



Destination • Alaska

GIFTS OF THE GREAT LAND

BY ERIC LUCAS



SIMPLE DELIGHTS REWARD THE TRAVELER WHO TAKES TIME TO EXPLORE ALASKA'S FOOD, FUN AND SCENIC TREASURES



BY THE WAY, if a car comes by, we're going to lie down."

I glance over at my host, Milo Burcham of Alaska's Chugach National Forest. He grins. "I don't want anyone to see what we're doing," he explains, clearly jesting. Mostly.

What we're doing is neither wrong nor inappropriate in any way. Burcham has just introduced me to the nagoonberry, a coastal Alaska midsummer fruit much prized by Alaska residents, from Ketchikan to Bristol Bay. It looks like a small, reddish-purple raspberry; grows on low mats of vegetation barely 6 inches tall; produces just a single berry per stem; and tastes like a magical cross between a marionberry and a pineapple. Wild berry picking is as much a part of Alaska life as salmon fishing, but far fewer visitors stalk wild berries than coastal cohos. And when you find a nagoonberry patch, as we have just done in the Copper River Delta near Cordova, your local guide is intensely interested in keeping it to himself. As, frankly, you should be, too—searching and finding are intrinsic parts of the experience, which is just one of many lesser-known attractions in a place called the Great Land for good reason.

The vast expanse of Alaska offers an almost infinite variety of travel activities, which includes wildlife watching, mountain gazing, and salmon- and crab-sampling itineraries—each of which I enjoy on every trip north. But a place as large and diverse as Alaska offers hundreds of other marvelous things to do, as well. My favorite activities involve the landscape, water, people and lifestyles of Alaska, and taking part in these adds considerable depth to my personal understanding of a state that is extraordinary to begin with.



BERRY PICKING

On a sunny summer day on the South-central coast, my first taste of a nagoonberry adds one more sensory layer to common Alaska sensations—the sound of the breeze in the cottonwood leaves, the scent of nearby Sitka spruce, the clear northern light. It also adds one more facet to the wild berry experience in the state. I've picked huckleberries, blue-



At left, a young woman gathers berries on a slope overlooking Prince William Sound. Above, fresh blueberries and nagoonberries picked in the Becharof National Wildlife Refuge.

berries, crowberries, salmonberries, raspberries, thimbleberries, gooseberries and more. I once cajoled a cruise-boat chef into cooking up a pot of low-bush cranberries I'd gathered on a remote island south of Juneau; the result was more intensely flavored than even the best store-bought Thanksgiving version. I've had huckleberry pancakes on the back side of Denali, in Kantishna; salmonberries in a yard in Sitka;

crowberries on a hill outside Fairbanks; thimbleberries at Eagle Beach near Juneau. And now, near Cordova, nagoonberries, which may well be the best of the lot.

A circumpolar fruit found in Scandinavia, Canada and Russia, *Rubus arcticus* is called the "berry of princes" in Russia. "Nagoon" is believed to be from the Tlingit *nei'góon* ("little jewel," and rightly so); Alaskans have been treasuring these for millennia. Happy harvesters turn them into pies, freeze them, make them into preserves and jelly... And, of course, sample them liberally on the spot to make sure they remember accurately just how good they are. That's what I'm doing this afternoon.

No, sorry, I won't reveal exactly where we were. Somewhere near the Copper River. It's a big state, chock-full of wild berries. Go find your own—please. And be sure to find out how to identify potentially poisonous plants.



DOGSLEDDING

Overnight frost has left diamond dust in the woods around us. The midmorning sun slants through the branches, and the blue-sky air is so clear, it's a prism for the light to reflect off the paper bark. The whole scene seems ivory, crisp, magical.

"Welcome to our backyard. We call this the gateway to Narnia," announces my passenger in the dogsled basket, Eleanor Wirts.

I look around. Almost anywhere else it would be a cliché to

compare a woodland trail to C.S. Lewis' famous fantasy world, but here in the Chena River Valley northeast of Fairbanks, I'm tempted to embrace flights of fancy while dogsledding on a fine winter morning.

The clean sub-Arctic air holds only the gossamer scents of spruce, snow and birch. The only sounds are the slice of the runners on the snow and the huffing of the dogs as we go. I'm encased in winter coats and gloves as thick as Persian cats, and almost all thought is focused on the marvel of the moment ... and the dogs I am guiding.

Kennel owner Wirts provided 10 minutes of instruction: Step on the brake to slow the sled; lean right or left around bends; set the dogs running with "Let's go!" (No, not "Mush!")

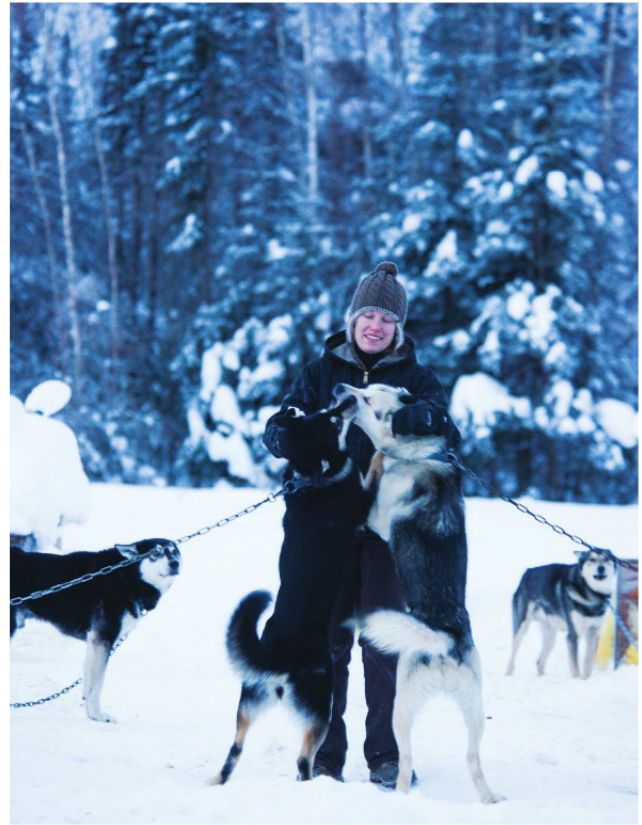
Then I met each of the ten dogs on the team, including the lead female, Patch. They are all gentle, sociable canines whose enthusi-



asm for greeting people and then running the trail is palpable. While driving the sled, I can't help but be impressed by the sheer acceleration the dogs generate. If this were an engine-driven conveyance, that would be called torque, but this is a classic, wood-slat dogsled, and my experience this morning with Just Short of Magic kennels is well beyond the ordinary for Alaska visitors.

The typical dogsled excursion in Alaska consists of a 40-minute snow-season ride while bundled up in the front of the sled, with kennel owners or staff driving. Similar summer tours take place on wheeled sleds, or high on glaciers reached by bush planes outfitted with skis.

The experience in any form offers a taste of why Alaskans such as Eleanor Wirts adore the sport, the lifestyle and the dogs, and why they arrange their lives to devote as much time as possible to



all three. Wirts, a former high school science teacher, keeps 30 sled dogs in her dog yard, and each of her canine family members is delightfully eager.

But the greatest delight at Wirts' kennel, as at a few others throughout the state, is the fact that guests can drive the sleds themselves. It's a profoundly different experience from simply

riding up front. The instant momentum provided by the dogs, the swing and sway of the sled, the brush of the breeze and giddy rush of rounding a bend—all of these enhance an already marvelous experience.

Sled dogs greet a guest at the Just Short of Magic kennels, above. Swimmers enjoy a warm summer day at the beach in Juneau, left, and paddlers ply the waters of Byers Lake in Denali State Park, right.



OTHER PURSUITS

• **BIKING:** Anchorage has almost 200 miles of off-street recreation trails open to bicyclists year-round. A popular ride is from downtown to Kincaid Park, about 11 miles along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail; bike rentals are available at several stores downtown.

• **HIKING:** One need not disappear into the wilderness for days to enjoy Alaska's

wildlands—every city has marvelous day hikes. Flattop Mountain Trail, near Anchorage, leads to expansive views of Denali from the Chugach highlands. Ester Dome, near Fairbanks, offers views of the Brooks Range. The Mount Roberts Tramway, in downtown Juneau, takes visitors to alpine territory directly above Alaska's capital city.

• **CANOEING:** Kayaking gets most of the press here, but paddling canoes on Alaska's lakes and rivers is a sublime and serene experience. Eklutna Lake, north of Anchorage, has rentals on-site; several tour operators offer daylong float trips on the Chena River, in Fairbanks. For more information, visit anchorage.net and explorefairbanks.org. —E.L.

It's not superfast, by the way; leave that to sled dog racers. An hour or so out and back at a working trot is the norm. Week-long treks are serious business practiced by overland competitors, or by expert guides who take guests out in the winter woods, such as the trips offered at another Fairbanks kennel, Paws for Adventure, which operates a remote lodge to which guests travel on overnight adventures.

"Want to thank the dogs?" Wirts asks when we arrive back at her kennel. Silly question—I mention how wonderful the trip was to Patch, the lead, and she smiles. Hard to say who had more fun, me or her, but I have to remind myself that there is neither snow nor room for a dog kennel back home in Seattle.

"That's why I moved out here in the woods," Wirts says. "It's my little fairy-tale land."



SWIMMING

"OK, this is too hot. Is there somewhere around here where people go swimming?"

My guide in Petersburg, Liz Cabrera, regards me quizzically. Rarely has a visitor asked about swimming in this Southeast city known for its fishing industry. Rarely, in fact, does it get warm enough to consider such a thing, but on this day it is 85 degrees. We have been strolling a boardwalk through a spruce bog that has steam rising from it, and the mid-July sun is high, high above and not moving. All I want is cool water.

"Yes, there is, actually," she replies, and off we go to a local picnic ground beside a slow-running stream that spills off the snowfields from the mountain above. Though this pool may be sourced from snow, on this hot July day the water is just delightfully cool, and I plunge in for a 10-minute splash.



That is one of several times I have gone swimming in Alaska. On a brilliant warm summer day in Juneau, I sampled the salt waters of Gastineau Channel at Juneau's Sandy Beach, an aptly named stretch of golden sand. Several years ago, at a lodge along Bristol Bay's Naknek River, I dove from a boat dock into the lightly tannic amber water—again, refreshing but not cold.

Some travelers make a point of visiting Barrow, America's northernmost city, just to plunge into the pewter waters of the Chukchi Sea, an arm of the Arctic Ocean, thereby ensuring that they have swum in all the world's oceans. I didn't find the water appealing, so only dabbled my toes. I've been in all the other oceans; do wet toes count?

Kirsten Dixon leads a cooking class at Tutka Bay, top left. Chef Matt Serfass prepares salmon-belly skewers at Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge, top right. The Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline and Dalton Highway stretch between Fairbanks and Prudhoe Bay.

Counting isn't the point. I must admit that there's a certain exotic appeal to enjoying an outdoor sport—swimming—that few Alaska visitors choose. Water is a foundational aspect of the state—its oceans, rivers, streams and lakes (more than 1 million of the latter) shape its character as much as its mountains. Glaciers carve the land; salmon spawn in the rivers; rain washes the woods; and to me, pausing to merely look at all that water falls far short of truly experiencing its sensory possibilities.



CULINARY EXPERIENCE

Matt Serfass' introduction to our midafternoon menu stuns me.

"This is salmon belly," he explains, holding a 2-inch-wide strip of silver salmon in his hands. "It's usually thrown away."

Disbelieving, I turn to my resident Alaskan friend, eyebrows raised. True, she nods. At home I have cooked hundreds of salmon, and I personally favor the belly over the rest of the fish. It's more flavorful, and carries more of the nutritionally desirable omega-3 acids than any other part of a




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salmon. I wouldn't dream of discarding it.

"If you leave the belly on a fillet, it will be way overdone when the loin [the thick part along the spine] is underdone," explains Serfass, chef at Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge, outside Seward. So the lodge conceived a culinary experience in which guests can learn a quick preparation of salmon belly. We three visitors—a Seattleite, an Alaskan and a woman from Lyon, France—watch him prepare a marinade of sesame oil, mirin (a sweet Asian sauce), honey, cayenne and soy, and baste the 2-inch chunks we have placed on skewers. Then, into an oven they go at 350 degrees. Just five minutes later, the belly slabs, garnished with a wild edible called beach greens (from the beach just out the door), prove delicious.

More and more Alaska lodges are offering cooking classes and culinary experiences, and why not? The state's

IF YOU GO

- Sled dog tours are available throughout Alaska, from Juneau to Nome; visit the website for each city's CVB.
- Northern Alaska Tours, in Fairbanks, offers land and air trips north of the Arctic Circle to Coldfoot and beyond; visit northernalaska.com.
- For information on the state's farms, markets and restaurants that feature their products, consult the state's Alaska Grown program at dnr.alaska.gov/ag.
- Guides to berry picking are online at the Alaska Public Lands Information Centers, www.alaskacenters.gov; and at the Alaska Channel, alaska.org.
- Information on Kenai Fjords Wilderness Lodge is at kenaifjordslodge.com. For information on cooking classes at Tutka Bay, visit withinthewild.com.
- Matanuska-Susitna Borough is the heart of Alaska's farm country, and home of the State Fair; alaskavisit.com. —E.L.



HEATHER WRIGLEY

Bryce Wrigley stands in a field of barley grown at Wrigley Farms, near Delta Junction. The grain will be milled at Wrigley's Alaska Flour Company for local markets.

seafood is matchless, and ingredients such as native ferns are generally far outside most travelers' experience. I've cooked

salmon fillets on a cedar plank at Icy Strait Point, near Juneau, sautéed herring roe in a skillet on a small-ship cruise near Sitka and learned how to prepare spot prawn sashimi.

All this is just the tip of a large iceberg.

"Alaska cuisine has elements of Russian heritage, Native culture, sourdough fortitude, garden harvests, pickled and preserved delicacies to last a harsh winter, Scandinavian influence, and all the seafood to be found in the cold, clear waters of the Pacific Ocean present at the Alaska table," says Kirsten Dixon of Within the Wild, an adventure-lodge company. Dixon, owner and chef, offers extensive cooking courses at her Tutka Bay Lodge, south of Homer on the Kenai Peninsula. "And now more recent immigrants are adding Asian flavors, too," she says.

In other words, Great Land cuisine represents cultural as well as gastronomic bounty. Learning about it simply deepens the taste.



ARCTIC CIRCLE ADVENTURES

"Here, it's like candy." Jack Reakoff hands me a freshly rinsed turnip just pulled from the sandy loam beside the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River. It's midmorning, a breezy July day, and I regard his turnip with, well, skepticism. Turnips lie

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low in my pantheon of vegetables. (The University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service has a pamphlet titled *Tantalizing Turnips*.) Candy?

Not candy, but it's the best turnip I've ever tasted, meshing sweet and sharp. It boasts savor and size—approximately softball size—and it's remarkable for the fact that we are 70 miles north of the Arctic Circle, in Wiseman, a tiny hamlet (14 year-round residents) just off the Dalton Highway in the approaches to the Brooks Range.

Turnips grow among the giant carrots,

hefty potatoes and kingly kohlrabi in the garden where Reakoff shows visitors the wonders of life in the Arctic.

"We may be far north, but in summer we have 24 hours of sun for almost 40 days," he explains.

Most of Reakoff's power comes from a rooftop solar installation. There's no cell service, but satellite Internet is high-speed. In winter, the snow he banks up against the walls of the house is welcome as insulation.

A trip north of the Arctic Circle is eye-opening in many ways. Along the Dalton

Highway at Coldfoot Camp, a truck stop/lodge/restaurant roughly halfway between Fairbanks and Deadhorse, the parking lot is a hive of activity for long-haul truckers (as in that television ice road show, though this is actually not an ice road), motorcycles, European tourists in rented vans and workers headed up to North Slope jobs.

After Wiseman, our Northern Alaska Tour Company van heads over Atigun Pass, the cleft that carries the highway and the trans-Alaska oil pipeline over the Brooks Range at a pass elevation of 4,739 feet. Descending the other side, we're in a treeless world of tussocked tundra, scrub and grass, mist and sun, planing down 200 miles toward the Arctic Ocean. It's like no other landscape I've seen on Earth, and I stop for a moment's appreciation when I spy a familiar-looking

ONLY IN ALASKA

- There are no public outdoor swimming pools in Alaska—the only such state. But there are several hot spring pools open to the public, as well as numerous freshwater lakes and ponds.
- Alaska's Cooperative Extension Service publishes guides to 16 different edible wild berries that residents (and visitors) can seek; uaf.edu/ces.
- Approximately 1,500 Alaska households have sled dog teams, estimates the Alaska Dog Musher's Association; sleddog.org.
- The sun drops below the horizon in Barrow on November 18, and returns January 23—more than two months of Arctic night. The reverse is true in summer, when the sun does not set for more than two months between May 12 and July 31.
- Palmer resident John Evans holds several world records for large vegetables, including a 45-pound red cabbage, a 19-pound carrot and a 39-pound kohlrabi.



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plant, an Arctic cinquefoil whose cheery yellow blossoms resemble those of its desert cousins thousands of miles south.

Otherwise, everything's different—the light, the air, the sound of the wind. When I head back up Atigun Pass, I turn and watch the last shale-slide foothills of the North Slope disappear into what seems like another dimension.



AGRITOURISM

"Not a bad place to work." Bryce Wrigley grins as I frame him for a snapshot against his farm and surroundings. Both are impressive.

First, the farm: 1,700 acres of rolling, volcanic loess soil in a broad valley with ample sun and rain. Wrigley grows barley and a few peas, and is experimenting with other grains.

And the surroundings: the rugged 9,000-foot snow-draped peaks of the Wrangell Mountains, above which a summer sky as vast as hope dangles a few threads of cloud.

Wrigley's farm is the foundation of his Alaska Flour Company near Delta Junction, 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks. Barley has been grown in the area for a half-century or longer. Wrigley has started a company to prepare his own value-added products from the thousands of pounds of grain he harvests each year—barley flour, barley cereal, barley couscous, even whole-grain barley, which cooks have been adding to hearty soups and stews for centuries. Wrigley's products are for sale in select grocery stores in cities such as Anchorage and Fairbanks, and online.

Back in Fairbanks, on a south-facing ridge west of the city, Calypso Farm raises broccoli, cabbage, chard, lettuce, onions, garlic and 70 other kinds of produce. Bright flowers fill side spaces, and the farm climbs the ridge in terraces whose lush rows of produce compose an agronomic postcard. Calypso's products are for sale at local farmers markets, and visitors are welcome at the farm itself, to admire the bounty, meet the farm's sheep, and marvel at the apple trees. Calypso is pioneering here where winter

temperatures reach far below zero.

The farm, which operates as an educational nonprofit, offers samples of vegetables, including potatoes, carrots, lettuce, and even kohlrabi and turnips. I pass on the last (how could it be as good as an Arctic turnip?) and taste a few sweet snow peas.

A brief shower patters on the roof, and the white birch trunks glimmer on the hill. Life seems simple, here, and the thought brings to mind a verse from that famous old Shaker song *Simple Gifts*: "And when we find ourselves in the place just right,

'twill be in the valley of love and delight."

Here in Alaska, the many layers and levels of life afford simple gifts, easy to find, as enduring as songs. ▲

Eric Lucas is a contributing editor.

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