



Vournas: An Alaska winter vacation? You betcha

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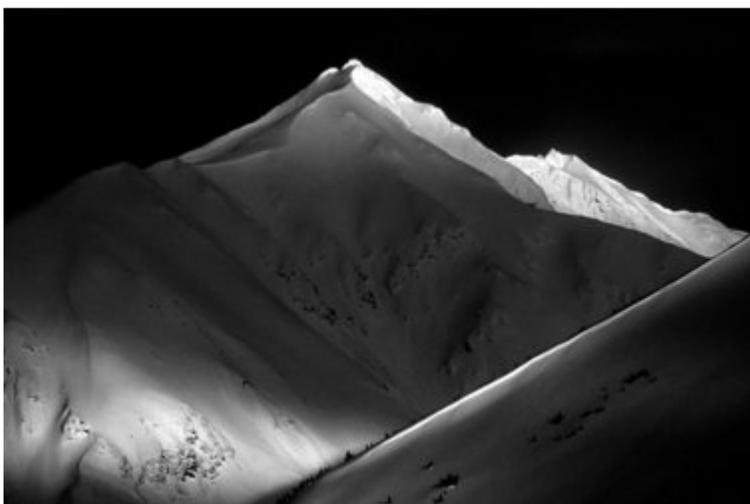


Martin Griff / The Times
By

From Dino Vournas:

The incredulity was unanimous. An Alaska winter vacation? You've lost it! What's next, a summer twirl on Waikiki wearing a mink? You learn a lot after landing in **Anchorage** for a winter adventure. First, the weather is not that extreme. In fact, it can be relatively balmy as the warmer waters off of coastal Alaska keep winter temps moderate, averaging around the low 20's. Second, Alaska has some of the most spectacular scenery on our side of the solar system. Third, Alaskans are not holed-up indoors waiting for spring, but are outside having a great time. A short drive south of Anchorage is the town of Girdwood and the home of Alaska's premier ski area and resort, **Alyeska**.

This ski area is perfect for slackers, and I mean that in a good way. Hate getting up early for first tracks? Then you gotta love the 10:30 a.m. mountain opening, necessitated by the late-arriving winter sun. But by March, the slopes are bathed with 13 hours of light. Alyeska skiing is accessed by a 60-passenger aerial tram, climbing 2000 feet in elevation and depositing you in the middle of a mountain that receives frequent and sometimes record powder dumps. A quick ride up high-speed Chair 6 and you are at elevation 2,750 feet, the top of lift-service. Cancel the high-altitude maladies. From here, wide-open Upper Bowl beckons intermediate skiers, while advanced and experts will try the challenge of the North Face, some of the longest double-black runs in North America.



Enlarge

Martin Griff / The Times

The last rays of the day illuminate this peak on the Kenai Peninsula near Seward, Alaska. Photo by Dino Vournas

Alaska By Dino Vournas gallery (9 photos)

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If you're even more adventurous, under good conditions, start hiking up 1000 more vertical feet and ski the awesome Headwall or Max's double-blacks at the ski area boundary. Linger for awhile, taking in the view of the Kenai Peninsula and the Chugach and Kenai Mountains, bisected by the beautiful Turnagain Arm of the Cook Inlet, named by William Bligh (later of the infamous HMS Bounty) for his English commander James Cook. During a 1778 expedition for the elusive Northwest Passage, one of Cook's ships had to "turn-again" as the arm disappointingly dead-ended. Progressing down-mountain, skiers and boarders can cruise on mellower runs, access the terrain park or show-off their skills on the new 18-foot-wall superpipe.

Well, it's 5:30, time to transition to night skiing or head down to the hotel. The Alyeska Hotel, one of the finest in the North Country, boasts many amenities, rivaling most on-mountain lodges in the contiguous states. Apres-ski, you can opt for some hot tub, pool or sauna time or a complete spa indulgence package. Don't forget to schedule a Northern Lights wake-up call with the front desk in case this natural wonder makes a visit to the Girdwood skies.

Alaska has evolved into a "surf and turf" gastronomic paradise, with abundant local seafood like the Kings:Crab and Salmon, halibut and shrimp and a plethora of red meat and game delicacies like bison, reindeer, caribou, and of course, beef tenderloin. It sure keeps the locals sustained during the long winter. Nowhere is this abundance treated with a finer gourmet flair than the **Seven Glaciers Restaurant**, high atop the ski mountain. Among the all-Alaskan delights are mesquite grilled salmon and a bison ribeye steak. Desserts are also inspiring, with a Baked Alyeska mousse channeling an Alaska mountain and Aurora night sky, and a pistachio chocolate cake with an edible chocolate spoon.

More local fare can be sampled in town at the renowned **Double Musky**, a Cajun-Creole joint where a burgundy-cruste beef and Louisiana love are served amongst an eclectic mélange of trinkets, hanging every which-way from all available wall and ceiling space.

Before retiring for the night, don't forget to order-up a **Northern Lights wake-up call** with the Alyeska front desk, if the celestial wonder should appear.

Perhaps you envied skiers on TV, taking waist-deep fluffy-white dives down seemingly vertical walls, carving untouched swaths of virgin real estate? The **Chugach Powder Guides** will take you there, via helicopter, to whatever you want to ski, from flat-out walls to less intimidating, endless powder runs. You can also schuss pristine lines while snowcat skiing their private slopes up-valley from Alyeska. Heck, in the summer they'll even take you heli-skiing and salmon fishing on the same vacation trip!

Close-by, **Glacier City Snowmobile Tours** will set you down on a snow machine, ("snowmobile" to us Lower 48'ers), and guide you on an adventure in the Alaska backcountry. Through Chugach mountain valleys and around gold mines and creeks you'll ride, and if the conditions are good, they'll take you to the face of a great glacier, where you can explore ice caves and view countless icebergs.

Would you like to fulfill a bush pilot fantasy? Try a flight-seeing helicopter tour with the pilots of **Girdwood's Alpine Air Alaska** zooming close above or even landing on clear-blue glacial ice.

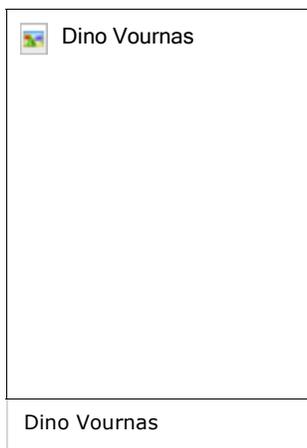
For a dependable wildlife fix for the trip, motor south out of Girdwood to the **Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center**. Journeying along the Turnagain Arm, which accommodates huge 30 foot tides and vast tidal flats, you are treated to the sublime meeting of mountains and water. At certain times of the year, 6-10 foot tall bore tides advance through the arm, sometimes ridden by loony surfers and harbor seals. The center is located near Portage, in an area mostly denuded of trees when a salt water intrusion caused by the Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964 killed most of the forest.

"See that guy?" asked our guide Ethan Tyler, as he pointed to an alpha-male musk ox. "He spends most of his waking hours trying to figure out how to kill me, so don't get too close to the fence," he warned. The center cares for and rehabilitates injured animals. Among the denizens of the natural enclosures are bear, reindeer, moose, elk, coyotes, caribou, bison and even a porcupine, bald eagle and an owl. Don't forget to check out their cool gift shop.

Continue on to the picturesque town of Seward for beautiful Kenai Mountains views and a memorable **Resurrection Bay boat tour**, starting in early March, replete with orcas, sea lions and bald eagles.

Don't miss seeing the sights of Alaska's metropolis, Anchorage, a city which didn't even exist 100 years ago. Started as a staging ground for the construction of the **Alaska Railroad**, the city has been building and booming since the North Slope oil revenues started to flow. Check out the city's museums to learn about Alaska's native heritage, pioneers and how the city and state were forever altered by the massive 9.2 magnitude quake of 1964. Treat yourself to the offerings at **Orso**, one of Anchorage's finest dining rooms. Check out **Humpy's** for beer and nightlife or stop in at the **FireTap Ale House**, seemingly with the city's entire population, for a little more brew. I found out that you can't see Russia from FireTap but can you get a Hockey Mom martini? You betcha.

About Dino Vournas



Dino has been a photojournalist for 40 years and ski and travel writer for the better part of 35 years. The largest part of his career was spent as a newspaper photographer with the (Hayward CA) Daily Review, Oakland Tribune and San Francisco Examiner.

For the last 8 years he has been a freelance photographer shooting sports and news for the Associated Press, other wire services and newspapers and has a set of steady corporate clients. He also writes travel and ski stories for the Tampa Tribune and the (SF) Bay Area News Group.

Dino graduated from California State Univ. at Hayward and has lived his whole life in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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