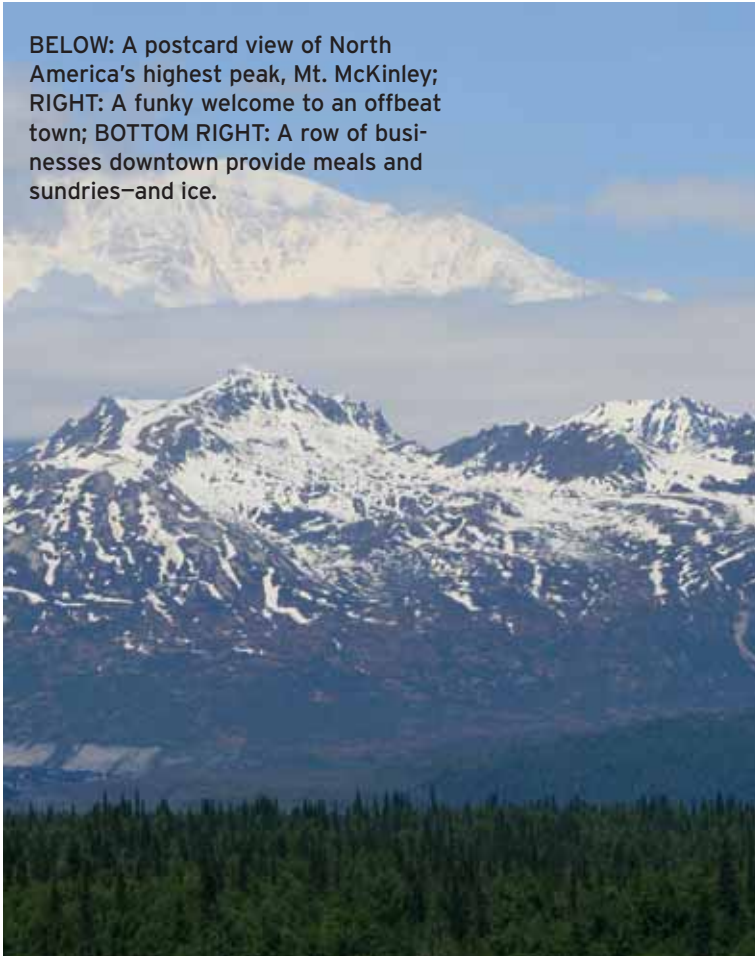


BELOW: A postcard view of North America's highest peak, Mt. McKinley; RIGHT: A funky welcome to an offbeat town; BOTTOM RIGHT: A row of businesses downtown provide meals and sundries—and ice.



Bruce N. Meyer photos

# Fairly Good Odds

From a feline mayor (seriously) to the annual Moose Dropping Festival, all's good—and perhaps a bit odd—in Talkeetna, Alaska.

There's a joke the folks in Alaska like to tell about the likelihood of a woman finding a husband in this state where men once outnumbered the gals 10 to 1: The odds are fairly good, but the goods are fairly odd. *Ba-dum-ching.* Those Alaskans are too much.

When the subject of Talkeetna—a town 150 miles south of Denali National Park—comes up, the odds (pun intended)

go a little higher. “One thing I know is that Talkeetna has some of the oddest folks around,” says Russ Weston, a lifelong Alaskan who lives in nearby Chugiak.

Odd might be an overstatement, but this is surely one quirky little hamlet, and it's been said that Talkeetna was the inspiration behind the 1990s TV show “Northern Exposure.” While the physical similarities to the fictional Cicely are lim-

ited, the TV-show town easily could have borrowed its offbeat personality from the mood here at the base of Mt. McKinley, or simply The Mountain if you're local.

And while Talkeetna certainly has its own flair, I didn't encounter an obvious tick from any of the 772 citizens. Just an appreciation for a special lifestyle—and logs, of course.

# JUST THE FACTS

## Talkeetna, Alaska

**Population:** 772

**Elevation:** 346 feet

**Property tax rate:** A mill tax currently set at \$1,500 per \$100,000

**Price and size of vacant land:** 5 acres with road access, electric and phone: \$50,000; 5 acres with a view of Mt. McKinley: \$100,000

**Price and size of recent typical sale of acreage with house:** 1,334 square feet, 3 bedrooms, 1 bath, 5 acres with road access, no view: \$60,000

**Closest airports:** Talkeetna Airport, Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage

**Closest medical services:** A two-room clinic at Mile 4 of the Talkeetna Spur Road; Valley Hospital in Palmer, about an hour away.



**For more information:** Mat-Su Convention and Visitor's Bureau  
Call 907-746-5000, or visit [www.alaskavisit.com](http://www.alaskavisit.com).

Randy Sweitzer illustration

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West Rib Pub & Cafe is named for the first ascent of McKinley's ridge.

### Rustic Frontier

Many of Talkeetna's businesses operate in the original log structures built by German immigrants in the early 1900s. Talkeetna Roadhouse is the oldest, built in 1914 as

home to a horse freighter for area miners. Horses don't hang around here anymore, but the restaurant does have reindeer on the menu in the form of an R.L.T. (Take a B.L.T. and sub in reindeer meat.)

Next to the town's makeshift welcome sign is the Three German Bachelors' Cabin, circa 1934. The wee building that once kept three German bachelors warm for the long Alaska winters is where native Michele Stevens was born. Now Michele's friend Laura McDonald sells jams here, made from the fresh berries she picks in the woods around her home.

Laura moved up from Iowa in the 1980s, and has taken to moving out a little deeper in the woods every few years to get away from it all. She and Michele admit that locals are wary of newcomers at first, but time is a true test of an individual's place in Talkeetna. "I don't consider your word gold until you've spent at least

one or two winters here," Michele says of her initiation rites. Fair enough, since it takes a hardy soul to withstand the average winter temperature, which ranges from 15 degrees Fahrenheit to five below.

### Northern Exposure

Folks started finding Talkeetna in 1985 when the 14-mile road connecting the town to the George Parks Highway, which leads from Anchorage to Denali, was paved. Later, in 2000, when the Talkeetna Lodge opened, land values doubled, as did visitors to the area.

While winters are rough here, there are many reasons to tough it out. If not for the clear view of The Mountain, then for the sentimentality of the town's famous feline, Stubbs the Cat. He's the official mayor of Talkeetna, whose story is told on the menu of West Rib, a ramshackle bar and grill named for the first ascent of

## MORE GREAT PLACES

### North: Red Wing, Minnesota

A Mississippi River town 50 miles south-east of St. Paul, Red Wing is surrounded by dramatic bluffs that serve as both a migration corridor for bald eagles as well as spectacular day-hike venues. Summer brings tubing (a leisurely bob down the Cannon River on your own inner tube), golf, biking and canoeing. In winter, go cross-country and downhill skiing or snowmobiling, or try your hand at Minnesota's famous ice-fishing. Back in town is back in time: Main Street features authentic buildings circa 1880 that now serve as shops, hotels and restaurants. [www.red-wing.org](http://www.red-wing.org)

### East: Henniker, New Hampshire

The storied history of Henniker includes land disputes with the Massachusetts Bay Colony and French and Indian War unrest. That was then—today this quiet hamlet of 4,500 is as peaceful as it gets. The bucolic beauty of the rolling countryside and the meandering Contoocook River began attracting tourists in the 19th century. Now, kayaking and skiing

have joined scenery as the big draws. Need to get to the city? Concord is just 25 miles away, and Boston about 100. [www.henniker.org](http://www.henniker.org)

### Midwest: Galena, Illinois

Some of the nation's most celebrated architectural styles are lovingly preserved in Galena, including the brick Italianate home local citizen Ulysses S. Grant left when he joined the U.S. Army in 1861. Thundering Ice Age glaciers bypassed the northwest corner of Illinois, leaving intact the region's rolling hills and gentle valleys. The Mississippi River and its backwaters teem with fish, and offer challenging kayaking and canoeing. Along the banks, the hiking is unbeatable. Above it all, bald eagles soar the bluffs, and year-round hot-air balloon tours offer views like none other. [www.galena.org](http://www.galena.org)

### West: Sheridan, Wyoming

Unspoiled, pristine, wild. All apply to north central Wyoming, home of the Bighorn Mountains, where the deer and

the antelope (and moose and elk) play. Sheridan, population 16,000, was recently honored as the Best Western Town in America by *True West* magazine, based on its authentic Western character, heritage, culture and pace of life. You'd expect the rodeos, but the golf, hang gliding, fly fishing and show-shoeing will knock your cowboy boots off. [www.sheridanwyoming.org](http://www.sheridanwyoming.org)

### South: Grenada, Mississippi

Located halfway between Memphis and Jackson, this city of 15,000 is home to Lake Grenada, the largest body of water in Mississippi. The year-round crappie fishing is some of the best in the country, and Grenada has proudly hosted national tournaments. Just north of town is Holly Springs National Forest, with recreation that runs the gamut: deer and turkey hunting, berry picking, birdwatching, hiking and biking. Retirees, take note: Mississippi has no state income tax on retirement income. [www.grenadamississippi.com](http://www.grenadamississippi.com)

—Nancy TeSelle

McKinley's treacherous ridge.

The establishment proudly displays flags and banners from the thousands of climbers who've used Talkeetna as a base camp in preparation for climbing some or all of Mt. McKinley's 20,320 feet.

### Life of Logs

Whether it's the paved road or the progressive efforts of Mayor Stubbs, folks are uncovering this gem of a community, and many want a log home here. Klaus Steigler, a former bush pilot turned real estate broker, helps people with that dream.

"The whole state of Alaska is perfect for log home living," he says. When it comes to settling on a spot, "you can't make a bad choice, but folks seem to be drawn to Talkeetna."

Klaus admits the community has earned superstar status in quirkiness, but it remains a place where time stands still, and people are drawn to that ambiance.

The challenge for most of the semi-retired out-of-staters who come here looking for a summer home is the seasonal construction demands.

Logs are most easily delivered in the winter and hauled over frozen, snow-covered ground. Then there's a wait until the mercury rises, making way for spring "break up," when the ground thaws enough to pour foundations.

Summer temps shoot up to the 70s—sometimes the 80s—and draw in the tourists for the Moose Dropping Festival, an appropriately quirky fundraiser for the Historical Society held each July. The main event is the Moose Drop Dropping, where shellacked and numbered moose droppings are netted, hauled in the air from a helium balloon and then released onto a bull's-eye. Closest and farthest droppings from the target win. Last year, more than 12,000 folks put down their hard-earned money for a pile of moose poop attached to a balloon. Now that's some offbeat living—and a true testament to this one-of-a-kind town. ■

*Diana Lambdin-Meyer is a freelance travel writer based in Parkview, Missouri.*



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