

Tracy Arm Trip Information



Written and Provided by: Alaska Boat & Kayak Rental Shop

GENERAL

Tracy Arm is a world class paddling destination located just 45 miles south Juneau. It is an awe inspiring 30 mile long glacially carved fjord with two tidewater glaciers at the end. The majority of the arm is about 1 mile wide and flanked by nearly vertical cliffs shooting 2000+ feet directly out of the water with numerous large cascades and waterfalls. The glaciers are both actively calving and receding (they have receded over a mile from their position depicted on the current topographic maps). In addition to the glaciers the fjord has abundant wildlife, large icebergs floating and drifting around, and 4000-6000 foot peaks reaching steeply up from the edges of the arm. Seals haul out on the icebergs near the glaciers, porpoises swim through the arm, bears are seen along the shoreline and in the valleys, mountain goats climb on the cliffs above the arm, and sea birds are everywhere. In 1980 it became designated as the Tracy Arm-Ford's Terror Wilderness area and has been within the boundaries of the Tongass National Forest since 1907.



TRANSPORT

The transport to the arm is best arranged through Adventure Bound. The cost they charge includes round trip transport for a person and kayak. The kayakers need to be loaded on the Adventure Bound boat by 7:00am on the day of departure (at the dock by Marine Park). Kayakers will typically be dropped off at either Harbor Island, Icefall Lake Falls, or by the face of the South Sawyer Glacier. The drop off is as pictured to the right, which is why kayakers must be pre-loaded. The pickups typically occur by Sawyer Island, at the waterfalls across from Icefall Lake Falls or at Harbor Island. Arrange your drop-offs and pickups with the Captain of the boat. The Adventure Bound will arrive back into town around 6:00pm. Availability and reservations need to be arranged through Adventure Bound. Transport round trip to and from the Adventure Bound dock with kayakers can be reserved in advance with Alaska Boat & Kayak Rental shop.



RECOMMENDED 3-DAY ITINEARARY

Most people do a 3 or 4 day trip down to Tracy Arm. The end of the arm is often full of ice and in a kayak it is impossible to get close to either the North or South Sawyer Glacier. As a result, it works well to get dropped off by the Adventure Bound up by the glacier, this allows the opportunity to push through the ice on the larger boat to get an up close view. If you opt for the drop off near the South Sawyer Glacier then the following would be your itinerary. A drop off at Harbor Island or near the “Elbow” would just be the itinerary in reverse, but against the wind and current the majority of the way.

Day 1: Have kayaks transported to the Adventure Bound dock at 7:00am. Load up the fully loaded kayaks between 7:00 and 7:15am and depart the dock sometime between 8 and 8:30am. Arrive at the South Sawyer glacier around 1:00pm and get into your kayaks directly from the boat. After getting your fill of calving glaciers, paddle back up the arm and camp at either on Sawyer Island or at one of the North Sawyer Inlet camps. Note - If you are a larger group, then you will have to paddle all the way to the Valley Camp. Also, if you are visiting Tracy Arm anytime in May-Early June, it is possible that the Sawyer Island camp and North Sawyer camps will be inaccessible due to impassable ice.

Day 2: After exploring around the North Sawyer begin paddling back up the arm towards Holkham Bay. Stay at the “Valley Camp”.

Day 3: Spend the morning paddling/exploring the arm and get picked up about 5-6 miles away at the “Hole-in-the-Wall Waterfall” at around 3:00pm by Adventure Bound.

Day 4: If you opt for a four day trip, then day three would be spent paddling to one of the “Elbow Camps.” Day four would entail paddling the remaining distance to Harbor Island for a 3:30pm pickup.

HAZARDS and CONCERNS

Tracy Arm is generally a novice friendly area to paddle, but there are definitely concerns to have and hazards of which to be aware.

- **Rough Water:** Calm conditions are usually found, however, it can become rough at any time. Wind is the primary cause for rough seas and it is typically stronger on hot, sunny days and increases as you approach the glaciers. The water between the “Elbow” and Harbor Island is also more likely to be rough than further into Tracy Arm.
- **Cold Water:** The water is very cold due to the amount of fresh glacial runoff floating on the surface of the sea water and falling in can become a life threatening incident.
- **Calving Glaciers:** It is recommended to stay at least 400 yards from the North and South Sawyer glaciers because they are both active tidewater glaciers that are constantly breaking apart at the terminus and calving into the fjord. When the glacier calves it can splinter as it cracks and crashes into the water sending basketball sized chunks flying

over 150 yards through the air. As it crashes into the water it can create large waves that can flip a kayaker. If a kayaker is near the edge of the fjord it can cause them to “dry dock” and flip as a result of the water level rapidly dropping before rising with the waves. A third scenario is a phenomenon known as a Shooter. This happens when an iceberg breaks off from underneath the surface of the water and its buoyancy causes it to come shooting up out of the water like a submarine surfacing.

- Splitting or Rolling Icebergs: Give icebergs their space, especially the larger ones (even



if they are grounded on land). Approximately 90% of an iceberg's volume is underwater, as they melt their center of gravity changes and they can rotate or roll completely flipping an unsuspecting paddler. They will also splinter

apart creating a mini calving event.

- Limited Places to Camp and Take Breaks: Tracy Arm has a steep shoreline from the “elbow” all the way to the glacier. There are a very limited number of places to be able to camp or to get out of kayaks to take a break. When paddling, take advantage of areas to get out when they arise and be prepared to paddle up to 6-8 miles between these sites. Additionally, many of the areas to get out to camp or break are difficult with slippery rocks, slopes that drop off steeply, and areas that can have dramatic wave action due to the calving glaciers (even when they are several miles away).
- Difficult Camping Sites: The paddling can be novice, but all of the campsites east of the “Valley Camp” are expert campsites. They are difficult to find, can be extremely hard to get out of and into the kayaks, can have large wave surges from the calving glaciers, and require some searching to find where to put up a tent.
- Bears: Surprisingly, bears frequent most of Tracy Arm. Black bears are often seen around the “Mud Flat” and “Valley” camps (and sightings/bear sign has increased every year recently). Both brown and black bears are found in the first half of Tracy Arm up to the “Elbow” camp. Make sure you follow the accepted bear camping practices (described briefly on page 6)
- Tides and Currents: The area around Juneau has tidal fluctuations averaging 16’ and peaking at 25 feet. Know the tides while you are paddling and make sure your camp is well above the high tide line. In Tracy Arm there is almost always a current flowing away from the glaciers because of the glacial runoff. The tides add to this current and at large flood tides can reverse it. Generally the bigger the tide difference the stronger the tidal current.

CAMPSITES

Campsites and locations to get out of the kayaks to stretch your legs, have a snack or take a bathroom break are limited. From the “elbow” on there are only five to seven camp sites that work depending on the paddlers experience level and the height of the tides.

Elbow Camp

This camp is 10-13 miles from Harbor Island (depending on which shoreline you follow). There are two locations that have good beaches that are on the west side of the arm just before and at the northwest corner of the “elbow.” The elbow is the point where the arm turns from a north-south orientation to an east-west orientation. On the highest tides it will be necessary to camp in the forest, on smaller tides it is possible to camp on the beach itself. These sites have plenty of room for large groups, getting in/out of the kayaks is easy, and there are streams nearby to collect water.

Mud Flat Camp

This camp is 7 to 8 miles from the Elbow Camp and 2-3 miles from the Valley Camp. The campsite is on the smooth rocks at the furthest west end of the mud flat area. It can only be used when there is less than a 16’ high tide. It is easy to get in/out of the kayaks, has space to accommodate about 3-4 tents, and has a stream flowing next to it. This site is frequented by bears. Please be diligent in following bear camping procedures.

Valley Camp



This camp is 9-11 miles from the Elbow Camps and about 7-8 miles from the Sawyer Island camp. It has easy to fair access at all tide levels, enough area to comfortably fit a group up to 12 people, and a large stream flowing next to it. The best camping and access is on the east (glacier) side of the stream. This site is frequented by bears. Please

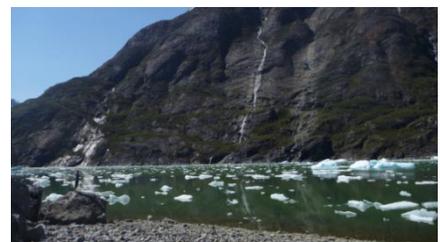
be diligent in following bear camping procedures.

Sawyer Island Camp

This camp is 7-8 miles from the Valley Camp and about 3 miles from the North Sawyer camp. Getting into/out of the kayaks can be difficult due to sloping rock that is often slippery, particularly at low tide. This is made more difficult by the wave action created by the calving glaciers. Using this camp requires an athletic paddler who is comfortable getting in/out of kayaks in all conditions. The best spot to get onto the island is the south west end. This camp is most suited to small groups with only a couple of tents, although it is possible to find mediocre spots for 3 or 4 tents. Water is unavailable on the island and must be carried with you. Bears can swim, but they should not be an issue at this camp.

North Sawyer Point Camp

This camp is on the east side near the mouth of North Sawyer Inlet, 8-9 miles from Valley Camp, 5-6 miles from the South Sawyer Glacier, and 2.5 miles from the North Sawyer Glacier. It has a rocky beach that is easy to land on, although it is subject



to wave swells from the glaciers calving. There is also some rockfall hazard from the cliff. There is a large waterfall that comes down on the north side of the beach where you can collect good water. This camp should only be used if the high tides are less than about 15' otherwise you may find yourself waking up in a waterbed.

North Sawyer Cliff Camp

This camp is about 3 miles from the Sawyer Island camp and 10-11 miles from Valley Camp. It is also difficult to identify and to get in/out due to sloping, slippery rock. At high tide it is much easier than at low tide. Like the Sawyer Island Camp and North Sawyer Point Camp, it can have rising/falling wave action caused by the calving of the North Sawyer glacier. Using this camp requires an athletic paddler who is comfortable getting in/out of kayaks in all conditions. The camp is located on the west side of the arm just past the last large stream/waterfall, which flows into a small cove. It is also directly across from a large waterfall on the east side. At high tide it is easy to get out on the south end (away from glacier), but is impossible at lower tides. It is preferred to get in/out on the north end about 100 yards towards the glacier from the cove. This site has accessible water, will work (with some effort) for large groups, and is the only campsite where you can actually walk around for any extended distance. This site is in an area that was recently (in the last 20 years) covered by glacier and as a result is void of vegetation. It is possible to climb up the mountain as far as one would like, and bears can be seen in this area.

LEAVE NO TRACE

Tracy Arm is a Wilderness area and receives minimal impact from humans, particularly anywhere on the land. One of the great things about the area is that it looks the same as it did 100 years ago (with the exception of the fjord being longer). As a paddler you are able to experience the feeling of being the first to explore the arm. In order to preserve this Wilderness character it is important that you follow the seven Leave No Trace principles. Below are the seven principles as well as some guidelines for the Tracy Arm Wilderness area.

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare: make sure that you have all of the appropriate route knowledge, clothing, gear, safety equipment and food so that you do not have to disturb the natural environment (i.e. cut pieces of trees to make a shelter because you forgot a tent)
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces: choose tent sites that will not destroy fragile plant life, camp on the beach if the tide allows it, avoid using the same footpaths to prevent social trails from forming (unless there are heavily impacted paths that already exist)
3. Dispose of Waste Properly: Pack out all trash – this includes biodegradable things such as apple cores or orange peels, human waste should be dealt with in the intertidal zone in areas where the current will flush the waste out to sea, (there is not enough soil in this recently deglaciated area to dig catholes in the forest), if you choose to use toilet paper then pack it out! Please, please, please, do not leave used toilet paper anywhere!
4. Leave What You Find: Unless it is trash left by previous travelers

5. **Minimize Campfire Impacts:** Use a stove to cook on, if possible avoid making fires altogether, if you choose to make a fire then build a small fire in the intertidal zone, only burn wood up to the diameter of your wrist and make sure that everything is burnt completely, no one wants to see large charred pieces of wood floating around on or on the beach where they camp, and again please, please, please do not make fires in the forest
6. **Respect Wildlife:** Follow the Alaska National Marine Fisheries Service wildlife viewing guidelines and regulations by not approaching marine mammals closer than 100 yards and limiting time to observing one individual to 30 minutes. Keep your food in bear resistant containers to prevent the bears from getting into your food and becoming conditioned bears that associated food with people. Keep a clean kitchen free of micro food trash, we DON'T want to feed ANY wildlife...even squirrels, birds, voles, and mice.
7. **Be Considerate of Others:** If there are other travelers in the Arm, keep your visual and auditory impact to a minimum. Follow the other LNT principles so that future travelers can appreciate the Wilderness to the fullest extent.

MARINE WILDLIFE

Seals, porpoises, orcas, humpback whales, river otters, and sea lions can all be spotted in Tracy Arm. It is one of the largest pupping areas in Southeast Alaska for seals, and as such, care should be taken to try to not disrupt the seals on the icebergs near the glaciers. Seals are more wary of kayaks than motorized boats, so please try to stay more than 100 yards away from the seals hauled out on icebergs if at all possible. Sea lions, porpoises, and humpback whales are more common toward the mouth of the arm. When you encounter these animals follow federal regulations and remain 100 yards away from them and do not place yourself directly in their path. Animal encounters from a kayak are to be cherished moments, just remember to provide them the respect they deserve.

BEARS

Tracy Arm is a heavily populated bear area. It is important to follow bear camping guidelines. Food must be stored in bear resistant containers (hanging is not an option at most of the camping sites). Food and other “smellables,” such as toothpaste and deodorant, should be kept away from the tents. Cooking should be done in the intertidal zone so that all the associated smells will be washed away by the ocean. When traveling in Tracy Arm you should also bring along bear spray and noise makers, such as whistles and signal horns. If you do have a bear encounter the first thing to do is group together, then let the bear know you're there by talking to it in a loud, low voice. If the bear approaches you should stand your ground, particularly if you have food around/with you. These bears are not conditioned to human food, and we want it to stay that way.