kodiak moments

WORDS AND PHOTOS **LANCE RICHARDSON**

You'd think the chance to walk in the footsteps of wild bears, on a trail created over hundreds of years, would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But not on Kodiak Island, where pure wilderness is a refuge for the world's largest bear.

THE FLIGHT over the island's interior is akin to being stuffed in an oversized tin can and flung across a mountain range. There are six passengers besides myself, each wearing a pair of earplugs. The pilot makes eight, and I try to shake the impression that he is not so much controlling the tiny aircraft as guiding the trajectory of its fall.

From the back, pressed against an emergency exit, I watch the ocean slip away as we ascend to icy peaks. Then there is an inland lake in the footprint of an ancient glacier. The green valleys of Kodiak Island are trimmed with stony outcroppings and unnamed waterfalls as we clear the other side, beginning our descent.

I imagine a scenario in which the plane tears open and I tumble into the centre of this place, surviving the fall to be pursued through mineral springs and Sitka spruce forest by a sleuth of ravenous Kodiak bears. The profusion of salmon protein can make them enormous —3m tall, 600kg. And they are shockingly fast, too. They can climb trees, swim across rivers, subsist on berries for weeks and then turn carnivorous in the next breath. The filmmaker Werner Herzog came here to interview residents about Timothy Treadwell, the infamous eccentric slaughtered with his girlfriend on the Katmai Coast in 2003. Would he come back for an ill-fated hiker?

Barely 30 minutes after taking off from Kodiak town we spiral down and land just outside the settlement of Larsen Bay. Once everyone has disembarked there is a flurry of activity between passengers and the small welcome party, then each person drifts away.

Having completed his freight duties and readied the plane for another take-off, the pilot lingers for a moment. "Are you meeting someone?" he asks, shading his eyes to look at me standing alone by the service shed.

It's all right, I say. I've come to see a man about some bears.

"Ah. Well then." He gestures towards the squat buildings and candy-red roofs in the distance: the Larsen Bay cannery. "How about I circle around to let everyone know you've arrived?"

Having thus acquitted himself of any guilt in leaving a man uncollected on the west side of the island, the pilot climbs into his flying can. After a dizzying run it shudders up towards the clouds. He circles once, in a wide and conspicuous arc, around the grim buildings and strange Russian church wedged between the forest and the ocean.


The cannery on Uyak Bay was abandoned in the early 1980s, and now serves as ground control for Steele Davis.

There are less than 100 people in Larsen Bay, and there is no industry besides the cannery.

There is no salmon either — or less than there should be for this time of year, which means the town is as tense as a line dragging seaweed.

But right now, sitting on my pack, all I can think about is the babushkas I saw being sold near the ferry in Homer, and how, like Russian dolls, Alaska keeps opening up while getting stranger and more inscrutable. Where is the end point, I wonder — the kernel of pure wilderness at the heart of America's "last frontier," as licence plates call it? I wait and wait.

STALKING THE CITY LIMITS

The island of Kodiak is 9,293sq.km — second, in the United States, only to Hawaii's big island in terms of size. The town of Kodiak, on the other hand, is a tiny honeycomb of streets on an eastern peninsula, connected to nowhere by a highway system that seems almost arbitrary in its terminus points. Beyond the highway, the "Emerald Isle" looms as unbroken and forbidding as it would have been in 1763, when Siberian fur traders arrived to confront the Alutiiq natives.

"If you make mistakes around here, you can pay for them with your life," a local photographer tells me. This is a warning, of course, and one which only grows in resonance as the geographical magnitude of Kodiak becomes clear. But it is also part of the attraction. Waking up on a ferry alongside a wild island has more than a fleeting whiff of Robert Louis Stevenson about it. Sheer cliffs and shingle beaches are signs of adventure, spelling out a story all but devoid of white-washing tourism initiatives. An actual sign — "Welcome to KODIAK" — has a cut-out fox erected beside it, somebody's idea of a welcome joke for visitors disembarking at the dock.

Above: The all-purpose Shelbee D converts from fishing trawler to kayak carrier at a moment's notice. Below: Ferry passengers are greeted with a jaunty welcome – and a sly fox.

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Kodiak also has the dubious privilege of being a regular target for nature's temper. An Emergency Preparedness Guide, available around the town, offers 29 pages of advice for dealing with earthquakes, volcanoes, ash fall, landslides, pandemic influenza, and petroleum spills (in the wake of the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989). On Good Friday, 1964, the downtown area was destroyed by tsunamis after a magnitude 9.2 earthquake struck near Prince William Sound. Every Thursday at 2pm the town has a siren drill, just to be sure.

Perhaps it is Kodiak Island's relative remoteness from the rest of Alaska, or perhaps the lingering threat of catastrophe calling forth a defensive attitude, but eccentricities abound here. Street signs are riddled with bullet holes; the same photographer who warns me of the island's dangers also tells me, when I forget to lock his car door: "No-one messes with my vehicle. They know I'm a nice guy who carries a gun." The greeting fox may be a cut-out, but the one in Mack's Sport Shop isn't. Nor, for that matter, are the mounted bears in the airport and bank.

The only unsurprising characteristic of locals is their penchant for the outdoors. An extensive hiking trail network branches off the highway system. One trail, on Near Island, leaves directly from downtown Kodiak. Another snakes above town, terminating in 360-degree views beneath the whine of three wind-turbine generators.

When prompted for a recommendation, most people direct me to the State Historical Park of Fort Abercrombie, a WWII military base between Mill and Monashka bays. Though its trail around Lake Gertrude is a stunning introduction to the unusual ecosystem of a spruce forest, "park" is the appropriate word here. This is a recreation area, complete with camp sites and a leash-free zone for dogs. Those looking for a less domesticated experience should range further, collecting *Kodiak Audubon's Hiking and Bird Guide*, which articulates the entire length of the highway system and identifies established trails and undeveloped wilderness routes. There are, in all, more than 40 possibilities, covering everything from Barometer Mountain (762m), a steep and exposed climb that should only be attempted by fit hikers in summer, to the easy 6.4km loop at Pasagshak Point, from which migrating grey whales are visible year-round.

I've hiked through the spruce maze of

The enormous amount of protein on offer means a full-size male Kodiak bear can weigh up to 635kg.

Termination Point when I realise what all of these trails lack — a conspicuous absence that hangs in the air like an unanswered question. The forest has given way to an open field of chocolate lilies, and though I can see all the way to Spruce Island and the indigenous village of Ouzinkie, I'm yet to find what I've come looking for.

As "charismatic megafauna", bears command a particular fascination in the menagerie of North America. At the extreme, hunters will pay up to US$22,000 to be guided to this greatest of trophies. Most people are happy to observe from a distance and, with a healthy population of more than 3000, Kodiak Island has a greater number of bears than any other place on the continent. To put this in perspective, the bear density for Kodiak's Karluk Lake area is estimated at 220 bears per square mile (2.6sq.km). The density in Alaska's famous Denali National Park, by contrast, is one bear per 12 square miles (31sq. km). So significant is Kodiak's population that a National Wildlife Refuge was set aside in 1941, encompassing more than two-thirds of the island's entire landmass. The highway system, however, goes nowhere near it.

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This means that though bears migrate wherever they feel like it — including across Kodiak city limits — guaranteed sightings demand a little more ambition on the part of the traveller. Nine public-use cabins are maintained by the wildlife service on Kodiak, Uganik, and Afognak islands. Each requires a boat or plane for access. Each also requires preparation and a sound knowledge of bear safety procedures. This is wilderness, after all. There are no trails in the traditional sense of the term and for hiking I am encouraged to consider a guide and carry "bear spray", a concentrated form of mace.

Then I'm told about another possibility: technical hiking and unsurpassed fishing; something about an abandoned cannery close to Karluk Lake. There is a man called Steele Davis who lives on Uyak Bay, a vast fjord that almost slices Kodiak in half. Fly to nearby Larsen Bay, I'm told. Steele can show you what you want to see.

GRIZZLY MAN

The man who walks around the corner of the service shed is slight and thickly bearded, hair pulled back in a ponytail. He looks dazed, like somebody has just woken him up and told him he is running late. The plane arrived sooner than expected, apparently; he was all the way across the bay catching Chinook salmon when it circled above.

Above: Steele Davis approaches bear-viewing with an intensity bordering on mania.
Left: Historic remnants of the cannery's earlier use offer a fascinating insight into a lost world.
Below: Kodiak wildlife, unused to humans, is startlingly profuse and curious.

Following his lead, I walk through the old part of Larsen Bay and down on to a shingle beach. Steele's boat, the Shelbee D, is anchored right at the shore. Though the tide is going out at a spectacular pace — and tides, in Alaska, are serious business, fluctuating in some parts by more than 3.5m — Steele is casual enough to point out the Orthodox church ("It doesn't get used much these days") and get excited over the discovery of a washed-up trowel ("Yes! Gardening!"). Three waiting passengers watch our progress with bemused expressions.

Steele looks like a wild man, but speaks with the gentle authority of someone who knows, with absolute confidence, what this landscape is capable of and how to deal with sudden changes in fortune. He's fiercely committed to his own brand of hospitality; I will later watch him nearly slide overboard in an effort to secure a 28kg halibut thrashing at the end of my line. I would have given up. Steele stabs it through the head with a gaff and, when it breaks this in half, uses his hands.

Our initial journey is a slow loop around Amook Island, which sits in the fjord like a large lozenge. By the time we reach its western shore I have seen otter, deer and bald eagles, and I know absolutely that I am with the right man. Steele is a conduit, channelling the wild, but absorbing much of the associated risk. Tell him what you want to do and watch it happen. I've come for wilderness hiking, I say, and to see the bears. He nods. Every rock, cove and climbing spot is filled with stories of sightings and close encounters. There is a .44 Magnum sitting by Steele's chair.

He drops his other guests at Amook Island's cabins, built by the remains of an Alutiiq townsite. Then we drive directly across the bay to Atlas cannery, abandoned since 1983. It is as if the Larsen Bay cannery has been mirrored in a muddy puddle. There are a dozen buildings linked by a crumbling pier. Crab nets rot along the shore with old propellers and whale vertebra. Once the caretaker, Steele is now the owner of this small corner of history out in the wilderness, where a fully stocked market, untouched since the early '80s, exhibits Jell-O, Tylenol, and Jockey boxers in something hovering between a museum and a graveyard.

Two buildings down from his own residence, my accommodation is approximated from found relics: a bouquet of eagle feathers, driftwood furniture, an anti-tank missile case for a coffee table ("I found it out back," Steele says). The cannery has, in the way of many untouched ruins, a quiet majesty. It helps that bald eagles linger on the boat posts, backlit by a sun that sets at midnight. I wake up the next morning to find deer resting on my porch.

Above this maze of buildings and bunkhouses is the most immediate of the area's hiking opportunities. A mountain leaps almost vertically from the water's edge, flattening out in a shallow crater before making a sharp 70-degree climb to a barren ridge. Behind it are several more mountains, then Karluk Lake with its density of bears. One need not go that far, however: a little way up the mountainside Steele has found an ancient bear trail. Over hundreds of years, the Kodiak bears have trudged the same path — the same footfalls, in fact. The going is extraordinarily difficult, through foliage so dense the only route is with a stick and thick skin. But how often do you get to walk — literally — in the footsteps of a thousand bears? Well, more often than you'd expect, it seems. Steele knows another place.

"Have you ever done any kayaking?" he asks.

INTO THE WILD

I quickly realise that there is a curious symmetry between the east and west sides of Kodiak Island. For every highway and carefully maintained hiking track there is, in the untrammelled wilderness around Uyak Bay, a natural equivalent. Where only days before I was driving in a pick-up to the trailhead at Kashevaroff Mountain, now I'm floating down the flat waters of a fjord to a trail maintained by carnivorous animals. My place in the food chain has been similarly up-ended.

Steele's other guests, a couple and their friend from Colorado, have spent three days fishing for salmon and Dungeness crab. I arrived yesterday and now they too are floating down the fjord on a wild bear chase. Steele throws out some conciliatory crab traps and then directs the Shelbee D upstream, pulling up on a deserted beach to unload the kayaks.

Above: hiking opportunities are found just off the highways
Below: Kodiak is a wild place, where conditions can change in a blink and vigilance is a key to survival.

As we adjust life jackets and climb into our seats, Steele runs through a short list of rules. Do what he says. Minimise noise. If a bear is spotted before we land, the kayaker not controlling the rudder should stop paddling immediately. The less splashing the better. Never panic. He fits the gun holster around his waist.

At first, pulling around the cape and into view of the clearing of interest, nothing can be seen except the gentle play of wind in the long grasses. But then Steele discerns a small brown patch migrating across the scene. The bear stops by a log and crouches out of sight, during which time we pull up on the shingles, shed our vests and climb the bank to the hidden bear trail behind.

As expected, the trail itself is not accommodating to human use. Unlike the open trails through Termination Point, this one is constantly impeded by overgrown stinging nettles and patches of cow parsnip. Ferns conspire with fallen logs to trip walkers or send them crashing into mud. What is, to bears, a simple stroll becomes a challenging scramble to those not gifted with herculean strength or a thick coat of waterproof fur. Add an increasing drizzle of rain and I've found the challenge I was looking for.

"And there's a bear," says Steele, pointing down the bank at a small face more than 200m away.

While there is an undeniable thrill in seeing a bear in the wild, I try to stifle a sense of mounting disappointment. Having come through so many layers of Alaska to finally get here, I was hoping for a closer look. Steele holds us back for a moment, but there's nothing else. Just grass in the wind and small creeks waiting for an influx of breeding salmon that still haven't arrived.

We climb through a marshy bog back to the kayaks. I pull ahead, considering my options glumly. Then there is a loud hiss. Steele is commanding me to stop.

Directly ahead, seated at our kayaks, life jacket hanging from it's mouth, is a Kodiak bear. It is looking straight at me. In retrospect, I'm reminded of Werner Herzog's speech in *Grizzly Man*, that he sees nothing in their stare except the overwhelming indifference of nature. "I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy," he says. At the moment of contact, all I see myself is the life jacket and the thrash of the bear's head as it efficiently tears it apart, daring me to come closer.

Steele pushes past me instead, pulling out his gun. There is a mock conversation as he attempts to defuse the atmosphere of sudden terror. "Where are your manners?" he demands. "Why are you messing up our stuff?" The bear steps backwards, thrown off-guard by this sudden confrontation. It retreats slowly, then rounds again, standing very still and studying us intently. Though he is laughing, Steele never turns his back. Eventually — sensing, perhaps, that we won't abandon our belongings — the bear gives up and wanders away into the forest. We collect the debris and cast out quickly into the bay. My heart rate doesn't slow until I've climbed aboard the Shelbee D. From the comforts of Kodiak town with its civilised hikes, I've come to the deepest reaches of the wild, where I got exactly what I wanted without really thinking through what that would entail. Thoroughly stunned, I watch as Steele then stands at the wheel of the boat and points out bears that have emerged on every shore where previously there had been, in my mind, nothing at all.

"Everyone scoffs at it, but I carry armour-piercing bullets," he says. "I ain't never shot one and I don't plan on it, but they have a hard head.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Kodiak Island is a 30-minute flight from Anchorage, Alaska. Alternatively, the town of Kodiak is connected to the Alaska Marine Highway System, a ferry route that runs the length of the Aleutian island chain. The ferry from Homer on the Alaskan mainland is an overnight journey. See *www.dot.state.ak.us*. Flights from the town of Kodiak to the six remote communities on the island can be booked through the Island Air Service: *www.kodiakislandair.com*.

When to go: Alaskan winters are particularly brutal – and bears hibernate. Align your travel with their active period, which is July, August and September. These are also the months best for hiking.

Kodiak on the highway: For the best breakdown of hiking opportunities on the Kodiak highway system, pick up *Kodiak Audubon's Hiking and Birding Guide* from the visitor's centre near the pier.

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge: Information on Kodiak's public-use cabins is available at the visitor's centre or by calling +1 (888) 408 3514. For a better alternative, Steele Davis runs "wilderness adventures" from his private cannery in the Wildlife Refuge. These are customised to suit an individual's interests in everything from hiking to wildlife viewing and world-class fishing. Steele is a US Coast Guard-licensed captain and certified kayak instructor. For details, call +1 (866) 910 2327 or see *www.spiritofalaska.com*.

Be prepared: *www.bebearaware.org, www.travelalaska.com, www.kodiak.org.*