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FINE LIVING IN VENTURA COUNTY monthly



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TRAVEL

Northward Ho!

Traveling against the grain, an intrepid Southern Californian heads into the snowcapped wilderness of Alaska to welcome winter.

By Anne Z. Cooke—Photography by Steve Haggerty



Sled dogs leap into action at the start of the 1,000-plus-mile Iditarod Race from Anchorage to Nome.

"Piece of cake," says Jerrod. He sees the overhead light and stops by my seat. "These Alaska pilots do it every day. Snow is like mother's milk to them." Out the window, I can see the Chugach Mountains, the string of peaks looking like so much whipped cream. Jerrod smiles confidently and buttons his uniform for the landing. I hold my breath as he hurries back to his seat, and sure enough, our plane floats down onto a snow-blown runway as smoothly as a skater gliding on ice. I hear an audible sigh of relief from my seat partner, as flurries whirl around the plane. She relaxes her grip on the armrest and takes out her lipstick.



The view from within a blue-ice cave near Whittier.

LAST ISSUE



SHORT LIST

Snow, mountains of it piling up in Anchorage, is the reason I'm visiting in late February. I tell friends here in town I'm interviewing dog mushers competing in the annual Iditarod dog sled race to Nome. They tell me Anchorage is on track to break the all-time record for total annual snowfall, a record set more than 50 years ago. But my real reason—undeclared—is the urge to go to extremes, to live on the edge. And that means the far north in winter, when temperatures sink into the cellar and snow and ice stretch away for miles, deep, white, and still. You won't find me tracking polar bears on the Arctic ice sheet. And I won't be summiting glacier-bound Mt. McKinley: at 20,320 feet, North America's highest mountain. But the call of the north at its least forgiving, most glittering best is irresistible.



Like dogsleds, snowmobiles are an effective mode of transportation in the sub-zero temperatures of Placer River Valley.

If you've been to Alaska, chances are it was during summer, when the days are warm and the sun dallies in the heavens until midnight. But by November, the 49th state shines like the jewels in a pirate's hoard. On the drive north to Fairbanks, giant flakes float down on the windshield as if a featherbed was ripped open and shaken over the highway. When the storm clears, the February sun bounces off the snow like candle flame on a crystal chandelier. Icebound rivers, their rapids frozen solid in mid-flow, gleam an opalescent silver-green. The ice blocks at Fairbanks' annual Ice Carving Competition—dump truck sized chunks sawn out of the frozen Tanana River—are so hard and dense that sculptors wielding saws and files easily shape graceful fingers, prancing horse's legs, and flowing strands of mermaids' hair. On the horizon at sunset, clouds of tiny ice crystals refract the lingering rays, creating rarely seen "sundogs," identical pairs of glowing oval shapes.



Though tourism slows in winter, the Denali National Park Visitors' Center

stays open year-round, along with Talkeetna's shops, pubs, and inn.

Before my trip ends, with a ride on the Alaska Railroad from Fairbanks back to Anchorage, I've signed on to every adventure one could reasonably fit into a single northern odyssey. With pilot Todd Mackinaw at the helm of an eight-passenger Piper Chieftain, I join a group in Fairbanks to fly north to the Brooks Range, cruising low over the serpentine loops of the frozen Yukon River. Our destination: a tiny airfield in Coldfoot, north of the Arctic Circle. A former mining outpost, Coldfoot earned its name when the last few settlers called it quits and left after two savagely cold winters. Now it's a café and supply point on the oil pipeline road between Valdez and Prudhoe Bay.



Ski trails atop Alyeska Resort pass this warming hut and observation point.

I've sledged through a forest of birch and sitka spruce behind a team of huskies and explored blue-ice caves in minus-20-degree temperatures. I've joined a guided snowshoe hike on the frozen Susitna River, near Talkeetna, where the occasional treacherous patch of open water threatens life and limb. I've been on hand as the sleepy brown bears at the Alaska Wildlife Heritage Center (rescued yearling orphans named Taquoka and Shaguyik) wake up and stumble out of their den, looking for a handout. I've been teased by the lure of a slippery hillside, and cutting too tight a turn, toppled a snow machine into a snowdrift not five feet from a not-so-frozen stream. Soaking at Cheney Hot Springs on a minus-10-degree day, my wet hair freezes into stiff spikes. Who would've thought?

Throughout, my closest friend has been my daily uniform: a fat down jacket, down mittens with expedition-quality glove liners, padded ski pants over with layered fleece underwear, and—on the coldest days—toe-warmers inside insulated waterproof boots. Stuffed and swaddled I look like a ragbag. But it's kept me warm, and to my surprise, sometimes too warm. But warm is always

good, here in the mystical winter of ice and snow. ●

Get detailed information and travel tips online at
anchorage.net and explorefairbanks.com.

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