

As my plane descended into Anchorage, Alaska, enroute to Fairbanks, Alaska, I realized I might have made a big mistake. A few years ago, I had a chance to apply for an assignment to Elmendorf Air Force Base, but opted instead for sunny San Antonio.

Now I saw what I missed. From my port-hole window, I gazed in awe at the stunning contrast of the shining snowcapped Chugach Mountains against the blueness of the Gulf of Alaska. Elmendorf lives up to its reputation as a wilderness Mecca, but with the amenities of a modern city nearby.

About an hour later, I landed in Fairbanks where I met up with Airman photojournalist Master Sgt. Scott Wagers with whom I would spend the next two weeks. Within 15 minutes, I was on my knees underneath grim skies in sub-zero temperatures struggling to dig out our rental car where it became stuck in deep snow while driving on a frozen river. Eielson Air Force Base seemed true to its reputation as an inhospitable northern outpost.

The reputation didn't stick.

Second thoughts about the last frontier

A group of friendly young snowmobilers soon appeared out of the dusk and offered a helping hand. That treatment was indicative of what we encountered from locals and Air Force people I met during our stay. Although Eielson is in a remote location, most people I met were there by choice and often reluctant to leave. It wasn't difficult to understand why.

Even though it was February, we bundled up enough to enjoy base activities such as snowshoeing, an exhilarating snowmobile ride across a frozen lake and a short, but memorable, dog sled ride that included a face plant when I failed to properly lean into a sharp curve.

There are days, of course, when locals said it's just too cold for anyone to venture outside. One captain said he drew the line on outdoor play for his children at minus 20 degrees. But it was readily apparent you don't have to be a member of the frozen chosen to enjoy Alaskan activities such as sledging, skiing, hunting and fishing.

It's easy to imagine the validity of parents who talked about Eielson being a great place to raise a kid. I could see how its remoteness could appeal to those seeking a slower, simpler life. Some spoke of the relief in

returning home from Anchorage after making their annual 360-mile trip to the big city for provisions such as school clothes for the kids.

So when we headed to Anchorage, I experienced a taste of what they were talking about. Instead of remote wilderness surrounding the base like at Eielson, Anchorage is just outside Elmendorf's gate. It didn't take long to revert back to enjoying having my wilderness and my amenities, too. And I'm positive I would never grow tired of looking at those spectacular mountains that seem to surround Elmendorf.

But at both locations, even longtime residents say the long, dark, cold days of winter can bring about cabin fever. However, they said, the splendor of summer makes it worthwhile, even if the swarms of mosquitoes can drive them crazy at times. I felt lucky to finally see Alaska, but now I feel obligated to see it in summertime.

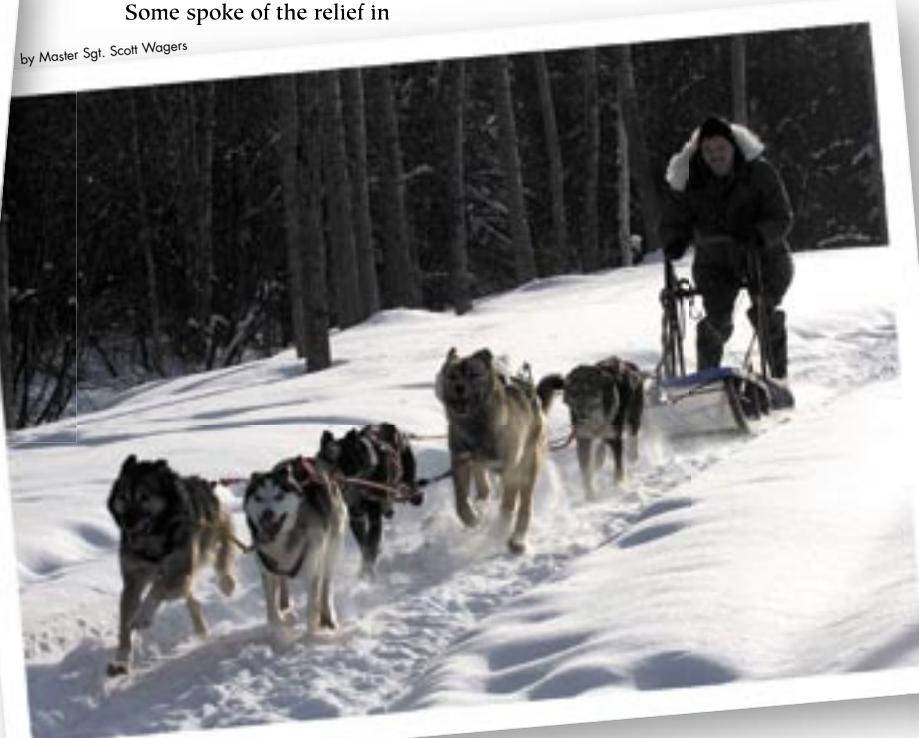
Heading home, I had mixed emotions about the assignment choice I made. Back in San Antonio, it was still "winter," and I had lunch on my patio while wearing shorts and a T-shirt. I'm not sure I made the wrong choice in opting for Texas instead of Alaska, but I don't think anyone can go wrong if they choose Alaska.

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



You don't have to head for the hinterland to experience the thrill of a dog sled ride. You can mush a team yourself on weekends near the back gate at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, as did Airman assistant editor Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts (right) while participating in the event arranged through the base Information, Tours and Travel office. Although bursting with energy to get to work, Cybil (above), an Alaskan husky that comes from the village of Kotzebue on the northwest coast, didn't seem to mind taking time out for an affectionate scratch.