

5 WAYS TO BE FRIGID IN ALASKA

Photos and text by Amanda Castleman

Bright as a Velvet Elvis, the autumn foliage reflects in the dark waters of Alaska's Yes Bay. I release the rope swing and shatter the 49-degree-Fahrenheit waters.

Like many cheechakos (newbies to the north), I'd had a sort of Glacial Age impression of cold weather in the Land of the Midnight Sun. Come fall, the freeze descends, trapping musky hermits in a sheet of ice, right? Then the survivors huddle up with homebrew and sled dogs, gazing at Russia's balmier shores like eagle-eyed Sarah Palin.

I did not expect to swim. Outside. In September. Paddling the Inside Passage.

Well, "swim" might be a slight exaggeration. I plunge, then squeal and hack my way back to the *Safari Quest*, InnerSea Discoveries' boutique "uncruise" ship that specializes in adventure (think "floating base camp"). Then I race to the top deck's hot tub, just steps ahead of the crewmember delivering my hot toddy.

See! I knew Alaska in autumn brought nothing but hardship...

Freshly baptized in saltwater, I have a convert's zeal, however, so I set out to unravel all the state's off-season secrets.



InnerSea Discoveries' *Safari Quest*, seen from a Pirate Airworks seaplane out of Yes Bay Lodge.

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1. STAND UP PADDLING

My toes white-knuckle on the longboard. A big fat longboard, the kind a beginner would normally ride tummy-down. But I balance upright, the sea pooling around my soles.

Stand up paddling (SUP) enjoyed its first surge in ancient Hawaii and revived with the beach boys of the '50s and '60s. Now the U.S.'s fastest-growing sport, SUP increased its flotilla by 900% in 2011, according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

I detach from the boat's side and take a few strokes towards a spruce-fringed cliff. The balancing act is easier than it looks, though I'm not about to surf six-foot freighter waves like my Seattle pal Rob Casey, who authored the first comprehensive guide: *Stand Up Paddling: Flat Water to Surf and Rivers* (Mountaineers Books, 2011). I pass over an orange sea star, its dozen-odd limbs askew (it can have a max of 24) like a child's frenzied crayon drawing of the sun. However pretty, this hardcore predator can race up to 40 inches a minute on its 15,000 tube feet.

I'm moving much faster, as I get in the groove, stroking to one side, then the other, with the single long paddle. And then I make eye contact with a very startled Sitka black-tail deer on a small island. I may be a cheechako, but on the board, I can stand tall and face Alaska. Or, um, at least its gentler wild side.



Blogger Nellie Huang of "Wild Junket" tries stand up paddleboarding on 49-degree water.

2. DODGING ICEBERGS

I hear tinkling like a 10-car pile-up of champagne stems long before I see the “bergy bits” — the ice crushed from Le Conte Glacier into the bay. Sunlight ignites the colors around us: the water mirrors the Wedgwood sky, as the *Safari Quest* skiffs thread toward this hemisphere’s most southerly tidewater glacier.

Soon the proper icebergs appear: chunks big as armchairs, mattresses and Bauhaus buildings. The boat captains slalom carefully: the erratic frozen shapes — 7/8 submerged — can melt and fracture, suddenly somersaulting, and crushing or swamping nearby ships. But we draw close enough to peer inside the calved-off fringes of an ice sheet that once covered much of North America during the Pleistocene age. Where the sea has scrubbed away the fresh snow, the bergs shine glassy and turquoise. I am deeply disappointed not to find any mountain men frozen inside by the harsh Alaskan winters. Now I will have to find other presents for my Seattle girlfriends, like Moose Poop Lip Balm (“It doesn’t heal chapped lips, but it sure keeps you from licking them!”)

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Icebergs calve off the glacier and float in Le Conte Bay.

3. GLACIER HIKING

The Zodiac mashes ashore. We walk inland atop smooth, softball-sized rocks, pressed into moss as thick and avocado-green as a 1970s ranch home’s shag carpet. As we climb toward the glacier’s mile-wide snout, the landscape leaks more and more. My boots press water from the heather, peaty brown like dregs, squished from a tea bag.

Wedges of ice start to furrow through the valley — the glacier’s “fingers” stretching low, as my feet churn upward. Then the moment comes where ice and earth and air mash into a sort of eco-trampoline. My friends Abi King and Pokin Yeung jump high, starfishing their limbs like asterisks! Then they bounce down. Yes, bounce. The mud compacts beneath them, then recoils before they sink. The entire Inner-Sea group seems to be on invisible Pogo sticks. Jell-O silt: crazy!

A hiker explores the ice and mud field below the Baird Glacier.

4. DRY SUIT DIVING

In a museum, I fixate on a jacket of seal intestine, its onionskin layers lovingly hand-stitched. My good friend Edward lurks up and punches me on the arm, as a big brother would do. “Is that the type of drysuit you’ll be wearing when you dive? Because it kind of looks like a bring-your-own-blubber situation...”

I pout on cue. But he’s not too wrong. I’ll wear a water-repelling shell, made of neoprene and latex, and drawn tight at each opening. With a garment underneath that resembles nothing more than big, fleecy, onesie pajamas. Some divers even layer heated vests under there. Smart divers, that is.

Whether ancient or modern, all drysuits work on the same principle: trapping warm air beside the body. Except in the new-fangled versions, the wearer can pump fresh air in — or drain some out — to rocket up or plunge down. The concept is very *George Jetson*. Until I hit the ice water and it goes all primal (and not in a good defrosted mountain man “rawr” sort of way).

Cold crawls along my scalp and sets my hands shaking like wind-whipped aspen leaves. I’m new to drysuits and have ineptly shrink-wrapped the material to my body, purging all the insulating air. We call it quits quickly and surface.

The instructor (from Sitka’s Island Fever dive shop) has seen it all before. Back on board, he pours hot soup and hot coffee in me. Then I commandeer his thermos and drain the rest of the warm water directly into my hood and gloves: a favorite trick of the Washington State diver dames back home, who are so patiently coaching me along in this male-dominated sport.

And then, whoa! I can explore an underwater prairie of lime-green eelgrass. Salmon, otters, tufted puffins, sea lions, orcas and humpback whales frisk through these cool, clear wintertime waters. We stick to the classic Alaskan drill, 20 minutes at 20 feet. But even that shallow dip makes me holler “wahoo!” like a trapper finally unstitched from his long johns in spring, as I’m passed by a gang of swimming scallops. They may not be men packed in ice, but they’re a lot like Pac Men. Good enough for this cheechako!

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Islands and fjords lace Alaska’s Inside Passage, a playground for divers, kayakers and boat passengers.

5. WINTER SURFING IN KODIAK

The snow starts sifting down as I lug the longboard across the sand. Wind buffets its length, so I have to crab sideways down the beach, which is no easy feat in a hooded wetsuit that layers 10 body-binding inches of neoprene over my torso.

“So here’s the beginner break,” say my companions, who all happen to be Coast Guard firemen that hit the water daily, because on Kodiak the surf’s always breaking somewhere around the island. “We’ll be over there.” They point to a mosh pit of white water.

“No problem,” I think. “I’ll just sit on the board and reacclimate, since I haven’t surfed in a decade or so.”

I gaze at the steely horizon. Next stop: Japan.

A faint wail finally cuts through my reverie, as I drift on the battleship-colored Pacific. I peer over my shoulder. My MemoryMakers Guide, Dake Schmidt — who appears about the size of a robust Yukon mosquito at this distance — is doing a full-body semaphore. “You’re caught in a rip current!”

Next stop: Japan. Bad.

I belly down onto the board and paddle horizontal to the beach, escaping the thin finger of pushy water. Then I start slogging for shore. By the time I hit the surf line, I’m too tired to pop up and Gidget around much. I coast through a dozen or so waves. Snow blanches the sky so white, I have to inhale to tell air from surf from whitewater.

Next stop: Japan. Or a warm bar with mozzarella sticks and a stein of microbrew, aka Liquid Sunshine from the Kodiak Island Brewing Company, via the pickup truck on the beach. The one with a rifle down the center console and constellations of fishing lures snagged into the roof’s upholstery.

Alaska has a way of fanning out the bleached bones of expectations like a card shark splays out a winning hand. A la Christopher McCandless of *Into The Wild*, I assumed moxie and athletic ability would carry me through the northern territory. Kodiak hands me back my arrogance, gift-wrapped with a bow of bull kelp. Yet it does this with such grace, that later all I can toast is the winter Pacific. Luckily options abound up here.

Small towns, often bordered by the bush and stormy seas, grow wild-hair bars like the rainforest sprouts moss. For extra excitement, add a lopsided gender ratio, inspiring women outside the cities to joke, “The odds are good, but the goods are odd.”

On our big night out in Kodiak, the Coast Guards warned me. “Look, nothing personal, but you may get hit on. There’s only four unmarried women wintering on the island and you have all your teeth.”

It looks like being frigid in Alaska could be more than I realized.

Ah... Alaska.

ALASKA ADVENTURE 411

InnerSea Discoveries (SE Alaska)

A weeklong adventure cruise — like the Inner Reaches Eastern Coves from Juneau to Ketchikan, — costs \$1,695 to \$5,995. Budget another \$167 for port taxes and fees.

www.innerseadiscoveries.com

Island Fever Diving (Sitka)

Sitka’s dive shop (www.islandfeverdiving.com) is temporarily closed. In the meantime, take the plunge with Ketchikan’s Wind & Water Charters and Scuba (www.wind-water.org).

Scuba Do (Kodiak)

This dive shop rents surf boards and wet suits for \$55 per day. www.scubadokodiak.com

MemoryMakers Tour and Guide Service

This outfit specializes in fishing, photography and sightseeing tours of Kodiak Island, home to a thriving population of Kodiak bears (a subspecies of grizzly). www.memorymakersinak.com

The surf’s up in the subpolar zone! Kodiak Island is most famous for its brown bears, but also boasts some of Alaska’s best wave breaks.