



SEASIDE IN SITKA

By Eric Lucas

» **Few places embrace** as broad an expanse of history and culture in a half-day walk as Sitka, which was Alaska's Russian capital from 1808 to 1867. The sights here reflect three disparate cultures—Tlingit, Russian and American—and thousands of years of human civilization.

Start at the so-called Castle Hill (Baranof Castle State Historic Site), a 60-foot-tall rise with vistas of Sitka Sound, the city of Sitka, the 3,354-foot-tall summit of Mount Verstovia east of the city and—to the northwest—the iconic dormant volcanic cone of Mount Edgecumbe. This Castle Hill vantage historically held Tlingit and then Russian fortifications, and it was where the United States officially took possession of Alaska in October 1867, after the U.S. agreed to purchase the land from Russia earlier that year.

Just a few blocks east of Castle Hill is St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral, a green-domed Russian Orthodox church in the center of a downtown traffic island. The cathedral holds one of the Western Hemisphere's finest sets of 19th century Russian Orthodox icons—paintings adorned with gold and silver—including the famed work known as the "Sitka Madonna" (sometimes out on tour) and depictions of the archangels Michael and Gabriel.

A couple of blocks farther along is the Russian Bishop's House, built between 1841 and 1843 and now part of Sitka National Historical Park. The cheery-yellow clapboard structure is built with hand-shaped spruce logs—a cutaway wall inside reveals artful construction. Historically a center of cultural and educational activities, the house is now a museum.



» **Clockwise from top left:** An aerial view of Sitka. St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral. Sitka National Historical Park's distinctive totem trail.

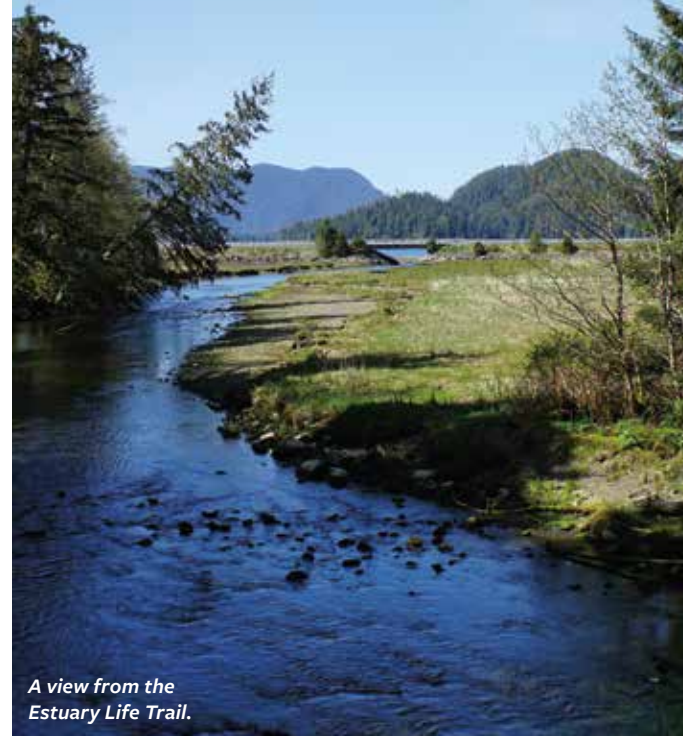
Continuing east on Lincoln Street brings you to a pair of standout local attractions. The Sheldon Jackson Museum occupies an octagonal concrete building that holds a priceless collection of historical artifacts from Indigenous Alaskan cultures, gathered by the building's namesake, a late-1800s Presbyterian minister. Nearby, the compact Sitka Sound Science Center offers a chance to learn about the area's rich maritime ecosystem. See and feel organisms such as anemones and urchins in the touch tank.

Another few hundred yards down Lincoln Street is the Sitka National Historical Park Visitor Center, which provides a brief introduction to a nearby wonder: a winding woodland path whose spruces, hemlocks and cedars shelter historical as well as modern Tlingit and Haida totem poles. Originally established more than 100 years ago (and modified over time), the totem collection is one of the most memorable in the United States.

The park also contains the outflow of the Indian River—known for its summertime salmon runs. When the river surges with pink salmon, there is no better place to marvel at the bounty of Sitka Sound and at the cultures that have thrived beside it for thousands of years. ✈

■ Fly Alaska Airlines to Sitka (SIT) from Seattle (SEA), Juneau (JNU) and Ketchikan (KTN). Visit alaskaair.com to learn more and book tickets.

A boardwalk section of the Forest and Muskeg Trail.



A view from the Estuary Life Trail.

A WILD ALASKA WALK

By Eric Lucas

» **Tongass National Forest**, the largest national forest in the United States, encompasses most of Southeast Alaska’s Panhandle. The part of this great maritime rainforest that borders life-rich Sitka Sound is a particularly exquisite area for observing wildlife and marveling at the breadth and diversity of nature.

At Starrigavan Recreation Area, located within the forest and 7 miles north of Sitka, you’ll find excellent paths to experience woods, bogs and wetlands. Start on the quarter-mile-long Estuary Life Trail, a boardwalk path whose first stop is a bird-viewing shelter made of local timbers. The site affords a vantage of the sedge and hair grass tidal shores where migratory waterfowl and other avian species flock. Watch for ducks, geese, eagles, blue herons, scoters, kingfishers, ravens and gulls galore.

Continuing on the trail, look for coastal wildflowers that bloom here in late spring and summer, such as chocolate lily, wild geranium,

yarrow and yellow paintbrush. At the end of the boardwalk, cross a footbridge over Starrigavan Creek to the Forest and Muskeg Trail, a gravel path heading uphill. This moderately steep three-quarter-mile trail climbs 150 feet through western hemlocks before emerging at another boardwalk that crosses a level area of muskeg. One of Southeast Alaska’s quintessential landscape types, muskeg is a bogland characterized in Starrigavan by deep moss, stunted lodgepole pines, and shrubs such as Labrador tea and bog laurel.

Observant hikers may find crowberry and cloudberry plants here, as well as impressive carnivorous sundews. Shooting stars, bog orchids and pond lilies add more color to the scene.

Hikers should stay on the boardwalk—not only is the landscape delicate; bog holes can be treacherous.

The trail heads downhill on the return to Halibut Point Road. You’ll cross Starrigavan Creek on a bridge that offers a great opportunity to look for whales, otters and sea lions in

Sitka Sound, plus eagles and coastal brown bears feeding on the creek’s salmon in late summer (visit the national forest’s website for tips about staying safe in bear country).

“Starrigavan” is derived from the Russian for “old harbor”—a nod to Russian settlers’ past use of the area. Although the center of human activity shifted to Sitka long ago, the cove still shelters an amazing array of plant and animal life—as evidenced on this coastal hike. ✈



Carnivorous sundews.

MORE OUTDOORS IN THE AREA

- **Kayaking in Sitka Sound** provides access to sheltered inlets and coves.
- **Sightseeing boat tours** depart Sitka by the dozen on some summer days. Whales are common (mostly humpbacks, with the occasional grays or orcas); other wildlife includes sea otters, harbor seals, Steller’s sea lions, bald eagles, marbled murrelets and puffins.
- **Bicycling in Sitka** is pleasant, in part due to fairly light traffic. Ask at the Sitka Visitor Information Center for information on bike tours and rentals. —E.L.