WHAT TO PACK FOR A SUMMER ALASKA VACATION

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Packing for a trip to Alaska can quickly get overwhelming: do you need shorts, a ski cap, or both?

The answer is both—and then some. Here are our suggestions on what to pack—based on what we've done, and what we know works in our famously varying climate:

COMING BETWEEN MAY AND SEPTEMBER? THINK LAYERS

Alaska is a pretty casual place, so our "dress code" is not about fashion so much as being comfortable, so that you can enjoy each day to the fullest, no matter the weather. That's why our mantra is to dress in layers. From spring through early fall, be prepared for temperatures in the 50 to 70 degree range, always with the possibility of a little rain and wind. If you dress in layers and bring a small hip pack or backpack, you'll stay warm and dry when it's chilly or wet, and you can peel off layers and stow them as the weather changes.

Rain or shine, many day tours—flightseeing, cruises, bus tours—offer some access to shelter, but you should always be ready with your own raingear and basics (like, say, sturdy shoes or boots for a hiking trip), since you'll easily be spending at least a little time outside. For specialized excursions, you can expect that the tour operator will provide specific gear that you would need for that day—like tackle and hip waders for a fishing trip, or a poncho, rain boots or dry suit for a rafting trip.

WHICH LAYERS DO YOU NEED?

If you're just walking around town or enjoying the ship's deck, there's no need for specialized activewear. But if you plan to be in fluctuating temperatures—or do anything strenuous that causes you to sweat—you want have some specific of layers.

THE INNER OR BASE LAYER

The inner or base layer goes against your skin—it's what we think of as long underwear. Its job is to wick moisture away from our skin—keeping us feeling warm and dry—and towards the outer layer, where it evaporates. On a hot day, you can also wear this alone instead of a cotton shirt, and it'll dry much more quickly. In general, don't choose cotton for active wear: If you get sweaty or it rains, cotton absorbs water, conducting heat away from your body.

THE BEST SYNTHETIC FABRICS (LIKE MERINO WOOL)

For years, we favored synthetic polypro long underwear, such as Capilene from Patagonia. But in recent years, we're increasingly using—and preferring—merino wool under-layers. Unlike the stiff, itchy ragwool of old (that comes from more common sheep with short, coarse hairs), merino wool is a soft, fine material that feels good on the skin (because Merino sheep have longer, finer hair fibers).

Even though it's 20 to 50 percent more expensive, wool now sells 50/50 with polypro in Alaska.

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THE MIDDLE AND OUTER LAYERS

Pros and cons of each:

Synthetics cost less, and dry quicker—but can smell. Bacteria grow readily on them, so they develop an odor after a day or two of wear—even the versions that weave in silver or charcoal into the fiber to deter bacterial growth. (Brand names for synthetics include: Capilene, Under Armour, REI Polartec Power Dry, and Ex Officio.)

Wool can be higher maintenance, but has natural anti-bacterial qualities. You can wear it for days with almost no odor. Wool does absorb 30% of its weight in moisture, but it still does a good job of wicking the moisture away, making you feel dry longer. The downsides are that it costs more, takes longer to dry when it gets wet, and should be washed with a mild, non-detergent soap then hung dry. (Brand names for merino wool include: Smartwool, Icebreaker, and Ibex.)

Wool is also more fire retardant. If you plan to be near campfires or in other situations with possible fire risk, know that polypro is made of plastic; a spark from a campfire (which happens frequently) puts an immediate hole in it.

THE MIDDLE, INSULATING LAYER

The middle, insulating layer has traditionally been expedition-weight long underwear, a fleece or synchilla jacket, or even a sweater. These synthetic materials have the edge over wool or cotton because of their lightness and warmth. They work well.

But lightweight synthetic or down jackets are now becoming popular mid-layers in Alaska as well. They're lightweight and pack down smaller, yet provide more loft as an insulating layer. When it's not raining, you can also wear them as an outer layer. They're wind- and abrasion-resistant and can handle a lot of perspiration, because they're so breathable.

DOWN IS MAKING A COMEBACK

Ounce for ounce, nothing insulates like duck down. Compared to synthetics, down is lighter weight, more breathable, more durable, softer against the skin, packs down even smaller and has a broader temperature comfort range.

Down traditionally has not been as popular in Alaska, because when it got wet, it was useless. But quality manufacturers now treat down with the same durable water repellent (DWR) they use to waterproof their outer shells. The result is down can be water-resistant, and if it does get wet, it dries out faster. The downside? It's more expensive.

THE OUTER LAYER

The outer layer is the one you really need to get right. You want a shell that's waterproof and breathable to stay warm when it's windy and dry when it's rainy. These thin, outer jackets can be tucked into in the outer compartments of your suitcase and should be fully waterproof.

DOES GORE-TEX WORK IN ALASKA?

A high quality Gore-Tex® or eVent jacket (including a hood) will keep a wet day from turning into a miserable one. Those two waterproof fabrics' brand names can indeed make a big difference, both in what you're getting and how much you're spending. If the jacket is under $200, you're probably not getting Gore Tex or eVent, but rather a spray-on coating that allows for only limited breathability (Marmot precip, for example). If you wear them for long periods, you'll think those cheaper fabrics are leaking, but what's actually happening is condensation from your body is not escaping, and it "wets out" inside the jacket. (One way to abate that problem: unzip your vents every now and then.)

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DON'T FORGET TO PACK WARM-WEATHER GEAR

THE OUTER LAYER (continued)

High-quality Gore-Tex and eVent jackets—stretched polyurethane fabrics that are glued to the outer nylon layer—help those vapors escape without unzipping, or letting in more moisture. Gore-Tex has been around for years (you'll find the thicker, most durable Pro line of Gore-Tex, as well as the more streamlined PackLite), while the newer eVent (increasingly available at REI) is gaining fans for perhaps being a little more breathable.

Either way, the laminate construction of Gore-Tex or eVent is more expensive; a jacket can cost $300-400 or more. But they're more breathable, so they'll keep you drier, and you should get 3-4 years of use out of them. A lot of people are afraid to wash their $500 jacket, but if you use non-detergent soap, keeping it clean allows it to perform better.

Have you ever noticed how water beads up nicely on new raingear? It's not the fabric that's causing the repellency, but rather a chemical treatment called DWR. Putting your Gore-Tex or eVent jacket in the drier reactivates that factory treatment. You can also buy spray-on or wash-in DWR treatments to extend your jackets repellency, or to treat your soft-shell insulating layers.

RAINPROOF PANTS

If you're going to be doing any hiking or kayaking, pick up a pair of rainproof pants as well, so that your legs will stay dry if you get rained or splashed on. All these synthetic outerwear garments have the added perk of being pretty wrinkle-proof, so you can roll them up tight in your bags.

BRING WARM-WEATHER GEAR, TOO

Pack some shorts and short-sleeved shirts for your vacation, too. There are plenty of outdoor retailers to find any last-minute items you may need, such as Big Rays, REI, Cabela's, Bass Pro Shop, Sportsman's Warehouse, and more. Recent Alaskan summers have been hot and sunny. See: Alaska weather.

SWIMSUIT

Your hotel may have a hot tub, sauna or pool facilities—or you may want to invigorate yourself with some Alaska lake swimming. (No kidding: read about Bob's swim across Kachemak Bay.)

SUN PROTECTION

Bring sunglasses, sunscreen and a lightweight, brimmed hat for sun and rain. Interestingly, the intensity of the sun in Alaska on a peak summer day is probably equivalent to a spring day in the Lower 48, because of the lower angle of the sun in the subarctic regions. But due to the long summer days, there are twice as many hours of daylight, so you definitely want to protect your skin.

OTHER EXTRAS

GLOVES & HAT

Even on a warm summer day, it can get pretty chilly when your ship pulls up to a glacier. While you won't need a parka or anything winter-weight, a pair of thin gloves and a light hat will be worthwhile. If anything, you'll be able to spend more time on deck taking great photos.

PROPER FOOTWEAR

Never bring new shoes to Alaska—you'll be walking a lot, and don't need blisters. We'd rather see you in old tennis shoes that are well-worn than fancy boots that have never been taken out of the box. If you want waterproofing, look for Gore-Tex socks that can slip over your regular, non-cotton socks. If you're going to invest in hiking shoes, we advise against old-fashioned heavy hiking boots. They're heavy, stiff, and can cause blisters. Instead, get yourself a comfortable pair of lightweight hikers with good traction—two pairs, actually, in case one gets wet. And break them in before you come!

LIGHTWEIGHT HIKING SHOES: MEN'S BY MERREL (LEFT) WOMEN'S BY KEEN (RIGHT)

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AVOID MOSQUITOS AND CONSIDER SOME EXTRAS

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EXTRAS (continued)

FISHING LICENSE
You can order this ahead of time online, but it's easy to obtain from your air taxi, fishing guide, or most local grocery stores. See: Where to get your Alaska fishing license.

SMALL FIRST AID KIT
Most hotels and tour operators will have you covered, but it's convenient to have Band-Aids and ointment for minor emergencies

BACKPACK OR TOTE BAG (MEDIUM TO LARGE)
Layers are useless unless you have away to stow them. You'll likely be away from your hotel for most of the day, so it's a good idea to have a bag to carry your camera, extra clothing layers, medications.

BINOCULARS/SPOTTING SCOPE
Wildlife won't (always) stroll up to you. Having binoculars to see them in greater detail can really make the difference between a good trip and a great trip.

ZIPPER-TOP BAGS
Freezer-sized, zipper-top bags are great for keeping your clothing folded and leak-prone toiletries isolated. Separate baggies also make it easier to repack in case your luggage is searched, and extra bags are handy for storing dirty or damp clothing.

IDENTIFICATION AND/OR PASSPORT
Bring enough ID: If you're a U.S. citizen and flying or driving, a driver's license will suffice. But if you're a U.S. citizen and cruising from Canada, you'll need a Passport to for the Canadian portion of your trip.

WATCH/ALARM CLOCK
With so much daylight, it's easy to lose track of time.

CONTACT INFORMATION
Bring cards with your contact information to give new friends, and mailing labels for sending postcards.

CAMERA / VIDEO CAMERA
Capture your Alaska experiences, and don't forget the extras: batteries, lenses, chargers and memory cards. Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau each have a good camera shop, but you're better off bringing everything you might need.

Get more Alaska advice: Alaska photography.

MOSQUITO PROTECTION

Mosquitoes aren't as much of a problem as most people think. But you'll still want to bring "bug dope" as an insurance policy.

30-40% DEET usually does the trick. The only time you'll need 100% DEET is on a backpacking or float trip in the interior near standing water.

DEET is a harsh chemical. It can sting eyes, cause glues to delaminate, burn through synthetic fabrics, and even melt camera plastics. The **natural plant extracts** we've tried, such as citronella, don't work consistently in Alaska.

The best DEET alternative we've found is **Picaridin**. This synthetic compound doesn't have as good of repellent qualities as DEET, but it works pretty darn well—and it doesn't damage fabrics like DEET, nor have the odor or oily feel, nor have the bad taste when applied to the skin.

If you're looking to reduce the chemicals you put on your body, a loose-cut long sleeve shirt creates a physical barrier to mosquitoes reaching your skin. Permethrin-treated clothes (such as Ex Officio BuzzOff) are even better and will last a good 50 washings.

Get more Alaska advice: Mosquitoes in Alaska.