

TRAVEL

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ALASKA IN WINTER

On the frontier's frozen edge

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

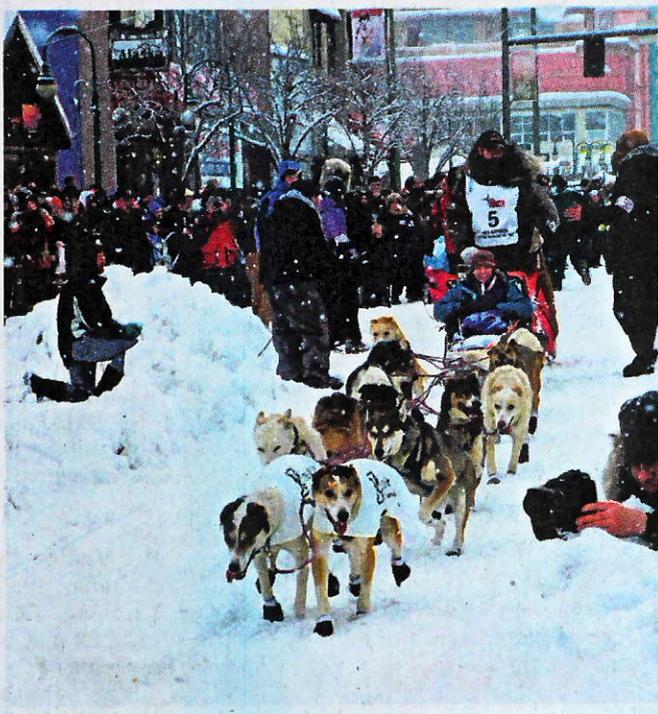
Special to The Miami Herald

ANCHORAGE — “First time here?” asks Jerrod. He sees the overhead light and stops by my seat. “No worries. These Alaska pilots do it every day. Snow is like mother’s milk to them.”

Out the window, I can see the Chugach Mountains, frosted white like so many cupcakes. 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 window. She relaxes her grip on the armrest and takes out her lipstick.

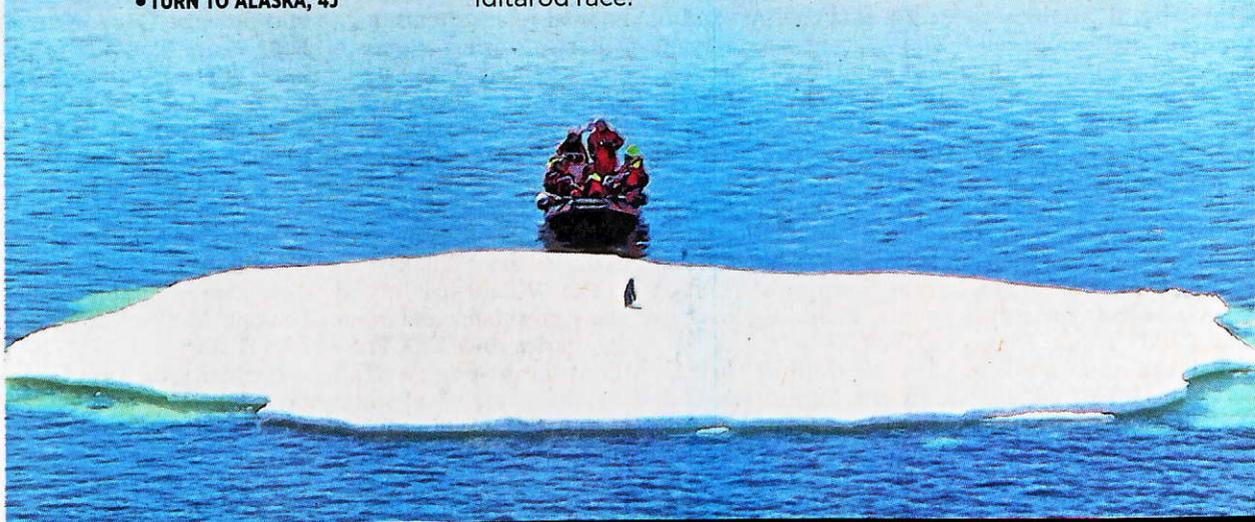
Snow, mountains of it, is the

• TURN TO ALASKA, 4J



STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD

NOME OR BUST! A dog musher competes in the annual Iditarod race.



ALASKA IN WINTER

Living on the frontier's frozen edge (for a week)

• ALASKA, FROM 1J

reason I'm visiting Anchorage in February. According to today's weather report, the town is on track to break the record for total annual snowfall, a record set more than 50 years ago. I tell friends I'm here to interview the dog mushers assembling for the annual Iditarod race to Nome. With snow still falling, it's going to be a classic send-off, the photo-op event that recent warm winters have up-ended.

But my real reason — un-declared — is the urge to go to extremes, to feel what it's like to live on the frontier's frozen edge. And that means heading north toward the Arctic, where winter temperatures sink into the cellar and snow stretches away for miles, deep, white and still. I won't be risking life and limb, not really. Tracking polar bears on foot is off the table, and so is ice-climbing on 20,320-foot Mt. McKinley (Denali), North America's highest mountain. But the call of the north in its glittering best is irresistible.

If you've been to Alaska, chances are that you toured it in summer, when the days are warm and the sun dallies in the heavens until midnight. By November, it hangs low over the horizon, beaming amber rays over a snowy landscape. And it's that moody half-light that makes the 49th state glitter like the jewels in a pirate's chest.

With that in mind, I'm continuing north to Fairbanks, flying to Talkeetna for two days, then driving the rest of the way. On the highway, blue skies turn gray as a storm moves in, giant flakes floating down on the windshield as if a feather bed had been ripped open and shaken above us.

The road disappears in a swirl of ice dust, then reappears at the base of snow-smothered peaks. Icebound rivers, their rapids frozen solid in mid-flow, gleam an opalescent silver-green. The ice lasts until spring, finally cracking into chunks that sweep downstream, crushing anything in its path — often moose, stranded on the ice as it starts to shift.

Will "break-up" be in early April, late April, mid-May? We stop to buy a ticket for the Nenana Ice Classic, \$2.50 for the chance to guess when this year's ice will finally crack apart. May 2 feels lucky. Last year's winners guessed April 22 and split the purse, \$338,000, or thereabouts.

As evening falls over Fairbanks, clouds of tiny ice crystals in the air refract lingering rays, creating rarely seen "sundogs," pairs of identical glowing shapes. By



ICE CAVES: Snowmobilers explore blue tunnels made by melting glacial water.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD



ICE CARVING: A mermaid sculpted in ice at the annual competition in Fairbanks.



TALKEETNA: Shops, pubs, inn and the Denali National Park Visitors' Center stay open year-round.



BREAK TIME: Snowmobilers tour the Placer River Valley in the Chugach Mountains.

8 p.m. the aurora borealis flickers over the city park where the annual Ice Carving Competition is held. Teams of carvers, each issued a dump-truck-sized chunk of ice sawn out of the Tanana River, set up their gear and, working by spotlights, wield saws and files late into the night. The ice is crack-resistant but hard, easily carved into fragile forms: flowing strands of hair, a horse's prancing legs,

flower petals and dolphins leaping above crashing waves. Illuminated by colored lights, the finished sculptures are stunning.

As Alaska's most northerly large town, Fairbanks is home for many arctic-bound outfitters and small plane companies. Calling around reveals that the Northern Alaska Tour Co. has two unsold seats on a trip to Coldfoot, north of the Arctic Circle. The next

morning seven of us meet at the flight office to hear a safety briefing and look at the map of our destination. Braving the wind and minus 20-degree temperature, we climb aboard an eight-passenger Piper Chieftain (heated), piloted by Todd Mackinaw.

Taking off in a swirl of snow, Mackinaw pushes the plane up into clear air for the 90-minute flight north, cruising low over the oil pipeline road and crossing the serpentine loops of the frozen Yukon River. Dipping between successive ranges of low snowcapped peaks, he points out his favorite fishing camp site, an empty valley among hundreds, one whose only residents are brown bears. Then, with the Brooks Range visible beyond, we see the Coldfoot air strip below.

A former mining outpost, Coldfoot survived until a string of relentlessly sub-zero winters drove away settlers. Now it consists of a historic sign, a maintenance depot and a truck stop on the road to Prudhoe Bay. We

all want to see the pipeline close up, and find it partially covered in snow. But around the corner are the unlikelyst of local residents, 20 sled dogs in training.

Like all Alaska sled dogs, they live outdoors, even in winter, each chained to its dog house to protect it from running after wolves and risking a fatal fight. Most sled dogs aren't pets. But this bunch gets attention and likes it. Hustling back to the café, we warm up with cups of cocoa.

By the week's end, I'm running out of juice. I've skied at Alyeska Resort in Girdwood, and dog-sledded through a Sitka spruce forest behind a team of huskies. I've explored the blue-ice caves in the Portage Valley, and toured the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center nearby. When I stop at the enclosure where the resident brown bears (rescued orphans, now slightly scary adults) live, they wake up from their winter snooze and lumber out when I whistle.

I've joined a guided snow-

Going to Alaska

Getting there, getting around: Alaska Airlines, with frequent flights and experienced pilots, is the choice for most Alaska visitors. For flexibility, rent a car. Roads in Anchorage and Fairbanks are plowed in winter, as is the highway between the two cities. The Alaska Railroad (www.alaskarailroad.com) offers regular winter service north and south, and provides a memorable railroad experience and spectacular scenery.

Anchorage: For lodging, events and tours in Anchorage, see www.anchorage.net. Skiing & ski resorts: www.alyeskaresort.com. The Wildlife Center: www.alaskawildlife.org.

Talkeetna: Lodging, local tours, events: talkeetna.roadhouse.com.

Fairbanks: Lodging, events, outfitters: www.explorefairbanks.com.

shoe hike on the frozen Susitna River, where an occasional — and treacherous — patch of open water threatens life and limb. I've even attempted to learn the secret of creating bakery-fresh, home-made apple pies at my hotel for the night, the Roadhouse, in Talkeetna.

Though museum visits aren't in the plan, I've toured the fabulous new Alaskan exhibits at the University of Alaska's Fairbanks campus. Heading to Chena Hot Springs, we go snowmobiling, a sport so exhilarating that within 30 minutes I've toppled the thing over into a snow drift not five feet from rushing water. Warming up afterwards, with a long soak in a hot pool, my wet hair freezes into frosty spikes. It's not pretty.

But a last reward awaits: 12 hours and 350 miles of awe-inspiring scenery seen from the comfortable warmth of a window seat on the Alaska Railroad. As the train winds southward to Anchorage, I can finally shed most of the uniform that's kept me warm — sometimes too warm — from first to last.

That would be my puffy fur hat with ear flaps and sunglasses, two breathable ski-shirts and a plump down jacket. Add mittens with expedition-style glove liners, padded ski pants over fleece long underwear and — for the coldest days — the crème de la crème: toe-warmers inside insulated waterproof boots. Alaska in winter? It couldn't be easier.