

AFAR

What It's Like to Sleep on a Glacier in Denali's New (and Only) Luxury Lodge

Alex Schechter | 7.4.2018



Photo by Jeff Schultz - High up in the mountains of Denali National Park, Sheldon Chalet is a unlikely spot of luxury on a remote and rugged landscape.

At Sheldon Chalet, you'll wake up surrounded by Denali National Park.

At 10:52 p.m. in late May, the Great Gorge is silent. The sky still has a faint bluish glow, and even though the sun has retreated behind Denali, it won't properly set. The never-ending twilight that characterizes a summer night in Alaska is both exhilarating and a little unnerving. Here, surrounded by [Denali National Park and Preserve](#), "night" simply means a lessening of light. But inside my room at the [Sheldon Chalet](#) at 6,000 feet up in the Alaska Range, it's a different story. Drawing down the blackout blinds, I snuggle under the covers after removing a truffle, colorfully decorated like the Northern Lights, from my pillow. Sleep is imminent.

Denali National Park was established on an old mining road in 1917, and this hard-to-access park has traditionally been an experience few travelers get to enjoy. Kayaking is not allowed on the rivers, and individual vehicles are not permitted inside the park. Instead, visitors have to board a tour bus and follow one 14-hour loop. For \$300, [Talkeetna Air Taxi](#) offers flightseeing tours on fixed-wing aircraft, and intrepid groups of climbers can venture out into the mountains, but there hasn't been a feasible way for most to spend prolonged periods of time up on any of the park's glaciers. That is, until now.



Photo by Jeff Schultz - The only way to reach the Sheldon Chalet is by helicopter, and the landing pad doubles as a lounge deck.

Set in the middle of a 35-square-mile bowl called the “Don Sheldon Amphitheater,” where more than 5,000 feet of compacted snow and ice conceal a prehistoric hollow that runs deeper than the Grand Canyon, the newly opened Sheldon Chalet is a five-room luxury hotel built, improbably, on a glacier. In 1966, bush pilot Don Sheldon [built a small, rustic cabin on this remote spot](#); the new, stylish lodge that his descendants have added is a feat of ingenuity and [the only luxury lodge in Denali](#). This could be the unlikeliest place for a hotel in the United States.

The 40-minute helicopter ride from a tiny airport 113 miles north of Anchorage in [Talkeetna, AK](#) (population: 876), to the chalet doubles as a sweeping aerial tour of Denali National Park, and visitors can watch the wilderness morph from rich forested plains to raw, gravelly moraine—earth that’s been upturned by the edge of a moving glacier. The ascent into the mountains passes over deserted ice fields hollowed out by circular pools of sapphire blue water.

The chalet, at 63° N latitude, is removed from all signs of life. There is no TV, no cell phone service, and no Wi-Fi. It’s 50 miles to the nearest town, over land that is largely impassable on foot. There are no roaming moose, no flocks of birds, no vegetation. You are entirely surrounded by snow, rock, and ice.



Photo by Jeff Schultz - Improbably perched on a glacier, the hexagonal Sheldon Chalet is a cozy luxury retreat.

I was prepared for strong winds and extreme cold (I’d even packed my heavy-duty winter Carhartt jacket and snow pants), but what surprised me were the dazzling plays of light across the “amphitheater” that surrounded the chalet. Stepping out on the helipad after landing, I immediately threw my sunglasses on—it was still early afternoon and without them, the landscape was a blinding wash of white. Up among the clouds, everything appeared sharper and more intense. The sky was a rich, undiluted blue, and the wrinkled tips of the mountains were rendered startlingly clear.

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Upon arrival, we were shown out to the “hammock,” a supported net that wraps around the edge of the helipad and extends out over the icy gorge below. I’d just landed at the highest inhabitable point on Denali. Now they were inviting me to recline midair, over the 1,000-year-old Ruth Glacier, and sip champagne. I liked where this was going. What else could be in store way up here, I wondered, aside from stretching out in the hammock and listening for avalanches?

It turns out, summer is just as active a time as winter at the chalet. Between helicopter trips to nearby hot springs, salmon fishing, and glacier hikes, the days can be as full or as relaxed as you like. I flirted with the idea of hanging back at the chalet while everyone else was out hiking. I could have used the rest, and it would have been a thrill to have the spherical, glass-enclosed lounge all to myself. But looking down over the rim into the plunging amphitheater, where some of the cliffs appeared sugar glazed, I decided a little cardio would be good for me.



Photo by Jeff Schultz - Ruth Glacier primarily occupies the southeast side of Mount Denali.

So on the second day, I strapped on my snowshoes, applied plenty of sunscreen, and followed Nikolai and Taryl, our on-site adventure guides, down onto the glacier. For novice mountaineers, it's unusual to be set loose on an actual ice field. But this setup is safe: Everyone in our group wore a harness with a rope attached to the person in front; earlier that morning, Nikolai and Taryl had gone out with a 15-foot pole to inspect the trail for dangerous air pockets. It was a thrilling two-hour hike across ice to the Gargoyles, a sheer granite wall that rises 200 feet above the snowy plains.

Since nobody hurtled to their death or got stuck in a crevasse, we celebrated with an al fresco lunch. At a picnic table carved out of snow, Nikolai sautéed fresh Alaskan king crab cakes, and served them with a fresh barley and root vegetable salad. I dunked my canteen into the snow and poured [Alaskan birch water](#) on top for a tasty (and 100 percent locally sourced) snow cone.

Dinners were a similarly unconventional affair. Since the sky stayed light for so long, we would linger on Himalayan white faux-fur beanbag chairs on the main floor lounge, taking turns looking through a telescope that points directly at Denali. (Starting in October, when nights last longer, guests can watch the Northern Lights without even leaving the kitchen table—better than any planetarium.) The helipad doubled as a glamorous “deck” for cigar smoking or wine tastings. Finally, around 9 or 10 p.m., well into our third or fourth round of cocktails, Delicious Dave, the chalet's Anchorage-based executive chef, would summon us to table, for intricate entrées like pistachio-encrusted filet mignon and seared sea scallops with garlic-roasted broccoli.



Photo by Jeff Schultz - While the snowy landscape may not change much over the seasons, winter's dark nights make for perfect aurora borealis watching from the helipad.

The chalet's distinctive hexagonal shape was designed to maximize views across the amphitheater—it also created a cozy, communal atmosphere. The five soundproof bedrooms upstairs hold a maximum of 10 guests, with two bathrooms to share (flushing toilets might be the chalet's most impressive achievement way out here). Downstairs, the open-plan lounge acts as breakfast nook, library, and dining room all rolled into one. And somehow, whether because of the nearly 360° panoramic views, or the high caliber of service, things never felt cramped.