

THE NEXT FRONTIER

From the wildest heli-hiking to the tastiest trout fishing, the state of Alaska's luxury lodges.

BY ANN ABEL

NORTHERN EXPOSURE: ULTIMA THULE LODGE, WHICH IS MORE THAN 100 MILES FROM THE NEAREST ROAD, OFFERS PRIVATE FLIGHTS TO PRISTINE HIKING OR BACKCOUNTRY SKIING LOCATIONS.



ULTIMA THULE LODGE
ultimathulelodge.com

Alaska is hands down the most exotic you can get in America without a passport, a northerly paradise where the mountains are twice as big, the skies twice as vast, the days twice as long (or don't happen at all), and the best places are exponentially more remote. Nature, at its most epic and glorious, is still king here, with the state accounting for more than half of the U.S.' protected wilderness areas. Locals don't mention highway numbers, as there's basically just one major artery, which runs in a loop from Anchorage to Fairbanks and Denali, that everyone simply calls "the road."

While plenty of cruise ships ply the waters of the southeastern panhandle, and a good number of visitors opt for camper vans or cheap and cheerful cabins with shared bathhouses, the quintessential luxury Alaska is found by going off-road. Catering to sportsmen and photographers, the best lodges are reached only by floatplane, helicopter or 12-seater Cessna—which makes the fact that people managed to build these outposts of refined rusticity all the more remarkable.

Here are three of the finest.





ULTIMA THULE LODGE

Quite possibly the most isolated lodge anywhere, Ultima Thule Lodge takes its name from the “unknowable realm” beyond the northern bounds of ancient Greek maps (and a Longfellow book inspired by same). Getting there requires perseverance: a six-hour drive northeast from Anchorage to Chitina, then a 90-minute flight from the airstrip to the lodge, in the Wrangell-St. Elias Wilderness. By the time we arrived, the other 11 guests and I were congratulating ourselves for merely having made it.

This was land that had likely never seen another human when owner Paul Claus’ father, John, staked out a claim on 5 acres (“with a 13-million-acre backyard,” as he liked to say) in 1960 under the Alaskan Homestead Act. (Even the Athabascan people who had been in the region believed the valley was haunted.) Now nearly every inch of it is accessible (and return-from-able), thanks to a fleet of Piper Super Cubs and some of the best bush pilots anywhere.

Paul Claus (who has more than 35,000 hours of flight time), his son, daughter and son-in-law are among them. Paul and his wife, Donna, made this land their per-

manent home in 1982 and began building the lodge. It’s a big step up from the rough cabin John built with two Eskimos, but some of the logs from that simple home are in the main lodge. Donna, a former champion ski racer, runs the kitchen—starting with the fluffy scones she pulls out of the oven around dawn.

The place is improbable, operated by a family that has spent more than three decades smack in the middle of nowhere—more than 100 miles from the nearest road—but is worldly, eager to converse about their Africa travels and ready to cater to guests who are accustomed to a certain standard of comfort.

The experience is homespun but undeniably luxurious. There are five log cabins, with porches festooned with petunias, dahlias and marigolds. Inside, each one is a little oasis with fluffy bear-skin rugs, a vintage writing desk, Craftsman furniture, a hot shower and a wrought-iron oil-drip stove. They share a wood-fired cedar sauna and outdoor hot tub, plus the main lodge, where dinners of vegetables from the on-site organic garden and locally sourced salmon and game are served family-style. Adding to the appeal is that everything here got here

RARE AIR

Inspired by its vintage aviation watches, Patek Philippe releases a high-flying new timepiece.

There are many reasons to covet a Patek Philippe timepiece, but a pilot’s watch is not the first model that comes to mind—until now. Introduced at Baselworld earlier this year, the Patek Philippe Pilot Time Calatrava Ref. 5524 (\$47,600) is a classic aviator timepiece—with large, luminous Arabic numbers on a blue-black dial, a skeletonized hand to track a second time zone and two large pushers at 8 and 10 that are locked to prevent unintentional adjustments. The 42mm case is offered exclusively in white gold and will be ready for takeoff in the fall.



TORDRILLO MOUNTAIN LODGE
tordrillomountainlodge.com



COLD COMFORTS: TORDRILLO MOUNTAIN LODGE OFFERS PADDLEBOARDING, HELI-HIKING AND EXCELLENT FISHING—AND AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOU CAN EVEN CHIP YOUR OWN ICE CUBES OFF A GLACIER.

via a small steel tube. (Everything: When the Chitina River changed course, forcing the Clauses to relocate some cabins, one of their crack pilots managed to land a C130 carrying an earthmover on a strip of ice.)

Those cabins, cocoons that they are, are the base camp for Ultima Thule’s distinct brand of adventure. Each day, guests climb into two- and four-seater planes and set off wherever their pilots and the weather suggest: flight-seeing, hiking, wildlife spotting, fishing, rafting and backcountry skiing in spring. The playground is the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, which at more than 9 million acres of tundra, glaciers, volcanoes and coastal mountains is the largest protected wilderness in the world. The massive Mount St. Elias is 17,000 feet of vertical rock (arguably taller than Everest, which starts at a higher elevation), and guests have found sea fossils on lesser peaks.

The pilots can get guests pretty much anywhere—Paul Claus parked our plane in a dry riverbed and led me on a hike to a hidden cave on the side of a mountain (discovered on a staff geocaching

adventure), flew us to a meadow full of wildflowers for our picnic, landed on a glacier where we walked over to see the remains of an old mining camp and soared by mountain peaks on our way home.

The Claus family makes everything look easy, but Paul begins every trip with a warning. The only given in the wilderness will be unpredictability. He calls it the Alaska Factor: “Everything is bigger, larger, greater—and tougher than it looks. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. If you come here, you’ll contend with the Alaska Factor.”

TORDRILLO MOUNTAIN LODGE

Olympic gold medalist Tommy Moe was ski royalty when he and some friends headed into the Tordrillo Mountains, about 60 miles west of Anchorage, with a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter and ten barrels of jet fuel nearly 20 years ago for a week of corn skiing and king salmon fishing. By the end, they knew they wanted to return—and were sure others would follow.

Since then, the partners, who also include Alaska heli-ski pioneers Greg Harms and Mike

Overcast, have turned Tordrillo Mountain Lodge, on the banks of Judd Lake and the Talachulitna River, into one of the most acclaimed bases for exploring and adventuring. The topflight backcountry guides and pilots are known for pioneering more heli-ski terrain than anyone else in Alaska. Although it’s just a 40-minute floatplane flight from Anchorage, it feels spectacularly remote.

That’s not a coincidence. Several of the owners operate bigger fishing lodges, and Tordrillo is their “toddy house”—where they take their families to escape the fishing tourism scene—built on 5 acres they self-scouted, on the edge of national forest with views of two 11,000-foot volcanoes and Mount McKinley.

The draws are isolation, excellent fishing and access to terrain that’s plenty challenging for accomplished skiers and other world-class athletes—a recently retired Major League player who pitched a winning World Series game was there during my stay, and Laird Hamilton and Karl Malone are also in the guest book. Hamilton insisted the owners buy

a stand-up paddleboard for guests to explore the lake and river; my guide confessed that it gets little use, SUP being a sport only for those with excellent balance and tolerance for cold, even during my visit in August.

Heli-skiing and boarding start during the lengthening days of March and continue into the midnight-sun months, and fly-fishing starts just behind. By late summer, the salmon are spawning in such great numbers that the streams may as well be koi ponds.

There are rich waters right outside or a short Jet Ski ride away (or SUP if you’re brave), but helicopters also get guests deeper into nature. There’s spectacular heli-hiking, too, like a ramble down a wildflower-dusted mountain slope, where the shrubbery was already beginning to turn crimson, toward a glacial lake whose shores resemble a Richard Serra work in glacial blue. My guide and I walked among the massive, irregular cubes, three times my height, chipped off some chunks and placed them in the baggage hold of the helicopter for G&Ts that night.

As for the lodge itself—where rates start at \$1,100 a night in the summer—it’s a 5,600-square-foot log cabin that sleeps 12, with walls of windows, a shared living room, three large cedar decks overlooking the lake and mountains, and a wood-fired outdoor hot tub and

sauna. (There is also a second, five-bedroom lodge on the opposite shore of the lake.) An Aman Resort it's not; my room had little more than a bed and some hooks for clothes, but that bed was plush, the shower was hot, and the stunning emptiness of Alaska was right outside.

FAVORITE BAY LODGE

This southeastern fishing lodge isn't quite as remote at Tordrillo—there are scheduled floatplane flights from Juneau to Admiralty Island, and the nearby community of Angoon is home to a few hundred people—but is no less placid. Favorite Bay Lodge is in a sublime spot on the inside passage, near the Tongass National Forest, and it's impossible to choose a favorite of the bays that surround it.

As at Tordrillo in summer, fishing is the big draw: freshwater for Dolly Varden, cutthroat and steelhead trout, and saltwater for salmon and massive halibut.

GREAT OUTDOORS AND INDOORS: AFTER A DAY OF SALT- OR FRESHWATER FISHING AT FAVORITE BAY, GUESTS ARE TREATED TO ALASKAN FUSION COOKING AT THE LODGE'S RUSTIC RESTAURANT.

One frequent guest I met proudly showed me his photo with the 375-pound fish he caught several years ago. (It's impressive enough to be on the lodge's website.) The guides have spent their lives on these waters. And here guests get to keep much of their haul (though the chef may take some for dinner, which everyone seems to appreciate); rates (which begin at \$3,750 for three nights) include processing and shipping up to 100 pounds of fish to Juneau.

But it's also a full-on luxury lodge, with 12 individually decorated guest rooms with native cedar walls, lodge-pole furnishings, big bathrooms with soaking tubs, handcrafted rugs and excellent bedding. The pretty dining and great room has a sunken fireplace area, double-height ceilings, three full walls of windows and spectacular views over Favorite Bay, especially for late-night sunsets. The activities extend far beyond rod and reel, with many guests exploring the bays by kayak or motorboat, hiking or scouting out the bald eagles and bears—both are here in huge numbers.

There's no way I'm going to

haul in a 375-pound anything, so I cruised over to a nearby island for a bear-spotting expedition with lodge owner Dana Durand, who built the lodge with profits from his catering business in Monterey, California. This is a be-careful-what-you-wish-for proposition, and I was secretly relieved to come across little more than freshly killed salmon, whose hunters had been scared off by our voices. Seeing the majestic, fearsome animals by boat is enough. Durand hap-

pens to be a mycologist, so we stopped off to forage, filling a bucket with a perfect porcini (soon a delicious carpaccio) and so many chanterelles that it was hard to carry.

On the way home, we cruised through the fishing waters of Chatham Strait, where the krill and herring that draw fish also attract humpback whales. Within 15 minutes, we saw a pair fully breach and spin in perfect synchronicity. You couldn't choreograph a better show. **FL**



FAVORITE BAY LODGE
favoritebay.com



THE ART OF TRAVEL

A new 21c Museum Hotel debuts in Durham, North Carolina.

In 2006, philanthropists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson had the bold idea to combine their love of contemporary art with travel. The result was the 21c Museum Hotel in their hometown of Louisville, a boutique hotel that displays some of their personal art collection and features exceptionally curated exhibitions in its public gallery spaces. Two more 21c hotels soon followed—in Cincinnati and Bentonville, Arkansas—and this spring they opened a fourth, in Durham, North Carolina (www.21cmuseumhotels.com/durham). The new 21c is set in the historic Hill Building, a 17-story Art Deco structure designed by Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon (architects of the Empire State Building) and reimaged by New York architect Deborah Berke. In addition to 125 rooms and Counting House, a restaurant serving modern North Carolina fare, there is 10,500 square feet of exhibition space. And as with all 21c hotels, Durham has signature penguins—in fuchsia—which mysteriously move around the hotel throughout your stay.

