



Mendenhall Glacier, Alaska

One of the world's most delightfully accessible glaciers is the Mendenhall. Some 20 km long, this is an outlet from the great Juneau Icefield in southeastern Alaska, and it ends almost at sea-level, nudging up against the outer suburbs of the state capital, Juneau. The main bus route through town has one terminus at the glacier visitor centre, right on the Neoglacial terminal moraine that impounds Mendenhall's pro-glacial lake. Across the lake, the ice wall at the end of the glacier is less than 20 metres tall, and now lies more than two kilometres away. Retreat of the ice terminus is currently around 30 metres per year, but the steady thinning of the glacier caused a major collapse in 2004, when its front was left floating and large blocks broke away into the lake. A close view of the glacier is best gained by hiking the trail up the western side, rising to a rock ridge that is 300 metres above and nearly two kilometres from the lake. Here, the Mendenhall Glacier slides over a rock step, so that it is broken by numerous crevasses into a spectacular forest of blue ice seracs. A mean rate of movement for the centre of the glacier is around 100 metres per year, and is about half that rate on the margins. That differential accounts for many of the crevasses, and the effect is that the view from the overlook is different every year. It is a splendid site of glacier activity, rather in contrast with a spot near the Mendenhall's eastern margin where a large flat expanse of ice is favoured for the helicopter landings when the cruise ships are in Juneau. This beautiful glacier has so much to offer, but the west-side trail has to be a highlight of anyone's visit to Alaska. © *Photograph and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*