



ALASKA SKI TRAIN

THE POLAR EXPRESS

In a cloud of steam and snow, the blue-and-yellow-striped 4,300-horsepower SD70MAC locomotive speeds northward. Distant, glaciated peaks scrape upward like the jagged icebergs that collide trackside in the heaving Susitna River. As the train winds toward Curry, Alaska, the scenery of the southeast corner of Denali State Park remains much the same as it did during the early 1920s, when skiers first came to this unlikely wilderness outpost.

The Alaska Railroad completed this 470-mile rail line from Seward to Fairbanks in 1923, and Curry, located about halfway, became a stop for passengers on what was then a two-day journey. That same year, the posh Curry Hotel opened, and throughout the next three decades, the town boomed, and skiers arrived. A ski-tow and jump were carved in 1947 onto a 200-foot hill just out of town. Adventurers toured into the surrounding country, where moose, wolves and caribou laid tracks of their own beneath sparsely treed slopes of powder. The Railroad Corporation advertised

the 75-room Curry Hotel as "a palace in the wilderness."

But in April 1957, three people died when the hotel burned to the ground. The ski hill shut down and the town was abandoned. All that remains are crumbling foundations, a renovated cabin and an airstrip. The rails that built Curry still curve through town, however, and once a year, the skiers return.

In 1972, the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage began chartering trains from the Alaska Railroad to visit the historic slopes of Curry, a tradition that continues after a hiatus last year. This winter, the Alaska Ski Train will chug north from Anchorage, a journey known as much for the party—commonly described as a "polka mosh pit"—as for the ski touring.

The thumping oom-pah-pah of a lederhosen-clad band begins at daybreak in the Anchorage depot, as skiers sway with the rhythm of the train. And at Curry, they party and ski, ski and party, celebrating winter as only Alaskans can in the long shadow of Denali.—Tyler Cohen

POWDER DEPOT:

"Hit the ground as soon as the train stops and head toward the quarry. Jump on the road on the east side of the tracks, which switchbacks through dense woods to the top of the plateau. The best tracks are from the top—just under 1,000 feet of elevation gain. Over the ridge, there are great views of Denali. Ski south on the ridge to the next hump and head down from there. The southwest aspect offers the steepest terrain. Be sure to be back by the 4 p.m. whistle or you'll be spending a cold night out."—Lynne McConnell, Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage

ALL ABOARD

ROUTE: This winter's trip is on March 19, 2011; Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage (anchoragenordicski.com).

TICKETS: \$100 for Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage members, \$130 for non-members; tickets go on sale for members on October 1, non-members on November 8.

SCHEDULE: Train boards at 6 a.m. and leaves at 7:20 sharp; the train leaves Curry at 4 p.m. and returns to Anchorage around 8 p.m.

SKIER CROSSING:

MAPS/COORDINATES: Talkeetna C-1 USGS Quad.

SNOW REPORT/AVY FORECAST: For current weather conditions, visit climate.gi.alaska.edu/Wx/current.html, and search for nearby Talkeetna.

LIFT-SERVED: Alyeska Resort offers gate-accessed backcountry and is about 45 minutes south of Anchorage on AK-1 (\$60/day, alyeskaresort.com).

GUIDES: The Ascending Path (ascendingpath.com).

STAY: Anchorage Grand Hotel (rooms start at \$95/night, anchoragegrand.com).

EAT/DRINK: Bring cash for snacks and non-alcoholic beverages; BYOB, but glass is not allowed in some cars; In Anchorage, try the pizza and a seasonal brew at the Moose's Tooth (moosestooth.net).

GEAR SHOP: Alaska Mountaineering has all your expedition needs for purchase and to rent (alaskamountaineering.com).