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## Discoveries with docents

### Guides at Alaska State Museum help visitors understand state's history

By **CHRISTINE SCHMID**

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A visitor to the Alaska State Museum could spend days peering through the glass panes of museum displays to examine cedar root, birch bark and eel grass baskets crafted by Natives from all over the state.

But under the guidance of a docent, who leads visitors through the museum with arms full of artifacts and art, visitors can gain a much better understanding of the baskets - how they smell and feel, how much they weigh and the density of their weave.

"It takes a lot of finesse to make one of these," said docent Shauna McMahon, passing a birch bark box around to members of her tour Monday morning.

Volunteer docents at the state museum have access to "hands-on material," a special collection meant to be handled by visitors, to give them a multi-sensory experience, said Mary Irvine, docent program coordinator at the museum.

"Not every museum does that," Irvine said.

McMahon carried a sea otter pelt, baskets and boxes, and a swatch of seal gut to demonstrate the feel of the seal gut parka worn by a mannequin in one of the displays.

"This is the densest fur in the world," McMahon told her tour, encouraging visitors to feel the pelt draped on her shoulder.

Docents and museum employees can access the hands-on collection, which consists of some reproductions, but is mostly authentic art, crafts and tools from the last several hundred years of Alaska's history.



**Taste of Alaskana: Volunteer docent Shauna McMahon, left, wears a sea otter pelt over her shoulder as she shows a picture of an otter to visitors (from left to right) Connie Soper of Virginia, Susan Yalom of California and Toshiko Yarimizu of Japan, during a tour of the Alaska State Museum.**

As a result, only visitors who go on a docent-guided tour have the opportunity to experience the tactile side of the museum.

Docent are trained with weekly lectures for about six weeks starting in March of every year. They are former teachers, historians, writers and long-time Juneau residents who can filter through the abundance of information at the museum and point out the highlights.

Like most docents, McMahon spent most of her tour in the Native galleries on the first floor of the museum, first explaining the traditions of the Indians of the Northwest Coast, including Southeast Alaska, British Columbia and Washington, then moving to the Athabaskan, Eskimo and Aleut exhibits.

"In the Interior you are always moving quite a bit, so you wanted less material goods to pack around," McMahon told her group, pointing out the birch bark baskets made by the Athabaskans of the Interior. The baskets are quicker and easier to make than those made by Natives in Southeast Alaska - and therefore more disposable.

Because of the lack of vegetation in northern regions of Alaska, Eskimos saved driftwood for special projects such as boats and shelters, McMahon said. Walrus ivory, fish skin, swan down and polar bear fur was used for other everyday projects.

On the way up to the Russian-American history portion of the museum, on the second floor, McMahon pointed out Haida carvings in argillite, a rock found in North America on the Queen Charlotte Islands, in a display case on the ramp.

She also answered questions about bears, eagles and vegetation in Southeast Alaska, and then explained briefly the transfer of the territory of Alaska from Russia to the United States.

"I don't take time to read everything," said Susan Yalom, a California resident who visited the Alaska State Museum on Monday because of the impression the museum left on her during an earlier visit in the 1970s.

"I like to look at the big things, but I miss some of the smaller displays," she said. "And I like to ask questions."

McMahon has volunteered at the museum for about six years and is in the process of earning her master's degree in archeology. She fielded the questions, especially about Natives on the Pacific coast, with ease.

"It was wonderful," said Yalom of McMahon's tour. "She definitely pointed out things in the display cases that I wouldn't have found out about because I wouldn't have read everything."

"You get so much more out of a tour," said Ann Soper, an independent traveler from Summit, N.J., who also took McMahon's tour. She and her group learned of the tour that morning when they paid the \$5 per person entry fee for the museum, which is part of the state Department of Education and Early Development.

Juneau residents should call ahead to the museum at 465-2901 to find out what time docent tours are during the day they plan to visit. Though most tours stay in the permanent exhibit, visitors can request a special tour of temporary exhibits, said Irvine. Tours also can focus on a specific topic for a group.

"You can really ask your docent to tailor it to what you're interested in," Irvine said.

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<http://juneaualaska.com/visit/stories/docenttours.shtml>