

Fishing With My Boyfriend

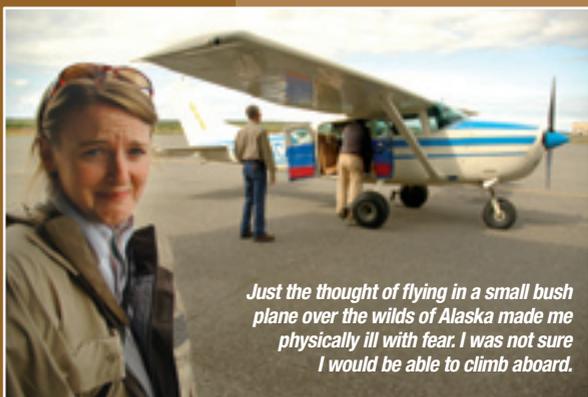
Whereupon a brave cheechako of the fairer sex confronts fly fishing in Alaska, fear of flying in bush planes and helicopters, terror from the thought of becoming grizzly food, living in waders, minimal makeup, unkempt hair, desecrated fingernails, diet-blowing camp food, and not only survives to tell about it, but also breaks the secret code of the male angling obsession.

For me, preparing for a fishing trip to Alaska was about as intuitive as preparing for a visit to the International Space Station. Space suit... waders... same thing. But I had been given the apparent "privilege" of joining my globetrotting photographer boyfriend, Tim, on one of his wild adventures to a nether-region of Alaska to actually pen a story on an adventure I had scarcely imagined, let alone considered for myself. Maybe I yearned for the company, maybe I wanted to press personal boundaries, and maybe I wanted to crack that "code" of what made a die-hard angler like Tim feel the need to chase fish with a fly rod to the four corners of the world. In any regard, I signed up.

One week before the trip I found myself sitting at the edge of a friend's backyard swimming pool, rigging up a fly rod to practice casting. I wasn't keeping track of time, but I think it took me 15 minutes to rig the rod and about another five to realize that the reel was on backwards and that I was holding it with the guides facing up. My cool unfamiliarity with the sport was mildly comical, but mostly disastrous. The odds of breaking the borrowed rod in my hands increased exponentially. After a tedious re-rig, it was time to start casting.

So there I was... standing on a diving board against the picturesque background of the Rocky Mountains, cold beer nestled between my feet. My first cast was okay – albeit only about 20 feet – the second collapsed into a bird's nest of line and the third was plain pathetic. My dream of being that girl who looks hot in waders and casts tight loops with grace and ease was realized as just that, a dream. Satisfied with the effort, and resolved to my hopelessness, I broke down the rod

Story by Ellie Childs & Photographs by Tim Romano



Just the thought of flying in a small bush plane over the wilds of Alaska made me physically ill with fear. I was not sure I would be able to climb aboard.



A week later I was putting the stick to a big chum salmon as if I'd done it my whole life. Alaska is a transforming experience; I arrived as a frightened observer and left as an enthusiastic participant – all while surrounded by the most spectacular scenery imaginable.

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same sentence,
my heart
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a little faster.
The lump in
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like it was
going to take
over, obstruct
all my breath
and kill me.
”

Alaska from the air
is beyond description
and left me awestruck.
Our bush plane pilot
Heather, (below left) and
later, our helicopter pilot
Sam, gave Tim and me
a lifetime gift of visual
treasures. There can be
no more beautiful
place on earth.





“
...just across the
sliver of sea that
sliced through
the flat, was a
bear feasting
on a salmon.”

and prayed that I would figure it out when I got there.

Ah yes, the “getting there” part. In the weeks before our trip, I became more than terrified of the means of transportation required to get to the Alaska Wilderness Safari camp, located on the remote Alaska Peninsula. My pre-trip visions did not consist of pristine wilderness, sensational wildlife, and rivers chock full of pink salmon. Instead, I pondered what to do when a small Cessna collides with a snow-capped volcano, or plummets into the Pacific Ocean. I had literally woken in the middle of the night desperately trying to remember anything from the first-aid course I took three years ago. I wondered if I would be able to distinguish a poisonous berry from one whose sweet juices could sustain life in the event that my impending doom was realized.

Tim and I have been together for almost eight years. In that time, I’ve caught a few small brook trout, and maybe a brown or rainbow, the biggest of which was at best a couple of pounds. Fishing was his sport that he did with his

friends. Most of the time, I’m cool with that. I am used to the pre-dawn pick-up times, being woken to the clinking of gear and rustling of waders. Last winter, I was jolted out of bed to the screeching of a drill. I ran downstairs only to find him tapping studs into his wading boots. Annoyed though intrigued, I went back to bed and lay there wondering what it is that draws him, even in the most miserable conditions, to be out there. What could possibly be fun, or even tolerable about standing in icy water all day long? Could it really be the thrill of catching a fish?

After connecting in Anchorage via air taxi to King Salmon, we found ourselves waiting in the Egli Air Haul for Heather, our bush pilot, to drop off the first round of guests at the camp and then fly back for us. When I heard the name “Heather” and the words “bush pilot” in the same

sentence, my heart gave a sickening jolt and an instant lump formed in my throat, threatening to obstruct all my breath and kill me. A female pilot? There was not an inkling of feminism in my body, not an ounce of trust in my own sex. We were clearly doomed.

Just when I started to relax, John, the manager of the hangar, popped a copy of Werner Herzog’s documentary *Grizzly Man* into the VCR in the hangar lounge. As it turns out, Sam Egli, the founder of Egli Air Haul was involved in the rescue, or recovery rather, of Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend after a rogue bear on the peninsula mauled and ate them. As I watched, I hoped it wasn’t the final irony that this bear-worshiping freakshow’s name was Tim and that he more or less dragged his poor girlfriend into the bush to partake in his obsessive endeavors.

When Heather eventually taxied up in the plane, she had a grin on her face that reminded me of a little kid coming to a stop after the most incredible toboggan run of the day. She was petite, blonde, and pretty. As I shook her hand I suddenly realized that every preconceived notion I had about this trip could be wrong... very wrong.

We loaded up the plane, strapped ourselves in, put our headphones on, took off and flew over some of the most incredible landscape I have ever seen. Rivers stretched out like silky ribbons across the Tundra. Myriad lakes passed beneath us with no boats, no houses, hotels or casinos. We flew between two massive peaks through a rocky pass and then hugged the coastline the rest of the way to camp, transecting bay after bay, each more spectacular than the one before. We stared speechless at the turquoise coves, white

sand beaches, rocky islands swarming with birds, and the vast Pacific Ocean teeming with schools of salmon, pods of jellyfish, and groves of seaweed swaying with the current. As we rounded the corner into “our” bay, I looked down and spotted a whale for the first time in my life. It spouted when we flew over, as if to welcome us.

The thought of the landing that was about to take place made my palms sweat and my throat misbehave again. I reminded myself that the weather was perfect and that Heather has done this before. She was cool, calm and collected. For her, this flight was like taking a jaunt down a vacant, familiar backroad.

We touched down and bounced along the sand until we came to a gentle stop. Holy shit, we had survived! I looked to my left and a couple hundred yards away, just across the



Two panoramic composite collages of the tidal flat in front of our camp at different times in the long Alaska day.



Camp life – fragile comfort in a beautiful, savage wilderness.



sliver of sea that sliced through the flat, was a bear, feasting on a salmon. Welcome to the Last Frontier.

Rus Schwausch, our host and owner of Alaska Wilderness Safari, enthusiastically greeted us at the plane and gave us a camp tour, which ended at our new digs, the “honeymoon suite” – a roomy, tent-like shelter nestled snugly in a thick grove of alder trees. I quickly noticed that this thin wall of material would be our only defense against nature (read that “bears”) for the next seven nights. But it was cute, and comfortable, and even had a little front porch built out of driftwood gathered on the beach. I called the cot on the left, for no particular reason other than I felt like a little kid claiming a bunk at summer camp. As I tested out the mattress, I looked at Tim and smiled.

“This is awesome,” was all he said, with a big Cheshire grin of his own.

The Alaska Wilderness Safari camp is situated high on a bluff a few hundred yards inland from the Pacific Ocean. If you look to the right, you see the beach, the ocean, and a couple of islands in the distance. It could be the Caribbean. To the left, the snow-covered Mount Chiginigak towers over surrounding peaks. Sharp glacial valleys, rugged cliff faces and lush rivers define this alpine environment. Definitely how you pictured Alaska, only better. The juxtaposition of views is surreal.

Little dirt trails wind their way around the camp. In the center is a huge patch of fireweed, a freakishly tall magenta-colored wildflower. When the sunlight hits it at just the right angle, it lights up like a spontaneous wildfire. The camp itself is rustic, but elegant.

On the tour, Rus showed us one of the many ingenious features of the camp: the beer cooler. Nestled in a grove of alders was a trough full of beer chilling in frigid spring water that was constantly circulated through a pipe and drain system. Tim and I grabbed a beer and headed to the “observation table,” the central social hub with two spotting scopes perched on a driftwood table. This is cocktail central.

Before the trip, Tim coached me on “camp clientele” – men with money and egotistical, exaggerated fishing stories that all sound the same. I wasn’t necessarily frightened by the prospect of being in this testosterone soup for an extended period of time, but it would be fair to say that I wasn’t exactly excited. But when we met the rest of the group, I was relieved. This was not a “booze all night, fart all day” group.

I was excited about my company for the week ahead.

That first morning, after a cup of coffee and a hot breakfast, we headed down to the water. Everyone was geared up and ready to go. Our guide for the day was a West Texan named Johnny Quiroz, and he was taking us just below the camp to where a fresh run of fish were gathering to head up river. I already felt bad for him. Wait until he sees my hideous casting technique! As we walked along the water, I looked down at my waders and boots. How awkward? I felt like I might as well have been suited up for my first game in the NFL.

Sure enough, the first cast was my worst ever. I started laughing and couldn’t tell whether Johnny was amused or appalled. Tim was downstream hootin’ and hollerin’ as he landed his first fish. I cast a few more times. Each was terrible. Johnny might as well have wondered if I was even potty-trained. He didn’t hesitate to give me advice. He told me to concentrate on being stealthy and work my way out into water so I wouldn’t have to cast so far. Brilliant. I could do that.



Salmon eat our flies. We eat salmon. Char eat salmon eggs, we eat char. Bears eat salmon, bears might eat us. Very important to keep the cycle in balance!

I slowly walked forward to a point where I felt I could cast into the dark blue pod of fish we could see amassed in the deeper water. One cast, nothing. Another, nothing. Another, still nothing. I was doing exactly what Johnny said, stripping exactly when he told me to. What the hell? I threw the line again and this time something struck! I was so startled that I let the line go slack and lost the fish. Oops.

A few long minutes later, I was hooked up again and this time I was pretty sure I had snagged a woolly mammoth or a friggin’ dinosaur. I couldn’t imagine that a fish could pull like that. I was instantly freaked and wanted to hand the rod to Johnny, who wasn’t about to take it from me. This definitely wasn’t Colorado, and most definitely not a tiny brook trout. Johnny instructed. I followed. Eventually, we landed it – a chum salmon, big and ugly. At 12 pounds it was officially, by far and away, the largest fish I’d ever caught. We revived it carefully and then let it go to continue on its journey upriver to spawn. As the beast swam away I felt a little adrenaline high permeate my body.

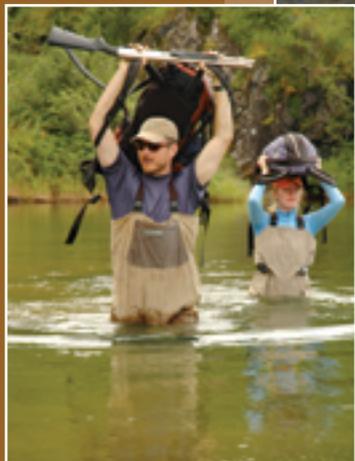
After a few more fish my arms felt like they were going to fall off. It was like I had just powered through a set of four-million push-ups. Maybe I should have done some training before this trip. I am not exactly “beefcake” to begin with, but apparently I am significantly lacking muscle

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*I was wading
chest deep in
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through an
unnamed valley
surrounded by
unnamed peaks.
The fact that
I arrived there
by helicopter
was beyond
surreal.*
”

mass in the zones necessary for casting and fish-fighting.

At low tide, we walked across the flat toward the beach, toward Pink Creek on the other side of the bay, a couple miles down the beach. I could tell by the name that it was going to be a spectacle. Swarms and schools scare me. I hate crowds and crowded places. I loathe the furious, unpredictable nature of pods, packs, and herds. Such quantities rarely bode well for a pleasant encounter. Stacked-up fish are all procreating and dying at the same time, which sounds like a recipe for mass hysteria to me. As we walked down the beach, I tried to imagine this behavior imposed on human beings. I thought of myself traveling all the way to Pittsburgh, the city of my birth, to give birth myself and then facilitate my own death through starvation. How morbid, cultish, and freakishly pre-determined it seemed.

Pink Creek was indeed crowded with writhing bodies. Fins everywhere protruding through the surface of the water. I threw a cotton candy-colored fly into the mass and withdrew a healthy pink salmon dotted with sea lice on its belly. I released it and cast



again. I must have stripped the line too aggressively because I foul-hooked a fish in the back. Two minutes later, I foul-hooked another. There were so many fish crammed into Pink Creek it was nearly impossible not to snag one. I stood back and watched Tim gracefully land a few right at the mouth of the stream. A bright-red sockeye mingled in the crowd, but wanted nothing to do with his fly.

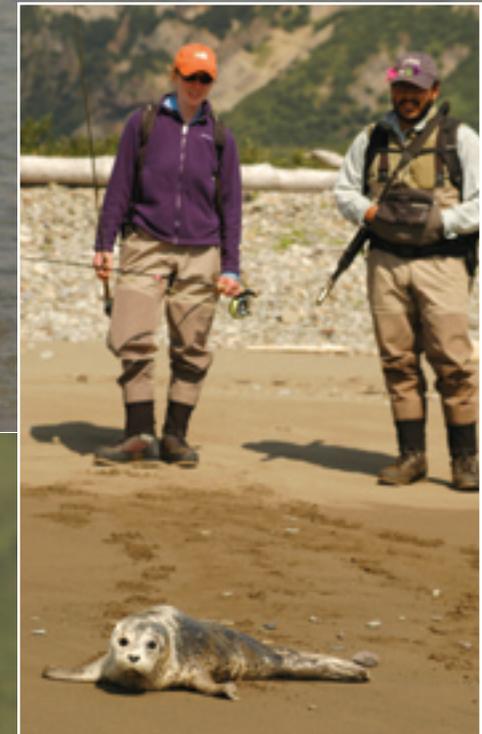
Walking back to camp along the beach was like being on a treasure hunt. Scattered debris and soft, weathered driftwood lined the shore. Even the “trash” was interesting and beautiful in a strange way. Plastic crates with Japanese characters, buoys and life preservers so faded that they were white.

Where did they come from? Who did they belong to? Did the ship this stuff was on sink or were drunken sailors playing catch in a late-night stupor? We found sand dollars and strange piles of small jellyfish.

We spotted a baby seal that was obviously lost and confused, so I coaxed it back into the water. Tim was disappointed because he wanted to hide out there until a bear made a snack out of the poor baby. He was even changing camera lenses, getting ready for the inevitable attack.

As we walked, we noticed schools of salmon cruising close to shore and Johnny proposed we attempt some “surf-casting.” I didn’t know exactly what this entailed, but Tim seemed gung ho. Before I knew it we were running, at times sprinting, down the

At play in the fields of Alaska – wading rivers, hiking tidal flats, chasing (and catching!) fish – always under the watchful eye of my wonderful guides, especially Johnny Quiroz.





beach chasing fish. It was intense and exciting – my kind of fishing – running with rod in hand, trying to get just far enough ahead of the schools to cast to them. The thrill of the chase was awesome.

We landed some fish, and shuttled from the spit back to camp where we were greeted with cold beers and appetizers at the observation table. Chef Aaron had filleted a fresh halibut and paired it with a delicious tartar sauce. Day one... and I was into Alaska.

Rus had mentioned something about tide pools the day we arrived, so I asked him if we could go see them. We spent the second morning hiking along the edge of the bay, over a series of incredible rock formations, out to the tide pools. Mussels covered every inch of many of the rocks and sea anemone hid beneath; bright-orange starfish stood out among the stalks of kelp and seaweed. Looking for starfish amongst a backdrop of snow-capped volcanoes made me feel like I was playing around in some fantastic, imaginary world.

Later, feeling ambitious, we walked past camp, across the tidal flat and up a creek bed to a waterfall. As we made our way across the flat it was low tide and the sandy plain seemed to go on forever. We walked and walked. I felt so small in the shadows of the huge mountains that surrounded the area. The creek bed was lined with massive paw prints. The number of prints was unnerving and astonishing – an *Ursine* South Beach. We made a lot of noise as we walked to scare off any that might be lurking around the corners. I wondered if my voice would sound threatening to a bear. It's not very deep and it doesn't resonate in a stern or frightening tone. What if I sound like a wounded animal that would make a quick and easy meal? What if my pitch is too high? Or sounds playful and attracts them?

We sat on some rocks at the bottom of the waterfall for a good portion of the afternoon. Rus introduced us to the watermelon berries that were growing all over the place. As we feasted, I noticed the expression on Rus' face. He was truly in love with this place. I'm sure he'd been to this waterfall and eaten these berries countless times, but this moment seemed like his first.

A hot shower and a tasty Margarita in the middle of nowhere is quite possibly the best way to end a long day of hiking. Dinner consisted of enchiladas, pico de gallo, chicken, fresh avocado, queso and the most incredibly moist *Tres Leches* cake for dessert. After a few more Margaritas, Tim challenged me to a game of "washers." The goal is to throw painted washers as close to, or if you are lucky, into the PVC cups buried in the ground. Margaritas made this game pretty much impossible for me, but for some reason improved Tim's game. As soon as he found a new challenger, I went to the observation table to check out the wildlife action on the tidal flat. It was low tide again and the bears were feasting. I watched them thrash around in the water. Legs flailing, belly-flopping, splashing. Their tactic was very different from the strategic stealthiness Johnny showed me. However, their success rate seemed exponentially higher. Hmmm? I followed their every move. I watched them rip off the heads of the fish and devour the bodies. I saw two wrestling, rolling around in the water, the occasional tuft of fur flying through the air. I saw a female urinate with the force of a fire hose. They are incredible, fascinating animals. And from hundreds of yards away, they are entertaining to watch.

The next day, Ted Mendrek took us up an unnamed river valley to fish for char. We stopped at the "Lion's Head," a bend in the river named after a Rushmore-style lion's profile jutting from the cliff face. The fishing was ridiculous. On almost every cast, I pulled out a beautiful, silver gilded char. We came across transparent plunge pools in the river and took turns catching beastly fish. For the first time ever, I found myself wanting to hog the water. There was a burning desire to catch one of these huge ones, and I did not want to leave until I got one. I told Tim to put his rod down and grab the camera. He looked at me like I had asked him to put



In Alaska you can see and do more wild things than you've ever seen or done before, in less time than you think possible. I was in sensory overload from the moment we arrived.



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”



“
It's all about
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that second
or minute,
hour or week
when everything
around you
is suddenly in
tune. When you
couldn't possibly
imagine another
place you'd
rather be.”



Tim and I in a perfect moment in a perfect wilderness.

on a tutu and practice his grand plié. I stood close to him and worked hard to cover the water before he did. I wasn't just going through the motions, I was honestly enjoying this. For the first time ever I truthfully cared whether or not I caught fish. After some work, I pulled out a healthy 22-inch char. Okay, it may not really have been 22 inches, this may be a total exaggeration, but that's what real fisherpersons do, right? What a rush. I wanted to hold its smooth, slivering body in my hands forever.

Ted pointed out a small rockslide and we stopped to search for fossils. We sifted through the shards of rock for a while before I extracted a nearly perfect fern. An amazing fish and now this? Tim was so jealous of my superior excavation skills he could've cried. He inspected the fossil, congratulated me and flashed a smile that, though seemingly impossible, was bigger than my own.

As we walked along the river, I thought again about the lure of fly fishing. Maybe this fly fishing thing isn't so much about the fish in the net, as it is about the experience, the excursions, the scenery... even the sound of pure water flowing.

After a few days at camp, I had transformed from casual observer to conqueror. We decided to leave our rods behind for a day and scale the unnamed ridgeline across the tidal flat. We started off just after breakfast, following Collins' lead, bushwhacking through a dense grove of alder trees. There were no trails, so we followed game trails, and blazed our own. The ridge was above tree-line and provided the most incredible views. The top of the ridge was a series of rolling hills, tiny lakes and steep cliffs extending to the lush valleys below. We startled a caribou napping in a meadow and we studied it as it studied us. We never missed the fishing.

Helicopters have never really appealed to me. As far as I am concerned, they are for military maneuvers or medical evacuations. As I watched the chopper make its way into the bay, it hit me that it was coming to pick me up. I felt like I might throw up. Sam Egli was our pilot, which offered a little relief because supposedly he is the best there is. He gave us a thorough safety briefing and though every detail made perfect sense, it translated into my head as one broad, general idea: don't touch anything because if you do, you might die, and if you don't die, you might when you realize how much it costs to fix it. I could understand this and I kept my arms by my sides at all times.

When we took off, the look of horror on my face quickly transformed itself into a perma-grin. What was going on? I felt relaxed. I checked my pulse, thinking I might be dead and this was all a dream. Nope. Alive and well. Wow. Sam was suddenly my hero. He followed the landscape closely as we sailed across the tundra and buzzed through narrow ravines. I think he could sense that we were having a good time, so he gave us a helluva ride. He would fly straight up, then stall for a second and drop us back down, leaving me looking for a good place to barf. I estimated the cost of puking on the seat as opposed to the door, but before I knew it, we were on the ground, and I was sitting on the bank with my head between my knees. I tried to smile and tell him this was the best day of my life, but the threat of projectile vomit was still real. A few minutes later, I rallied, picked up my rod, and waded into the river.

I was wading chest deep in an unnamed river flowing through an unnamed valley surrounded by unnamed peaks. The fact that I arrived there by helicopter was beyond surreal. We spent the day in the valley of awe, fishing and strolling the banks. I couldn't believe that we were going to get to do this again tomorrow.

Tim asked Sam to take the doors off the helicopter for our second flight so he could

take pictures with an unobstructed view. I didn't dispute it. I didn't even ask if any essential safety features were being compromised. Just before we prepared to take off, a fog rolled into the bay and settled over the water, with no escape in sight. Only the mountain tops were visible. We took off and headed straight through the fog and eventually popped out right on top of it. Without the doors, the wind blew in my face, but felt good, making me feel so alive. Gliding over the clouds, looking down at summits and the tips of glaciers brought tears to my eyes. There was a new burning in my throat that reminded me that this was all real and better than any dream or imagination. It is impossible to have fear when the experience is worth dying for.

The convergence of the glacial stream with the waters where we landed created an incredible swirl of color. Sam parked the helicopter and Rus, Tim and I set off on foot across a meadow, where we stopped to gorge on Nagoon berries, which look like raspberries, but taste more citrus. We hiked over a rocky notch and forded a chest-deep lake to get to the river of char. After lunch, we took turns spotting fish and casting to them. We shared one rod by choice and stood side by side taking as much pleasure in each other's fish as our own. I finally felt like this was my activity, too. I wasn't intruding on Tim's adventure. This wasn't his trip with his friends. It was suddenly ours. After all these years, I understood what it was to be an angler.

Our final flight back to camp proved to be the most spectacular yet. Sam flew us all around the bay, right over a group of six bears fishing in the river, over a bald eagle's nest. Between, around and over clusters of islands. We followed the landscape, hugging the shore, scaling the cliffs, racing down the hills. Huge pods of white jellyfish, visible to the naked eye, pulsed in the water. Schools of fish and flocks of birds everywhere. Pristine beaches, unnamed peaks, breaking waves, volcanoes, glaciers, rivers all around us. We were living in our own personal IMAX movie. It was like experiencing silence and listening to your favorite song at the same time.

We landed and I looked at Tim, speechless. For the next few hours, I felt like I was floating. I could tell he felt the same way. At least we wouldn't have to describe the experience to each other.

This thought stuck with me. As we ate our last meal at camp, drank our last beer from the trough, took the last look through the spotting scopes and watched the tide roll out for the last time, it hit me that this would be the first of many adventures. That secret "code" I've been trying to crack isn't really a secret at all. It's quite obvious. A long day on the water isn't something you do to kill time, or get exercise, or even bragging rights. It's not the macho, dude-fest I once thought it was. It's all about that moment, that second or minute, hour or week when everything around you is suddenly in tune. When you couldn't possibly imagine another place you'd rather be. 📌

when you go

Alaska Wilderness Safari Alaskan Peninsula

OUTFITTER: Epic Angling & Adventure
2111 Lanier Drive, Austin, Texas 78757
512-656-2736 • info@epicanglingadventure.com
• www.alaskawildernesssafari.com

<p>SPECIES OF FISH Rainbow trout, arctic char, Dolly Varden, pink salmon, chum salmon, silver salmon, halibut.</p> <p>SEASON Mid-July through the end of September.</p> <p>RATES \$4,950 per person from Saturday to Saturday with a maximum of nine guests per week. Price includes two helicopter fly outs per week.</p> <p>LOCATION The Alaska Wilderness Safari camp is located on the southern coast of the Alaskan Peninsula, due south of King Salmon.</p> <p>GETTING THERE From Anchorage you'll fly to King Salmon where you will connect with an Alaska Wilderness Safari's chartered plane to fly you to camp.</p> <p>FOOD From fresh salmon to fresh blueberries, smoked char fritatta to almond crusted halibut, New York strip steak to roasted pork loin, and desserts to die for, this is gourmet cuisine in the wilderness. Freshness like this will forever change your opinion about the fish you have been eating back home!</p>	<p>TIME ZONE Alaska Time Zone. One hour earlier than California and four hours earlier than New York.</p> <p>WEATHER Can change daily. Anticipate the possibility of wind, rain, sun and evening cold.</p> <p>BUGS Not a huge problem but this is Alaska in the summertime. Bring a DEET-based bug spray and wear long sleeve clothing.</p> <p>CLOTHING Good rain jacket, breathable waders, and a selection of fleece are the solution for staying warm and dry. Don't forget comfortable camp clothing and waterproof camp shoes.</p> <p>EQUIPMENT 8 and 9 weight rods for salmon, 5 and 6 weight for char / Dolly Varden. Good reels with floating and sink tip lines.</p> <p>FLIES Bring pink pollywogs if you have salmon in your sights. Chartreuse, pink and purple starlight leeches are also recommended for salmon; and eggs, zonkers and zuddlers can be the ticket for Dolly Varden and arctic char.</p>
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The famous Pink Pollywog