



## *Finding a Seasonal Job on Alaska's Waters:*

### *Fishing Guide, Charter Boat Operator, Kayaking Guide, Rafting Guide, or Crew Member*

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Each year thousands of young people find rewarding seasonal jobs in Alaska's outdoor recreation and tourism industry, working on or around the water as fishing guides, charter boat crewmembers, tour boat crewmembers, shore boat operators, kayaking and rafting guides, and in related occupations concerned with booking, housekeeping, food service, and logistics.

It can be a great life, in the outdoors, on the water, handling boats and equipment, landing big fish and seeing amazing wildlife. And surprisingly, business owners often have difficulty filling those jobs with qualified workers. There are three important reasons that these jobs often are hard to fill:

1. The jobs tend not to pay very much, although gratuities (tips) often raise the income total.
2. The jobs tend to involve tedious hard work and long hours. They exist to provide services to paying guests, not to provide entertainment for the employees.
3. Many applicants simply don't meet the requirements.

This publication can help you decide what kind of job you want to apply for, help you assess your qualifications, and offer advice on finding the job that's the right fit for you.

### **Decide What Kind of Job You Want**

Your job search will be much easier if you narrow it down to the kind of job you want. Here are some factors to consider:

- Open sea, sheltered waters, inland, or on shore? If you get seasick, sheltered waters or freshwater lakes and rivers might be a better choice than a deep-sea charter fishing boat.
- Is your interest in fishing, or are you more attracted to wildlife viewing, whitewater, or other elements of ecotourism?
- Day trips or expeditions? Most charter and tour boats go out just for the day, but many fishing, kayaking, and rafting guides go out for days or weeks at a time or spend the season at a remote lodge. Creature comforts may be limited and opportunities for social life may be curtailed.

- Work onboard a boat, or ashore in service or support work? Many great jobs in beautiful settings involve making bookings, cooking, housekeeping, or providing other services. High-end fishing lodges employ chefs, mechanics, drivers, and even masseuses.

## **Do a Realistic Evaluation of Your Motivations, Skills, and Qualifications**

Recreation and tourism industry positions are service jobs. The task of a fishing guide is not to catch fish; it's to help paying clients have fun catching fish. All of these jobs require cheerful, tireless service to clients.

If you don't think you're a "people person" you might find a more rewarding job outside the tourism industry, perhaps with a research and management agency like the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or on a commercial fishing vessel.

Employers are only interested in what you can do for them and their clients, not in providing you a good time. If your motivation in going after a job is that you want to do a lot of fishing, or to "see Alaska," an employer may not be interested.

Be realistic about your own knowledge and experience. Interest in fishing, for example, is not the same thing as guiding experience. Recreational fishing and boating experience may bolster your application, but don't confuse them with professional guiding or deckhand experience.

In the bigger companies it is possible to return year after year and advance in responsibility. Management experience in a tourism business can lead to other management jobs or can lead to a career within the industry and even with the same company.

## **Make a Professional Resume**

Once you decide on the specific job or class of jobs you want, write up a professional resume as you would for any other kind of job. Most employers require it, and even those who don't will give you more favorable consideration.

Make the resume specific to the job you want. Be brief, factual, and to the point. Focus on relevant education and experience. Be sure to mention any first aid training or other skills you have. Skip hobbies and interests unless they are directly pertinent, but include any participation in active sports or service activities.

Make it neat and use spell-check, or have a good writer proofread it. Consider including a photo (without sunglasses) if you think it will help your chances.

Include either three letters of reference or the names (with addresses and numbers) of three individuals the prospective employers can contact for personal and professional references.

## **Look in All the Right Places**

Many great jobs are listed in tourism industry job Web sites, such as <http://www.coolworks.com/>, <http://www.seasonaljobs.com/>, and <http://www.alaskatourismjobs.com/home.html>.

Outdoor and recreation magazines sometimes carry job listings. The *Anchorage Daily News* carries an outdoor jobs listing special section each spring.

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Industry trade groups like the Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association (AWRTA) and the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) provide job listing referrals for their members. Local chambers of commerce often list jobs for their members as well. The University of Alaska Fairbanks holds a tourism job fair every year in January. The Alaska Department of Labor's Job Center Network lists jobs for tourism businesses statewide.

Hiring for certain jobs, such as crew on large tour boats and "small ship" adventure cruises, is done in Seattle or some other port of origin rather than in Alaska.

The traditional way of finding a job onboard a boat is "dock stomping" or going boat-to-boat and office-to-office asking owners directly for employment. It still can be effective if you find yourself on site at the right time.

Remember, apply early. Hiring normally begins shortly after the first of the year and most of the desirable jobs with reputable companies are filled by about the end of February. If you miss the first round of hiring, however, don't give up hope. Peoples' plans change and sometimes a great chance comes up at the last minute.

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## General Tips

- Get a copy of the employer's employment standards, if available, and ensure that you can meet them.
- Many jobs have a minimum age of 21, and most require at least age 18 or 19.
- U.S. citizenship or permanent resident status is required in most cases. Some employers will accept applicants with a J-1 Cultural Exchange or F-1 Practical Training visa.
- Some companies offer student internships to students.
- All prohibit use of restricted drugs, and most require pre-employment and random drug tests.
- Most prohibit alcohol, or strictly limit it to specific off-duty times.
- Most prohibit smoking, or limit it to outdoor locations when clients are not present.
- Most prohibit profanity, obscene speech, and loud or annoying talk in the presence of clients. Personal political and religious opinions generally are not welcome.
- Most have dress and grooming codes that address matters such as:
  - Uniforms or clean and neat specified clothing items.
  - Neatly trimmed hair and good personal hygiene.
- Employees may be required to provide their own good quality boots, raingear, and field clothing. They also may have to buy a fishing license.
- Jobs that involve transporting passengers in motor vehicles require an Alaska commercial driver's license.
- Some employers require employees to get a physical exam prior to hiring.
- Many employers require their workers to commit to a full season, which may be as much as five full months.

## For Fishing Guide Jobs

In most cases, guides must know fly and spinning tackle, lures, and techniques.

Guides should be able to do minor tackle repair in the field.

A guide should be able to teach or coach guests in casting and playing fish.

Guides must know how to “read the water” and know where fish lie.

In most cases guides need experience running skiffs with outboards and/or jet boats.

Guides must have at least a current first aid/CPR card.

Pre-employment drug screening may be required.

Some guides have to be competent with firearms, especially shotguns for bear protection.

Some employers require at least a Coast Guard Limited Scope (Western Rivers) license.

All fishing guides need an Alaska sport fishing guide registration.

## For Fishing, Wildlife Viewing, and Water Taxi Charter Boat Operators

All need at least an appropriate Coast Guard OUPV (Operator Uninspected Passenger Vessel) license, a Master license for inspected vessels, and, depending on area of operation, may need a Near Coastal or Ocean endorsement.

Experience fishing for Alaska halibut and/or salmon is usually expected.

Most operators must be able to do routine maintenance and minor vessel and engine repairs.

Operators may be expected to commission the boat at the start of the season and decommission or “put her away” at the end of the season.

Increasingly, boat operators are expected to have some knowledge of local birds and wildlife.

Operators are required to have pre-employment drug screening and to be enrolled in a random drug-testing program.

An operator must be registered as a sport fishing guide and maintain an ADFG saltwater logbook if the passengers do any recreational fishing.

## For Mates and Deckhands

Mates and deckhands should know angling tackle.

Mates and deckhands should know how to catch Alaska salmon and/or halibut.

Mates and deckhands must know safety procedures on the boat, to be trained by the captain.

Mates and deckhands may be expected to clean and/or filet and bag the catch.

Thoroughly cleaning the boat will be a daily expectation.

Mates and deckhands need a state sport fishing license.

All crew members must be pleasant and congenial.

## For Kayaking and Rafting Guides

Guides must have documented extensive experience in the sport.

Guides need at least basic first aid/CPR card, and in many cases Wilderness First Responder or some other higher-level first aid training is required. Certification must be current.

Some employers favor guides with National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) or university wilderness leadership certification.

Guides usually are expected to have extensive local natural history knowledge.

## For Tour Boat and Small Ship Crew Members

First aid/CPR certification is required.

Safety and emergency procedures knowledge is essential (provided by the company).

Local geography, natural history, and cultural history knowledge usually is required.

Fluency in a foreign language is an attractive plus.

## Follow Application Instructions Closely

Adhere to the employer application deadlines. Tardy application implies lax work habits.

Send complete applications only, and include all requested materials. Don't assume that an employer will hold a partial application and match it up with certificates, references, or other correspondence later.

Be persistent. Call or write the employer periodically until you get a final answer, just to provide reassurance that you are still interested, and to keep your name in the employer's mind. Be tactful, of course, and considerate of the employer's valuable time.

## Compensation

Pay varies widely from one employer to the next, and may take into account factors such as room and board, clothing and equipment, transportation to and from the site, and season-end bonuses. In some operations food service, housekeeping, and other workers participate in pooled gratuities programs to augment their pay. At high-end lodges tips can equal total wages for the season. Some companies offer higher pay with succeeding seasons with the company.

### Typical pay ranges (exclusive of gratuities) for specific jobs

Sport fishing guide	\$1,500-2,400/month.
Charter boat operator	A percentage of the gross, or a wage of up to \$5,000/month.
Mate/deckhand	\$100-125/day plus tips.
Rafting guide	\$1,500/month or \$200/day, plus tips.
Shore crews	\$8/hr.-\$1,500/month (sometimes plus room and board).
Shore operations supervisors	\$2,000/month.
Cook, housekeeper	\$7.15-10.00/hr., \$1,200-1,500/month, up to \$2,600/month.

*Under federal law, people who operate motor-driven boats that carry passengers for hire on the navigable waters of the United States must be licensed by the Coast Guard.*

## About Coast Guard "Six Pack" and Master Licenses

Under federal law, people who operate motor-driven boats that carry passengers for hire on the navigable waters of the United States must be licensed by the Coast Guard. "Passengers for hire" includes guided anglers, whether they hire the guide directly or are on a fishing outing provided by a lodge. "Navigable waters" include all tidal waters, all the major rivers, and some lakes and smaller rivers, as designated by the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard issues various classes of licenses, specific to the area of operation, number of passengers, and design of the vessel. The OUPV (Operator Uninspected Passenger Vessel) or "six pack" license is carried by many fishing guides and small charter boat and water taxi operators. The holder is limited to carrying no more than six passengers at a time, with some exceptions. The Master license is valid on vessels that meet certain Coast Guard design and maintenance standards, and those vessels may be certified to carry more than six people. Both licenses are issued with Inland or Near Coastal endorsements that restrict the operator to carrying passengers only within certain geographical limitations. In addition, in Alaska the Coast Guard issues a special Limited Scope (Western Rivers) OUPV license valid only on specific rivers and lakes. In other words, a

guide who wants to carry clients on, for example, the Kenai or Yukon rivers can get a license specific to that activity without meeting all of the criteria for a more general Inland or Near Coastal endorsement.

For any Coast Guard license an applicant must meet certain basic requirements, plus specific experience requirements for the endorsement sought. Basic requirements include:

- Age at least 21 (18 for Western Rivers).
- Birth certificate or proof of citizenship (citizenship not required for OUPV).
- Recent physical, vision, and hearing exam, and drug test.
- Proof of currently valid first aid/CPR certification.
- Original Social Security card.
- Clean criminal and motor vehicle record.
- Payment of fees (currently \$190-240 depending on license).
- At least 360 days of certifiable sea service (90 for Western Rivers) including 90 days within the last three years (30 days for Western Rivers), and greater numbers of days for higher level endorsements. Endorsement issued depends on the location, number of days, and size of vessel on which sea service (operating experience) was obtained.
- A passing score on a written test issued for the particular license sought.

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In other words, not everyone can qualify for a Coast Guard license, and those who can have to put some real effort into getting it. The tests for most licenses are fairly difficult and require intense study or taking a course. Short courses for the Western Rivers license are sometimes available through training institutions and can be completed in as little as three or four days. Courses for the other licenses require at least two weeks to complete.

The onus is on the applicant to provide documentation of sea service time, so if you think you may want to apply for a license, start right away collecting documentation from owners or skippers of boats you've worked on, and document your own time on your own boat if you have one. Check with the Coast Guard for details on documenting sea service time.

To operate a sport fishing guide boat, charter boat, or water taxi additional state and federal requirements are in place, including registration in a drug testing program, vessel registration, required safety equipment, ADFG sport fishing guide registration, a business license, etc. A Coast Guard license is the first, but not the only, step in preparing to operate your own business.

## For More Information

For more detailed information on finding a job in Alaska's marine recreation and tourism industry, contact the following sources:

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Alaska Job Center Network offices throughout the state:  
Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development  
<http://www.jobs.state.ak.us/offices/index.html>

Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association  
2207 Spenard Rd. #201  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
(907) 258-3171  
info@awrta.org [www.awrta.org](http://www.awrta.org)

Alaska Travel Industry Association  
2600 Cordova St. #201  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
(907) 929-2842  
atia@alaskatia.org  
<http://www.alaskatia.org>

U.S. Coast Guard Regional Exam Center  
510 L St.  
Anchorage, AK 99501  
(907) 271-6735  
rec@cgalaska.uscg.mil

For field guides to Alaska marine mammals, flatfishes, and rockfishes, and brochures on halibut, rockfishes, and other publications about Alaska's marine resources, visit the Alaska Sea Grant bookstore at [www.uaf.edu/seagrant](http://www.uaf.edu/seagrant).

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