

EXPEDITIONS ALASKA

THE ALASKA GUIDE TO SPORTING TRAVEL



Fjords

First-class In the

Luxury boat fishing is
the ultimate in style

The 54-foot *Miss Brizz* plies the waters of Kenai Fjords National Park. When guests aren't busy catching salmon [BELOW], they can soak in the vessel's Jacuzzi or relax on a couch to watch a DVD.



**Story and Photos
By Dave Atcheson**

It seemed fitting to return to the Kenai Fjords almost 20 years to the day after I'd originally made the voyage. This trip, however, would bear little resemblance to that journey of self-discovery taken by a 20-year-old kid—a youngster seeing the ocean for the first time, taking a chance aboard a commercial fishing boat.

This trip would be different not only because I'd been hardened by the additional years of world experience—many of them spent working aboard various fishing boats—but because this time I was simply out to enjoy myself. This time, I'd have the opportunity to take in all the scenery I'd missed, without having to relive the endless toil of cleaning the engine room, mending nets or painting the deck.

Still, walking down that dock, I was confronted by a rising tide of memory. The same salt air and the swirling sound of bickering gulls I'd encountered so long ago momentarily filled me with youthful indecision and doubt. It was a feeling that would be short-lived, completely brushed aside the moment I saw *Miss Brizz*. I knew immediately that this vessel was a far cry from any fishing boat I'd ever worked on.

At 54 feet long and nearly 20 feet wide, *Miss Brizz* was built for comfort. And there was not a grizzled fisherman in sight, only a handful of clean-shaven and casual-but-finely-dressed crewmembers whose sole purpose was to see that their guests had a good time.

I've always lived to sport fish and looked forward to doing it in style, but the initial reports of limited silver salmon didn't bode well for this trip. Nevertheless, I was heartened listening to Tom Konop, owner and skipper of the *Miss Brizz*. The silvers were out





Double-hulled with seven water-tight compartments and a bridge equipped with the latest electronics for navigating and finding fish, the *Miss Brizz* might be overbuilt, said skipper Tom Konop.

there, he assured me, well beyond the relative shelter of Resurrection Bay, out where only the largest and most seaworthy of vessels could find them.

Heading out of Seward, it was as if I was seeing it all anew. The sense of enchantment was infectious, and shared among my fellow passengers. Mike and Rebecca Poling, and Jeff and Lisa Symonds, were just as captivated and filled with reverence as I was. What was remarkable was that, unlike most of the guests who had sailed aboard the *Miss Brizz* in the seven months since she'd been launched, we were all Alaska residents.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to get over the degree of luxury from which I was viewing all of this. It struck me just what extravagant digs I was in when I went below to stow my gear. I had a stateroom to myself with a bed large enough to accommodate someone more than six feet tall. In the past I'd been stuffed into the bow compartment and forced to kick the feet of the crewman on the opposite bunk if I wanted to straighten out. And the bathrooms. On my first fishing boat there was no show-

er and a bucket served as the commode. Here, there was a choice of three heads, all larger than mine at home, with one sporting a Jacuzzi. And up in the living area there were couches and a recliner, surround sound, DVDs, and a galley that would put many restaurants to shame. I pondered the lavishness of it all as I watched crewman Mike Dunn, a retired fire captain and cold-water-rescue expert, prepare the back deck for fishing while I sipped an ice-cold imported beer and gnawed on a crab-stuffed bell pepper.

Mid-reverie, the churning behind the boat stopped and the *Miss Brizz* glided to a halt. Konop emerged on deck and although he hadn't spotted any fish on the sonar, he had what he could describe only as a hunch, a gut feeling.

"All that state-of-the-art equipment and that's usually what catches us fish," Dunn said as he began cutting plugs of bait herring and readying them for the hunt.

With the gear set, we began a slow orbit around the only island in a vast expanse of blue. Rods arched against steep granite cliffs bathed in the sharp



reflection of afternoon light as we began the slow, methodical search for salmon—and I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before Konop's intuition paid off.

Then, seemingly without warning, one rod tip and then another sprang free from the weight of its downrigger. Each line rose and in the distance a pair of silvers—the hardest and most acrobatic of Alaska salmon—appeared on the horizon. They broke the surface in unison like dance partners displaying an array of cartwheels and pirouettes. There was an instant when everything stopped, a brief moment of recognition on our parts, before we rushed to the side of the boat in a frantic attempt to set the hooks. That initiated a 10-minute torrent of excitement, a spectacle nearly as much fun to witness as it was to participate in.

We would replay the scene numerous times over the course of the afternoon until finally, with a bit of a chop rising, we motored off in search of a resting place for the evening. Though this was the first time we had really felt the motion of the sea, there was no need for



A guest on the *Miss Brizz* battles a halibut in an area of Resurrection Bay where 60- and 90-pound fish are common.

apprehension aboard the *Miss Brizz*. While she may be the ultimate pleasure craft, and above the waterline resemble Cinderella dressed for the ball, beneath the surface she shares a pedigree with much of the fishing fleet. Custom-made in Anchorage by a commercial builder, she's double hulled from stem to stern, with seven watertight compartments, and boasts what many would see as an excess of electronics.

"She's truly one of a kind," said Konop, his voice swelling with pride, "designed specifically for this—taking our crew and up to six passengers into the harshest environment in complete safety and comfort. In fact," he said, "we may have overbuilt her."

Konop's enthusiasm and concern for safety doesn't end with his design for the boat. It carries over to those entrusted with running her. Crewman Bill Vogel, for instance, is also a licensed skipper and spends his winters building boats with Sea State One, the manufacturer of the *Miss Brizz*. In fact, Vogel helped put her together and has intimate knowledge of her inner workings.

Along with safety, Konop's concerned with designing trips that will, above all else, be fun. While he'll tailor the trips to whatever his clients want, outings usually include fishing. That's why he had the aft deck built with 150 square feet of elbow room, a fish-cleaning station and six downriggers. It's the

type of angling I rarely get the opportunity to indulge in. With someone to place the bait on the hook and lower the downrigger—even to open my next beer—all I had to do was sit, wait and soak up the sun while reacquainting myself with the magnificent surroundings and the mesmerizing roll of the sea.

And although the salmon fishing on our first afternoon was good, I still looked forward to the secret halibut hole where we'd anchor our second night. I'd been trying to catch one of these giant flatfish on a fly rod, and this sounded like just the spot.

Dreams of halibut would have to wait, and that was OK. We spent our evening anchored in a secluded bay, sharing a bottle of wine over an elegant dinner of filet mignon and braised baby vegetables, a meal that far surpassed the instant potatoes and overcooked meat that was customary aboard many of the commercial vessels of my past.

Our adventure continued the next day as we visited bird rookeries, watched sea lions sun themselves in the warmth of midday, and motored so close to the vast, blue-veined face of a glacier that we could practically touch it—all under the canopy of a bright, sapphire sky with weather so unseasonably warm it prompted Mike Poling to take a dip in the clear, frigid waters of the fjords.

And then we came to rest in

Kenai Fjords National Park

» **Though Tom Konop and crew will customize trips** based upon the desires of their guests, they usually begin by charting a course for either Prince William Sound or Kenai Fjords National Park. While either locale would serve as a wonderful setting for an Alaska adventure, our group chose to head southwest out of Seward into the Kenai Fjords, a primordial world of snow-crowned peaks and glacier-carved valleys that epitomizes the wild north.

» **Designated a national park in 1980**, this geological wonderland encompasses more than 600,000 acres and 400 miles of shoreline. It's an incredible study in contrasts, where a sliver of temperate rainforest clings to the edge of a landmass dominated by the Harding Icefield. This enormous icefield, thousands of feet thick and covering more than half of the park's surface area, is the staging point for 32 massive glaciers that are still active, slowly sculpting the landscape as they split the mountains and spill to the sea.

» **Despite its stark appearance**, however, this difficult-to-reach coastline is dynamic and teeming with life. It is home to a variety of bird species such as kittiwakes, puffins and eagles. Seals, sea lions and a variety of whales are often seen in the waters of the park. And it's not uncommon to spy a black bear browsing the beaches for sea grass and berries, or a mountain goat slicing its way along one of the steep outcroppings far above the sea.

» **Whether kayaking, yachting or just sightseeing for the day**, taking a trip to Kenai Fjords National Park is a journey back in time. It's a place where the hand of man has been limited by the harsh realities of the environment, and where the awe-inspiring forces of nature are evident in every direction.

Wingerin Bay, Konop's code name for his secret fishing hole. With a gradually sloping beach and relatively shallow water, it was, he admitted, an unlikely hideaway for halibut. Yet he assured me this was the spot, bragging that on the last trip they'd caught nearly 600 pounds of halibut here. Any doubt I might have had evaporated when Jeff Symonds hauled a 60-pounder aboard. With little wind or

current, I let out a fly I'd tied especially for this occasion—a heavily weighted affair—that very soon hit bottom. While stripping line in a sweeping motion that could best be described as a slow jig, the rod suddenly stopped, and my every fiber strained against nearly 90 pounds of brute force. A 20-minute tug-of-war finally ended with Mike's handy use of the harpoon and the largest halibut I'd ever caught—on fly gear, no less.

If You Go

>> **Alaska Wilderness Voyages** typically charters the *Miss Brizz* to groups of four to six guests for a minimum of three days and two nights. They offer premium (meals provided) and deluxe (provide and prepare your own food) trips. Both options include vessel, crew, fuel, fishing gear and accommodations. Depending on the number of guests, premium trips range from **\$3,000 to \$3,500 per day**. Deluxe trips are **\$2,600 to \$3,000 per day**.

>> **For more information, contact:**

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How does one even begin to unwind after a day such as this, a day so filled with excitement and wonder? On the *Miss Brizz*, with a sumptuous dinner of the freshest salmon and halibut, topped off with something called Chocolate Gateau Royale. As if that weren't enough, how about a nightcap of 12-year-old scotch smoothed out over 10,000-year-old glacier ice? How about while the boat swings gently on anchor, not another vessel in sight, each turn offering another stunning portrait of the most untrammelled, raw beauty the world has to offer? It was almost too much, a sensory overload. But after a day and an evening like this, there was also an overriding sense of inner peace, a contentment I'd never experienced at sea before. What would my old crewmates and skippers think if they could see me now?

DAVE ATCHESON is a free-lance writer based in Sterling and the author of *FISHING ALASKA'S KENAI PENINSULA*, available at: www.fishinginkenai.com.