



# The bear necessities

**Nick and Jenny Coghlan** relate an adventurous cruise to Kodiak and the Alaska frontier

**A**s we sat and waited in Tokyo Bay for one typhoon after another to pass, we were reluctant to start working our way through our carefully acquired pile of paperbacks; the sail to Alaska would be a long one and we'd need all the reading material we had. So every evening we scanned the diminishing list of obscure movies that we had copied to our laptop over the past year.

One night it was *The Guardian*. The opening sequence is exciting and seemed quite relevant. A terrific storm is raging at sea and a middle-aged couple abandon their foundering sailboat in the middle of the night. But then we hear the noise of a chopper. Bright lights appear in the black sky. The US Coastguard are coming to the rescue. As a chisel-jawed rescue diver - Kevin Costner - drops into the heavy seas, the husband brutally elbows his wife out of

the way: he wants to be the first to be hauled up. A full five minutes in, with the chopper's fuel gauge grazing Empty but the exhausted couple finally safe, the diver gives the panicky pilot a cool thumbs-up. The first words of the movie are spoken: "Kodiak Base: we're coming home."

Our passage from Japan to Kodiak was slow: 42 days for 3600 miles, nearly all of them fogbound, much of it on the wind. The damp got everywhere; those carefully saved paperbacks swelled up and we had to place them on top of the stove to dry them out (giving a new meaning to the phrase "cooking the books"). But by the time we were coasting by the mountains of the great island's east coast, the seas were glassily calm and the skies clear. The Laysan albatross that had been following us for weeks disconsolately settled on the water, an orca nosed over. A Coastguard helicopter did fly over us, but Jenny was disappointed when Costner failed to materialise on the end of a steel cable.

ABOVE LEFT  
Bosun Bird at anchor

ABOVE CENTRAL  
At the Ouzinkie  
small boat harbour

## *Quaint customs*

Entry into the USA was surprisingly low-key. At the office for the St Paul fishing harbour at the town of Kodiak, where we tied up, the manager was welcoming but looked blank when we asked what formalities we needed to do:

"Not quite sure what you mean. There's a washroom around the corner...laundry at the Walmart. Customs? Immigration? Nah, there's none of that here, but I can give you a phone number in Anchorage if





you really want to speak to them...”

Back down on the dock we were also surprised when, once or twice a day, tourists would knock on our hull and politely ask where they might find Wild Bill, or Captain Corky. It took us some time, but we eventually worked out that these were the stars of a TV reality series – The Deadliest Catch – that featured local crab-fishing boats at work in the Bering Sea in winter. It was a massive hit in the Lower 48 and episodes ran in a constant loop in the town’s two bars.

We never did meet Wild Bill, but daily life in and around the harbour could be colourful all the same. The crab fishers were hard-working and just as free-spending and hard-living. One morning there was yellow Crime Scene tape around the marina washroom; there had been a drug takedown by State Troopers in the early hours. One fisherman told us darkly that dealers caught up in turf wars had been known

to end up on the bottom in one of those large crab traps we’d seen on TV. And that odd-looking boat at anchor, with an enormous square stern cabin overhanging the water?

“Oh yeah ...” said the harbour manager. “Pole-dancing. Russian gals. See, the town council won’t allow it, but they get around that by doing it in the harbour... On bad nights there’s always people falling in, coming and going after a drink or two...”

We would spend three summers cruising the spectacular waters of Kodiak – which is the USA’s second largest island, after Hawaii – and we scarcely saw another sailboat.

A favourite destination, just a couple of hours’ sail away, was Long Island. Here in World War Two more than 5000 troops were stationed; you can hike out to see the massive guns that were installed to guard the approaches to Kodiak, and in the dripping

**ABOVE**  
Bosun Bird, St Paul Harbour, Kodiak

**BELOW LEFT**  
Remains of WW2 installations on Long Island

**BELOW CENTRAL**  
Kodiak bear, Kodiak Island

**BELOW RIGHT**  
The Russian Orthodox church, Ouzinkie

woods are crumbling Nissen huts and rusting old jeeps. The Japanese did take two of the Aleutian Islands and bombed Dutch Harbour, but it’s said that there was always too much cloud over Kodiak to allow for an attack here. By all accounts this was not a popular posting.

### ***Russians not back***

A little further away is Ouzinkie, population 160 and the second-largest settlement outside of Kodiak itself. John, the part-time harbour master and, like most of Ouzinkie’s natives an Alutiiq (not to be confused with the related Aleuts), welcomed us and showed us the tiny, beautifully kept Russian Orthodox church and cemetery behind the harbour. John claimed (only half seriously) that when William Seward bought Alaska from Russia for USD \$7.2m in 1867, Russia reserved the right to reoccupy Ouzinkie. But apart from the pole-dancers, the



Russians have not been seen again.

Working our way south – timing our transits for favourable tides in Ouzinkie Passage and Whale Passage – we rode out the gales that roll through every three days, at anchor off abandoned canneries or in lonely, steep-sided granite bays. Near Karluk we worked our way into a narrow fjord then – following the directions of a friend – hiked for an hour up a creek to a weir and fish-ladder.

“Just sit back and wait,” he’d said. “But don’t get TOO close.”

Half an hour after we arrived, 30 metres below us, the first bear arrived: a massive male lumbering up the stream, his head rocking close to the water’s surface. He was soon followed by an only marginally smaller female with two cubs. The cubs played happily, clambering on and off the weir, but were eventually persuaded into the water and shown how to catch their own salmon (the technique is crude: massive swipes of the forepaws.) Kodiak bears are a subspecies of the Grizzly: better-fed and larger, often the size of a polar bear. They can be just as aggressive but tend not to be – or so we’d been told - when the salmon are abundant and the living is easy, as it was at this time of year.

The local weather forecasting is good but conditions change at a frightening speed. Most dangerous are the frigid outflow winds that pour from coastal inlets and accelerate at headlands, when the atmospheric pressure in the interior is high: they often reach 50 or 60 knots. So from Karluk, we chose our moment carefully to cross the Shelikof Strait to the Alaska Peninsula. We were rewarded with a 20 knot north-easter on the beam for the entire 32-mile crossing.



**ABOVE**  
Geographic Harbour, Alaska Peninsula

**BELOW LEFT**  
Reaching across the Shelikof Strait to the Alaska Peninsula

**BELOW CENTRE**  
A sea otter reposes

**BELOW RIGHT**  
Strict town council rules in Kodiak on ‘entertainments’ are dodged by anchoring this floating pole dancing club in the harbour

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**  
Nick and Jenny Coghlan are a pair of adventurous cruisers based in Victoria, BC, Canada. They have covered many miles in their trusty Vancouver 27, Bosun Bird. Nick’s book *Winter in Fireland* is available at [bosunbird.com](http://bosunbird.com)

snow-capped peaks occasionally peeping tantalisingly through the clouds to the west. The mountains on the Peninsula side of Shelikof are higher than on Kodiak, reaching to around 2500m. They are perpetually covered in snow, but what at first sight appear to be large patches of dirty snow on many lower slopes are huge areas of volcanic ash, left over from the massive 1912 eruption of Mount Katmai.

After a long day at sea we wound our way through narrow channels to the emerald green and still waters of Amalik Bay, then deeper into the mountains to a small complex of lagoons known as Geographic Harbour (after the National Geographic reporter who came here to report on the Katmai cataclysm).

### **Grizzly central**

This is Grizzly Central. Over the several days we spent at Geographic there was almost invariably a bear in sight on the tideline or lumbering up into the salmonberry patches above. Big males, with their distinctive

hump, would eye us quietly for a minute or so, but other than that take no notice of us. One swam by us blithely, only 20m or so off our bows. If there were no bears around, sea otters would back-stroke over and just hang out, often with a pup fidgeting on their chest.

The days are long in the summer, but by late August winter seems not far away and the nights start to get chilly in Kodiak. There’s a McDonald’s where the cannery workers congregate, using the free wi-fi and gossiping in Spanish; most of them are seasonal and come from Central America. There’s a beautiful public library too, built with Alaskan oil money, where you can doze over a three-day-old copy of the Wall Street Journal. But things get pretty quiet. We hauled out over the winters at Fuller’s Boatyard, in a wooden cradle we had to build ourselves; they weren’t accustomed to blocking sailboats.

One September day in the boatyard, as I was walking around Bosun Bird, fingering a possible osmosis blister on the now-exposed hull, Jenny beckoned me over to the other side of the yard, where they were adjusting blocks under a huge black-hulled steel crabber.

“It’s Time Bandit!” she exclaimed.

This was one of the perennial stars of *The Deadliest Catch*. It had briefly captured the national headlines when its engineer had turned up dead in a hotel room in Homer, Alaska. One of the crew was complaining of a two-degree list as the yard workers rammed wedges under the hull. Crusty Bill Fuller, supervising the operation, was unimpressed. “F\*\*\*ing Reality prima donnas,” we heard him mutter.

It wasn’t Kevin Costner, but we’d had our brush with stardom anyway. ✦

