

# SNO-TRAVELER

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# SNOWMOBILING THE LAST FRONTIER

THE ALASKA RANGE OF  
DENALI NATIONAL PARK

Story and Photos by Dan Gould



Ask any outdoor enthusiast for a list of their top five adventure destinations and chances are Alaska is on that fantasy list. What’s the allure? There are currently 11 reality TV shows that are set in The Last Frontier. Do you really need more convincing?

The largest but most sparsely populated state in the United States, Alaska is only 55 miles from the Russian border, from whom it was purchased in 1867 for little more than two cents an acre in today’s dollars. I met a guy who recently moved to Alaska because his home state of Texas was too small. Actually, he relocated because the oil industry pays better up north, and he’s tired of sweating like a desert burro. That doesn’t change the fact that Alaska is more than twice as big, notwithstanding claims that everything is bigger in Texas.

What can’t be disputed - snowmobiling is bigger. In fact, I’ve never imagined anything like this even existed. Apparently, you can ride wherever a compass or whim may point you. Sled tracks crisscross every road and parking lot outside of Anchorage, with tracks running roadside all the way to Denali. Officially there is less than 500 miles of maintained trails but that’s a non-issue as snowmachines are clearly a de facto mode of everyday transportation.

Our reality show started at Gate Creek Cabins in the Petersville, Alaska, whose total population could easily gather around a fair-sized bonfire. Once on sleds, the brain hit sensory overload as the evergreens cleared and Denali dominated the horizon. The

highest mountain peak in North America, standing at 20,310 feet, is stunningly surreal. It was nothing short of a double unicorn day, as we motored along one of the few groomed trails in the entire state, straight into a panoramic symphony of color and light.

As the landscape burst into vast open areas, we left the trail for snow-covered tundra. This required standing at attention, with butts off the seat for extended stints. The rack of my Polaris Voyager 650 was freighted with a bungeed five-gallon gas can and a sizable dry-bag stuffed to the gills. It flattened whatever was in its path as we picked our way through dips and hopped over drifts.

After 45 minutes of hammering, the legs reminded the brain they had the stamina of a newborn giraffe. Fortunately, we transitioned to a wide swath of virgin snow in a valley that ran for miles to a mammoth wall. Before us was the mighty Tokositna Glacier, a 25-mile-long mass of rock and ice in the Alaska Range of Denali National Park and Preserve.

The thought of snowmobiling to the face of a glacier was unimaginable, never mind the fact we rode atop the ice of a glacial river channel to get there. In the spirit of avoiding calamitous falls into an open crevasse, we never ventured onto the glacier. Instead, we took photos from a distance and enjoyed one of the most unique lunchbreaks in memory.



Chris Gamache, Dan Gould, Roger Wright and Gary Broderick were promoted from rookie status to Alaskan novice after tackling the mountains all week.



The highest mountain peak in North America, Denali positively dominates the landscape at 20,310 feet. The terrain varies wildly throughout the Alaska range.



The following morning we were to be schooled on the finer points of deep snow and sidehilling. I’ve seen the videos, simple enough. Lucky for us, Stoney Creek was covered in 4-6 feet of snowpack, otherwise access to the Dutch Hills would be impossible due to treacherous alder growth. This was going to be another epic adventure!

In theory, carving a right turn requires a quick lean to the right, while counter steering to the left. I’m here to tell you it doesn’t work. At least not until the end of the day and you’ve tumbled into the fluff a few times. After playing in a meadow, we watched the guides on 850 Polaris RMK Khaos mountain sleds sidehill a slope and quickly draw a line to a far-away peak. The two-way radio soon crackled. It was our turn. Huh?

At this point, the decision to be a spectator was already solidified. Seriously, how much fun does one need? The photo opportunities were absolutely stunning from the valley floor. Then one of my fellow newbs went up, barely making it but still getting that high five. Suddenly it became clear the opportunity to be ridiculed for eternity had arrived. Time for the big boy bibs.

Looking as though the training wheels were removed, the right side of the sled leaned up and the ski dangled in air, as my first steep and deep got underway. The 650 wailed wide-open as I crushed the throttle flipper to smithereens. The summit approached just as I ran out of talent. The sled veered to the left, almost heading downhill, but instead dug in next to the other rookie. Dang!

Gotta admit, getting that far out of my comfort zone was truly exhilarating, with smudges of fear blended in for good measure. We hung around the top for a while, absorbing the infinite view while playing the leading roles in our very own reality program.

The rest of the week was a combination of adventures and kicking back. Sometimes sleeping in late at the well-appointed cabins or enjoying an evening of food and tall tales around the fire. Around these fires we met snowmobilers from Oklahoma, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, Wisconsin, New York, and a group from Germany, who were returning for their second trip.

Overall, the weather in late March was nothing short of perfect, with relatively seasonable temperatures. We still got to experience a good mix of Alaska’s winter, which we welcomed. The wind was howling one particular cold day, and some wondered out loud if it was worth going out. Those from New Hampshire decided to ride the 70-miles of marked trails. There may not be cell service but the Polaris sleds were equipped with Ride Command, which allowed us to keep track of each other on the map.

Gusts exceeded 50 miles-per-hour at times, the wind yanking at our helmets, cutting through every imperfect seam in our riding gear. Massive drifts kept our exploration team entertained and warm for hours. Fortunately, we stumbled upon another explorer, this one trapped in a Toyota buried to the floorboards. In this episode, a young man, new to the area, was under the impression he could

drive his SUV 35-miles on a groomed trail to view real estate. Thanks to an additional group of riders, and the club’s PistenBully, we were able to extract the lost soul while instilling the importance of basic survival gear, as this guy had nothing but the coat on his back. If it weren’t for snowmobilers the outcome could have been grim.

Decades of slicing trails did not translate a lick to mountain riding, despite a master’s degree at YouTube University. We needed more practice. The plan was to hone our carving techniques in a play area the next morning before heading for the mountains. The snow varied from waist deep drifts to hardpack. We would transition back and forth, from trail mode to mountain mode. It was a blast. Maneuvering and climbing came easier that afternoon thanks in part to ripping the Band-Aid off earlier in the week.

Everyone gathered for a break after climbing a ridge of increasing angles. The guides then huddled for a minute, pointing off in the distance, then directed everyone to fire-up the sleds. It was clouding up. One minute the sky is clear blue, then suddenly you are encased in an eerily gray overcast sprinkled with light snow. Thankfully, we were led by a skilled crew who were intimately familiar with the region, and highly trained. They got us off the mountain well before winter blew in and visibility tanked. There’s no way we could have gotten down without them which points to the value of experienced guides.

From there, we traveled into the Petersville gold mining area which is still active. In the late 1800’s local natives reported bright colors in the river. Within years the Petersville wagon road was established to the mining camps, the very roads we were snowmobiling on. The overcast sky added to the mystique, as we crept by old camps, ramshackle cabins and abandoned machinery, all under the watchful eyes of a moose herd.

Our last day of riding wouldn’t have been complete without basking in Denali’s greatness one more time. Buzzing down the trail, we found the perfect angle for the final photo shoot. With the weekend approaching, traffic increased on the access trail while the sun slipped behind the 600-mile Alaska Range. Dozens of utility snowmachines towed cargo sleds, loaded with drums of fuel, crates of food, and other staples for camp. Several families passed by, with Mom leading the way, the kids close behind (also pulling significant payloads), followed by Fido sitting proudly on the seat in front of Dad.

Those families drove home a point: Reality is what you make of life. Adventures with family, friends, sometimes even strangers, stay with us forever. That’s the allure of Alaska.

# ALASKA SNOWMOBILE GUIDES

If you’re going to sled in unfamiliar territory, consider a guide. Be it an experienced friend or a hired gun, the trip will be far safer and more enjoyable. You will ride the best routes, see the most impressive scenery, and benefit from insider knowledge. After dozens of trips, I wouldn’t do it any other way. Our Alaska adventure was led by a highly skilled group, with considerable knowledge of the region and backgrounds covering multiple disciplines.



**KIM BERGERON** has finished the famed Alaska Iron Dog five times. This New Hampshire resident puts thousands of miles on his sleds and dirt bikes every year, in Alaska and New England. He volunteers for his clubs and is a NHSA county director, among other posts. His enthusiasm and leadership skills make him a natural guide and an amazing host for any adventure. Kim has three rentals available at Gate Creek Cabins ([gatecreekcabins.com](http://gatecreekcabins.com)) and organizes tours. He can be reached at [kebergeron68@gmail.com](mailto:kebergeron68@gmail.com).



**RANDY BEDARD** of Willow Alaska is the manager of Hatcher Pass Polaris. With ten Iron Dogs under his belt, adventure and snowmachines are his stated passion. Randy’s knowledge of the area dates back to paper maps. His ability to guide our group in and out of remote areas was nothing short of impressive, and confidence inspiring. Additionally, his comedy routines were epic.



**JP BERNIER** is another Granite State motorhead who frequents the Alaskan backcountry. He transitioned from rock and ice climbing to racing dirt bikes and running a sled in the Iron Dog. JP often played clean-up, making sure no one got separated from the group. He also dug more than a few newbs and pros out of deep stuff. His insight and encouragement pushed us higher, as did his wisecracks.



**JEFF “YUKON” SOWADA** is a Midwesterner who spends significant time hunting, fishing and snowmobiling in Alaska. Traveling the world during his career at Boston Scientific, he’s now immersed in adventure motorcycling. His story of spending a night in a valley with stuck sleds, knowing that overnight cold would firm the snow enough to escape, speaks to his idea of adventure.

