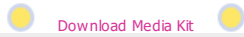


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Kenai sampler: A taste of Alaska

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty

COOPER LANDING, Alaska -- Like most Alaskans, George Heim, owner of Alaska River Adventures, is a man of few words.

For three decades he's been organizing sightseeing and fishing trips on the Kenai Peninsula, a job that demands more doing and less talking. When he pauses to reminisce about paths taken and not taken, he wastes no words.

"I used to wear a suit and tie and sit at a desk," he said as we signed in at his headquarters in Cooper Landing for a 14-mile, half-day float trip down the Kenai River. "Then one year I came out with a friend to fish. We couldn't believe how good it was, so we came the next year. And the next. Then one year, when he went back I stayed."

Heim ran a thoughtful eye over our summer-weight jackets. Then he rummaged around behind the counter and produced two pairs of waterproof pants and boots. "You're wearing thick socks, I hope," he said, sending us back to the car to exchange cotton for wool. Even in mid-August, the river, wide and deep at Cooper Landing and milky-green from glacial silt, stays icy.



The Kenai River, fed by glaciers and flowing west to Cook Inlet, is the heart of the Upper Kenai Peninsula.

Though fishing is king on this river, Heim and his partners know that recently- disembarked cruise passengers – that was us – hope for choices. So he and his partners offer horseback rides, hiking, guided salmon fishing and gold panning. His raft trips, highlighting the Kenai's spectacular scenery and abundant wildlife, also includes a picnic lunch and an introduction to the area's pioneer history.

We also stopped to tour a local history museum and a pre-European era Athabaskan village site, both open (they aren't always) on the day we were there.

Alaska is bigger than life, no matter where you are. But the Kenai Peninsula, half the size of Maine, is the jewel in the crown. Here, two to three hours' drive from Anchorage, lie rugged peaks, vast ice fields, salmon streams, lakes, tidewater glaciers, brown and black bears, moose, caribou, hundreds of miles of hiking trails, historic towns, deep bays, whales, sea otters and harbors with fishing charters. There's enough, in fact, to fill three summers.

From Anchorage we drove southeast toward Whittier and Prince William Sound, then turned south for three nights in Seward, on Resurrection Bay, and later, southwest for three more nights in Kachemak Bay, near Homer. Rambling on our own time, we stopped at vista points to shoot photos, and parked at roadside trailheads to stretch our legs. But we also included some planned highlights, starting with a half-day sightseeing cruise through Prince William Sound.



This 12-pound Coho salmon is one that didn't get away.

Turning off toward Whittier, we parked at the dock and boarded the Klondike Explorer, one of a half-dozen boats that cruise to some of the Sound's many glaciers. The Explorer, with a top speed of 50 miles per hour, is the only boat fast enough to cover the distance (65 miles) to College and Harriman Fjords and back, leaving an hour for maneuvering in front of the glaciers to watch them calve into the bay.

There were more Alaskans on board than tourists; cruising the Sound is a popular family attraction it seems. For us it was a perfect chance to stake out a table and chairs near a window and look for whales, or to ask the folks around us for restaurant recommendations. An onboard lunch counter sells sandwiches, burgers, coffee and beer; the ride is so smooth you can carry a bowl of soup without spilling a drop.

Seward, founded long before Anchorage, was Alaska's original port of entry, the harbor where ships from Seattle unloaded



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their cargo. Now it's a fishing port and the entry for boaters, hikers and birders entering the Kenai Fiords National Park. The town is a tourist mecca, as well, with hotels, restaurants, shops and fishing charter boats.

We weren't fishermen, exactly, but when you're in Rome...well, you know what I mean. At 6:30 a.m. the next morning we met "Captain Andy" Mezerow at the harbor and boarded his fishing boat, the 46-foot Crackerjack IV, for a day fishing in Resurrection Bay. "Catching halibut is easy," said Mezerow, as we glided away from the dock. "The skill is in finding them."

Catching a halibut WAS easy, in fact. You find a place about 225 feet deep, bait a hook and clip on a three-pound weight, toss it over the side and wait for a jerk on the line. Then comes the hard part: reeling the fish, 40 or 50 pounds of dead weight, 225 feet back up to the surface.

"The ideal fish is 35 to 80 pounds," said Mezerow. "Smaller halibut taste better. Nobody should ever keep a halibut over 100 pounds. That's a no-no. Those really big ones are the breeding females." By four o'clock we were docking the boat and dropping off our fish for quick-freezing and overnight storage.

The last half of our week on the Kenai we drove to Homer, on Cook Inlet, then headed out to Kachemak Bay and legendary Tutka Bay Lodge for three days of luxury pampering. The Grand Dame of the area, Tutka Bay has six exclusive cabins, award-winning chef-prepared cuisine and a host of recreation options designed to highlight your stay and the location, a forested site at the end of a deep fjord. We kayaked, fished for salmon, hiked up to a glacial lake, sunned on the dock and had a daily massage.

We sampled yoga sessions, joined the wine tastings and caught one of the award-winning culinary classes. Tutka Bay is pricey – \$2,650 per person for a three-night stay – but everything, and I mean everything, is included. So splurge. The Kenia Peninsula is what vacations are all about.

Getting there: Alaska Airlines and other U.S. carriers offer nonstop flights to Anchorage from a number of hubs in the lower 48 states.

Staying there: Per night lodging varies by the day, month and demand. In Anchorage, find the Sheraton at sheratonanchoragehotel.com. In Seward, The Windsong Lodge is at sewardwindsong.com. Locate Tutka Bay at withinthewild.com.

Paying there: Alaska River Adventures (askariveradventures.com) are \$59 and \$159 and up, for half and full-day excursions. Klondike Express day cruises (phillipscruises.com) are \$139 and \$79 for adults and kids. Crackerjack Sport Fishing (crackerjackcharters.com) is \$325 per person from June-September. For more, visit sewardchamber.org, kenaipeninsula.org or homer.alaska.org.



Passengers on the Klondike Explorer get a close-up view of Harriman Glacier, in Prince William Sound.



Halibut fishermen on the Crackerjack IV get an early start for a day in Resurrection Bay.