



# Alaska



An escape with a view



Ultima Thule Lodge:  
accessible only  
by bush plane



David Leebron  
Rice University  
president:

**THE PERFECT TRIP:** "Renting a house for a couple weeks on the outskirts of a medieval French town where I can enjoy the countryside, culture and cuisine. And a really good croissant."

**BEST RECENT ESCAPE:** "Taking our kids to see some of our spectacular national parks—especially Bryce Canyon, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Mesa Verde—was a thrill. It brought back memories of my own childhood travels with my parents. The beauty and wonder of our national parks are unsurpassed."

**WHAT'S NEXT:** "We're looking forward to a Mediterranean trip including Rome, Pompeii and Sicily. I love connecting to 2,000 years of history, and the opportunity to draw connections between our current challenges and those of our forbears."

# NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Where Alaska meets the Yukon—and a remote lodge offers no end of adventure

By Michael Hardy

"IF I WANTED TO, I could set off an avalanche right now."

Steve Davidson, a veteran bush pilot with a suntanned face and a laconic demeanor, sat next to me on a plastic tarp, eating a roast beef sandwich. We were alone in a snow-covered valley—actually a frozen lake blanketed in several feet of newly fallen snow—somewhere in the vast hinterland of Alaska's 13-million-acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, which borders Canada's Yukon. The bush plane we'd just flown in on, a bright yellow Super Cub three-seater, was parked nearby. Rising up from the valley on three sides were jagged, white-capped cliffs.

"See that gully in the shadow?" said Davidson, pointing to the ridgeline of a nearby bluff. "If I made a ski cut about an eighth of the way into that gully, I could make the whole thing avalanche. One of the things Pi used to say was, 'If I wanted to start an avalanche, where would I have to go?' Because if you figure that out, you know where not to go."

Pi was Peter Inglis, who, like Davidson, had been a long-time guide for Ultima Thule, the remote \$1,700-a-night wilderness lodge where I was spending the weekend. (Ultima Thule was a term used on ancient Greek maps to designate regions beyond the known world.) About a week before I arrived, Inglis had been skiing in another part of the park when he fell through a



## GO

United offers daily nonstop flights to Anchorage, where you can rent a car for the five-hour drive to Ultima Thule's private airstrip in Chitina. [united.com](http://united.com)

## STAY

Ultima Thule Lodge [ultimathule-lodge.com](http://ultimathule-lodge.com)

## EXPLORE

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve [nps.gov/wrst](http://nps.gov/wrst)

snow cornice and plunged several thousand feet to his death. It was a freak accident, everyone told me; Inglis was a vastly experienced skier who had traversed much more dangerous areas in the past.

But his recent death was a reminder that, despite its creature comforts—well-appointed cabins, gourmet dining, wood-fired sauna and hot tub—the world beyond the lodge remains a dangerous place. Every year, scores of Alaskans are killed or injured when they fall off mountain ledges, crash their planes, suffer hypothermia, are attacked by grizzly bears—or, yes, get buried by avalanches. (On a bookshelf in my cabin I found a collection of true-life Alaskan survival stories entitled *Cheating Death*, filled with stories of downed planes and cap-sized boats, along with a particularly harrowing moose attack.)

Despite their grief, everyone at Ultima Thule seemed to accept Inglis's death as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of living where they do. Most of the older lodge employees I spoke with had lost other friends to similar accidents. "He knew the risks," said Paul Claus, who founded the lodge with his wife in 1982 on

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At 13 million acres, Wrangell-St. Elias is the largest national park in the country.



**TOURS DE FORCE** If you bristle at the notion of taking a tour, then you probably haven't been on one lately. Gone are those if-it's-Tuesday-this-must-be-Belgium days of yesteryear when seeing a city meant being bus-bound with a bunch of blue-hairs. These days, small group and private tours are the rage, along with customized itineraries (e.g., night tours of Paris for photographers, ninja training in Tokyo, scouting for street art in San Francisco). Bonus: They're often a great way to meet locals who love where they live and can field questions on local culture. **Vayable.com** and **Viator.com**, with their worldwide listings of tours and guides, may be the best places to start, but don't overlook local tourist offices or message boards, both of which can offer solid recommendations.