for the summer season, which sometimes results in a less-than-professional handling of special requests at the front desk request. Nevertheless, service is pleasant and certainly well-intentioned. One evening, on our way back to our room during our visit in early September, a friendly desk clerk suggested that we might want to go outdoors later that night and see the Northern Lights. We did, and they were spectacular. Doubles from about \$200. 1000 Arlberg Avenue. Tel: 800-880-3880. www.alyeskaresort.com.

Hotel Captain Cook

If you do decide to spend a night in Anchorage, your best bet is the **Hotel Captain Cook**. Named for the English explorer who sailed these waters in 1778, the hotel has 547 rooms, a reliable restaurant (try the king crab legs) and a very nice fitness center with pool. Try to get a room overlooking the Cook Inlet, but regardless of what views are available, insist on an upper floor. During the summer tourist season, motorcoaches park outside the hotel while waiting for passengers, and many of the drivers don't bother to turn off their noisy and noisome engines. In-season doubles from about \$200. Fourth and K Streets. Tel: 800-843-1950. www.captaincook.com.

Kenai Princess Wilderness Lodge

Princess Cruise Line operates five lodges in Alaska. Although most are booked by their cruise ship patrons, rooms are often available on a nightly basis. Among the lodges, the **Kenai Princess Wilderness Lodge** is a very nice rustic property that lies in the middle of the Chugach National Forest near Cooper Landing and the Kenai Wildlife Refuge, a bit more than two hours south of Anchorage. There are 85 modern, bungalow-style rooms with open-beam-vaulted-ceilings, separate bedrooms, wood-burning stoves, tub/shower combinations in the bathrooms and small porches overlooking the forest. The food in the Eagle's Crest restaurant is standard resort fare, but the fresh-caught local fish, simply prepared, is very good. This is wonderful country for hiking and fishing, both available within steps of the lodge. And there are relaxing outdoor hot tubs to come back to. As this is one of the nicest accommodations on the peninsula, you must book well in advance. Open May to September. Doubles from about \$220. Mile 47.7 Sterling Highway. Tel: 800-426-0500. www.princesslodges.com.

Restaurants

Double Musky Inn

You can expect to be welcomed as if you were a local at the **Double Musky Inn** in Girdwood. Bob and Deanna Persons serve huge portions of Alaska seafood (halibut ceviche is excellent) and steaks with a New Orleans twist; the smallest steak weighs a pound. There's not a blank space on the walls which are covered with all kinds of memorabilia; you're welcome to add your own contribution. Dinner for two, without beverage, about \$60. No reservations. Closed Monday.

Mile 0.3 Crow Creek Road. Tel: 907-783-2822.

Glacier Brewhouse

Glacier Brewhouse is one of Alaska's best brew-pubs, producing about 40 handcrafted beers rotated seasonally. The restaurant has an alderwood-fired oven that turns out fine pizzas, but you really should try the seafood chowder and one of their delicious salmon preparations. Portions are large, especially the starters. Always crowded with locals. Dinner for two, with beer, about \$70. 737 W. Fifth Avenue. Tel: 907-274-2739. While waiting for your table, check out Zoez Window Gallery next door, where there's a colorful mix of original, high-quality native art and some whimsical furniture pieces. Tel: 907-274-0232.

Ray's Waterfront

At Seward's small boat harbor, you'll get a friendly welcome at **Ray's Waterfront**. The surrounding mountainscape views are memorable, and you'll usually find a group of locals ready to dish out news, gossip and fishing advice. Ray's scratch Bloody Marys are a tradition, and at lunch and dinner, generous portions of good planked salmon and other Alaska standards make this a worthwhile stop. Lunch for two, with beverage, about \$40. Tel: 907-224-5606.

Resurrection Roadhouse

The **Resurrection Roadhouse** is a slick, modern example of a characteristic Alaska institution. Found in locations around the state, roadhouses may serve many purposes—restaurant, saloon, hotel, community hall or general store. This one, part of a Windsong Lodge on the Resurrection River, is a good place to stop after a trip to the Exit Glacier on the outskirts of Seward. Lunch and dinner choices, especially the fresh and house-smoked seafood, are quite satisfying, accompanied by an unexpectedly good wine list and a great selection of Alaska beers. Dinner for two without beverage, about \$35. Mile 0.5 Exit Glacier Road. Tel: 888-959-9590.

Varly's Swiftwater Seafood Cafe

Varly's Swiftwater Seafood Cafe in Whittier would be outstanding regardless of where it was located. Here, with little else to distract one's attention, it is truly remarkable. It's a tiny dockside café serving shrimp, halibut and rockfish straight from the sound. Each order is hand-battered. Don and Margaret Varlamos' homemade clam and seafood chowders are fresh and chunky. They have 30 beers and ales, plus wine. Friendly, efficient service, blues and jazz on the CD player, and plenty of historical shipwreck photos on the wall. All in all, a very casual environment. Deck dining overlooks the water. Dinner with beer for two about \$45. Open May to September daily for lunch and dinner. Wharfside, Whittier. Tel: 907-472-2550.

Travel Tips

Activities in Kenai Peninsula

Kayaking on Prince William Sound is an unforgettable experience, and even if you've never tried the sport before, **Alaska Sea Kayakers** will provide instructions and all equipment for a safe and enjoyable outing on your own or with a guide. They supply dry suits, footgear, dry bag for camera, and rubber gloves, as well as kayak and paddles. Prices start at \$70 for a three-hour trip, and they also offer private charter expeditions over several days. Located on the wharf at Whittier. Tel: 877-472-2534. www.alaskaseakayakers.com.

Major Marine Tours offers glacier and wildlife cruises in Kenai Fjords National Park and on Prince William Sound. Half-day and full-day cruises take you through stunning areas where the scenery and wildlife are everything you've come to Alaska to see. Cabins are heated, and all cruises are narrated by a National Park Ranger. There is a well-organized, reasonably priced salmon and prime rib buffet, but you may well prefer, as we did, to spend all the time on the top deck rather than crowded below eating lunch. You can put together a splendid picnic lunch at one of the delis along the dock in Seward or Whittier. The cruise provides complimentary coffee and tea. Good binoculars are useful, and you may want to bring a camera and a journal to record your sightings of Steller sea lions, Dall's porpoises, whitetail and Sitka blacktail deer, peregrine falcons and sea otters. If you're susceptible to sea sickness, take precautions before boarding or bring something along with you. Reservations suggested. Cruises depart from Seward's Small Boat Harbor and the harbor at Whittier and start at about \$70 per person. Tel: 800-764-7300. www.majormarine.com.

The **Exit Glacier** in Kenai Fjords National Park, about ten miles from Seward, is very accessible. There's no need to sign

up for a special excursion if you have a car, as the 3/4-mile trail is well marked. It involves some easy climbing and leads along the edge of the wall of ice; great photo ops. Markers show the distance the glacier has receded since 1790. Park entrance fee, \$5. Turn at mile 5 Seward Highway (Glacier Road Exit) and drive eight miles to the parking lot. The glacier is not accessible before mid-June.

For a quintessential Alaska experience, **Chugach Express Dog Sled Tours** will fly you to their alpine camp and take you mushing along a snow-covered glacier. Two-hour tours start at \$325 per person. Tel: 888-655-4020. www.alaskavisitorscenter.com/images/chugachexpress.html.

Scenic Mountain Air offers sightseeing and wildlife tours over glaciers, ice fields and deep fjords, as well as fly-in fishing charters and transportation to secluded Forestry Service cabins. They have flights leaving from Seward and Moose Pass and ranging in price from \$50 per person for a 15-minute scenic flight from Moose Pass to \$729 for a 4½ hour trip to Denali National Park and around Mt. McKinley. Tel: 907-288-3646. www.scenicmountainair.com.

One of Alaska's oldest and most popular fishing charter operators is **Silver Fox Charters** based in Homer. They offer half- and full-day shared outings for halibut and salmon starting at \$170 per person, private charters starting at about \$1,200 and multi-day expeditions, including overnight lodging, starting at about \$5,500. Even novice anglers usually catch halibut weighing 20 pounds or more, which Silver Fox will fillet and arrange to have shipped to your home. Tel: 800-478-8792. www.silverfoxcharters.com.

What to Expect in Kenai Peninsula

Alaska is not about cities. Alaska is about nature—land, sky, water and wildlife. With three million lakes, 100,000 glaciers and 586,000 square miles of pristine wilderness, Alaska exercises a mythic allure that draws visitors from all over the world. And one of the state's most scenic areas is the Kenai Peninsula lying just south of Anchorage.

Originally the site of a Russian trading post, Anchorage is Alaska's metropolis, with more than 40 percent of the state's population. Today it is still a trading post, albeit of the 21st century variety—well supplied with national franchise outlets and not particularly attractive despite its mountain-rimmed setting. There are several acceptable hotels in Anchorage, but if you arrive early enough to have a couple of hours of daylight, head straight out of the city and spend the night in Girdwood, a small town tucked into a stunning glacial valley. The 37-mile drive along the state's most-traveled scenic highway offers unforgettable views of Turnagain Arm, a narrow inlet off Cook's Inlet.

Girdwood is an excellent jumping off point for other destinations on the peninsula. Whittier, on Prince William Sound, is not much more than a few cement buildings, an outpost of the grittier Alaska, but the town is surrounded by three glaciers and on clear days, the views are magnificent. It's also the departure point for many adventure trips. Nearby, at the eastern end of Turnagain Arm, is a visitor center overlooking Portage Lake, where in summer you can get great views of impressive ice floes. Turning back along the southern edge of Turnagain Arm leads to the coastal town of Hope, site of one of Alaska's earliest gold discoveries. Then, by way of Moose Pass (immortalizing an epic confrontation between a dogsled team and a moose) and Cooper Landing, you arrive at Seward, about 125 miles south of Anchorage, and finally, Homer, at the southern end of the peninsula.

The best time to visit is from May through early September; skies are likely to be clear and daylight hours long, allowing you to see and do quite a bit in one day. All the locations and activities mentioned in this report are accessible via paved, well-maintained roads, mostly on the Seward Highway. Gas stations are sparse, however, so fill up whenever you come to one. And, of course, heed the many warnings to use caution around wild animals, especially bears and moose.

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