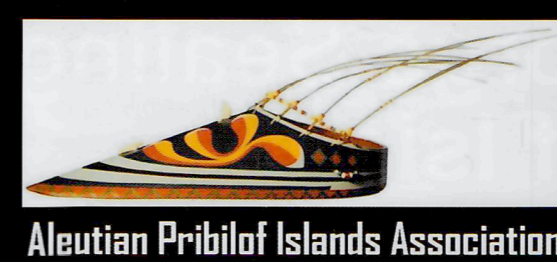


# St. George Sealing Plant Pribilof Islands

Seal Islands National Historic Landmark



An Island Shrouded in Fog...

The village of St. George, summer 2004. Photograph by Rodney W. Lekanof.



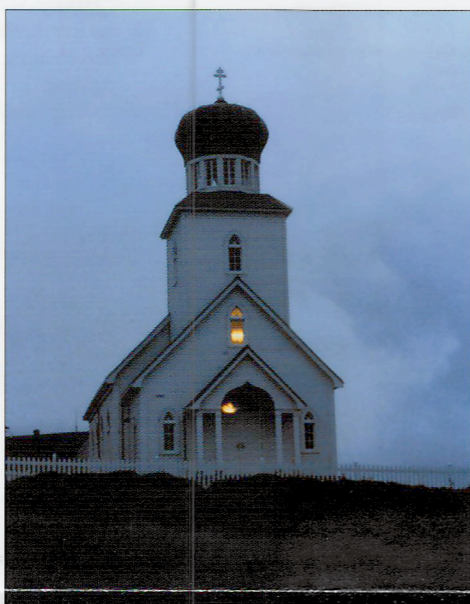
*"Nowhere, nowhere else could there possibly be so much teeming life. Every inch of earth is covered with writhing, barking, roaring, fighting fur seals, hair seals, sea lions... and thousands of birds."*

Libby Beaman, St. George Island, 1880  
Wife of the Assistant Special Agent for the Seal Islands

## The Russian Period (1786-1867)

In 1786, the Russian navigator Gerasim Pribilof came upon the walls of

Generations of Russian rule left their mark: Pribilofians became bilingual in Unangan and Russian, converted to Russian Orthodoxy, and adopted Russian names. By the time Alaska was sold to the United States, the Pribilofians considered themselves both Unangan and Russian.



Russian Orthodox church of St. George the Victorious Holy Martyr. This church was built in 1936 and rehabilitated in 1996 by the Aleutian Pribilof Island Restitution Trust. Photographer: Linda Cook. Courtesy National Park Service.

Tolstoi Mees, heard the unforgettable sounds of the seal rookeries and named the island "St. George" after his ship. Drawn to this new, seemingly inexhaustible source of fur, the Russians forced Unangan families from the islands of Unalaska and Atka to re-establish their homes on St. George and St. Paul. There they harvested thousands of seals every summer and shipped the skins to China.

The village of St. George was established around 1800. Shortly afterward, the Russian American Company built a school on St. George, supported a teacher, and in 1833 constructed the first Russian Orthodox chapel on the island, dedicated to St. George the Victorious Holy Martyr. Alarmed by declining fur seal numbers, the Russians also began to enforce strict conservation measures.

## World War II, Evacuation & Internment (1942-1945)

On June 3-4, 1942, the Japanese bombed Unalaska Island in the Aleutian Chain, and invaded the islands of Kiska and Attu three days later. On June 14, the Pribilofians were ordered to evacuate, taking only the clothes on their backs. They were taken by the U.S. Navy to dilapidated canneries and mines in Southeast Alaska where they remained in dismal, unsanitary, and cramped conditions, suffering from preventable diseases and poor nutrition.

Most of the internees were forced to remain in the camps until the war ended in 1945, but the Pribilofians returned earlier because their labor was needed to maintain the valuable fur seal harvest. Sealing crews were sent to St. George and St. Paul in the summer of 1943, and in May, 1944, most of the Pribilofians were allowed to go home. In a final crushing blow, they discovered that many of their homes had been ransacked by American soldiers and their valuable possessions, abandoned in the rush to evacuate, had been stolen or damaged.

St. George residents were interned at this abandoned gold mine at Funter Bay during World War II. Courtesy Frederika Martin Collection, Accession #1991-0223-00353, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

St. George is the second largest of the five Pribilof Islands, which lie over 300 miles west of the Alaskan coast. Only St. George and its neighbor, St. Paul, are inhabited. St. George has a harsh and beautiful landscape, with towering basalt cliffs, black sand beaches, and thriving wildlife. Millions of sea birds come to the island every summer, in addition to breeding fur seals, sea lions, harbor seals, and arctic foxes. The Aleut (*Unangan*) have inhabited the Aleutians for thousands of years, but did not settle on the Pribilofs until the Russian period. The Unangan used sophisticated technology to draw a living from the sea. Hunters harvested marine mammals from skin boats, took sea birds and collected their eggs, and women collected shellfish, seaweed, and driftwood. The fur seal, which would become the cornerstone of the Pribilof economy, was used in making womens' clothing. Long before the arrival of the Russians, tales were told about mythical fog-shrouded islands in the Bering Sea that teemed with life.



## Under a Different Flag: The Early American Period (1867-1942)



St. George men row a baidar (skin boat) laden with supplies towards shore. The original sealing plant is in front of them. 1948. Courtesy San Francisco Call-Bulletin Collection, Accession #1970-0011-00096, Archives and Manuscripts, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States, which in turn leased the Pribilofs to the Alaska Commercial Company in 1879. The company ran the islands, harvested the fur seal pelts, and sold them as fine furs. Over 150,000 pelts (worth over \$2.5 million, or about \$50 million in 2002 dollars) were processed each year. Special Agents of the Treasury Department were stationed on the islands and monitored the harvest. Pressure to make a profit outweighed concern for the seal herd, and Russian conservation measures were abandoned.

Like the Russians before them, the Alaska Commercial Company controlled social conditions on the islands. Every aspect of

*"I was afraid to leave... If we didn't come back on time, they would say we might lose our houses or our job. So people didn't leave. If you got out without permission, they reduced your sealing division, threatened not to give food to your family."*

Anonymous St. George Resident, 1975

life, from education to housing, depended on the sealing industry. Company officials often abused their Unangan employees, suppressed the Unangan and Russian languages, and destroyed traditional sod houses (*barabaras*) which they thought were unhealthy.

The Pribilofians persevered during these years of suffering. They pooled their resources to take care of their elders, and found solace in family life, their church, and their traditions. Conditions did not begin to improve until after World War II when Pribilofian leaders campaigned for and won basic civil rights.

## The Postwar Period (1945-Present)



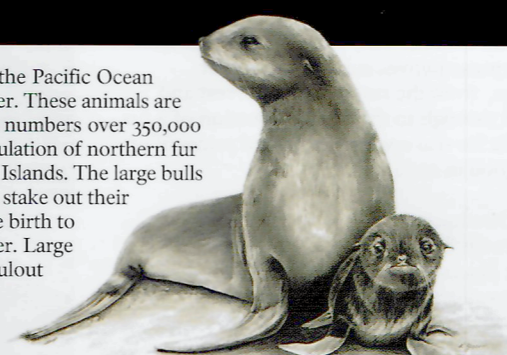
Barrels filled with seal skins wait to be loaded to the Navy transport, USS Thuban in 1948. Courtesy San Francisco Call-Bulletin Collection, Accession #1970-0011-00100, University of Alaska Fairbanks Alaska and Polar Regions Archives.

After World War II, the environment in the Pribilofs began to change, in more ways than one. Pribilofian leaders brought nationwide attention to their plight as "wards of the state" and ultimately won significant new rights, including wages, civil servant status, improved education and local self-government. At the same time, the

fur seal population was in serious decline; the herd never recovered from an ill-fated attempt in the 1950s to force young females to breed early by killing over 300,000 female seals. In 1973 commercial sealing ended on St. George (St. Paul followed in 1985). Today seals are harvested only for subsistence purposes.

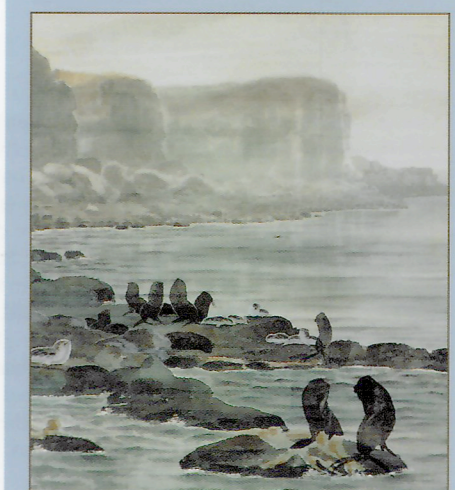
## The Prize of the Pribilofs

The northern fur seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*) ranges the Pacific Ocean from the Bering Sea to the California-Mexico border. These animals are named for their dense, waterproof underfur which numbers over 350,000 hairs per square inch. Over 70% of the world's population of northern fur seals breed on the shores of St. George and St. Paul Islands. The large bulls or "beachmasters" arrive at the rookeries in May to stake out their territories. Females arrive in late June and soon give birth to their pups, which leave the islands in late November. Large groups of young males or "bachelors" collect in haulout areas adjacent to the rookery where they spar in preparation for the day when they will be large enough to hold a territory.



Northern fur seal mother and pup. Artist: Katherine Zecca. Courtesy National Marine Fisheries.

## Henry Wood Elliott: Artist and Advocate



"The Reef Point" by Henry Wood Elliott, 1872. Courtesy University of Alaska Museum.

Henry Wood Elliott was one of the first fur seal conservationists. Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1846, Elliott first came to the Pribilofs in 1872 to supervise the Alaska Commercial Company's management of the fur seal herd. He shipped between 200 and 300 drawings and paintings back to Washington, D. C. after his first year in the Pribilofs. He also married an Unangan woman, Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Milovidov. When Elliott returned to the Pribilofs in 1889, he was horrified to discover the fur seal herds had been decimated by pelagic sealers, primarily from Canada, Russia, and Japan. His campaign to save the fur seals culminated in the 1911 North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty, which was the first international conservation treaty to effectively end pelagic sealing, and allowed fur seal populations to recover. Elliott died in Seattle in 1930.

# St. George Sealing Plant Pribilof Islands

Seal Islands National Historic Landmark

St. George Island

Alaska



St. George Sealing Plant

St. George Sealing Plant, March, 2004. Photo courtesy Andrew Malavansky, St. George Kayumixtax Eco-Office.

The Sealing Plant was the center of the sealing industry on St. George. Most of the island's men and boys worked in this building from 1951 until 1972, when the plant shut down. During the summer sealing season, the men alternated between harvesting seals one day, and processing the skins the next. This one-of-a-kind building is the most complete structure of its kind in the northern hemisphere; remarkably, much of the original seal skin processing equipment is still intact. The building consists of the Wash House, Blubber House, Brine House, and Barrelling Room, all of which you can tour with the help of a local guide and this brochure.

In 1962 the Sealing Plant was designated a National Historic Landmark building. It is currently used by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) (a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA) and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as a research and housing facility. In 1998, after nearly half a century of abuse by the elements, the building was in danger of collapse and being lost forever. St. George Tanaq Corporation and NOAA began a \$2 million construction project in order to preserve the plant's structural and historical integrity. The restoration was completed in 1999.

## 1 WASHING & KENCHING

The Washroom was the seal skins' first stop in the Sealing Plant. The skins were tossed through the windows on the east side of the building into wash tanks, blasted with high pressure hoses and soaked in salt water for 24 to 30 hours.



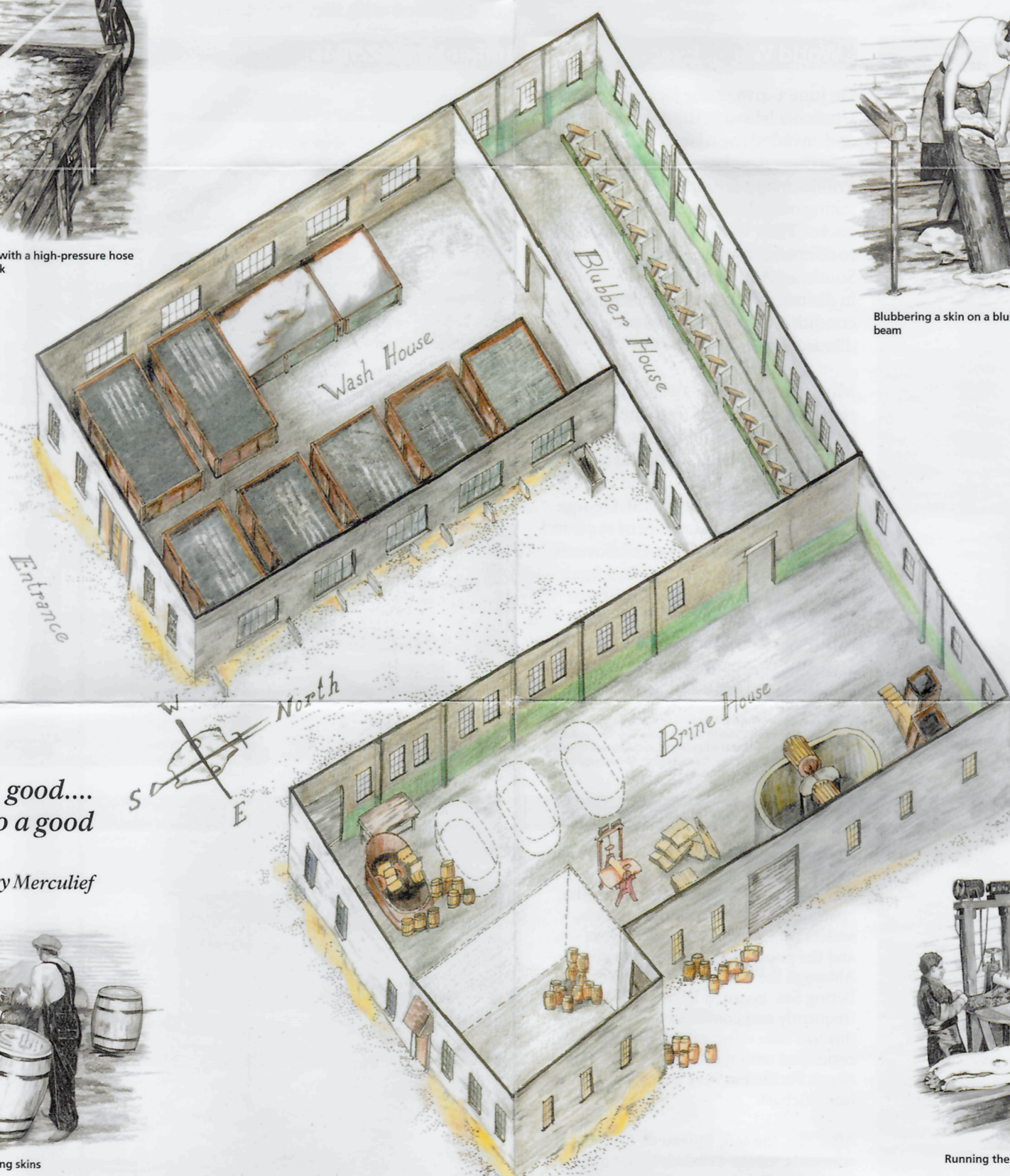
"Kenching" the skins in salt

Some skins were thrown into the kenches in the northwest corner of the room, where they were encrusted with salt. A well-kenched skin could keep for up to 4 years before proceeding to the next stage of the process.



Spraying skins with a high-pressure hose in the wash tank

## ST. GEORGE SEALING PLANT



## 2 BLUBBERING

*"We'd get blisters on our belly from rubbing on the beam.... Nobody talked, you'd just hear the "whooch, whooch, whooch, whooch" from the knives. The sound of hides slapping down on the rails was like waves crashing on the beach."*

Victor Malavansky, Sr.

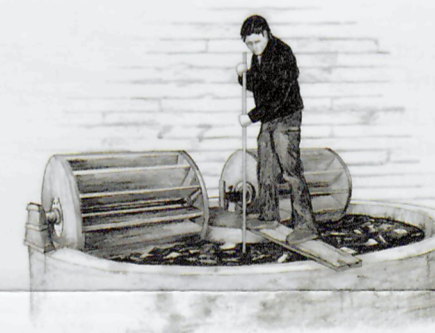


Blubbering a skin on a blubber beam

After the pelts were washed, their blubber was stripped off. This laborious process took place in the Blubber House, where 15 blubber stations were lined up against the north wall. Each station consisted of a beam, a rail on which to hang pelts, and a knife box. Blubberers pinned the skins against the beams with their stomachs and used a two-handed knife to strip the blubber off the skin.

## 3 BRINING

Freshly blubbered skins were taken to the Brine Room. The skins were placed in salt brine in the brine tanks and agitated by two constantly turning paddles. The person pictured is pushing the pelts down into the brine. The tank operator stood on a nearby platform poured salt into a salt box as sea water flowed through the box and into the tank, saturating the skins.



Pushing skins down in the brine tank

## 5 ROLLING & PACKING

*"They make sure they roll [the skins] good.... like the bread dough.... They used to do a good job."*

Terenty Mercurief

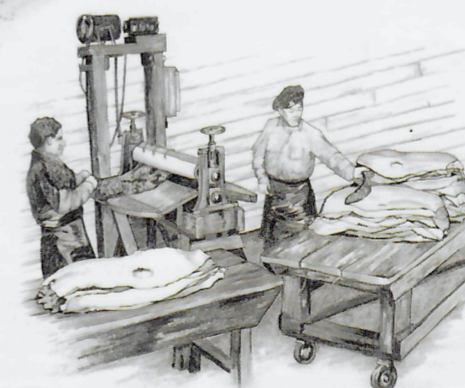
In the cooperage, barrels were assembled by the barrel makers, or "coopers" before the sealing season began. Finished barrels were stacked in the attic until they were needed. When the seal skins were dry, they were rolled tightly in salt (or, later on, borax), counted, and packed in the barrels. As many as 90 skins could be packed in a barrel, which could weigh as much as 500 pounds. The packed barrels were rolled to the dock and loaded onto ships, the start of a long journey to the Fouke Fur Company in St. Louis, Missouri.



Rolling and packing skins

## 4 WRINGING

Pelts went through the wringer twice, immediately after they were blubbered and then again when they came out of the brine tank. After the pelts had soaked for 12 hours in the brine solution, they were taken out and put through a wringer to remove extra water. The skins were then stacked on redwood racks to air dry for up to a week.



Running the skins through the wringer

Illustrations by Mark Luttrell, Artifact Illustration, 2004 & 2005

### Fouke Fur Company



The Fouke Fur Company of St. Louis, Missouri, was the premier purveyor of fur seal products for most of the twentieth century. Before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, London companies had processed most of St. George's seal skins. When transatlantic transport became too risky, the U.S. Government signed a contract with Fouke Fur Company allowing them exclusive access to the Pribilof Island seal skins. By 1960, the Fouke Fur Company was responsible for processing 90 percent of all commercially harvested fur seal skins worldwide. Company representatives supervised the fur processing at every stage, from the summer seal harvest and tanning in the Pribilofs through to the final production of a fur coat in St. Louis. Alaska fur seal coats commanded prices of up to \$1,000 in 1930 (\$11,000 in 2002 dollars).

The Fouke Fur Company's headquarters at the International Fur Exchange Building in downtown St. Louis still exists and is on the National Register of Historic Places. It was recently saved from demolition; after a \$20 million renovation project in 1997-2000, it reopened as the Drury Plaza Hotel.

Right: Fouke Fur Company employees inspecting fur seal skins in St. Louis.



### Travel Information

#### Getting to St. George

Flights to St. George from Anchorage leave three times a week in the summer, and take three to four hours. Tanaq Corporation runs the local hotel; call (907) 859-2255 for reservations, or vehicle rental. There is no restaurant on the island, but guests can use the hotel kitchen. The St. George Island Institute offers package tours and general tourist information and can be contacted through the St. George Traditional Council at (907) 859-2205. Mist, wind, and fog are common in the Pribilof Islands, and summer temperatures range from 40-60 degrees F. Dress warmly and pack rain gear. For views of the island see [www.mystisles.net](http://www.mystisles.net).

#### Contact Information:

St. George Traditional Council, (907) 859-2205  
[www.apicda.com](http://www.apicda.com) or [www.alcuttravel.org](http://www.alcuttravel.org)

#### What To See

The best time to see the seals and birds is late June to late August, which is also when wildflowers adorn the rocky tundra. The fur seal rookeries are closed when the seals are present, but you can get a permit from the St. George Traditional Council to visit the seal viewing blind. Watch harbor seals frolic at Garden Cove on the island's south side, or head west to watch sea lions sunning themselves at Dalnoi Point. For a spectacular view, visit the highest point of the island at High Bluffs. The St. George Traditional Council has a map with various points of interest and an etiquette guide.

#### Things You Should Know

St. George is known for its spectacular bird cliffs, but cliff edges are unstable, so please approach with extreme caution. Seabirds and fur seals are susceptible to disturbance. Noise, scent, vibration, and falling rocks can trigger panic flights by wildlife, harming or killing young. Vehicles may only be used on designated roads. Walking is welcomed, but remember most of the island is private property, except for the bird cliffs (USFWS) and seal rookeries (NMFS), which are federally owned. Please obey all posted signs. The Pribilof Islands are "rat free" islands. A rat prevention program works to keep invasive species off the island. Dogs are not allowed on the islands, to prevent disease transmission to seals and foxes.