A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO KATMAI NATIONAL PARK

BROOKS FALLS

Visiting Guide

Lodging • Flights • Camping • Day trips





Plan the journey. Make time for the bears.

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Find your way through the guide

What the bracketed numbers mean

Numbers such as **[8, 11]** identify the sources supporting the nearby information. Look up those numbers in the resource lists near the end of the guide, then select the clickable source name to open its website. For example, source 8 is Katmai Air’s Brooks flight information and source 11 is Katmai Water Taxi’s booking information.

[M] identifies material adapted from my book manuscript. **[P]** identifies firsthand experiences I shared while preparing this guide. Recommendations and sample routes are planning suggestions; confirm availability, opening times, prices and conditions directly before booking.

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This guide is designed for use on a screen. Keep a downloaded copy for areas with limited connectivity. The scenery used for decoration coordinates the design; my supplied photographs appear throughout, with outside image credits identified where applicable.

START HERE

Choose the visit that fits you

Brooks Falls is an expensive destination. Flights and remote logistics account for much of the cost, even when the overnight accommodation is inexpensive. Start with the bear activity you want to see, then choose the amount of time and comfort your budget allows.

Option	Main advantage	Main tradeoff	Travel to Brooks Camp
Brooks Lodge	Comfort and repeated river visits	High cost; scarce rooms	Already at Brooks Camp; walk to platforms
Brooks Camp campground	Low overnight fee; time at Brooks	Gear, weather and food storage	Already at Brooks Camp; walk to platforms
King Salmon base	Town lodging; multiple day visits	Pay for each return transfer	About 20–25 min by floatplane; boat alternative
Anchorage day trip	Fits a wider Alaska vacation	Long day; limited viewing time	About 75 min by standard airplane to King Salmon, then 20–25 min by floatplane
Homer day trip	Combines with a Kenai road trip	Long drive plus a costly flight	Drive from Anchorage about 4½–5 hr, then floatplane about 1½ hr each way

Times are approximate and exclude check in, ground transfers and weather delays. Flight itineraries differ by operator. [8–11, 23–26]

Why I recommend allowing time

In my book, Brooks Falls: A Journey Into Wonder, I describe being selected on my first lodge lottery application and staying for three nights. Even that felt too short. Returning to the river gave me time to notice behavior I had missed before. A day trip can be rewarding, but an overnight stay lets you return to the platforms without starting another journey from town. [M]



WHEN TO GO

Choose your bear viewing season

July for the classic falls scene

If your goal is bears catching jumping salmon at the waterfall, July is the strongest general planning choice. Sockeye arriving in late June draw bears to Brooks River, with numbers typically greatest around mid July. July is also busy, so build waiting time into your day. [1, 2]

September for bears along the river

As spawned salmon weaken and die, bears return to feed. September often brings substantial bear activity, particularly around the lower river and river mouth. Plan to explore the viewing platforms rather than expecting every bear to fish at the lip of the falls. [1, 2]

June and August require different expectations

June can precede the main salmon run. Many bears leave during August when salmon are harder to catch, and there can be days without bear sightings at Brooks Camp. Activity often builds again in late August, but the timing varies. A cheaper or available room does not necessarily mean the bear activity matches your goal. [1, 2]

NPS lists regular Brooks Camp services from June 1 through September 17. Some operators published service through September 18 in 2026. Confirm meals, transport, ranger services, and campground facilities for your exact dates, especially near closing. [3, 8]

These are seasonal patterns, not wildlife guarantees. The same week can look different from one year to another. Match your dates to your priorities and keep expectations flexible.



GETTING THERE

Fly via King Salmon or drive to Homer

Via Anchorage and King Salmon

The usual route is Anchorage (ANC) to King Salmon (AKN), followed by a floatplane to Brooks Camp. The Anchorage to King Salmon leg is a standard land based airplane, not a floatplane. Alaska Airlines serves the route; Aleutian Airways lists King Salmon as a seasonal destination, and Katmai Air also advertises seat fares. Check the schedule for your travel year. [2, 9, 26, 27]

Katmai Air describes about 75 minutes to King Salmon and about 20 minutes onward to Brooks. Its flight instructions also describe the floatplane leg as about 25 minutes, so allow roughly 20–25 minutes and obtain your operator’s actual itinerary. Leave time for the transfer between the airport and floatplane base. [10, 21]

From King Salmon by boat

A water taxi is another option. A vehicle takes you to Lake Camp, then the lake crossing to Brooks takes about 45 minutes. The road transfer and check in add time. Strong winds and rough lake conditions may interrupt travel. You cannot drive directly to Brooks Falls. [11, 13]

Via Homer

You can drive from Anchorage to Homer instead of flying to King Salmon, then take a direct floatplane tour to Brooks. Allow roughly 4½–5 hours for the approximately 220 mile drive before sightseeing stops. Stay in Homer the night before an early tour. Direct floatplane trips are approximately 1½ hours each way; confirm the routing because some products use King Salmon and an aircraft change. [23–25]

Homer is useful if the Kenai Peninsula is already part of your itinerary. Add rental car costs, fuel, Homer lodging and the Brooks flight to your comparison. Driving to Homer does not make Brooks a low cost trip. Book a tour specifically to Brooks Falls; other Homer bear tours visit different parts of Katmai or Lake Clark.





OVERNIGHT AT BROOKS

Staying at Brooks Lodge

Comfort close to the river

Brooks Lodge has 16 guest rooms. Each sleeps up to four people in two sets of bunk beds, with heat, electricity, and a private bathroom and shower. The attraction is comfortable access to Brooks Camp rather than a luxury hotel experience. [4]

The Brooks Lodge lottery

Applications typically open in December, generally from December 1 through December 30, for a travel season two calendar years ahead. Apply in December, allow the following calendar year for planning, and travel during the summer of the year after that. Apply through the lodge website. Check the current announcement for the exact deadline and rules. [5]

Each person may submit one application and must travel on the booking. Selection is random; applying early does not improve the draw. Offer only dates you can accept, while allowing as much flexibility as possible. Reservations are not transferable. [5]

Payments and stay limits

Current rules require a 50% deposit promptly after selection and final payment 90 days before arrival. Rates can change before travel. Stays touching July or September currently have a three night limit. Check your lottery announcement and invoice for all deadlines and terms. [5]

Cost and meals

The published 2026 room rate is $1,260 per room per night plus 6% bed tax, or $1,335.60. That equals $667.80 per person for two sharing, or $333.90 for four, before flights and meals. Room sharing changes the economics substantially. [4]

Published adult buffet prices are $25 breakfast, $45 lunch, and $52 dinner, totaling $122 per person for three meals. Meals and transportation are separate unless your invoice explicitly includes them. Confirm dietary requirements and meal hours. [6, 7]

Pros and cons

The advantages are a warm room, private facilities, charging access, and repeated walks to the river. My manuscript describes how much I appreciated the evenings at the lodge and the chance to return each morning. [M] The disadvantages are the price, limited inventory, and the need to plan far ahead. Staying at the lodge does not reserve platform space or guarantee bear sightings.

Staying at Brooks Lodge









RESERVE YOUR CAMPSITE

Booking Brooks Camp campground

Campground photograph: ALASKA.ORG / Alexyn Scheller. [63]

Camping offers time at Brooks without the lodge room charge, but transportation remains a major expense. Reserve the Brooks Camp Camping Permit on Recreation.gov. This is separate from the lodge lottery. [12]

Nights you want	Typical release date in the travel year
May and June	January 7
July and August	February 7
September and October	March 7

The published release time is 8 a.m. Alaska Standard Time, equivalent to 9 a.m. Pacific Standard Time or noon Eastern Standard Time. The three block schedule is the current published pattern. Confirm the release dates and time on the live Recreation.gov permit page each year. Older advice may describe a single January release for all summer nights. [12, 13]

Prepare before reservations open

Create your Recreation.gov account in advance and check the current permit page. Prepare your exact dates, group size, payment method, and acceptable alternatives. Log in before release time and check that every night is available. Keep your confirmation and verify the dates and number of campers. If unsuccessful, monitor returned availability; the campground does not maintain a waitlist. [14]

Fees and limits

Peak season camping is $18 per person per night from June 1 through September 17, with a $6 reservation fee. Shoulder season is $10 per person per night. A permit covers up to six people. NPS limits stays to seven nights in July and 14 nights per calendar year. Eligible Senior and Access Pass holders receive a 50% camping discount for the pass holder only. [12, 13]

Life in Brooks Camp campground

Your camping setup

Bring your own tent, sleeping bag, insulated sleeping pad and rain protection. Its electric fence deters bears, but is bear resistant rather than bear proof. Keep gates closed and follow ranger instructions. [12, 13]

Bathrooms and showers

There are two shared vault toilets in the campground, rather than private bathrooms or flush toilets. Drinking water is available seasonally at the food cache. Brooks Lodge offers paid showers for campers; confirm access, towels, hours and charges directly with the lodge. [13, 14, 59]

Cooking and washing dishes

Three covered cooking shelters have picnic tables. Prepare and eat food only in the designated shelters, never at your tent. Bring cookware, utensils and a stove, or confirm a specific rental in advance. Scrape dishes clean, then wash them at the designated spigot beside the food cache. [12, 13]

Food, gear and fuel caches

Put food and scented items in the designated food cache whenever they are not in immediate use. Keep these items out of tents. Use the gear cache for extra equipment and stoves, and the separate fuel lockers for stove fuel; liquid and gaseous fuels go in different lockers. Dispose of food waste and rubbish in the food cache receptacles. [12, 13]

Bring a complete camping setup

Pack warm layers, waterproof clothing, footwear for mud, insect protection and enough food for your stay. Bring essential sleeping equipment yourself: do not assume replacement tents or bedding will be available. Confirm stove fuel availability and your carrier’s rules before travel. Verify that all your equipment has arrived before continuing from King Salmon. [14, 59]

What you gain and give up

Camping lowers the nightly accommodation cost and gives you more time at Brooks. You take on wet weather, shared facilities, equipment weight and strict food storage routines. The fence is maintained seasonally; confirm operating dates and water availability before a shoulder season stay. [12–14]



RETURN TO TOWN EACH EVENING

Day trips from King Salmon and Anchorage

If you want to travel sooner and have not secured an overnight reservation, a day trip may be a better choice. You can book multiple day trips from King Salmon, Anchorage or Homer, returning to your accommodation after every visit. The two overnight options within Brooks Camp are Brooks Lodge and Brooks Camp campground. Both require advance reservations; confirm your overnight stay well ahead of travel.

King Salmon as your base

Stay in King Salmon and reserve a return floatplane or water taxi to Brooks. This avoids needing an overnight reservation at Brooks and allows separate viewing days. The tradeoff is paying for transport again on each day, and returning to town according to the operator schedule.

Published 2026 Katmai Air transport was $500 per person round trip from King Salmon. The water taxi currently displays $205 each way, or $410 return, including its CUA fee. These cover the Brooks transfer, not flights to King Salmon or a hotel. Confirm future rates and operating dates; the water taxi says future season bookings open according to its annual announcement. [8, 11]

The boat operator currently advertises outward trips on odd hours from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and returns on even hours from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. These are not promises for a future season. Allow time for the land transfer and check in, and obtain a clear missed departure and weather plan. [11]

Places to investigate

Antlers Inn is centrally located near the airport and local services. King Salmon Lodge offers hotel style stays with breakfast and airport shuttles. Bear Trail Cabins and Campground has cabin and town camping options. Request a dated quote and compare taxes, transfers, meals and cancellation terms. [15–17]

An Anchorage day trip

This is useful when Brooks is one part of a larger Alaska vacation. Katmai Air published a 2026 price of $1,489 per person including round trip air transport and taxes and fees. Its sample schedule departs Anchorage around 7 to 8 a.m. and returns around 6:30 to 7 p.m. The journey goes through King Salmon. [10]

Regal Air also lists a Brooks trip at $1,450 per person, roughly 10 to 12 hours overall, with about four hours on the ground. Its displayed price is a benchmark requiring confirmation of season, fees, and inclusions. Routing can involve a transfer. Ask how much time you actually have at Brooks rather than comparing only headline prices. [18]

Advantages are a simple base in Anchorage and no camping equipment. Disadvantages are the long day, weather exposure, and viewing time lost to walking, orientation, and queues. Neither buying a day tour nor staying overnight gives priority at the Falls Platform. Ask whether a guide accompanies you at Brooks or whether the purchase is transportation only.

Plan repeated day trips carefully

Each day requires another paid return trip. Ask about time at Brooks, guides, check in, weather refunds and rescheduling. Book the visit early in your stay so you have some flexibility if weather interrupts travel.





A KENAI PENINSULA ALTERNATIVE

Drive to Homer and fly to Brooks

Make it part of your Alaska road trip

Homer lets you trade the Anchorage to King Salmon flight for a scenic drive down the Kenai Peninsula. Build the drive into your vacation rather than trying to rush it before a tour. Published tourism guidance allows roughly 4½–5 hours without lengthy stops; scenery, traffic and roadwork can make it longer. [23]

Choose the right flight

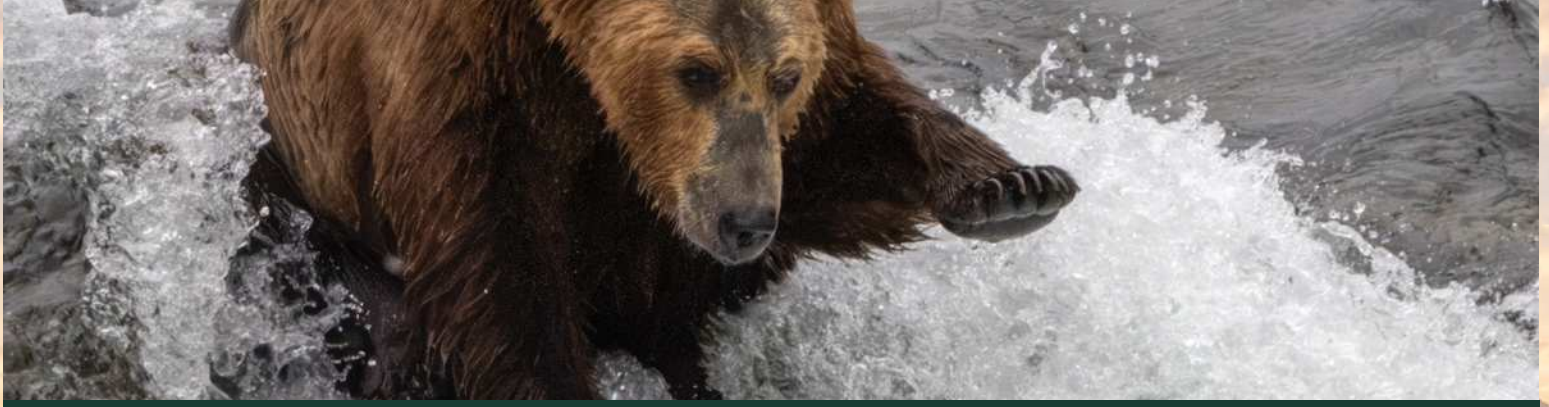
Emerald Air Service and Northwind Aviation offer Brooks floatplane trips from Homer. Their published descriptions put direct flying time around 1½ hours each way. Confirm the aircraft and routing: Northwind also advertises a separate product that flies to King Salmon and changes aircraft. A general bear viewing tour is not necessarily a Brooks Falls tour. [24, 25]

Costs to compare

Northwind’s displayed standard Brooks trip is $1,495 per person before listed extras such as taxes, fees and fuel surcharge, with a card processing charge also described. Treat this as a price checked in October 2026, not a guaranteed future fare. Add your rental car, fuel, meals and Homer hotel. Compare the final invoice with an Anchorage tour. [25]

Pros and cons

The benefit is combining bear viewing with a Kenai road trip and avoiding the need to fly to King Salmon on a direct floatplane itinerary. The drawbacks are the long drive, another hotel base, substantial tour cost and weather exposure. Stay in Homer after the tour if possible instead of planning a long drive back to Anchorage that evening.



WHAT THE TRIP MAY COST

Budget for the whole journey

Brooks Falls is not a budget destination. Compare complete costs for the same party size and number of viewing days. These are published 2026 benchmarks or fares displayed when checked in October 2026, not current quotes for every future season. [4, 6, 8, 10–12, 25]

Item	Benchmark
Brooks Lodge room including 6% bed tax	$1,335.60 per room per night
Three adult buffet meals	$122 per person per day
Peak camping fee	$18 per person per night + $6 reservation
Anchorage to Brooks return flights	$1,489 per person
King Salmon to Brooks return floatplane	$500 per person
King Salmon to Brooks return boat	$410 per person
Homer direct Brooks tour example	$1,495 per person before listed extras

Three nights at the lodge

For two sharing: room $4,006.80 + two Anchorage to Brooks flights $2,978 + three full meal days $732 = **$7,716.80 for two**. Actual meal counts depend on arrival and departure. With four sharing one room, the same assumptions give **$2,856.70 per person**.

Three nights camping

Two adults on one reservation: camping $114 + two Anchorage to Brooks flights $2,978 = **$3,092 for two**, before food and equipment.

Day trip comparisons

Two Brooks days for two from King Salmon: **$1,640 by boat** or **$2,000 by floatplane**, before airfare to town, lodging and food. One Anchorage day trip for two: **$2,978** for the tour flights. A Homer example starts at **$2,990 for two** before listed extras and road travel.

All examples exclude flights from home, hotels before or after Brooks, other meals, baggage charges, local transfers, optional activities, tips and disruption costs unless expressly included. Do not treat these subtotals as all inclusive prices.



TIME BESIDE THE RIVER

Make the most of your visit

Allow for walking and waiting

All visitors begin with the required bear safety orientation. It is about 1.2 miles each way from the visitor center to the Falls and Riffles platforms. Bear activity can delay movement on trails. Leave time for the walk back and your operator check in rather than waiting until the scheduled departure to leave the falls. [2, 19, 20]

The NPS Falls Platform page lists capacity at 40 people, with half hour rotations when full and waits commonly exceeding 90 minutes at midday in July. Another NPS safety page still describes one hour. Plan for queues and follow the rangers' current instructions. The lodge and campground do not provide reserved viewing slots. [19, 20]

The Falls, Treehouse, and Riffles areas are closed from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. from June 15 through August 15, often extended later. Overnight guests therefore have more flexibility, but not unrestricted night access. Expanded tripods and rail mounts are prohibited on the Falls Platform June 15 through August 15 and potentially longer. Confirm current restrictions. [19]

Respect the bears

Attend orientation, remain at least 50 yards from bears unless rangers direct otherwise, and let bears pass. Keep food, gum, candy, and flavored drinks in the designated storage areas; carry only plain water outside approved eating locations. Keep gear within reach and follow temporary closures. Ordinary platform viewing does not require entering the river. [20]

King Salmon with two viewing days

Suggested plan: arrive in King Salmon and stay overnight, visit Brooks on the next two days, then leave a flexible return day before your onward flight. Confirm two separate transport reservations. If weather prevents the first trip, a second booked day offers another opportunity, but does not guarantee a replacement seat or a refund.

Anchorage with one Brooks day

Suggested plan: arrive in Anchorage at least the night before, take the Brooks tour, and retain the following day as flexibility before fixed onward plans. A spare day is useful only if the operator has space and can reschedule. Ask about this before purchasing.

Book accommodation and transport together in your plan

For an overnight visit, coordinate accommodation availability with transportation before making expensive commitments. For a day trip, secure the Brooks tour or transfer and then match it to airline and hotel dates. Allow a night before an early departure and, where possible, a buffer night before your flight home. This is a planning recommendation, not a guaranteed protection against delays.

Bear school and the walk to the falls

Every visitor starts with bear orientation

On arrival, attend the required National Park Service bear safety talk, often called “bear school,” before exploring Brooks Camp. It explains how to share the area with bears, respond to encounters, store food and follow local rules. This applies to lodge guests, campers and day visitors. Allow time for orientation in your arrival schedule and ask rangers about current conditions. [60]

An easy walk through bear country

Plan for roughly 1 to 1½ miles each way from the lodge area to the Falls Platform, depending on your starting point and route. NPS describes the falls as about 1.2 miles from the visitor center. The route is generally easy and fairly level, with unpaved trail and raised boardwalk. In my experience, it is a beautiful walk that feels like part of the visit. I have even seen a wheelchair on the route. [2, 60, 61, P]

Expect a bear jam

Brooks has one of the densest seasonal concentrations of bears on earth. Bears use the same paths, so encounters can happen well before you reach a viewing platform. Scat along the way is another reminder that this is bear country. If bears block a trail or bridge, wait and follow ranger directions. Never squeeze past to keep to a schedule. Bear jams can delay meals, platform access and departures; leave a generous time buffer. [13, 20, 60, P]

Wheelchair users should discuss the route with NPS before travel. Although much of Brooks Camp is accessible, assistance may be needed on muddy or uneven sections and when moving aside for bears. Conditions vary. [60, 61]





GIVE IT A SEPARATE DAY

The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes

A different side of Katmai

The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes reveals the volcanic landscape created by the 1912 Novarupta eruption. A ranger guided bus excursion starts at Brooks Camp, with bookings arranged through Brooks Lodge or Katmailand. It is a chance to understand the landscape beyond the river and bear platforms. [62]

Best planned during an overnight stay

NPS lists this as an approximately seven hour tour. I recommend it primarily for visitors camping at Brooks Camp or staying at Brooks Lodge, because it takes a substantial part of the day. Give the tour its own day and allow other days for the bears. A standard fly in day trip usually leaves too little time to combine both experiences comfortably. Confirm any proposed same day flight connection with both operators before booking. [62]

The bus ride and optional hike

The trip follows the gravel Valley Road to the Robert F. Griggs Visitor Center, with scenic stops along the way. An optional guided walk descends to the valley floor. NPS lists the hike as about 3.4 miles round trip with approximately 1,000 feet of elevation change, including the climb back up. You can consider the bus experience separately from the hiking portion. [62]

What to confirm before paying

Ask about the operating season, departure and return times, current price, seats, lunch arrangements, required footwear and clothing, and cancellation terms. Road and weather conditions can affect the outing. Bring water and layers and follow the ranger’s instructions for food and bear safety. Reserve ahead rather than assuming there will be space after you arrive.

In my book, I describe saving this tour for another visit so I could spend more time with the bears. It is a worthwhile option to plan for, but it should reflect your own priorities and length of stay. [M]



Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes. Photograph: Catherine Bodry / BBC.



BEFORE YOU LEAVE

Pack light and confirm the details

Clothing and baggage

Bring rain jacket and pants, warm layers, comfortable walking shoes, spare socks, insect protection, a head net, medication, and waterproof protection for electronics. For camping, add shelter, sleep system, food preparation equipment, and food suitable for your storage and transport arrangements. Carry extra food and medication for possible delays, within carrier limits.

Katmai Air’s 2026 instructions allow 50 pounds of baggage per person including carry on, prefer soft bags, and say excess baggage may not travel. This is specific to that operator and itinerary. Weigh camera and camping gear together, and obtain your carrier’s current rules for bags, batteries, bear spray, and stove fuel. Do not assume commercial airline allowances apply to the floatplane. [21]

Photography without carrying everything

My manuscript recommends a backup body, several batteries and memory cards, and knowing your camera before arriving. It also describes watching the water below the falls to anticipate salmon rather than reacting only to a bear. A versatile zoom, protection from rain, and enough power may be more useful than bringing every lens. Match your kit to the transport limit and current platform restrictions. [M, 19]

Get these answers in writing

• Exact dates, names, occupancy and every night reserved.

• Invoice inclusions: meals, each transport leg, fees, baggage, pickups and guides.

• Required connection time and exact departure location.

• Weather plans, rescheduling, extra lodging and who pays.

• Deposit, final payment, cancellation and change terms for each booking.

• Maps, reservations, communication plans and charging arrangements.

Cancellation terms

Katmai Air’s current policy says cancellations at least 30 days before travel incur a $100 per person fee and cancellations within 30 days are nonrefundable. Weather refunds apply if the operator cannot fly; a completed leg is not refundable if you choose to travel partway. Additional hotels or missed connections are not covered by that promise. [22]

For Brooks Lodge, payment is generally nonrefundable unless the room is resold, and cancellation fees can apply. Read the linked lodge policy and the terms attached to your reservation. [5] Avoid assuming that an airline, hotel, lodge, campsite, and tour share the same refund rules.

Build a wider Alaska adventure

Brooks Falls was the reason for our journey, but Alaska gave us many other experiences to enjoy. We rented a vehicle in Anchorage and drove to different places, spent time in Talkeetna, took a Denali flightseeing tour with a glacier landing, enjoyed the 26 Glacier Cruise, watched whales and other marine wildlife, and kayaked at Bear Glacier. These are some of the experiences I would consider when planning extra time around a Brooks visit. [P]

The options below focus on summer travel. Driving times are approximate one way from Anchorage, before sightseeing, roadwork or tour check in. The day trip and overnight recommendations are planning judgments. A tour can last one day even when staying near its departure town is the more comfortable choice.

Destination	Drive from Anchorage	Good planning approach
Girdwood and Turnagain Arm	45–60 min	Comfortable day trip
Portage Valley	About 1–1½ hr	Comfortable day trip
Whittier	About 1½ hr plus tunnel allowance	Full day cruise outing
Seward	About 2½–3 hr	Long day possible; 1–2 nights preferable
Cooper Landing	About 2–2½ hr	Day trip or Kenai road trip stop
Homer	About 4½–5 hr	Stay overnight; 2 nights adds flexibility
Talkeetna	About 2¼–2½ hr	Day trip or 1–2 nights for flightseeing
Denali park entrance	About 5 hr	Stay near the park for at least 2 nights
Hatcher Pass area	About 1½–2 hr	Day trip; confirm seasonal road access
Matanuska Glacier	About 2–2½ hr	Full day with a reserved guided walk

Driving references: [28, 34, 50, 51, 56]. A return drive doubles the road time. Anchorage to Denali and back is about ten hours of driving before any park visit; Homer is similarly unsuitable for a relaxed same-day return from Anchorage.

Enjoy a day close to Anchorage

Walk or cycle the Coastal Trail

The Tony Knowles Coastal Trail runs about 11 miles one way between downtown and Kincaid Park. Rent a bicycle or walk a short section rather than assuming you must complete the full route. Earthquake Park and the coast offer useful stops. This is an easy activity to shorten if you need a flexible day around Brooks flights. [29]

Alaska Native Heritage Center and Anchorage Museum

The Alaska Native Heritage Center is a place to learn about living Alaska Native cultures through exhibits, outdoor village sites and seasonal programming. The Anchorage Museum adds art, history and science in a downtown setting. They are worthwhile cultural visits, and the museum is a useful indoor option for a wet day. Check each attraction’s current hours and program schedule. [30, 57]

Girdwood and the Alyeska tram

Follow the Seward Highway beside Turnagain Arm to Girdwood. The Alyeska aerial tram offers mountain and inlet views without a strenuous climb; the scenic summer ride takes about seven minutes. Visibility and operating hours depend on weather and season. Allow time for a meal and a short walk in Girdwood rather than filling the day with appointments. [28, 32]

Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center

Near Portage, the center provides opportunities to see Alaska animals in a managed wildlife sanctuary setting. It complements a Brooks visit but offers a different experience from watching free-ranging bears. Combine it with Girdwood or Portage Valley rather than adding another long drive. [31]

An easy day to put together

A suggested route is Anchorage, scenic stops beside Turnagain Arm, the wildlife center, Girdwood and back. Pick two main activities and leave time to enjoy them. Use designated pullouts and parking areas; do not stop on the highway shoulder for wildlife photographs.

You can return to the same Anchorage accommodation tonight. A cabin or rental in Girdwood may suit travelers who want quieter evenings and more time on nearby trails. This is optional, not necessary for the outing.



Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center

One of our stops along Turnagain Arm. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.

Cruise among glaciers and walk the valley

The 26 Glacier Cruise from Whittier

This was one of the excursions we enjoyed. The cruise leaves from Whittier and explores Prince William Sound, not Kenai Fjords from Seward. Phillips describes a journey of about 5¼ hours through glacier scenery with opportunities to see marine wildlife. It is a full day from Anchorage once you include driving, the tunnel and boarding. [P, 33]

Whittier is reached through the Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel, where vehicle traffic alternates by direction. Follow the operator’s recommended tunnel crossing and arrive early. A drive time estimate alone does not account for a missed tunnel window. Phillips recommends allowing about 1½ hours to Whittier and selecting the specified tunnel opening for your sailing. Confirm the current tunnel schedule and toll. [34]

Portage Glacier Cruise

For a shorter outing, the M/V Ptarmigan operates a roughly one hour cruise on Portage Lake. This is a different product from the 26 Glacier Cruise. It works well with a short walk in Portage Valley or a wildlife center visit, with less time committed to the boat. Check operating dates before booking. [35]

Portage Valley on foot

The Trail of Blue Ice offers forest, wetland and valley scenery, with sections suitable for a shorter walk. Byron Glacier Trail provides a walk toward the glacier valley; use the maintained trail and heed current avalanche guidance. Portage Pass begins on the Whittier side of the tunnel and climbs to views toward Portage Glacier. Pick the route that matches your fitness and the conditions rather than trying to do them all. [36, 37]

Price example and practical fit

The displayed adult 26 Glacier Cruise fare was $219 before taxes and fees when checked in October 2026. That is a benchmark, not a future quote; tunnel tolls, parking and transport may be additional. Choose either a long cruise or a substantial hike as the main event. A short lake cruise and an easy valley walk are easier to pair. [33]



The 26 Glacier Cruise from Whittier. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.

Whales, sea life and Bear Glacier kayaking

Marine wildlife and glacier cruises

We enjoyed seeing whales and other marine wildlife during our Alaska travels. Seward is a good departure town for cruises into Resurrection Bay and Kenai Fjords. Operators offer shorter bay outings and longer trips toward tidewater glaciers. A typical national park cruise is around six hours; the actual route, wildlife and glacier viewing depend on the tour and conditions. Whales are wild animals, so sightings cannot be guaranteed. [P, 38]

Compare the specific destination and time on the water, not only the tour title. Shorter bay trips may suit a limited schedule, while longer national park cruises involve more exposed water. Ask about seasickness, accessibility, meals and the cancellation policy before paying.

Bear Glacier lagoon kayaking

Kayaking at Bear Glacier was another experience we loved. The lagoon is outside Seward and requires specialist transport, not a drive to a public launch. Liquid Adventures offers guided kayaking with boat or helicopter access options. The glacier, icebergs and access conditions change, so confirm how you will get there, the full trip duration, required clothing and included equipment. [P, 39]

This is cold water paddling around moving ice. Use an experienced guide and the provided safety equipment. It is not a casual independent paddle beside the glacier face. Reserve one substantial outing for the day and keep extra time for weather.

Exit Glacier and the Alaska SeaLife Center

The Exit Glacier area is accessible by road in the summer and has short viewing trails, with a much harder hike toward the Harding Icefield. The Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward offers marine animal exhibits and a connection to research and wildlife response work. It is useful when sea conditions alter a boat plan, subject to its opening hours. [40–42]

Day trip or overnight

Seward can be reached from Anchorage in about 2½–3 hours each way. A cruise and return drive is a long day. I would allow one or two nights for a relaxed visit, especially if you want both a cruise and kayaking. Cabins, hotels and vacation rentals let you stay close to an early departure. [28]



Whale watching in Kenai Fjords.



Kayaking at Bear Glacier.

Glaciers by water and on foot



Glacier scenery from a boat tour. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.



Hiking near Exit Glacier. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.

Homer, Cooper Landing and a rail adventure

Homer and Kachemak Bay

Homer is a useful base for Brooks flights and for exploring Kachemak Bay. Walk the waterfront, arrange a guided paddle or bay outing, or reserve a water taxi for a hike in Kachemak Bay State Park. Grewingk Glacier Lake is one option. There is no road across to the park; agree on the trailhead, pickup beach, tide considerations and return time with your operator. [43]

Homer is about 4½–5 hours from Anchorage before stops. Give it at least an overnight stay; two nights lets you separate a Brooks tour from a Kachemak Bay excursion. Do not treat a boat pickup as flexible unless the operator has agreed. [23]

Cooper Landing and Russian River Falls

Cooper Landing makes a useful stop on a Kenai road trip. The Russian River Falls walk is about 2.4 miles each way, or 4.8 miles return, using the Forest Service's mapped distance. The area has salmon and bears, but it is not managed as a bear viewing destination. Follow local closures and bear guidance, and do not approach bears to make a photograph. [44]

Spencer Glacier by train and guided float

For a day without a long drive, the Alaska Railroad offers access to Spencer Glacier Whistle Stop and bookable guided excursions. Its Spencer Lake and Placer River float combines a train journey with a guided raft outing. There is also a maintained path of about 1.3 miles one way toward the lake overlook. Choose a confirmed rail and activity package and understand the return train arrangements. [54, 55]

A cost example

The railroad's published 2026 Spencer float package was $316 from Anchorage or Girdwood, including return rail, the guided float and specified equipment. Future prices and inclusions require confirmation. This is a different outing from both Bear Glacier kayaking and a glacier cruise. [55]

The Kenai Peninsula rewards a slower route. If you want Seward and Homer, compare a moving road trip with repeated returns to Anchorage. Choose accommodation around your booked activities, not only the nightly room price.

Talkeetna and Denali are different bases

Why we enjoyed Talkeetna

We enjoyed staying in Talkeetna during our Alaska travels. It works well for Denali flightseeing and gives you a smaller town base between other adventures. We also took a flightseeing tour with a glacier landing, which was a highlight of our time in Alaska. [P]

Denali flightseeing and a glacier landing

Talkeetna Air Taxi is one operator offering several routes, with some tours around 1–1½ hours in the air and longer totals when a glacier landing is included. A glacier landing is a separate option: confirm that it is on your booking. Weather determines whether the flight and landing can operate, and a landing does not mean every flight follows the same route. [45]

As a price example, the operator’s Grand Denali tour with a glacier landing displayed $650 per adult effective October 1, 2026. Treat it as a dated benchmark and ask about park entrance charges, taxes, any extras and weather refunds. Choose an early flight within your stay if you want room to reschedule. [45]

Talkeetna is not the national park entrance

Allow roughly 2¼–2½ hours to drive from Anchorage to Talkeetna. The Denali National Park entrance is farther north, approximately five hours from Anchorage and another substantial drive from Talkeetna. Stay near the park entrance or Healy if you want full park days; Talkeetna is better placed for flightseeing than for commuting to an early park bus. [28, 56]

A proper visit to Denali National Park

Summer private vehicle access is generally limited to the first 15 miles of the Park Road. Reserve a tour or transit bus if you want to travel farther, and allow a full day for the experience. Trail walks near the entrance can be added on another day. Wildlife and mountain views depend on conditions. [46]

Park Road access has changed during the Pretty Rocks project. The September 2026 NPS announcement anticipated west end bus service returning for the following visitor season. This guide does not assume any fixed turnaround point will remain current: check the latest NPS access update and book the route actually offered in your travel year. [47]



Denali flightseeing from Talkeetna. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.

Choose a route near Anchorage

These are suggested summer outings, not interchangeable levels of effort. Distances are approximate round trips unless noted. Drive estimates refer to the general area; confirm the trailhead, parking and latest conditions before leaving. [28, 36, 48–51]

Walk or hike	Approximate distance and effort	Why consider it
Tony Knowles Coastal Trail	Up to 11 miles one way; choose a shorter section; easy paved path	Coastal views and flexible walking or cycling in Anchorage. [29]
Thunder Bird Falls	About 2 miles return; easy rolling trail	Forest walk to a waterfall viewing area north of Anchorage. [48]
Eklutna Lakeside Trail	Choose your turnaround; the full trail is about 12.9 miles one way	Lake and mountain scenery; a short out and back avoids a very long hike. [49]
Flattop Mountain	About 3 miles return; difficult summit route; about 1,300 ft climb	Views above Anchorage, with scrambling near the top; not an easy family stroll. [48]
Hatcher Pass and Independence Mine	Short historic walks or longer mountain routes; choose locally	Historic mine scenery and alpine surroundings; Gold Mint offers an adjustable valley walk. [50]
Matanuska Glacier guided walk	Operator example: 2–3 hours on a guided outing	Walk on ice with a guide and supplied equipment, rather than a viewing trail. [51]

Matanuska planning

Allow roughly 2–2½ hours each way from Anchorage plus the guided visit. The operator’s displayed adult summer rate was $160 with listed equipment when checked in October 2026. Book the guided experience and confirm access arrangements; do not assume a public viewpoint and an on-ice walk are the same thing. [51]

Hatcher Pass has seasonal snow and road restrictions. The route from Palmer to Independence Mine is paved, while the road over the pass is a separate gravel section with seasonal access. Check your rental agreement before choosing an unpaved route. [50]

Glacier views and longer hiking days

Walk or hike	Approximate distance and effort	Planning note
Trail of Blue Ice	Up to 5 miles one way; choose a short section or arranged route	A gentler Portage Valley option; do not assume the full trail is a short loop. [36]
Byron Glacier maintained trail	About 1.8 miles return to the maintained viewing area; easy grade	Primitive routes continue beyond it. Snowfields and avalanche conditions change the risk. [37]
Portage Pass to Portage Lake	About 4 miles return; steep sections and a climb back over the pass	Starts on the Whittier side of the tunnel; allow both tunnel and hiking time. [36]
Exit Glacier View Loop	About 1 mile loop; accessible surfaced route	Road access near Seward is seasonal; viewpoints change as the glacier retreats. [40]
Harding Icefield Trail	About 8 miles return; strenuous; allow 6–8 hours	A full hiking day with a major climb. Snow and avalanche risk can remain into summer. [41]
Russian River Falls	About 4.8 miles return; moderate length	Near Cooper Landing; follow closures and bear guidance. [44]
Grewingk Glacier Lake	Route length depends on water taxi drop off and pickup	Day hike from Homer by reserved water taxi; confirm the exact route and pickup. [43]

Viewing a glacier is not permission to walk on it

Stay on signed trails and respect closures. Do not enter glacier ice caves, walk beneath unstable snow bridges, or climb onto ice without the appropriate guided arrangements. Kayaking among icebergs also requires distance, specialist judgment and suitable equipment. A photograph does not show all the hazards in the landscape. [37, 39, 41, 51]

Use an easier route when weather, snow, fitness or time makes the longer outing unsuitable. Avoid combining a full Harding Icefield hike with a long return drive or a major cruise on the same day.

MAKE THE DAYS WORK TOGETHER

Sample routes and places to stay

Two extra days with Anchorage as your base

Use one day for Girdwood, Turnagain Arm and the wildlife center. Use the other for either the Whittier glacier cruise or a shorter Portage Valley outing. Keep the first day after returning from Brooks lightly scheduled in case weather changes your arrival. This is a suggested arrangement, not a package.

Three or four days for Seward and the coast

Drive to Seward, stopping only as time allows. Give one full day to a wildlife cruise and another to Bear Glacier kayaking or hiking. Stay in Seward between the main outings, then return to Anchorage. Add Homer as a separate extension rather than trying to squeeze it into the same weekend.

Four or five days for Talkeetna and Denali

Spend one or two nights in Talkeetna with a reserved flightseeing day and some weather flexibility. Continue north and stay near the Denali park entrance for two nights, giving a full day to a park bus or trail outing. Return south on a separate day. This gives you two different Denali experiences without daily long drives.

Base	Best fit	Lodging to compare
Anchorage	Brooks flight connections and short road outings	Hotel, apartment, cabin or Airbnb/Vrbo rental
Girdwood	Turnagain Arm and Portage Valley	Cabins, resort accommodation or vacation rental
Seward	Cruises, kayaking and Exit Glacier	Harbor area hotel, cabin or vacation rental
Homer	Brooks floatplane trips and Kachemak Bay	Inn, cabin, apartment or vacation rental
Talkeetna	Flightseeing and time in town	Cabin, B&B, lodge or hotel
Denali entrance or Healy	Park buses and full park days	Lodge, hotel, cabin or vacation rental

We enjoyed Talkeetna, but the best base depends on tomorrow’s activity. Local directories list cabins, lodges and rentals around Anchorage and Talkeetna. Check Airbnb, Vrbo and direct property websites for your dates; availability is not guaranteed. Compare the total after cleaning fees and taxes, distance to check in, parking, kitchen facilities and cancellation terms. A cheaper property farther away may cost you an extra hour of driving. [52, 53]

Reserve the most important flight, cruise or guided outing first, then match your rental vehicle and lodging to it. Check Alaska 511 before long drives and leave a buffer before a fixed flight home. [58]

STAY CONNECTED BEFORE AND AFTER YOUR TRIP

Explore.org and the Katmai bear cams

Explore.org brings a visit to Brooks into your home. Its nature camera network partners with Katmai National Park and Preserve to share views of the bears, salmon and landscape. Use the cams to build anticipation before your journey and keep following the river after you return. Start at **explore.org/bears**. [64, 65]

The main live bearcam season is typically late June through early October, although opening dates and individual feeds vary. Several cameras cover the falls and lower river; the selection can change, so choose from the current camera list rather than expecting a fixed number. [64]

Camera or view	Location and what to look for
Brooks Falls	The Falls viewing platform area, overlooking bears fishing along the waterfall. [64]
Brooks Falls Low	A lower perspective of the same falls, offering a view closer to the bears' level. [64]
The Riffles	About 100 yards downstream of the falls, where bears chase salmon; families and less dominant bears may fish here. [66]
River Watch	The bridge area at the lower river, looking upriver; useful for watching bear families. [64]
Kat's River View	Near the outlet where Brooks River meets Naknek Lake. The lower river can be especially rewarding in September and October. [67]
Underwater Salmon	An underwater look at the salmon of Brooks River, when this seasonal feed is available. [68, 69]
Dumpling Mountain	High above Brooks Camp, with broad views of Naknek Lake and the surrounding mountains. This is a landscape view rather than a close view of the falls. [64]

Watching at any hour

You can return to Explore.org whenever you wish, but a page being available around the clock does not mean every camera is transmitting live 24 hours a day. Check the "Live" or "Highlights" label, the camera's viewing hours and the Alaska time shown on the feed. Darkness, maintenance and connection interruptions can affect viewing. [64, 67]



Visitors at the Brooks Falls viewing platform. Photograph by Andy Samarasena.

KEEP THE ENTHUSIASM GOING

More than a view of the falls

Join the bearcam community

The discussion beneath the camera feeds lets viewers share observations and questions. Watching the same area over several days can help you recognize individual bears, notice different fishing approaches and follow families through the season. Treat viewer identifications as observations to check against ranger information and the park's bear resources. [64, 68]

Bear talks, presentations and live Q&As

Explore.org and Katmai offer seasonal online programs with park rangers, naturalists and other guests. Look for Brooks Live Chat, bearcam play by play, presentations about bear behavior and salmon, and question and answer sessions. These programs add context to what you see on camera. Check Explore.org's live events listings and Katmai's calendar or social media for the current schedule. [64, 70, 71]

Keep watching beyond the live season

When the cameras switch to highlights, you can still enjoy favorite sightings and recorded programs. Explore.org's YouTube channels carry bearcam content, and NPS points viewers to replays of live chats. These recordings are a good way to learn more during winter and spring while waiting for the next season. [69, 70]

Use the cams as part of your planning

Before a trip, compare the falls, riffles and lower river so the different viewing areas feel familiar. Afterward, revisit the places you walked and watch how the season develops. Camera sightings are a view of one location at one time, not a forecast or guarantee for your travel dates. Allow the experience to unfold at its own pace.

Where to begin

Explore bear cams · **Explore live events** · **Explore YouTube channels** · **NPS camera guide**

For me, the webcams helped turn an interest in Brooks Falls into the dream of visiting it. They remain a wonderful way to stay connected with a place that means so much to me. [M]

KEEP THIS GUIDE USEFUL

Booking links and copyright

Written and compiled by Andy Samarasena, drawing on firsthand experiences in Brooks Falls: A Journey Into Wonder and the official sources below. Research and published prices checked October 29, 2026. Recheck booking dates, rates, flight schedules and park rules for your own travel year.

1 NPS bear viewing season

2 NPS frequently asked questions

3 NPS operating hours and seasons

4 Brooks Lodge rooms and 2026 rates

5 Brooks Lodge lottery rules and cancellation policy link

6 Brooks Lodge 2026 meal prices

7 Brooks Lodge rates and services

8 Katmai Air 2026 return flights to Brooks

9 Alaska Airlines Anchorage to King Salmon

10 Katmai Air Anchorage day tour

11 Katmai Water Taxi fares and booking information

12 Recreation.gov Brooks Camp Camping Permit

13 NPS campground release blocks and facilities

14 NPS campground frequently asked questions

15 Antlers Inn King Salmon

16 King Salmon Lodge accommodations

17 Bear Trail Cabins and Campground

18 Regal Air Brooks Falls day trip

19 NPS Brooks Falls Platform rules

20 NPS bear safety at Brooks Camp

21 Katmai Air 2026 flight and baggage instructions

22 Katmai Air reservation and refund policies

23 Anchorage to Homer travel guidance

24 Emerald Air Service Homer trips

25 Northwind Aviation Brooks trips

26 Aleutian Airways destinations

27 Katmai Air King Salmon seat fares

M Andy Samarasena, Brooks Falls: A Journey Into Wonder, Final Manuscript 1.0. Firsthand passages adapted from the Prologue, Chapters 1, 7 and 8, and Appendix A.

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SOURCES FOR THE WIDER ALASKA SECTION

More planning resources

Select a source name to open its website. Bracketed numbers in the guide refer to these sources or the preceding list. [P] refers to Andy Samarasena’s firsthand recollections shared for this guide. Distances, products, access and prices can change; check the page for your own dates.

28 Visit Anchorage driving times

29 Tony Knowles Coastal Trail

30 Alaska Native Heritage Center

31 Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center

32 Alyeska scenic tram

33 Phillips 26 Glacier Cruise

34 Whittier drive and tunnel planning

35 Portage Glacier Cruise

36 Chugach National Forest trails guide

37 Byron Glacier trail and hazards

38 Kenai Fjords Tours cruise choices

39 Liquid Adventures Bear Glacier kayaking

40 NPS Exit Glacier area

41 NPS Harding Icefield Trail

42 Alaska SeaLife Center

43 Kachemak Bay State Park and water taxis

44 Russian River Falls map and bear guidance

45 Talkeetna Air Taxi Grand Denali tour

46 NPS planning a Denali visit

47 NPS Pretty Rocks road access update

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49 Eklutna Lakeside Trail

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59 Katmai Trading Post and camper showers

60 NPS Brooks Camp arrival and access

61 NPS Brooks Falls Trail

62 NPS Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes tour

63 ALASKA.ORG campground photo source

64 NPS Katmai webcam guide

65 Explore.org bear cams

66 Explore.org Riffles camera

67 Explore.org Kat’s River View

68 NPS watch the Katmai bearcams

69 Explore.org YouTube channels

70 NPS ranger online programs

71 Explore.org live events

Keep the plan flexible

Allow time for Alaska weather, seasonal changes and road delays. A spare day improves your options but does not guarantee replacement seats. Book the experiences you care about most, and keep some easy local activities available for days when the weather changes your plans.

DISCOVER THE BOOK

BROOKS FALLS

A Journey Into Wonder

By Andy Samarasena









A 200-page coffee table book filled with wildlife photographs and firsthand stories from Brooks Falls. Follow the bears, the salmon and the journey that brought me to Katmai.

Photography has been part of my life for more than three decades. Through this book, I hope to share my appreciation for Brooks Falls and inspire others to care for the natural world.

SCAN TO EXPLORE THE BOOK

www.brooksfalls.net

Visit the website for book details and ordering information.

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