



SHOW ME THE CHROME !

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It was my second or third bite out of my turkey sandwich (no cheese of course) when my reel started screaming in the rod holder. The rod was bent over hard from the chrome behemoth pulling on the other end. The sandwich quickly ended up in three or four pieces as it hit the floor of the rental boat. The rod seemed locked in the rod holder as I tried to lift it out. I finally managed to somehow get it out and fight the fish. The fish boiled on the surface just a few feet above the guide boat anchored fifty or so yards downriver from us. "Nice one!" one of the clients in the guide boat yelled in witness to the aerial commotion. "Whatcha got there bubba?" my buddy Vic asked as I stood up out of my chair. "Chrome on!" I replied. My other buddy Bill stood up from his chair behind me and quickly stepped to grab the net on the bow of the boat. "This is a biggun," I mentioned to Vic, "I don't have much on him." Vic didn't hesitate to ask Bill to let the anchor rope loose. Within seconds, we were free drifting downriver after the fish. Vic started the outboard motor and had the boat out of the lanes where the other boats were anchored. "I'm catchin up to him now," I said. Soon enough, the fish was just feet downriver from the boat and lay flat on the surface. "I think he's still green," Bill added, "he's gonna run one more time." With a quick flick of his tail, down he went toward the bottom of the Kenai River along with

thirty yards of my line. The buck finally stopped running and the line slowly came back on my reel. Moments later, he was on the surface again. "We got that sucker now," Bill adds in confidence as he dips the tip of the net in the water. With a smooth lateral pull on the rod, I lead the fish toward the net and with one quick slashing scoop, Bill had the chromer in the nylon mesh. "Yeah!" was the word of the moment as I assisted Bill in heaving the fish over the side of the boat. He was a fifteen pound chrome Kenai River coho salmon, fresh out of the salt, and our sixth keeper of the morning.



Above: Al and a typical Kenai River do-it-yourself Coho salmon

"That's our limit guys," I said, "now what do you wanna do? Which river are we going to now?" Those were the two questions that came out of my mouth every morning of every day that we were in Alaska. It was the fourth day of a nine day stay that me, Vic and Bill had on our mecca to Alaska. This was also my tenth trip to the last American frontier and definitely not my last. We were on a do-it-yourself vacation. We had no guides, no itineraries, no concierge to deal with or anyone to have to tip for any beverage we drank. Every morning, we woke up, got dressed, had our coffee, jumped in the rental boat, and went fishing. When we got our limits or fill of the Kenai River, we put the boat back in the slip, grabbed something for lunch, and within an hour, we were catching and releasing dime bright salmon, trout or steelhead on one of dozens of other rivers located on the Kenai Peninsula. We were on our own schedule, the fishing was awesome, we were having a good ole time and not having to spend a ton of money to do it. Sounds easy right? Well, it can be if you do some homework

DO IT YOURSELF ALASKA: The Kenai Peninsula

Part 1 of 2



and put in some time and research.

Alaska's Kenai Peninsula is located in the state's southwestern portion. It is a prime section of the state for the do-it-yourself angler since much of the Peninsula is accessible by vehicle via the Sterling Highway 1 which runs from Anchorage southwest to Homer or the State Highway 9 which connects from Highway 1 south to Seward. This allows you to visit many of the lakes, rivers and fishing towns without the need of a guide or airplane (or bush plane). The Peninsula is bound by the Cook Inlet to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south. The rivers which flow from the mountainous terrain of the Kenai Peninsula down to the Cook Inlet and Pacific Ocean offer some of the best salmon, trout and steelhead fishing I have had the honor of trying. The Cook Inlet also boasts world class halibut and rockfishing which is available for most of the year. As with any new waters you are about to visit, always do your homework and familiarize yourself with the local sportfishing regulations and closures. The Peninsula has four

main cities: Anchorage to the north, Seward to the southeast, Homer to the southwest, and Soldotna to the northwest. Anchorage is the largest of these cities and is where I choose to fly into on day one of



Above: Vic & a Deep Creek coastal river Coho caught at 9pm in the evening

my visits. Soldotna is the most centrally located city on the Peninsula and comparable in size to the city of Lodi, Eureka, or Merced. This coastal city is located on shores of the Cook Inlet and has the honor of having the mighty Kenai River flow right through town and into the Inlet. Given the town's central location from most of my favorite fishing spots, and only a three hour drive from Anchorage, this is where I choose to have my home base.

My first two visits to Alaska were not all wine and roses. In fact, it was more like champagne and brie (literally). They were definitely learning experiences. My first visit to Alaska was too early in the year. We signed up for an itinerized 3-day 4-night package in May with a mom and pop lodge operation in Ninilchik: an old historical Russian coastal town located thirty minutes south of Soldotna. The accommodations were fine although the walls were thin. The package cost me around \$3000 for a couple of guided trips on the Kenai River and a halibut six pack charter on the Cook Inlet including airfare & car rental. This price may sound reasonable, but I quickly learned that May is not an hospitable time to be in Alaska. The Cook Inlet was a wash tub the days we were there with swells to ten feet. There was still snow on the ground which made for chilly conditions and the wind

made it even colder not to mention the rain storm we encountered on our third day. What made it even worse was that the Kenai River is under strict NO BAIT, NO SCENT regulations at that time which made for tough fishing AND the coastal rivers are closed to angling for most of the month of May which made for cabin fever when our guided trips were finished at 1pm. I soon learned that a May visit is best for those chasing feeder king salmon on the Cook Inlet with smaller halibut available for the taking. The first run of kings occurs in May which can be hit and miss. Be prepared to sacrifice two or three days of downtime for bad weather periods in May as the saltwater sportfishery is the best game in town at that time of year.

June, July and first weeks of August are the prime months for foreign and domestic tourism. At this time of year is when the lodges and hotels are fully booked along with most of the fishing guides and operations. It's also at this time when prices are at a premium so be prepared to pay top dollar and a half for fishing tackle and accommodations. This is also the time of year I choose to avoid going to Alaska. I hate crowds. However, in all fairness, this time year is when the peak of the king salmon runs occur on most of the rivers along with the bulk of the large halibut catches. July is also when the big runs of sockeye (red) salmon occur. The sockeye runs are quickly overtaking the king salmon runs in popularity given the fact that anglers are allowed to keep more of them, are easier to catch and can be caught from shore.

With the peak of the tourism in mind, I chose to have my second visit to Alaska in late August. This time, the weather, conditions and fishing opportunities were great, but the accommodations were, well, not my cup of tea. This trip cost me close to \$6000 for a 6-day 7-night package. This was quite a bite out of my wallet. I was hoping that the steep price tag would guarantee me some better fishing opportunities. Unfortunately, the price only guaranteed me better food and lodging. I was hoping to do some fishing the first day of our stay, but instead, the lodge owner slipped a yellow smoking jacket on me, handed me a Cuban cigar, and asked me to follow him to the "billiards" room for a

game of snooker. It was 12pm with the Cook Inlet glistening through the window of the lodge and a Deep Creek flowing beside the lodge chocked full of chrome silver salmon and I had to rack up some red balls while wearing a yellow smoking jacket that didn't even fit me right. The next day, we finally got to do some fishing. One of the lodge guides took us down to a handful of the local rivers which flowed into the Cook Inlet. Given that it had just rained, the fishing was on the slow side. In the afternoon, the bite turned on and my friend and I got into some good action. We just started getting warmed up when the lodge guide told us we had to pack up and head back to the lodge for hors d'oeuvres at six o'clock. My friend and I looked at him and said, "You gotta be freakin kidding me right?" The guide replied, "Mrs ----- doesn't like it when we're late for dinner. She puts in a lot of effort in making dinner for the guests. I still have to chop wood for the fireplace in the smoking and reading room." As we reeled in our rods, my friend and I looked at each other is horrid disbelief. On the drive back to the lodge, I asked the guide if every day had to be like this. Let's just say I didn't like the answer. The next remaining days were guided trips with some really good and knowledgeable people. The fishing was excellent but always ended just when we were just warming up and having fun. We even flew out to a remote river across the Inlet in a bush plane and experienced some truly wild Alaskan fishing. But again, the experience was cut short by the urgency to have some champagne and cheese before our dinners at



Above: Rental cabins at Kenai Riverbend Resort

6pm. This experience taught me a lot about fishing the local rivers and areas. I also met quite a few important contacts which I would use in my later visits. The experience wasn't bad, in fact, we lived



Above: The Kenai River at dawn

and ate like kings. But I wanted to catch kings instead of live like one. When I returned home, a friend of mine asked me how my trip went. I told him I did a thousand dollars worth of fishing, four thousand dollars worth of eating, and a thousand dollars worth of cigar smoking.

They say three's a charm and so it was when it came to Alaska. I had met the owner of another lodge operation during my second visit. Fortunately, one of the fishing guides which we had scheduled also worked for this same lodge owner and asked us to meet him at his lodge in the morning. When we arrived at the lodge resort, it quickly came to my liking. I first noticed that the lodge wasn't really setup like a lodge, rather, more like a hotel for fishermen. I asked the guide a little about the resort and he told me it's owned by a fisherman and built for fishermen. The resort had three buildings which each had around six suites. Each suite accommodates up to six people and has a kitchen, bathroom, and living room. The resort also had a lagoon for the guides to park their boats and pick up their clients. There was ample parking and the best part was that each suite had access to the river. At the end of the trip, I met the owner who gave me a tour of his establishment and a brochure. The operation had me sold. And so my third visit to Alaska cost me around \$2500 for a 6-day 7-night trip. This included one halibut charter, four guided trips on the Kenai River, and one bush plane trip. We had to take care of our own food accommodations which was fine considering that the town of Soldotna has several groceries and plenty of restaurants. Overall, the experience was great. I learned even more about the area and the fishing. Still, the guided trips always ended up with my friends and I wanting more. Each outing ended around 1pm when we were just

getting warmed up. On our last guided trip, my friend turned to me and said, "The only time we'll truly be satisfied is if we do this on our own. We don't need guides to do this." What he had said at that moment planted a seed in my mind. There was substance to what he had said. And what he had said, prompted me to do some research for our next trip.

And so my fourth trip, was the start of our REAL Alaskan vacations. I had found another lodge operation which was family

owned and operated. We had decided, again, to visit in late August and avoid the crowds and chase the abundant coho salmon which we, in California, aren't allowed to fish for. The lodge, aside from offering, pre-itinerized packages, also offers do-it-yourself fishing packages which includes cabin lodging for six persons, one halibut charter, and six days of boat rental. This vacation cost me just under \$2000 including airfare and car rental. The best part was that I was the guide. I had been on enough guided trips to learn "the ropes", now I was ready to do it myself. With the experience of running my own jetboat on the Sacramento and Feather Rivers, the Kenai was an easy experience. For the novice, the Kenai can be intimidating especially with the heavy guide boat traffic and the abundant flows from the late summer glacier melts. But a little common sense and patience can make for a good and safe outing on the Kenai. For the first time visitor to the Kenai and Alaska, perhaps a few guided trips is warranted in order to learn the rivers, run timing, regulations, and local customs. The lodge owner was even gracious enough to take me on a river tour to alert me on the latest hotspots, gravel bars, and traffic zones. This proved invaluable as it kept us from spots where we would waste our time fishing. The package also included a halibut charter. The lodge owns and operates two or three of their own halibut boats. Our one and only halibut trip which we took was the only one we needed. We each boxed forty-five to sixty pounds of halibut fillets in six hours of fishing the Cook Inlet. Given the proper tides and weather conditions, fishing for halibut in the Cook Inlet is, for the most part, a sure bet. The summer months are when the halibut enter the Inlet to feed and the bottom is literally crawling with these monsters from the deep. August is also when the cohos enter the rivers to start their spawning runs. I can't express the satisfaction we felt after our first self-

guided trip on the Kenai River. We had our limit of chromers by noon and spent a few hours trying other spots. We then cleaned our fish, delivered them to the processors, had a quick lunch in town, and then fished one of the other rivers on the Peninsula. At that time of year, the sun doesn't set till around 10 o'clock. This gave us ample time to play around the other rivers and fishing spots which will be the subject of part 2 of this article: Fishing the Kenai Peninsula.

For those on a tight or loose budget, the Alaska Kenai Peninsula is a do-it-yourself's paradise. Access to prime fishing opportunities is abundant but research, a little experimenting, and some footwork is necessary to find out for yourself what you do and don't like. What I like isn't necessarily what the next person will like. Others may actually like to end their fishing days with wine, cheese and smoke a cigar. Me, I prefer to whine about my aching shoulders from reeling in chromers all day, cut the cheese from the breakfast burrito I had that morning, and watch my drag smoke from that 125lb halibut peeling line out of my reel. For those seeking a little more adventure on your do-it-yourself trip, bush plane trips are available starting around \$260 per person. These trips are what can make a vacation most memorable. It's on these fly outs where one can experience the true Alaskan wilderness fishing. I definitely recommend trying one at least once. Lastly, what are you waiting for? There's chrome fish to be had!! See you on the water!!

Lodges & Charter Operations:

Kenai Riverbend Resort - Soldotna, AK - www.kenairiverbend.com (800) 625-2324

RW's Big Eddy Resort - Soldotna, AK - www.rwfishing.com (800) 478-6900

Alaska Air West (Bush Plane Charters) - (907) 776-5147

Ninilchik Saltwater Charters - Ninilchik, AK - www.alaskabigfish.com (907) 567-3611

Fish Processing & Boat Rentals:

Deep Creek Custom Packing - Ninilchik, AK - www.deepcreekcustompacking.com - (907) 567-3980

Smitty's Salmon Safari's - Soldotna, AK - (907) 262-3948