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Riding the Alaska Railroad is a fun and beautiful way to see the Last Frontier state



Anne Z. Cooke May 21, 2021



ALASKA CRUISES ARE a popular way to visit Alaska, but all you really see from the crowded ships is the coast and there's not much time to explore beyond the ports of call. If you want to see what it's like in the middle of the state without having to tire yourself driving hundreds of miles, consider riding the Alaska Railroad through south-central Alaska.

Southcentral Alaska is brimming with thick forests and wind-blown ponds. Snow-capped peaks fill the horizon and rivers sparkle, rushing down through stream-carved gorges and past rocky cliffs. Marshy lakes meet green fields and brown hills. The Alaska Range can be seen even on misty days with Mount Denali standing higher than the rest at 20,320 feet.

Riding the train in Alaska comes complete with comfortable seats, big windows, and dome cars so transparent that except for the occasional click-clack of the wheels, you might think you're floating.

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What ticket class to book and what you get for each



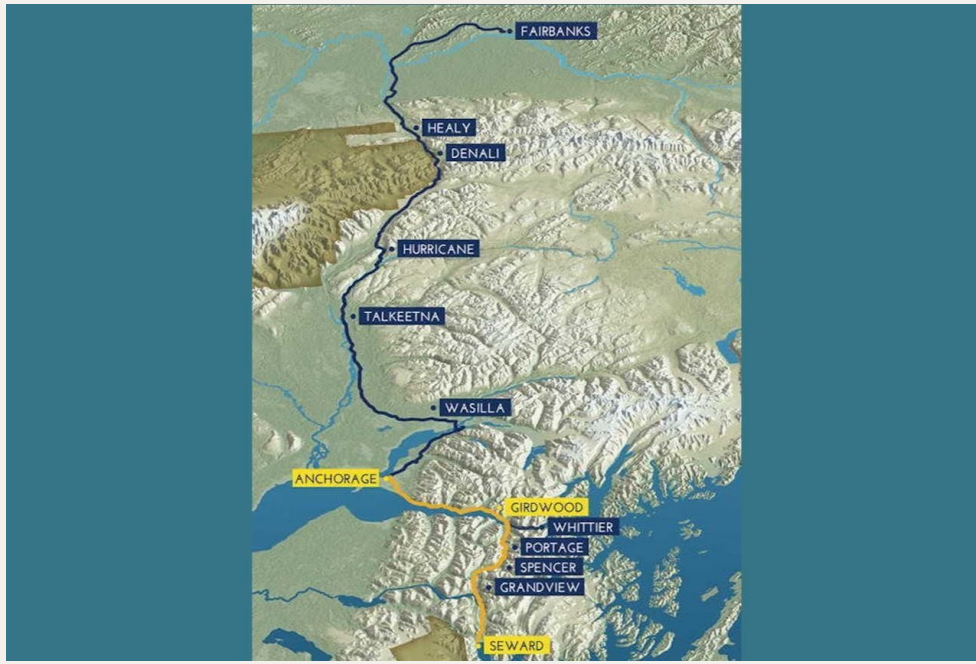
Photo: [Alaska Railroad](#)/Facebook

Adventure Class tickets offer the basic comforts: spacious seats, the freedom to walk through the cars, scenery shared in the Vista Dome, and a café where you can buy lunch. Gold Star-class tickets cost more, but also offer dinner and a drink in the private dining car, plush forward-facing seats, outdoor viewing platforms, glass domes, and onboard tour guides who are ready to answer all kinds of questions.

Where does the Alaska Railroad run?

It has two main routes, both starting in Anchorage: the Coastal Classic and the Denali Star.

The Coastal Classic route



The Coastal Classic is 120 miles long and was built between 1903 and 1910. This is the route to take if you have just one day. Leaving early and heading south through the Kenai Peninsula to Seward, on Resurrection Bay, it returns at 6:00 PM the same day.

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If you decide to try the Coastal Classic, be ready for a 6:45 AM departure. The leisurely pace is specifically designed to give passengers time to absorb all of the landscape and to snap photos. The views from the train are both varied and exceptional.

After Whittier, the train turns east, goes passed Skookum and Spencer Glaciers, and then turns south along the Placer River through the Chugach National Forest. Look west toward thick forests and a cluster of lakes and you're likely to spot fishermen casting for trout.





Photo: [Alaska Railroad](#)/Facebook

If the light is right, you might see bears or moose in the forest they call home. And it's a beautiful home at that. For proof, just look to the narrow creeks that wind through marshy fields and the hundreds of low hills punched up like sandcastles on a beach.

The Kenai Mountains are to the east on this route. The range runs north and south for 45 miles and divides the peninsula from Prince William Sound. The ancient ice that swaths the summit is the Sargent Icefield, a blanket of separate glaciers jammed up against each other and pushing over the edges.

The train eventually meets the highway and the two run parallel down into Seward, the peninsula's oldest town. Settled during the 1896 gold rush, Seward is the port where many Alaska-bound gold miners disembarked on the voyage north from Seattle. Today, it's where visitors come to fish, kayak, to explore the downtown's narrow streets, and to dine on fresh halibut and salmon.

Tours here include the Chumash Heritage Museum and the [Alaska SeaLife Center](#), a museum, marine-life laboratory, and zoo, all in one. But for most visitors, the star attraction is a tour of [Kenai Fjords National Park](#) and one of the three- to six-hour wildlife cruises that explore it from Resurrection Bay.

On a bad day you'll see whales, orcas, salmon, otters, porpoises, bears, seals, and sea lions. On a good day you'll see twice as many, swimming in groups, breathing mist into the air, somersaulting on the surface, or clambering up on the coastal rocks for a sunbath.

Keep an eye peeled for birds, including bald eagles perched near the top of the tallest trees, and auklets, marbled murrelets, and puffins nesting

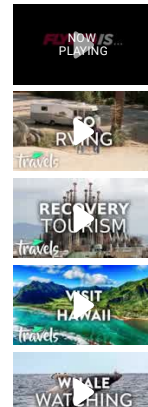


on rocky cliffs.

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The Denali Star route



Photo: [Alaska Railroad](#)

The Denali Star route covers 356 miles of track laid between 1914 and 1923. It runs north to Denali National Park and on to Fairbanks, the gateway to the Arctic. If you're looking for a real adventure (and have at least three days to spare), this is the route to choose.

Running north and south on alternate days between Anchorage and Fairbanks, it stops at [Denali National Park & Preserve](#), both going and coming. This National Park and its many miles of stupendous wilderness are not something to miss.

When you look at the Denali Star's schedule, you'll see that it sometimes stops in Wasilla and Talkeetna, and that it makes whistle stops along the tracks near Hurricane as part of public service. Though introducing Alaska to visitors is important, the Railroad's mandate is also to help people who live beyond the roads but need groceries or a doctor.





Photo: [Alaska Railroad](#)/Facebook

If you're going on to [Fairbanks](#), don't get off at Denali Park. But if you've come just for the ride and the scenery, get off at the Denali National Park train station, stay overnight in a hotel, and take the next day's train back to Anchorage. In that case, remember to make a hotel reservation before you arrive. Lodges and hotels fill up quickly in summer.

The more days you have in Denali, the better the experience. If you're planning to camp or explore some of the park's many trails, visit the National Park Visitor Center and learn the rules for bear encounters. Expect to take one or more bus tours, as they're the only way to get past the entrance area and reach the interior. The National Park operates some free tours, but commercial tour companies offer more choices, from simple activities like wildlife viewing to river rafting and glacier hiking.

After the Denali Star leaves the Park it heads north to Fairbanks. The town is famous for ice sculptures and the Northern Lights, but there's far more to see. After taking the Fairbanks "City Highlights" tour, walk through Pioneer Park and to the University of Alaska for a look at the campus.

From there, stop at the [Museum of the North](#). Don't miss the [Aurora Ice Museum](#), either. You should also consider a day trip to Chena Hot Springs where you can rent snow machines for a deep slosh through miles of drifts and take a long hot soak before taking the train back to Anchorage.

On the way back from Fairbanks, take another look at the Alaska state map. Southcentral Alaska, viewed from the dome car and the windows, feels awfully large to most people. But it's really just the tip of the iceberg.



If your time in Alaska is short, try the railroad's newest route: the Glacier Discovery

The [Glacier Discovery](#) drops off and picks up passengers at fascinating destinations once omitted. Girdwood and Whittier have always been regular stops, but now you can spend time at Portage, the Spencer Glacier, and Grandview, and count on a ride back.

Does Alaska have any other railroad trains and tracks?



Photo: [White Pass & Yukon Route/Facebook](#)

The historic [White Pass & Yukon Route Railway](#) was built during the gold rush in 1898 and is based in Skagway on the southeast coast. Now a tourist attraction owned by Carnival Cruises, narrow-gauge steam engines haul visitors up the mountain behind Skagway along the historic Klondike Trail.

Peering out as the train weaves around rocky cliffs, you can't help thinking of the men and horses that struggled and died there trying to reach the gold fields. The trip, crossing deep gorges and hanging onto cliffs, is sensational.



But there's a hitch: You'll never ride the White Pass & Yukon unless you go to Skagway, and you can't go to Skagway except by ship. This tiny coastal town is one of Alaska's isolated communities, a place with no way in or out. The only way there is the reason you chose the train in the first place: an Alaska cruise.

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