

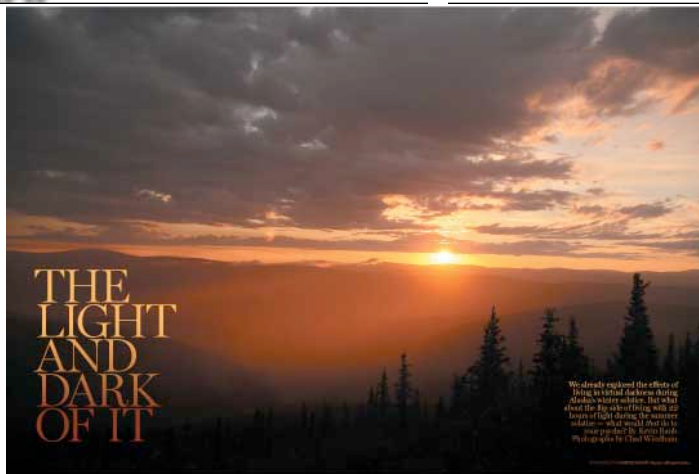
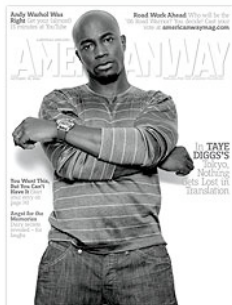
AMERICANWAY

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The Light and Dark of It

We already explored the effects of living in virtual darkness during Alaska's winter solstice. But what about the flip side of living with 22 hours of light during the summer solstice — what would *that* do to your psyche? **By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Chad Windham.**

With the exception of obituarists and Dear Abby, journalists tend to be gluttons for life-threatening situations. It was for this reason that my photographer, Chad Windham, and I found ourselves on a white-knuckle flight around the summit of the 20,320-foot Mount McKinley in Alaska's Denali National Park during last year's winter solstice, and it's the very same reason why we decided to return during the summer solstice. Only this time, we decided to up the adrenaline ante by actually *landing* on a nearby glacier, God willing.

Of course, this isn't the sole purpose of our journey. After hanging out in Fairbanks last December to see what life without light was all about (the town plunges into 22 hours of darkness during the shortest days of the year), it was decided that the opposite would be interesting as well. How does one sleep when there are 22 hours of daylight, especially when those other two remaining hours aren't really all that dark, anyway?

Naturally, we had to find ways to fill all those hours — and how better than with perilous activities, like landing a five-seat Cessna 185 prop plane on a pack of ice high up in the jagged peaks of the 600-mile Alaska Range? After getting my will in order, I quiz the pilots at Fly Denali as to the exact stupidity level of an excursion such as this. "How do you know you aren't landing on top of a crevasse?" I inquire. "You don't," says pilot James Hoffman. Fabulous.

Weather had thus far squashed this crazy idea on three separate occasions over the past two days, and we were tempted to take the hint, but on this day, it's gorgeous. There would be no pardon. While our pilot, Eric Denkwalter, finishes off his preflight checks, we chat with his wife, Geri, who does little to relieve our apprehension. It turns out she has just returned from having lunch on our destination, Ruth Glacier. (Things are done a little differently around here — the local deli simply won't do.) "There are lots of avalanches," she tells us. "You can hear them all around you." I feel the tears well up.

It turns out, however, that our fears are unfounded. The 45-minute flight over Denali National Park to Mount McKinley feels like a trip to heaven itself. The melt ponds of the glacial environment look like small pools of electric-blue popsicle juice scattered around the numerous glaciers that converge from nearly every direction. We fly as close as 500 feet (the closest we are legally allowed to get) to monstrous peaks, though it appears as if we are one sudden wind gust away from planting a big, wet kiss on them. Then we see the "airport."

The Don Sheldon Amphitheater, a part of the massive Ruth Glacier, looks just like it sounds. The towering peaks of the Alaska Range form a natural amphitheater on three sides, and somebody, at some point, was brave enough to test its surface as a landing strip. When the whole thing didn't cave in on itself or tumble down the nearby mountains in a roaring fit of snow and ice, the idea for one of the most spectacular tourism spectacles I have ever been privy to was put in motion.

The plane slightly jolts when Eric lowers the landing skis, and though it's a completely unnatural thing to do, touching down here suddenly seems quite obvious. We hit the snow at an elevation of 5,700 feet and bounce around a bit — much in the same way a beginning skier might depart a chairlift. Then all is quiet. We pop out onto the 1,000-foot sheet of ice like giddy schoolchildren.

Ten miles to the northwest, the north and south peaks of Mount McKinley loom over us like sentinels of the fortune of Mother Nature herself, though they seem a snowball's throw away. It's around five p.m., but the sun remains intense, just as it does pretty much the whole time we're in Alaska. Though we're surrounded by snow, it's hot enough to remove our jackets. We realize man has no business being here — we're witnesses to something that represents little more than a postcard to the majority of people.

Though residents report feeling reenergized in the summer, my internal clock's tendency to wake me up at four a.m. each day we're here is causing me to beg to differ. The hotels claim to have blackout curtains, but we seem to have differing opinions on the definition of *blackout*. You've seen *Insomnia*, right? It's not quite that bad, but I can't seem to nail down my required eight hours of beauty sleep either.

"I get sluggish in winter," says Dan Unkerskov, head brewer at Silver Gulch Brewing & Bottling Co., where a gaggle of classic Alaskan characters gathers every Friday during the summer for free beer. "In summer, we all get sleep deprivation without realizing it. It's definitely cool to sit outside at two a.m. and read a book."

Silver Gulch is one of numerous Alaskan microbreweries churning out excellent suds, though its motto is more noteworthy than its Pick Axe Porter. "Fairbanks: Where the people are unusual and the beer is

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unusually good." When we meet Fairbanksan Justin Rousseau at the brewery, he does little to challenge this theory.

Rousseau is a dead ringer for Colin Farrell, if Farrell had moved to Alaska and lived in a coal mine instead of pursuing an acting career. (In fact, when Rousseau inevitably becomes famous for something or other, we're convinced Farrell will get the part in the Hollywood movie of his life.) Rousseau is the kind of guy one can only encounter in Alaska: a gangly, unclean, bearded wild man who looks as if he walked into the woods somewhat normal and emerged significantly less so. He's a land surveyor of Sioux Indian descent and quite possibly the most quotable person I've met in my 10 years of journalism. When Chad asks to take his picture, he tells us that his convertible pickup truck, a custom Rousseau invention, is even more photogenic than he is.

"I was doing the *Dukes of Hazzard* thing for a while," he reports, referring to jumping in and out of the truck via the window because the doors would no longer open. "[But] that pretty much sucks in a truck, so I just cut the top off. It's real cool. *Really* cool in winter."

We eye the truck and are indeed impressed. It looks like Rousseau literally took a chain saw to it, cutting away the entire bed and cab, right up to the steering wheel. Around here, nobody bats an eyelid.

"The Lower 48 is kind of compressed," continues Rousseau. "You have to mind your p's and q's more. Here, you can do your own thing and drive a beat-up old pickup truck with the top cut off, and nobody seems to notice." Yeah, they definitely do things differently around here.

The two biggest attractions in Fairbanks during the summer are the riverboat *Discovery*, a supertourist ride down the Chena and Tanana rivers in an authentic stern-wheeler riverboat (the highlight of which is the tasty smoked salmon treats they pass out to the 900 or so tourists on board), and panning for gold at the El Dorado Gold Mine, a surprisingly fun way to pretend to strike it rich.

You cringe at the cheesiness until you see resident miner Dexter Clark sift through a random load of dirt until gold appears. Chad and I give it a try and net a total of \$24 worth of gold between us — not enough to buy an hour of darkness, though, which would be kind of nice at this point. "When you get tired, you close your eyes and go to sleep," Clark tells me. "Don't you know that trick?"

But the problem in Fairbanks in the summer isn't going to sleep (although exiting a local haunt like the Marlin bar at two a.m. into broad daylight doesn't exactly help you to know when to say when), it's *sleeping in*. Unless your bedroom is underground, the chances of waking up to the annoying blare of an alarm isn't likely. How does 4:55 a.m. sound? My thoughts exactly.

While a visit to Fairbanks and the surrounding area in winter mostly involves a search for the elusive northern lights, a summer trip to the area revolves around the pursuit of the midnight sun (and let me tell you, it's a heck of a lot easier to find). The difference is like ... ahem ... night and day. Fairbanksans go all out for summer solstice, planning all manner of midnight activities and uttering such non-Lower 48 colloquialisms to each other as, "Have a good solstice." (After nearly eight months under the paralyzing grasp of relative darkness, you'd say silly things like that too.)

In Fairbanks proper, the midnight sun is hard to spot. It sits so low on the horizon that the surrounding hills block it from view from most vantage points. So, after attempting to see it at the Midnight Sun Baseball Game (no) and the Midnight Sun Festival (no), we head up to Ester Dome, one of the highest points in the Fairbanks area.

If you've never seen the midnight sun, it is a glorious sight indeed. You can never quite get over the fact that what your watch says and what the sun says don't exactly square up. On this night, nearby wildfires have lofted a smoky mist into the valley below, creating a natural filter for the sun's fiery orange glow. The sun's rays shimmer through the fog, creating a reddish haze across the valley. It's a perfect backdrop for something like ... an album cover. Supposedly, the sun is down for two hours on this particular night, though it never truly goes away.

While everyone seems a tad happier — and a tad less insane — in the summer, I can't help but think that the charm of Fairbanks lies in the snow and ice. Take the new Museum of the North, for example. It's now fully up and operational at the University of Alaska. The stunning architecture is meant to evoke Alaska's glacial landscapes — but it somehow falls short when the luminous pinks and blues of the low-lit winter skies aren't bouncing off its whitewashed walls.

Still, the museum's exhibits (notably Craig Buchanan's junk-strewn Great Alaska Outhouse Experience and the conceptual prurient photography of Mark Daughhete) are worth an afternoon stroll. And, of course, the building remains the most architecturally interesting of all the others in the state — that hasn't changed since last winter.

In Denali National Park (125 miles south of Fairbanks), we discover a cozy little restaurant called McKinley Creekside Café. It's full of Alaskan charm and tasty entrées like coconut-battered salmon and perfect Alaskan halibut and chips. Everything is going along swimmingly until a transformer blows in nearby Healy, cutting the electricity to the entire area.

Being journalists and all, Chad and I are cashless. The power outage means, of course, that the Creekside cannot run our credit cards. In the Lower 48, we'd either be washing dishes or leaving the rights to our firstborns as collateral until we could return with payment.

"Lunch is on us," says assistant manager Leigh Anne Williams, a Georgia transplant going on her seventh year in Alaska. Yeah, they definitely do things differently around here. Perhaps it's the light?

"Obviously, the 22 hours of light is better for your psyche," says Ryan Binkley, captain of the riverboat *Discovery*. "In winter, you get cabin fever — the pioneers would literally go crazy. When spring comes, it's a weight off your shoulders."

So in the end, Alaskans tend to put up with the unrelenting darkness and bitter cold of winter as a penance for what many consider to be the perfect summer. After all, what other reason could there be for wanting to colonize the harsh extremes of the last frontier?

Well, there is that business of the Permanent Fund Dividend as well. What's that, you say? You're not familiar with the good ol' PFD? Well, neither were we. Turns out, up this way yearly checks relating to oil royalties — sometimes upward of the \$2,000 range — are doled out to all permanent residents of Alaska ... *just as a way to say thank you*.

I told you, they do things differently around here.



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Kevin Raub is a travel and entertainment journalist based in Los Angeles. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among others. He now wonders what Fairbanks might be like during the equinoxes.



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