

By Nicole A. Bonham Colby

KETCHIKAN, Alaska – There is no traveling to the wilderness from Ketchikan.

The frontier – flora and fauna – is literally at your doorstep.

Situated on Revillagigedo Island along the southern tip of Alaska's Panhandle, the island town of Ketchikan enjoys a unique advantage of a central location amidst hundreds of miles of wilderness geography. So, not only are there opportunities at hand to explore the surrounding islands and archipelago, but Ketchikan also offers immediate wilderness access via a web of trails and road systems within the proximity of downtown.

### *Nearby Hikes*

Notable hikes include a web of maintained trails on the Tongass National Forest. Just north of town is the Ward Lake Recreation Area, which includes a short and easily accessible nature hike around the lake. Other hikes closest to Ketchikan proper include the popular 2.3-mile Perseverance Trail and 2-mile Connell Lake Trail, both also north of town near Ward Lake. For experienced hikers, there is the Deer Mountain Trail, which leads over Deer Mountain from Ketchikan City to Silvis Lake on the southern end of the primary island roadway. For the healthy and prepared hiker, the 10-mile adventure offers a striking alpine landscape and postcard views of Ketchikan and Revillagigedo Island and the surrounding island chain.

### *Cabin Stays*

For those with a day or two to spare, locals will suggest a short flight to any one of the area U.S. Forest Service or private cabins, available for rent. A number of local

floatplane operations – Taquan Air, Pacific Airways, Promech Air, and others – provide daily scheduled or charter service to regional popular drop offs. If planning to stay over, it's necessary to reserve the cabins, with advance planning suggested to ensure preferred dates and locations.

The remote cabin option offers a unique opportunity to experience true Alaska wilderness first hand, low maintenance, and for as long as your schedule permits (with a 7- to 10-day limit, depending on the season). Given that the Tongass is roughly the size of the state of West Virginia, it's easily possible to extricate yourself from the population center and to spend your days and evenings on a remote creek or ocean cove with nothing but animal calls and a sea breeze to keep you company. As you'll find, there is nothing silent about backwoods Alaska, however, where every moment chimes with the music of a quivering Alder branch, bird call, or ocean ruffle.

### *Flora and Fauna*

Dozens of local Ketchikan tour operators are available on the spot to arrange sightseeing or fishing trips for the immediate day or a future return trip. Local hotels and bed & breakfast establishments often provide their guests with an insider's connection to favorite boat captains, wilderness guides, or tour directors.

If a mild afternoon saunter is your idea of a good time, consider the Historic Ketchikan organization's Historic Walking Tour, covering between 30 and 35 sites chronicling the community's evolution – from the former red-light district to gracious churches and private homes.

For gardeners, the city's collection of community flower gardens are scattered throughout the downtown area and provide an accurate cross section of what grows well in the limited soil of the granite island. From flamboyant rhododendrons to native hosta and curious bleeding hearts, Ketchikan is afire in vibrant color during the extended sunshine hours of summer.

If your tastes lean more to the animal kingdom, consider a half-day trip to the Anan Bear Observatory, a short flight north near Wrangell. From the banks of Anan Creek, safely watch black and brown bear fishing for the native salmon running upstream. The observatory is recognized as a world-class opportunity to view bear feeding in such close proximity. For black bear, consider the closer viewing areas at nearby Neets Bay and also at Traitors Cove, located only 26 miles north of Ketchikan.

### *Resources*

Whether considering an on-the-fly day hike, or an extended outdoor vacation, resources are easily available to assist in your planning. For a quick, virtual tour of possibilities, check out the following websites:

- U.S. Forest Service's homepage for the Tongass National Forest:  
[www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass](http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass)
- Historic Ketchikan: [www.historic-ketchikan.org](http://www.historic-ketchikan.org)
- Ketchikan Outdoor Recreation and Trails Coalition  
([www.geocities.com/trailscoalition](http://www.geocities.com/trailscoalition)), organized in 1992 to cultivate awareness and maintenance of popular recreation corridors. The group released a trails plan a few years later and has recently sponsored kayak and hiking trips.

- Ketchikan Visitors Bureau for links to walking tour maps, commercial tours, flight operations, and wilderness guides: [www.visit-ketchikan.com](http://www.visit-ketchikan.com)

Even should you visit Ketchikan each year for a lifetime, it is impossible to explore every adjacent creek bank or alpine lake – just consider, the Ketchikan Gateway Borough alone measures some 1,750 square miles.

That said, whether your stay is for a day or a month, take care to experience the real Alaska – after all, its wilderness is just beyond the door step.

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