HOW TO PLAN A TRIP ON THE ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY
The ferries of the Alaska Marine Highway stop in 33 local communities; they also offer service to and from Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and Bellingham, Washington. Here’s what you need to know about this popular way to get around.

WHY TAKE THE ALASKA FERRY?

• It’s a cruise but not a “cruise”: If you like the idea of a trip by sea—visiting ports, seeing gorgeous scenery, going whale-watching—but don’t want a floating-resort experience, the ferries are your answer. They’re clean and comfortable, though basic. Still, you’re here because you want to focus on what’s off the boat, not on it.

• You get off the beaten path: Ferry itineraries mix the big-name ports of call with lesser-known Alaska Native communities. You can explore villages off the tourist grid and travel alongside locals.

• You can connect some serious dots: The ferries offer a great way to link far-flung segments of an Alaska odyssey. Road-trippers, RVers, and backpackers use the ferries to traverse sections of Alaska that are too time-consuming (or even impossible) to see by land.

HOW DOES THE MARINE HIGHWAY WORK?

Just walk on! You can even bring a bicycle or drive your vehicle aboard. Your rate is based on how far you’re going, whether you book a cabin, and whether you take a vehicle (as well as the size of that vehicle). When your ferry stops in a port, you can either get off and walk around for a few hours, or drive off and spend a few days. Just be aware that if you want to overnight anywhere, you have to book your stop when you purchase your ticket. Plan ahead!

FINDING A SAILING DATE

To start, search the Alaska Marine Highway sailing calendar online; select the month you expect to travel and the departure port you’re interested in. The calendar will display all sailings during that month. The calendar can be tricky to decipher, so use the available key.

Abbreviations include the ship, the port, and whether the ship is arriving or departing. Also know that some stops are a part of a longer sailing. For example, if you’re searching for the town of Sitka, the calendar might display the ship’s origin and final destination instead of Sitka. (In that case, just click on the sailing, and the calendar will show when the ferry stops in Sitka.)

Once you know which dates are available to travel to your desired port, switch to this sailing search tool for a quote. Enter the number of travelers, any vehicles, the starting and ending ports, and the dates. You’ll then see a list of optional sailings.

Next, you’ll see if there are cabins available. Select a cabin if you want a room aboard the boat. This is absolutely recommended for any overnight sailings, but you’re not required to book a cabin. (See cabin and camping info below).

The AMHS’s reservation agents can help you map out an itinerary, whether you want to create a contained cruise vacation or make the experience part of a longer trip. For reservations, call 800-642-0066 or e-mail dot.amh@alaska.gov.

OTHER IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Cabins: For multiple-day ferry rides, you can book a cabin with bunk beds, which sleeps up to four.

Camping: Some travelers set up camp on a deck chair in the solarium, while others pitch a tent on the deck and sleep under the stars. Make sure to bring a foam mat.

Food: Almost all ships offer food and beverage service (both hot and cold meals), as well as vending machines. You can also bring your own cooler. You’ll find coin-op ice machines, but not refrigerators.

Restrooms/showers: All vessels have public restrooms, and you can find public showers on all vessels except the MV Litua, FVF Chenega, and FVF Fairweather. Other Onboard Amenities: Many ferries offer observation decks, theaters, an arcade, reading room, and kids’ playroom.

Pets: Allowed, though you’ll have to keep them in a carrier or vehicle on the car deck during transit. Pet calls are made roughly every 8 hours so owners can go to the car deck and check on their animals.

Schedule: Ferries run year-round, though the prime summer schedule is May 1 to Sept. 30. Departure times vary by day on certain routes.

Fares: Prices vary depending on the distance you’re traveling, whether you take a vehicle, and whether you book a cabin.

Discounts/Specials: Children ages 6 to 11 ride for half-price; kids under 6 are free.

Other Travel Policies: See here.
SOUTHEAST ALASKA: THE INSIDE PASSAGE

WHAT IT’S LIKE
This is the classic Alaska cruise route, but with a down-to-earth twist. You’ll start in either Bellingham, Washington or Prince Rupert, British Columbia and head north to popular ports like Ketchikan, Juneau, Sitka, and Skagway. You’ll also have the opportunity to explore Native Alaska communities like Hoonah and Kake.

PORTS
Angoon, Bellingham, Gustavus, Haines, Hoonah, Juneau, Kake, Ketchikan, Metlakatla, Pelican, Petersburg, Prince Rupert, Sitka, Skagway, Tenakee, Wrangell, Yakutat

SOUTHCENTRAL ALASKA: KACHEMAK BAY & PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND

WHAT IT’S LIKE
If you don’t want a long cruise experience, this route may be for you. It offers a variety of good two- and three-day trips. In fact, exploring the ports of Prince William Sound is a popular weekend activity for Alaska locals, as is going to see bears on Kodiak Island—a great trip off the beaten path. At ports on the Kenai Peninsula and Cook Inlet, you also have easy drives to Chugach State Park for day hikes.

PORTS
Chenega Bay, Cordova, Homer, Seldovia, Tatitlek, Valdez, Whittier

SOUTHWEST ALASKA: KODIAK & THE ALEUTIAN CHAIN

WHAT IT’S LIKE
This route is a big hit with independent travelers, especially repeat Alaska visitors looking for something remote or anyone who wants a rugged, off-the-grid itinerary. The sparsely populated islands are excellent for hiking, cycling, and bird watching. Note: This route has very limited service, so plan well in advance.

PORTS
Akutan, Chignik, Cold Bay, False Pass, King Cove, Kodiak, Old harbor, Ouzinkie, Port Lions, Sand Point, Dutch Harbor/Unalaska
PRINCE RUPERT TO HAINES

Trip Length: 10+ days
This is the perfect itinerary for drivers/RVers who want to bring their own vehicle to Alaska without driving the whole way. It’s also a great route for anyone who wants to combine a land tour with stops in Southeast Alaska. Start by driving to Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Then sail from Ketchikan to Haines, stopping in Wrangell, Petersburg, and Juneau. After spending a few days in Haines, follow the Haines Highway (Highway 3) to Haines Junction in the Yukon Territory, where you can meet up with the Alaska Highway (Highway 1). Continue on to Alaska via Tok. Or head back south on the Alaska Highway.

View the complete itinerary

VALDEZ TO WHITTIER + HOMER TO KODIAK

Trip Length: 5+ days
This cruise works well with a popular driving circuit through some of America’s most beautiful highway scenery. Begin in Anchorage and drive to Valdez along the Glenn and Richardson Highways, passing Alaska’s largest roadside glaciers and highest waterfalls. In Valdez, board the ferry with your car and cruise back to Whittier, then drive south to the Kenai Peninsula. After a few days in Homer, board the ferry to Kodiak. Spend a few days before returning to Homer.

View the complete itinerary

CROSS GULF: BELLINGHAM TO WHITTIER

Trip Length: 7+ days
This is a prime route for independent travelers who want a driving trip but don’t want to motor all the way from the Lower 48 or Canada. Sail from Bellingham and get off at Whittier, a connection to the main Southcentral Alaska highway system. Stop in Juneau along the way. From there, you have a straight shot to either the Kenai Peninsula or Anchorage, and from there to Denali and beyond.

View the complete itinerary

HOMER TO ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

Trip Length: 9+ days
Starting in Anchorage, fly (30 minutes) or drive (5 hours) to Homer, at the end of the Kenai Peninsula. From there, board the ferry for Kodiak Island (you can bring your car, but leave it in Kodiak). Spend 3 days in Kodiak before boarding the ferry for a 2.5-day journey to Unalaska/Dutch Harbor. Along the way, stop in Chignik, Sand Point, King Cove, False Pass, Cold Bay, and Akutan. The stops are usually 1–3 hours, just long enough time to go ashore and stretch your legs. Your final stop is Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, a remote part of Alaska with rich World War II history, lots of hiking trails, and home of the popular TV show, Deadliest Catch. If you brought your vehicle to Kodiak, make the 2- to 3-day trip back on the ferry to Kodiak and then Homer. If you flew to Homer, you can fly directly from Unalaska back to Anchorage. Note: The MV Tustumena only makes this trip twice a month between May and September.

View the complete itinerary