Anchorage great jumping off point for tour of Alaska

BY CHRIS LUNDGREN

A laska is big - really big.

So big, in fact, that if it were divided in two, it would make the first and second largest rates. Michigan would fit inside it ten times over. What does this mean for you, someone who wants to visit the 49th state but can only break away far a week or ten days? You should fecus on a region. One of the easiest regions to reach is Southeentral, home of Alaska's largest city, Anchorage, About 260,000 people populate the city, which has all the immenties of metro Detroit plus securery. The Chugach Mourains Ilank Anchorage's east eide, and the Cook Inlet, part of the North Pacific, touches the city's western edge and breaks

the North Pacific, touches the city's western edge and breaks into two sub-inlets that make a cideways "7" around the land. Most importantly, the wilds of Alaska are within a short drive. In an hour or less (and in some caves just minutes), you can reach breathtaking places that will leave you grappling for your camera.

Wildlife in the city

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Forget the acenery, some people just want to see animals.
There's no guarantee, of course, but you have a good chance of sighting bald engles, moose and whales in Southeentral. In fact, you could observe all three species without even leaving Anchorage.
Those willing to road-trip will most likely see Dall sheep, mountain goats, see lions and see otters. Bears, lynx and valves are shy of humans, and you can count yourself lucky if you spot one in the wild.
Here's where to start

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Fly into the Anchorage International Airport and head for your hotel. You can begin your sightseeing right in the city at the Tony Knowles Constal Trail, an 11-mile paved path that starts downtown and traces the Cook Inlet. Walk or rent bicycles from one of several outfitters. You'll see Mt. Susitna, also

Practical matters

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Hotel and airline reservations tend to fill up quickly, so it's not too early to plan your trip.

Where to stay

A few hotels of many in Anchorage include: the Captain Cook, (907) 276-6000; the Anchorage Hotel, (907) 272-4653; the Anchorage Hilton, (600) 246-2527; and Westmark Anchorage (at the 720 West 5th Avenue location), (907) 276-7676.

The Alaska Chalet Bed and Breakfast in Eagle River comes highly recommended. Call (907) 694-1528. For the young and budget-conacious, try the Hostolling International youth hostel in Anchorage at (907) 276-3635.

Mow to get there

Northwest Airlines offers a direct Detroit-Anchorage route during the summer months, with a flying time of about six hours. Other carriers include Dolta, United and American. Call the airlines' toll-free numbers for details.

Cetting around

Several major car rental agencies operate from the Anchorage International Airport. For rates or reservations, call the agencies 'toll-free numbers. Traveling by train is a fun (though expensive) way to see Alaska. For information, contact the

Alaska Railroad at (800) 544-0552.
Two tried and true kayak outfitters are: Alaska Outdoor Adventures, (997) 783-7868, out of Whitter and Sunny Cove Sea Kayaking, (800) 770-9119, out of Seward.

Bighteooling cruises
To go on a half-day or full-day sightseeing cruise from Seward or Whittier, contact Major Marine Tours at (907) 274-7300 or Kenai Fjords Glacier and Wildlife Cruises at (907) 276-829.

Bishing
For fishing information, contact the Alaska Fish and Game Department, (907) 267-2100. If you're interested in fly-in fishing trips in more remote parts of the state, try one of two well-known companies: Rust's Flying Service, (800) 443-919 and Ketchum Air Service, (800) 433-9114. Seward-based Saltwater Safari Co., (800) 382-1564, does deepwater fishing charters in the Gulf of Alaska. King's Budget Charters takes people out on the famous Kenai Rivsr (a couple of hours' crive from Anchorage) for salmon fishing. Call (888) 578-5333.

More travel info
Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau: (907) 278-4118, www.anchorage.net.

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Kayakers: Kate Ballow (left to right), Chris Lundgren, Becky Gerik and Gena Hornsby paddle the western edge of Prince William Sound. Billings Glacier is in

known as Steeping Lady, across the inlet and the sharp, glacier-crusted Chigmit Mountaina in the distance behind it. On a clear day, Mt. McKinley and Mt. Forsker are visible to the north. You'll know these giants if you see them. pages.

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The inlet itself is a swirling, hazardous bady of water not suitable for leisure boating because of its strong tides. Its shores are not sandy, but rather mud flats that act like quick-and. Needless to say, it's anfest to stay on the trail.

Beluga whales are spotted in the inlet with surprising regularity. Ask around to learn of sightings and keep your eyes open.

The Coastal Trail (which connects to a whole system of inland

The Constal Trail (which connects to a whole system of inland trails) ends at Kincaid Park, a great place to see moose. The park is a large, hilly combination of forest and open spaces. Moose roam mostly in the morning and evening, and they'll wander right not to the path. And, yes, they're as huge as you've heard. Give them lots of space; a spooked moose will rear up and stomp. If you're someone who feels you haven't seen Alaska until you've seen Mt. McKinley (known locally as "Denali"), try a

flight. Dozens of operators leave from Merrill Field, the airport just outside of downtown and within the city limit. Ask your hotel's concierge or desk clerk about them or try the yellow

Oh, the places you'll go

Oh, the places you'll go Willing to venture farther? Within an hour's drive north and an hour's drive south, you'll find some of the region's most dramatic actings. Motor south on the Seward Highway, the only road leading out of Anchorage in that direction, and see the Cook Inlet narrow into Turnagain Arm.

Inlet narrow into Turnagain Arm.
It's hard to keep your eyes on the road on this stretch of high-way. To your left are the steep walls of the Chugach Mountains, which in places jut up right next to the road. Dall sheep and mountain goats balance on the higher rocks and are easily seen with binoculars and sometimes with the bare eye. Farther down, slender waterfalls cascade into pends next to the road. Eagle sightings are common.
To the right is Turnagain Arm, which looks different in high tide and low. During low tide, mud flats stretch out almost as far as

you can see and the water rip-ples in the distance. During high tide, the water reflects the mountains encircling it. This is a very good spot for whale sight-ings. Fortunately, there are a number of turnouts on the Seward Highway so you can pull off and enjoy the view.

An hour south of Anchorage

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The tiny town of Girdwood is about 37 miles from Anchorage. The Girdwood area is lush and green with a variety of activities for travelers. It's home to the state's largest ski area, called Alyeska. In summer, you can ride a tram to the top of Mt. Alyeska for a heart-stopping view of Turnagain Arm and the Chugach Mountains. Near Girdwood are two popular hiking trails. The Winner Creek Gorge trail starts at the base of Mt. Alyeska and runs a couple miles through the forest to the gorge. This is bear country, so hikers should wear bells or talk loudly along the way. The Crow Pass should wear bells or talk loudly along the way. The Crow Pass trail is a fairly difficult mountain hike that passes ruins of a gold mine, an alpine lake and a glacier. From the Seward Highwoy, you can get to the western-

most edge of Prince William Sound via a brand new road to the town of Whittier. The 12-mile road should be completed this June. If ti's not, you'll take the train along the same route, tunneling east through the Chugach Mountains.

Either way, a visit to the Sound is warranted. From Whittier, you can take a daylong kayaking trip into the Sound or hop on a tourist boat and cruise past massive glaciers. The sheltered waters of Prince William Sound are almost always calm. The water is clear enough to see at least ten feat down. Seal, otter and eagle sightings are prevalent, and if you're in a kayak and it's salmon senson, you can paddle into coves and watch the fish swimming frantically upstream. Kayakers may also see bear tracks along the shore. Actual bear sightings are rare, but they do happen. If you spot one, stay your distance and don't forget they can swim.

Back on the Seward Highway, a mile past the Whitter junction, is a left-hand turn onto Portage Glacier Access Road. Five and a half miles down this road are a dock and gift shop on the shore of the stay of the s

The end of the road

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Keep going on the Scward

Highway, and eventually you hit
Seward, the onto road.

A seward should be on every

traveler's must-do list. It lies on
the eastern edge of the Kenni
Peninsula, in the Kenni Fjords

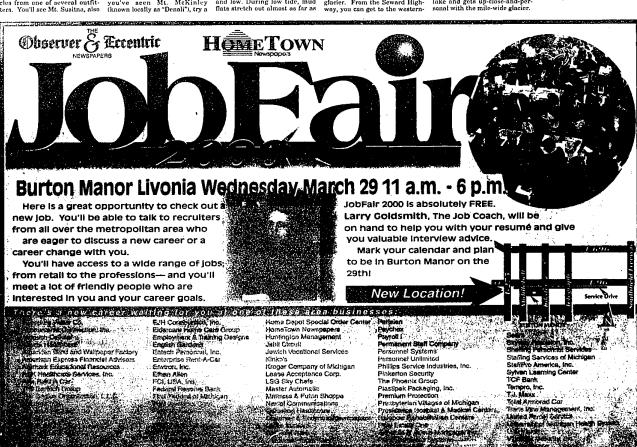
National Park. Its greatest fenture is Resurrection Bay, a clear,
emerald colored body of water
chock full of wildlife. Animals
commonly sighted in this section
of the Gulf of Alaska are sea
otters, Stellar sea lions, eagles,
whales (beluga, killer and gray),
porpoises and puffins.

There's no shortage of tour
agencies with comfortable boats
to shuttle you around the bay.

Generally it's 10-20 degrees
colder in Southeentral Alaska
than in Detroit. Plan for temperatures in the high 60s to about
70, with possible spikes in either
direction. The weather varies,
and rain and sun often take
turns appearing on the same
day, You can leave the evening
attire at home. Even in the
finest restaurants, appropriate

finest restaurants, appropriate clothing is whatever keeps you comfortable as you take in the

sights.
Chris Lundgren is an Alaska-based writer who grew up in Birmingham.



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