

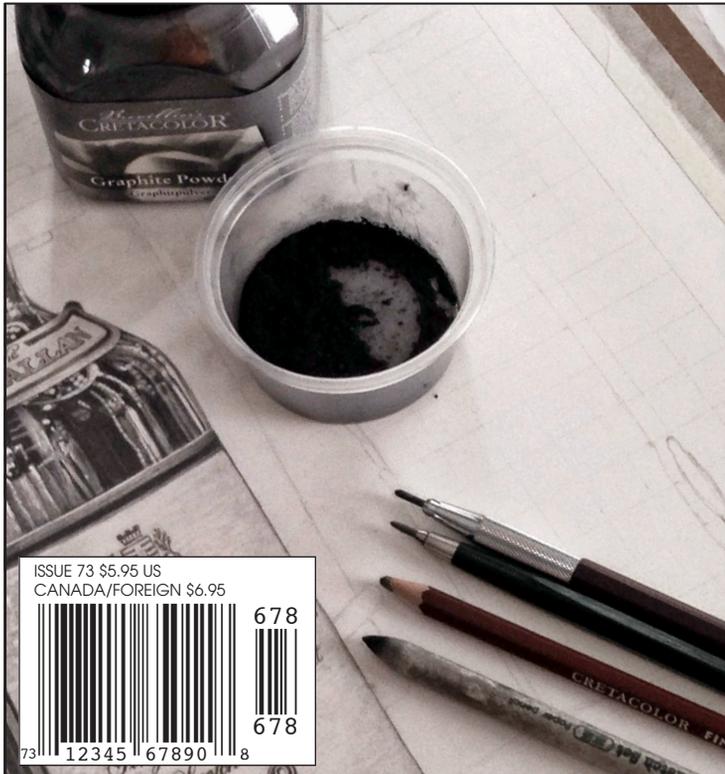
AMERICAN LIFESTYLE

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THE MYSTERIOUS PULL OF sitka, alaska

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Though at 4,811 square miles, it's the largest incorporated city by area in the US, Sitka isn't an easy place to get to. The residential area of eight or nine thousand is on the coastal edge of Baranof Island—one of the largest islands of Alaska's panhandle. The area is only accessible by boat or plane, and both ABC News and CNN have ranked the Sitka Rocky Gutierrez Airport as one of the most thrilling (read dangerous) in the United States.

Yet, despite the difficult and sometimes frightening travel it takes to get to Sitka, the town is spectacularly beautiful, charming, and deeply connected to a culturally rich past. In fact, I often daydream of visiting Sitka while I sit at a dusty, frumpy nonprofit desk. Over ten years, I've made many return trips—and none has ever disappointed. More than almost any other place, Sitka is a destination I recommend to fellow travelers; hardships and all, it's worth the journey. Here's why:

THE SETTING

From the air, one can see pulsing waves from the Gulf of Alaska roll into Sitka

Sound. They crash around black piles of rock and send clumps of white foam swirling back into dark teal water. Tiny wooded islands dot the sound like freckles, and when I peer carefully into the trees, I can often spot a precariously perched cabin looking west toward the sunset. Wood smoke from the chimney indicates that someone is home.

The pilots of Alaskan Airlines, the only commercial carrier with service in Sitka, seem to be quite accustomed to the tiny runway with a big reputation. Its close proximity to crashing waves means that sometimes it's strewn with boulders and driftwood, but I've never experienced more than the expected bump upon landing.

Getting downtown from the airport is an easy, five-minute taxi ride and provides another reminder of Sitka's stunning setting. I love crossing the O'Connell Bridge that connects Japonski Island, where the airport is located, to the much larger Baranof Island. From the top of the arched cable-stayed bridge, I have a 360-degree view. Directly in front of me is downtown Sitka. The two main streets bustle with tourists, locals, and fishermen alike, and the chanterelle-colored Sitka Pioneer Home—a state-run assisted living facility—makes an impressive welcome.

Gazing past town, my eyes lock on Mount Verstovia, a rocky, arrowhead-shaped peak

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that seems more like the caricature of a mountain than a real mountain. If I were to spin a full circle, I would see the Pyramid Mountain to my right, with handfuls of evergreen islands scattered in the water below it; the open expanse of Sitka Sound behind me; and far to my left, the rounded bald dome of Mount Edgecumbe, a 3,200-foot stratovolcano whose snow-striped flanks always remind me of the famous Japanese print series, *36 Views of Mount Fuji*.

Besides just letting your eyes soak up this beauty, the best way to experience Sitka's natural splendor is to get dirty in it. Options for this abound. My personal favorite is to hike the Verstovia Trail. The trail starts a couple miles from town and climbs through alder and salmonberry shrubs, then hemlock and spruce forest, before finally cresting the ridge on the west shoulder

of Verstovia, where the mighty evergreen trees give way to expanses of low scrubby plants and, depending on the season, a snowfield or two. Climb even higher, and these subalpine meadows give way to the twisted, bonsai-like plants characteristic of an alpine setting.

A steep, five-mile round-trip trek, this hike isn't for everyone, but the eagle-eyed view of town, a close-up of Mount Verstovia, and the chance to see wildlife, such as brown bears, black-tailed deer, and mountain goats, are well worth a pair of burning thighs! Friend, writer, and local fisherman Brendan Jones has played host to me many times in Sitka. He explains, "It's so rare to get those views without driving ten hours or knocking into ten thousand people along the way." The last time I did the hike, I was able to enjoy the panoramic views in near solitude—I saw only a handful of people the whole day.

For those less altitude-inclined, the Sitka National Historical Park is a pleasant alternative. The 112-acre park features two miles of mostly flat, gravel walking paths that meander through giant Sitka spruce trees, along rocky beaches, and up a salmon creek. Come at the right time of year, and you'll see thousands of salmon making their way back to the very spot where they hatched! The park, known to most locals as Totem Park, is also home to an excellent visitor center and a large collection of totem poles. Native groups built the originals in the early 1900s. Today, new, refurbished, and old poles alike



decorate the park and surprise visitors with their stately beauty.

I'd be remiss not to mention Sitka's many water activities. With a little research into the right outfit, anyone can have the adventure of a lifetime: Whale watch in kayaks, but if you're downwind of the animals, watch out! It's easy to get covered with slime and fish breath when the whales spout. Sport fish with pros who know all the local honey holes for rockfish, halibut, and salmon. Or go for a guided cruise with Sitka Harbor Tours, and keep an eye out for the ever adorable sea otters.

THE HISTORY

The Tlingit people originally settled Sitka more than 10,000 years ago. Rich natural resources in a moderate climate made for a relatively easy life of hunting and gathering, so by the time Europeans made first contact in 1741, they found a highly developed culture. Tlingits are renowned for their oratory arts, basket weaving, chilkat blankets (woven from cedar bark and mountain goat fur), and dugout canoes, among many other arts and crafts.

Unrest between the colonizing Russians and the native Tlingit people led to battles over



land. The Russians eventually turned Sitka into a very successful fur-trading outpost; throughout the 1800s, the town was known to many as the "Paris of the Pacific." The home of fur trader Alexander Baranov boasted a grand piano, museum, ballroom, and other fineries that would still seem luxurious today.

By the late 1850s, however, Russia faced economic and political turmoil. Fearing that they might lose control of Alaska, Russia simply sold their territory to the US. This act has often been called "Seward's Folly," but all of resource-rich Alaska was purchased for \$7.2 million (roughly 2 cents per acre)—which doesn't seem like folly to me!

Today, Sitka retains an abundance of historical sites that exemplify this diverse history. When I'm in Sitka, I always visit Castle Hill—this prominent rocky lookout was home to Tlingit long houses and Baranov's "castle." Then, in 1867, Castle Hill became the site where Russian Alaska was formally transferred to the US. None of those buildings stand today, but Castle Hill has been converted into a small park with lovely views of O'Connell Bridge.

Also prominent on Sitka's skyline is the Cathedral of Saint Michael, which was completed in 1848. Though the original church burnt to the ground in 1966, members risked their lives to save many of the icons inside. The church today has been

restored to its original appearance and sits in the middle of downtown—in fact, the main road forks to go around the church! Tours are available here and at the Russian Bishop's House (built in 1842) a few blocks down the road.

If you're interested in Native American history, Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi Tribal Community House hosts dance performances in full traditional dress and storytelling events, and features a shop with authentic Native American artwork and crafts. The Sheldon Jackson Museum also offers an impressive collection of thousands of objects, such as spruce root baskets, engraved silver objects, and elaborate beadwork. A smattering of stone



“... go for a guided cruise with Sitka Harbor Tours, and keep an eye out for the ever adorable sea otters.”



tools, fishing and hunting equipment, and clothing items also give an inside look at the daily life of Native Americans in the 1800s.

THE ARTS

Sitka's history might be rough and tumble, but it has paved the way for an impressive arts scene that draws heavily on its Native American and Russian roots. A myriad of downtown galleries have collections of Russian art and icons, and my favorite galleries, like Sitka Rose and Fishermen's Eye, feature work from a variety of Alaskan artists—potters, printmakers, silversmiths, wood-carvers, and more—who expertly

SITKA SEAFOOD CAN BE BOUGHT ALL OVER THE WORLD, BUT THE GREAT THING ABOUT VISITING SITKA IS THAT YOU GET IT STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE.



capture the beauty and history of Alaska in their one-of-a-kind products. Unlike many Alaskan tourist towns, it seems that Sitka strives to support local artists. Locals rally behind events like the Grind, a monthly, wintertime community talent show, and the Sitka Summer Music Festival, a world-class gathering for chamber music.

THE FOOD

In the 1800s, Sitka's economy relied heavily on the fur trade. Today, the same can be said for its fisheries. According to the Sitka Economic Development Association, Sitka is the ninth most productive seafood port in the US. In 2013, the town sold \$84 million worth of seafood! This includes salmon, herring, halibut, and more exotic species, like sea cucumber and black cod. Sitka seafood can be bought all over the world, but the great thing about visiting Sitka is that you get it straight from the source. Sitka restaurants save the best and freshest seafood for themselves!

For brunch, lunch, or dinner, I like to visit Larkspur Cafe, a homey restaurant where Sitkans often meet for a quick bite or an evening of live music. Located downstairs from the local radio station, it's easy to feel

like you belong. The menu changes often, but Larkspur always has a soup of the day, local fish tacos, and a surprising special, like Vietnamese banh mi sandwiches or blackened halibut.

For a special occasion, Ludvig's is the best choice. My friend Brendan describes it as an "oasis of peace and good cheer," and he's right—the tiny, Mediterranean-themed restaurant is warm and welcoming from the moment one walks in the door. Tapestries hang from the ceiling, the smell of home-baked bread wafts from the kitchen, and just the right amount of hustle and bustle makes the restaurant feel lively without being overwhelming.

Ludvig's menu connects Sitka's fisheries with Spanish-themed dishes, and the results are stunning. Paella—a Spanish rice dish—blends the seafood flavors of prawns, scallops, salmon, rockfish, and calamari with saffron and chorizo. The rich, broth-soaked rice is perfect after a long hike or a rainy day on the water. Another favorite, the Katlian Special, pairs a thick, white slab of local halibut with oyster mushrooms, truffle oil, and risotto. Featured in *The New York Times*, *Sunset*, and *Everyday with Rachel Ray*, Ludvig's is commonly referred to as the best restaurant in Southeast Alaska. It might just be my favorite restaurant ever.

The last place I'll recommend is about the only place in town that doesn't serve seafood, but that doesn't mean it's not part of the seafood experience—the Pioneer Bar is a great place to meet the fishermen who caught your dinner. Affectionately called the P Bar, the place is long, low, and dark. Seafoam green booths line one wall, and bar stools hover over a black-and-white linoleum floor. The bartenders are gruff, the walls are covered in photos of sunken boats, and the drink of choice is whiskey.

A large bell hangs over the bar—ring it, and you've bought the house a round. This tradition runs so deep that the bartenders actually hand out special P Bar chips—like poker chips—that are good for one free drink when the bell rings. If you're lucky, you'll hit the P Bar on a night when a few fishermen roll in. They're always good for a story—and if they've had a good catch, one or more might ring the bell. If you're hungry, they'll tell you to order a takeout bento box into the bar from Kenny's Wok and Teriyaki next door. Brendan recommends "ordering an Alaskan Amber at the bar and waiting for your fried cream cheese wontons to show up. It's just awesome."

If you have only one day to spend in Sitka, climb Mount Verstovia, visit the Sheldon Jackson Museum, drink a cold beer at the Pioneer Bar, and top the night off with a superb seafood dinner at Ludvig's. You'll experience the natural beauty, history, art, and food of Alaska, and if you're anything like me, that'll be enough to keep you coming back for years!

[For more info, visit sitka.org](http://www.visit-sitka.org)