



Walk through the temperate rain forest covering much of the park and see one of the finest collections of totem poles (*right*) in the Northwest.

TOTEM POLE: PATRICK J. ENDRES, ©ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS;
RAIN FOREST: NPS

The Russian Bishop's House also served as a seminary and school for Native children. (*Right*) Bald eagles and other raptors thrive in the area.

RUSSIAN BISHOP'S HOUSE: ©ALASKA STOCK;
EAGLE: ©ROLF HICKER

Russian Orthodox missionaries built St. Michael's Cathedral in 1848. Orthodox icons fill the Russian Bishop's House chapel (*left of cathedral*).

CATHEDRAL: PATRICK J. ENDRES, ©ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS;
CHAPEL: ©FRED HIRSCHMANN

Tlingits living on Shee (now Baranof) Island called their village Shee At'iká, "people on the outside of Shee." The Russians called it Sitka.

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When They Tell the Story of Sitka . . .

. . . they remember a land of plenty and the people drawn to its wealth. The forest shrouding the land, the rivers running through it, and the sea around it provided everything needed to sustain a vigorous human community. Tlingits had thrived on the island they called Shee for countless generations before ambitious traders came from the west in search of new goods. Here Tlingits and Russians met, fought, and then uneasily coexisted for a time. When the Russians departed after six decades, both groups had been changed by the encounter. The Tlingits preserved their traditions as the Americans who replaced the Russians wrought their own changes. In the 1960s, after decades of acculturation and population decline, Tlingits began to reassert their culture. If you pay close attention to the landscape, artifacts, and artisans of Sitka National Historical Park, you will hear the story of the cultures who lived, and still live, on this island.



Alaska was one of the last places in the Americas to be settled by Europeans. The Russian-American Company, headquartered in Irkutsk, Siberia, took the lead. From the port of Okhotsk it expanded its fur-trading operations via the Aleutians to Alaska in the late 1700s.

A Place of Power

From the Aleutian Islands to the Alexander Archipelago off Southeast Alaska, a great arc of ruggedly sculpted shoreline embraces the far reaches of the North Pacific. It is a dynamic land, where the flow of vast glaciers cuts steep-walled fjords, and forested mountains of the coastal range plunge to the sea. For thousands of years before Europeans found it, this was a wild, remote place where the "white thunder" of calving glaciers was heard by Alaska Natives alone, and where the cry of the raven and the call of the wolf echoed through their stories.



Tlingit fishing canoe
ALASKA STATE LIBRARY, HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS



Tlingit girls at the Presbyterian mission school
ALASKA STATE LIBRARY, HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS
Berry basket woven of spruce root
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA, MUSEUM OF THE NORTH



Ceremonial dress for potlatch
ALASKA STATE LIBRARY, HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS



Russian Orthodox clergy and seminarians
ALASKA STATE LIBRARY, HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS



Russians with model of St. Michael's
ALASKA STATE LIBRARY, HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS



Russian Bishop's House
[RELDON JACKSON MUSEUM
Sea otter
©ALASKA STOCK

The Tlingit People

For the Tlingits, Haida, and other groups, Southeast Alaska was a hospitable land where the warm Japanese Current moderated temperatures—and kept Sitka's natural harbor free of ice year-round. Food resources were so abundant that the Tlingits essentially harvested whatever they needed. A maritime people, they drew much of their food from the sea and the rivers flowing into it. Salmon, the nutritious staple of their diet, was available in staggering quantities during the spawning runs. The Tlingits also fished on the open sea, wrestling 5-foot-long halibut into their canoes; hunted sea mammals; and gathered shellfish and edible seaweed. They hunted land animals and supplemented their diet with berries, grasses, and roots.

Cedar and other conifers in the great rain forest climbing the mountains behind Sitka provided the durable, straight-grained wood from which the Tlingits shaped much of their material world. They cut great beams and split planks to build their multi-family dwellings. Their basic structures were rectangular, pitched-roof buildings with round or oval entrances. From trunks they carved canoes up to 60 feet long, built in various types and sizes for fishing, sea travel, river travel, or war. They fashioned everyday implements from alder, like spoons and bowls, and crafted bentwood boxes to hold their large stocks of food and fish oil. Theirs was a bountiful life.

Coming of the *Anooshi*

Vitus Bering's 1741 voyage of exploration for Russia brought the first Europeans to Alaska. The sea otter pelts they took home to show the Czar drew them back to stay, and the area was soon overrun with Russian *promyshlenniki*—free-ranging hunters and fur traders. The Russians (called *Anooshi* by the Tlingits) were likely the first Old World traders to encounter Alaska Natives. Through barter and coercion the *promyshlenniki* used the skills of the native Aleutians—the Aleuts—to gather the profitable pelts. By 1784 a Russian trading company employing *promyshlenniki* had established a station on Kodiak Island, and forced Aleuts to hunt sea otter and other sea mammals. Russia remained the dominant power in the North Pacific for 125 years.

Wanting to stabilize Russia's foothold in the New World, Czar Paul I in 1799 granted a monopoly to the Russian-American Company, giving the company's manager Alexander Baranov the powers of a colonial governor. Baranov had already been pushing operations east and south from Kodiak Island to extend Russia's territorial claims and thwart growing competition in the fur trade from England and the United States. He also wanted to stop the British and American practice of trading guns to the Tlingits, a powerful group in Southeast Alaska. To those ends he planned to establish a fortified station on Baranof Island, the one called Shee by its native inhabitants.

Pink salmon crowd the Indian River during their spawning run. These runs peak in mid-August, but can extend from mid-July into October.

PATRICK J. ENDRES, ©ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS

Tlingits, Russians, and Americans

Resistance at Indian River

After a Tlingit leader ceded land north of Sitka to the Russian-American Company, Alexander Baranov brought some 1,100 Russians, Aleuts, and other Native Alaskans to the site and established Redoubt St. Michael. Other Tlingits, especially the powerful Kiks.ádi clan of Shee At'iká, chafed at the Russian presence on the island. In 1802 they attacked the settlement and killed most of its Russian and Aleut inhabitants. Baranov returned in 1804 with a party of Russians and Aleuts, this time to Shee At'iká, where he met up with the warship *Neva*. Preparing for battle, the Kiks.ádi moved to a nearby fortification they had built at the mouth of the Indian River.

After the Kiks.ádi rejected Baranov's demands for surrender, *Neva* and other gunboats bombarded their wooden structure. When that failed, Baranov led a party ashore and stormed the fort. Behind their war chief K'alyaan (*right, with club*), the Kiks.ádi repulsed the attack, wounding Baranov. Undeterred, he laid siege to the Kiks.ádi. After seven days, seeing no activity ashore, Baranov landed again. The Kiks.ádi had run out of gunpowder and quietly left during the night. The battle was one of the last major acts of Tlingit resistance to the Russians.



This bronze plaque, buried in 1799 at Redoubt St. Michael on Baranof Island, reads "Land of Russian Possession."

NPS



NPS/OLUS S. GLANZMAN



Fur trader Alexander Baranov (1746–1819) (*left*) became head of the Russian-American Company. He paved the way for Russian Orthodox missionaries like Ioann Veniaminov (1797–1879) (*far left*), who built schools for the Tlingits and created a Tlingit alphabet. In 1840 Veniaminov was named Bishop Innocent. Both men served the Russian Czar, symbolized by the double-headed eagle.

VENIAMINOV AND BARANOV: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; DOUBLE-HEADED EAGLE: ALASKA STATE MUSEUM

The Tlingits encountered by the Russians were a vital, complex society. Tlingits were divided into moieties, the Eagle and Raven. (At *right* is the war chief K'alyaan's raven war helmet.) Clans, the basic social and economic units, controlled resources and trade routes. So abundant was food that large surpluses were created, allowing Tlingits time to bring decorative design to every area of their lives (*far right*).

HELMET: SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM; SEATED MAN: BERNECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY; LIBRARY, TLINGIT GROUP: ALASKA STATE LIBRARY



New Archangel and American Sitka

Baranov made Shee At'iká the Russian-American Company's headquarters, renaming it New Archangel—though it was commonly called Sitka. On the rocky promontory now called Castle Hill he located his home and harbor fortifications. The Russians never became self-sufficient, depending on fresh food from Tlingits who had stayed in the area. The company remained wary of them, maintaining a stockade between the communities. The Russian Orthodox mission, though, established a sympathetic relationship with the Tlingits.

By the mid-1800s the Russian government had grown disenchanted with its stake in America. When the United States offered to buy Alaska in 1867, Russia accepted and Sitka became a U.S. territorial capital. The Presbyterian Church established its own mission in Sitka in the 1870s, building a school for Native children. In 1890 the U.S. government created a federal reserve, Indian River Park, at the mouth of the river. The park was designated Sitka National Monument in 1910, then became part of the National Park System when that system was established in 1916. In 1972 it was redesignated Sitka National Historical Park.



Who Lives Here?

The convergence of the Indian River, Pacific Ocean, and coastal rain forest creates a biologically rich habitat. This temperate rain forest ecosystem is dominated by towering Sitka spruce and western hemlock. Brown bears, river otters, mink, and black-tailed deer frequent the area. The park's intertidal zone teems with marine invertebrates like sea stars, limpets, and barnacles. The area hosts 150 bird species, and pink salmon runs sometimes pack the Indian River with over 1.3 million fish.

Salmon are the ultimate recyclers: Aquatic insects, a critical food source for juvenile salmon, feed on organic nutrients in the Indian River.

Salmon eventually head to sea to feed on rich ocean resources. Mature salmon return to the river to spawn and die. Their carcasses provide food for bears, gulls, and eagles and add nutrients to the stream ecosystem, jump-starting a new generation of salmon.

Sea otters thrive at Sitka, as do ravens (*above*).

PATRICK J. ENDRES, ©ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS



About Your Visit

The park Visitor Center houses a collection of Tlingit artifacts, many of them loaned to the National Park Service by Tlingit clans. "The Voices of Sitka" video connects the stories of Sitkans present and past. The visitor center also houses the Southeast Alaska Indian Cultural Center, which grew from a collaboration between the park and the Alaska Native Brotherhood to promote demonstrations of traditional arts of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people. Native artists work in studios devoted to textile arts, carving, and metal work. Completed in 1843, the Russian Bishop's House was Bishop Innocent's home and the diocese administrative center.

Hours The park Visitor Center is open daily, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. It is open year-round except on Thanksgiving and December 25.

The park trails are open daily mid-May through September, 6:00 am to 10:00 pm, and October to mid-May, 7:00 am to 8:00 pm. The Russian Bishop's House is open daily mid-May to September, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Ranger-led tours are offered every 30 minutes. From October to mid-May the house is open by appointment only. Call 907-747-0110 to schedule a tour.

Accessibility Most structures and trails in the park are wheelchair-accessible. The Russian Bishop's House upstairs is not accessible.

More Information
Sitka National Historical Park
103 Monastery Street
Sitka, AK 99835
907-747-0110
www.nps.gov/sitk

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Totem Trail

The Totem Walk is a 2-mile loop trail through temperate rain forest, where you will find a remarkable collection of totem poles carved by Tlingit and Haida artists. The poles have been part of the Sitka story since 1906, when a collection of poles donated by villages from southern Southeast Alaska were shown at national expositions in 1904 and 1905, then shipped to Sitka and erected in Indian River Park. Traditionally the poles were allowed to deteriorate naturally, and many of those you see today are replicas.

Woodcarving is a fundamental art form of Northwest American Indian cultures, and the totem pole is among their highest

achievements. These are public records, displays of identity and clan pride serving several functions: Crest poles (*shown here*) record the ancestry of a family; legend poles depict folklore or historical events; history poles recount a clan's story; and memorial poles commemorate an individual clan member.

The art of carving totem poles lives in Sitka: Three of the park's poles have been raised since 1976. Tribal organizations continue to carve poles that address themes like wellness and healing.



A village watchman tops the Yaadaas Crest corner pole.

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