

# Fairbanks, Alaska in the Winter

Ready for the Yukon Quest, the Northern Lights and a Blast of Cold

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Even though it's been almost a year now since my own Yukon Quest experience in Fairbanks, Alaska, much of the particulars remain the same. It was my reason for trekking up there with my colleague, Russell Dandridge, during the coldest time of year in Alaska.

The Yukon Quest is a 1,000-mile dog race, which every year begins or ends in Fairbanks or Whitehorse, YT, Canada. This year for 2013 it begins in Whitehorse on Saturday, February 2, 2013, finishing in Fairbanks nine to 11 days later, last year during my trip I watched the race begin from the starting line.

While the mushers and their dogs show tremendous fortitude for the race, which follows historical Gold Rush and mail delivery dog sled routes from the turn of the 20th Century, what really endears me to the race is the fact that the dogs' healthy and safety are of utmost importance.

Lead veterinarian from last year's Yukon Quest, Dr. Kathleen McGill said after the race in 2012 that all the dogs did well and there were no dog deaths. In 2012 the temperatures started around -30°F and ended at +28°F, but it's the heat that is more of a problem for the dogs than the cold.

"The ideal running temps range from -25°F to about 10 above," McGill says. "The dogs are conditioned to the cold by breeding and exercise so the high temps have the mushers running at night and resting when it gets too warm."

Over the years, the dogs in the Yukon Quest have changed too, "the dogs have continued to change over the last 40 years of modern racing," McGill explains. "Going from heavy trap line dogs to the smaller Alaskan husky that is a combo of Siberian Husky, hound dog and a pinch of Malamute."

Much like human marathon runners the dogs eat special diets and are conditioned according to elaborate schedules starting many months before race start. For the Quest, there are also race rules that spell out required amounts of food and gear for the dogs and what is humane treatment and what are the consequences for not following the rules.

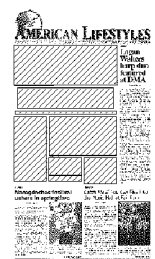
For your own mushing experience, you will find Fairbanks offers companies like Paws for Adventure where you can either enjoy a dog sled ride or learn to do your own mushing in dog mushing school, and even better, you can even take overnight or multi-day excursions with this outfit.

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## See the Northern Lights

A big deal in Fairbanks in the winter is also the chance to see the aurora borealis and, since Fairbanks is positioned under the "Auroral Oval" a ring-shaped region around the North Pole, this means the city is one of the best places in the world to see the northern lights.

The lights can be seen from mid-August through early April and range in color from green to red to purple, with the brightest and most common being a yellow-green. Intensity varies from night to night, with the best displays happening in the late evening to the early hours of the morning. In fact, when the nights are clear and dark enough, there will be aurora visible an average of eight out of 10 nights and if you stay a minimum of three nights and are actively out dur-



ing the evening hours, your chances of seeing the aurora increase to 90%.

As for where to see the lights, there are many options available for viewing the aurora in **Fairbanks**. You can drive to a nearby vantage point and wait for the northern lights to appear or see them from a heated "aurorium" cabin or lodge, during an overnight dog sled adventure, by snow cat tour or on a flight above the Arctic Circle. Most accommodations in the area also offer a wake-up call when the aurora appears.

Another outdoor must is walking with reindeer at Running Reindeer Ranch ([www.runningreindeer.com](http://www.runningreindeer.com)). The owner is friendly and knows her reindeer well. I have been around reindeer before, but these were particularly enjoyable as we walked through the boreal forest with reindeer's named Ruby, Olive, Willow and Jasper, only once finding that the youngest male had a real naughty streak trying to nudge me along on the snowy path.

### Exploring Indoors

Few things in my travels have impressed me more than what I found at the University of Alaska Museum of the North's exhibit room called The Place Where You Go to Listen. I stayed at the museum for over an hour and my colleague kept coming to find me in the room, it was addicting. In a word, The Place Where You Go to Listen is a unique sound and light environment created by composer John Luther Adams. It is an ever-changing musical ecosystem giving voice to the rhythms of daylight and darkness, the phases of the moon,

the seismic vibrations of the earth and the dance of the aurora borealis, in real time.

The University of Alaska Museum of the North research collections include 1.4 million artifacts and specimens and are organized into 10 disciplines (archaeology, birds, documentary film, earth sciences, ethnology/history, fine arts, fishes/marine invertebrates, insects, mammals, and plants) and serve as a valuable resource for research on climate change, genetics, contaminants and other issues facing Alaska and the circumpolar North.

One real surprise in Fairbanks was the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum offering a larger-than-life and certainly larger-than-expected display of early 20th Century automobiles outlining Alaska's transportation history. In fact, it is over 70 autos ranging from horseless carriages to art deco classics of the 1930s and everything in between.

### Where to Stay:

Both times I have visited Fairbanks, I found the Pike's Waterfront Lodge to be nice, friendly and toasty and that means a lot when it's below freezing outside.

I also spent two nights at the Marriott Springhill Suites, which gave me a front row seat to the Yukon Quest. This is the perfect location to get a good look at the start or finish line for the Yukon Quest with an indoor pool and spa room.

### Where to Eat:

I found some of the best food around in Fairbanks with a start at Lemon Grass Thai Cuisine. Thai you asked, yes and it was

some of the best I have had outside of Thailand – enough said.

Lavelles is located in the Marriott Springhill Suites and the wine list here is worth a mention with 3,000 bottles in the wine cellar. An elegant dining experience, the chef's prepare the food in a performance kitchen in the middle of the room and the fresh meat and ingredients are unique, but the finest you can find anywhere.

A short drive outside of Fairbanks and the Silver Gulch Brewery is the kind of place where you want to spend hours eating and drinking with friends. The Sweet Moose Root Beer is made in-house and Russell recommends the Fairbanks Lager, The Black Prince and the Osculum Infame. For dinner we opted for the hot and creamy Asiago Ale Dip to start and after rather big portions of the entrées (too many to choose from) we ended it all with Blackberry Crème Brule.

