

Ep #284: Surprising Things About Running In Alaska with Kim Ryals



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Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you've never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, your fat running coach. I help fat women over 40 to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. I have worked with thousands of women to help them achieve their running goals, and now I want to help you.

Jill: Hey, runners. So this week, I am here with a super special guest. Her name is Kim Ryles. And she is the founder, owner, and operator of a super cool company called Run Alaska Trails. And last year, I had the deep pleasure of being on one of the Run Alaska Trails trips in Alaska, where we did a whole bunch of trail running, hiking, exploring, and everything.

And I realized that I never actually talked about going on the trip. Before the trip, I talked about it on the show, but then I never really did a follow-up of how it went. What it was like for an east coast city girl to be out in the wilderness, living her best wilderness life running and doing all kinds of things out there.

So I thought it would be fun to bring Kim on the show and have her sort of interview me so we could kind of talk about the trip, rather than just me going blah, blah, blah, this is what it was. I thought it'd be kind of fun to have Kim come and ask because I think she's probably got some questions about what were my thoughts about Alaska and so forth.

So we're going to do that today, and we're going to see how it goes. So, the first thing I want to do, of course, is introduce the fabulous Kim. And maybe you can tell us a little bit about how, before we dive all the way in, can you tell us a little bit about how you ended up in Alaska? Because you're not a born and bred Alaskan, are you?

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Kim: No, I'm not. I went up to Alaska a little over ten years ago to take a position as executive director for the Copper River Salmon Prince William Sound Regional Seafood Development Association. Basically marketing high-quality Copper River salmon to the rest of the country, the lower 48, and around the world in a community that was off-road. It's a bush community. You can't get there except by plane or boat.

And I really enjoyed it. And I did that for a little while. I ended up missing being able to drive places and ended up moving over to what we call the road system and living in Palmer. And there, I took a position as the executive director for the Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation. My charge was to develop and connect the trail system in and around the Mat-Su borough.

Which is an area about the size; for some reason, we always say West Virginia. I'm sure they're about the same size. It's kind of odd to compare Alaska to a state that is all the way on the other side of the country. But that's how big the borough/Alaska's name for counties is that I was responsible for putting the trails and parks system together.

So I got that group on their way and decided it was time for me to go out on my own. I started my company, Run Alaska Trails, and took out our first group of people in 2019, I believe. We were closed a little bit for COVID, but we have come roaring back. And the two things that come to mind for the inspiration for me kind of starting the company is I wanted to make Alaska's outdoors, specifically the trails, accessible to everyone.

And I always get a kick out of seeing Alaska through other people's eyes. It's always refreshing. I mean, it's great to be there. And, you know, you just step outside, and you're going on a dog walk or going to get groceries or something, and you're looking around, and you're like in a postcard or a national park or something.

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But the human brain is funny. You just start to get used to that after a while. And I just find it thrilling to invite people up to Alaska who haven't been there before and see the state through their eyes. So that was the inspiration for starting the company. And I think we've been doing a pretty good job ever since.

Jill: I love that. And yes, you have. You have. Spoiler alert.

Kim: Spoiler alert.

Jill: Spoiler alert. So yeah, so let's kind of dive in. I mean, it's kind of like usually I'm the one interviewing other people, but I'm just going to kind of like turn it over to you to. I'll let you ask me what you want to know about the experience from the perspective of somebody who's brand new to Alaska.

And I was not an experienced trail runner either before. You know, I'd done some running on trails, but definitely not, you know, I've done a lot more street running than trail running. So I'm just going to turn it over to you, and like, what do you want to know?

Kim: I love this idea because I've got some questions. You know, we spent two weeks together last summer and it was fantastic. But everyone kind of bounced out pretty early on the last day of the trip, and I didn't get to ask you all sorts of things. And just for the record, I am not an interviewer, but I've got questions.

Jill: Okay, I got answers.

Kim: She's got answers.

Jill: I'll do my best. I'll do my best.

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Kim: So, when I contacted you about coming up to Alaska, you were immediately like, “Yes, I’m all in.” I guess there’s nothing to ask about that because why wouldn’t anybody be? But it was your first trip to Alaska, right?

Jill: Oh, gosh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kim: Yeah.

Jill: And it wasn’t even on my radar, really. I was like, oh, someday it will be nice to go to Alaska. But it wasn’t something I was actively pursuing. And then you emailed me. Just absolutely out of the blue, there’s this woman in my inbox saying, “Hey, I run a trail running retreat company in Alaska, and I want to create retreats that are women only and really, really inclusive, meaning, like all abilities get the chance to experience it. And hey, it seems like you and I might be a good fit to put something together.” And everything in my brain was like, “You don’t know this woman.”

Kim: Well, you do now.

Jill: I was like, “Who the fuck is this lady?” Right? But then there was just this little voice that was like, “I don’t know, this seems like it could be really fun.” And that voice totally won out, and I was like, “All right, all right. You have my attention. Tell me more.” And then, I don’t know what, six months later, there I was in Alaska with ten friends.

Kim: I rolled into Anchorage airport and picked you up. And, you know, podcasts aren’t visual. I’ll never forget you stepping away from the curb and having this jacket, beautiful. It’s not fuchsia, is it? What’s the color?

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Jill: It was just like a hot pink. It's like an old Land's End rain jacket, hot pink.

Kim: Yeah, but what you didn't know at the time was that it is like the summer color for Alaska because it's the color of the fireweed that's all over the sides of the highway and everything. And I thought she knew that, so that was super fun.

Jill: I did not. It must have just been synchronicity.

Kim: Totally.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: Once we got rolling on the trip, what were your first impressions, or what surprised you the most about the state?

Jill: Oh gosh, the whole state was a surprise. A delightful, delightful surprise. But I think one of my favorite moments was actually when you rolled up at the Anchorage airport, and you were in this big van with like Run Alaska Trails on the side. And suddenly, I was like, "Okay, this is actually real."

Kim: This is all happening.

Jill: I was like, it seems legit. But then I was like. I don't know. People get catfished all the time for crazy stuff. But you rolled on up and hopped out of the van, and it was like an instant bond. I was like, oh my gosh, like this woman is my people. So that was a really good moment for me that I will never, ever forget. And then we were kind of like meeting everybody else and stuff. But for me personally, I was like, oh, this is awesome.

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But I think the thing that surprised me the most about Alaska, there are a number of things. But the number one thing is how I don't think you can go anywhere in the state and not see mountains. Is that an accurate statement? Because I was never any place, and we were all up and down all over the place, and I don't think I was ever somewhere where I couldn't look around and see a mountain.

And that kind of blew my mind because, I'll tell you, there are a lot of places on the east coast where you can't see a mountain anywhere. And so that, to me, was very powerful and meaningful because I love the mountains. I love the view of the mountains. I love being in the mountains. And to realize that there was like a place on earth where you could just go everywhere, and you're always able to see the mountains was really amazing.

And one of the really cool things, so in between the first – No, I think it was on our way home on the very last day, and we were driving from Hope back up to Anchorage. And way off in the distance, I saw this mountain. And I was kind of like, I don't remember seeing that before. And the weather had been kind of cloudy for the first like seven to 10 days. And so we were heading north, and there were no clouds, and I'm looking off in the distance. And I'm kind of like, is that Denali?

And Denali was probably like at least a six-hour drive away from where we were, and I'm like, I don't remember seeing that mount before. So I started looking up on my phone while we were driving to see what Denali looks like from a distance. And I found this picture, and I held it up, and I was like, "Oh my fucking God, that's Denali. We are hundreds of miles away, and I can see it."

And that kind of blew my mind of like just how big Denali is that you can, like, honestly, I was like, how can you even see this mountain from this far

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away? And that kind of, I think, brought home the scale of the landscape and everything. And so that was incredibly cool.

And I think also another thing that surprised me a lot about Alaska was how truly friendly everybody is. Not just fake friendly, but honest to God like, hey, if something happened to you, I would help you out even though you're a stranger. Like that level of friendly and kind and thoughtful. And I don't think I ever felt unsafe, even though we were out in the fucking wilderness.

Kim: We do like to get into the back country.

Jill: I mean, one of the towns that we went to, Hope, there are only 200 people that live there, and so we're out in the wilderness. I'm like, if something happens, I'm dependent on this guide and these people. And I felt so safe and so taken care of.

So that was surprising to me because, again, it's not a city vibe at all. It's a very, like. You can feel the community. You can feel the love that everybody has for everybody else, just as humans, regardless of whether people get along or not. Like you could just tell that everybody's like, okay, well, we're all humans, and it's very rugged up here. And we need to just kind of take care of each other.

Kim: Absolutely.

Jill: Yeah. And so that was amazing because I don't think I've ever really been anywhere where that was the vibe. So that was fun.

Kim: Yeah. Yeah, that's a good observation. I feel, you know, obviously, tourism is a big thing for the state, right up there with the seafood and a little bit of oil. Alaskans are really happy to see people coming from other

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places during mostly June, July, and August. The season is short. Alaskans are all about partying during the summer because so many times throughout the year it's dark and it's cold, and whatnot. Summer is the time to have fun.

Seeing people that you haven't seen before in your small communities is fun. I feel like Alaskans have the hospitality thing down. And so I'm glad that that showed through.

Jill: Oh, it did.

Kim: You know, it was shining through the trip and connecting people. I guess I could put a third inspiration for what we do down on the books there. Accessibility, seeing Alaska through other people's eyes, and building community in Alaska and from Alaska down to the lower 48 is kind of our jam.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: You know, we're used to the trails that we run. They're very different all over Alaska. You know, although it's a huge place, it's pretty easy to drive from one ecosystem to another. And the trails do look different, whether they're a little bit further up towards, say, Denali and Hatcher Pass is kind of Alpine. The ones down and towards Seward and Hope are a little bit Marine because they're closer to the big water. What did you think of our trails?

Jill: I absolutely loved them. Well, and here's yet another thing that really surprised me about Alaska because when I think about – And you told me once, how many citizens are there in the state of Alaska? How many people live there?

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Kim: Let's just round it to 700,000 people in the whole state.

Jill: Okay, so I'm thinking, like, I don't know, like the city of Philadelphia alone has probably a couple of million residents. So like, less than half of the population of my city across a state that is twice the size of Texas. So for me, I'm like, how are they maintaining all these highways? How are they maintaining all of these trails and everything?

Because we were kind of chit-chatting on the way up to Talkeetna on the first day about how few people there are in the state and how big the state is. And I'm thinking, what are the trails going to look like? This is going to be a clusterfuck, right?

And it was the opposite, like everything. First of all, so many trails, so many options, and different choices. And everything was so beautifully maintained and well-marked. And so when we were in the Talkeetna area, which for people listening is kind of closer to Denali, the terrain was different, and it was almost more open. Like when you're on some of the trails, you're not packed in.

Like down in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, when you're on the side of a mountain, you're like in tree cover until you get to the very top. But on a lot of the trails in that particular area, you could just stop on the trail and just have this beautiful vista available to you before you even made it to the top of the mountain. And so I thought that was really cool.

I found that the trails, and it may have just been the trails that you took us on, maybe you were very prudent in what you chose. But they were not super technical, right? Like when I think of some of the trails I've run in the mountains, there's like tree roots and large rocks and all kinds of things that you have to look out for while you're running, even if it's like flat.

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And I felt like these trails were, and maybe it's because we weren't deep in the woods when we were on some of them, but I felt like they didn't require as much attention to my feet as maybe I have elsewhere. And that was a very pleasant experience. So, again, obviously, I was there for two weeks. I did not run on every trail in Alaska. So I'm sure there are probably plenty of examples of the type that are super technical.

But I appreciated that, as a new Alaskan visitor, you kind of like chose trails that were easy for me to navigate but also incredibly beautiful. And we definitely, on some days we got some elevation. Gosh, when we went up to Hatcher Pass, we got a lot of elevation there. And that was like, that felt like being on top of the world. That was amazing.

We kind of like climbed up to this one spot where you could just look around and see all these peaks and all these lakes. And it was just like, I have told people that I came back from Alaska feeling like a different person, having seen how beautiful and majestic it is. And I've been to some really gorgeous fucking places, right?

Kim: I know you have.

Jill: But like Alaska just blew my mind at how stunning it was. But I think, like the trails, yeah, I was just pleasantly surprised, again, at how well maintained they were and how well marked they were and how well-groomed they were. They weren't paved or anything, but they were not a hassle, right? Like sometimes, I feel like it's a hassle being on the trails. And this is me, not the experienced trail runner.

But they were lovely and pleasant. And still, I mean, some were definitely challenging from a perspective of elevation, right? But also, I loved that you had so many options for us on that trip that, you know, one day, I was like, all right, yeah, I want to get some elevation. And then another day, I'm like,

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well, actually, I'd rather just kind of like run by the water. And, like, boom, here's your guide, right? Like we figured out how to make you able to run wherever you want, and there was always somebody to support us. So 10 out of 10 on the trails, yeah.

Kim: Our friends at the state parks and the National Forest headquarters are going to be so happy to hear that because it is a challenge of having so few people. There's not very much density of people paying for the services, you know? Supporting the services and stuff. So our agency friends are going to be very happy to hear that.

Jill: Well, I get the feeling that it seems to me like Alaskans place a high priority on the experience, like the outdoor experience, for visitors but also for residents. Like that's part of the appeal. And so it seems like they probably spend more time and resources on that than maybe other states do because it's such a big deal up there.

Kim: Yeah, it's a huge deal. The running community is big, and it's tight, and it's very active year-round. I think you and I were talking at some point, and I'd mentioned, just for my own information, I'd looked up on one of the websites that have all the races that you can sort them by state and by year. Anyway, Alaska has over 100; was it 125 or 150 trail races in a year?

Jill: That's a lot.

Kim: And they don't see a lot of people from the lower 48. I mean, there are some, but if you were to have 50 people registered for a race, there might be one or two not from Alaska. If there was 100, you might see five or ten. But for the most part, they're Alaskans in those races.

Jill: I love it.

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Kim: And there's at least 100 of them every year.

Jill: That's so cool.

Kim: So huge participation. I think everyone who lives in Alaska, it's one of the reasons you're up there, full-time anyway, is that you want to be outside and take advantage of what's there.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: So yeah, that's good to hear. Last year, you took two groups up. You had a larger group and a little bit of a smaller group. You had everybody. I feel we had a lot of diverse needs. Everybody was super fun to hang out with.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: How did you feel about the pacing for a group of that size?

Jill: I mean, for me, it was perfect. And it was funny because, you know, amongst the group that we had, especially the first group that we had, I was one of the slower runners. And so I think my concern was I don't want the people that are out there wanting to do like a 10, 15-mile trail run to be held back.

And then we had some folks that were kind of like, oh, you know, I want to go out and run a few miles on the trails, but not a ton. And then I was kind of like, I was just getting over COVID, so I was like, yeah, you know what? Two or three miles on the trails, I'm good because I was still sort of feeling the effects of that.

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And I think you had enough guides, and you also had, like every location that we went to, there were multiple options for places to go so that some people could get in the distance that they wanted, and other people could do a shorter distance.

And I think we even went, one time we went where the group was able to split off into two or three, and one group went to the top of the mountain, one group went like halfway up and circled around, and then myself and one of the other guests went along, again, we went along the water and got like a beautiful run in that way.

And so I think the guides were all really understanding and welcoming and accommodating so that we could have, you know, three different groups of people at different paces and distances, and everybody got to have the running experience that they wanted. Because I remember you told me before we went up there, you were like, oh yeah, it's going to be fine, everybody's going to get what they need. And I'm thinking, how the fuck is she going to make that happen?

Kim: How is that going to happen?

Jill: But all right, all right. I was just kind of like, oh, well, I've already decided to go to Alaska and meet this complete stranger, so I'm just going to trust her. I'm just going to trust her. And you were spot on. You were spot on. You're just like, of course, I was. I know what I'm doing, Jill. But it really was an awesome experience.

And it wasn't like there was this huge group of people in single file, like tromping down the trails. We kind of naturally broke off into smaller groups. And that, I think, was probably the key to it being super fun for everybody. Because nobody ever had to feel like, oh, I'm holding anybody up, or I'm waiting for somebody. It just happened so beautifully and naturally.

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And I think the guides that you had on the trip were the key to that because they're so knowledgeable and experienced in doing exactly that. So yeah, that was cool. That was another thing that kind of surprised me how easy it was to manage that and how literally everybody got to have exactly what they were looking for on the trails.

Kim: Yeah, we pride ourselves on that. But I do have to hand that over to our guides, as you mentioned, Lia, Wendy, and Rya. I mean, none of this would be happening without them. They're amazing. And all three of those ladies were born in Alaska. Between the three of them, they have about 100 years of experience out on the trails and in the back country of Alaska.

Jill: Oh my gosh.

Kim: Boy, I can't say enough about them, and I just appreciate the heck out of them. They're super good at what they do. And they're marvelous human beings, too.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: So this works out well that way. But it's great to hear. We're getting a lot of feedback. I think that's probably the most mentioned in feedback when we survey guests after and talk to our partners, that we do make it work for everybody. And that's, you know, yay.

Jill: Yeah, that was totally my experience.

Kim: Okay, check off number one inspiration.

Jill: Done. Done, love it.

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Kim: Do you have any key moments when you look back? Any like exciting, funny, or favorite parts? And I feel like we had a pretty good time the whole time. But what, if anything, stands out in your mind about any of it?

Jill: I mean, there were so many favorite parts. And I swear, Andy's got to be tired of me talking about Alaska at this point, although I'm just bringing him back with me the next time I go. I think that'll just be easier. Then he'll get it. But one of my favorite moments actually happened like on maybe our first or second day. And we were doing a run around this lake. I can't remember the name of the lake.

But we're on this trail, and we can see the lake, and it's absolutely gorgeous. And somebody like looks out and is like, hey, what's that? What's that in the water? And we all are like it's moving. Is that a moose? Oh my God, that's a moose. And then we recognized that it was not just a moose in the water, but it was a mama moose and a baby moose, and they were swimming right towards us, and they were coming pretty quickly.

And so we kind of like sat, it wasn't like they were like right on the shore. But they were swimming at a pretty good clip. I was kind of like, oh, it must be a shallow lake, and they must be walking. And our guide was like, nope, moose can swim. I was like, okay, all right, good to know. And so that was like, we actually got that on video, which was really fun to see the moose, mooses, I don't know what the plural of moose is, just kind of swimming.

Kim: Just moose.

Jill: It's just moose? Okay, to see the moose swimming towards us. And then we were like. We should probably go before they reach the shore. And we did, and we never encountered the moose again. But that was, like, I still laugh about that because it was like –

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Kim: It was your first run.

Jill: It was.

Kim: It was your first day, first run, first trip. It was the first stepping out of the van to get on the trails.

Jill: Yeah, and like, almost the first thing we see is a moose swimming in the water. And I'm like, how can something that big float? What is happening? I was very confused. But it was cool because I'm like, again, like I'm a city girl. You don't see that near where I live.

I mean, I have encountered a bear once in my life. Andy and I were hiking up in North Jersey, and we were just coming down from the summit of the mountain, and this bear just fell out of the tree onto the path in front of us, looking very confused. And he like stopped and looked at us, and we're probably like 15 feet away from the bear.

And Andy was like, "Bear." He didn't want to yell. And we kind of looked at it, and then it just walked away. And I was like, oh my God, that was intense.

Kim: So you're a person, so I have a person in my circle that has seen more bears in New Jersey than they have seen in Alaska.

Jill: Yeah. Right, because I didn't see any bears in Alaska.

Kim: None.

Jill: We saw signs that were like bears have been spotted in the area. We saw those more than once. But we didn't see any actual bears. At least not on the trails. I thought, when we were on that glacier cruise I thought I spotted a bear in the woods. But I couldn't be sure. I didn't have my binoculars with me.

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But yeah, so that was one of my favorite moments, seeing the moose. I think a lot of my favorite moments were moments of surprise where like, for example, the first time when we drove up to Hatcher Pass, and we got up to the top. And then we like hiked up from there and just being able to see so much from there and just the constant beauty.

I think, on the last day we were driving, and I'm just like, oh my God, like the mountains never go away. Like this is just how it is. It's, like you said, living in a postcard. So that was kind of amazing. Okay, wait, now I'm like, it's all coming back to me. Another thing that I thought was so cool was, is it the Turnagain Arm?

Kim: Yes.

Jill: That body of water where the tide goes out for miles.

Kim: Oh, the bore tide.

Jill: Yeah, and then it's like all you can see is this mud. But it's like the stories that people told about the mud. They're like, you don't go walking on the mud because it'll suck you in, and then the tide will come back in, and you'll drown. And I'm like, oh, that's crazy. Who would do that, right?

And then I'm like, somebody else is saying the same thing. Because I heard it, okay, I heard it on the first day I was there in Anchorage before you picked me up. I took this little trolley tour around Anchorage. And then the guy on the trolley was like, yeah, don't walk out there. You'll drown if the tide comes back in.

But then you told me the same thing. And then, one of the guides said the same thing. And I'm like, oh, he wasn't making that up. Like this is real.

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Kim: No, it's real.

Jill: So that was, like, because we kind of were joking about how Alaska is always trying to kill you.

Kim: And that's true.

Jill: And I was just like it is, like it's no joke. I mean, it's very safe until it's not, I guess.

Kim: Absolutely. It's just information, you know?

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: You've got to know where to go when to go, what to do when you get there, that kind of thing.

Jill: And I think you guys did such a great job of, like, you know, we had the bear talk before every run. We had the moose talk before every run. And, you know, we went on the glacier, and the guide was like, these are crevasses, do not fall into them. And I'm just like, what? Where are the safety, like where are the guardrails? They're just like letting us romp around on this glacier, and we could literally die. And everybody's just so blasé about it.

Kim: Local knowledge is key.

Jill: Like one guy is out there with his two-year-old in his backpack. I'm like, don't fall into the crevasse. That was one of the things that surprised me, I guess, is how blasé everybody is about all of the things that could go horribly wrong in Alaska.

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Kim: Now that you say that, so to get to the glacier, now you're triggering a memory here. To get to the glacier, we have to go over those couple of little bridges, one of them one lane with the wooden thing.

Jill: Oh yeah.

Kim: And you're right. And I saw the car go over it. I was like. I'm going to let him go first.

Jill: Yep.

Kim: It was one vehicle on the bridge. Oh good, he made it. Let's go too.

Jill: There were a lot of moments like that, yeah. But overall, I feel like even though there are a lot of things that could get you, so to speak, it doesn't seem to happen because everybody's like, you know when you see those videos about the Darwin Awards and people doing like a really dumb shit?

Kim: Yes.

Jill: I feel like that only happens in the lower 48 because I think that in Alaska, everybody seems to have a lot of common sense. And this is why it works.

Kim: Yeah. Things happen in Alaska. They happen year-round. They don't just happen to people who are coming up from the lower 48. Occasionally they happen to Alaskans. But it takes common sense.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: It's not a place where you can just wander freely.

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Jill: Yeah.

Kim: There are just things to know.

Jill: Yeah. And so I think that's why I appreciated so much having kind of a guided experience, because I was like, they will tell me what I need to know, and it will be fine. And it was. It was totally fine. But yeah, I wasn't just like wandering around willy-nilly like doing dumb things. You were very clear about, like, you know, this is what you need to look out for. And I don't know, I felt like in a potentially dangerous place, very, very safe.

Kim: Oh, that's so good to hear. That is making my day right there. I mean, we just want to support everybody. Without guides, coming up to Alaska, if you go into places without guides, I don't feel like you're going to get to see as much of it as you could with some local knowledge. That's all.

Jill: Oh, yeah, for sure.

Kim: On our trips, of course, our number one focus is on everyone's safety. Then comfort, fun, general happiness, and silliness are right underneath that, but safety is number one.

Jill: Yeah. And yeah, I know I did. I think everybody else felt super, super safe.

Kim: Yeah.

Jill: Even when the moose was swimming right for us. I was like. We are not in any danger. This is okay.

Kim: This is happening. Apparently, these things happen out here.

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Jill: Exactly, exactly. It was fun. It was like a nicely curated adventure, I think.

Kim: That's so good to hear. I think that because our season is so short and, obviously, it happens over June, July, and August, which most of the time, the weather up there is like weather anywhere else in June, July, and August. I think the things that I hear people are a little bit more surprised about is some of them have a little bit of an issue getting used to the sun being up all day long. Did you bring an eye mask last time?

Jill: I did bring an eye mask. Most of the places we stayed had blackout blinds, so it wasn't an issue for me. I think there was like only one place that didn't. Yeah, it was weird. It was just strange, too, because I never sleep through the night. I always have to get up to pee at least once or twice. And I'd get up to pee, and I could see sunlight coming through the cracks.

Or, you know, more than once, I'd just like wake up to pee and think, "I wonder if it's light out." And I would literally like go out on the balcony or something and be like, yep, it's full daylight, and it's midnight. And that was strange but cool at the same time. Like, I didn't find it uncomfortable or disconcerting or anything. I just found it kind of like curious and weird.

And I did appreciate that, like at 9, 10 o'clock at night it was still wonderfully light. So I felt like I never had to worry about, like, oh, I've got to get out of the woods before it gets dark or anything because it's just not an issue in the summertime.

Kim: It's intriguing. And it can be fun during the summer. You can be like a little Energizer Bunny. I remember my very first summer in Alaska in Cordova, again, off-road. I was driving up the one road that they do have to the airport, that turns into gravel and goes for like another 30 miles before it

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just stops in the middle of nowhere. And I passed some new friends coming. I guess I was coming back into “town,” and they were headed out. Two or three trucks with like canoes, kayaks, inflatables, that kind of stuff.

We stopped and said hi, and I was like, what are you guys doing? Where are you going? Oh, we’re going to go rafting. And I’m like, at nine o’clock at night? But it was complete daylight, and they had another three or four hours of daylight to enjoy, so why wouldn’t you?

Jill: Yeah. I think, yeah, it probably takes a while to get used to that. Because I think when we were talking about the trip in the first place, I was like, can we, like, just get up and go running at two o’clock in the morning? And you’re like if you want to, yeah. It kind of like blew my mind. Like, wow, that’s amazing.

And the one regret that I had with our trip is that I wasn’t there around the summer solstice.

Kim: Yeah.

Jill: Because I imagine there are a lot of celebrations. Do people really kind of have a big, is that a big thing in Alaska, the summer solstice celebrations?

Kim: It is there are a lot of festivals around it and parties. And that’s the height, you know, that’s the height of summer.

Jill: Yeah.

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Kim: It marks kind of the beginning of the march towards the long winter, too. So there's just like this crescendo of activity. And yeah, the solstice in Alaska is a special occasion.

Jill: Oh, cool. That's so cool. I love it.

Kim: You know, you came two separate times. And the trips were, for the most part, kind of the same but different a little bit. In one, we went up to Talkeetna and Hope. The other one was Palmer and Hope. Anything about the accommodations or the different towns or communities that you came away with?

Jill: I mean, I enjoyed all of the communities. I think Hope might have been my favorite because it was just this tiny little town right on the water.

Kim: What do you mean by tiny?

Jill: 200 residents. Yes, for anyone listening, literally 200 people live in this town. It was so funny. Actually, a funny story about the post office there. So I think one morning we were, it might have even been the morning we were – I can't remember. Anyway, one morning we were going to the post office, and we got there, and I looked it up online, and it said the post office opened at like nine o'clock in the morning.

So we got there at nine o'clock, and it wasn't open yet. And you're kind of like, well, you know, sometimes in Alaska, people just kind of roll with their own. And I'm like, okay, but I was thinking to myself, I don't know, this is the post office. I feel like, you know, they're going to be like come hail or hell water, or high rain, sleet. I don't know what their motto is.

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But so we're sitting there waiting and about, I don't know, like a few minutes after it was supposed to be open, somebody showed up. And the woman said, "Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry I'm late. There was a bear between me and my car." So she like walked out of her house and she went to get in her car to drive to work, and there was a bear there. And so she had to wait. So her husband came out and like managed to scare the bear away.

And she was so matter-of-fact about it. She's like, "I'm so sorry I'm late. There was a bear between me and the car." And it was like me saying I got stuck in a traffic jam. And I was kind of like, wow, Alaska really is, like, no joke. And the people are just so comfortable with it. And it kind of blew my mind.

Kim: The casualness.

Jill: Yeah, it was very casual. It's like yeah, there was a bear. I'm sorry I'm late. And I'm just like, what? Okay, all right. I just want some postcard stamps. But I think, yeah, like, Hope was my favorite. It was the prettiest, I think.

Kim: Hope, yeah. Well, and the food.

Jill: Oh, and the food was spectacular there, yeah. The food was so good.

Kim: For a town of 200 people, having the quality and tastiness of the food.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: That's probably one of the best restaurants in all of Alaska.

Jill: Yeah.

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Kim: I can assure you that the post office and entities like that do try to maintain a regular schedule. But we're not going to see, for instance, what we might see at some private shops and stores that you could, especially in the summer, when you do literally have to make hay while the sun shines. You could go up to a store and have a note on the door that says the fish are running.

Jill: Oh, and they're like, sorry.

Kim: Closed. We'll see you tomorrow. The fish are running, or the sun's out or whatnot. So it's pretty casual up in Alaska.

Jill: Yeah. I kind of liked it, you know? And I liked that there was no big box, I mean, other than in Anchorage, which is a large city. But everywhere else, like I didn't see one Target. I didn't see a Walmart. I didn't see any kind of like typical suburbia. It was just beautiful. And I can't even like words are failing me. But I felt like everything was just very individual.

And like when you'd go to a shop, you knew that that shop was the only shop of its kind and the person behind the counter was probably the owner of the shop and maybe the craftsman or craftswoman who made whatever the product was. And that was really cool, like just feeling like everything was a very unique experience. Everything felt very special.

Kim: I think it's important for us to take the people who come up and see us and take them out away from Anchorage and give them some authentic experiences. Genuine, authentic Alaskan experiences.

And once you see, too, the simplicity of it all, you end up getting used to not having a lot of choices, which sounds like sometimes it can be a bummer. But also, in some ways, it relieves you a lot if you're not going to spend an entire Saturday afternoon going to five stores looking for the exact

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whatever it is. Because you walk into a place and you're like, this is what we have. And thank you for that. I'm very grateful to have that.

And that's the end of that decision-making, and off you go. We used to say, you know, set your watch back 50 years sometimes to people coming up to Alaska.

Jill: But at the same time, there were tons of modern conveniences, just in a very simple kind of rustic way, right? Like we had Wi-Fi.

Kim: We had fancy coffees.

Jill: We had Wi-Fi, and we had fancy coffees. Yeah, it was an interesting combination of like rustic and modern conveniences, I think. And I found that kind of cool. Because I felt like, oh, Andy and I always joke that every time I go someplace new, I'm always like, okay, well, we should move here, right?

So we went to Seattle. I'm like. We should move here. We went to Maine. We should move here. I was serious about Maine. I bought books on how to move to Maine. I still have those books. I haven't ruled it out. But coming back from Alaska, I was like, maybe I should move there. Like I always look at every new place that I go to visit to see like is this a place I could live. Would I enjoy living here? Would I thrive here?

And I saw a lot of things in Alaska that I was like, oh, I can make this work. Right, and I'm pretty high-maintenance. And I was like. I think I can make this work. So yeah.

Kim: Wi-Fi and fancy coffee.

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Jill: That's really, yeah, as much as I say I'm high maintenance, maybe I am really simple. Wi-Fi and fancy coffee that's all I need.

Kim: Everything's possible with just those two items. Yeah

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: Do you recall, I mean, from my vantage point, one of my favorite things when we're, especially when we're going from point to point, and we're all loaded up in the van, is looking in my rearview mirror, looking back at all the guests and seeing just rows of happy faces and smiles. Do you remember? I think there were a few times we laughed until we cried, but I don't remember the circumstances.

Jill: I think like one of the things that stands out to me is when we went on the glacier tour, and just like everybody had so much fun. And on the drive back from that, I just remember everybody being like, oh, did you see this? Did you see that? And kind of like reliving it, so that was super fun.

And definitely, like every time we drove back from like a running or a hiking experience, especially when we came back, I think we were in Palmer for that one. We came back from the Butte, and we'd all gone to the top of the Butte, and it was so funny because we're like, oh, it's going to be fine. It's just like. I don't know, like all of us thought it was going to be easy peasy. But then it actually turned out to be kind of challenging.

But fortunately, there were a lot of steps, you know, like stairways with like very well-made steps. And I'm like, who came out here and made all these stairways so we could get to the top of this thing? Gosh, there were. What was there, like 500 stairs or 700 stairs or something? But we got to the top, and the view, again, the view was amazing. And you could look out and see glaciers everywhere.

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And I remember on the hike back down, and then in the van, just kind of like, did you see this? Did you see that? And like everybody just sort of smiling. And I think there were just a lot of, like, really happy faces because we had folks that were totally out of their comfort zone and doing things that were like scary, felt scary to them. But they did them, and then afterward they were like, oh my god, I just did that. Can you believe that?

Kim: Oh gosh, yes.

Jill: I remember Jen, like yeah, on the glacier, the time that we hiked the glacier. She was really quiet on the glacier itself. And then after we got off, she was like, I cannot believe. Like I was so scared. I can't believe I did that. I'm so proud of myself. And she was just riding this wave of accomplishment and pride, right?

And I just thought that it was so cool that people got this opportunity because nobody was ever in any danger, to be clear. But it was outside of her comfort zone, right? We were wearing these ice, these clip-on, you know, like ice spikes.

Kim: And helmets.

Jill: Yeah, and helmets. And we were kind of like climbing and scrambling around on a 2000-foot-high solid piece of ice. It was something I'd never done before. And there were some moments where I was like, oh, this is a little intimidating, a little scary.

Kim: Just a little dicey.

Jill: Yeah. But again, we had an amazing guide, and we were very trusting. And we were like, whatever the guide said, we did exactly what she said.

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So I think that that was one of my favorite things. Like seeing people, just like seeing the awe on everybody's faces when they were like, oh my God, this is amazing. Seeing people doing challenging things and feeling really proud of themselves.

And seeing people connect with each other. That was, I think, one of my favorites, too, is how by the end of the trip, everybody was really like friends. That was it. Like the whole group, everybody was friends by the end.

Kim: And they'll continue to be friends too. The community and the connection are really important to us. You know, we take a lot of singles out, and we get questions about coming up and not knowing anyone. And well, I tell people that'll last maybe half an hour because right into the trip, you'll have all your new best friends in Alaska.

Jill: Yeah. So speaking of trips, we should probably spill the beans that there is a 2023 trip in the works.

Kim: It's happening.

Jill: So for those who missed out on last year's trip, not only is there a trip in 2023, but also, I kind of think it's going to be even more fun if that's possible. I think it's going to be even more fun. And here's the coolest part because I told you one of my biggest regrets was that we didn't do it over the summer solstice, and then this one is going to be over the summer solstice. So I'm so excited about that.

But do you want to like talk a little bit about what this year's trip is going to look like? Because it's different, it's somewhat of a different experience. Like a lot of the same things, but then you've kind of added a lot of cool stuff.

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Kim: Yeah, you know, we're making some changes in response to things that we see and feedback that we hear. And this time, we're not going to go to two different places. We're going to go to one place. It's high-end, probably by any standards, but definitely by Alaska standards. We're going to stay in one place, one central place on the Kenai Peninsula, for the entire time.

There's a diverse set of trails all around the place. It's central to several different communities, Cooper Landing, Whittier, Hope, and Seward. It has a restaurant on site. And we're going to, well, I say, you know, the lakefront cabins, the in the woods cabins, the private ones, heated bathroom floors and everything.

Jill: I am so excited about that.

Kim: The lodge itself is on Summit Lake, which is three miles long. And we're going to have the surfboards, canoes, and kayaks at our disposal, at our convenience, at all times. We're incorporating all the side trips, where before, it was a little bit informal and loose about people deciding what they wanted to do and times that they weren't out on the trails or running and walking. We are including them this time.

So we've upgraded the lodging. We're going to sink into one place and call it home for six days, five nights. The whole trip is scheduled to lead right up to the summer solstice and have a solstice celebration on the lake. So right there at the end of your trip, before you fly home, you will have experienced it will never get dark really the whole time there. So it's going to be super cool. Even if you were to fly out at midnight, you'd be able to see all the mountains on the way out.

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The side trips are going to be off the hook. We've got a private glacier cruise. We're going into two different national parks. And I just put it together that we're seeing both of them by water.

Jill: Oh my gosh.

Kim: The rafting trip is in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. And Kenai River is turquoise going through mountains. It's world-renowned for recreational salmon fishing. We should be able to see a lot of people pulling salmon onto the banks. But we should be able to see bears from the water as well. So that's a rafting trip.

Jill: But it's not whitewater rafting, right?

Kim: No.

Jill: Okay, it's just like it's calm rafting.

Kim: Calm, calm. For all ages and abilities rafting. Definitely, no skills are needed.

And then the other way we're going to see gorgeous scenery by water is the private glacier and wildlife viewing cruise, which is going to take up half the day. It's a good five to six hours long. The boat is going to be all ours, our group only. So it's a private cruise. It is in the Kenai Fjords National Park. So going out to see wildlife and glaciers and whatnot.

But the cool, and I don't know if I shared this with you before, I think I did. But I think I found the only woman doing this out of Seward.

Jill: Oh yeah.

Kim: So we have a female captain.

Jill: I love this.

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Kim: I'm sorry, I kind of feel that's pretty badass. The boat is comfortable, it's got outdoor seating and indoor seating, and it's all ours for an afternoon.

In addition to that, we're going to meet some of them. I like to get sassy and ask people if they really think they're trail runners before they meet the Iditarod sled dog team and go rushing out with them. Trail running sometimes is easier when you have four feet as opposed to two, and you've got a low center of gravity and everything. We're going to go out and train Iditarod dogs and take a ride with them.

We've got a sea life aquarium on the books. What else have we got? We feel like we have a robust itinerary, and we also have built-in time to relax at the lodge, which has a dedicated, as mentioned, restaurant. Also, a tiny bar with beer and good wine. And a separate building that serves ice cream, pizza, and coffee. So if anyone gets some munchies in between what's being provided, they'll have a place to get something right there on site.

Jill: And we're going to be running and hiking several times as well. In addition to all of that.

Kim: Yes, guided trail runs will be provided on an almost daily basis as well, which we mentioned will be accessible for everybody, even if you want to do mostly walking. Run/walking, a little bit of running, yeah.

Jill: And I think that's the key, is that if you're a new runner and you're thinking like, listen, I like running, but I've never run on trails, and I'm not sure if I can keep up. You can keep up. It's like you literally, we will probably have an entire guide dedicated to walkers or hikers or however you want to call that.

So this is going to be like you will belong. You will fit in, and you will be completely; I don't even want to say accommodated because that means we're making special dispensations or something.

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Kim: No.

Jill: Like, no, you will belong. You will be part of the group. And you will have people that are running at the same desired pace and everything as you. Because I think that's like, last year when we had this trip opened up for folks to join, that was the most common question I got was like, well, I've never run on trails, or I'm not very fast, or what have you.

And we had at least three people this last time that was like, nope. Nah, I don't want to do any running. I just want to walk. And they had an awesome time.

Kim: Yeah. There are no accommodations because we are all tribes.

Jill: Yes, exactly.

Kim: We are all going out there together.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: I don't recall, do you recall, there was never a subgroup that ended up with just one person in it?

Jill: No.

Kim: No.

Jill: Nope.

Kim: There were two or three together.

Jill: Yep, every time.

Kim: Our ratio, our guest-to-guide ratio, we like to keep it about four or five guests to each guide. And that allows us, and often we are going,

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sometimes often we're going out on the same trail, but we're going at different paces.

If we need to pick other places based on what we've learned on the trail, you know, we send all the guests a survey in advance to learn more about everybody before they come. And we're definitely responsive in curating the itinerary to match everybody's skills, experience, expectations, and any goals they might have. So I feel like we're really customizing the trip in that way.

I think it's pretty affordable. The high-end king lakefront, you're staying in one of those, and there are only five of those. So there are four available, but you've already got one sold to date. There are three private kings that are off the lake. And I think you have two of those sold. And then there's a number of spots available to share a very comfortable cabin with another person who's going to end up your best friend.

And those trips, for everything that's included, the length of the trip and all the side trips, are really affordable.

Jill: Yeah, agreed. And so we've got, yeah, I think out of the 24 spots, as of right now, we've got eight folks already signed up. So they're going quickly because we just really kind of started promoting this within the past couple of weeks. So they're going quickly. They're going quickly.

Kim: They are.

Jill: So how can people find out all of the details and register and everything? It's at runalaskatrails.com, right? And then what do they do?

Kim: Correct. So you're going to go to runalaskatrails.com. If you just enter those words into Google, we'll come right up at the top. You're going to go into retreats. And then you're going to take a look at Jill Angie's, obviously,

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retreat and the dates available. And it's going to list out all the things, what we're doing, where we're going, and all the things that are included.

To register, on the same page, you'll fill out an interest form, which is basically just your name, email, and phone number, and select the trip that you want to go on, which is Jill's. That gives us your contact information. And if there's still space available, our registration system will turn around and provide a registration link for you. And then, you follow the prompts through there to go ahead and put down a deposit and pick the type of room you want.

And that's pretty much it. That process will give each guest a password-protected online portal in that they'll have all the paperwork in for the trip, the guest survey, and other details. Everybody will need the packing list and whatnot. You can go back in there and fill it, and the invoice and everything. Everything will be in your guest portal.

We'll have the surveys filled out. We like to have those by the beginning of May so we can super customize the trip for you. And we have reminders about that. Once we get all the guest lists and the roster put together, we will have at least one video session live with Jill, myself, and probably all of the guides, if not one or two of them, to really drill down into details and a Q&A session, so everybody feels super comfortable getting prepared for the trip.

But in reality, there's not a lot of preparation to do. Just sign up, and tell us a little bit about your running. Mark the dates off on your calendar and get airfare to Alaska and back.

Jill: Yeah. Oh, and the dates, we should tell people the dates. June 16th to June 21st.

Kim: Yeah.

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Jill: Yeah. And you will get, and this is another common question we get, you will get a packing list ahead of time of like recommended things. But honestly, you all provided so much on the last trip that I completely overpacked. And this time around I probably will not need quite as large a suitcase because I actually won't need to bring as much stuff.

So yeah, yeah, I think that's one of the things I loved, is there was a lot of great preparation from you prior to the trip so that you showed up with exactly what you needed. It was really, really, really good.

Kim: We get the roster, and we connect the guests through email too. Another thing that we like seeing happen, and it happens with every trip, is once everyone is registered, I start a group email, a group thread, and we kind of talk about who's coming from where and whatnot. People connect in that email thread and often will pair up, triple, or quad up and do some other activities while they're in Alaska, either before or after the trip, which is great.

And although we don't plan that part for our guests, I am happy to jump in on that email thread and say, if I was doing this, I would go there, and I would stay there and do this and that.

So we group everyone up together with the email thread. We answer a few questions that way. But then we do have the live Q&A with Jill, myself, and the guides.

Jill: And we'll have a little Facebook group, too, for everybody to meet each other before the trip as well. So yeah, so fun.

So okay, so one more time, the website is runalaskatrails.com. And you're just going to click on retreats and click on Jill Angie, and all the information will be there.

Kim: Yeah.

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Jill: I hope we see you there. But I personally am very excited to come back to Alaska because now I'm just like ready to, like, what's going to awe me this time? What is going to blow my mind this time? Because I know there's just going to be so much. And then, like you, Andy is going to fly up and meet me at the end of this trip, and then I get to see his reaction to Alaska. And I'm very, very excited about that as well. So yeah.

Kim: That's what it's all about. Anyone's first time in Alaska is just their starter trip.

Jill: Yeah. Right, exactly.

Kim: You know you're going to end up wanting to come back. As a matter of fact, someone who signed up for your trip has done one of our trips before.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: And she wants to do it with you, so here she comes.

Jill: Yeah, exactly. Somebody who was on last year's trip has signed up for this year's trip again. So I love it. So good.

So anyway, all right. Well, thank you so much for joining me today. And I hope that you know if folks have any questions, they can always email support@notyouraveragerunner.com, or they can go to [runalaskatrails](http://runalaskatrails.com). It's probably better to go to runalaskatrails.com and then fill out the contact form there.

And they can also follow you on Instagram at Run Alaska Trails.

But yeah, I hope that if Alaska is anywhere in your brain as a possibility someday, that you consider this adventure because it's a lifetime experience. You will never, ever forget it. It's so fun.

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Kim: I'm so glad to hear that. Thank you so much. Whether or not this is what I'm supposed to be doing on Instagram, this is what I'm doing. My MO is I connect with all, obviously, our partners in putting together the big trip. I follow all of our guests. And they're still talking about it from last year.

Jill: Yeah.

Kim: One gal, in the gift bag, we had these little wall hangings or ornaments. She hung her ornament on the tree this year. And she said, you know, she posted this on Insta, she goes, you know, there's not a day that goes by that I don't think of this trip. And it just made my heart melt.

Jill: Yeah, that's so awesome.

Kim: That made me so happy.

Jill: I mean, I feel the same way.

Kim: And it's almost here.

Jill: Yeah, I know, right? Six months from now. So yeah, so get busy, people. Get over there and check it out. Get signed up, and we will see you in the 49th states.

Real quick, before you go, if you enjoyed this episode, you have got to check out Run Your Best Life. It's my monthly coaching program where you will learn exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you have always wanted to be. Head on over to runyourbestlife.com to join. I would love to be a part of your journey.