TRAVEL

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From Anchorage, it's easy to get a seaplane flight to tour an Alaska glacier. The city itself has museums, microbreweries and more. MICHAEL MILNE

Anchorage at 100

The vibrant city, just a collection of tents in 1915, offers Alaska treats off the cruise-ship path.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — We climbed gingerly down onto the narrow float of the seaplane that we had ridden in for a soft landing on Lake George, 45 miles northeast of downtown Anchorage. Just off to our right was the soaring Colony Glacier, its craggy azure surface providing a launch pad for polar winds blowing out to greet us.

As we balanced on the float, the sound of gunshots echoed through the valley. At least that's what we thought they were, until we watched Humvee-sized blocks of ice calving off the glacier and landing spectacularly in the lake, sending giant plumes of water into the air.

Just another day in Alaska, the vaunted "last frontier." More than living up to its reputation as pristine, rugged, and off-beat, the state has become ratings bait for reality-TV shows. At last count, about a dozen are being filmed here.

Far longer than it's been a magnet for film crews, Alaska has been a popular spot for cruise vacations. However, most ships only skirt the shoreline of America's largest state. Usually, passengers fly in or out of Anchorage to stay one night before boarding or after disembarking, missing much of what this dynamic city has to offer. Visitors should plan to spend extra time here — particularly as Anchorage celebrates its centennial this year.

Summertime in Alaska is enchanting. Long hours of daylight give plenty of time to explore, and all that solar warmth encourages flowers to bloom in rainbow-hued profusion, overflowing beds and planters. Hemlock trees are festooned with thumb-sized purple pine cones, as if decorated for an early Christmas.

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Anchorage offers treats off the cruise-ship path

ALASKA from N1

Culturally, Anchorage, with about 300,000 hardy souls, ranks up there with metropolises boasting larger populations. Begin immersing yourself in the region at the Anchorage Museum, which displays more than 600 indigenous artifacts in the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center. Native Alaskans descend from 450 tribes, more than in any other state, and that diversity is revealed in the collection.

Remarkably, many delicate pieces have survived, including intricately beaded satchels, carved walrus ivory bows, and the ahead-of-its-time pearly white *imarnin*, or "gut parkas." These translucent gems were sewn by members of the Yup'ik tribe from sea mammal intestines to provide a clever form of waterproof protection.

Given their remote location, Alaskans were locavores — with diets dominated by what is locally grown and produced — before that concept became one of the latest hottest trends. In addition to Alaskan favorites such as king crab, salmon, and reindeer sausage, the city is home to a growing international foodie scene.

A display of metal and wooden skids used by plane for glacier landings, at the Alaska Aviation Museum in Anchorage.

Anchorage also is tapping into a burgeoning microbrewery movement. For true local flavors — of both the culinary and people-watching variety — try Humpy's Great Alaskan Alehouse: live music, the state's largest selection of local beers on tap, and an Original Crab Roll (Alaska's answer to New England's lobster roll). The place really starts hopping when an overeager eater takes on the Kodiak Arrest Challenge, a six-pound tray of seafood that must be eaten in an hour.

If you're still hungry, head over a few blocks to Town Square Park on West Fifth Avenue. Follow the smoky aromas where three food carts duke it out for reindeer sausage supremacy. Each has its own secret sauce and methods of preparing these local delicacies.

Husky Dogs sautés its onions in Coca-Cola to give them a sweet, spicy flavor. And don't worry, if you're traveling with children who can't stand the thought of eating Rudolph's brethren, the vendors will refer to it as caribou sausage. Around 10 p.m., with the summer sun still casting its amber glow across the park, is the perfect time for a taste.

You can't become much more of a locavore than if you're fishing for salmon in the shadows of Anchorage's downtown buildings. At Ship Creek, anglers can rent equipment, buy bait, even acquire an Alaskan fishing license before dropping a line into the pristine water. If the thought of sliding fish roe onto a hook makes you squeamish, a viewing platform reveals the pink fish on their annual pilgrimage upstream, and you haven't gotten your hands dirty.

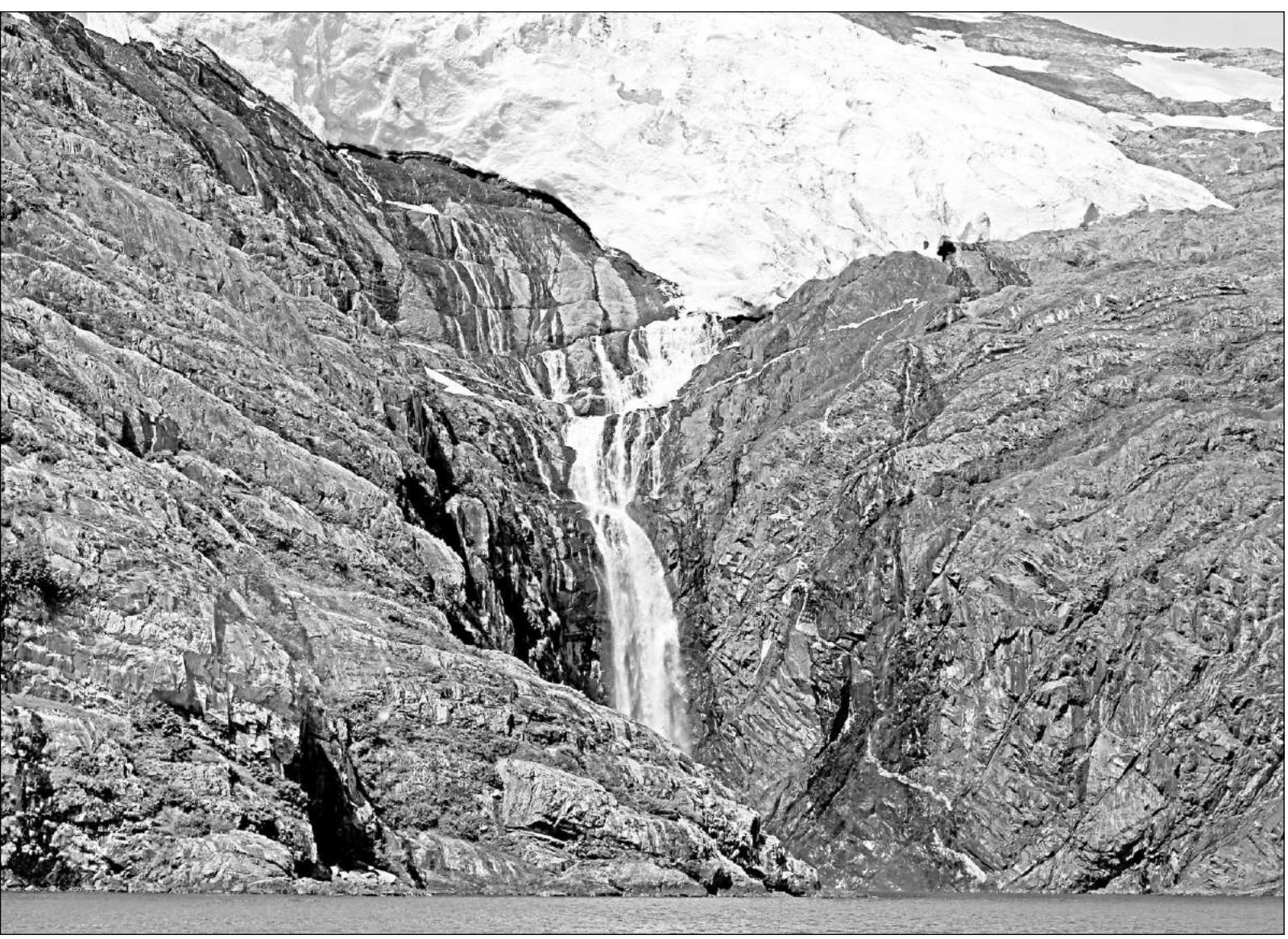
Anchorage is an outdoors town year-round, but even more so in summer. An easy way to experience its relationship with nature is via the 11-mile Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, which runs from the train depot downtown to out beyond the airport. Don't worry about the length; it's flat and paved. You can take on just part of it, or rent bikes along the way. If you're channeling your inner Greg LeMond, watch out for the occasional moose strutting across the path. It's also not unusual to spot a few bald eagles.

Along the way, take a well-marked side trip to Earthquake Park. The site of a major ground rupture during the 1964 earthquake shows just how violent these tremors can be. A whole neighborhood shelved off a cliff, creating a geological rift.

Back on Lake George, we climbed carefully into the plane. After battening down the hatches and making sure we were all accounted for, our pilot, Scott, from Rust's Flying Service, serpentined his way through the icebergs drifting by, and gently lifted off. On the way back to Anchorage, we flirted with the Chugach Mountains for an aerial wild game safari. On the steep rocky hillsides, snow white Dall sheep sporting prominent curved horns stood out against the summer vegetation, while down below moose cavorted in the boreal forest.

In less than a half-hour, we were back in Anchorage, splashing down at the Lake Hood Seaplane Base, which is the busiest in the world. It's also a convenient starting point for flightseeing trips to Mount McKinley and Denali National Park.

When Anchorage started out in 1915 as a construction camp for the new railroad, it was just a tent city. A century later, it's a metropolis with a thriving cultural life set amidst some of the world's most spectacular scenery — definitely more than a transit point for a cruise.



Glacial runoff near Anchorage. Since most ships only skirt the shoreline of America's largest state, visitors who want a more complete experience should plan to spend time in the city, with day trips into the interior. MICHAEL MILNE

Anchorage marks its 100th

For information on the yearlong birthday bash in Alaska's largest city: **www.AnchorageCentennial.org**

Larissa and Michael Milne have been global nomads since 2011. Their new book is "Philadelphia Liberty Trail: Trace the Path of America's Heritage."