

WINTER ADVENTURES

THE SNOWY SEASON OFFERS A UNIQUE
SET OF ACTIVITIES IN THE GREAT LAND

BY ERIC LUCAS

Can't ride this in summer, you know. Too wet." Our Fairbanks fat-tire-biking guide, Jeff Gilmore, sweeps his arm around the frosted landscape we are traversing on this morning ride to the Golden Heart City's beautiful nature preserve, Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. Our tires crunch snowy rime. The vast blue sky bears

rays of sun that arrow down through the birch groves. The trail is the province of rushing dog sleds, ever-busy squirrels, ravens flapping wide arcs and ice dust glistening on dark spruce boughs. Though city streets are mere blocks away, they seem far in the distance.

We started at Beaver Sports, an outdoor-gear store near the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus, and



Fat-tire biking is a popular winter pastime around Fairbanks and in other parts of Alaska.

HACEPHOTO

we're now pedaling 3 miles to Creamer's on off-street trails. But we could go much farther, Gilmore says.

"We could ride all the way to Ivory Jacks [a popular restaurant north of the city], have a burger, ride back, and just cross one road," he says. "Winter brings a lot more bike-riding opportunity in Fairbanks than summer, because trails through marshy areas freeze."

Winter in Alaska is one of the state's most undervalued treasures. Often perceived as wildly cold and uninviting, winter is, in reality, one of the best times to visit and play outdoors. Downhill skiing, Nordic skiing, dog sledding, snowshoeing, ice-skating, ice fishing and, yes, bike riding—all of these activities are well-loved by people in Alaska.

Today's riding opportunity is made possible by a relatively recent innovation in winter sports. The fat-tire bicycle (or "fatbike") may have been invented in Fairbanks, or Anchorage, or elsewhere, depending on whom you ask. What's certain is that these conveyances are surprisingly effective and fun.

That isn't obvious at first glance. In essence, the bikes are sturdy frames mounted with huge tires that look like knobby circular balloons. One wonders before bestriding such a contraption whether (a) it will navigate the snow and ice as needed, and (b) can you steer the silly thing? *Yes* is the answer to both questions. In fact, in some ways, riding a fat-tire bike is easier than riding a regular one, which is why they are appearing more often in places such as Seattle where snow is often no more than a rumor.

It's no rumor in Fairbanks in winter. This March morning is exemplary. About 2 feet of powder lies beneath the trees; the sun lances sharply through a cornflower sky; the temperature is a pleasant 10 F. Yes, pleasant: It's a dry cold, as Fairbanks residents



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“The light and air are crisp. The sights and scents of snow and spruce please our senses. ... We grow so warm that caps and scarves are shed.”

Above: Ice fishing is a classic Alaska winter activity. **Below:** A skier glides down a broad slope at Alyeska Resort, near Anchorage.



RALPH KRISTOPHER

say. Not only is that true, the city registers surprisingly little wind. No fan of windy rides, I embrace both facets of the day: sunshine and calm.

From a practical standpoint, the conditions are highly user-friendly. But the experience is also aesthetically impressive; it proves to be one of the loveliest outdoor experiences imaginable. Fat-tire riding is like Nordic skiing: an honest effort that yields a rapid journey on a winter path. The light and air are crisp. The sights and scents of snow and spruce please our senses. Sounds scurry low in the woods. We grow so warm that caps and scarves are shed.

Gilmore, whose sturdy frame and prospector beard suit his profession, informs us cheerfully that though we seem to be making good time, it's nothing compared to the sport's hard-core adherents. Those are the folks who ride 100 miles in midwinter through the White Mountains north of town ... in a day. On snow. Bundled like bears.

"Yep, those folks are really going," Gilmore says. "It's for people who are completely dedicated."

THE SAME HAS BEEN SAID OF ICE FISHING, the sport I try the next day. In its usual form, ice fishing is undeniably tough. Sitting on a bucket atop a frozen lake,

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hands jammed in pockets, waiting for bites from fish that slog through glacially cold water. *Tough.*

There's a better way. Reini Neuhauser uses a spiffy ice shack he drags every winter onto Chena Lakes, east of Fairbanks in North Pole, Alaska (where Santa also greets tour buses). Neuhauser's hut has comfy benches beside six precut ice holes. Sign up for his ice-fishing "tour" and he'll bait your hook, hand you the

WINTER SIGHTS

Winter is the best time to see one of Alaska's most-sought attractions, the northern lights (aurora borealis). While the aurora may be seen throughout the state—and all year—Fairbanks is the capital for this spec-



PATRICK J. ENDRES / ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS.COM

tacle, for two reasons: From early February through March, skies here are often clear, and the Golden Heart City lies in a particularly susceptible latitude zone. The magnetic forces that produce the lights are strongest and most active in this area, making auroras an almost nightly occurrence.

Winter (March, especially) is also one of the best times for another spectacle: Denali. The 20,310-foot massif southwest of Fairbanks is its own weather maker, often shrouded in cloud in summer. National Park Service figures show that the mountain is visible from Talkeetna only 20 percent of the time in August. But in March, it's more than half the time.

Winter's cold, clear air makes both of these sights, the aurora and Denali, extra impressive. Head out to see them on skis, snowshoes, a dog sled or a fat-tire bike, and you will enhance your experience. —E.L.

DAVID MCMASTER



Downhill skiers enjoy the Eaglecrest Ski Area, near Juneau.

rod, show you how to jig it gently in the aquamarine water, and clean your catch.

That proves to be, in my case, four salmon, about 12 inches each, stocked in the lake each year by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Easily the first-caught fish of the year, for me.

We arrived at dawn, a time in winter when the sky is a painterly canvas of color, a kaleidoscope of fuchsia, platinum, indigo, peach and sand. High clouds shift aloft. The rising colors spread themselves hither and yon, not layered in orderly fashion but spreading above the eastern woods. Now, before the sun breaks over the lake, I thrust hands into pockets and stamp feet on the ice.

Later, once the fish have been caught, Neuhauser steps out to clean them on a snowbank, and it's again so warm that a jacket is unnecessary. I watch him work while he jokes about his trade: "And you thought ice fishing would be tough!"

Neuhauser brings the fillets back into the shack and fries them on a woodstove in the middle. Lunch is served beside the ice: crackers and fish and hot cocoa. And I have to laugh at the incongruous luxury of the moment. Tough, indeed.

THE CLIMB OF THE SUN in February and March—my favorite Alaska months—brings light to the land in a rush. A visit to Fairbanks holds delights such as guiding a dog sled through deep birch woods, or soaking in Chena Hot Springs at night to watch for northern lights while you



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trade hot springs myths with fellow visitors. Does the water vapor freeze in your hair so that your locks break when you touch them? Nah, but it's a colorful jest. The mist does cling to willow branches in shards that will glimmer like diamonds as you ski up the creekside trail the next day.

Skiers at Moose Mountain, one of Fairbanks' three small day-use areas, ride a quaint set of "lifts" up the hill after they have skied down: old school buses that rattle and chug, gears grinding and chassis swaying. The ride takes about nine minutes. It's a good chance to warm up.

Farther south, winter brings a bit more snow and cloud. In Talkeetna, the little riverside village about a 115-mile drive north of Anchorage, you can ski out along the Susitna River (known as the "Big Su"), and then head into the cottonwoods and cross crystalline snow 7 feet deep. If the clouds part, Denali shines in the distance, immense and pure.

In Anchorage, a different kind of conveyance—ice skates—allows you to shimmy and slide over Westchester Lagoon. It's a good idea to check ice conditions for safety. Also, one ought to wear insulated winter pants, not so much for warmth as for cushioning when one, ahem, loses one's balance. Not that I ever do that. Not purposely, anyhow.

I first learned to ice-skate at age 8, and revisiting the sport all these years later carries with it a boyish glee. Of course, boys and girls on the lagoon skate circles around me. Yet they aren't as appreciative as I am of the fine view of the Chugach Mountains east of town.

Southeast of Anchorage at Alyeska Resort, the huge skiing destination in Girdwood, the vista is as memorable as any I know. Here the powder piles up in feet, and big-mountain skiers soar out as though they were high in the Alps. Yet the ski-area base is barely 100 feet above sea level, making it unique among major U.S. resorts. The aerial tram that whisks skiers upward makes it easy to enjoy the

IF YOU GO

For Fairbanks travel information, including more about the northern lights, visit explorefairbanks.com.

• Along with skiing, ice-skating and other snow sports, Anchorage is the home of the famous winter festival Fur Rendezvous, which includes events such as snowshoe softball. Visit anchorage.net. • Learn more about winter adventures in Juneau at traveljuneau.com. —E.L.

slopes and provides a scenic ride. This is the biggest West Coast ski mountain north of Whistler, and a run top to bottom can easily consume 20 minutes or more, especially when you stop to gawk.

Clouds that look like spun silk wrap the Kenai Range peaks visible across the titanium-hued tidal flats and boisterous currents of Turnagain Arm. Up here, Alyeska's vast upper bowl clasps late winter's afternoon light, amber and mild.

ON ONE MORE FINE ALASKA WINTER DAY, I find myself at Eaglecrest Ski Area, Juneau's homegrown day-ski destination, which is smaller than Alyeska but similarly well-situated. Poised there, on Douglas Island, I face the peaks and ice fields that divide Southeast Alaska from British Columbia. Here, too, Inside Passage seas shine reflected light from below. Yet this ski area is small enough that a run takes 10 minutes, max. I decide to follow a black-diamond run with an intermediate skip down a cruiser slope.

The snow is as soft and supple as the crest of a wave. I turn my skis into the fall line and head toward the sea. ▲

Eric Lucas is the author of the Michelin Must Sees Alaska guide.

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