



The Best Way to Spend 3 Days in Denali National Park...On A Budget!

Overview

Denali National Park is UNREAL and deserves to be added to your Alaska bucket list! I spent 3 days and 2 nights exploring the depths of and camping inside the incredible Denali in July 2022. And I can honestly say that this park is unlike any other national park I've visited. Measuring 6 million acres, Denali is an incredible place to experience true solitude and admire the most resilient wildlife and vegetation in the world. And if you're truly lucky, you might catch a glimpse of Denali itself, North America's tallest peak.

If you're ready to plan your Alaska trip, check out this epic Denali National Park itinerary if you're looking for things to do in 2 or 3 days. It's packed with my **insider travel tips and how to spend 3 days in Denali** for an epic national park vacation!

Day 1: Explore & Hike Around the Denali Visitor Center

To protect Denali's wildlife and resources and preserve the park's untouched solitude, you'll find only a single road to travel on. Along Denali Park Road, [private vehicles are only allowed to drive the first 15 miles](#) (from the Denali Visitor Center to the Savage River area). Beyond Mile 15, you'll need to ride the Denali transit bus, hike, or bike to explore deeper into the park.

Take advantage of your first day in Denali by exploring the top sights along the first 15 miles of the park, including the family-friendly hikes by the Denali Visitor Center.

Stop 1 - Denali Visitor Center Exhibits

No matter what national park I'm visiting, my first stop is always the visitor center so I can get all the hiking trail maps and park ranger recommendations to make the most of my trip.

Not only does the Denali Visitor Center have a ton of trip planning resources, like hiking trail maps and suggested Denali itineraries, but it has one of the most impressive and interactive exhibits I've ever experienced. Stroll through and interact with the cultural and wildlife exhibits to fully immerse yourself in **Denali history, Alaskan native culture, and wildlife resiliency**.

Stop 2 - Hike to the Suspension bridge

Denali has several hiking trails for all activity levels, many of them being family-friendly and perfect if you're traveling with kids! There are a whopping 8 hiking trails that start right at the Denali Visitor Center.

My dad, brother, and I decided to do a short, easy hike by the visitor center before heading to our campsite to set up camp. We did the Suspension Bridge Hike (about 1.8 miles roundtrip, easy) by following the McKinley Station Trail towards the Triple Lakes Trail. This is an easy and exciting Denali hike to do with kids along a well-maintained path.

Along the hike to the suspension bridge, enjoy views and therapeutic sounds of the rushing Hines Creek and Riley Creek. Make sure to listen for the Denali train and you might catch a view of it crossing Riley Creek in the distance!

Stop 3 - Purchase bus tickets at the Denali Bus Depot

Since I planned to explore deeper in Denali National Park (past Mile 15) along Denali Park Road on day 2 of my Denali trip, I headed to the Denali Bus Depot to pick up my Denali transit bus tickets.

Although I made advanced reservations online to ride the Denali transit bus (\$30 per person), don't worry if you showed up at the park without bus reservations. You can purchase Denali transit bus tickets in person at the Denali Bus Depot. Learn about how to ride the bus and places to see along the drive.

Day 2: Ride the Denali Bus, Visit Sled Dogs, & Stroll Glitter Gulch

Stop 1 - Ride the Denali Transit Bus

To explore the magic of Denali's landscape and wildlife in its purest form, I booked a Denali transit bus (non-narrated) ticket to experience the park past Mile 15 (private vehicles are not allowed to drive past this point).

As the bus winded through the narrow Denali Park Road, I sat by the window and soaked in the rugged and untouched landscape that makes Denali so magical. I kept my eyes peeled and binoculars ready for bears, Dall sheep, moose, and other Denali wildlife! Bus drivers will frequently pull to the side for wildlife viewing for bus passengers to admire together. Talk about poor timing, but apparently, my bus had just seen a **mama moose and her baby** in the meadows just before I hopped on the bus!

At the time of my trip, Denali Park Road was closed at Mile 43 through the summer of 2023 due to destruction from the Pretty Rocks Landslide at Mile 45. Denali buses can only go as far as Mile 43, which took about **two hours** to get to from the Savage River area (Mile 15). Although the buses turn around to head back towards the visitor center, hop out at this point to intimately explore the East Fork Toklat River. Hike by the river and admire the panoramic views of the mountain passes in the distance.

*Note: although I booked the cheaper bus (non-narrated Denali transit bus), our driver did an excellent job in providing Denali's history and wildlife knowledge during the ride. If you prefer

detailed narration and a tour experience, book one of the Denali tour buses. Check out my [ultimate Denali trip planning guide](#) to learn the difference between the two Denali bus types and choose the right one for you.

Stop 2 - Hike to the Pretty Rocks Landslide & Polychrome Mountain

Viewpoint

Although the Denali bus can't currently go past Mile 43 due to the road destruction from the Pretty Rocks Landslide, it doesn't mean YOU can't!

Get off the Denali bus at Mile 43 to see the aftermath of the landslide and indulge in the best views of the most colorful part of the park, Polychrome Mountain. This is a moderate 2-mile hike (each way) on a gradually inclining, gravel road that's great to do with kids and families. The hike itself is beautiful, with tons of vivid fire weed lighting up the trail and breathtaking panoramic views of the different mountain ranges that make up Denali.

Make sure to keep your eyes and ears open for wildlife! Look up the mountains to see if you can spot grizzly bears or Dall sheep. And search in the meadows to see if you can find any marmots!

Once you get to the Pretty Rocks landslide road closure at Mile 45, you'll be reminded of Mother Nature's true power and beauty. Although the landslide is an example of the unrelenting force of nature, the mesmerizing and vivid swirls of Polychrome Mountain puts nature's softer, artistic side on display.

At the sight of Polychrome Mountain, how was I going to say no to those lunch views? I decided to enjoy my packed lunch before heading back to Mile 43 to catch the Denali bus to the Visitor Center.

Stop 3 - Visit the Denali Sled Dog Kennel

Visiting the sled dogs was one of the most entertaining things I did in Denali and is a must-see if you're looking for things to do in Denali with kids!

As the only national park with a sled dog kennel, Denali continues to celebrate the spirit and importance of sled dogs in the park. Since 1922, Denali National Park rangers and sled dogs have worked together to help serve and protect the area. Although sled dogs were once used for transportation and patrolling poachers, they are now integral parts of Denali winter patrols, search and rescue, and supply transportation.

During summer, you can walk through the kennels and personally meet (and pet) all of Denali's sled dogs. When I visited, their new litter of sled dogs was just 3-weeks old!

And if you're interested in learning more about dog mushing and the importance the sled dogs are to protecting Denali, check out the **FREE** sled dog demonstrations, offered [three times a day](#).

If you don't have a car, you can ride the free Denali shuttle from the visitor center to get to the sled dog kennels.

If you're looking for a **free, family-friendly** thing to do in Denali, go meet the Denali sled dogs at the kennels!

Stop 4 - Stroll through Glitter Gulch

If you've still got some energy after your full day of exploring, check out the small town right outside the Denali National Park entrance, known as Glitter Gulch. Here, you'll find several gift shops, hotels, and places to eat.

Day 3: Hike the Savage River Area

Stop 1 - Hike Savage River Loop

Hiking the Savage River Loop was one of the highlights of my Denali trip and is highly recommended for anybody looking for a shorter, family-friendly Denali hike!

Located at Mile 15, the Savage River Loop is a moderate, flat 2-mile (roundtrip) hike along a well-maintained trail along the tranquil Savage River. This day hike is flat and is easy to do with kids.

Along the Savage River Loop, you're surrounded by Denali nature and wildlife! The trail is brought to life by the vivid, unique Alaskan wildflowers and the rushing sounds of Savage River. Make sure to look on top of the cliffs around you for bears, Dall sheep, and other wildlife!

By the Savage River Loop trailhead are picnic tables by the river, where we finished off our last Denali lunch sandwiches of the trip. We also stopped by the small ranger table before heading out to learn about the different wildlife in the area...the ranger even let me wear a grizzly bear pelt (ok...THAT was my favorite memory from Denali)!

If you don't have a car, you can ride the free Denali shuttle with the sign that says "Savage River". Parking is extremely limited, so I'd recommend you ride the shuttle if you are hiking during peak times.

*Note: Before hiking the Savage River Loop, make sure you're familiar with [wildlife safety and how to protect yourself](#) since the Savage River Area is known to have a lot of grizzly bear activity.

Stop 2 - Shop for Denali Souvenirs

Before leaving Denali, make sure to pick up a few souvenirs at one of the park stores. You'll be able to find a wide array of gifts and souvenirs at the Alaska Geographic Park Store (next to the visitor center). The small gift shop at the Bus Depot also had a selection of shirts, mugs, and other small gifts.

Denali Trip Planning Guides

- [The Ultimate Travel Guide for an Epic Denali National Park Adventure](#) - For everything you need to know about Denali before you go, how to get around, where to stay, what to pack, and travel tips

Is Denali National Park on YOUR Alaska bucket list?