

Juneau, Alaska

A state capital you cannot drive to, a glacier twelve miles from downtown, and a whale rule that is actually federal law.

THE SHORT ANSWER

Juneau is a docked port with two city-owned cruise berths, capped by agreement at five large ships and 16,000 lower berths a day. Mendenhall Glacier is 12 or 13 miles from downtown depending on which US Forest Service page you read, and costs \$5 per person from 1 May to 30 September, free for visitors 15 and under. Approaching within 100 yards of a humpback whale is unlawful under 50 CFR 216.18.

Facts checked against official sources on 24 September 2026

THE WHALE

We came off the fjord in the morning and went whale watching in the afternoon, which in hindsight was a greedy amount of Alaska for one day, and I would do it again.

Here is the honest version of whale watching. You spend a long time looking at flat grey water while a very cheerful guide tells you about what you might see. You get cold. You start to wonder whether you have been had.

And then the water breaks somewhere you were not looking, and the whole boat swings around, and it is the best thirty seconds of the entire cruise.

There is no way to guarantee it and anybody who tells you otherwise is selling something. But I got mine.

Getting ashore	Ships dock. The City and Borough of Juneau operates two city-owned cruise ship docks downtown, taking vessels up to 1,100 feet , completed in 2017. Private docks and lightering areas also exist.
How busy	Capped by agreement at no more than five large ships a day , and 16,000 lower berths a day , dropping to 12,000 on Saturdays
The road out	There isn't one. Alaska's transportation department calls Juneau " <i>the largest community on the North American continent not connected to the continental highway system.</i> "
Mendenhall Glacier	12 or 13 miles from downtown, depending which Forest Service page you read
Auke Bay	Statter Harbor is about 12 miles by road from downtown, per the city. Many whale tours leave from out that way.
Documents	Alaska is a US state. Domestic stop.

The tramway is closed

Check this before you plan your day. As of today the operator's own website says: "*The Goldbelt Tram is temporarily closed as assessments continue.*" No reopening date is published. The Lower Terminal lobby is still open daily 8am to 6pm for coffee, gifts, Chilkat weaving demonstrations and totem carving.

When it runs, the Goldbelt Mount Roberts Tramway is the thing people do in Juneau when they have a short call: the base station is at 490 S. Franklin Street, which the operator describes as "*just steps off the cruise ship dock,*" and it climbs **1,800 feet** in about **six minutes** in two cabins of 60 passengers each.

We could find **no published accessibility or wheelchair policy** for the tramway. Its accessibility, FAQ and visit pages all return errors. If that matters to you, the number is (907) 463-3412 and you will have to ask.

Mendenhall Glacier

The glacier is the other big Juneau day, and the Forest Service publishes the practical details.

Distance	One Forest Service page says approximately 13 miles from downtown Juneau and the cruise ship docks. Another says approximately 12 miles . Both are official. We are not going to invent a tiebreaker.
Fee	Visitor passes required 1 May to 30 September: \$5 per person daily , or \$15 for a season pass including one guest. Visitors 15 and under are free . America the Beautiful, Senior and Military passes accepted.
Getting there	The Forest Service names two private shuttle companies running between the cruise dock and the glacier, and then says plainly: <i>"The Forest Service does not recommend any business in particular."</i>
Visitor Center access	<i>"The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center is accessible from the parking lots by stairs, elevators, and an easy ramp."</i>
Grounds	Open year round, 6:00am to midnight

Visitor Center hours: three official answers. One Forest Service page says summer daily 8:00am to 7:30pm. Another says summer daily 9:00am to 6:00pm. A Forest Service news release gave a third pattern for 2025 entirely. All three are USFS. The phone number is 907-789-0097, and on this one we would actually call.

A food closure order is in effect right now. Forest Service Order 10-05-33-26-12 runs from **10 August 2026 through 31 October 2026** and prohibits possessing or storing food or refuse, and consuming food or open beverages other than water, within the mapped Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center area except in one designated zone. It is a Class B misdemeanour carrying up to \$5,000 for an individual and up to six months. Do not pack a sandwich for the glacier without checking where you are allowed to eat it.

Worth knowing for planning: the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area was closed entirely from **7 August 2026** under an emergency order after a glacial lake outburst flood from Suicide Basin, with the Visitor Center targeted to reopen on 14 August. That order has expired. But Suicide Basin floods are a recurring annual hazard, so if you are sailing in August, check the Tongass alerts page before you commit to a glacier excursion.

The whale rule, which is law

People think the whale-watching distance is a courtesy. In Alaska it is a federal regulation, 50 CFR 216.18, and it applies within 200 nautical miles of Alaska and in inland state waters.

It is unlawful to **approach within 100 yards** — 91.4 metres — of a humpback whale, by any means *including interception*. It is unlawful to cause a vessel or object to approach within 100 yards. And it is unlawful to disrupt normal behaviour: rapid changes of direction, prolonged diving, evasive swimming, abandoning habitual areas. Vessels must "*operate at a slow, safe speed when near a humpback whale*."

Separately voluntary, from NOAA: a 30-minute observation limit per whale or group, not encircling or trapping them, approaching from behind rather than head on, and never feeding them.

WHY THIS IS GOOD NEWS FOR YOU

It means the captain who will not creep closer for your photograph is not being difficult. He is staying out of federal trouble, and he is the reason there are still whales there to look at.

It also means: bring a zoom, or accept that the memory is better than the picture. Mine is terrible and I do not care.

MY VERDICT

Juneau is the port where you actually have to choose. Glacier, or whales, or the tramway when it reopens — on a normal port call you are not doing all three well.

If it is your first Alaska cruise and you only get one, I would take the whales, because the glacier photographs beautifully and the whale does something to you.

If you are travelling with someone whose knees have opinions, take the glacier. The Visitor Center is reachable by ramp and elevator and the Forest Service says so in writing, which is more than most places give you.

Questions people ask about Juneau

Is the Mount Roberts tramway open?

Not as of today. The operator's own site says the Goldbelt Tram is temporarily closed while assessments continue, with no reopening date published. The Lower Terminal lobby remains open 8am to 6pm daily. Check goldbeltram.com before you plan around it.

How far is Mendenhall Glacier from the cruise dock?

Two US Forest Service pages give different figures: one says approximately 13 miles from downtown Juneau and the cruise ship docks, the other says approximately 12 miles from downtown. Both are official and we have not resolved which is current.

Is there a fee at Mendenhall Glacier?

Yes, from 1 May to 30 September: \$5 per person daily or \$15 for a season pass that includes one guest. Visitors 15 and under are free, and America the Beautiful, Senior and Military passes are accepted.

How close can a whale-watching boat get to a whale in Alaska?

No closer than 100 yards to a humpback whale. That is federal law under 50 CFR 216.18, not a guideline, and it covers approaching by any means including interception. Vessels must also operate at a slow, safe speed near whales.

Can you drive to Juneau?

No. The Alaska Department of Transportation describes Juneau as the largest community on the North American continent not connected to the continental highway system. You arrive by sea or by air.

Where these facts come from

- City and Borough of Juneau, Docks and Harbors (<https://juneau.org/harbors>)
- City and Borough of Juneau, harbour facilities (<https://juneau.org/harbors/facilities>)
- City and Borough of Juneau, port capacity agreement (<https://juneau.org/newsroom-item/city-and-borough-of-juneau-and-cruise-lines-agree-on-port-capacity-guidelines>)
- Goldbelt Mount Roberts Tramway, official site (<https://www.goldbelttram.com/>)
- Goldbelt Tram, current closure update (<https://www.goldbelttram.com/goldbelt-tram-update/>)
- US Forest Service, Mendenhall Glacier fees and passes (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r10/tongass/offices/mendenhall-fees-and-passes>)
- US Forest Service, getting out to Mendenhall Glacier (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r10/tongass/offices/getting-out-mendenhall-glacier-visitor-center-recreation-area>)
- US Forest Service, Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r10/tongass/offices/mendenhall-glacier-visitor-center>)
- US Forest Service, Mendenhall Glacier VC Unit food closure order (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r10/tongass/alerts/mendenhall-glacier-vc-unit-food-closure>)
- eCFR 50 CFR 216.18, Alaska humpback whale approach regulation (<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/chapter-II/subchapter-C/part-216/subpart-B/section-216.18>)
- NOAA Fisheries, Alaska humpback whale approach regulations (<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/alaska-humpback-whale-approach-regulations>)
- Alaska DOT&PF, Juneau Access project (<https://dot.alaska.gov/juneauaccess/>)

Ports change their rules and their prices. Check the official pages above before you sail.

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