Fairbanks, in Alaska’s vast interior, has much to offer the intrepid explorer whatever the time of year. Managing Editor Mark Nicholls visited its international airport – a vital communications node for the state’s oil and gas industry and the gateway to natural wonders, the Arctic tundra and much more.

The primary direct route to Fairbanks International Airport (FAI) from Seattle takes you over some of the planet’s most spectacular scenery during the three-and-a-half-hour flight. Once there you’ll be greeted by a modern terminal (opened in 2009) and, depending on the time of year, you might even find the sun beaming away at midnight... which is a very curious feeling indeed. Fairbanks is about 120 miles (190km) south of the Arctic Circle and is perfectly placed as a base from which to explore some incredible landscapes, visit a wealth of attractions and at opposite times of the year, to experience 24-hour daylight or the awe-inspiring Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights). Charters bring travellers from around the world to view the natural spectacle during the long winter nights, with visitors from Asia becoming more prevalent. Attractions and activities abound all year round and the city’s airport stands ready to welcome anyone eager to venture north to enjoy them.

History
An airstrip was established at Weeks Field (also called Weeks Ball Park) to serve the growing town, as people began to explore the frozen wilderness to the north - the last frontier. The airstrip gained importance, especially after pioneering pilot Carl Ben Eielson arrived and flew Alaska’s first air mail service in 1924. Most of the region’s GA and commercial traffic remained concentrated at Weeks Field until the early 1950s, although some carriers also used Ladd Air Force Base, now the US Army’s Fort Wainwright. Today what was Weeks Field is a residential area.

To better serve the community, Congressional authorisation was given to develop a new international airport in 1948, 4 miles (6.4km) west of the downtown area. It was finished three years later at which point all commercial flights switched across from Ladd AFB. However, infrastructure and amenities were minimal, leaving airlines to use temporary structures until a passenger terminal opened in 1954.

The airport was run by the federal government until Alaska was granted statehood in 1959, at which point responsibility for FAI was handed over to the state’s Department of Public Works. This was later passed to the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, which remains in control today. A separate GA runway (01-19L) was added in 1971 aligned parallel to the main stretch of tarmac. The Alaska International Airport System (AIAS) was set up in 1961 encompassing FAI and Anchorage International Airport (now Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport) with the intention of making efficient use of both facilities. There is no state funding – revenues and costs are shared by both facilities with local management in charge of day-to-day running, and the setting of landing fees and other charges fall under the jurisdiction of the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

Fairbanks airport’s development has gone hand-in-hand with that of the city and its population. In particular, passenger numbers and cargo volumes soared between 1974 and 1977 while the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System was being built. Two years later international

Signs at the front of the terminal simply point to arrivals and departures; note the ‘Migration’ sculpture in the centre.

Air North Boeing 737-200/200C (G-AGWV (c/n 23122)) arrives on stand at Fairbanks on July 6. The aircraft was ferrying oil and gas industry workers to and from Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay on Alaska’s northern coast. (Key – Mark Nicholls)

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Alaska Airlines is the primary carrier serving FAI, with flights to Anchorage and smaller communities within the state, and to Seattle, Washington. (AirTeamImages.com/Ken Graham Photography)
cargo flights started using FAI for technical fuel stops – Japan Airlines and Korean Airlines being the first. Other carriers followed suit, bringing in large freighters such as the Boeing 747, Douglas DC-8 and McDonnell Douglas DC-10. While this new business was most welcome, it placed a heavy burden on the airport’s infrastructure. The flights stopped in 1984 (moved to the larger facility at Anchorage), but resumed in September 1990 with Lufthansa Cargo.

Terminal
The current passenger terminal, costing $89 million, opened in 2009, replacing the original 1954 structure. Last year it handled almost a million passengers, but it could take up to four times that number. There are six airbridge gates, two for Alaska Airlines, two common-use, one for Delta Air Lines and one for ConocoPhillips’ Alaska oil industry flights. In addition there are two walk-on gates at the northern end of the building used by smaller regional aircraft serving outlying communities.

Landside the terminal is fronted by a large open-air car park, with short- and long-stay options, as well as a rental car area. To simplify drop-off and pick-up signs only indicate ‘arrivals’ and ‘departures’, rather than individual zones for airlines. Alaska Airlines’ check-in is the most central and features self-service kiosks as well as traditional desks; other carrier’s desks are to the left. The arrival hall is clearly shows the four runways: two asphalt, one gravel and one water.

FAIRBANKS

FAI’s terminal makes good use some ‘green’ technologies. For example-ground water is used to cool the terminal during the summer. After the long, cold winter, ground water stays almost at freezing, even in mid-summer. It is piped to a special unit, cooling the air which is then pumped around the building – natural air conditioning.

Infrastructures
Not many airports can handle every type of aircraft, whether it has large wheels (airliners), small wheels (GA), floats or skis, but FAI can. The primary Runway 02L/20R is 11,800ft (3,597m) long and can accommodate any aircraft currently flying, including the giant Antonov An-225, which has visited on occasions. It comprises grooved asphalt and both directions are ILS-equipped and have four-light PAPIs. The northern end of the parallel GA runways is a long thin lake used by floatplanes – the ‘runway’ being marked by a series of red buoys.

Several good-size aprons on the commercial site are displays from a local aviation museum and the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Suspended from the ceiling above one of the two baggage reclaim carousels is Curtiss JN-4D Jenny 47356, which is owned by the University of Alaska Museum of the North based in Fairbanks.

In the passenger terminal, there is a souvenir shop, small cafe and other amenities. At first sight that’s it; however, this terminal was designed to be ‘smart’ and its southern end can be reconfigured to section off parts of both the departure lounge and arrivals hall to handle direct international flights and international transit passengers. Shuttles in the departure lounge can be lowered to seal off at the end of the building, creating up to three separate sections. International travellers can then be screened by immigration, while transit passengers remain segregated. Once through immigration the second landside baggage carousel can also be isolated using drop-down walls in the arrivals hall, permitting the necessary customs inspections. At the press of a button, the walls are raised and the terminal becomes purely domestic again. A novel solution to a common problem smaller airports face when dealing with limited direct international flights.

During the summer the water runway is particularly busy. Privately-owned de Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver N73Q gets airborne.

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Airlines

Air North Canada

Alaska Airlines

Ravn Alaska

Frontier Airlines flew in from its Denver hub between 2009 and 2014, but pulled out during a route consolidation exercise. United Airlines competed on the same route but it too has withdrawn, perhaps surprisingly as it was tucked into a monopoly. However it continues to fly to Chicago O’Hare.

During the summer Condon flies in once a week (Thursdays) from Frankfurt, currently the only direct European connection - the city is also the largest in the US with a non-stop link to Europe. Canada’s Air North flies summer services between Dawson City, Haktan and Fairbanks several times a day using a Boeing 737-200. Winter charters from Asia have not been successful, with only the occasional charter from Japan’s JAL Airlines continuing to fly. At present the carrier is operating a twice-weekly service to Anchorage. It uses a mixed fleet of small aircraft, ranging from 19-seat Beech 1900C-26 and six Bombardier Dash 8-100s to Cessna 207s and 208s and two former Air Circle Air Short 330s that carry cargo. It is also the sole mail supplier to the villages of the North Slope region, and the smaller aircraft in its fleet give vital access to some of the remotest communities in the US. Resident carrier Warbelow’s Air Ventures also links isolated communities, mostly to the north of Fairbanks where many are inaccessible by road. In partnership with the Northern Alaska Tourism Company its aircraft are available for a wide range of mainly summer tours, plus the popular Aurora Borealis and winter adventure trips. Everts Air has to be the most appealing carrier based at FAI for anyone interested in aviation. It is actually two companies – Everts Air Cargo hauls freight to remote airports across the state, while Everts Air Fuel specialises in transporting largely petrol-based flammable and hazardous materials. Everts is Federal Aviation Regulations Part 121-certified, permitting it to provide domestic, flag, and supplemental services. The cargo arm flies mostly Douglas DC-6s along with Embraer EMB-120s, Cessna 208s, McDonnell Douglas DC-3s and B17s, and of course a Curtis C-46 Commando. A further three C-46s, four DC-6s and two Air Tractor AT-802s are used by Everts Air Fuel, aircraft, engine and APU manufacturers occasionally bring their latest products to Fai for low temperature testing during the depths of the Alaskan winter.

General Aviation

Driving along the GA apron is akin to being at Oshkosh, with vast numbers of small types neatly lined up including what must be one of the largest concentrations of Piper Cubs and Super Cubs on the planet. The eastern side of the float Pond has dozens of moorings for floatplanes. Numerous small businesses and air carriers work from the eastern side of the airport, with easy access by the Old Airport Road that borders the GA area. Hangars, workshops and other ancillary buildings are often surrounded by dozens of aircraft, many stored or up for sale, alongside others on long-term maintenance. Near the control tower a North American T-6 Texan is available for warbird rides and a short distance away the Northern Alaska Tour Company has a check-in for its various tours. Similarly, Warbelow’s Air Ventures is just along the adjacent taxiway. In the northeast corner of the airfield, off the Charlie taxiway, is an unusual find – an air-camping park designed specifically for GA visitors. It is equipped with two barbecue pits, showers, toilets and covered gazebos and this wooded area serves as a gateway to those 15 ‘clocks’ either side of a gravel taxiway in which to park aircraft, allowing visitors to set up camp under the wings of their planes. Visitors can park for $10 per day.

Nearby is the University of Alaska Fairbanks Community and Technical College aviation maintenance technology hangar: It boasts one of the few 12-month FAA-certified, Part-147 school programmes in the US, an associate’s degree in aviation maintenance, and certificates in airframe, powerplant, or airframe and powerplant.

Prospects

Fairbanks and the North Star Borough in which it sits, has approximately 100,000 inhabitants so origin and destination traffic is fairly light. Tourists make up most of the passenger traffic, while business travellers and those employed in the oil and gas industries account for the remainder. Yet FAI is within nine-and-a-half hours’ flying time of 90% of the northern industrialised hemisphere and Europe is barely eight hours away by a direct polar flight. It is why Anchorage-based Ravn Alaska welcomes dozens of cargo aircraft every day for technical stops, which Fai can also accommodate. Thanks to so many tourist attractions, outdoor recreation and superb wildlife on the doorstep, accompanied by a plethora of man-made sights, there is enormous potential for increased passenger traffic. Seven hotels are within a mile radius of the airport, several beside the Chena River which borders the western side of the facility. They provide a convenient base from which to explore the city and surrounding area with excellent road links to the city centre, barely 15 minutes away. For airplanes considering new routes, the airport is an attractive option. Delays are often inevitable as up to 4% of Fai’s runway is taken up by parking aircraft for maintenance, and certificates in airframe, powerplant, or airframe and powerplant.

Acknowledgements

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Fairbanks

Of all the cities I’ve visited over the years, Fairbanks, Alaska, has been by far the most surprising. It is not a place you often read about, giving the impression there is not much to see or do - but nothing could be further from the truth. It has a wealth of fascinating attractions and is surrounded by the vast Alaskan interior, with swathes of pine forests, mountains, rivers and lakes all waiting to be explored.

It celebrates the indigenous Indian population and promotes a ‘can do’ attitude – essential in America’s largest and most challenging state.

I say challenging because of the climate. Fairbanks is barely 120 miles (190km) south of the Arctic Circle and being so far north makes for short summers and long cold winters. And unlike cold - the average winter temperature is -26°C to -32°C the record is -50°C set in 1954 - yet in summer it is usually between 10°C and 20°C. The long winter effectively starts in September when the first snow usually falls, and lasts until May, leaving just three short summer months.

Fairbanks lies in the Tanana Valley on the Chena River. This means cold air often becomes trapped over the city in winter, and ice fog can form. But generally it is a dry cold, with little moisture, so in the same way the dry heat of Arizona makes the temperature more bearable, so the cold is less noticeable than it would be in a dry cold, with little moisture; so in the same way the dry heat of Arizona makes the temperature more bearable, so the cold is less noticeable than it would be in a dry cold, with little moisture.

Compensating for the cold are the spectacular displays of the aurora borealis, or the light show is directly overhead. A short walk along the river bank brings you to the Golden Dredge 8 attraction near Fox, just north of Fairbanks. (Shannon Negus/Explore Fairbanks)

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the well-known branded hotels, bars and restaurants found in the rest of the US. Local business proliferates, with dozens of cafes and restaurants unique to the area - including the Cookie Jar Restaurant, Sam’s Sourdough Cafe, the Pump House, LuLu’s Breads & Bagels and the Silver Gulch Brewing and Bottling Company, to name just a few.

The same is true for accommodation, with plenty of independents providing a wide range of rooms to suit all pockets. I can certainly recommend Sophie Station Suites for cleanliness, polite service and a good, quiet restaurant.

Two of the best local attractions are the Riverboat Discovery tours and the Gold Dredge 8, which tells the story of Alaskan gold prospecting. Travelling down a river on a large American riverboat is an entirely relaxing experience, but extras are thrown in, such as a Piper Cub floatplane taking off and landing right beside you, a stop beside the kennels of the late Iditarod Champion Susan Butcher to see her sled dogs in action, and then mooring to explore an Athabascan Indian village.

Here the boat’s passengers are split in to three groups and escorted around three displays where Indian boys and girls (part of the boat crew) give short but informative lectures about frontier living and survival. An absolutely fascinating experience and well worth the trip.

You can strike it rich at the Gold Dredge 8, as you get the chance to pan for gold during the tour (even I found $35 worth!). A narrow-gauge railway takes you past several dioramas showing the evolution of gold prospecting before arriving at the main site dominated by the rusting hulk of the old Gold Dredge 8 machine. A museum section details the history of the site and Alaskan prospecting while a US$75,000 gold nugget that was found at the site is on display at the jewellery shop inside the main building.

If you want to be more adventurous, take one of the Northern Alaska Tour Company’s packages. There are several options, including fly-drive and fly-fly, which start from the firm’s small terminal on the GA side of the airport. You venture north to Coldfoot on the Dalton Highway, made famous by the Ice Road Truckers TV series. The fly-drive involves a long coach trip up the Dalton to Coldfoot and then a flight back, or vice-versa.

I took the fly-fly option, which gives a great idea of the vastness of Alaska as well as providing some spectacular views of the mountains, forests, rivers and lakes. If you’re sitting at the front of the Piper PA-31 you can watch the GPS readout reach 66° 33’ 00” north as you cross the Arctic Circle.

Once in Coldfoot, a minibus takes you to the tiny village of Wiseman (population 13), where resident Jack Reakoff gives an enthralling talk about, survival, hunting, basic living and life in terrifying low temperatures. It’s then back to the Coldfoot truck stop and chance for a bite to eat in the famous truckers’ cafe before heading across the Dalton to the small airfield and the 70-minute flight back to Fairbanks. Thoroughly recommended!

If time permits then a trip to the Denali National Park should certainly be considered (a two-hour drive). The park is home to Mount McKinley, America’s highest peak, pristine rivers, and, of course, plenty of wildlife, including grizzly bears, wolves and caribou.

If you want to see the Northern Lights, then you must go in winter, but otherwise summer is the best time to visit as you can use the 24-hour daylight to best advantage. You will never be short of things to do, so if you want a truly unique experience, then I can wholeheartedly recommend a week or two in Fairbanks.

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