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Anne Z. Cooke: Answering The Call Of Alaska

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"Piece of cake," says Jerrod. He sees the overhead light blink on 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 mounds of whipped cream. Jerrod smiles confidently and buttons his uniform jacket 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 snow piling up in Anchorage is the reason I'm visiting in late February. I tell friends I'm interviewing the dog mushers here for the annual Iditarod dog sled race to Nome. They tell me Anchorage is on track to break the all-time record for total 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 winter travel, when 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 scaling 20,320-foot Mt. McKinley, either. But the call of the north at its harshest, glittering best, is irresistible.



Chances are you've been to Alaska in 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 treasure chest. On the drive north to Fairbanks, giant flakes float down on the windshield as if a feather bed was ripped open and shaken over the highway. When the storm clears, the February sun bounces off the snow like candlelight on a crystal chandelier. Icebound rivers, their rapids frozen solid in mid-flow, gleam an opalescent silver-green. The ice blocks at the World Ice Art Championship are so dense and hard that the competing artists easily saw, chop and file them into graceful fingers, prancing horse's legs and flowing strands of hair. On the horizon at sunset, clouds of tiny ice crystals refract the lingering rays, forming rarely-seen "sundogs," glowing oval shapes.

Before my trip ends, with a ride on the Alaska Railroad from Fairbanks back to Anchorage, I've sampled as much as will fit in a single northern odyssey. With pilot Todd Mackinaw at the helm, I join a group to fly low over the frozen Yukon River in an 8-passenger Piper Chieftain, touching down for cocoa (beer also served) in Coldfoot, north of the Arctic Circle. A former mining outpost, Coldfoot earned its name when the last few residents upped and left after two savagely cold winters. Now it's a cafe and supply point on the pipeline road from Prudhoe Bay. I've sledged through a birch forest behind a team of huskies. I've explored blue-ice caves in minus-20-degree fahrenheit temperatures and joined a guided snowshoe hike on the icy Susitna River, near Talkeetna.

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I've waked up the sleepy brown bears (rescued orphans named Taquoka and Shaguyik) at the [Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center](#), at the end of Turnagain Arm (near Portage) and toppled a snow machine into a deep drift just feet from a not-so-frozen river. Soaking at [Chena Hot Springs](#) on a minus-10-degree day, my wet hair turns to icicles. Who would've thought? Otherwise, my closest friend has been my daily uniform, a fat down jacket and padded ski pants, with layered fleece underwear and toe-warmers stuck onto wool socks inside insulated waterproof boots. I look like a bundle or rags, but it's kept me warm, and to my surprise, sometimes too warm. But that's always better than too cold, here in the land of ice and snow.

Images Courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

Link to the full article: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-z-cooke/ice-time-in-alaska_b_1376468.html

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