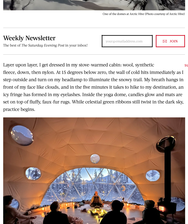
June 9, 2016 | TRAVEL

Arctic Hive: An Alaska Backcountry Retreat Under the Northern Lights

This off-grid immersive experience puts guests in tune with remote wilderness.

Jill K. Robinson



One of the domes at Arctic Hive (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

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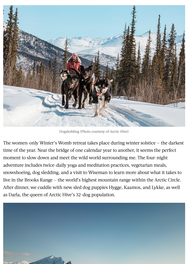
Layer upon layer, I pretend to stay snow warmed cabin; wool, synthetic fleece, down, then nylon. At 15 degrees below zero, the wall of cold hits immediately as I step outside and turn on my headlamp to illuminate the snowy trail. My breath hangs in front of my face like clouds, and in the few minutes it takes to hike to my destination, an icy fringe has formed in my eyelashes. Inside the yoga dome, candles glow and mats are set on top of fluffy, faux fur rugs. White celestial green ribbons still twist in the dark sky, practice begins.

A yoga session (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

North of the Arctic Circle in Alaska's interior, Arctic Hive's small collection of cozy cabins and fiberglass domes are still under dark skies at 9 a.m. in December. The off-grid destination tucked into the Brooks Range near the Gates of the Arctic National Park operates wilderness retreats from yoga to dog mushing to skiing and snowboarding – but the sky is most dramatic during polar night. With only a muted blue twilight for about four hours per day, it's not uncommon to see the Northern Lights from dinnertime straight through breakfast.

The Northern Lights (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

The route here begins with a flight to Fairbanks, followed by a 7 hour van ride on the Dalton Highway, a 414 mile stretch of gravel road that runs north to Prudhoe Bay through some of the state's most remote wilderness. It's been described as "vast emptiness," though it's all but empty, with birch and spruce forests giving way to snow-dusted scrublands that take on an ethereal quality in the pastel winter light.



The Dalton Highway (Shutterstock)

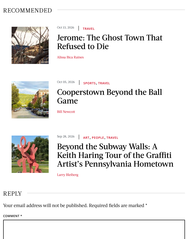
After stops in Yukon River Camp and Coldfoot, the van arrives in the historic mining village of Wiseman – population 11. It's here where visitors meet Mollie and Sean Burke, who founded the hike-in backcountry retreat center for those looking to explore the arctic ecosystem through yoga, meditation, hiking, skiing and snowboarding, and dog sledding.

Mollie and Sean Burke (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

The short trek to Arctic Hive is only about a mile, but once there, it feels a world away from everything. In the effort that it's taken to arrive, my sense of time has dissolved, and the new pulse of life without the anxieties of being a human in the modern world is felt once more.

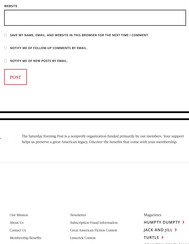
Following a dream of living in Alaska, Mollie and Sean sked out to the property that was to become Arctic Hive and found that the mountains reminded them of Arctic Norway, which was special in their travel memories. "Before we moved to the Brooks Range, I thought I knew wild places," says Mollie. "But nothing prepared me for the tundra igniting in fiery reds and oranges, or for the punch of antioxidants packed into tiny Arctic blueberries. I couldn't believe it when I first saw hundreds of caribou migrating across snow-covered mountains – it's like witnessing the land itself in motion."

Yoga and adventure retreats began in 2021 and are held from late September through late April, as well as dog-assisted backcountry ski and snowboard opportunities, yoga teacher trainings, and learn-to- mush retreats for those who yearn for the thrill of driving a dogsled with a team of Alaska huskies in the Arctic.



Dogsledding (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

The women-only Winter's Womb retreat takes place during winter solstice – the darkest time of the year. Near the bridge of one calendar year to another, it seems the perfect moment to slow down and meet the wild world surrounding me. The four-night adventure includes twice-daily yoga and meditation practices, vegetarian meals, snowshoeing, dog sledding, and a visit to Wiseman to learn more about what it takes to live in the Brooks Range – the world's highest mountain range within the Arctic Circle. After dinner, we cuddle with new sled dog puppies Hygge, Kasmos, and Lykke, as well as Darla, the queen of Arctic Hive's 32 dog population.



The Brooks Range (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

Only three to eight participants can attend each retreat session. When my session's four attendees retire to our cabins for the evening, we choose across watch times to wake up, peek out the window, and dash outside in knock on doors and marvel together at the undulating emerald and amethyst lights. It feels like a game to measure the childlike experience of wonder against the growing feeling of cold to determine just how long I can remain outside before returning to the warmth of my bed. No matter how much I wake up each night, I never feel tired in the morning. The aurora magic carries me through the day.

Snowshoeing (Photo courtesy of Arctic Hive)

"Guests sometimes ask if we think they can do this, but it seems that the people who can't are those who never ask the question," says Mollie. "By the time guests get here, they've worked very hard in planning and packing the right gear. It's powerful to experience the Arctic without having to worry about your survival, and enjoy the wilderness in a comfortable bed in a warm cabin with the aurora just overhead."

In addition to Arctic Hive, the Bushys also run Riding On Insulin, action sports camps for kids with type 1 diabetes – a non profit born in 2010 out of Sean's desire to give back to kids who inspired him to continue his pro snowboarding career after his own diagnosis at the age of 19. The ski and snowboard camps are located across North America, but a summertime Alaska wilderness adventure retreat for teens takes place on the Bushys' remote arctic property.

In the moody dimness, following the fairy string lights between the trees to yoga practice and meals often reflects as if at this scene world is ours alone. On the day before we pack into the van to return to the land of grocery stores, traffic, and airports, we take a twilight dogsled journey along the frozen Koyukuk River beneath jagged peaks to see herds of caribou. Their collective breath, like ours, twines and rises into the crisp air, dissipating in the boreal forest. To experience wilderness in this rare way is to feel the spirit of the Arctic deeply and remember the importance of protecting the "vast emptiness."

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