

BILL AND ANNE'S

EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

**Warm welcomes, rich
history—and a
weather window that
wouldn't budge.**

*By Anne Vipond and
William Kelly*

*Above: Amee Bay, an
anchorage near Old Harbor in
Sitkalidik Strait.*

The Kodiak Islands

*T*he Alaska Peninsula proved to be our nemesis. We were merrily making our way along its rocky, unsurveyed shores to the Aleutians when Alinchak Bay stopped us dead in our tracks.

For two days we were trapped at anchor while a cold mountain wind spilled with gale force into the bay, whipping its shallow waters into foaming seas. We finally fled Alinchak Bay and sailed back across Shelikof Strait to Kodiak Island.

After the rugged, lonely shores of the Peninsula, Kodiak Island seemed to brim with life as we cruised past lallygagging sea otters, duck-diving puffins and feeding humpbacks. The Port of Kodiak, however, was fairly quiet with most of the fleet out working a salmon opening.

That evening we dined at the Westmark Hotel overlooking the harbor. Halfway through our salads, Bill lost a tooth—a crown actually. Once he got over his disgust at the sight of someone's tooth lying on his salad plate, then his dismay at realizing it was his own, he phoned Edmonton to ask my sister Joan, a

dental hygienist, for advice. She was more interested in our trip than Bill's missing tooth.

GAP-TOOTHED GRIN: A gap-toothed grin is fairly common in fishing ports and Bill's dental work seemed unimportant alongside the damage we had sustained to our dinghy and anchor rode at Alinchak Bay. First we ordered a new dinghy—an inflatable—and arranged for its delivery. We also ordered a portable short-wave radio for receiving weather broadcasts. It arrived a few days later and was fine for listening to the BBC World Service but not much help for local weather.

Last but not least, we bought 400' of new anchor line.

While waiting for our new dinghy we visited the sights of Kodiak, a former capital of Russian America. The local Baranov Museum is the oldest Russian structure remaining in Alaska and was built by the Russian American Company in 1808 to store fur pelts. Of solid log construction, it overlooks a stone wharf once used by sailing ships in the fur trade.

Behind the museum a sweep of lawn leads to the Russian Orthodox Church—a vital presence in Kodiak since 1794 and a moderating influence on Russian fur traders who were often brutal in their treatment of natives. Orthodox missionaries frequently clashed with Alexander Baranov, the harsh but respected head of the Russian American Company and governor of the colony.

To this day, the Orthodox Church is a valued part of Alaskan society. It was instrumental in helping the Aleuts and Eskimos preserve their traditions and has retained a faithful following among the indigenous population. Native fishermen display icons on their vessels and often ask the local priest to bless their boats before heading out.

DIVINE ASSISTANCE: We could appreciate why fishermen want all the help they can get. As we circumnavigated the Kodiak archipelago, we encountered steep seas, tricky passes, volatile weather and pinnacle rocks which looked downright spooky. But these unwelcome conditions were more than offset by the beauty of the islands and the warmth of the people we met.

At Hidden Basin, an anchorage south of the Port of Kodiak, we were greeted by two fellows—Cable and Frank—who run a hunting/fishing lodge here. They told us we were the first sailboat to visit their cove, gave us a bucket of Dungeness crab, warned us about brown bears in the area, and invited us for dinner that evening. Even Tuck, our scottie, got the royal treatment, carried by Frank into the lodge while the resident dogs were left outside to chase off grizzlies.

At Amee Bay, in spectacular Sitkalidik Strait, we met a family from the village of Old Harbor who were out sightseeing in their small powerboat. Freddie, a fisherman, and his wife Glenna suggested we stop at their port for a visit. So next morning, after catching a lovely Pacific cod off the stern and watching some terns from a nearby rookery chase off a bald eagle, we motored into Old Harbor.

GO BANYA: The dog-leg entrance into the dredged basin was shallow but we made it through. Sven Haakanson, former

chief of Old Harbor, and his wife Mary watched from dockside and suggested we tie up at the finger closest to the ramp near the freshwater hose. Then they invited us to their house for a banya (sauna) that evening. In the meantime we walked to the nearby Sitkalidik Lodge where Glenna, the owner, showed us around and introduced us to friends and family.

When Sven and Mary picked us up



after dinner they brought two geologists in the back of their truck who were also coming for a banya. Previous visitors to Old Harbor included James Michener (researching his book *Alaska*), the singer John Denver (following the Exxon Valdez oil spill) and David Rockefeller (leader of a sailing expedition to Kodiak in the summer of '91). When Denver paid the Haakansons a visit he didn't have time to "go banya," but Rockefeller, who was travelling by boat, did.

So did we. "Stay in as long as you want," Sven told us. "Take an hour if you like." We lasted ten minutes, all the while hosing ourselves down with cold water. Afterward we sat in the Haakansons' living room and watched the Olympics on television. It felt like a typical suburban home with a microwave in the kitchen and a deep freeze on the porch. The only difference was the steady flow of neighborhood visitors, most of whom were also relatives. Their daughter Phyllis and her family live next door, and son Sven Jr., about to begin anthropology studies at Harvard in the fall, came home that evening from a nearby archaeological dig.

LOCAL HISTORY: The original natives of Kodiak were Pacific Eskimos called Ko-

niag who spoke Alutiiq—one of the Yupik languages. They inhabited Kodiak Island for 10,000 years and shared such Aleut customs as hunting whales from kayaks with harpoons.

Their subsistence lifestyle was forever changed when a Siberian merchant named Grigori Shelikhov led fur hunting expeditions along the Aleutians to Kodiak. In 1784 the first Russian settlement in Alaska was established at Three Saints Bay, not far from the existing village of Old Harbor. An important battle, in which the Russians led by Shelikhov defeated the resident Alutiiqs, took place in this area, and Sven Jr. was participating in an excavation at its site.

The village priest, Father Sergius, provided more historical details the next morning when we paid him a call. Old Harbor is the oldest continuous Eastern Orthodox community in the U.S., and its small church is the spiritual centre of the community. Situated at one end of the village below a hillside cemetery, this wooden structure withstood a series of tsunamis during the '64 earthquake which wiped out the rest of the village. Those who watched from the mountainside above saw the church stand its ground against waves surging past its windows. They say it was a modern-day miracle. When the huge waves stopped, the church became a refuge until outside help arrived.

Tsunamis also plagued the Russians who first settled at Three Saints Bay. After enduring a destructive tsunami and two devastating earthquakes inside eight years, Shelikhov's replacement, Alexander Baranov, decided to move the company headquarters to Saint Paul Harbor, the present-day Port of Kodiak. A century later, a settlement at Three Saints Harbour was reestablished and became known as the "Old Harbor", as distinct from the new harbor at Kodiak.

STORYBOOK VILLAGE: After two days at Old Harbor we reluctantly said goodbye to Father Sergius, the Haakansons and local fishermen who had just returned from a salmon opening. As we drew away from port with our spinnaker flying, Old Harbor looked like a storybook village of colored houses nestled at the base of a

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green valley. The white church with its blue roof and onion-shaped domes was the last tiny image we saw as a following breeze carried us down Sitkalidak Strait to Three Saints Bay.

Here a wooden cross has been erected on a grassy spit to mark the location of the first Russian settlement in Alaska. We tied to a barge, moored inside the spit, and spent a quiet night surrounded by granite peaks and Russian ghosts.

The next day, August 1, we were pulling out of Three Saints Bay when we sighted an eastbound sailboat proceeding up the Strait. We made radio contact and Tom, the skipper, told us he was returning to his home port of Port Protection in Southeast Alaska after a two-year cruise of the South Pacific. He warned us about the abrupt onset of winter in the Gulf and suggested we get across by the middle of August.

TIME RUNNING OUT: His words stayed with us as we headed for the southern tip of Kodiak Island. After a night anchored in Jap Bay, we rounded the bottom of Kodiak Island in gale-force winds and heavy rain squalls. We piloted with loran and a chart pummelled by wind and rain which scoffed at our canvas dodger.

We took a number of waves over the stern and Bill, at the helm, took a few in the face as we turned toward Alitak Bay. Then, with mainsail and working jib reefed, we screamed closehauled past Cape Trinity. Finally, we were able to fall off and reach into Alitak Bay where we found protected anchorage in Lazy Bay. The chart was shredded and our determination to reach the Aleutians was doused.

BECAUSE IT'S THERE? The next day, Bill's birthday, brought more thick weather. The bay, with a cannery on the far shore at Akhiok village, was busy with fishboats. We talked on the radio to a crab fisherman who was anchored behind us, and he provided weather updates throughout the day. That evening, Bill dinghied over with some birthday cake and returned with more local knowledge. Al, the skipper, was curious about our desire to sail to Dutch Harbor in the Aleutians. "Just because it's there?" he asked. He told us Kodiak was nicer.

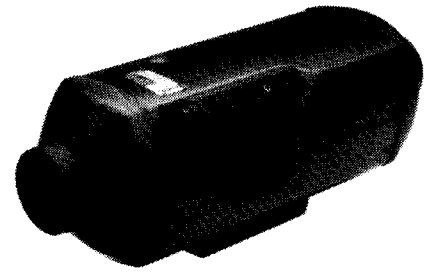
Our backup plan was to circumnavigate the Kodiak archipelago, so with summer slipping away we headed up Shelikof Strait to explore the islands' northwest shores.

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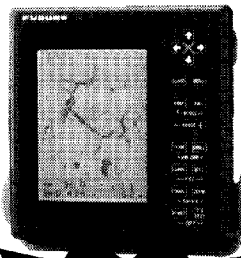
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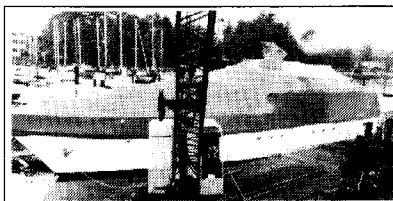
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Porpoises swam in our bow wave and sea otters drifted past. Some fishboats were setting their nets near shore as we passed Rocky Point and headed into Uyak Bay. On our approach to an anchorage protected by a few islets, a friendly fellow in an aluminum skiff pulled alongside and asked if we wanted a salmon and threw a twitching sockeye into our cockpit.

NEXT, BREAKFAST: Welcomes don't get much better than that, or so we thought until the skipper of a large converted tug named *Waters* waved us over and asked if we'd like to raft up rather than anchor. It was late in the evening and we gladly accepted his offer while his crew and passengers gazed down at us.

Next came the breakfast invitation, and the following morning we dined aboard *Waters* and learned more about the Exxon Valdez oil spill from two biologists on board who were studying its long-term effects. The entire Kodiak fishing fleet stayed home in 1989 to help with clean-up operations after currents carried the slick to local shores.

Kodiak's shoreline is indented by deep narrow inlets, and Uyak Bay stretches 20 miles inland. The main settlement within the inlet is at Larsen Bay, site of Kodiak's oldest operating cannery. Many of the workers are college students from the Lower 48 who fly in for the summer. They're housed in wooden dormitories set on pilings and joined by boardwalk streets to the cannery buildings. When the fish tenders pull in, the assembly lines roll—regardless of the time of day or night.

CANNERY CALL: Fishboats were rafted three deep to the dock pilings when we pulled into Larsen Bay, but we had no problem obtaining fuel or water at the cannery. The fuel attendant was a college student from Oregon, and he said we could have all the diesel we wanted as long as he could come aboard for a look around. Then the cannery supervisor came aboard to help fill our water tanks and take a look below.

Before leaving Uyak Bay, we stopped at a small teardrop-shaped island at the bay's mouth. Bear Island has been the summer residence of the Fields family since 1961 when they bought the property from an elderly Norwegian. DeWitt and Wanda Fields, along with their three adult sons and their families, work here at fishing each summer. They do most of their gillnetting

from aluminum skiffs built by Bellavance Welding of Richmond, B.C., and a fleet of these skiffs bob on mooring buoys in the lee of Bear Island.

But the Vancouver suburb seemed a long way away as we strolled past the Fields' clapboard homes clustered at one end of this treeless island and listened to Weston warn us about crossing the Gulf of Alaska before the September blows begin. He said they usually start with the first high tide, which would fall on August 29.

TEMPTING: The next day, when we motored up Shelikof Strait, the sky was so clear we could see peak after snow-capped peak of the Aleutian Range—the backbone of the Peninsula. It was tempting to sail back across for one last visit to Geographic Harbor, but we carried on to Afognak Island.

Spruce trees began to dot the mountainsides and, by the time we reached Blue Fox Bay at the northeast end of Afognak, the shores were thickly forested. A wine merchant back in Kodiak had told us Blue Fox Bay was the prettiest anchorage in the entire archipelago and that he knew the owner of a lodge located there. So we pulled in, threaded our way past some islets, and anchored off the sand beach of one. Then we went exploring by dinghy and soon found ourselves in the midst of a large gathering of sea otters. Dozens of round faces gazed nonchalantly at us puttering past.

ICEWORM COCKTAILS: We also came across the lodge owner—Jerry Sparrow—who was out in his skiff. He invited us to the lodge and we spent an entertaining afternoon and evening with him as he poured us drink after drink before cooking us halibut steaks for dinner. His spontaneous recitation of Robert Service evoked memories of school skits starring Sam McGee and ice-worm cocktails.

We left our battered wooden dinghy with Jerry, as we couldn't have it cluttering *Sway's* foredeck when we crossed the Gulf. We also promised to send him a letter when we reached the other side—he said he didn't want to be left wondering whether we had made it!

Then, following a quick overnight stop at Big Bay on Shuyak Island, we headed back to the Port of Kodiak to prepare for our Gulf crossing. After six weeks of cruising an archipelago which rivals any in the world for lush beauty and abundant wildlife, it was time to head home. 📖



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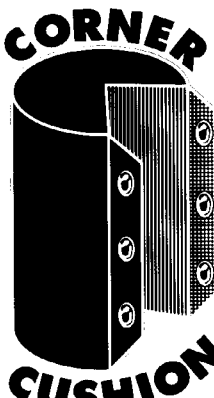
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