

## 2005 Alaska Cruise Journal # 7

**Fourth and Final Leg** Kodiak Island is the largest island in Alaska, and is second in the U. S. only to The Big Island of Hawaii. Kodiak has only one main town, also named Kodiak, and a handful of small remote villages, each with no more than about 200 residents. As you move westward through the island chain, the trees gradually disappear until finally there are only tall grasses covering the hillsides. Joann's sister Loretta and her husband Ed Schafer from St. Louis joined us on this last portion of our trip. They can be seen above the tall grasses of Kodiak (see photo).



**Recent Kodiak History** The last one hundred years have been difficult for the residents of the island. It started with the volcanic eruption of Mt. Katmai in 1912, which blanketed all of the villages with up to two feet of ash. The 1964 earthquake lowered the shoreline of much of the coast and triggered a series of tsunamis. The subsidence affected most of the villages resulting in periodic flooding during high tides, and the tsunamis destroyed several towns. Finally, the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred in March of 1989. Although the spill was almost 300 miles away, prevailing winds and currents soon swept oil south along much of the Kodiak Island coastline.

**Port Hobron** A thick fog bank along the coast did not deter us as we once again headed out into the Gulf of Alaska waters and traveled seventy miles along the southern coast to Port Hobron on Sitkalidik Island. Originally established in 1917, Port Hobron was the last remaining Alaskan commercial shore based whaling station. Norwegian whalers slaughtered about a hundred whales a year there until the coming of World War II sent the whalers back to Norway. On shore,



remains include a large rusted tank farm and many collapsed wooden buildings. Stranded on the beach, there was a 110-foot long wooden whaling boat. Carl is the tiny person standing on the boat (see photo). The vessel's planks were joined together with wooden pegs and her hull was chinked with hemp. We found the adjoining stream to be choked with spawning salmon, and additional

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salmon lined up along the Port Hobron shoreline waiting their turn to go up-stream. For a more secure overnight anchorage, we went to the head of McCord Bay. This area with abundant tall wild grasses was a natural site for cattle ranching from the early 1900s, except for one large ongoing



dilemma, brown bears. The bears ultimately caused the demise of the cattle ranches both here and elsewhere in the Kodiak archipelago. The island now belongs almost entirely to the Old Harbor Native Corporation as part of the 1971 Native Claims Settlement Act.

**Old Harbor** Since departing Kodiak, very hazy skies had partially obscured the sun due to forest fires on the mainland. Carl carefully picked our way through an extremely shallow section of



Sitkalidik Strait into the village of Old Harbor (**see photo**). We spoke to the owner of the small and only store in town and learned about the village. She explained that the inhabitants were a mix of Alutiiq, Russian and Norwegian ancestry. The Alutiiq people are related to the Eskimos. Her eleven-year old daughter sold us one of their homemade beaded necklaces. We walked into the “old” section of town, which was almost completely rebuilt after the tsunamis of the 1964 earthquake. We were

encouraged to visit their Russian Orthodox Church (**see photo**), which is “always open” and was spared any tsunami damage due to a more elevated location. We climbed the adjoining hill to see the old cemetery before we continued to explore the rest of this small village. We located the storeowner’s husband, carver Rolf Christianson, at his carving shed near the beach. He exhibited a



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strong pride in his mixed cultural background, and spoke of his interest in continuing the subsistence lifestyle of his Native American ancestors. Some of the jellyfish in this area are very sizable. With their pulsating movement, they are a source of frequent enjoyment (**see photo**).

**Big Travel Day** During the trip break, we had moved Carl's mother to St. Louis and into a retirement community. Shortly after our departure from a small lagoon near the mouth of Three Saints Bay, we received a call on our satellite phone from cousin Barry Pessin. Carl's mother was being taken to the hospital. The timing could not have been worse as it was the farthest the *Inside Passage* has ever been from its home. With the intention of returning to port as soon as possible, we made the decision to keep going once we reached Cape Trinity at southwestern end of Kodiak Island and passed up some of previously selected sites of interest.



**Completing the Circumnavigation** We rounded Cape Ikolik at 154° 49.172' W, the furthest west the *Inside Passage* has ever cruised. There was added concern because the recent weather forecast said a major storm was closing in, but we decided under the new circumstances to take a chance and



run the 135 miles to Larsen Bay. Enroute on that fourteen-hour travel day, we saw an eagle make three unsuccessful attempts to dive and snare a tufted puffin in its talons. Other wildlife sightings during our journey around the Kodiak coastline were two orca whales in the morning, and a much larger pod of at least fourteen in the afternoon (**see photo**). We followed the latter pod for some time at a reduced speed. They paid no

attention to us, keeping just ahead of the boat. The whales often swam in a straight-line spread out and breathing in unison like synchronized swimmers.

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### Waiting Out the Storm



The State of Alaska has built a small first quality boat harbor across the bay from the large cannery in Larsen Bay (see photo). We were relieved to have a secure moorage to wait out the big storm, but frustrated that we couldn't go on. During our two layover days, we checked in with the hospital and spoke to Mom's doctor and others to continually check on her condition. We were reassured to hear she was in stable

condition although quite confused. While waiting, we toured the Larson Bay Cannery, which was as busy as ever. To stay in business, they have added a fresh frozen fish line along with the canned fish operation. We heard from the clerk in the company store that Kodiak Salmon Packers has a primarily multinational work force with the seasonal employees coming primarily from Russia, The Czech Republic, Ukraine, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and even one worker from Micronesia. She said that notices are typically posted in five languages.

### Our First Kodiak Bears

When we returned to the *Inside Passage*, we watched a Kodiak brown bear mother and two cubs swim out to the nearby breakwater about sixty yards away (see photo).

This was our fourth visit to the Kodiak Island chain, but it was the first time we were able to see and photograph the famous Kodiak brown bears, considered by some experts to be the world's largest (see photo on next page). From onboard the boat, we enjoyed a ringside seat observing this family for over an hour. After a night of heavy rain, we checked the



boat's wind speed indicator. It showed the winds had reached a maximum wind speed of sixty miles per hour even in the sheltered harbor. The weather report said the seas out on Shelikof Strait were sixteen feet.



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**The Weather Breaks** Thursday morning the weather broke, and we got an early start to another fourteen hours of travel as we continued our run back to Cordova. It turned out to be an unusual day



with an amazing amount of wildlife. We had repeated encounters with Dall porpoises riding our bow wave and large pods of both orcas and fin whales. Late in the afternoon we found ourselves in the midst of a large pod of over fifty humpback whales feeding aggressively in the Barren Islands. We had to quickly shift our gears into reverse to avoid three humpbacks that suddenly surfaced immediately in front of the vessel. This has now happened twice this summer, yet never before in twenty-

one years of cruising in Alaska. After we anchored, a sea otter lazily paddled by the boat as a black bear meandered along the shoreline. It was a fitting end to a day that reminded us of the finale to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration where all the remaining fireworks are fired off at once. Could it be that the word was out among the denizens of the sea and shore that we were leaving shortly?

**Finishing Up** The next morning we ramped up again, and increased our traveling hours to eighteen (5:30 AM to 11:30 PM), and the final morning we pulled anchor at 4:15 AM in order to make it into Cordova in time to catch the noon flight. With one person always watching the helm, we completed necessary chores so we could quickly depart once we were moored. We are now in St. Louis. Carl's mother was discharged from the hospital today. Hopefully she will be soon be back to normal.

**Final Thoughts** It's disappointing that three of the last four times we have taken our summer cruise out across the Gulf of Alaska, we have had to shorten the voyages because of family emergencies. Nevertheless, we treasure the opportunity we have had to immerse ourselves in what we consider to be one this planet's most beautiful and exciting natural areas. In addition, we have been able to experience it with wonderful companions and dear friends. We hope that through these journals, we have enabled you to share a small portion of what we have seen.

