

Harbingers of spring, black-and-white, clownish snow buntings scatter in front of the truck's grille like confetti. A few miles farther on the Elliott Highway, a ptarmigan sails off into the sky's glacial blue. Its plumage already shows mottled brown, the color these hills will soon wear.

It's the end of March, one week past the spring equinox, when day and night hang briefly in balance. It is also the weekend of Seward's Day, and this year marks the 150th anniversary of Alaska's purchase from Russia. Though the new territory proved to be a windfall for these United States, in 1867, Secretary of State William H. Seward was mocked for wasting government funds. The Republican press called his acquisition "Seward's ice box," "Walrussia," or President Johnson's "polar bear garden."

Blinded by sunshine and eager to shed surplus pounds and the season's lassitude, my wife, Melissa, and I are headed for Hutlinana Hot Springs, about 120 miles shy of the Arctic Circle. We've tunneled through three minus-50-degree spells in Fairbanks this winter, the last one in January.

A severe climate and Russian steam-bath heritage make hot-springing a favored Alaska pastime. Unlike coastal Alaska, the Interior has no volcanoes. Most hot springs here form when water seepage through cracks in the planet's dermis finds rocks closer to Earth's blazing heart. The state's more than 100 named, thermal springs range from spartan to decadent, from tranquil to buzzing, from tepid to egg-boiling hot. At the remote Selawik Hot Springs, separate bathhouses accommodate Athabaskans and Inupiat, and people warn, if you see small hot air bubbles rising in the water, to exit quickly to keep from getting cooked. On the Okpilak, Brooks Range hikers build rock dams to create a primitive tub. Chena, near Fairbanks, boasts a geothermal greenhouse that produces restaurant food and, until the fire marshal shut it down because it lacked sprinklers, had an ice hotel in which even the beds and martini glasses were made from that stuff. In the resort's outdoors pool, Alaskans float whalelike with frost thatches that would give hairdressers headaches.

There are lukewarm Alaska mud wallows known only to moose, muskoxen, and mosquitoes. And there are spas where history lurks like a vagrant. Pilgrim Hot Springs, 60 washboard-miles north of my former hometown of Nome, is one of those. In the early 1900s, during the gold rush, it was a retreat for sore-backed miners, complete with a dance hall, roadhouse, and of course, saloon. The roadhouse and saloon burned in 1908, and the property (in an act of penance?) was given to Father Bellarmine Lafortune. Seizing his luck, Lafortune turned it into an orphanage. Famished children found a home of sorts at Pilgrim Hot Springs. A Spanish flu epidemic in 1918 struck Native communities especially hard, leaving behind an army of dependents housed in the Catholic mission established by Father Lafortune. The hot springs kept indoor plumbing from freezing and the ground thawed early, and with 24-hour summer daylight, food grew there successfully.

Melissa and I founder and flail—she on skis, I on snowshoes—for an hour under heavy backpacks in thigh-deep corn snow unable to locate the trailhead. Ready to call it a day, we run into a group of snowmachiners who point us in the right direction. The trail is hard-packed and skirts Hutlinana Creek meandering in its bed between spruce-clad, squat domes.

The creek owes its name to the Lower Tanana Athabaskans, subarctic

Taking the Waters

Snowshoeing to a hot spring, traversing the miles—and the ages

by Michael Engelhard

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The Serpentine Hot Springs include a bunkhouse and bathhouse that today serves weary hikers, but the area has been used by Natives since they crossed the Bering Land Bridge.

RALPH JONES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

cousins of the Navajos and Apaches. The original *Khutl-'onh No'* translates as “he-or-she-has-a-structure creek.” No longer visible, the structure was likely the cabin that in 1915 stood on a small meadow near the spring. Someone grew vegetables and potatoes, and placer miners from the Eureka Creek district stopped by to rinse the dirt from under their fingernails.

In my experience, facilities that sometimes are add-ons to hot springs often bring inconvenience. During a trip with two Guatemalan clients to the fly-in Serpentine Hot Springs in western Alaska's Bering Land Bridge National Preserve, we found that the park service occupied half the bunkhouse. They were fixing the bathhouse, but the pipe that should have siphoned cold stream water into the tub didn't pipe. It dribbled. The hot water spigot, however, worked fine. The tub's content was scalding, and the only way to make it bearable was to haul five-gallon buckets—about twenty of them—from the creek. I couldn't just wait for the hot tub to cool, because it leaked faster through cracks between the floorboards than it mellowed with cold influx from the pipe. My Guatemalans were shy, and after laboring with my coolant, I had the bathhouse to myself.

Living where folks love to bask in wood-fired tubs below the aurora's sheen, I didn't understand why they'd entombed this one in a room. Beyond the fogged-up windowpanes, the stark granite tors and bald hills, and steam curling from the creek suggested a bygone, primordial world. I half expected mammoths to come rumbling through. Archaeologists have indeed found Clovis-style, fluted, stone spear tips on one of the surrounding hills. They've also dug up 12,000 year-old charcoal, possibly from fires

Pleistocene hunters built while camped there.

The Inupiat people of Shishmaref, on the coast, maintain close ties to Serpentine Hot Springs. They called their tundra Shangri-La Iyat, “cooking pot,” or “a site for cooking.” According to one of their legends, the basaltic tors are Deering women who petrified when they approached the forbidden location. Each of these stone sentinels is said to emanate specific healing powers. The place is a storied shamanistic training ground, and in the old days, non-shamans avoided this numinous boot camp until called.

When Shishmaref residents plucked spear points or similar ancient artifacts from their eroding beaches, spirits that dwelt at the springs whisked the unsuspecting back there via out-of-body flight for some harsh lessons. At Iyat, the initiates would enter its pulsing gateway to parallel worlds, diving through permafrost to the spirit realm. Through its Tribal Doctor Program, Northwest Alaska's Maniilaq Association has arranged Serpentine Hot Springs visits for Inupiat healers more recently and by small plane, continuing the tradition.

Those in the know not only consider the past at these springs, but also peep into their future. A mukluk's leather ties dipped into the seething water augur a long life or impending death for the wearer. If your laces curl up, make sure your will is in order.

Serpentine was, and still is, a precarious place. Avoid visits while menstruating or with your mind or emotions on edge, elders advise—just when you need a soothing soak most. They caution against going alone or staying too long. A careless person may not make it back as herself or himself.

The Catholic mission near Pilgrim Hot Springs once provided homes for Native orphans.



A third of the way to Hutlinana Spring, we pass through an old burn of spindly tree trunks, a skeleton forest. Somewhere downhill, two great horned owls are wooing, lusty with spring. In the oblique afternoon sun, our shadows have grown gaunt; those of blackened spruce striate the trail like so many gnomons.

When we arrive at the springs late in the day, only one other couple is there, ensconced in a wall tent with woodstove. They hauled in their load by sled, not like pack mules as we did. After we set up our tent and start a fire, we cross the creek for our treat. The hot spring wells from a fissure at the base of a cliff that braces the steep hillside west of the creek. Stacked rocks ring the knee-deep pool of clear, bubbling water.

As flesh melts off my bones, I zoom back to a bedrock pool in Yosemite's high country where, eons ago, a black bear had joined me for ablutions. I assure myself that at this time of year the bears still hibernate. Just in case of one early riser or insomniac, I keep my repellent handy. Next I ponder the amoeba that prowls hot springs and lakes, devouring brain tissue and sometimes killing people. But I'm just as likely to catch that nasty bug from a Vegas motel room's air-conditioning duct or from decrepit plumbing on the Fairbanks university campus. (I no longer do saunas or public swimming pools, because of human contaminants.) I then wonder if the locals, long ago, parboiled mammoth steaks at Serpentine? Did Koyukon Indians tender caribou in Kanuti? The scant evidence leaves unclear if they just camped near the wholesome springs or used them as kitchenware.

Inupiat and Athabaskans have taken the waters at thermal springs in the Arctic and Interior for generations. The mineralized pools promised relief for hip and back pain, for headaches, arthritis, skin rashes, and other ailments long before there were HMOs. Greens for curing stomach problems, ulcers, and sores grow near the margins year-round. Preparing the body, people drank from the springs and consumed medicinal plants beforehand. Some collected spring water and greens as home remedies. The pull was so strong that people traveled hundreds of miles. One elder recalled how in 1935, during the decline of western Alaska's reindeer-herding industry, a man took his sick cousin from Cape Espenberg to Serpentine. The cousin rode bundled up in a sled pulled by four draft deer; the journey lasted a week. The patient and his driver stayed for a month, until they ran out of food. Compared to that, our 12-mile round-trip is but a stroll in the park.

Hot springs were mentally therapeutic as well. Immersed, people connected with their better selves and with family, with their culture, and with the land. Such springs demarcated a neutral or even a sacred zone; conflict was not tolerated.

“It was way more complicated than they are doing now, just focusing on the physical body,” a man raised near Serpentine once reminisced.

The author's wife, Melissa, enjoys Hutlinana Hot Springs, one of more than 100 of the state's named thermal springs.



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(OPPOSITE PAGE) MICHAEL ENGELHARD; (THIS PAGE) MELISSA GUY

Lastly, there was hygiene, though sweaty travelers often leave mud-lined, algae-scummed pools dirtier than they were when they slipped into them.

White as fish bellies and winter-shrunk, my thighs turn to Jell-O in Hutlinana's silky embrace. The warmth triggers memories of the womb. It's like zero gravity down here on Earth.

Spirits, high-proof ones, cut some ice at this hot spring too. I take sips from the *uisge-beatha* I brought in a flask, and the Gaelic “water of life” makes my insides glow. My shoulders uncramp. Then eyelids droop, and thoughts become fuzzy. No wonder someone drowns in a bathtub or spa in America almost daily—three times more often in rural Western states and often under the influence. (Some who die, it must be said, are infants or senile or on blood-pressure medications.)

Once more I toast William H. Seward and his beads-and-blankets bargain.

Without delay, I dress in the sharp night breeze and at camp heat a pouch meal for two. Some bears are moving about: Ursula Major wheels overhead in the clearing, backup to our fire's crackles and sparks. Melissa soon joins me, roasting socks on a stick over flames and acrid smoke before marshmallowing her foam sleeping pad. Bands of aurora flank the state's signature constellation, phosphorescing neon green, rippling like the hem of a windblown curtain. Above the matchstick silhouette of forested hills hovers Orion's bejeweled belt. It all is almost too cliché, a double-page spread from a tourist brochure.

Morning arrives with the typical symptoms of off-season camping: stiff joints, frozen boots, cold campfire ashes, a sluggish gas stove, and a dehydration hangover.

After a last dip to preheat the engine—Melissa is having her coffee in the pool—we are breaking camp. I look up from stuffing my pack and glimpse a wolverine sauntering past the spring.

By the time we are halfway back to the truck, the light has gone flat. Gray scud veils the sun. Winter has more in store. 🐾

Michael Engelhard is the author of *Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon* and *American Wild: Explorations from the Grand Canyon to the Arctic Ocean, a 2017 Independent Publishers Book Awards winner.*