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Alaska, off the beaten path

Most take in America's last frontier from the deck of a cruise ship, but there are many other ways to enjoy the Frozen North up close and personal

February 21, 2010 | By Jane Engle, Tribune Newspapers

Sarah Palin may have put Alaska on the political map, but to many of her fellow citizens, the 49th state remains a formidable frontier.

"Do you guys take American money?" is a question that Ron Peck, president of the Alaska Travel Industry Association,, says he gets from visitors.

Maybe that's why many travelers prefer to glide by Alaska's heart-stopping scenery from the confines of a cruise ship. In 2009, about a million of the state's 1.62 million summer visitors spent at least one night on a cruise ship.

But you will find myriad other ways to experience America's last frontier. Here's a quirky sampling:

Surfboard: "People think, 'Oh, man, surfing in Alaska; that must be horrendously cold,'" said Jack Endicott, co-owner of Icy Waves Surf Shop in Yakutat, about halfway between Juneau and Anchorage. But at 50 to 60 degrees, the Pacific summer surf isn't much chillier there than in Santa Cruz, Calif., he said. And there are advantages.

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"We don't have a lot of stuff that can eat you," Endicott said. "Sharks are few and far between."

So are fellow wave riders.

With a glacier as your backdrop, what's not to like? And you can't beat the bragging rights. Yakutat may be Alaska's best-known surfing destination, but you can also catch waves at Kodiak, Sitka and numerous spots along the state's 40,000-odd miles of coastline.

Dog sled: You can pay about \$100 to hitch a brief ride with the huskies on a cruise-ship excursion. But to really be top dog, learn to mush. All Alaska Tours in Anchorage will fly you 110 miles by ski plane to Winterlake Lodge, a checkpoint in the renowned Iditarod race, to attend dog-sledding school.

By Day 3, you're usually driving a team, "out in nature with nothing but the animals and you and a guide," said company owner Al Koch. The four-night trip costs \$3,752 per person, including airfare, gear, training and meals.

Zip line: If hurtling down a cable at 60 mph above dense forest sounds fun, strike out for Icy Strait Point, which claims its zip line is one of North America's longest (5,330 feet) and highest (1,330 feet above sea level). During your 90-second run, if you dare to look down, you will catch sweeping views of Port Frederick and Icy Strait, about 50 miles west of Juneau, before landing on the beach.

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