

ALASKA

Hi, my name is Liz Banicki and I am currently a U.S. Teaching Assistant in Salzburg, Austria. I would love to talk to you about my home, the beautiful state of Alaska. The name "Alaska" derives from the Aleut word, Alyeska, meaning "great land."

The greatness of Alaska was not so immediately apparent when U.S. Secretary of State William Seward negotiated the purchase of the territory from Russia in 1867 for 2 cents per acre, a decision which was popularly derided as "Seward's Folly." Defying this namesake, Alaska was admitted to the Union in 1959 and has since proven its value as the 49th state, providing the United States with access to a treasure trove of natural resources, including some of the largest oil and natural gas reserves in North America. The largest state in the country, Alaska is home to not only 730,000 inhabitants, but also to 229 federally recognized Alaska Native tribes. These groups, along with a prominent and dedicated military community, are integral parts of the cultural and social patchwork that defines the very resilient spirit of the state and its citizens.

Nearly one-third of Alaska lies within the Arctic Circle. Alaska is so large that the state of Rhode Island could fit into it 425 times.

With names like Chicken, Deadhorse, Unalaska and North Pole, Alaska may have a monopoly on peculiar town names! A little known fact is that in 1942 the Imperial Japanese Navy invaded Alaska, starting the year-long Aleutian Islands Campaign, the first battle fought on American soil since the Civil War. As a resident of Alaska for 15 years, here are my top 5 reasons you should visit the Land of the Midnight Sun:

5. Northern Lights

A brilliant natural light show caused by solar changes in the Earth's atmosphere, the aurora borealis, or "northern lights" are only visible in the winter months. The unique solar display has inspired many Alaskan artists and authors over the years.

4. Wildlife

Don't let a grizzly scare you away. Both on land and in the sea, Alaska hosts an array of wild animals. Whales, polar bears, bald eagles and even wolverines are only a few of many diverse species that call Alaska home. But you won't find any snakes here! Alaska's characteristically cold climate only allows for a few reptiles and amphibians.

3. Outdoor Activities

Alaskans love the great outdoors. Whether it is hiking Hatcher's Pass, dip netting on the Kenai River or skiing in Girdwood, the rugged landscape of Alaska allows for a variety of outdoor activities in both the summer and winter months. The annual Alaska State Fair at the end of the summer showcases the best of Alaskan artisan crafts and locally grown produce, including its well-known Giant Cabbage Weigh-Off competition.

The Iditarod, historically known as the "Last Great Race" is the highlight of the winter season and tests both mushers and dog's physical and mental endurance as they race nearly 1,000 miles through the Alaskan wilderness from Willow to Nome.

The winter months also bring the historic “Fur Rendezvous Festival” in late February. Keeping to tradition, this “largest winter festival in North America” has been an Alaskan staple since 1935. Events include the official Fur Rondy Fur Auction, the Running of the Reindeer and the Mr. Fur Face beard contest.

2. Food

And I’m not just talking about Baked Alaska! Because of its proximity to the pristine waters of the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, Alaska has some of the finest seafood in the world. Whether it’s fresh Chinook salmon, halibut—my favorite— or monster king crab legs, Alaskan seafood should not be missed.

Large game animals like moose, bear, caribou and reindeer also add to the unique flavors of Alaskan cuisine. Something distinctively Alaskan is sourdough bread, brought to the region during the Klondike Gold Rush in the late 1800’s. A “sourdough”—a nickname for a seasoned gold prospector—would carry the bread starter in a necklace around his neck in order to prevent the yeast from freezing in the cold winter conditions. That way, fresh bread was always available. In Alaska, sourdough bread is as common and as well-loved as apple pie.

1. Landscape

Perhaps the single biggest draw for residents and tourists alike is the rugged and untamed beauty of the state’s landscape. Alaska, with over 571,000 square miles of land, has a diverse geography. In the Panhandle near the capital city of Juneau, the Tongass National Forest—the largest national forest in the U.S.—dominates the region with its fjords, glaciers and temperate rainforests.

The Aleutian Islands, located in the western part of Alaska, stretch 1,200 square miles over the Bering Sea and are comprised of 14 large volcanic islands and around 55 smaller islands. In South-central Alaska, where I’m from, mountains, thick patches of forest and endless coastline define the landscape. In the interior, the Denali National Park and Preserve is home to Mt. McKinley (or Denali), the highest point in North America. Mountains, vast tundra and winding rivers stretch up through the interior, past Fairbanks and all the way to the northernmost town of Barrow.

So that’s my list. If you have an adventurous spirit, a natural curiosity for the unexplored and a good pair of hiking boots, take my word for it and visit Alaska, the Last Frontier, and make a list of your own.