

Grays On Trays

A resource for the adult snowboarder

Alyeska, Alaska

If you think going to the mountains requires putting up with altitude sickness, think of going north–north to Alaska. And when you think of lift-served snowboarding in the state, there's only one choice that's worth a long trip from the lower 48: [Alyeska](#), some 40 miles south of Anchorage and a three-hour flight from Seattle.

The Mountain

Alyeska claims [1,610 skiable acres](#), and 37 percent of that, or nearly 600 acres, is rated as expert or advanced. For the intermediate rider, the resort feels somewhat smaller than the statistics suggest (roughly 1,000 acres for intermediate or beginners). The reason is that much of that terrain is one giant bowl. If you're seeking expert terrain, check out the Christmas Chute, which the Daily Beast placed on its list of the world's [13-most dangerous ski runs](#).

The mountain has a very unusual stature among U.S. ski resorts: It's above the tree line (for the most part) and near sea level. Both of these features could make riding more difficult than you're used to. There are few trees on the mountain, and none in the area for intermediates, which means that when the skies turn overcast or foggy, you may have be dealing with flat light. Fortunately, I had bluebird skies during my visit. The tall and steep southern edge of the bowl is tall casts a shadow, though, which means that much of the bowl is in the shadows until late in the afternoon.

The lack of trees, meanwhile, means that the slopes can get windswept. While I had, in the months up to my trip, anticipated powder days (the resort claims 650 inches of average annual snowfall), the reality on the mountain was quite different. The snow was in one of two states: hardpacked groomers on piste, or or bulletproof crud off-piste. It's hard to fault the resort, however: If there's no new snowfall—and there was a two-week snow drought during my visit—there's no new snowfall, and grooming can do only so much to soften up the snow if the temperatures stay cold.

The severe angles of the upper reaches of the bowl mean that you'll have to wait until late in the season to ride the hike-to terrain. For lift-served terrain, you can drop into one of the chutes that are accessible through mid-mountain lift 6—though even then, you may have to hike some.



Riding in the Alyeska bowl is largely an above-the-treeline experience.

While intermediate and especially expert riders can find a lot to do here, it's not a good mountain for never-evers. The terrain for them is very limited, and there's a very large step-up from novice to intermediate terrain. The longest sustained pitch for novices, which comes off chair 7, is also the route that people use to get back to the hotel. A halfpipe on one side of the pitch, and a terrain park on the other reduces its width by two-thirds, further limiting its utility to novices. This is pity, since that area has a quad/magic carpet combination and a midway unloading station for those who want a shorter descent. There is a small rail yard in this area, too, which is actually well placed for beginners.

Overall, the mountain is mixed as far as snowboarders go. There are cats everywhere, though if the snow is good you can just cross them at a right angle. There are benches at the top of most lifts for riders who need to sit to set their bindings, an amenity that the even the high-end mountains sometimes skip. The exit ramps from the lifts are not too steep for snowboarders, who ride away with one foot in the binding. The entrances to lift-loading areas are either a slight decline or flat, which is more good news. One approach to the loading area of chair 6—sorry, I forget which one—is a winding chute that can get scraped off, causing some riders to head to the edge of the chute in search of snow that hasn't been skied off.

On-mountain facilities

The **day lodge** is small, basic, and clean. It eschews a fancy wood roof in favor of corrugated metal and exposed pipes. Most of the seating is offered in an open cafeteria style, with plastic tables and plastic chairs. The floor is rubberized, not wood. The lodge has both a coffee service (with sandwiches) and a cafeteria-line food service. It's a surprisingly small space, and in some ways more basic than what you might find in some day lodges in the Midwest. It works well, though with the great sun we had during the afternoon, the lodge needs some seating outside. There is none, though you can walk five minutes to the Sitzmark bar.



The Alyeska day lodge offers a good view of the mountain.

The **Sitzmark** is a classic alpine sports bar, with the appropriate ski kitch, plus a nice display of early Burton snowboards, and a Snurfer. This being Alaska, there are also some game trophies on the wall. The bar hosts bands at night.



Care for a few trophies with your beverage? Sitzmark bar.

The **Alyeska Hotel** is about 20 years old, and has gone through several management changes and several names. It is a luxury hotel but doesn't feel like one—and I say that in the best possible way.

Travel and Leisure says Alyeska Resort is the 13th on its list of "[North America's best ski hotels](#)," It is located near both the tram and chair 7. Keep up your speed come down Blueberry Hill to the hotel, respecting the fact that it's a slow zone, and you may be able to ride either to the base of the tram or the entrance of the hotel.



Rooms come either with a queen bed or two doubles. I had the two-doubles room, which came with two night stands, a desk with chair, a two-person bench with padded seat suitable for sitting and taking off boots, and a three-drawer dresser. It also had two sitting chairs and a small table, all near the window with a view of the tram building, mountain, and base of chair 7. The electronics were a bit dated; the TV was tube-based rather than a flat panel. The clock radio had a CD player built in but lacked an input for MP3 devices. It's easy to miss the coffee maker and refrigerator, since they are placed behind one of the closet's two sliding doors. My room was definitely on the warm side, even after I turned the thermostat down all the way on the first day, and left it there the whole week.

There's a nice little touch in the hallways: Outside each room is a bench that you can use to don and doff boots. Be sure to stop at the front desk to ask for the key that will unlock the small storage area that's underneath the bench.

The service was very good. I kept leaving my room key in the room, and the desk clerks cheerfully made a new key for me each time, without complaint. The cleaning staff, when I encountered them, were friendly and knowledgeable. A waitress in the Aurora Bar and Grill was very attentive, offered to move me to a table near the window, which gave me a great view of the mountain for my late lunch. And when I took my board to the rental shop for a tuning, I got it back with a wax as well.

The hotel has a spa, a hot tub, and an ice skating rink, but little in the way of “fancy” shopping. There’s also no water park or snow tubing, so options for non-skiers are limited. There’s a real-estate office, and plans for some development, but so far, they’re modest.

The town of Girdwood

Alyeska is at one edge of the small town of Girdwood, which has about 2,500 people.

We ate dinner most nights at the hotel, but one night I went out a few blocks away to the Double Muskie, a restaurant known for cajun food. The menu claims that the Double Muskie is known for having the best steak in America. I shared a steak with a dinner companion, and neither one of us were impressed. It didn’t taste like steak as much as roast beef. The waiter didn’t help matters by his confused handling of our bill. Like many resort-area restaurants, the Double Muskie does not give separate checks. The waiter, though, tried to be helpful by calculating the bill for each person in our party of 8, off one ticket. Though that sounds like a simple mathematical problem, it was quite a fiasco by the time it was over.

The sea

Alyeska and nearby Anchorage are nearly at sea level, making the resort and city a great refuge for anyone who suffers from altitude sickness. As a bonus, the mountain offers fantastic views of Prince William Sound.



Views of Prince William Sound are available from the top of chair 6 and elsewhere.

The road from Anchorage goes along the sound.



Ice. Water. Mountains. All at the sound.

When to go

There's no bad time to go snowboarding, but some times are better than others. In the case of Alyeska, the month of March is a good choice. For one thing, it offers visitors so much more daylight than January does. On January 15, you'll have but 6 hours and 25 minute of sunlight. By March 15, that window expands to 11 hour, 44 minutes, a gain of 4 hours, 52 minutes. And if your local hill is winding down, there will be plenty of show left way up north.



National flags of competitors mark the start of the parade.

Another advantage of arriving in March is that you can participate in some of the events associated with the [Iditarod](#), the famous race that is held each year in the first part of the month. The race stretches over 1,000 miles and takes anywhere from eight to 20 days to complete.



During the parade, also known as the ceremonial start, mushers take their teams through the streets of Anchorage, along with paying customers.

The race starts on Sunday outside of Anchorage, but the day before features a parade of teams downtown. People come from all over the country to participate not only in the race but in the parade. If you enter and win an auction, you can pay for the privilege of being pulled by a team in the parade. The weekend, and indeed, weeks surrounding the race, are filled with all sorts of social events, including the “running of the reindeer,” a northern, and less dangerous, running of the bulls of Pamplona.

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