



While most visitors are familiar with Alaska's summer landscapes, there's no getting around the fact that the snow-covered version of our surroundings is with us longer. Fortunately, Alaskans don't just make peace with [winter](#) – we celebrate it! Many visitors would be surprised to discover that our winter temperatures are comparable to many places in the Continental U.S. Alaska boasts near-limitless winter adventure options, with activities ranging from dog mushing, skiing and winter festivals galore. So why not come up and experience Alaska the way the locals do – on skis, under the northern lights, soaking in an outdoor hot spring or racing down a snowy trail behind a team of sled dogs.

Northern Lights

The aurora borealis, also known as northern lights, occur about 60 or 70 miles above the earth's surface —about 10 times higher than a jet aircraft flies — and can extend hundreds of miles into space. The most common color displayed is a brilliant yellow-green, but the aurora borealis can also produce red, blue and purple patterns.

When to view

The northern lights are best viewed during the winter and often spotted as early as August. The aurora is most active around the autumn and spring equinoxes, September/October and March/April, and are most likely to be seen late at night or in the early morning hours. Fortunately, many Alaska hotels offer a northern lights wake-up call to alert visitors when the lights are out.

Best conditions

Ideal conditions for aurora viewing involve clear, moonless skies, but with clearer skies come sub-zero temperatures — so be sure to dress warm.

Enhance your chances

Aurora activity increases with sun spot activity, which generally occurs in 11-year cycles. The most recent solar peak, known as the solar maximum, occurred in 2001; the next is expected around 2012. Visitors can track near-term activity by taking advantage of the University of Alaska Fairbanks' online [aurora forecasting tool](#).

Location

High solar sunspot activity makes it possible to view auroras across the United States. However, the aurora is most easily spotted when the viewer is closer to the North Pole. Certain factors to consider include weather patterns and light interference. Some regions of Alaska experience frequent low-pressure systems that create a cloud cover over the night sky making the aurora difficult to view. Towns and cities also produce ambient light that interferes with aurora viewing, and while auroras are still visible from cities, it is best to view from the outskirts of town, or in an area known for clear, dark skies. Fairbanks and points farther north are considered the best in Alaska for northern lights viewing, although they can be spotted anywhere in Alaska.

Dog Mushing

Dog mushing is the official sport of Alaska. Visitors travel from around the world to witness any number of Alaska's famous sled dog races, including long-distance races like the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race from Anchorage to Nome and the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race; mid-distance races like the Kuskokwim 300, Copper Basin 300 and Tustumena 200; and sprint races held in conjunction with winter festivals, including the Open North American Championships in Fairbanks and the Open World Championship Sled Dog Race held in conjunction with Anchorage's Fur Rendezvous Festival. In the summer, many sled dog kennels offer tours, providing visitors an opportunity to learn about and experience dog mushing firsthand – on a sled dog excursion atop a glacier or along a groomed trail. The sport is broken down into three main styles:

Sprint Mushing

Dogs are trained to run as fast as they can for speeds as short as two miles to as long as 20. Sprint mushers use a lightweight sled. Their speed is enhanced by the fact that unlike in longer races, sprint racers don't need to carry extensive camping provisions and food for dogs and mushers.

Distance Mushing

Dogs train to travel long distances, and have impressive endurance. These canine ultra-athletes can cover 40 to 100 miles at a time. Distance mushers typically run their dogs on an even "run-rest" schedule, meaning dogs will run and then rest for equal periods of time. A great deal of strategy goes into these extremely competitive races, so each musher has their own approach. Distance races fall into two categories – mid-distance, which is usually defined as up to 300 miles; and long-distance races, which, like the Iditarod, can be 1,000 miles or more and take winning teams about 12 days to complete.

Recreational Mushing

While the glory goes to the race champions, many dog-team owners in Alaska just do it for fun. Recreational mushers have small kennels ranging from two to

20 dogs and take advantage of local trail networks groomed and maintained for mushing. The community of Two Rivers, just outside Fairbanks, has the highest concentration of dog teams in the world, and other mushing hot spots include Willow, north of Wasilla, and the Kenai Peninsula. Another popular recreational activity for dog lovers in Alaska is skijoring, which involves skiing while being pulled by one or two dogs. There are many skijoring races throughout the winter and recreational dog mushers often participate in both sports.

Skiing/Snowboarding

Alpine sports in Alaska are a way of life. Whether you're simply looking for a good workout and beautiful surroundings, or if you're a thrill-seeking, deep-powder addict, Alaska has an experience for everyone.

Alpine Skiing/Snowboarding

Juneau's Eaglecrest Ski Area and Girdwood's Alyeska Resort are the main destination downhill recreation areas for resort-based alpine skiing and snowboarding. Locals find plenty of opportunity for lift-serviced skiing in Anchorage at Hilltop Ski Area and Alpenglow at Arctic Valley and in Fairbanks at Mount Aurora/Skiland and Moose Mountain. Those that prefer the backcountry enjoy terrain at Thompson Pass near Valdez, Palmer's Hatcher Pass and the Kenai Peninsula's Turnagain Pass.

Cross-country

Cross-country and backcountry skiing is easily accessible in just about every Alaska community, whether it is on groomed trails or trackless mountainsides. Anchorage's Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, part of which is in Kincaid Park, is a popular place to start with groomed trails and maintained tracks. Also in Anchorage are Russian Jack Springs Park and the Hillside Trail System. Cross-country skiers in Fairbanks can enjoy Birch Hill Recreation Area and the University of Alaska Fairbanks trail system. Eaglecrest Ski Area is also the right place to find groomed Nordic trails for both cross-country and skate skiing in Juneau. The Kenai Peninsula, Hatcher Pass in the Mat-Su Valley and many other areas offer groomed trails and peaceful winter landscapes for cross-country skiing. Rentals are available in many communities, so make a great workout part of your Alaska winter vacation!

Heli-skiing

In Alaska, one need not be an expert skier or snowboarder in order to heli-ski. The sport consists of off-trail, downhill skiing and, as the name implies, skiers and snowboarders access untouched runs and deep powder by helicopter, not on a ski lift. The season runs from late winter to spring, February through April, a time with prime snow conditions, increased daylight hours and safest flying conditions. The most popular areas for heli-skiing in Alaska include the Prince William Sound communities of Valdez and Cordova,

Girdwood in Southcentral Alaska, and the Inside Passage communities of Haines and Juneau.

Snowmobiling

In Alaska, no wilderness is too far out of reach to explore and a snowmobile is often the best way to get there. Numerous tour operators offer both guided and unguided treks into the backcountry for riders of all abilities. Some excellent snowmobiling locations include Fairbanks, Denali, Talkeetna, Valdez, Haines, the Mat-Su Valley, Girdwood and the Kenai Peninsula. Oh, and if you do go snowmobiling in Alaska, don't be confused if people start talking about snowmachines – that's the local vernacular for the backcountry machines.

Winter Festivals

Alaska's winter festivals are fun, quirky, full of arts and culture and are also an educational experience for visitors. Eager spectators flock from all parts of the country to partake in the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous Festival. Fur Rondy, as it's known, is just the beginning of weeks of activity in Anchorage beginning in late February and stretching through the ceremonial start of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in downtown Anchorage. Snowshoe softball, a snow-sculpting competition, traditional Inupiaq blanket toss and many other interesting and wide-ranging events mark this period in Anchorage. Those who are even braver may opt to jump into frigid waters in the Polar Bear Jump Off, which takes place each year in Seward. In Fairbanks, the World Ice Art Championships feature the work of the world's top ice sculptors. The ice sculptures remain on display in a giant ice park for spectators to wander through and enjoy for several weeks, and those who come early in the festival can watch them being created. In the Inside Passage, Haines' Bald Eagle Festival celebrates an annual early-winter congregation of thousands of bald eagles on banks and in the treetops bordering the Chilkat River. These are just a few of the many events in Alaska that offer something for everyone. For more winter events in Alaska visit TravelAlaska.com.

If You Go

Alaska Travel Industry Association

www.travelalaska.com/Media%20Center

Phone: (800) 327-9372

Anchorage Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.anchorage.net

Phone: (907) 276-4118

Alaska Dog Musers Association

www.sleddog.org

Phone: (907) 457-MUSH

Anchorage Fur Rendezvous Festival

www.furrondy.net

Phone: (907) 274-1177

Alyeska Resort

www.alyeskaresort.com

Phone: (800) 880-3880

Arctic Valley Ski Area

www.skiarctic.net

Phone: (907) 428-1208

Cordova Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center

www.cordovachamber.com

Phone: (907) 424-7260

Denali National Park and Preserve

www.nps.gov/dena/index.htm

Phone: (907) 683-2294

Eaglecrest Ski Area

www.skijuneau.com

Phone: (907) 790-2000

Fairbanks Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.explorefairbanks.com

Phone: (800) 327-5774

Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks

www.gedds.alaska.edu/auroraforecast

Phone: (907) 474-7558

Haines Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.haines.ak.us

Phone: (800) 458-3579

Hilltop Ski Area

www.hilltopskiarea.org

Phone: (907) 346-1446

Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race

www.iditarod.com

Phone: (907) 248-MUSH

Juneau Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.traveljuneau.com

Phone: (888) 581-2201

Kenai Peninsula Tourism Marketing Council

www.kenaipeninsula.org

Phone: (907) 262-5229

Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.alaskavisit.com

Phone: (907) 746-5000

Moose Mountain

www.shredthemoose.com

Phone: (907) 479-4732

Mount Aurora Skiland

www.skiland.org

Phone: (907) 389-2314

Nome Convention & Visitors Bureau

www.visitnomealaska.com

Phone: (907) 443-6624

Polar Bear Jump Off

www.seward.com/news-events/polarbear.htm

Phone: (907) 224-8051

Talkeetna Chamber of Commerce

www.talkeetnachamber.org

Phone: (907) 733-2330

Valdez Convention & Visitors Bureau

<http://valdezalaska.org>

Phone: (907) 835-2984

World Ice Art Championships

www.icealaska.com

Phone: (907) 451-8250

Yukon Quest Sled Dog Race

www.yukonquest.com

Phone: (907) 452-7954