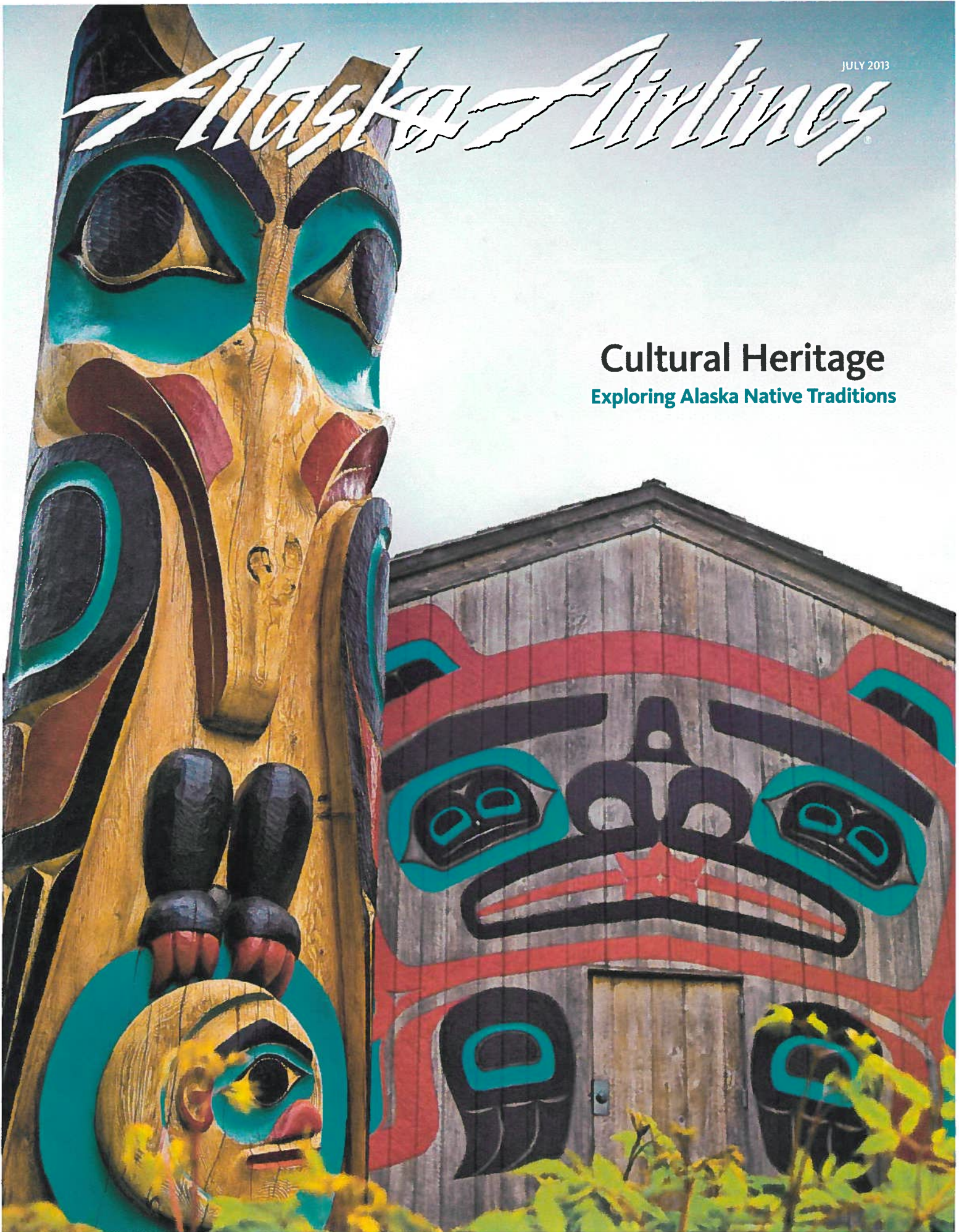


*Alaska Airlines*

JULY 2013

## Cultural Heritage

Exploring Alaska Native Traditions



Last March in Berlin, Camille Ferguson got a firsthand look at Europeans' fascination with Native American culture. The booth she was working at ITB Berlin, one of the world's biggest travel trade shows, was bustling with Native dancers representing six of the nation's more than 500 American Indian tribes. An international crowd gathered to watch them, and the U.S. ambassador, Philip Murphy, even stopped by to join a dance.

The German fascination with the Wild West—which includes clubs, reenactment societies and specialty magazines—is often traced to the novels of 19th century author Karl May. A popular German author virtually unknown in the United States, May depicted Indians as tragic, vanishing peoples—but such myths and misunderstandings aren't limited to any one nation.

# CULTURAL CONNECTION

## LOCAL TOURISM SPOTLIGHTS ALASKA NATIVE HERITAGE

By Andromeda Romano-Lax

One of Ferguson's jobs as the new executive director of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, based in Albuquerque, is to spread the word that there's more to Native culture than the old "cowboys and Indians" stereotypes of old-fashioned novels and John Wayne movies. "They're more than just a story," Ferguson says. "The cultures are very alive, and they're all across America. Native people are different everywhere you go: the dialects, the dances, the food, the art and the overall way of life."

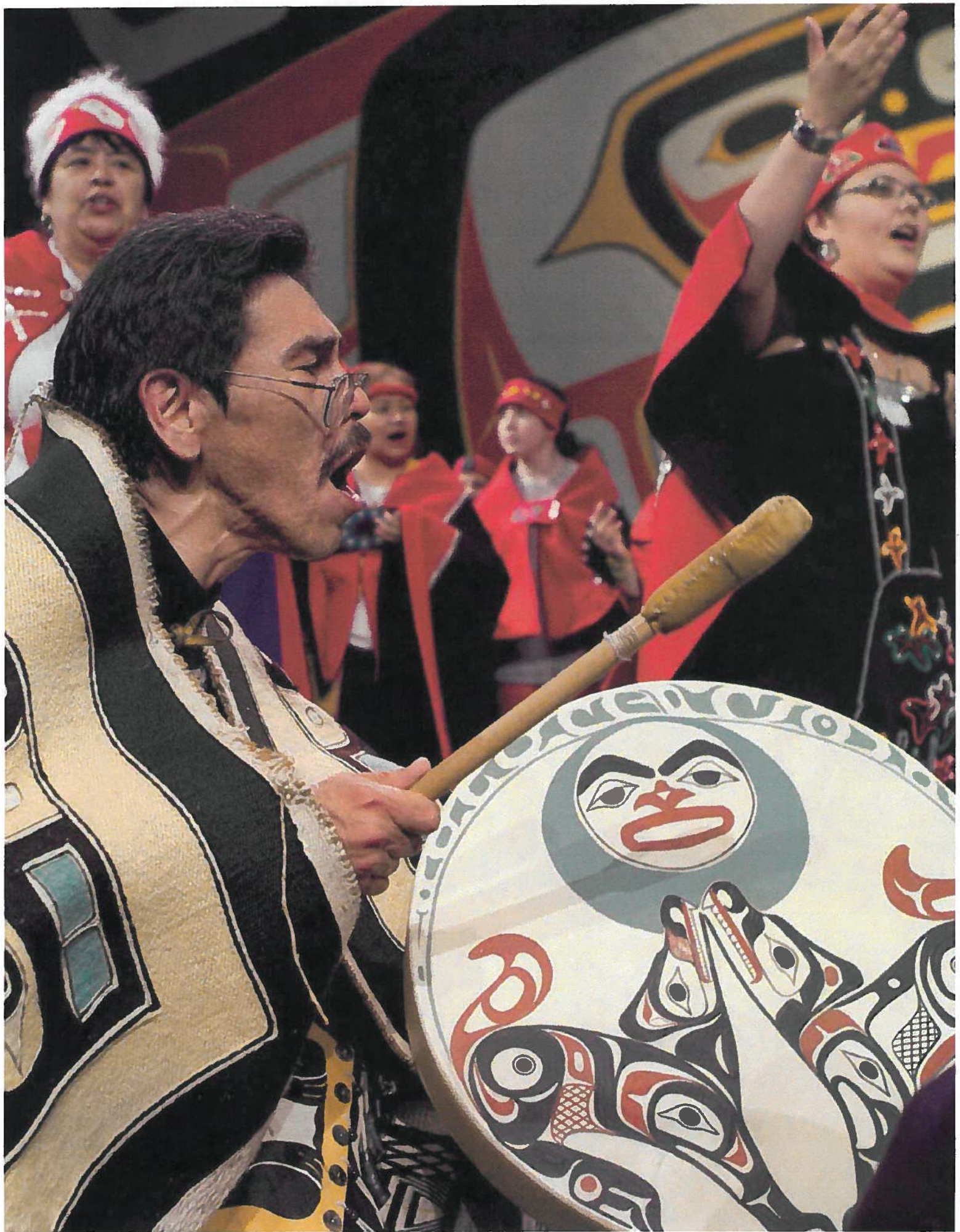
Hailing from Alaska herself, Ferguson is well aware that within the 49th state alone, the diversity is tremendous: from the Tlingit of rain-forested Southeast Alaska to the Iñupiat of the Arctic far north, to the Haida, Eyak, Aleut, Alutiiq and Athabascan peoples—and more. Alaska Natives and American Indians make up almost 15 percent of the state's population, more than 10 times the national percentage.

Long the subject of visitor attention, Alaska Natives have taken the lead in promoting even greater interest in their cultures, arts and everyday lifestyles. Ferguson is a perfect example: A Tlingit Native from the Kiksadi Clan, she has worked in tourism for 26 years, driving a tour bus, managing a native-owned hotel and serving as economic development director for the Sitka Tribe. She recalls the days when Native people listened to non-Natives telling stories about indigenous cultures; now, Ferguson says, American Indians and Alaska

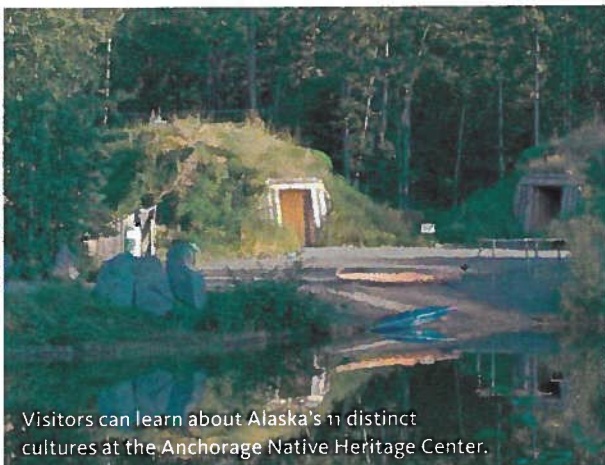
The Xudzidaa Kwáan Dancers of Angoon, from Southeast Alaska, perform during the Celebration native cultural event in Juneau in 2012.



BRIAN WALLACE, COURTESY: SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE



COURTESY: ALASKA NATIVE HERITAGE CENTER



Visitors can learn about Alaska's 11 distinct cultures at the Anchorage Native Heritage Center.

Natives “have learned they want to tell their own stories” in a way that is in tune with the cultural heritage, so these stories can be “shared without sacrificing the authenticity or integrity of people.”

And visitors, in turn, want to hear stories about Alaska life from the people who are actually living it. They want not just information, but interaction.

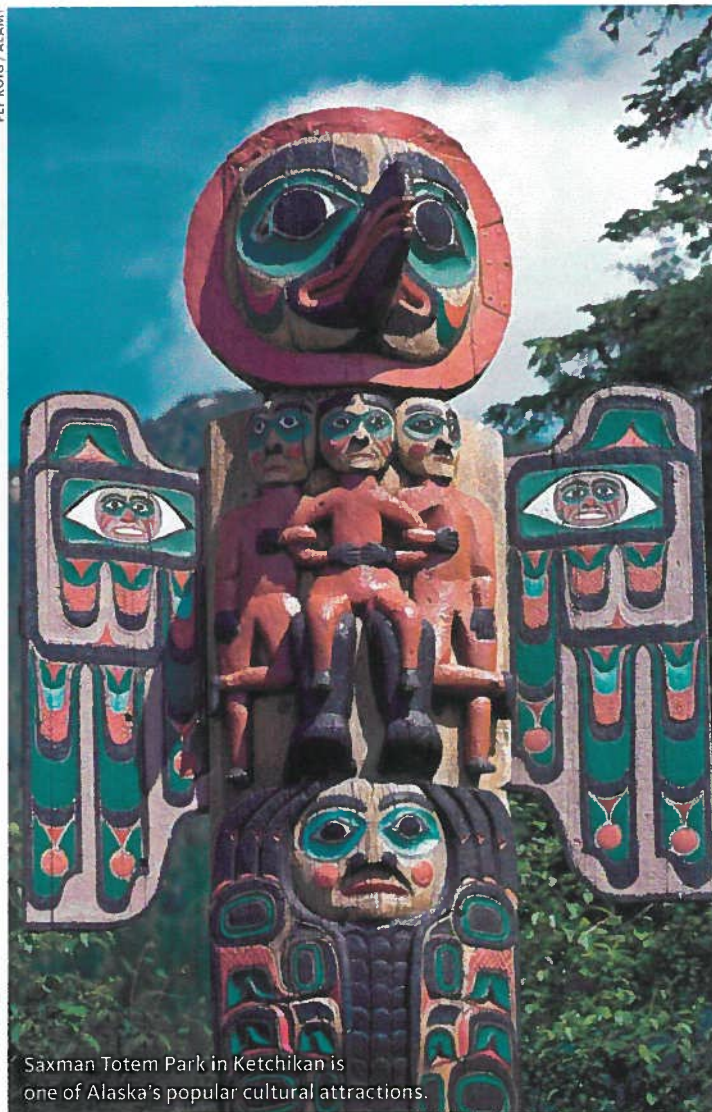
“They want to see the people,” Ferguson says. “They want to experience what it’s like to be a Native American. They want to watch the dance shows and participate. They want to taste traditional foods and learn about edible plants.”

In Anchorage, the culture-curious are likely to visit the Alaska Native Heritage Center, a central gathering place for the state’s 11 distinct cultures. In Fairbanks, they’ll discover a new addition to the museum scene: the three-year-old

### ALASKA NATIVE CORPORATIONS

In 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which established regional corporations to administer financial and land claims made by Alaska Natives. Twelve for-profit corporations were designated to cover distinct regions of the state (a 13th corporation was later established to represent Alaska Natives no longer residing in Alaska), and individual Alaska Natives were enrolled in these associations as shareholders; additional village corporations were introduced within the various regions. Today, the list of Alaska Native Corporations includes entities such as the Cook Inlet Region Incorporated (CIRI), the Bering Straits Native Corporation and Sealaska Corporation. These companies are invested in a number of for-profit ventures, including mining and energy resources, but travel and tourism are increasingly a part of the portfolio. By actively participating in bringing visitors to the Great Land, the Native corporations not only generate economic benefits for communities throughout the state, but have an opportunity to more accurately and thoroughly tell the stories of Native Alaskans.

PEP ROIG / ALAMY



Saxman Totem Park in Ketchikan is one of Alaska’s popular cultural attractions.

Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center, dedicated to celebrating the Interior’s land, people and cultures. Like its Anchorage cousin, the center is not only a place for exhibits but a community centerpiece for the active perpetuation of language, traditions and living arts. Visitors can also engage in more active opportunities, such as joining an archaeology tour on Afognak Island in the Gulf of Alaska, or going birding while also learning about Aleut culture with local guides in the Pribilof Islands.

Many of these travelers are already globe-trotters: They come to Alaska with an idea of what they want to do and learn, and they crave personal enrichment from authentic experiences. “As travelers are becoming more informed and savvy, they’re looking for deeper meaning, more backstory and more human connection,” says Mark McKernan, director of Cultural Interpretive Services for Huna Totem Corporation.

The most recent state of Alaska surveys find that 17 percent of visitors statewide already participate in Native cultural tours or activities. But interest—and the economic

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potential for developing tours and activities around that interest—may be even greater. National phone surveys of potential Alaska visitors indicate that 80 percent say learning about Alaska Native lifestyles is an important attribute of a trip to Alaska, says Jillian Simpson of the Alaska Travel Industry Association.

Southeast Alaska, starting with its southernmost port of Ketchikan—where Saxman Totem Park draws both cruise ship and independent travelers—abounds in cultural options. Juneau hosts a biennial festival called Celebration that features dance groups and a Native artists' market. This event provides a \$2 million boon to the local economy, with more than 3,000 tickets sold to nonresidents.

There's something to do and learn in most Alaska communities, all the way up to Barrow and the Arctic Coast, says Lorene Palmer, director of the state Division of Economic Development. The state is striving to help cultivate even more visitor opportunities, which can create additional employment and revenue in communities that need it most.

### PAST PLAYERS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Some of the larger Native corporations have been involved in tourism for some time, focusing mainly on accessible adventure and wilderness sightseeing. CIRI Alaska Tourism Corporation (CATC)—a wholly owned subsidiary of Cook Inlet Region Incorporated—got into the business in 1997. The corporation owns Alaska Heritage Tours, Kenai Fjords Tours and three lodges: in Talkeetna, in Seward and on Fox Island in Resurrection Bay. At these lodges, visitors can enjoy the awe-inspiring Alaska scenery while engaging in activities such as hiking, river rafting and sea kayaking.

Native-owned Goldbelt Incorporated, in Juneau, owns the Goldbelt Hotel, the Mount Roberts Tramway and the Seadrome Marina. The company refocused from timber to tourism in the mid-1990s, and recently it's diversified its strategy to balance tourism with land development and federal contracting across 20 states.