

Natural Beauty Abounds at Misty Fjords Lodge

So you find a brochure describing this fantastic little lodge in Alaska. There are photos of happy fisherman posing next to rows of freshly landed salmon. The lodge appears cozy and weather worn. Inside there are fireplaces and gourmet meals. Staff members outnumber the guests!

Outside there is a stunning world to which you are introduced by naturalists and guides who take you into the 2.2 million-acre preserve of protected rain forest known as the Misty Fjords National Monument. You'll see bears, whales, rivers and fresh water lakes, waterfalls, and fjords – sheer rock walls that plunge into the sea.

There's a toll-free number on the brochure. You dial. In minutes you are talking to someone intimately knowledgeable about Misty Fjords Lodge, on Mink Bay, 25 air miles from Ketchikan, Alaska.

"Where are you?" you eventually ask the friendly Misty Fjords guy on the other end of the line. "In Alaska?"

"No," he answers. "I'm in Key West, Florida. I don't leave for Alaska until spring."

"So you live in Key West all winter," you say, "and then in Alaska, all summer?"

"That's right," the man says.

"You've got to be the world's luckiest guy," you say.

"You bet," the guy answers.

According to Misty Fjords General Manager Luis Martell, and operations director Scott LaBombard, this scenario plays out every day, as the 2-man management team works the magic of maintaining the magnificent lodge from their sunny office at the Key West Golf Club.

The melding of Alaska tourism with the study and conservation of the Alaska wild has fostered the development of a handful of remarkable fishing lodges. Misty Fjords Lodge, built of pine on the site of a 19th century salmon cannery, is the only one in the national monument. In fact, it is the only structure for at all for many miles in any direction. But to Misty Fjords a fishing lodge downplays its stunning grandeur.

Pritam Singh, with his wife Ann Johnston, purchased the 4-star accommodation several years ago. They've been dedicated to finding ways of making theirs the most luxurious inn imaginable ever since.

It has been said that this southernmost region of Alaska, bordering on British Columbia, just two hours by plane from Seattle, is one of the most remarkable in the world. The goal of these world travelers, they say, is to create a lodge worthy of the spectacular and untouched wilderness that surrounds it.

There is a library, a collection of native Alaskan art, and a celebrity chef. Even the fishing tackle and rain gear are the finest available.

LaBombard has dreamed of living in the Alaskan wilderness since he was a little kid. He still recalls the time he skipped school and went instead with his pole and trusty dog for a day of hooky at a nearby stream. He was busted when his mom drove by and spotted her 6-year-old knee deep in the brook.

LaBombard makes the 13-hour trip between the lodge and Key West at least a half dozen times a year. There is a 4-hour time difference, which calls for a dicey period of adjustment on each end. But he doesn't mind that, LaBombard says.

“The woods, the outdoors, the wilderness is my idea of paradise. Between Key West and the Alaskan wilderness, a man can live a fitting life.”

Martell's first job at the lodge was as a chef, a job he got through a friend who worked elsewhere in Alaska. Martell recalls the first time he flew from Ketchikan into Misty Fjords.

“I was terrified of making such a move. Here I was, going to Alaska, full of trepidation. Then I was on the tiny plane to the lodge, looking down at the most magnificent nature I'd ever seen. I pinched myself. I thought I might be dreaming. I'd never seen nature so raw. So real.”

And the food, Martell says, is the freshest imaginable. The seafood is served minutes after being caught. In addition to fresh caught halibut, cod, rockfish and a half dozen species of salmon, there is shrimp and crab.

“It's a chef's dream,” he says.

A couple of summers ago Singh wandered into Martell's kitchen and introduced himself. Several months later, the Florida International University Hospitality School grad found himself on his way from Alaska to Key West, and at the job of managing not just the kitchen, but the entire Misty Fjords Lodge.

“It's a perfect operation,” Martell says. “In Key West we have great winter weather, and resources like computers, FAXes, and phones.”

The lodge opens in early summer and closes in early fall. During the winter months, Martell and LaBombard promote the elegant retreat, hire summer staff, keep in touch with guides, and monitor how the lodge and piers are withstanding the brutal cold.

In the Misty Fjords southern-most office in Key West, anticipation comes into bloom in early April, when preparations for the new season are nearly complete. Misty Fjord's first guests, who will pay about \$500 a day to experience this last frontier, begin to arrive in early June.

"I warn people to prepare themselves for a shock," says Martell. "It's overwhelming. Breathtaking. No one is ever ready for this. No one."

Information and reservations for Misty Fjords Lodge can be obtained by calling toll-free, 888-295-5464.