

2 Background information

2·3 Alaska, the 49th State



Though the state is nicknamed 'The Last Frontier' and 'The Land of the Midnight Sun', the official name Alaska is taken from the Aleutian word *alyeska*, or *great land*. It was first settled by humans crossing the Bering Strait, which at the time was still a land bridge. Now Alaska is known as the 49th State. However, not only is it physically detached, but also it has a much more casual culture than the 48 contiguous states.

It is largest in area of the American states, roughly the size of Western Europe. Of its 650,000 inhabitants, about 40% live in or near Anchorage on the coast of South Central Alaska. The population is very thinly spread outside Anchorage, its largest city. It has the highest percentage of American Indians of all states, namely 16%. After the signing of the 1867 agreement known as "Seward's Folly", the USA acquired Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.

The gold rushes at the end of the 19th century attracted many fortune seekers, but the area was still little more than a colony for the other states. Only after Japan bombed Pearl Harbour and occupied some islands in the Aleutian chain, lots of money was spent on military enforcement and infrastructure. Amongst other things, this resulted in the construction of the Alaska Highway from Dawson Creek, BC (Canada) to Fairbanks, AK – thus opening up vehicle access to the area. At that time two out of three residents were military, a ratio that remained high throughout the Cold War.



After protracted debate, President Eisenhower signed the official declaration on 3.1.1959, making Alaska the 49th state. The nation's flag was adjusted to show 7 rows of 7 stars.

Though the capital is Juneau, Anchorage is by far its largest city. The economy is still fairly dependent on the military, but nowadays the oil business and tourism have also become important. The main export is seafood. During summer, temperatures typically range from 13 to 23 Celsius (55°-80° F), but in winter it drops to -7 to -15 C (20°-5° F). Due to its high latitude, the summers have extremely long days and the winters are very dark, sometimes lit by the Northern Lights.



Northern lights (*aurora borealis*)

Currency

Overall living expenses are slightly higher



in Alaska than the rest of the USA. The official currency is still the US dollar, which in recent years has been floating roughly at par with the euro. As in the rest of the US, the most widely used payment method is not cash, but credit card. You'll need one as a deposit (when reserving a hotel or renting a car) and can pay for almost everything with it, e.g. Park fees and air taxi. Bring dollar notes as well, for small purchases and tips.

Time zone



The whole of Alaska (except the far west Aleutian Islands) is now on Alaskan Standard Time. Before 1983 there were four time zones, allowing clock and sun time to be better aligned. AST is nine hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT-9). Given its longitude, this puts most of Alaska effectively on permanent daylight saving. Nevertheless, Daylight Saving Time (DST) is applied during the summer months (GMT-8). DST is controversial in Alaska: it postpones the overhead sun to as late as 2 or 3 pm in places.

Power supply and telephoning

The US operates on 110 volts, so check if your chargers etc can handle this: some are switchable by means of a tiny lever or button. Most Alaskan sockets can handle both North American-style two- or three-pronged plugs. Often a razor (European) socket is available, but bring an adapter just in case.

To dial the US from elsewhere, prefix the number with 001. To phone home from the US, dial 011 then your country code and number.

