



*Tourists view icebergs from the Columbia Glacier in Prince William Sound.*

## ALASKA'S AGELESS BEAUTY

The Alaska territory will celebrate its 150th birthday in October

By Eric Lucas

» We'd driven up the lush sub-Arctic valleys of the Seward Peninsula, admiring August flowers such as Jacob's ladder, marsh marigold, false hellebore and fuchsia-hued fireweed. We stopped on a bridge across the Sinuk River to admire sockeye salmon below, flashing vermilion and jade in the sun-laced current. Nearby stood the triangular peaks of the Kigluaik Mountains. We crept quietly near a herd of musk ox, placidly grazing summer grass, their yard-long outer hairs shimmering in the breeze.

Only after all that did my guide, Nome Mayor Richard Beneville, turn and say: "You're probably wondering how an actor from New York City wound up in Nome."

Actually I had not wondered that at all.

Instead, I'd thought about the box fan in my hotel room a month earlier in Latvia. The German-made fan's brand was "Alaska," illustrating one of my favorite ideas about the Great Land: It's evocative enough to be a global brand. Say its name, and people envision snowy peaks, untracked wilderness, cool forests, wild creatures ... and a brawny, paddle-your-own-canoe society in which people can move on from their pasts "Outside."

Though I've enjoyed so many adventures, great and small, in Alaska, my day in Nome was a perfect microcosm of this compelling land that America bought from Russia 150 years ago.

The day began with a quintessential Alaska breakfast (a sizable platter of hash



browns, reindeer sausage and eggs) and ended with an equally quintessential trip to an AC Value Center, remote Alaska's go-to pantry, for fruit (the same bananas everyone buys in the Lower 48). In between, Beneville and I scanned the sky for gyrfalcons; toured the abandoned Pilgrim Hot Springs orphanage, a relic of the Great Spanish Influenza epidemic that broke out on the Seward Peninsula in 1918; and chatted about life in America's biggest state.

Salmon, wildlife, wildflowers, history, snowcapped mountains—all the Alaska elements, all in one day. That's the great beauty of Alaska. Everything iconic here is absolutely true: towering mountains, salmon-snatching bears, whales leaping out of the water, brawling rivers, misty forests, glaciers poised at ocean's edge. But layers of complexity lie beyond each icon, infinitely enriching the picture.

When Secretary of State William Seward engineered the \$7.2 million purchase from Russia in 1867, a few critics derided it as "Seward's Folly." But the disdain was not as widespread as legend has it; *The New York Times* described the new land as rich with gold, timber, fur, fish and even ice.

The author of *Seward's Folly: A New Look at the Alaska Purchase*, Lee Farrow, a history professor at Auburn University at Montgomery, Alabama, once met a Russian who argued that Americans should be grateful every day to Russia for "the gift of Alaska."

The state will celebrate its official handover to the United States on Alaska Day, October 18, at the precise spot in Sitka where it happened 150 years ago. Much of the pomp and circumstance will celebrate how lucky Alaska was to be purchased by the United States.

But many of us—myself and Richard Beneville included—will be celebrating something slightly different, a mirror image: How lucky the United States is to have Alaska. ❧



*Ed Stielstra runs in Anchorage during the ceremonial start of the 2016 Iditarod.*

## PART OF THE PACK

### Sebastian Schnuelle

>> **I was at the Rohn checkpoint**, 188 miles into my first Iditarod, with 810 miles still to go, and I was low on food. It was 2005, and I had recently finished the Yukon Quest, a race about the same distance as the Iditarod. I thought I was

prepared. But resting at the gateway to the interior flatlands, I was worried.

Then five-time champion Rick Swenson, who was in his fourth decade of running the Iditarod, tossed me a few packages of vacuum-sealed meals. He also fed me some great advice: I should take my time, enjoy the ride and not even think about racing. That's when I realized that even though all the mushers were technically competing, this race makes you part of a family—one I've now been proud to belong to for more than a decade.

This year marks the 45th time mushers and their teams will run the Iditarod. The approximately 1,000-mile race that was created to preserve the valuable tradition of sled dogs—long after snow machines replaced sled dogs as the most efficient means for getting supplies to remote Alaska—has even become something of a literal family tradition. This year, three



*Mitch Seavey races on the 2016 Iditarod trail.*

**The 2017 Iditarod** will begin Saturday, March 4, with the ceremonial start in Anchorage. The race to Nome alternates between a 975-mile northern route (even years) and a 998-mile southern route.

grandchildren of race founder Joe Redington Sr. are signed up to run: Ray Junior, Ryan and Robert Redington. To boot, we are currently in the middle of a championship dynasty, with the last five races going to the Seavey family. In fact, Dallas and his dad, Mitch, have finished first and second the past two races.

Despite the solitude that the Iditarod provides, the race is marked by the community it creates. There's the ceremonial start on Fourth Avenue in Anchorage, a parade that lets the public shake mittens with the mushers. Then, as mushers arrive in villages along the trail, they meet up with local people they only get to see once a year, often for only a few hours, yet it feels like a reunion of long-lost friends.

Of course, most important to the Iditarod community are the dogs, and lead dogs are often just as famous—if not more

famous—than their mushers. For instance, Leonhard Seppala's, Balto, has a statue in New York City's Central Park. Balto, along with dogs such as Togo, was part of the 1925 serum run in which mushers and sled dog teams delivered medicine from Anchorage to Nome. Today, the Alaska Airlines Leonhard Seppala Humanitarian Award recognizes a musher who takes outstanding care of his or her team.

As time marches on, the Iditarod remains true to its motto: The Last Great Race. Still, a race can't run four and half decades without evolving. Sleds are built from lighter materials; teams have dropped from an unrestricted number of dogs to 16; and finishing times have gotten much faster. Dallas Seavey reached Nome last year after eight days, 11 hours and 20 minutes—a record that more than halved the 20 days it took early winners to finish.

I've run the Iditarod seven times, finishing second in 2009, but I now spend my Iditarod days as a reporter for *Iditarod Insider*, following the race on a snow machine. Sitting next to the trail, waiting for the lead teams to emerge along the Kaltag to Unalakleet portage, I wonder about the generations of people who have used this ancient trail, a ribbon of ice engraved into the windswept tundra. Long a lifeline connecting villages and families, the trail today allows mushers a glimpse into an Alaska that few people get to see, never mind experience.

There are 17 rookies signed up for Iditarod 45, and my advice to them is the same advice Rick Swenson gave me many years ago in Rohn: Enjoy the ride, take your time and don't overthink it. If all goes well, you'll be in Nome about 11 days later, an Iditarod finisher and part of the family. ✈

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## SLED DOG FACTS TO CHEW ON

The leading Iditarod sled dog teams cover approximately **120 miles per day**.

The average sled dog **weighs 50 pounds** and can consume about **10,000 calories a day**, the equivalent of 30-plus cheeseburgers.

**All sled dogs** receive mandatory EKG testing and blood work before they are allowed to race. They are examined by race veterinarians upon arrival in each of the 26 checkpoints.

Sled dogs typically **wear dog booties** to protect their paws. That means each musher puts on 64 dog booties before each leg of the race, using more than 1,000 booties per Iditarod. —S.S.

