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Busy March in Fairbanks, now busier with addition of Iditarod start

Fairbanks, Alaska (AK) - "The Official Start of the Iditarod," has been added to the already full list of events and attractions that draw visitors to Fairbanks, Alaska. The community of Fairbanks, with a population of 97,972, is 260 miles north of Anchorage and 125 miles south of the Arctic Circle.

Due to low snowfall in some of the most treacherous sections of the trail's roughly 1,000 miles, the official start of The 2015 Iditarod Sled Dog Race will be moved from Willow, Alaska to Fairbanks and commence Monday, March 9, after the ceremonial start is scheduled for March 7 in Anchorage. 2003 was the only other time the starting line has been moved from its traditional starting point. This year's Iditarod will pass through two new checkpoints in Interior Alaska: Huslia and Koyukuk, as the dogs and mushers travel about 1,000 miles total to the finish in Nome.

Visitors to Fairbanks for the start of the Iditarod can also enjoy the 2015 World Ice Art Championships. Fairbanks is the home of the largest ice sculpting competition in the world and features more than 70 teams from across the globe. Approximately 45,000 visitors come to the Ice Art Park annually to see these intricately carved masterpieces. Sculptors will use over four million pounds of "Arctic Diamond" ice—exceptionally clear, thick ice—considered by sculptors to be "the best in the world." The theme for the 26th Annual World Ice Art Championships is "Sculpting World Friendships," and runs from February 23rd through March 29th, 2015.

The 42nd Annual Festival of Native Arts is another must see for Iditarod visitors. Scheduled for March 5th, 6th & 7th, 2015, the festival provides a forum for Alaska Native groups to share their rich cultural heritages. Dance groups and artisans from Alaskan locations as distant as Hooper Bay, Atmautluak, Barrow, Juneau, Huslia, Stevens Village and Shishmaref will join with invited guests from the continental United States, Japan, Russia and Canada for diverse presentations, crafts and food booths.

While you're here for the Iditarod don't forget to look up, because early March is a great time for viewing the aurora borealis. Fairbanks is one of the best places on earth for experiencing the beautiful and mysterious northern lights, and if you stay three nights in Fairbanks, you'll have an 80% chance of seeing them. Prime viewing time is late evening through the wee hours of the morning. You can experience the aurora from a heated "aurorium" cabin, on an overnight sled dog trip, by snow cat tour to a panoramic vista, in a horse drawn sleigh, on a flight above the Arctic Circle, or simply walk outside and look up to see the captivating northern lights weave their way across the night sky. If the aurora appears in the middle of the night, many hotels offer wake-up calls so you won't miss a moment. The longer you stay, the better your chances of viewing a once in a lifetime display!

If you're in Fairbanks for the Iditarod and have an interest or curiosity about dog mushing, you're in luck. The 2015 Iditarod start, adds to March's already busy Fairbanks dog mushing schedule, which includes the Junior North American Championship Sled Dog Race from March 6th-8th, the North Pole Championship Sled Dog Races from March 7-8, The Limited North American Championship Sled Dog Race from March 13-15, and the 70th Annual Open North American Championship Sled Dog Race from the 20-22. These all come after the finish of The Yukon Quest, "The Toughest Sled Dog Race in the World," which finishes during the 3rd week of February.

A trip to the Morris Thompson Cultural & Visitors Center in downtown Fairbanks is always a good idea, but it's an even better idea during the Iditarod. ExxonMobil's *Icons of the Iditarod* will hang at the Morris Thompson Center through April 2015. Jeff Schultz has been photographing the Iditarod, "The Last Great Race," since 1981 and has been the official Iditarod photographer of the race since 1982. He has photographed all the checkpoints, all the Iditarod mushers and all trail conditions through the years. Schultz chose the particular images for this exhibit based on his knowledge of the 'Icons' of the race after 34 years on the trail. The images go beyond iconic, well-known mushers, and include Iditarod icons such as trail locations, food, events, dogs, volunteers and of course the mushers. "To me these images are not only icons but in many cases legends," says Schultz.

The Fairbanks Community/Dog Mushing Museum will be featuring the Iditarod and Open North American Championship Sled Dog Race when it opens in early March at its new location in the historic Empress Theater in the Co-Op Building in downtown Fairbanks. The Iditarod exhibit will include 24 photographs by Jim Brown from the early 1980s as well as other memorabilia from past Iditarod races. There also will be an exhibit about the Open North American, which will be celebrating its 70th running this year. The Museum will officially open with a First Friday event starting at 5 p.m. on March 6th. The Museum will be open from 11 a.m.- 9 p.m. on Sunday, March 8th.

If you're feeling lucky while in Fairbanks, a \$2.50 chance purchased by April 5th, 2015 will get you into this year's Nenana Ice Classic pool. The jackpot totaled \$ \$363,627 in 2014. Since 1917, those with a betting spirit have wagered when the ice will break up on the Tanana River. Venture down to Nenana, a small community on the banks of the Tanana River about an hour's drive south of Fairbanks, for the Nenana Ice Classic Tripod Weekend, March 6th-7th. A tripod made of local logs is raised and frozen into the river and attached to a time clock ashore to mark when the ice goes out – it could be as early as late April or it could be late May.

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About Explore Fairbanks

Explore Fairbanks is a non-profit marketing organization whose mission is to be an economic driver in the Fairbanks region by marketing to potential visitors and optimizing the visitor experience. Explore Fairbanks markets Fairbanks as a year-round destination by promoting local events, attractions and activities to independent travelers, group tour operators, travel agents, meeting planners and the media. Find out more at explorefairbanks.com.