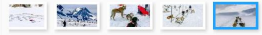


# Dog-sledding in Alaska: Best excursion ever?

Devin Reina, USA TODAY 10Best 12:40 p.m. EDT July 3, 2014



Crusting to Alaska had never been on my dream list. But when the opportunity for a bargain basement deal on the Norwegian Pearl presented itself, I pushed aside my doubts and decided to take a seven-day summer cruise from Seattle through southern Alaska.

In my quest for a little action, I found more than enough side trips to keep me busy for days including glacier walks, sea kayaking, scuba diving, horseback riding, rock climbing, rappelling and zip-lining. Unfortunately, I couldn't do them all.

The excursion which intrigued me most, however, was that of taking a helicopter ride to go dog sledding in Skagway. After flying over glaciers, the description said, I'd land in a dog camp on Deniver Glacier, where I'd learn how to drive a dog sled with a few mushers who were training for the Iditarod. How could I resist an adventure like that?

**RELATED:** 10 reasons to cruise to Alaska  
**MORE:** USA TODAY's guide to the best Alaska cruises

The day started with us "gearing up" in heavy glacier boots and bright orange zip-up vests, so we could be easily spotted against the snow in a nearly blinding sun. Then everyone weighed in. It's a necessity, to make sure that everyone in the group — a dozen or so cruisers — don't overload the helicopters. At nearly \$500 a person, the price had me questioning my sanity at times, but this was still feeling like a potential once-in-a-lifetime type adventure.

Here's a blow-by-blow: two hours of pure magic.

We board the helicopters in groups of four or six people and don large earphones to guard against the whap-whap noise of propellers beginning to slice thick, cool moorain air.

We float above the snow-topped mountains, amazed by views of each awesome peak. It's like the thrill you get from your first roller coaster ride, in a gentler, awe-inspiring manner.

Despite it being June, the snow appears to flow down dark mountains of rock and pine trees. Within what feels like seconds, the 20-minute flight is coming to an end.

As we circle in to land, tiny white dots like snow-capped crop circles appear below. Eventually we realize that these are hundreds — 250 or so — white-washed wooden doghouses housing furry residents.

We descend into the camp of Alaska Infield Expeditions. The snow is blinding; wearing sunglasses is mandatory. But despite the snow, it's warm on this spring-like 50-degree day that makes our bulky winter jackets seem like a mistake. Split into groups of two or three, we're assigned a musher and a set of 12 Alaskan Huskies, with names like Willy, Digi and Oleg.

They bark and jump in friendly excitement as their line jingles in the air. They are ready to go: this is their training season. Warm weather has created a summer-time slushy of thick moist snow. The combination of heavy snow and multiple heavy passengers (non-athletic mushers like myself) means the dogs get a strength-training session every time they pull.



Musher in training session for the dogs, when thick, sticky snow gives them a workout each time they pull. (Photo: Devin Reina)

Like all her counterparts, our musher, Therese Bartlett, has skin the color of burnt toast from the sun's reflection off the snow. A Northern Michigan University Magna Cum Laude graduate, she moved to Alaska in 1987 as a "handler" to assist Loby Ridders, the first woman to win the Iditarod (her husband Peter moved from Hawaii to Alaska the same year, and has raced the Iditarod multiple times). Polite and informative Therese quickly puts us to work.

There are two sleds attached one behind the other, and all behind a long line of Huskies grouped two-by-two. The guy I'm paired with wants to drive the sled first. He stands on two narrow wooden skis known as runners. I sit in the clear of the front sled with Therese standing up behind me.

"Hiiiiikeee," she bellows out as the sled begins to take off. In front of us are nothing but sand dune-like hills covered in snow. It is perfect. It is a panoramic, imax-like experience in real time. No crowds, just quiet, nothing but the panting of the dogs and wind against my face.

Soon we must head up a hill or turn right. "Greeeeeee," Therese tells the dogs, as the sled shifts to the right. "Sawwww," she quickly bellows, as the sled veers back to the left.

Eventually we stop. It's my turn to drive the sled and I can't wait. But as soon as I step onto the runners, I realize this isn't going to be as easy as it looks. We start off slow. It feels like I'm water-skiing over the snow, gliding over small bumps and dips. It's fun, but I want to go faster.

"Okay, let's go," I yell, as Therese has instructed me to do if I wanted more speed. "Are you sure you want to do that?" she asks from the front sled.

"Sure, it'll be fun," I tell her.

A few seconds later, I fully realize why she had asked, as we start charging down a drop-off from a hill. If I want to brake, I have to balance on one leg while lifting up the other to press down on a bar in between the runners. I'm sure I'll probably fall off if I try to do that at this pace.

Considering my options, I decide standing on two legs and hanging on for dear life is the better choice, as we run down the hill like a commuter train in rush hour. My hands are sore from gripping the back of the sled with its slim handle bar. Then all too quickly our ride is done.

I hold and hug some of the puppies, share a few laughs with the mushers, then fly back to port on our helicopter.

My takeaway: I'm not sure how anything can be better than this.

**RELATED:** 10Best explores the Iditarod  
**TRIPLOG:** Alaska articles on Triplog

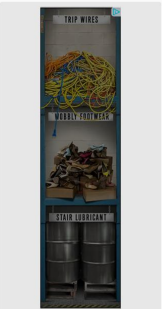
Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn | Google+ | Email | Print

### AD CONTENT

QUIZ: Are You PhD-Level Smart? | New U.S. Currency Law Now In Effect | We've Ranked, Rated & Reviewed Our Top 5 Personal Lenders | What 10 TV Actresses Look Like in 'Real Life' (Photos) | Your 401(k) Isn't Growing as Fast as It Should - Here's Why | 8 Poisonous Foods We Commonly Eat

### MORE FROM USATODAY

Ask the Captain: Fears about flying to Hawaii | American 737 clips Southwest 737 at Detroit airport | Boy removed from plane over allergies, passengers applaud



### MORE STORIES

- Julia Louis-Dreyfus showed at Big Ten tournament she's just another nervous basketball mom
- Hollywood's summer of divorce isn't so secret anymore
- 6 shot dead, 3 wounded at backyard party in Phoenix, Arizona
- Spider-Man steals the show in new 'Captain America: Civil War' trailer
- 'Chumlee' from 'Pawn Stars' arrested on gun drug charges