



TRY THIS

SIMPLE RETREATS

REST EASY IN A PUBLIC USE CABIN
by Michael Engelhard



IN **MAYBE FILM'S BEST KNOWN** and certainly funniest cabin scene, a starving, axe-wielding miner chases Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp—transformed into a five-foot five-inch chicken—around a board shack on the brink of a snowy abyss.

In truth, the odd murder notwithstanding, Klondikers gathered in cabins to sing, rehash tall tales, jig, play blackjack and monte, hold meetings, and eat dried-apple pie from pans hammered out of old tin cans. Miners at Kobuk River camps vied for owning the coziest, most hospitable digs.

Tourists and Alaskans seeking social distance partake of the romance, sampling pioneer grit in rustic resorts. Roughly 345 public use cabins offer pockets of domesticity in Alaska's state and national parks and forests, wildlife refuges, and

recreation areas. Add several managed by nonprofits like the Mountaineering Club. The Panhandle's Tongass alone, our grandest, deepest woods—woods that could cover West Virginia—had 149 before budgets and low visitation forced the dismantling of 10. Too many cheapskates dodge the fees, rangers say. Sleeping two to 12 people

Above: The Moose Creek public use cabin in the White Mountains National Recreation Area north of Fairbanks. **Right:** Interior of Richard's Cabin north of Fairbanks, a public use cabin named after Richard Platz, the miner who built it.

at \$0 to \$100 per night, however, those cabins, like trendy tiny houses, are bargains. Accessed by snowmachine, car, ATV, dog team, watercraft, floatplane or wheel plane, on foot, or on snowshoes or skis, some come with a rowboat for angling or lollygagging on lakes. Off-grid, you at long last tune in, more connected than ever—to your surroundings. Whales, otters, bears, marmots, eagles, porchside moose, or mice scratching underfoot, depending on the setting, will be your closest neighbors. Perhaps claws scored hunger marks onto the door. You while away time crabbing, ice fishing, gold panning, hillwalking, berry picking; or flip hot cakes, whistling; or listen to wind raking birches, to rain rattling on tin sheets, to spruce muttering in a steel barrel's gut.

Sipping Yukon Jack next to an oil-fed Nordic Stove in honeyed candle or lantern light calls for gallons of fuel often not stocked on site. You bring water, melt snow, or

filter local sources. Pack mosquito coils in the summer, a headlamp in winter, and pen and notebook if you plan to write the next *Walden*, *To Build a Fire*, or *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. Though kept brief, outhouse sessions at 30 below will be daunting. Better look elsewhere, the Fish and Wildlife Service warns, if you need plumbing or gas heat.

Huts nonetheless are great tent-camping alternatives. In bear country, the agency understatedly states, "Sleeping inside four walls has an undeniable appeal." Kitchenware, warmth, and space to dry sopping clothes are nothing to scoff at either.

Architectural styles range from log to plywood to cedar shingle, from modernist A-frame to government shoebox. History joins you at a rough-hewn table in certain humble abodes. The Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s built some. Homesteaders and fishermen expertly carpentered others. Nation Bluff Cabin in the Yukon-Charley Rivers

National Preserve belonged to Christopher "Phonograph" Nelson—a trapper dread-ing breaks in conversation who possibly died drinking turpentine. The roster of compact lodging includes a restored roadhouse, now a "drop" for spent or injured Yukon Quest dogs. Its former owner, Frank Slaven, too squirrely for the innkeeper's hat sometimes left a note telling travelers he was gone gallivanting, wearing the prospector's.

The realty mantra "Location, location, location!" also guides getaway choices: A scramble behind a Nabesna Road haunt unlocks views of three ice-clad volcanoes. Mallard Slough's trail skirts a bay of floating sculptures LeConte Glacier calved. Three million shorebirds surge like smoke to Stikine River Delta buffets. The Chugach National Forest's Spencer Bench Cabin, reached on switchbacks after riding the Anchorage-to-Whittier Glacier Discovery Train, overlooks riven Spencer Glacier tonguing a lake and invites alpine meadow explorations.

Unlike bare-bones emergency shelters and sundry "first-come, first-served" bucolic havens, most cabins require reservations. Slots for popular, especially scenic or accessible ones, fill up fast, so booking six months ahead is recommended.

Cabin guest-books inspiring jokers, the smitten, the wannabe bards, are fun

reads. A "magnificent" brown bear with two cubs, "popping jaws, woofing and bouncing up and down," forced Kodiak vacationer "Daddy-O" to back off into water. "Five days without a shower [must have] convinced her I wasn't worth eating," he concluded after she'd left. But Nature drops in only rarely frothing at the mouth. Another entry describes "Incredible sockeye spawning on the N. Fork inlet stream. Pink salmon coming thru in waves."

Lastly, etiquette must be mentioned. Never, like Robert Service's sourdough musher "Cap," rip out floorboards to burn. Sweep. Donate spare food. Replenish any kindling and split rounds you've used. Take home your trash. Don't leave crusty dishes in washbasins. Close bear shutters on windows before departure.

While uncluttering minds, single-room, backcountry chores beat housekeeping at an urban mansion gloves-down. Cabin life is life distilled into art. It is tenancy honed into Zen essentials.

- Chop wood.
- Carry water.
- Catch fish.
- Consider beauty. ♡

A cabin dweller for two decades, the author fondly recalls sea kayakers in Kenai Fjords' Holgate cabin who took him in when, cold, wet, and weak with giardia, he knocked on the door.

