

Alaskan Town Lives In One Building

Whittier, Alaska is a pretty unique town. It's located along a three-mile swath of coastline between mountains and water. The weather there is very harsh: there is up to 250 inches of snow annually, and the wind can blow as fast as 60 miles per hour. The weather makes getting around town very difficult, so the residents of Whittier came up with a pretty neat solution: most everyone lives in the same building!



Around 200 people live in Whittier, and all but a few of them live in Begich Towers, a 14-story condominium on the edge of town. And Begich Towers isn't just a residential building: there's also a health clinic, a laundromat, a church, a convenience store, and a police station there. This may seem strange to outsiders, but it works pretty well for people who live there.

Whittier is pretty difficult to get to. You can only reach the town two ways, either by the sea or by a one-lane tunnel through the mountains. This tunnel only runs one way at a time, and it's closed at night.

Begich Towers started off as an army barracks. Whittier was originally an army outpost. It was founded in 1969, nine years after the army abandoned the outpost. The people who founded Whittier continued operating the freight, railroad, and oil storage facilities the army left behind.

Originally, the founders wanted Whittier to be the first car-less town in America. They envisioned trams that would carry people back and forth across the mountains. Eventually that idea fell through, and the tunnel was built instead. The few people who have been in town since Whittier was founded sometimes complain about the tunnel and the road that goes through it. They say that the road has eroded Whittier's isolation and sense of community. Nonetheless, residents of Whittier are still pretty tightly knit.

"Whittier magnifies what people are about," said a resident who has lived there since 1982. "We certainly don't all love each other here, but we help each other, and we bond because of whatever it is that attracts you here."

Some Whittier residents live in a smaller condominium, and some live in trailers or boats. Not everyone lives in Begich Towers, but most of them do.

"A lot of people don't stay here because they think it feels like prison," said Terry, a Begich Towers resident. "I just laugh. I tell everybody, 'We all live in the same house, we just have separate bedrooms.'"

In addition to all the amenities mentioned before, there's one more advantage to living in Begich Towers: there's a school nearby. The school is in another building, but it is attached to Begich Towers by an underground tunnel. So if there's a blizzard outside, kids can walk to school without ever going outside.

No snow days in Whittier. Lucky students!

And if Whittier sounds like a place you'd like to visit, guess what? The top two floors of Begich Towers is a bed and breakfast. Every room is equipped with binoculars, so visitors can watch whales breaching, mountain goats grazing, and that sort of mountain / wilderness thing.

Whittier sounds like a very interesting place. As the town's original motto says, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen Whittier."

Do you have a sense of adventure?

Would you be able to live in Begich Towers?