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Salmon season on the Kenai River

BY ANNEZ COOKE

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Here's what it's like fishing the Kenai River.

Since 4 a.m., you've been straddling a narrow path on the edge of a rushing current, your back against a steep, 15-foot-high slope of hard-packed mud. There's barely room to swing the rod, your feet are wet and there's no place to sit down.

An average Joe, you're thinking ahead to winter, hoping to stock up your freezer. You're swinging the fishing rod at warp speed, two casts a minute, minimum. Each cast is a quick, side-hand jerk that drops the hook in mid-river among tens of thousands of "reds" (sockeye), swimming upstream to spawn. The fish aren't hungry, but when they see the hook slide by, some swipe at it. If you reel in the hook like Ahab with the whale, you'll catch one.

By 9 o'clock the river banks are overrun with fishermen standing 20 feet apart, on the mud, in the bushes and in the shallows. The scene is a madhouse, but a madhouse that no "sourdough," a card-carrying Alaska resident, would pass up. For a "cheechako" like me, visiting from the Lower 48 with my kids, it ended in mid-afternoon when my ride - the guide and motorboat - finally came to pick me up.

You count yourself lucky if you're the only fisherman on your stretch of river bank and doubly lucky if you catch four or five big sockeyes. If you happen to hook a king salmon, aka Chinook, you've found the holy grail, the reason the Kenai attracts sports competitors from five continents, big spenders determined to go home with a trophy fish.

But there's a better way to fish and appease your family at the same time. Rule 1: Don't come all this way just to fish. There's a world of wonder on this frying pan-shaped hunk of land, a wilderness as spectacular as the Tetons and as big as Massachusetts and Connecticut put together. Close to Anchorage, it's just a couple of hours' drive away on Alaska's most scenic paved highway.

By an accident of geography, the Kenai Peninsula is one of the few places in Alaska where history, adventure, sports, hiking trails, glaciers, bays, rivers, bears, birds, hotels, lodges, rustic cabins and great fresh seafood restaurants intersect. Think of the Kenai as a three-dimensional Alaska album, a new experience on each page and an ideal place to introduce Alaska to your kids, your friends, neighbors, even the engaged couple across the street.

We planned a week's trip, rented a car and covered a lot of ground. Too much, actually. But looking back at the photos, we remember it all. There was the glacier-viewing cruise through Prince William Sound, to see giant slabs of ice calving into the sea and to learn about glacial action. And the flightseeing tour over the vast Harding Icefield, mother of most of the area glaciers. We hiked to Exit Glacier, looking for brown bears and eagles. We didn't try kayaking or windsurfing, but we watched other intrepid sportsmen breasting the whitecaps in Resurrection Bay. And we took the wildlife sightseeing cruise to the far end of the bay, stopping at Fox Island for a salmon bake, lingering in front of Bear Glacier, a huge tidewater glacier, and idling beside sea lion and puffin colonies. Later we saw more sea lions and puffins but a close range, in the rescue wing of the extraordinary Alaska SeaLife Center, the aquarium and wildlife rescue center in Seward.

We ate, shopped and explored Seward, the gateway to Alaska in the pre-railroad era, where recent excavations have revealed ancient aboriginal village sites. We took a guided float trip on the Kenai River, spotting a couple of moose and learning about other pre-European village sites nearby.

We spent a night in Homer, a budding artists' colony on the southwest tip of the peninsula, driving the length of the thin strip of sand known as the Homer Spit and strolling along the boardwalk past bars, cafes, shops and boat slips.

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We got a brief look at early Russian history, still alive at the miniscule Russian orthodox churches in the villages of Kenai and Ninilchik. We stopped at North Beach, near Kenai, to watch hopeful fishermen wielding huge, round dip nets. It sounded so easy when a friend described it, but holding one of those metal nets in the breakers was darn hard. And we ate fresh fish at every meal, from grilled salmon and king crab to the kids' first choice, fish and chips. They liked cod better than halibut: go figure.

So that was Rule 1. Here's Rule 2.

If you want to fish the Kenai River, book a cabin for a couple of nights with Bill White or Joe Connors, two good ol' boys who share prime Kenai River frontage near Sterling. Real-time sourdoughs, they've got cabins, docks you can fish from any time of day, and rods and reels to borrow. In the middle is a campfire ring where other good ol' boys (guests from elsewhere) sit around with a beer in hand, reliving the day's fishing.

Joe, a licensed guide and owner of Big Sky Charter & FishCamp, shows newcomers how to catch sockeye (unique to this river), sells fishing licenses and books half and full-day guided motorboat fishing. His guides will clean and filet your salmon, and truck it to the fast-freeze plant in Sterling.

A former University of Alaska professor and member of the Kenai River Sportfishing Association, Joe is also founder of the Alaska Fisheries Conservation Alliance, AFCC, a group dedicated to minimizing the damage that 20-foot-tall set nets, used by commercial fisheries, inflict on the annual king salmon runs. The sockeye are a legitimate catch. But the nets, anchored parallel to the shore, also trap king salmon. With many fewer kings reaching their spawning grounds - and the numbers are down - future generations of kings are endangered, as is today's sport fishing.

Bill White and his wife, and Bill Jr., who run their place as the Alaska Sports Lodge, helped us settle into our cabin and loaned us rods, reels and knee-high rubber boots. The cabins offer basic shelter and an efficiency kitchen - remember, fishermen are not there for the decor - and a sofa, chairs, breakfast table, beds and bunks downstairs and in the loft. Our cabin slept six, and had a delightful front deck with deck chairs and a gas grill. It looked bare when we arrived. It felt like home when we left.

With our photo count at 2,351 and a notebook crammed with details, we spent our last long day driving back to Anchorage, and to the airport for a night flight home. As we whizzed past now-familiar names and places, I can't tell you how many times I heard a voice from the back seat say, "Next time, I want to stay here longer."

I hope they will.

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For the Alaska SeaLife Center, see www.sealifecenter.org.

The Seward Windsong lodge at www.sewardwindsong.com.

For Bill White's cabins, see www.alaskasportslodge.com.

For Joe Connors' cabins and guides: www.kenaignuide.com.

For Kenai River float trips: see www.AlaskaRiverAdventures.com.



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