

Homer the town at the end of the road

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HOMER, Alaska — Here, in what locals call the Halibut Fishing Capital of the World, the motel rooms have freezers and rental-car agencies charge extra for returning a vehicle with a “fish smell.”

The best time for a beer at the Salty Dawg Saloon on the Homer Spit is 4-7 p.m. “That’s when the people come in and start talking about the big, fat fish they caught,” says Asia Freeman, 36, a Homer native and owner of the Old Town Bed & Breakfast.

Homer, a town of about 4,000 on Prince William Sound in Southern Alaska’s lower Kenai Peninsula, lies literally at the end of the U.S. highway system where the Sterling Highway (U.S. 1) stops at Kachemak Bay. The halibut catch draws thousands of tourists each year. Seafood processing, fishing boats and charter operations support the economy, so much so that an outsider might wonder if there’s anything else to do here besides fish.

Take it from Freeman, a painter who moved from India back to her hometown 13 years ago to transform a 1930s general store into a B&B and community art gallery: There’s another Homer.

It’s the one that hikers and kayakers share with sea birds and black bears, and artists capture as the glacier-filled Kenai mountains color the morning summer skies an icy blue. Mountains, water, rainy summers, dark winters ... sound familiar?

“You take Seattle and lay it over Colorado and that’s Homer,” says Freeman.

A 10-point plan

1. Start your tour 12 miles outside of Homer by turning left off the Sterling Highway at Mile 160.9 near the town of Anchor Point. Look for a little sign that says “Gallery.”

This is the home and studio of still-life painter Norman Lowell. Lowell, 76, paints during the winter, mostly from sketches collected from years sleeping in tents next to rivers and glaciers.



CAROL PUCCI / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Landscape viewing is a favorite Homer activity. These houses overlooking Kachemak Bay were spotted during a summer sunset on East End Road. The purple-pink flowers are fireweed.

If you go

Homer

Where

Homer is on the north shore of Kachemak Bay on the southwestern edge of the Kenai Peninsula, a five-hour drive from Anchorage.

Traveler’s tip

Plan on a minimum of \$45-\$50 a day for a rental car in peak season. For the best rates, rent from an agency with an off-airport location. Save an extra 8 percent tax on the total bill by avoiding airport-shuttle service and taking a taxi to the rental agency. The fare is around \$10.

More information

Contact the Homer Chamber of Commerce at 907-235-7740, or see www.homer.alaska.org. Ask for a free visitor’s guide.

A gallery where his work is for sale is open May-September. Lowell and his wife, Libby, are usually around to welcome visitors and show them their gardens and the cabin where they homesteaded in 1958 after coming to Alaska from Iowa. Phone 907-235-7344 for opening hours.

2. Art hop along Pioneer Avenue. What saltwater taffy and fish and chips are to the Homer Spit, galleries and cozy cafes are to Pioneer Avenue, the commercial hub in the center of town. Stop into the Fireweed Gallery, 475 E. Pioneer, for kitchen utensils crafted from shed antlers, pottery and metal sculptures. Next door at 471 Pioneer is Ptarmigan Arts, a co-op filled with the work of 45 Alaskan artists.

3. Explore Old Town, the original town settlement until an earthquake struck the Prince William Sound coastline in 1964. Freeman's Old Town B&B (www.oldtownbedandbreakfast.com) is on the top floor of a green wooden building that looks out over Bishop's Bay. Downstairs is the Bunnell Street Gallery, (www.bunnellstreetgallery.org) a nonprofit community exhibition and performance space for the arts.

Nearby are beach boardwalks; a bookstore, cafe, bakery and hip restaurants like Fat Olives, 276 Ohlson Lane, a slice of the Italian countryside transported inside an old school-bus barn.

4. Visit the free Islands & Ocean Visitor Center at 95 Sterling Highway near Old Town. Run by the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and Kachemak Bay Research Preserve. This is one of the best environmental museums anywhere, and a must-do for a quick lesson on the diversity of sea and wildlife in this part of Alaska.

Check out the free programs including tide pool walks along Bishop's Beach, estuary and slough walks and birding workshops. See www.islandsandocean.org.

5. Go wine-tasting. Alaska's known mostly for beer, but after moving here from California 30 years ago, Bill and Dorothy Fry started making wine in their garage, calling in friends and family to help crush locally grown rhubarb, blueberries and raspberries.

Friends liked the results so much, they opened the Bear Creek Winery two years ago next to the B&B they run. Dorothy Fry describes it as a "hobby gone amok." Samples are poured in a cozy tasting room where copies of "Witcher," a thriller set in Alaska by Bill Fry, are also for sale. See www.bearcreekwineryalaska.com.

6. Explore Kachemak Bay State Park. Alaska's first state park encompasses more than 400,000 acres of mountains, glaciers, forests and coastline. Any number of outfitters can arrange dropoffs into remote wilderness areas for hiking and kayak trips. One of the best organized trips is a daylong excursion conducted by the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies.

The trips (\$95 for adults, \$63 for children under 12) include a morning boat ride across the bay, forest



THOMAS AUCIELLO

Jami Epley, a naturalist guide for the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies, holds a starfish plucked from the water at low tide. The center offers daylong guided hikes and kayak trips across Kachemak Bay.



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hikes, tide-pool explorations and optional kayaking (\$45 extra). See www.akcoastalstudies.org for details.

7. Walk at low tide or bike along the Homer Spit, the five-mile-long finger of land jutting into Kachemak Bay. Shove your way into the Salty Dawg for a beer. Scrawl a message on a dollar bill and tack it to the wall along with thousands of others. "It's like carving your initials in the table," says one local.

8. Hop aboard a seaplane for the 15-minute ride to Seldovia, population 300. The former Russian fishing village is attached to the Kenai Peninsula but can only be reached by water or air. Spend the day poking around the shops near the historic boardwalk, and hike the 1.5-mile Otterbahn Trail through spruce forests filled with wild blueberries. See www.seldovia.com.

9. Go for a scenic drive. Try Skyline Drive to the Carl E. Wynn Nature Center where there are

wooded trails. A scenic turn off at East Hill Road leads to views of Kachemak Bay State Park and the Kenai mountains.

10. Eat fish, but remember, just because it comes from Alaska doesn't mean it's cheap. Three pounds of Bering Sea king crab legs as long as your forearm cost about \$70 per person at Captain Pattie's Seafood Restaurant.

Easier on the wallet is the seafood sampler at the funky Sourdough Express Bakery and Cafe, 1316 Ocean Drive. (Look for the green bread truck parked in the front yard. Owners Donna and Kevin Maltz used it to start up their baking business in 1982).

Forty dollars a head buys a wild salmon or halibut dinner with shrimp, scallops and Dungeness crab legs.

This is a heap of seafood for the money. So what if you didn't catch it.

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