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A hiker clammers up a Baranof Island trail, framed by a spectacular seascape.

pictures and scans with binoculars. Along the ridgeline, mountain goats grazed. And just for a few seconds, we spied a black bear, shining far in the side-slanted light.

You might imagine a deep wilderness experience, the sort of trip that might require planning, equipment, and expert outdoors skills—not to mention a stiff payout. In fact, our adventure was a day hike planned on the spur of the moment, just a fifteen-minute drive from downtown Juneau. Our fancy outdoor gear amounted to decent shoes, day packs, and lunch, and our layout for the entire day, including food and gas, might have been fifteen bucks. Skills? Aside from a reasonable level of 50-something fitness, and the ability to follow a trail, zilch. The key to that great excursion was simple knowledge: knowing the trail (tucked into the back of a Juneau neighborhood) was there; that it was safe and doable, and what rewards lay ahead.

Each summer brings a million-plus visitors to Alaska, many drawn by the lure of wilderness and all that goes with it. But most end up clumped in great herds, conveyed by cruise ships, trains, jets, or highways from one destination to another. Even the wilderness tours, from whale watching to whitewater rafting to guided nature hikes, tend to be activities involving a dozen on up to a hundred-plus folks within a few feet of one another. While group excursions are totally fine and worthwhile, they don't provide one essential Great Land experience, perhaps the most important of all: finding your own way through wild country, making personal discoveries unfiltered by the chatter of voices, and the presence of others who make all the decisions. It's up to you to find your own private Alaska. When I think of my own Alaska memories, stretched over decades, a huge number of my most vivid experiences came from short, local hikes, trips practically anyone could take.

The good news is, opportunities for slipping away on your own almost always lie close at hand. Virtually every Alaska town, from tiny Haines to the great suburban sprawl of Anchorage, offers a network of hiking trails and paths (not to mention beaches) ranging from well-known to local secrets. Don't be shy. Ask

# Your Private Alaska

Great excursions almost always lie close at hand

BY NICK JANS

**P**ANTING FROM THE CLIMB, WE broke out into the view. Ahead lay a high meadow, framed by snow-streaked peaks; at my back, a half-mile below, stretched Alaska's longest fiord, Lynn Canal. Fed by snowmelt and the sun, the electric green of early summer glowed beneath a cirrus-streaked sky. We had the entire wildflower-spangled basin to ourselves.

Sherrie and I cooled our three tongue-lolling dogs in a clear pool. As they waded, paddled, and shook, marmot whistles cut the air, and the fluting of eagles echoed in the stillness. After lunch and a rest, we hiked farther up the basin, pausing for



around, and chances are you can find a number of choices, often within walking distance of cruise-ship docks, busy downtowns, and even major airports. Add on state and federal parklands stretched along connecting highways. A local trail guidebook or pamphlet, if one exists for a given area, is required reading. Keep in mind that some trails are maintained by municipalities, others by the state, and still others by federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. All are happy to share free information through websites and information centers. Commercial guidebooks, including the ubiquitous *The Milepost* (full disclosure: published by Morris Communications, who also owns this magazine) may be useful. Even after all these years, I keep a well-thumbed copy handy.

Do that homework and think outside the proverbial box. If an interesting trailhead

is too far for walking, and you don't have your own wheels, city bus lines or shuttles may get you close enough; failing that, call a cab. The fare is a bargain compared to the least expensive group tour. You could spend weeks hiking near some communities and never run out of new country.

My former home town of Juneau is especially notable for its amazing walk-up access to the wild. Thanks to its rich, varied, and compressed topography and a super-active locally supported organization known as Trail Mix, not to mention the U.S. Forest Service's work in the adjoining Tongass National Forest, Alaska's capital city can lay claim to the best hiking-trail system of any city in the state, and perhaps the entire world. Dozens of amazing, accessible trails offer myriad landscapes: tidewater meadows, pristine beaches, old-growth river bottoms, glaciers, and high alpine

country. Seasonal activities include casual strolls, angling, cross-country skiing, wildlife viewing, mountain biking, and more, on up to hike-up, jump-off hang gliding, and ice climbing. That's the beauty of these trails; they're completely scalable, according to the individual.

While most trails are well maintained, some require rubber boots or a complete disregard for dry feet. They range from nearly level, wheelchair-friendly asphalt paths to downright gnarly going, and are often laced with unofficial trails, human-made and otherwise. Main trail lengths range from less than a mile to challenging alpine loops that require days and the soul of a mountain goat. As a further bonus, both the state and forest service maintain a number of cabins that are available for day use or overnight rental, scattered at prime spots throughout the trail system. By the way, dozens of similar cabins lie across the state, some so popular you have to make reservations a year ahead.

But what about bears, moose, and who knows what? The idea of sharing country with big wild things is enough to intimidate most visitors out of even walking a few feet into the Alaska wild alone. Having once been a newbie myself, I totally get that fear. That said, most locals seldom carry guns or pepper spray on their outings. They know that bears, wolves, and moose are far more scared of you than you are of them, and given some common sense and respect, pose far less danger than the texting drivers we encounter in our daily travels. Paying attention to where you put your feet is far more critical to your safety.

So, go for it. Do what the locals do, and enjoy Alaska's accessible, local trails. Dust off your spirit of adventure, moderated by common sense. Make sure you're paying attention to where you're going, and your surroundings. Note landmarks, and leave sticks or rocks as trail markers when in doubt. If the going gets tough, remember that trails run two ways. I've always reserved the right to turn back whenever I felt like it. But I keep going out and always will. 🐾

Nick's wife, Sherrie, and their dogs enjoy one of the many amazing neighborhood trails around Juneau.



*Nick is a longtime contributing editor to Alaska. His latest book, The Giant's Hand, is available from [nickjans.com](http://nickjans.com)*