

## Anchorage Bound

Winter visitors find a vast range of experiences in Southcentral Alaska

By Eric Lucas



MATT HAGE

The Susitna River is a broad Alaska waterway that brawls its way out of the Talkeetna Mountains into a vast plain at the foot of the Denali Range. Its chill, glacial blue waters churn across wide gravel bars. Fallen trees float downstream like sticks. ■ But that is its summer persona. On this late winter day, the Susitna is a placid path of snowclad ice that's taking me toward a quiet copse of tall cottonwoods across from the town of Talkeetna. Ski racers have left an excellent trail to follow: multiple tracks set in the fine snow atop the river ice. I'm striding directly toward

Mount McKinley, known in Alaska as Denali, which crinkles the skyline 60 miles away like origami made of birch bark. Beneath that vista, winter-bare cottonwood branches lace the sky. It's about 25 F; the sun is pushing past skeins of overnight fog; and the rhythmic *scoosh* of my skis on the snow is the melody of the moment.

A moment like this is exactly why I've come north in winter. While hundreds of thousands of



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visitors head to Anchorage from May to October, using the city as a jumping-off post for fishing, sightseeing and adventure, winter visitors number far fewer. And in Talkeetna, a charming village 2½ hours north of Anchorage, I may be the only out-of-state visitor among several hundred Nordic skiing fans who've come for the annual Oosik Classic race.

That makes me as unique as the town itself. Early 20th century log-cabin inns and cafes line snowbanked streets. White-haired old-timers sit on restaurant porches in the sun, looking like movie characters. One tells me the pizza inside is the best in the state. Rambling dogs, strolling visitors and poling skiers far outnumber cars. By March the sun has wound its way far enough north that it seems warm at midday—in fact, I have to shed two inner layers while I'm skiing across the river—yet the snow is still powdery beneath my no-wax skis. Once I'm out of town, my only companions in the woods are ravens and the spirits of gnarled old-growth cottonwoods.

In other words, everything is perfect.

As I'm finding, there are many benefits of a winter trip to Anchorage. Though the impression persists in the Lower 48 that Alaskans head indoors in November for six months, that's pure myth. The city itself sports a remarkable network of recreational trails—120 miles of paved trails and 300 miles of wilderness trails—where one can ski for hours, and marvel at a sight heretofore unknown to me: bike riders, crunching their way along the trails with studded, knobby tires. You can walk from your

Facing page: Backcountry skiing in areas such as Tin Can Ridge, south of Girdwood, is a popular weekend sport among Anchorage residents.

Above: The Alaska Railroad provides access to Southcentral Alaska wilderness with its winter weekend passenger service.

downtown hotel to ice-skate on a frozen pond—freshwater lagoon, actually. And, of course, 45 minutes south of Anchorage is Alyeska Resort, the state’s major alpine ski area and by far the largest this far north in the Western Hemisphere. Connecting all these winter playgrounds are uncrowded highways, bare and safe: no problems managing snow removal up here.

Better yet, Nordic skiers can hop on the Alaska Railroad’s winter-weekends Aurora Train Service—northbound out of Anchorage on Saturday, southbound on Sunday—and get views of the magnificent landscape dressed in winter ermine that few visitors see. The train departs

Anchorage toward the spruce/birch forests of the Matanuska Valley beside the Chugach Range. After nearly 90 minutes, it reaches Wasilla, hometown of a recently famous national political figure whose former house, visible along a lake from the tracks, the conductor gaily points out. “Everyone still thinks of it as Sarah and Todd’s place,” reports the character who wishes to be known as “Conductor Steve.” Wasilla is also the home of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race and the race’s real start, the send-off in Anchorage being ceremonial.

Rounding the toe of the Susitna Mountains, we head north into the Susitna Valley, the broad plain at the foot of the Denali Range. Two miles before we reach Talkeetna, the train *whish-whooshes* to a stop, and almost all the passengers crowd back into the baggage car to enjoy a full-on panoramic view of Mount McKinley, Mount Foraker and three subsidiary peaks. McKinley is 20,320 feet, Foraker 17,400, and the three satellites would be notable summits in the Lower 48. Here, framed by the confluence of the Talkeetna, Chulitna and Susitna rivers, they seem mere pebbles on the skyline, and Denali itself seems majestic rather than overwhelming.

“That’s quite a mountain,” says my seatmate, a visitor from Argentina, where there are similarly formidable summits. His companion is from Mexico; they are onboard for the day’s entire 11-hour journey to Fairbanks. I’m going only partway; I spring down from the passenger car at the Talkeetna stop, hefting gear and duffel on my shoulder for the four-block walk to my overnight lodging, Trapper John’s Cabin. Yes, that’s not only what they call it,

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that’s what it is—a pioneer log cabin first built in 1921 by its namesake.

The cabin is set in a tidy village lot framed by birch trees; snowbanks line the drive, tower up to the eaves and guard the little shack out back that serves an indispensable function. I’d say Trapper John’s is on a quiet side street, except every street in Talkeetna, save one, qualifies for that description. During my entire stay I don’t hear a vehicle go by. My abode for the night has an oil-stove heater, electric power, two beds, a picnic table and a décor theme for which the term “eclectic” is a huge understatement. There’s a microwave so old it’s historic. Books, atlases and magazines from the Eisenhower era line various shelves and cubbyholes. A portable record player rests on a cart holding not only dusty 45s and 33s—Johnny Cash, for instance—but 78-rpm records by the Glenn Miller Orchestra. Not reissues; originals. I try one out and, sure enough, the scratchy strains of *Pennsylvania 6-5000* issue into the room.

From the front porch I need only step into my skis and head down the street for the wilderness, over the river and through the woods, as the old holiday song goes. After leaving the track-set trail to ski up to one particular grandfather cottonwood, an invigorating adventure in snow 6 feet deep, I turn back toward town, and by the banks of the river encounter a family resting for a moment. Mom’s pulling a bicycle-style baby buggy, only this is on skis, not wheels.

“Admiring the view?” I inquire. They’re facing directly toward Denali.

Views from Alyeska Resort’s Glacier Bowl encompass Turnagain Arm and the Kenai Mountains beyond.

#### More Info

**Alaska Railroad:**  
www.alaskarailroad.com;  
800-544-0552

**Alyeska Resort:**  
www.alyeskaresort.com;  
800-880-3880

**Anchorage Information:**  
www.anchorage.net;  
907-276-4118

**Talkeetna/Mat-Su Valley Information:**  
www.alaskavisit.com;  
907-746-5000

“Oh, *that*,” Dad tells me, acting like he just noticed.

“He’s kidding,” Mom assures me. “We never get tired of seeing Denali.” And off they go toward the tallest peak in North America, posed handsomely in a cornflower sky. I’d like to think the kids in the ski-buggy are gaining early-life inspiration, but with the afternoon sun and the rhythm of Mom’s strides, I suspect they’re sound asleep.

**A**s compelling as the Alaska landscape is, there are notable attractions to be found indoors, too. The next day I have lunch at one of those, Moose’s Tooth brewpub and restaurant, back in Anchorage. Mention Moose’s Tooth to anyone and they smile, nod and endorse it. So I ask the waitress why it’s so popular. She leans in to confide her answer.

“Everyone thinks it’s our beer—and that’s great, no doubt—but really it’s the pizza. Probably the best this far north.”

This information presents a dilemma: If the Moose’s Tooth pizza is the best this far north, and I’d been assured the pizza in Talkeetna is the best in the state, and Talkeetna is north of Anchorage, how can one reconcile this data? Only by trying at least two pizzas at each locale, obviously. I’d fulfilled the two-pizza requirement in Talkeetna at Mountain High Pizza Pie, a fine place whose name clearly refers to customer opinion, as its home is at an elevation of just 350 feet. My lunch companion in Anchorage, a city resident who brought me here on the proposition that Moose’s Tooth pizza is world-class, aids the comparative research: I try a chipotle/flank steak pizza and the Brewhouse Favorite, a chorizo/sun-dried-tomato pizza. Each highly flavored pie is superb and I can honestly say I’ve had no better, anywhere.

After lunch I proceed, borrowed ice skates in hand, to Westchester Lagoon, a city park about two miles from downtown that holds a freshwater pond which, in winter, is a neighborhood ice rink. Plows clear enough snow to create a space about twice the size of an ordinary indoor rink. The skate area encircles a small island, and a smaller side rink is reserved for hockey.

The setting could not be better, a fact of Alaska winter travel I keep encountering. The sky is once again powder blue. The ice-cream flanks of the Chugach Mountains line the skyline eastward. A branch of the city’s trail network winds by the lagoon, and skiers, walkers and bikers chug by in a constant, sun-warmed stream. Moms and dads with kids in tow come to the skate pond at a steady rate of about a half-dozen an hour. The skating that ensues is wonderfully low-key. After all, Anchorage may be the biggest city in Alaska, by far, but the morning news on TV still includes the day’s school-lunch menu.

“Yeah, I play, but I can’t say I’m very good,” confesses a young man to a young woman he’s brought to the ice with two hockey sticks and a battered puck. She raises her eyebrows and promptly proves his statement by stealing the puck and back-skating around the island. He follows, bending over to laugh. “See what I mean?”

Meanwhile I—who first skated as a boy in the Northeast a half-century ago on an utterly unscenic city pond—rediscover the combination of balance and strength it takes to skate any great distance, such as around the island. No, I don’t tumble. Most likely thanks to very circumspect lack of daring. There’s a warming barrel with a spruce blaze someone has lit, but I am warmed more than enough by midwinter sun, exercise and Moose’s Tooth pizza.

A day later, after a stunningly scenic drive between towering mountains and along Turnagain Arm’s crumbled ice floes, I arrive at Girdwood to embark on recreation I’m more familiar with. Downhill skis in hand, I hop the tramway from The Hotel Alyeska to its midmountain terminus 2,025 feet above. There’s 3 inches of soft, fresh snow atop the resort’s usual midwinter accumulation of 6 feet or so. Bands of cirrus form ribbons across the blue sky I’m coming to think is an everyday occurrence. There are barely enough skiers here midweek to make the early-run tracks that lead me across Alyeska’s open upper-alpine bowl, and I warm up on a long, looping blue run that, on the map, is called Silvertip but on the mountain is just a wide

wrinkle in the bowl.

It takes two chairs to return me to the lift top, 2,750 feet above sea level. I wend my way back down, tucking into short black-diamond runs and back onto rolling blues. My skier concentration is again and again interrupted by the vista—Turnagain Arm's icy seawater, backed by the snowy summits of the Kenai Peninsula.

Once down, I climb on Chair 1, an old-fashioned double that takes 12 minutes to mosey 2,020 feet back up to the tramway landing. Here, at the terminal, is a viewing platform from which I gain an unobstructed, unparalleled panorama of the scene to the southwest—the Girdwood Valley, Turnagain Arm, the mountains beyond and the clear North Pacific sky above, draped with gauzy cirrus.

"I can't imagine a more spectacular view. Can you?" asks another skier beside me on the platform.

I think back to Talkeetna and the mass of Denali posed above cottonwoods, backdropping the frozen Susitna River. And the white-bearded old-timer I'd conversed with on the porch of the pizza place there. "Pizza good?" I'd asked.

"Best in the state," he'd replied.

"In the state? You sure?"

He'd crinkled his eyes philosophically and reached down to stroke the muzzle of his equally white-haired Malamute.

"We have a lot of bests up here," he'd averred. "I guess it's a category that's inclusive rather than exclusive."

So three days later I nod at my companion, the fellow skier enjoying the unimaginably spectacular view at Alyeska, then put my skis back on and head down into the best run of the whole year. ▲

*Freelance writer Eric Lucas lives in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood.*

## GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines serves Anchorage daily. To book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Alaska, visit the Web at [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 866-500-5511.