



ALASKA

The last frontier

THE LARGEST STATE OF THE USA, ALASKA IS HUGE, WILD AND MOSTLY EMPTY, WITH JUST OVER 730,000 PEOPLE SPREAD ACROSS ALMOST TWO MILLION SQUARE KILOMETRES. BUT, AS *Jocelyn Pride* DISCOVERED, THERE ARE POCKETS OF ULTRA LUXE ACCOMMODATION AND HOME-STYLE HOSPITALITY TO BE FOUND. YOU MIGHT JUST NEED TO TAKE A FLOATPLANE TO GET THERE. IMAGES BY *Jocelyn Pride*.



WE JUST PICK A MOUNTAIN OR RIVER, THEN go and play,” says Ty Potgieter, co-manager of Winterlake Lodge, pointing across the lake into the vast Alaskan wilderness where rolling mountains blur into infinity. And with a shiny red Robinson R-44 helicopter sitting on the grass, a resident pilot at the ready and 24 hours of summer daylight, why not?

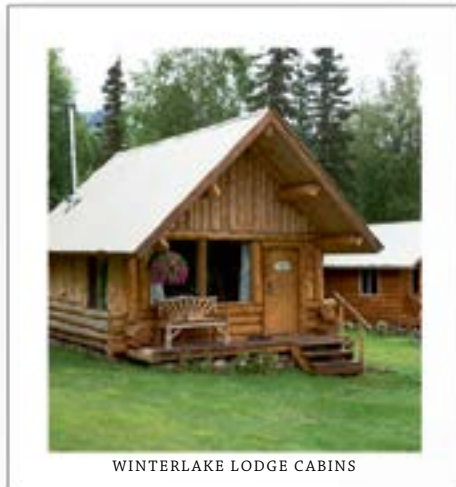
As we whir over the lake, a bull moose stands knee-deep munching water lilies. Within a few minutes, the alpine tundra merges into the ice fields of Hayes Glacier. Lofty peaks that look like sculptured meringue surround us and jagged crevasses cut through the layers of compressed ice below. “Do you want to taste pure water?” asks Ty as we touch down on the glacier.

Aquamarine is often used to describe water but to see is to believe. The intense

colour of a series of glacial pools contrasts with the white ground sparkling like billions of diamonds trapped in prisms of ice. The crunch of our boots breaks the silence as we walk around a pool that would be the envy of any five-star hotel. I lie on my stomach and drink, savouring the freshness of water with a 1,000 year history.

Walking on a glacier is just one of the indulgences upscale Alaskan backcountry lodges offer guests. Exclusive experiences like dog mushing, bear viewing, fishing for wild salmon, whale watching, river rafting, naturalist-led hikes and kayaking expeditions enable savvy travellers to interact with the pristine landscape. And with hand-hewn log cabins, massages, yoga, hot tubs and gourmet meals, there is no compromise on pampering. >>

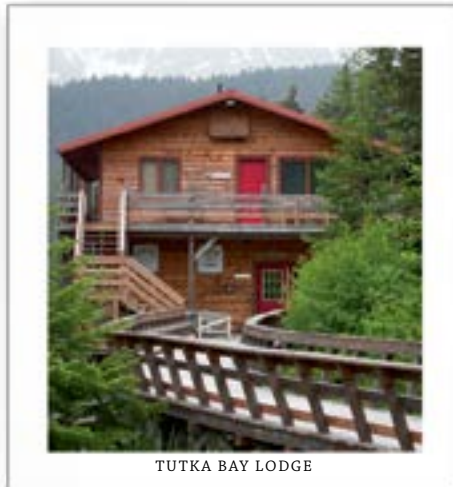
This page: Silver Salmon Creek has a large population of curious brown bears. Opposite page: Winterlake Lodge is only accessible by float plane.



WINTERLAKE LODGE CABINS



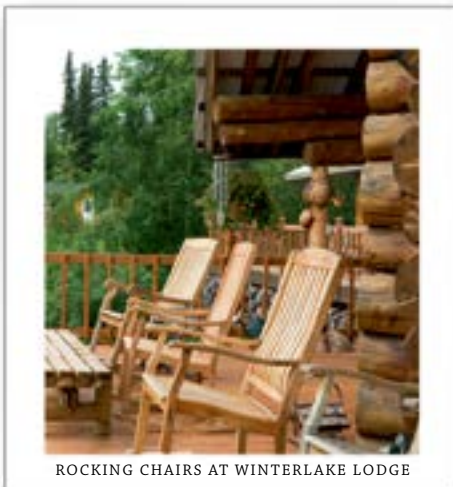
TUTKA BAY LODGE COOKING SCHOOL



TUTKA BAY LODGE

A one hour floatplane flight from Anchorage, Winterlake Lodge is part of the Within The Wild group owned and operated by the Dixon family. Renowned chef Kirsten Dixon, together with her husband Carl, two daughters and their partners, specialises in remote eco-luxe lodges. Each of the five one-to three-bedroom cabins evokes the Alaskan dream. Large windows in knotted wooden walls frame the pretty lake. An intricate patchwork quilt covers the handmade bed, flowers from the garden sit on the bathroom vanity and a rocking chair on the deck completes the picture. "We work hard to give guests an experience they won't forget," says Kirsten.

At Tutka Bay Lodge, another of the Dixon's eco-luxe lodges, (a 25-minute water taxi ride away from the city of Homer or 90 minutes via floatplane from Anchorage), I learn how to cook Alaskan style. A hidden cove of Kachemak Bay is an unusual place for a world class cooking school. When the Dixon's



ROCKING CHAIRS AT WINTERLAKE LODGE

purchased the lodge in 2009 they recognised the potential of the Widgeon II, a rusty old steel hulled ex WWII troop carrying boat moored on the property. An elegant renovation features a centerpiece of a magnificent driftwood chandelier hanging above a handcrafted wooden table. Kirsten and her daughter

Mandy (also an award-winning chef) run small group cooking classes here during the summer.

With an emphasis on local produce we make everything from scratch and help gather the ingredients. We take a short boat trip to select oysters from the floating oyster farm, pick berries from the woods and vegetables from the garden. The black cod we steam comes straight from the water in front of the lodge. This is the same bay that exports the cod for Nobu Matsuhisa's signature dish - black cod with miso, to his restaurants throughout the world. We eat ours with handmade ramen noodles sitting around the banquet table on the banks of Kachemak Bay.

"Have you seen a bear yet?" is the most asked traveller question. Bear viewing is big business in Alaska and, like anything involving wildlife, sightings can be as unpredictable as the weather. We fly via light plane to Silver Salmon Creek where the chance of seeing bears during the summer season is virtually guaranteed. >>

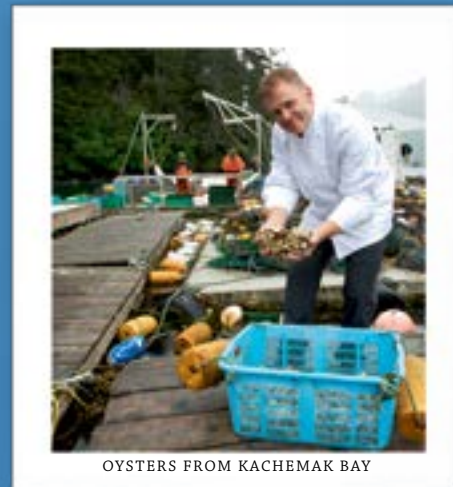


Where to stay

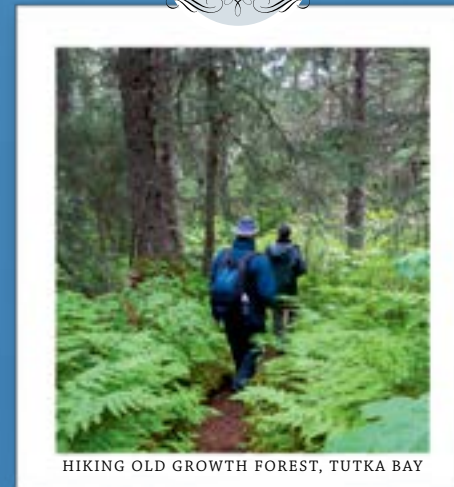
Winterlake Lodge
Cabins are priced from US\$1,400 (about A\$1,503) per person per night for a one-day/one-night stay. Rates include all meals, selected alcoholic beverages, individual guide service, use of equipment and floatplane transfer from Anchorage landing on the lake outside the lodge. withinthewild.com/lodges/winterlake

Tutka Bay Lodge
Cabins are priced from US\$1,000 (about A\$1,073) per person per night for a one-day/one-night stay. Rates include all meals, selected alcoholic beverages, individual guide service, use of equipment and water taxi transfer from Homer. withinthewild.com/lodges/tutka-bay

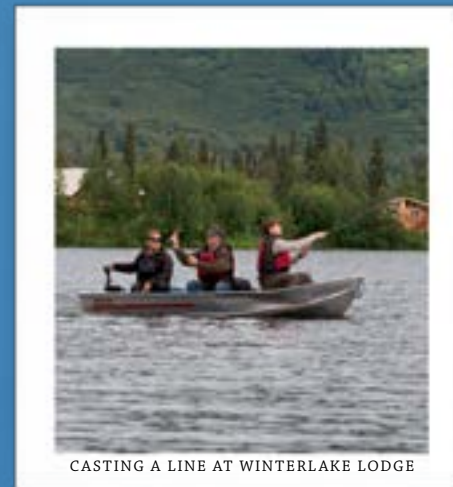
Alaska Homestead Lodge
Rooms are priced from US\$1,100 (about A\$1,181) per person per night for a one-day/one-night stay. Rates include all meals, guides, use of equipment and light plane transfers from Anchorage landing on the beach in front of the lodge. alaskahomesteadlodge.com



OYSTERS FROM KACHEMAK BAY



HIKING OLD GROWTH FOREST, TUTKA BAY

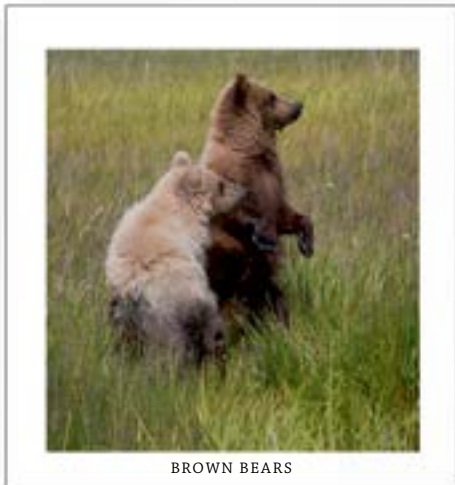


CASTING A LINE AT WINTERLAKE LODGE

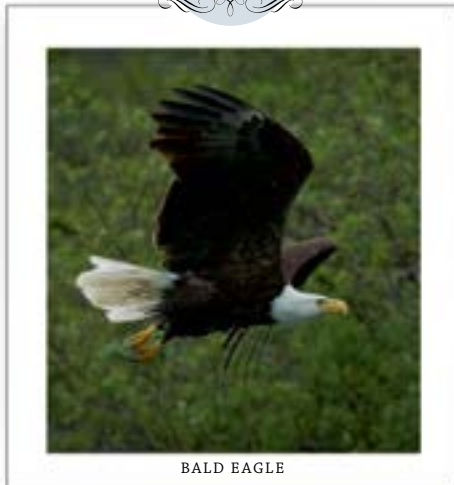
Within moments of arriving at the main lodge, two bears run past chasing each other. Blessed with a salmon creek and large meadows dotted with wildflowers and berries this area is a brown bear hot spot.



Ice fields of the Hayes Glacier.



BROWN BEARS



BALD EAGLE

Like the Within The Wild lodges, Alaska Homestead Lodge at Silver Salmon Creek is a family operation. Alaskan born James Isaak and his Californian wife Shelia are the only year round residents in this remote corner of Lake Clark National Park. For the last 13 years they have shared the original homestead of the area, as well as their knowledge and passion for Alaska, with small groups of bear and fishing enthusiasts.

Within moments of arriving at the main lodge, a pretty whitewashed log cabin with a green roof, two bears run past chasing each other. Blessed with a salmon creek and large meadows dotted with wildflowers and berries, this area is a brown bear hot spot. Where there is food, there are bears. And with the cosy bedrooms overlooking the meadow and Cook Inlet, the bedside bear viewing is unique. But going out with a guide is the ultimate experience.

After a rundown on “bear awareness” we ride in a tray on the back of an ATV with our guide Aaron, armed with the cautionary bear spray and flare. As it’s too early in the season for salmon, the bears are munching the grasses in

the meadow. One morning we not only see 14 bears including three cubs, we walk among them.

Aaron reads bear behaviour like a book. We walk, giving the bears time and space. Only once does our trusty guide have his hand on the bear spray. Luckily a quick “shoo bear” is enough when a curious female lumbers towards us. Standing near 300 kilos of sheer body mass is humbling. I hear the chomp of every mouthful and watch as the wind ruffles the thick fur of a sow feeding as her two cubs roll around fighting. Another bear flops in the creek to cool off, then stands and rubs herself on a tree trunk. A single female sits in front of us, and lays down resting her head on her paws like a dog. Although completely wild, the bears are habituated to humans and don’t feel threatened. Considered one of the best places to safely see bears from ground level, Silver Salmon Creek is a popular choice with photographers.

Whether it be photographing bear cubs, casting a line, hiking through an old growth rainforest or watching a whale breach, in the words of Kirsten Dixon, “Alaskans realise they have something different to offer the world.”

WHEN TO GO:

Summer and autumn are the most popular months to travel to backcountry lodges in Alaska. Winterlake Lodge is also open for a winter season from January to April. Winterlake Lodge is a checkpoint on the famous Iditarod dogsled race and offers an excellent vantage point. Tutka Bay Lodge opens from May to September. Homestead Lodge at Silver Salmon Creek is open from May to October. The best time for bear viewing is July and August.

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies direct from Sydney to Vancouver and on to Anchorage, Alaska daily. Return economy fares are priced from A\$2,304 and business class fares from A\$8,656. Total flight time is just under 18 hours plus stopover. aircanada.com

Try this at home



Baked Alaska

RECIPE BY KIRSTEN DIXON
WINTERLAKE LODGE

INGREDIENTS

- Eight (2.5 centimetre thick) slices of pound cake
- 500ml berry flavoured ice cream
- ½ cup plus one tbsp granulated sugar
- Two egg whites
- Two tbsp water
- ¼ tsp cream of tartar
- ½ tsp vanilla extract
- 500g fresh seasonal berries
- One tbsp crème de cassis

METHOD

Using a 7.5-centimetre round cutter, cut eight circles from the pound cake slices. Place a scoop of ice cream onto one round. Top the scoop of ice cream with an additional round of cake. Press down lightly and, using a knife, smooth away any ice cream that has pressed out the sides. Repeat with the remaining rounds of cake. Place the four cakes onto a baking sheet and cover with plastic wrap. Place the tray in the freezer for at least 15 minutes to firm the ice cream.

In a large saucepan, bring about 2.5-centimetres of water to a simmer. In a metal bowl that will fit over the saucepan, place ½ cup of the sugar, the egg whites, two tablespoons of water and the cream of tartar. Set the bowl over the simmering water and beat with a hand held electric mixer at low speed, moving the beaters around the bowl constantly, for three to five minutes, until an instant-read thermometer registers 60 degrees Celsius. Increase the mixer speed to high and continue beating over the heat for a full three minutes. Remove the bowl from the heat and beat the meringue until cool, about four minutes. It will form peaks. Beat in the vanilla. Cover with plastic wrap and put in the refrigerator to chill for at least 15 minutes.

When ready to assemble the dessert, preheat the grill. In a small bowl, gently mix the berries, crème de cassis, and the remaining one tablespoon of sugar and set aside. Remove the cakes from the freezer, and quickly spread them with the meringue, swirling it to make peaks. Place the cakes under the grill, as close to the flame as possible, just to brown the meringue at the tips, for about one minute. Alternately, you can use a small handheld torch to brown the meringue. Serve the cakes immediately, surrounded by some of the berry mixture.

MAKES FOUR SERVINGS