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Four Walls and a Roof

Making the most of Forest Service cabins in the Last Frontier

BY LISA MALONEY

SPRING IN ALASKA BRINGS AT least an hour of twilight on either end of each day. It's a luxurious grace period, adding a few extra hours of "daylight" if you squint your eyes hard enough and carry a headlamp—just in case.

But if you catch the twilight at just the wrong angle—still, quiet as a coffin, draped around a lakeside forest and a few scant inches of firm, crusty snow—it feels like the lull in a creepy movie, just before the first twig goes *Crack!* and you know something big is about to happen. Especially when the only other soul you see is a stranger in a big SUV who pulls up to the near-empty lot you just parked in, looks at you, then walks up the same trail

you were planning to take to your cabin.

His look at Eddie and me—and maybe our look back—was strange enough that I pulled the receipts for our cabin rental out of my pocket to double-check the date. Chugach State Park and Chugach National Forest, both in what locals call the Southcentral part of the state, are peppered with dozens of public use cabins, all reserved pretty much like you'd reserve a hotel room. The chance to sleep under a solid roof in the wilderness is such a hot commodity that the best dates are spoken for as soon as they open for reservations, six months in advance.

We had the dates right, and I watched as the same man crunched

The McKinley Lake Trail Cabin in Chugach National Forest.

(THIS PAGE) RAY BULSON/ALASKASTOCK (OPPOSITE PAGE) QUENTIN SMITH/ALASKASTOCK



Four men play cribbage by candlelight in the Forest Service's Rynda Cabin near Andrews Creek in the Tongass National Forest.

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back to his truck after a few minutes, driving off with a disappointed look in our direction. Maybe he felt the easing stillness of the twilight too, sinking into our bones like fog taking over a stage. The woods were telling us it was time to sleep, but we still had to tote our bundles of firewood almost a mile to our reserved Forest Service cabin.

One of the best things about Southcentral's spread of cabins is their variety: Some are just a scant quarter-mile off the road, while others require a hike of ten miles or more. Others can only be accessed by boat or plane.

We'd chosen the Bald Lake cabin in Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, about 30 miles northwest of Wasilla and the only building on that particular lake. The few sounds we heard that evening were echoes rolling back across the frozen water—*thunk, thunk, thunk*—as Eddie whacked firewood into kindling using the inappropriately small hatchet I had packed.

Often, a public use cabin will have a proper ax or saw for splitting wood, and

sometimes you'll even luck out and find both wood and kindling pre-stocked. But don't count on it. The only things you can really trust to be there are four walls, a roof, a wood or propane stove, and an outhouse. Other essentials—fuel for the stove, tools for splitting wood, air mattress, toilet paper—are hit or miss, so you're well-advised to bring your own.

There's no electricity or running water either; something that Mona Spargo, public affairs specialist for the United States Forest Service, said causes occasional consternation and requests for refunds. But it's the rustic feel and remote location of the cabins that bring even more people in.

Inside, each cabin is a wealth of flat wooden surfaces: Bunk bed platforms (no mattresses), broad counter, picnic table, wide bench seats. They may be spartan, but they're hardly tiny; our "little" cabin was rated for six people, but could easily sleep ten in an emergency.

Most cabins are equal parts basecamp and adventure waypoint: A base from which you can hike, boat, fish, ski or sled depending on the season, or just get a good night's sleep without worrying about bears mistaking your tent for a human-filled nylon enchilada. In our case, it was a cozy farewell to winter, playing game after game of Farkle at the table in the lights of our headlamps, tiny blots of light shining through the windows.

The fire crackled and the stove put out a slowly advancing wall of heat—treat enough for city dwellers wanting the taste



IF YOU GO

→ For Forest Service cabins, go to recreation.gov and search for Chugach National Forest (or any other national forest). For state park cabins, visit dnr.alaska.gov/parks/cabins.

→ "Pack everything out that you came with," says Graham Predeger, recreation operations supervisor of the USFS Glacier Ranger District. "That's good not only for bear attractants, but also leaves the cabin in good shape for the next user groups."

→ Speaking of bear safety, keep a clean camp—including the deck and exterior areas. Secure food attractants in the cabin, and keep the door and windows closed when you're not around. Don't burn food scraps; pack them out when you leave.

→ Keep an eye out for a new USFS cabin this summer: The Spencer Bench cabin, up above the Spencer Glacier whistle stop. And don't be shy about calling the Forest Service or state park rangers if you have questions about the cabins or what to expect.

of a simpler life, or a chance to peep out the windows at moose browsing for their dinner.

By the time we'd spent the night in that well-insulated cabin—cozy and quiet, getting up just once to add another log to the fire—the absolute stillness didn't feel like the prelude to a horror movie anymore. It had morphed into a cradle around us, broken only by one or two birds trying their voices as the sun rose.

On the uphill side of the twilight, ramping up until day, it made sense to poke around. We explored along the lakeshore and teased each other as we jogged back along the trail, made lighter without our load of firewood. It's as if the twilight were a gate between the worlds, the cabin our vehicle for safe passage through. 🐾

