

Alaska 10-Day Road Trip Itinerary



Experience the wild, rugged and diverse beauty of the 49th U.S. State with this 10-day Alaska road trip itinerary. From grizzly bear viewing to walking on glaciers, this road trip will put you in touch with what makes Alaska spectacularly unique.

Best time to visit Alaska

Summer is well considered the best time to visit Alaska as these are the warmest months with the long daylight hours, lots of wildlife activity and best road/access conditions. Summer season in Alaska encompasses late May through to early September, with May-June seeing the least rainfall.

If you are set on seeing the Northern Lights (*aurealis borealis*), late August into September are better summer months to visit. Due to the northern latitude of Alaska, the sky does not get dark enough around the summer solstice (late June), for them to be seen.

Important Alaska road trip itinerary notes

- If you are booking a trip from Chicago, Minneapolis or Seattle areas, you can get a direct flight to Fairbanks and cut 2 hours off your drive to Denali on day 2. Before you book your flights, just make sure there is rental car availability one way from Fairbanks to Anchorage.
- Book your Denali National Park Transit or Tour Bus ticket in advance. Transit buses are just that, transportation that you can hop on or off at any time. Tour buses have commentary and only make a few scheduled stops.
- Currently, Denali's main thoroughfare, Park Road, is undergoing major construction at Mile 43 due to an ongoing landslide. A bridge is being built to avoid the slide but it won't be complete for a couple of years (probably summer 2024). Until then, no vehicles (including bicycles) can proceed past this point.
- If you still really want to go to the end of the road, your only option is to book accommodation at Skyline Lodge and take the air taxi. I cannot comment on the quality of this experience.
- If you are travelling in the high season (June through early-September) make sure you book accommodation and tours in advance as these tend to sell out.

10-day Alaska road trip itinerary

Day 1 - Anchorage

Arrive in Anchorage. If you have time, visit the Anchorage Museum. This institution is a terrific combination of art, history and science museum, all relating to Alaska. It's the perfect intro for what you are about to experience and explore.

Driving distance: Local driving depending on your accommodation location.

Day 2 – Anchorage to Denali National Park

Pick up your rental car in Anchorage and head north to Denali National Park. Allow plenty of time to stop and take in the amazing landscapes along the way including these scenic detours that I detailed in this post:

- Talkeetna - An excellent place to stop for lunch. Make sure you walk out to the riverbank for views of the mountains when the weather is clear.
- Igloo - the abandoned roadside hotel shaped as a giant igloo.
- Denali South and North Viewpoints - On a clear day you will have spectacular views of Mount Denali, Hunter and Foraker with the Susitna River in the foreground.

Once you arrive in Denali, get a preview of what you will be exploring more of the following day by driving the 24km (15mi) of Park Road accessible to public vehicles.

Spend the night in the town of Denali Park, just outside the Park entrance for easy access in the morning.

Driving distance: Anchorage to the entrance of Denali National Park (not including the 15mi of Park road) is approximately 419km (260mi) 4hrs 40mins.

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Day 3 – Denali National Park

You have the entire day to explore Denali National Park. If want to do some hiking, it is important to note that Denali National Park has relatively few designated trails and visitors are encouraged to roam freely.

If you are only spending a couple of days in the park, you will likely find sufficient trails to keep you busy. However, should you want to do some off-trail exploring, you'll need to be prepared with the right gear and know how to navigate in the wilderness to do so safely. For hikers and independent explorers, I recommend jumping on a transit bus (the green buses). A transit bus may or may not have commentary (that is up to the driver), but it will stop if you spot wildlife along the road.

The transit bus system allows passengers to request stops wherever they would like to get off the bus, and wave down the next one that comes along when they are ready to continue on their journey.

The best strategy for using the bus on your first day in Denali is to ride it as far as it will go, making notes on the places you'd like to get off on the way back. At the furthest point, give your bus driver a heads-up on the first place you want to alight so they are prepared to make the stop.

Driving distance: Local driving depending on the location of your accommodation.

Day 4 – Denali National Park to Seward

Driving from Denali National Park to Seward is a long-haul driving day, but you can take your time and revisit any of those scenic viewpoints along the way. Also, I have a few stops to suggest taking advantage of to break up the car ride:

- Talkeetna – The aforementioned town is a 30-minute diversion off your route and is not included in the timing/mileage below.
- Palmer – Less scenic but more functional than Talkeetna. Palmer is a quick detour off the highway and has plenty of food, coffee and places to stock up on supplies including gas.
- Beluga and/or Bird Points – Turnouts along Turnagain Arm with views across the water to the mountains on the Kenai Peninsula.
- Girdwood – A ski town with cute, small town feels surrounded by greenery.

Driving distance: Denali National Park to Seward approximately 600km (375mi) 6hrs 40mins without stops.

Day 5 – Seward and Exit Glacier

Experience Exit Glacier, whether it's a simple hike to the terminus or an all-day trek to the Harding Ice Shelf that feeds the Glacier.

There various options to get out on the ice depending on how much time, energy and money you want to spend. Whichever you choose, I absolutely recommend any able-bodied person gets out on the actual ice (with an expert). It's an entirely different experience to walk on a glacier rather than just looking at it.

There are even opportunities to fly in to more remote areas and pristine environments higher up on the ice shelf for a truly mind-blowing experience.

Drive distance: Local driving dependent on your accommodation's location.

Exit Glacier Alternative: Matanuska Glacier

Day 4 – Denali National Park to Glacier View

Drive out to Matanuska Glacier, near Glacier View. Take full advantage of the pull outs along the Glenn Highway because the scenery is absolutely beautiful.

Driving distance: Denali National Park to Glacier View approximately 417km (259mi) 4hrs 40mins without stops.

Day 5 – Exit Glacier

Take a guided hike on Matanuska Glacier and then continue on to Seward to pick up this itinerary again at day 6.

Driving distance: Glacier View to Seward approximately 368km (229mi) 4hrs 20mins without stops.

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Day 6 – Kenai Fjords National Park

Enjoy a full day in Kenai Fjords National Park, where almost 40 glaciers spill from the Harding Icefield, carving valleys on their path to the North Pacific Ocean. The fjords created by these rivers of ice are abundant with wildlife such as orcas, humpback whales, puffins, harbour seals, sea otters and sea lions.

We took a full day kayaking tour to Aialik Bay where we also kayaked close to the toe of Aialik Glacier and picnicked while we watched it calving (a mostly May-June phenomenon).

Drive distance: Local driving dependent on your accommodation's location.

Day 8 – Drive Seward to Homer

Homer is the “Halibut fishing capital of the world” and ground zero for bear viewing excursions to Lake Clark and Katmai National Parks. This beautiful fishing town has a spit that extends into Kachemak Bay and is surrounded by natural beauty.

On your way from Seward to Homer, make a lunch stop in the town of Kenai and visit the Old Town where you can see buildings remaining from Alaska's Russian and American history.

Drive distance: Seward to Homer through Kenai 300km (186mi) 3hrs 40mins.

Day 9 – Katmai or Lake Clark National Park

Take a half-day bear viewing excursion over to one of the area's National Parks. Your tour operator will decide on the best Park to visit based on where the bears are spending their time at that moment, to give you the best chance of seeing them.

These National Parks can only be accessed by plane or boat. A boat ride from Homer is about 2-hours in each direction, while a small plane takes about 1-hour.

If you choose a small plane tour, as we did, you'll not only get a chance to see grizzly bears, but incredible aerial views over Kachemak Bay, Cook Inlet, the Alaska Peninsula and the region's various volcanos.

Drive distance: Local driving dependent on your accommodation's location.

Day 10 – Return to Anchorage

Drive back to Anchorage for your flight out, revisiting any of your favourite stops along the way or any you missed the first time.

Drive distance: Homer to Anchorage 360km (225mi) 4hrs 30mins.

Places to eat, drink and be merry

Here are a few places we ate, drank and enjoyed on our Alaska road trip:

Tent City Taphouse, Anchorage – Dinner
Great Harvest Bread Co, Anchorage – Coffee and sandwiches
Kinley's Restaurant & Bar, Anchorage – Dinner
Spinach Bread, Talkeetna – Lunch and snack (local institution)
Conscious Coffee, Talkeetna – coffee and drinks
Sunrise Grill, Palmer – Lunch or dinner

The Black Bear Café, Denali – Breakfast and coffee
Sea Bean, Seward – Coffee, breakfast and lunch
Gold Rush Bistro, Seward - Dinner
Veronica's Old Town Cafe, Kenai – Coffee and lunch
Captain's Coffee Roasting Co, Homer – Coffee and sandwiches
Captain Pattie's Fish House, Homer – Dinner