

Sitka, Alaska (9-Night Alaska Itinerary)

No Alaskan cruise port celebrates the state's Russian heritage more than Sitka. To the Russians this was New Archangel, capital of their North American holdings and for a time, the most important port on the West Coast north of Mexico. This is where "Seward's Folly" was officially signed over to the U.S. in 1867 and continued as the territorial capital until the Juneau gold strike. The largest city by area in the U.S., and fourth-largest in Alaska by population (8,881), Sitka is perched on the western shore of Baranof Island, on the Gulf of Alaska. Nearly all of this island, tenth largest in the U.S., is part of Tongass National Forest. When the weather's good, the imposing cone of the dormant Mt. Edgecumbe volcano looms 15 miles away, across Sitka Sound. Wildlife-watching, the best fishing on the Alaska itinerary, and hiking are the top out of town activities, with several popular trailheads right in town.



A cruise ship dwarfed by Tracy Arm

Walking Sitka (sites are free unless noted): It's less than a mile along Lincoln St. from Totem Square on the west to Sitka National Historic Park on the east. The shuttle from the cruise pier will likely stop a block away, at the west end of Harbor Drive by Castle Hill Historic Park. Catch the view from the hill, then head north to Lincoln St. and Totem Square. Across the square is Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi, the Tlinget tribal center and native dance show (\$10 walk-up, if available, or book with DCL). There too is Sitka Pioneer Home, an assisted living facility and one of Sitka's 22 national historic sites. Just beyond to the north are the Russian Blockhouse and Russian Cemetery. Continue on Lincoln St. to St. Michael's Cathedral. The original burned down in 1966, and the replica displays historic Russian artwork (\$2 donation). From here detour one block south to Harbor Dr. to visit Sitka Historical Museum (\$2) and the **visitor information desk** at Harrigan Centennial Hall. The hall also hosts the New Archangel Russian dancers, who perform twice daily (\$10/\$5). A harbor-front walkway skirts a marina and returns you to Lincoln St., where you'll find the Russian Bishop's House, one of Alaska's four surviving Russian colonial buildings (guided tour \$4). Next is Sheldon Jackson Museum, showing the state's largest collection of native artifacts (\$4), and the Sitka Sound Science Center's hatchery and aquarium (\$5). That brings us to Sitka National Historical Park, Alaska's oldest National Park. 113 wooded acres on Sitka Sound preserve the site of the decisive battle between the Klingsits and Russians. Two miles of accessible woodland and bay-side trails offer views of 18 totems and area wildlife. The visitor center hosts ranger-guided walks and the Alaskan Indian Cultural Center. The Alaska Raptor Center is also nearby, on the east end of the park (\$12/\$6).

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GETTING THERE

The Wonder berths at Old Sitka Dock, five miles north of town in a commercial shipyard. There's nothing to see at the pier, but there's **free bus service into town**. In town, a hop-on/hop-off bus may be running (\$10, pay the driver). Taxis, bike, and car rentals are available, though most visitors will walk. In 2014 the Wonder makes her only visit on Tues, May 27. Just the 382-passenger Silversea Silver Shadow will be sharing the port. All ashore time is 7:30 am, all aboard at 4:30 pm. The average high for that date is 56°F (13°C), the low is 41°F (5°C), and expect a 50% chance of rain.

ACTIVITIES

Disney Cruise Line lists just **11 shore excursions for Sitka**, but they manage to cover the gamut of what the port has to offer. Many morning excursions depart from the ship but end in town, while the afternoon version of those tours may start in town and end at the ship. Use the free shuttle bus for the other half of the journey.

We're underwhelmed by the in-town tours, which offer little value in this very walkable town other than the assurance of a seat at the Klingit dance show. We'd rather explore at our own pace, pay admission out-of-pocket (see the previous page for sights and rates), and maybe pop \$10 for the tourist bus. We're more positive about the nature and active excursions—actually, they all appeal to us (although \$84/\$64 for a hike that starts just two miles up the road from the cruise pier seems a bit much). Sitka claims to have the **best fishing** of the cruise ports, thanks to its location on the Gulf of Alaska, so that's something to consider. The port has a fair number of fishing/wildlife-viewing charter operators too small to serve the cruise lines, but offer excellent service by all accounts. You can find listings at Sitka.org and TripAdvisor.com. Several **hiking trails** start in town. Indian River Trail is a gentle valley walk, Gavan Hill Trail gains 2,500 ft. of altitude. Though hard to navigate, SitkaTrails.org is packed with useful trail info <http://www.sitkatrails.org/sitka-road-system-trails/>

The Sitka Convention and Visitor's Bureau web site <http://www.sitka.org> is a fine resource, covering much of what there is to see and do. The site's downtown and hiking/biking maps are especially helpful.

Have you read Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policeman's Union*, which is set in Sitka? You do realize that it's alternate-history fiction? It's fun reading, but John Muir's *Travels in Alaska* is far better preparation for this journey.