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WILDERNESS LODGES

## Frontier living with a dollop of luxury



The Crystal Creek lodge overlooking the Naknek river. COURTESY CRYSTAL CREEK LODGE

- In search of treasures big and small
- CHOOSING A LODGE
- A travelers' sampler to Alaska's wilderness lodges

BY ANNE Z. COOKE  
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

FINGER LAKE, Alaska -- It was a mild spring day at Winter Lake Lodge, in the Alaskan bush, when the swans arrived. Annual summer residents, they stretched out their feet and water-skied to a stop, landing with a splash near a family of loons.

Spotting them from the kitchen counter, Kirsten Dixon, Winter Lake's owner, poured another cup of coffee and joined me at the window. For a few quiet minutes we sat quietly, watching summer come to the foothills of the Alaska Range.

Five more guests were due later in the day, but for now I had the place to myself. There was time to join Karl, Kirsten's husband, for a 10-minute helicopter flight to a secluded trout stream for an hour's fly fishing, then grab binoculars and a

handful of Kirsten's cookies for a stroll to the Skwentna River to look for eagles.

The others arrived via float plane from Anchorage, and by later that afternoon we had gathered in the lounge for one of the lodge's signature events. Once a week, Kirsten teaches an informal gourmet cooking class (she trained with Jacques Pepin, in Boston), followed by a wine and cheese tasting. As Kirsten chopped herbs and filleted a salmon, we sipped our chardonnay and compared imported cheese ordered from Murray's in New York City.

If you're looking for an authentic but deluxe introduction to wild Alaska, Winter Lake Lodge ranks among the best. Set among low hills near the Iditarod trail 195 miles west of Anchorage, the lakeside location is ideal for guided fly fishing, hiking, birding, canoeing and helicopter flightseeing. Kirsten teaches three-day culinary classes; her staff organizes yoga sessions and massages. Those willing to brave the winter can go dog mushing with Karl or hit the slopes for Nordic or heli-skiing.

But Winter Lake isn't entirely unique. Most family-owned Alaskan guest lodges -- and there are dozens -- feature personalized service, intimate settings for fewer than 25 guests, and access to untrammelled wilderness in locations so remote they're often reached only by small plane. Running in to guests from the lodge next door isn't usually a problem; they're likely dozens of miles away.

But in other respects, each lodge is distinctive. Those set on salt water focus on fishing, along with close-in sightings of whales, seals and sea otters. Lake and lodge rivers offer fly-fishing for trout, Dolly Varden and arctic grayling. Those that cater to both men and women -- as most do -- include bear watching, hiking and kayaking.

Though most activities aren't designed for children under 10, many owners welcome families. "We gets lots of father-son pairs fishing together, and even some mother-daughter combinations," says Brad Steuart, owner of Boardwalk Lodge on Prince of Wales Island. "But we don't have children's programs, per se. The kids should be old enough to want to spend a half-day out on a boat or to paddle a kayak."

And none is cheap, thanks to those remote locations. Price can range from \$400 per person per day for a rustic lodge to more than \$1,200 at an all-inclusive luxury lodge where programs include culinary classes and heli-flights.

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"Each lodge is a reflection of its owners and their tastes. That's why they're so diverse," says Kirsten Dixon.

## KENAI PENINSULA

My own history of lodge life is the proof. My introduction was a Kenai Peninsula visit with a friend. Unaware that the Cook Inlet tides vary widely, I was nonplussed to see that the water level and the floating dock, where we were to meet our host, had dropped 38 feet below the bank.

After a dodgy descent on a steep wood plank, we boarded a motorboat for a foggy 45-minute ride to a hulking peeled-log lodge on a rocky cove. In a roadless area off the grid, we were beyond civilization; two diesel-powered generators kept the lights on and the electric range hot. Our dinners featured hearty portions of salmon, halibut, duck, moose, mountain goat and caribou, all shot by the owner, an avid hunter. The experience was clearly designed for men, and it was no surprise that I was the only woman in the place.

## YENTNA RIVER

Three years later, in July, another chance encounter brought us to Riversong Lodge, then a rustic trapper's cabin on the Yentna River. The lodge, 70 miles west of Anchorage, has now been remodeled under new owners. Even then, though, women were a third of the guests -- which meant twilight conversation that stretched beyond hunting tales to favorite films and treasured books. Delicious meals were enhanced by home-grown herbs and vegetables raised in their garden.

Since then, Riversong's guests have doubled in number. A trained chef prepares the meals and professional guides escort fishermen. But Riversong's casual, comfortable ambience remains.

## CRYSTAL CREEK

Four more lodges and as many years later, I found myself heading for Crystal Creek Lodge, a classic two-story log lodge west of Katmai National Park, renowned for its brown bear population. Though seamless organization and first-rate guides make Crystal Creek a stand-out, it was owners Lori and Dan Michels' particular passion for exploration that made the visit memorable.

Both Michels are pilots -- which means guests spend most of every day flying to remote trout streams, landing to watch the bears fish for spawning salmon or looking for walrus pull-outs. On a flightseeing jaunt, we circled over the crater of Novarupta Volcano, blown out in 1912, and dipped down to watch beluga whales on the move.

At dinner, prepared by the chef and served by the staff, we met our fellow guests and their spouses. A friendly, well-traveled group, they included a couple and their two teenagers, a corporate CEO, a museum director, a doctor, a retired actor and a honeymoon couple. Elegantly rustic, our pine-paneled lodge room had puffy quilts, native Alaskan art and a private bath.

During our week at Crystal Creek, another like-minded couple became our fishing and hiking companions, and along the way, we shared life stories and eventually, e-mail addresses. That's the thing about an Alaska lodge experience; like any great travel experience, it feeds both mind and soul.

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