



VITAL STATS

POPULATION:
13,913 (2000 census)

**AVERAGE ANNUAL
PRECIPITATION:**
71 inches

**AVERAGE HIGH
TEMPERATURE:**
January, 35°;
August, 62°

**AVERAGE LOW
TEMPERATURE:**
January, 25°;
August, 48°

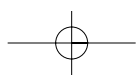
FIRST SETTLEMENT:
Alutiiq peoples arrived
7,500 years ago

**RUSSIAN DISCOVERY
OF ISLAND:** 1762

**NUMBER OF
COMMERCIAL
FISHING VESSELS
OPERATING:** 900

**RECORD-BREAKING
YEAR FOR SALMON
HARVEST:** 1995,
49 million fish

Nina Burkholder has been salmon fishing off Kodiak Island for more than 20 years. Above right, a setnetter transfers its catch to a tender.





FAR LEFT: MINOT/HERSHMAN STUDIO

Two or more times a day, the Alitak Bay District setnetters head out in skiffs off Kodiak Island, Alaska, to check their nets for salmon.

It's called picking fish: The nets—some as long as 900 feet—are strung like curtains from shore out into the water, attached to a rock on one end and an anchor on the other. As the nets are hoisted aboard through a set of rollers, the fishermen, usually two or three to a boat, remove the salmon from them, one by one. The fish are sorted, counted, and put on ice before the fishermen motor farther out to a tender boat that will take the catch to processing facilities 100 miles away in the town of Kodiak. On good days, each fisherman can gather thousands of pounds of salmon; sockeye (or red) are the most valuable. On bad days, there are few salmon but plenty of jellyfish, which can pool up ankle deep, a great mass of stinging goo.

Stretched out in the Gulf of Alaska, about 250 miles southwest of Anchorage, Kodiak Island is big—at about 100 miles long, the second-largest in the United States. Kodiak's two ends couldn't be more different. At the south end, where Alitak Bay is, the windswept hills are mostly bare of trees, covered instead by tundra, bushes, and grassland. Just outside the town of Kodiak, at the north end, the forests grow tall and thick, with dangling mosses and



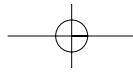
PLACES IN THE WEST

Kodiak Island, Alaska

Salmon and bears adore this island. So do the rugged people who call it home

BY MATTHEW JAFFE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES MARSHALL



Life on Kodiak: Signs show distances from Lazy Bay; the blue view from Nina Burkholder's deck; Kodiak's bustling harbor; one of the island's famous brown bears. At right, Eddie Mac Donald shows off smoked salmon.

hanging fogs—this being the northwesternmost extent of the temperate rain forest.

Kodiak is one of the country's busiest fishing ports and is the biggest community on the island, whose overall population is 13,913. But Kodiak Island is less celebrated for its people than for its namesake bears. Reaching up to 10 feet tall and weighing 1,500 pounds, they're the Earth's largest terrestrial carnivore—the heavyweight champion of the world.

All told, there are about 3,000 Kodiak bears in the Kodiak Archipelago. Many of them are on Kodiak Island itself—a big island, to be sure, but still, to a nonresident, that sounds like a whole mess of bears. It's a little like hearing that there are 3,000 sabre-toothed tigers. A primordial carnivore is, after all, a primordial carnivore.

Island residents are far more sanguine about the presence of all this Ice Age-style menace on their doorsteps. The bear necessities—food and wilderness—are here in abundance, so while sightings aren't uncommon, there's actually plenty of Kodiak to go around. As one person put it, "Well, you do have to keep an eye on the kids, and you might lose the occasional dog, but the bears really aren't that big of a deal."

About half the setnetters live outside Kodiak Island, and at the beginning of each summer, they arrive from all over the country. Dave and Rita Dieters come up from Florida; Bruce and Tanna Luque from Snohomish, Washington; and Nelle and Pete Murray from Idaho's Snake River country. Some of the setnetters who live on Kodiak year-round teach during the school year and work the nets in the summer.

Unlike many of the setnetters, Bruce Luque grew up on Kodiak. His dad was a commercial fisherman, and the family moved here when Bruce was 12. In 1978 he bought his father's permit. Now his two kids help him out.

"It's a good life," Bruce says. "It's work where you can involve your whole family, and you share and spend time with other families too. I guess community is the word that best describes things around here. We're just one big group."

A connection to community—as well as a love of fishing—is what keeps bringing Nina Burkholder back to Kodiak. As a kid, she spent her summers here, salmon fishing with her family. She has returned for the last 21 summers, coming

up from her winter home in Homer, Alaska.

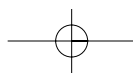
It is in many ways an enviable existence. The work isn't easy. But the opportunity to spend time in this fjord offers huge rewards: fresh salmon berries just outside your door, foraging red foxes on your beach, and no shortage of fresh seafood—halibut, a couple of permitted king crabs per summer, and of course salmon for such local specialties as *pirokh*, a puff-pastry dish that reflects the island's 300-year-old Russian heritage. And on the rare warm, sunny day, the series of bays can look, strangely enough, like Hawaii, actually 2,500 miles due south.

That illusion usually doesn't last longer than a day or so. Kodiak Island sits on the northwest corner of the Gulf of Alaska, the breeding ground for many of North America's storms. It gets hit with more than its share of harsh weather, and the setnetters pay close attention to the marine forecasts broadcast over shortwave radio.

Email? Cell phones? Forget it—except in the town of Kodiak, they don't exist here. A few people now have satellite phones, but everyone still counts on their shortwave radio. It's a permanently open party line, where everyone on the bay pretty much knows everyone else's business. The only land lines are all the way in the native town of Akhiok or at the Ocean Beauty Cannery at Alitak. It's either a short, easy trip or a long, bumpy one, depending on conditions and the location of your fish camp.

Despite their end-of-the-world isolation, the setnetters remain linked to the outside world, affected as they are by the realities of global trade. While setnetters tout both the health benefits and the quality of Alitak Bay's wild-caught salmon, they face ongoing competition from salmon farms. To give the catch greater brand identity, fish caught by island fishermen are now being labeled "Star of Kodiak, Wild Alaska Salmon."

Any edge is helpful in an increasingly difficult marketplace. In recent years, prices have crashed: In 1988 red salmon went for \$2.89 a pound; this year the fishermen are looking at 45 cents a pound. While on a great day a setnetter can catch 5,000 pounds of fish, such days don't happen often. Regulations dictate that the fishermen can only set their nets for limited periods once enough salmon have reached the spawning rivers by staggered target dates. Openings can be as





TOP RIGHT: JAMES CARRIER (FOOD STYLING: KAREN SHINTO)

long as seven days and as short as 33 hours. In 2002, the fishery remained closed for the entire season, which typically runs from early June to around Labor Day.

There is competition among the setnetters, with rivalries both low-key and longstanding. But at least once each summer, everyone comes together for a potluck, notable for its amazing assortment of fresh seafood and a community

spirit akin to a barn raising in the Amish country.

With the potluck winding down, I make a disturbing revelation: In the six days that I have been on the island, I have yet to see a single bear.

That doesn't sit comfortably with the setnetters. You don't go to Kodiak Island without eating fresh-caught salmon, and you don't go to Kodiak without seeing a Kodiak bear. So for my last night at Alitak Bay, my hosts plan an outing to a surefire



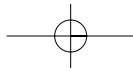
Barbecued salmon

Fresh-caught Kodiak Island salmon is best when cooked simply. Try it grilled, with a brown-sugar, mustard, and thyme glaze.

For one fillet (3½ to 4 lb.), whisk together 3 tablespoons melted butter, ¼ cup brown sugar, ¼ cup dry white wine, ¼ cup lemon juice, 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard, 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme leaves, 1 teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper.

Grill the salmon, skin down on heavy foil over indirect heat, brushing with the glaze every 5 minutes, just until opaque but still moist-looking in center of thickest part (cut to test), 25 to 30 minutes.

—SARA SCHNEIDER



Nina Burkholder loads dark chum salmon into a brailer bag; salmon drying outdoors in the village of Akhiok; blue-domed Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church; state biologist monitoring fish (and bears).

spot to see bears, the weir on Dog Salmon River. The shallows at the creek mouth are busy with salmon. The fish entering the creek are in the homestretch. These are the elite. They have survived as tiny fry, matured, and moved downriver and eventually out into the ocean. They spent one to three years at sea before picking up chemical cues from their native stream, where they have at last returned after running a gauntlet of purse seiners and the setnetters themselves.

We look down on the salmon as they mass against a final barrier—the fish weir, designed with a small gate that the salmon have to pass through, giving wildlife specialists a chance to count the number of returning fish. (The set-net fishery faces frequent closures to ensure that enough salmon come back to spawn.)

As one of the specialists clicks on a hand counter, the salmon swim through the gate, one by one. I almost want to congratulate them. What tiny percentage of the fry that hatched in this stream have made it this far?

Suddenly the salmon on the upstream side of the weir turn around and frantically swim back downstream, only to find themselves up against the weir. A male Kodiak bear has waded into the water. He's hungry. As powerful as the salmon's instinct to head upstream and spawn may be, it is trumped by the instinct to beat the retreat from a massive predator.

Suffice it to say that the result is memorable, if not pretty, either to the eye or ear, and certainly not for the salmon. The crunching sound made by the world's largest bear chomping down on a live 5-pound sockeye is one that stays with you. So, too, does the experience of looking down through the slats of the weir as a mother bear walks a few feet directly beneath us while her two cubs play onshore.

Except for faint light to the northwest, the bay is in darkness. I ride in a skiff with Bruce Luque, at whose cabin I have stayed for the past couple of nights. He's aiming for a friend's camp with nothing but the silhouette of a ridgeline to guide him.

"It's just experience," he says. "I know where I am from looking at the mountaintops. When I'm coming down bay, I'll pick out a ridge that keeps me outside the nets. There's a notch in the hill above my place, and I have to come past that notch. It's the kind of thing you learn over the long course of doing things."

We glide across the bay's blackness, and I sit back and take it all in, savoring the kind of stillness now found only at the ends of the Earth. ✨

Exploring Kodiak Island

Your best source for information on the island is the Kodiak Island Convention & Visitors Bureau (www.kodiak.org or 800/789-4782). Its *Explore Kodiak* guide has a comprehensive list of outfitters and free activities.

Getting there

Alaska Airlines (www.alaskaairlines.com or 800/252-7522) and Era Aviation (www.flyera.com or 800/866-8394) fly several times a day between Anchorage and Kodiak. The Alaska Marine Highway System (800/526-6731) operates ferry service from Homer (9½-hour trip; \$63 one way) and Seward (13-hour trip; \$70 one way).

Kodiak town attractions

HISTORY. Russians began settling Kodiak Island in the mid-1700s. The onion-domed **Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church** (907/486-5532) is one of Kodiak's landmarks. For a look at island history, try the **Baranov Museum** (907/486-5920) and its exhibits on Russian, Alutiiq, and Aleut



history. The **Alutiiq Museum & Archaeological Repository** (907/486-7004) displays Alutiiq history and artifacts, including early kayaks.

Out on the island

Despite its size, Kodiak Island has less than 100 miles of road; to explore the island, you'll need to hire guides or outfitters to reach remote areas. Access is via floatplane or boat.

Lodging

A. Wintel's Bed & Breakfast. Intimate three-room inn with deck overlooking the ocean; two rooms share a bathroom. From \$90. 1723 Mission Rd.; 907/486-6935.

Best Western Kodiak Inn. Motel lodging near the center of downtown. 80 rooms from \$139. 236 W. Rezanof Dr.; 888/563-4254.

Wilderness Cabins. Seven remote, rustic cabins are available for \$30 per night through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (<http://kodiak.fws.gov> or 907/487-2600). Reservations are determined through lotteries, but sometimes there is short-notice availability.

➔ Alaska Grand Tour: www.sunset.com/alaska_tour

