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On a Remote Glacier in the Middle of Alaska, I Learned the Magic of Disconnecting

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The light in the mountains.

Photo: Jeff Schultz / Courtesy of Sheldon Chalet

On a beautiful June day, from the road two hours north of Anchorage, the mountains of the Alaska Range look like a painted backdrop; their dramatic peaks, including Mount Denali—the highest in North America—are stark white against the lush green forests and cerulean sky.

It seemed almost impossible to believe that, in less than an hour's helicopter ride, I would be among them, at the Sheldon Chalet, a recently opened five-room luxury property set on the mighty Ruth Glacier.

The most astounding thing about the Sheldon Chalet—more than 50 miles from the nearest town—is that it exists at all. But in some of the most remote nature on the planet, it succeeds as a full-on luxury property, with Champagne and oysters on arrival and meals from one of the most talented chefs in Alaska.

Enormous expanses of Denali National Park are accessed only by true adventurers; there's no electricity, no running water, and hardly any structures. And national parks, of course, are almost entirely off-limits for private development. But the mapped much of the region—staked his claim to five acres of land under the Homestead Act in the 1950s, before Alaska had even become a state.

On this land, high on the Ruth Glacier at around 6,000 feet in elevation, the Sheldon family had long maintained a “Mountain House”—a no-frills refuge for mountaineers, just a simple structure, an outhouse, and a few board games to pass the time on cold nights. But a younger generation of Sheldons had grander ambitions. Two of Don Sheldon's children, Kate and Robert, together with Robert's wife, Marne, had the singular opportunity to open a guesthouse on a glacier.

Access to the Sheldon Chalet is strictly limited to helicopter. There's no cell service, no WiFi. At night, the nearest humans outside the chalet might be tens of miles away. There's a sense of utter isolation that few of us have the chance to experience in the all-too-connected 21st century. And yet it includes cozy comforts: there are artisan chocolates as part of the turndown service, and sumptuous faux fur throws on the king-sized beds.



The view from the helicopter.

Photo: Chris Burkard / Courtesy of Sheldon Chalet

The journey to the Sheldon Chalet is an adventure in itself. The gateway town of Talkeetna, Alaska (population: 870) already feels remote to an urbanite like myself, with its log cabins and dense forests. At the Talkeetna airstrip, a bit nervous but reassured by the confidence of helicopter pilot Chad, I climbed into a chopper and strapped in. We flew low over forests and rivers, until, suddenly, the trees were gone and the craggy landscape began to resemble another planet altogether. We flew closer, and snowy peaks rose up on either side of us, the snow below dotted with ice-blue glacial water pools.

The helicopter eventually edged over a final gap between peaks where, the expanse of the Don Sheldon Amphitheatre appeared spread out before us. I was already snapping photos of the incredible panorama before I quite grasped it: What looked no bigger than a jagged rock was, in fact, the nunatak, the rock outcropping on which perched the Sheldon Chalet; not the dot it appeared to be, but a five-bedroom property constructed to resist the elements.



The view from Sheldon Chalet.

Photo: Jeff Schultz / Courtesy of Sheldon Chalet

As we swooped around the nunatak and set down on the helipad, I felt myself resisting the vista around me, noticing just the vast expanse of mountains and how very, very small we were in their shadow. (The surreal feeling only heightened as I climbed out of the helicopter to accept a glass of Taittinger.)

I reached for my phone to take a few photos, before stopping myself. There would be hours and hours to take photos. With no WiFi or cell service, there would be no editing for Instagram, no texting pictures to my husband. Instead, I took a breath and looked back at Mount Denali.

The scale of the surrounding landscape is both meditative and, at moments, nearly frightening. It's easy to become distracted by the chalet itself, which does an extraordinary job of catering to those who want to easily experience the majestic park, from chef Dave Thorne's constant culinary offerings (lavish charcuterie spreads, afternoon cookies, sushi platters) to the cedar-lined sauna. But over and

over, I found, nature won out. I couldn't escape the rumble of avalanches, at least a few every hour—thunderings that echo around the amphitheatre, clearly formidable but, like a far-off lightning storm, harmless at a distance. Then there was the shifting of the light: in June, dusk never quite reached full darkness. (In the winter, this is one of the best places in the world to glimpse the cascade of the Northern Lights.)



Photo: Chris Burkard / Courtesy of Sheldon Chalet

To get beyond the walls of the chalet, its team can arrange helicopter excursions to remote hot springs, fishing spots, and berry bushes ripe for picking. But it's a tremendous adventure to simply walk out onto the glacier itself. I soon found myself strapped to snowshoes, roped up with a mountain guide blazing the trail, out on an endless expanse of snow. My nearest companion, 50 feet ahead, appeared a tiny figure against the vast panoramas; the figures ahead of him were no more than dots.

In anticipation of the trip, I had downloaded music and loaded extra books onto my Kindle, imagining that without the distractions of modern life, I'd find myself bored. A few days later, the notion struck me as ludicrous. Every direction showed a different view; every hour presented new clouds over the peak of Denali, and new avalanches cascading down the slopes. I didn't miss reading the news, or any connection to other humans. In truth, I hardly thought of it at all.

When I returned to New York, with a fresh Alaska tan that I definitely didn't anticipate, friends would ask about the glacier adventure. It felt impossible to put the experience into words. Even the photos I did eventually post couldn't quite do it justice. I had the distant feeling of having returned from the moon. As if friends and colleagues were saying, Your moon Instagrams were incredible. How was the trip?

And for those of us who will never go into space, it probably is the most moon-like destination you could choose: vast, inscrutable, and textured. *I should be a mountaineer*, I found myself thinking wildly, *so I could experience this all the time*. But in truth, I'd rather helicopter back to the chalet.