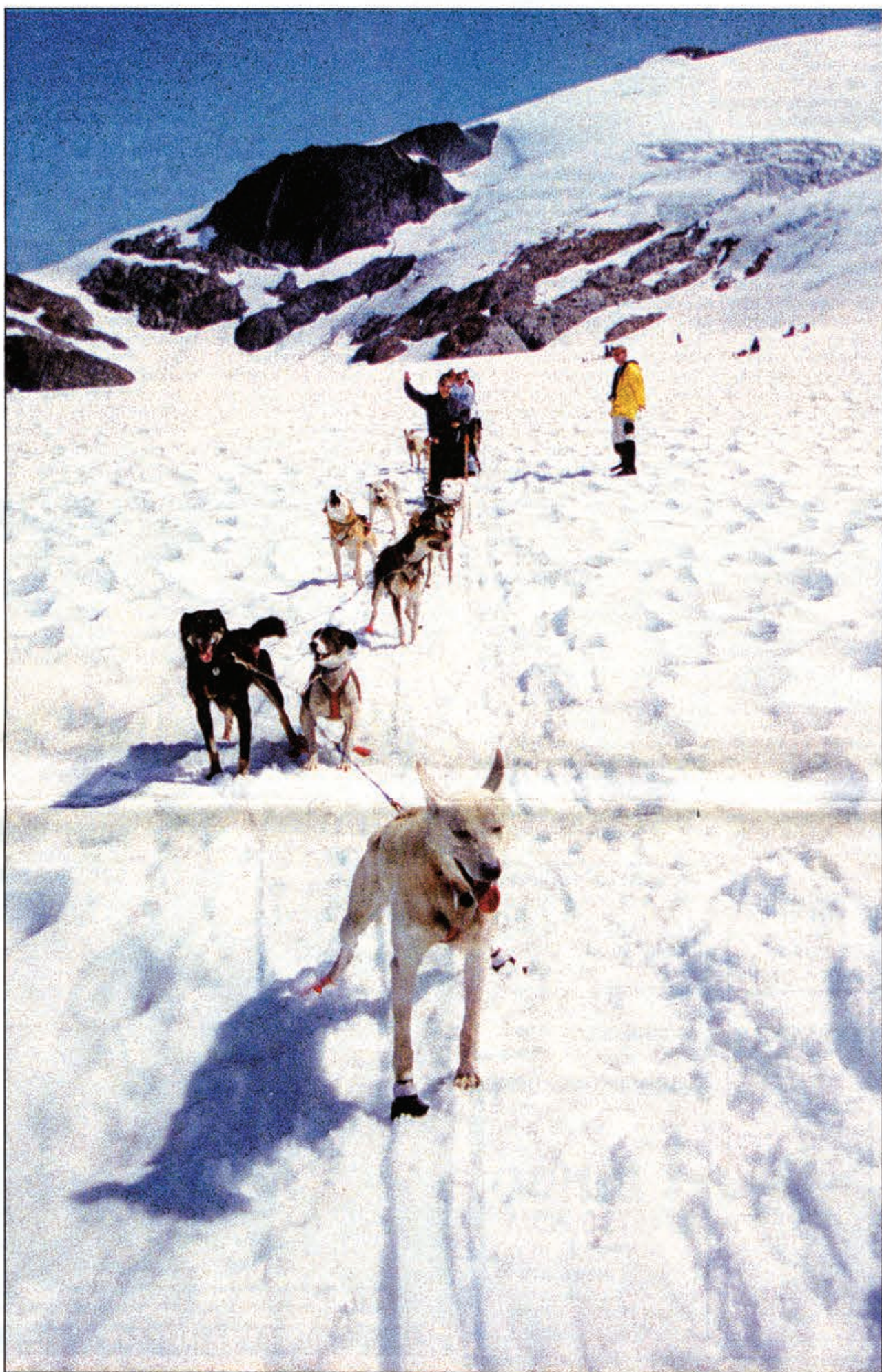


Glacier Getaway

Trip to Alaska allows
for cool runnings with sled dogs



Beth Parks
with lead dog
Fuzz Nuts.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BETH PARKS
Corea resident Beth Parks drives a dog sled on the Norris Glacier where, at an altitude of about 3,500 feet, the dogs can pull sleds all summer.

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

They tell me it was 90 something degrees F in Bangor that day in mid-August. But there I was in Alaska, wondering if I had made a mistake by leaving my wool cap and polar-fleece mittens back at the Juneau airstrip.

"Four Glacier & Dog Sled Adventure by Helicopter," the brochure had proclaimed boldly. Visions had been creeping into my dreams for weeks. I didn't dare think about the excursion during my waking hours for fear the reality would not meet my expectations.

I was skeptical. And I was wrong.

Excitement was palpable as our helicopter rose above the rocky mountaintops and soared out over the vast Juneau Icefield. Every scene, every vista, was more breathtaking than the one before.

If we wanted to talk to one another on our headsets during the flight, all we had to do was flip a switch. We didn't. We were far too awestruck to speak.

Off to the sides and below us, one after the other, passed Taku, Hole in the Wall and Dead Branch glaciers. Spectacular and unique, they were just three of the 37 glaciers that make up the ice field.

Sunlight shimmered off pockets of water and bounced off the edges of crevasses of every imaginable shape and size. Then there was that amazing blue of the fabulous glacial ice. You can read about it, but you never comprehend it fully until you see it with your own eyes.

The helicopter lifted over a prominent stony ridge and dropped into a huge basin filled with snow so white it hurt our eyes. This was Norris Glacier. What first seemed like dark specks against the white quick-

ly became recognizable as the tents and igloo-like doghouses of a sled dog camp.

If ever there was a glorious morning on this Earth, it had settled on Norris Glacier that day in August.

Never have I seen the sky such a deep, clear blue. As we stepped out of the red-and-white helicopter into the brilliant sunshine, we squinted against the snow's dazzling glare despite the protection of our sunglasses. The sun's warmth mixed in an extraordinarily pleasant way with the cool of the snow beneath our feet.

Linwood Fiedler, the musher who finished second in the 2001 Iditarod, greeted us genially and welcomed us to his camp. He explained that he keeps about 150 dogs on the glacier from May to early September. Here, at an altitude of about 3,500 feet, the dogs can pull sleds all summer.

And don't they love it! To the



People travel by helicopter to Iditarod veteran Linwood Fiedler's camp on the Norris Glacier.

uninitiated, asking dogs to pull a sled may seem nothing short of cruel. But to huskies, even house pets like my own, pulling comes as naturally as breathing.

Fiedler employs about 20 people at his camp, some of them budding mushers who bring their own dogs to the glacier. Staff members live in tents and fly back to Juneau on their days off. On days such as this, though, they introduce tourists from Inside Passage cruise ships to the art and sport of dog sledding.

Jeff, our affable college-student guide from one of the Western states in the lower forty-eight, led three of us to a pair of sleds and explained the basics of their operation. He

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wore shorts in the warm sun, even though the temperature hovered slightly above freezing. He selected seven dogs for each sled and carefully positioned them by ability, experience and social preference. The huskies scarcely could contain their energy as the young man hooked them up.

We had trouble curbing our own enthusiasm as we took turns riding and driving around the 2-mile loop above the camp, shouting commands to the dogs and demonstrating our growing prowess at maneuvering the sleds.

I've had Siberian huskies for more than 25 years, but these dogs were not like mine. Called Alaskan huskies, they claim a mixed heritage that may include hound, shepherd or other ancestry that helps give them strength, speed and endurance. Quite simply, they are bred to race.

The youngest dog on my team was Sweet Cream, a 6-month-old female just beginning to learn the ropes. Paired with an older female closest to my sled, her eagerness radiated from her like a glowing aura.

What Sweet Cream and the other dogs crave in addition to pulling is praise and affection, and they get plenty of both on Norris Glacier. Fiedler and those who work for him clearly love these animals. They know each dog's distinct personality and needs, as well as its own special talents and abilities.

It takes time to forge bonds of trust between mushers and dogs. They learn to work together much as coaches and athletes do on professional sports teams. Once the bonds are formed, they seem virtually unbreakable.

Fiedler was a social worker,

specializing in children and families, until he turned to mushing full time just a few years ago. When he first started his Alaska Heli-Mush business in partnership with ERA Helicopters in Juneau, people thought he was foolish or just plain crazy. But racing is expensive, and Fiedler saw a way to make money while letting other people help him exercise his sled dogs.

Most other Iditarod competitors spend up to six months of downtime after the big race, with their dogs staked outside on chains. The dogs exercise by pulling carts on dirt or running in circles tethered to a device that looks somewhat like a merry-go-round. But by working on the glacier, Fiedler's dogs already are in prime condition when the other contenders are just starting their regular training routines in the fall.

As visitors to Fiedler's camp, our only concern was that the experience would end all too soon, and it did. Nevertheless, we had ample time to play with the dogs and ask questions about the daily routine.

Before we departed, a young man from Alabama who had seen snow only in films engaged us in a rousing snowball fight. It was clear he was having the time of his life.

As the sun began its descent, and shadows began to fall along the slopes of Nugget Mountain, we reluctantly boarded our helicopter and lifted back out of the basin. Once again, the dog igloos and tents of the camp shrunk to the size of black specks on a sea of white. The chopper nosed up over the rocky rim and wound its way back over the magnificent ice field on its return to Juneau.

In those few short hours, I fulfilled a cherished dream and gained memories to last a lifetime.

But in Bangor, they tell me, it was a sweltering 90 degrees.