

When Alaskans found out the United States Senate passed the Statehood Act in June of 1958, sirens blared and crowds celebrated around bonfires. It was a spontaneous party that kicked off six months of anticipation ahead of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's signature on the statehood proclamation on Jan. 3, 1959. Fast-forward 50 years, and Alaska is preparing to mark the official anniversary with just as much fervor.

With anniversary-related events scheduled throughout the year, 2009 makes a great year to travel to Alaska. Many tourism businesses are offering special anniversary deals that will reduce costs on experiences statewide.

The Statehood Gala at the Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center will lead off the celebrations on Jan. 2, in Anchorage, with remarks from the state's political dignitaries and statewide musical and performance groups. The next day, a birthday bash will take over downtown Anchorage, led by a procession of Alaska's diverse people. The event will continue with a stage performance, musical and cultural acts and a fireworks show.

Also on Jan. 3, the Valdez Family Fest will include dog sledding, snow sculpting, a Wii tournament, an indoor carnival, fireworks and, of course, birthday cake. The events will take place in and around the Valdez Convention and Civic Center.

"If travelers are looking for a different kind of New Year's party to attend, this is it," said Ron Peck, president and COO of the Alaska Travel Industry Association. "We're celebrating our history, our successes and our growth as a state. It's going to be a tremendous day for Alaska, and an even bigger year."

Many Alaskans can think back over the past 50 years and marvel at how the state has changed. But even as the state grows up, it will only take a scan of the crowd on Jan. 3, to realize Alaska's pioneering spirit is still alive.