

NORTHERN



ENJOYING THE GLACIERS OF ALASKA BY ERIC LUCAS

ALL AROUND ME is a torrent of sensations—noise, chaos and change, color and motion. I'm a half-mile into a trek on Alaska's Matanuska Glacier, about 100 miles northeast of Anchorage. The surface is a broad palette of color, from ivory snow to watermelon algae to the shimmering sapphire of exposed ice.

Water rushes everywhere in trickles and freshets and runnels and cascades.

A symphony of sound is erupting: the creaks and crackles and groans of shifting ice and, beneath our feet, the roar of hidden cataracts.

It's as vivid and immediate a natural experience as any on this planet.

But if you are philosophically inclined, Alaska's glaciers also represent abstract infinities—eons of time, trillions of snowflakes, unstoppable geological forces that



Hiking on Matanuska Glacier provides views of blue ice pinnacles and mountain peaks.

FROM LEFT: LYNN WEGENER / DESIGN PICS / GETTY IMAGES; PATRICK J. ENDRES / DESIGN PICS / GETTY IMAGES

break down mountains born long before the human race, long before the glaciers themselves.

The state's overall statistics are gargantuan: more than 27,000 glaciers (about 600 of them named by the U.S. Geological Survey), more than 30,000 square miles of surface area, 17,000 to 28,000 gigatons of ice. Alaska holds 0.1 percent of all the glaciers on Earth, which may seem small

until you realize that Greenland and Antarctica have virtually all the rest. Alaska's Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Preserve north of Icy Bay contains the nation's largest glacial system, including Bagley Icefield, stretching 127 miles long, 6 miles wide and up to 3,000 feet deep.

But when you are actually on an Alaska glacier, none of these statistical superlatives come to mind. Physical immensity

gives way to sensory immediacy—even the air seems alive as you breathe it, a crisp atmosphere of ice vapor, mountain zephyr and hints of the dust that glaciers file off the rocks as they pass.

“Not like anywhere else, is it?” observes my hiking partner, Jody, as we stop beside a serac, an ice pinnacle, on the Matanuska.

No, it isn't like anywhere else. The

snowy peaks of the Chugach Mountains tower southward; cotton-ball clouds rim the sky; it's astoundingly warm in the sun, whose rays bounce off the ice like high beams. Ravens soar nearby, and tiny puffs of fireweed seeds float past.

What we are experiencing is amazingly easy to accomplish in Alaska, where dozens of glaciers are close to major visitor hubs and within fairly reasonable distance of roadways or other access points.

Alaska visitors can drive to glaciers, walk to glaciers, paddle to glaciers, sail to glaciers, fly to glaciers—and once there, can hike, climb, sled, ski, dog-sled, picnic, sightsee and even swim on glaciers. Yes, swim—more on that later.

Calling our trek on the Matanuska “easy” might seem unrealistically naive to those who’ve never tried it. But with crampons strapped on our hiking boots, ice axes that serve mostly as walking sticks, and sufficient layers to guard

against the cold (and to remove in the warm sun), Jody and I find our Matanuska excursion no more challenging than any moderate mountain hike. The surface of the glacier is typically more a crust of slushy snow—resembling grains of a snow cone—than slippery ice. And we have a Matanuska Glacier Park guide to steer us around hazards such as crevasses, icefalls and moulins (ice shafts).

My first Alaska glacier walk, years ago, was on the Mendenhall, in Juneau’s backyard. Once we tramped our way up the valley and reached the glacier itself, we admired the stunning blue of exposed ice, the precipitous cataracts of surface streams plunging into moulins, the long uphill rise of the glacier into the mountains above, the clean whisk of ice-scented air on our skin.

The blue ice looked like highly polished stainless steel formed into curvilinear shapes that put me in mind of Frank

Gehry’s Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle. Our guides led us, carefully, to the edges of crevasses and moulins that they had checked for safety on prior outings. The bravest among us peered into the immeasurable depths where a hydro symphony roared.

On that trip, I was in the capable hands of Above & Beyond Alaska, a Juneau-based adventure company that has operated on and near the Mendenhall for nearly two decades. Sean and Becky Janes first offered helicopter camping tours on the Mendenhall, but soon added guided hikes, somewhat of a novelty in the late 1990s. Even though Becky Janes has been on the Mendenhall hundreds of times, she pronounces her fascination undimmed.

“Glaciers are magical, mysterious, always changing. Go up one week, it’s one place; a week later, you’re exploring a completely new wonderland,” says Janes, who grew up in Juneau. She and Sean



From left, a short stroll offers great views of the Mendenhall Glacier. A man navigates Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Preserve’s Root Glacier.



STARS ON ICE

More Alaska glaciers to visit: **Exit** → Diving down a steep gulch from the heights of Kenai Fjords National Park near Seward, the glacier is visible from an overlook that's reached by about a 1-mile path from the Nature

Center. Energetic adventurers can climb a longer trail up to the glacier's origin in the Harding Icefield.

Portage → About 60 miles southeast of Anchorage off the Seward Highway, this glacier (above) is a popular

destination for fat-bike trips and boat tours.

Spencer → The Alaska Railroad's Glacier Discovery Train includes a whistle-stop at this wilderness locale, where a cabin, campground and hiking trails await visitors.

Worthington → The Worthington drops to within a mile of the Richardson Highway, 28 miles northeast of Valdez, in 2,805-foot-high Thompson Pass. A short hike takes visitors to the toe of the glacier. —E.L.

sometimes visit the Mendenhall just for fun in winter, skiing across the frozen out-fall lake. In summer, the company leads outings, including paddling trips in large, eight-person canoes. Once the group reaches the glacier, an hourlong hike follows. These adventures usually sell out.

The popularity of these trips matches the Mendenhall's overall popularity. U.S. Forest Service officials, who manage the glacier's visitor center, estimate that more than 600,000 travelers come each year. The glacier's proximity to downtown Juneau is amply illustrated by the fact that the glacier can be seen when flying into Juneau International Airport.

While my time on the Matanuska and the Mendenhall were experiences befitting the old Zen saying "Be here now," later reflection led me to pondering: How can something that flows downhill also retreat? Simple: The glacier is melting at its face at a faster rate than it is moving downhill from its origin. Think of a trickle

of hose water running down a driveway on a hot day. As the day warms, the evaporating water seems to retreat back up the drive. The face of Prince William Sound's Columbia Glacier, one of the world's fastest-moving glaciers, has retreated almost 10 miles in the past 35 years.

"I'm fascinated by the fact that glaciers seem slow, but in fact are moving rather fast geologically," says Shad O'Neel, a researcher with the U.S. Geological Survey in Anchorage who has spent years studying Alaska's Columbia and Wolverine glaciers. "We can see the evidence of movement, but not the motion itself."

Philosophical peregrination did not occupy me while I was trekking across Root Glacier, which is near Kennecott in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.

Heidi, our guide, led us up on the ice on a sunny, 70-degree June day, and the surface was as granular and saturated as any Rockies snowfall dropping amid warm Chinook winds.

We sidestepped down a small slope to the edge of a deep, narrow blue pool of standing meltwater. "I'll go in if anyone else does," Heidi declared, confident she was the only one suited up for a dip. But I happened to be wearing swimming trunks and was more than willing to take the dare. The sun beamed, and the water in the blue pool shimmered—water that had fallen on the distant heights centuries before.

"Life is only a flicker of melted ice," said the Serbian poet-philosopher Dejan Stojanović.

Heidi and I looked at each other, instant co-conspirators, and grinned. ❧

Eric Lucas lives on Washington's San Juan Island. For more on visiting Alaska, go to travelalaska.com.

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) provides regular service to 19 communities throughout Alaska.