

Juneau:

At the Heart of the Inside Passage



Tracy Arm blue iceberg hole

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Alaska celebrated its 50th birthday as the 49th state of the union in 2009. Its capital, Juneau, with a population of 32,000, is a unique and special place. It is unique because one can reach it only by boat or airplane. There is one 35 mile road north and south through town and along the mainland. Juneau is also unique because it sits in the midst of the world's largest temperate rain forest, which is the size of New England. In some

parts of the *Inside Passage* the annual rainfall is 250 inches per year. The weather forecast in Juneau is inevitably *rain likely*. Seventeen million acres of this rain forest lie within the Tongass National Forest home to the last giant hemlocks, cedars and spruce trees over 1000 years old. This wilderness is home to over 6000 brown and black bears and 25,000 bald eagles.

Juneau sits between Mt. Juneau and the Gastineau Channel. Behind the range of high and rugged mountains stretches the 1500 square mile Juneau ice field from which at least 40 glaciers flow. Juneau is unique because the Ice Age never ended here. The nearby glaciers give birth to icebergs large and small at a constant pace. Ice masses as large as houses calve off from the glaciers and crash into the water creating huge waves that can shake boats dramatically. Huge icebergs can come to the surface from beneath the water surprising small craft. It is not easy to capture these calving explosions with a camera—a quick reflex is required because one never knows where and when the break will come. When one hears the rumbling thunder it is already too late. The glacier descends 1000 feet below the water's surface, and the calving can be dangerous. The icebergs become beautiful floating sculptures. When sunlight strikes these icebergs the age-old

Black bear walking





Seal kiss—mom and baby

Photos © Dana Vannoy, APSA, PPSA

air trapped inside the ice glows blue-green. The color appears most saturated from the shady sides, and the variety of emerald shades are endlessly seductive for photographers.

Some History: The area known as the *Inside Passage* along this narrow, western-most portion of the United States that abuts Canada stretches from Misty Fjords National Monument near Ketchikan in the south to Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve just west of Haines in the north. This web of quiet stately fjords and peaceful forested islands is much the same as it was 100 years ago when prospectors came to find gold.

In 1880 a mining engineer living on Sitka (the island settled by the Russians and the first capital of the territory) asked Chief Kowee to lead him to gold bearing ore. The engineer sent Joe Juneau and Richard Harris with Chief Kowee to the Gastineau Channel. Finding nuggets the size of beans and peas, on October 18, 1880 they staked the 160 acre town site that is now Juneau. A mining camp appeared almost immediately. The capital of the territory was not moved to Juneau from Sitka until 1906. Four indigenous groups lived in this pristine area—the Athabascan, Aleut, Inuit, and Northwest Coast people. While many natives still reside in Juneau, most migrants from the lower 48 are in the tourist and fishing industries or employed by the state government.

The Inside Passage is a bonanza for photographers prepared for the spontaneity of North American wildlife. The three biggest islands west of the mainland and the channel are Admiralty, Baranof, and Chichagof. These dense rainforests provide a comfortable home for some of the nation's most endangered animals. Admiralty has the highest density of Grizzly Bears in the United States—one bear for every square

mile. No photographer should explore the island without an experienced ranger. Thousands of brown and black bears live on the mainland in the forests surrounding the ice fields. When hiking or exploring the fjords it is not unusual to see



Vertical buoy & sea lions (Herbert Glacier in background)

Young whale breaching



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mountain goats resting or eating on the sides of the steep mountains, as well as puffins and guillemots, maybe even wolves. The bald eagles are plentiful everywhere—almost as common as robins or sparrows in the lower 48. They perch on treetops, icebergs, and, in town, on wharfs, power lines and boat masts.

The cold waters are replete with sea lions and the more curious harbor seals who sun themselves at every opportunity on the ice bergs, swim effortlessly in the channels, and watch the human activity on the shoreline or passing small craft. The channels and fjords are home to the humpback whales that come from Hawaii to feed on the rich marine waters. An exciting photographic opportunity is seeing the hunting ingenuity of humpbacks that work together to trap schools of herring in a half acre bubble net. Some whales swim in a tight spiral and blow bubbles while

others rush up with their mouths wide open to catch the fish in great quantity. While not every photographer will be so fortunate, it is not so unusual to see young whales playing by breaching and creating huge explosions of splashing water when they fall. The challenge of whale watching with a camera is to be ready while trying to predict where the whale will surface next. Having a long lens on a beanbag on the rail of the boat can help, because when handholding, it is too tiring. There is a rhythm to watching the swimming whales—hearing the unmistakable blow, seeing the nose, then the dive exposing the hump, and finally the flip of the dripping tail.

The great majority of people see the Inside Passage from huge passenger ships that stop in Juneau for one day. While one can enjoy the splendor of the jagged mountains and fjords and even be fortunate enough to see some wildlife, the experience may be frustrating for a photographer. The best way to get up close and personal with the glaciers and animals is in a small boat. There are many specific photo expeditions that provide a wonderful experience. However, one can find numerous independent guides and boating opportunities with experienced personnel in Juneau that are also marvelous. A flight to this capital city and a week's stay will afford a great photographic adventure.

Tracy Arm Fjord south of Juneau is not to be missed. There are miles of beautiful mountain shores with waterfall upon waterfall gushing down the ravines and endless floating sculptures of ice throughout. The fjord's South Sawyer Glacier is renowned for its blue ice. The enchanting blues can also be most dramatic on overcast days, so no one needs to despair if they miss sunny days. The fjord is a haven for eagles and playful seals sitting safely

Group of eagles on rocks



on the icebergs enjoying people watching as much as people enjoy watching them.

North from town are Stephen's Passage, Favorite Channel, and Frederick Sound with spectacular scenic views of the islands to the west and the glaciers on the mainland, two picturesque ones being Herbert Glacier and Eagle Glacier. A whale watching excursion here is very likely to be especially rewarding. The channels are full of human and animal activity. Bright red buoys provide resting places for the sea lions and the birds. Much closer to town is Juneau's "drive-up" glacier, Mendenhall. It is a 12 mile river of ice dropping 4500 vertical feet from the ice field to near sea level. The face is one and a half miles wide and there are numerous angles from which to photograph this spectacular natural wonder. Flight seeing excursions over Mendenhall and to the Juneau Ice Field are available and often afford opportunities to walk on the glacier.

Alaska's capital city has a special small town and outpost charm—still a frontier for the wilderness-bound. It is an easy town to walk, and many older homes up the mountain are being colorfully restored. Flowers, domestic and wild, are everywhere and in enchanting arrangements. The St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church (1897), the salmon hatchery, and the Governor's mansion are favorite photo opportunities. The first class cable car traveling up the mountain behind the town takes visitors to a pleasant visitor's center, hiking trails, and fabulous views of the channel, the town, Douglas Island, and the distant mountains both north and south. Above all Juneau is a port – a haven for the many large and beautiful tourist ships that bring visitors to this spectacular scenery. One could spend hours simply photographing the port activity, the ships, and their maneuvers. This harbor is never empty of sea-going vessels. Juneau is a photographer's paradise. The endless natural compositions, the challenge of wildlife,



Mendenhall Glacier Face with people

and the interesting cultural mix provide endless stimulation.

There is a great deal of white in overcast skies and also in the plentiful snow and ice. It is easy to overexpose especially if sunlight is present. Consequently it is important to fool the camera by overexposing a stop when photographing such white scenes with film. Digital photographers need to check the LCD panel and histogram often and modify shots as necessary. Soft overcast light is good in the rainforest proper, and it is good for many circumstances in which the high contrast of dark wooded mountains and white ice and snow could be difficult. Because the Inside Passage can be rainy the professional photographers who work in the area refer to "artistic mist." All photographers traveling to Juneau need to be prepared for this kind of shooting and have rain protection for themselves and their equipment. Tripods will be useful for maximizing depth of field and getting sharp detail in any lighting situation. Lots of cards or film is the order of the day in this special place, and taking along a quick trigger finger will enhance the prizes one takes home. ■

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Panoramic North Sawyer Glacier calving