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The Aurora Borealis is a big winter draw to Fairbanks, but there is much more to do besides viewing the nighttime phenomenon.

Northern Lights a draw to Fairbanks

Museums, ice parks, hot springs fill the hours in wintertime

By Beth J. Harpaz

ASSOCIATED PRESS TRAVEL EDITOR

Last winter, my 10-year-old son and I headed to a destination that had friends and family wondering if we'd lost our minds.

We went to Fairbanks, Alaska. In February.

We hoped to see the Northern Lights, though we knew there were no guarantees. If you stay three nights in the area, locals say you have a 75 percent likelihood of witnessing the phenomenon, but cloud cover or snow falling can ruin your chances. We got lucky, and saw them twice on a three-night stay.

But while we went to see the aurora borealis, we ended up doing so much more. In Fairbanks, we visited an ice park, saw ice sculptures and toured the Museum of the North. At Chena Hot Springs Resort, about 60 miles from Fairbanks, we went dogsledding and snowmobiling, soaked in an outdoor hot tub surrounded by snow, and visited an ice museum and geothermal energy plant.

We don't get much snow in New York City, where we live, so the trip also cured our snow deficit. My son Nathaniel loved rolling down snowy hills and climbing up snowpacked river banks.

We'd been to Alaska once before — like most tourists, in the summer. We fell in love with the landscape and wildlife, and became obsessed with everything about the state. We read books, talked endlessly about our trip (him in school, me at work), showed off our photos, and quizzed anyone we met who'd been there.

Only about 250,000 tourists venture to Alaska between October and April (compared to some

1.7 million summer visitors). But most winter tourists are like us — 75 percent are making their second trip to the state, according to the most recent data from the Alaska Visitor Statistics Program.

My husband and teenage son declined to accompany us, although they had been on the summer trip. Husband said he had to work; teenager headed to a warm beach with a friend's family. I wondered if they were right to take a pass when I checked the weather in Fairbanks a few weeks before our trip: Temperatures in early February had set record lows in the minus 40s and 50s.

We bought special gloves, socks and face protectors, borrowed ski outerwear from relatives, and hoped it would warm up. It did, with temps in the 20s and 30s — above zero. We were fine outside for hours at a time.

We also experienced an unexpected cultural immersion. Charter flights from Tokyo bring thousands of Japanese visitors to Alaska each winter. Seeing the Northern Lights is "on their life list," explained Chena spokeswoman Denise Ferree. It's also part of Japanese culture's "traditional reverence for and appreciation of the beauty of nature," said Colin Lawrence, director of tourism for the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Watching these Japanese visitors waiting outside in the snow, sometimes for hours, all bundled up, for a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see the aurora borealis, was inspiring. Like a lot of Americans, patience is not my strong suit. But my son and I shared the Japanese tourists' exclamations of joy when we spotted the Northern Lights.

There was no snow when we got home; we put away our ski gloves. And the trip didn't cure our Alaska obsession. We're still reading books about Alaska (my son surprised his fifth-grade teacher by tackling Jack London), and we're dreaming of our next trip — to the Arctic Circle.

These days, mud comes at bargain prices, even if it's not exactly dirt cheap



Solage

At Solage, guests apply mud to themselves or friends, left, rather than simply sitting in a tub. The first step of the day, though, is to choose an aromatherapy concoction at the Mud Bar, below. Spa guests can use the pool, right, and other facilities all day for \$25 extra.



Solage

During off-season, Calistoga spas cut prices, offer special deals

By Susan Fornoff
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Those of us who love to sink into a tub of Calistoga mud realize that plenty of people think the very idea is gross. My friend Cheryl and I don't care. At the end of The Works at Dr. Wilkinson's or Indian Springs' Classic Mud Bath, our skin is soft, our psyches soothed. I've even had success easing chronic knee aches and foot pains with a therapeutic soak and massage.

There are alternatives, however, and the economy's recent hiccup presents a seasonal opportunity to experience one called the Mudslide for a deeply discounted price at the Napa Valley's most luxurious new resort. The verdict: We wouldn't substitute a Mudslide for the bathhouse mud experience, but a day at chichi Solage made us feel like we belonged with the beautiful people on the magazine covers.

Sunglasses, please. Rooms at Solage — on the Silverado Trail just below Calistoga's heart — run \$300-plus and up, a 50-minute massage plus use of the pools and steam rooms (but not bocce courts) starts at \$145, and a two-course lunch at Solbar would be \$30 without wine. Here was our deal, a package Solage calls "Double Your Leisure": \$375 for what we calculated as a \$550 value — Mudslides, massages and lunches, plus use of the spa's mineral pools and bocce courts and access to a very special clothing-optional section outdoors.

Sunglasses, yes. Swimsuits, no. Ahhh.

Why now? It's all about the climate. Cooler temperatures mean the mud not only detoxifies us, it warms us. And as for the economic climate, well, deals are better than ever and prime-time appointments are easy to come by for a quick one-day getaway at fancy resorts all over Northern California.

The back story: This goes back to 1859, when Sam Brannan bought up the northern end of the Napa Valley, declared Calistoga "the Saratoga of California" and mixed its volcanic ash with hot mineral water to get the mud baths off and, er, running. The classic recipe: mud (in a tub), waters (in another tub, after a serious shower), rest (blanket wrap and, ideally, massage).

Now there's the nouveau cuisine on the menu, the Mudslide. First, guests go to the mudbar to pick their aromatherapy concoction — in our case, Revitalizer for Cheryl, Muscle Soother for me. The bartender whips the essential oils in with the mud in miniature champagne buckets, and then guests are sent off — privately, in couples or in groups of up to five — to a tiled Mud Lounge to smear the cocktail all over themselves and/or each other and then bask in the warmth while the mud dries.



Mount View Hotel

Lincoln Avenue is the main downtown street in Calistoga, offering a variety of shops and eating places, as well as some wine tasting.



SUSAN FORNOFF / The Chronicle

Checking in: Even on a week-night, it would have cost close to \$350 to stay at Solage. On this visit, I stayed in the center of town, in a nice, king-sized room at the Mount View Hotel for \$200, including tax and random tariffs, with continental breakfast brought to your room. The Mount View has a spa and the director specializes in unique treatments for the lymph system.

Spend your day: A winter spa day at Solage can start as early as 8 a.m. and requires a minimum of 5 hours from mud through lunch. Mud packages at area bathhouses demand a similar time commitment. After lunch, one can relax all afternoon at the spa pools and steam room — or hit the shops on chain-store-free Lincoln Avenue, or taste a little wine at the two tasting rooms on Lincoln or countless others in the vicinity. The overnight visitor will then want to have dinner at one of the many spots in the foodie-friendly town, where menus are posted on restaurant doors and windows.

Dining: Bar Vino, which used to be the main bar at the Mount View, now cooks up some great food at reasonable prices. (Don't be fooled by the seemingly lower prices at Jole next door; plates are smaller there. At Bar Vino, you can choose between small serving and big one.) Seasonal offerings include a gnocchi with braised duck and butternut squash, and braised short rib in a bitter chocolate espresso sauce. The wine list included many by-the-glass selections.

Don't miss: With any treatment at any time of year at Spa Solage, spring for the extra \$25 to use the spa pools and facilities as a day guest. The perks include a large, coed mineral pool with a selection of cocktails (we had the mangotini) available at the Mud Bar, plus the clothing-optional men's and women's areas including maybe the best steam room ever (not too hot, extremely steamy, and really pretty when the steam clears), a cold plunge pool (we didn't dare without a defibrillator handy) and a swimming-pool-size hot tub with lots of strong jets.

Don't bother: Making random stops at Napa Valley tasting rooms on the way to Calistoga. Before

you know it, your wallet will have slimmed down though your taste buds have hardly been quenched by pricey yet often meager pours of wines you can find at Safeway. For a more mellow vibe, try the Calistoga Cellars and On the Edge tasting rooms in town or, en route, Back Room Wines in Napa.

Word to the wise: Our bonus was a glorious November day, but the Double Your Leisure package

runs through February (except holiday periods), so if you can visit on short notice, pick a decent day to maximize value. And, alas, tips are not included in the package, so figure in another 20 percent or so for the invisible but always present service.

Susan Fornoff will succeed John Flinn as Travel editor Thursday. To comment, see sgate.com/travel and follow the links.

Fun in frigid Fairbanks

DAY 1

We landed in Fairbanks late afternoon, headed to our hotel for dinner and a nap, setting an alarm to be up for a 10 p.m. pickup to see the Northern Lights at the Aurora Borealis Lodge. Lodge owner Mok Kumagai picks guests up at hotels downtown, and takes them away from city lights to see the aurora. We stayed at his home until 2 a.m., napping in his loft before being awakened by exclamations of "Aurora!" from his Japanese guests when the light show began. Details at www.auroracabin.com or (907) 389-2812, \$75 a person; overnight accommodations, \$169-\$224.

DAYS 2 AND 3

We previewed Fairbanks' Ice Park, where the World Ice Art Championships take place. The park has slides and other playground structures made from ice, along with larger-than-life ice sculptures. Open Feb. 24-March 22, 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; www.iceparkalaska.com. The sculptors do their chiseling and carving Feb. 24-26, and March 1-6, with the creations finished and lighted on Feb. 27 and March 7.

Then we headed to Chena Hot Springs Resort, www.chena-hot-springs.com or (907) 451-8104 (nightly room rates start at \$179 a night; packages available; van transportation from Fairbanks can be arranged 72 hours in advance for a fee). Our visit included dogsledding through snowy woods; visiting and playing with sled dogs and their puppies; our first-ever snowmobiling adventure, with a guide; dips in the hot tubs and hot lake (children are not allowed in the lake but they can try the outdoor tub and indoor pool); and tours of the resort's Aurora Ice Museum and geothermal energy plant. The resort also offers horse-drawn sleigh rides, flightseeing and therapeutic massage.

DAY 4

Back in Fairbanks, my son had a blast climbing up and down the snowy banks of the Chena River. Then we headed out to the Museum of the North, at the University of Alaska campus (a \$15-\$20 taxi ride from downtown, or take the Airlink shuttle from the airport). My son was fascinated by displays on Alaska's animals, from prehistoric creatures like mammoths and mastodons, to bears and wolves. I liked the history of the gold miners, the frontier era and Native culture. Don't miss the museum's unique sound-light installation, called "The Place Where You Go to Listen." Computers create sounds and images using real-time data from seismic stations and magnetometers that track earthquake and auroral activity, and the colors and sounds in the installation change with the position of the sun. Museum winter hours: Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (holiday schedule, Dec. 26-Jan. 4, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., daily), admission \$10, www.uaf.edu/museum.

Fairbanks' many restaurants include 25 offering Asian cuisine. We ate at Lemongrass, one of 10 local Thai eateries, before heading home.

IF YOU GO

If all this gets you dreaming of your own magical visit to Alaska this winter, the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau can help: www.explorefairbanks.com, (800) 327-5774.

If you go

GETTING THERE

Drive up the Silverado Trail to the Calistoga turnoff, which takes you left onto Lincoln Avenue, the main drag. Or drive yourself nuts behind the tourists on Highway 29 and make a right into Calistoga. Solage is on the Silverado Trail but the equivalent of only about a couple of blocks south of town. Dr. Wilkinson's, Indian Springs and other spas are in the heart of town right on Lincoln.

WHERE TO STAY

Mount View Hotel and Spa, 1457 Lincoln Ave., www.mount-viewhotel.com, (800) 816-6877. \$139-\$429.

Indian Springs Resort and Spa, 1712 Lincoln Ave., www.indian-springscalistoga.com, (707) 942-4913. \$185-\$715.

Indian Springs recently absorbed Nance's next door and now has a two-story lodge building of rooms starting at \$185, along with its studio, one-bedroom, two-bedroom and three-bedroom cottages starting at \$195. Through March 31, the resort is offering two mud bath treatments per overnight stay Sun-Thurs, with some exceptions.

Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort, 1507 Lincoln Ave., www.drwilkinson.com, (707) 942-4102. \$109-\$299. Dr. Wilkinson's has really nice bed-and-breakfast style rooms in the Victorian building starting at \$229-plus on weekdays, and very basic motel rooms starting at \$109.

Solage, 755 Silverado Trail, www.solagecalistoga.com, (866) 942-7442. \$295-\$575.

WHERE TO EAT

Solbar at Solage, 755 Silverado Trail, (866) 942-7442. Lunch entrees, \$15-\$19 and the \$33-for-two (or more) Lucky Pig. 11 a.m.-3 p.m. daily. (Also serves breakfast and dinner.)

Bar Vino, 1457 Lincoln Ave., (707) 942-9900. Dinner entrees in half-plates and full plates, \$6-\$18. 4 p.m. to closing, Wed.-Sun.

Brannan's, 1374 Lincoln Ave., (707) 942-2233. Same chef as Bar Vino, with a beautiful room and the must-have Chocolate Lava Torte dessert. Dinner entrees, \$16-\$39. 4:30 p.m. to closing nightly. (Also serves lunch.)

Calistoga Inn, 1250 Lincoln Ave. (707) 942-4101. Tree-shaded patio makes it a great spot for lunch. Entrees, \$8-\$18.50. Daily 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. (open at 11 a.m. on Sat-Sun) (Also serves dinner.)

WHAT TO DO

"Take" the mud at your choice of bathhouses in town. Walk the main drag and pop in and out of one-of-a-kind shops. See the bees and taste the wine at **On the Edge** (1255 Lincoln Ave., (707) 942-7410, open daily from around 10 a.m. to around 5 p.m.). See the art and taste the wine at **Calistoga Cellars** (1371 Lincoln Ave., (707) 942-7422, open Thurs.-Sat. from noon until 5 p.m.).

WORD TO THE WISE

Prices here are all based on winter rates; count on them starting to rise as early as March 1.



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