

KENAI

KINGDOM

WORDS & PHOTOS:

There's only one way to really experience the Kenai Peninsula: Expedition Style.

Above: The aluminum-hulled *Sea Star* navigates the ice field near Northwestern Glacier of Kenai Fjords National Park.

A A lone man walked into a Texas office building with two roses and a gun. Allegedly, he greeted the secretary with swarthy good old boy charm and offered her the first rose. Probably flattered by his gentlemanly rancher demeanor, she let him pass to the office of an oil tycoon who was working at his desk and perhaps daydreaming of his new yacht *Aquarius* that he acquired from a Pacific Northwest boatyard owner. The yacht was covered and waiting for him on the shores of Lake Union, and the tycoon was likely

fixing to take cues from John Wayne with plans of cruising Puget Sound and beyond.

The lone man tossed the second rose on the desk, causing the tycoon to stir from his thoughts and stare at the flower. The lone man drew his gun on his target's exposed head. Before he could pull the trigger in revenge for a land dispute, the victim glanced up. The upward glance spared his life, but he still took a bullet to the face, ending his active yachting hobby and ultimately leading to the sale of *Aquarius*. The yacht would remain covered and an



Pacific Expeditions (NPE) expedition-style trip of a lifetime.

HOMER TO SEWARD

This particular seven-day, expedition-style trip explores the waters of the Kenai Peninsula between Homer and Seward, Alaska, aboard the 85-foot aluminum hulled *Sea Star*, the charter vessel of NPE. I was invited along, and there were several reasons I was eager to hop aboard.

Prominently, the cast of characters was bound to be interesting. Proudly touting themselves as the “new kids,” NPE was founded in 2016 with summer 2019 being their second cruising season with paying clients. Company founder and owner, Boeing software and electrical engineer, and professional mariner Captain Erick Teevin and his first mate, business partner, Navy veteran, and sommelier Captain Tracy Meyer had impressed me with their unwavering commitment to the expedition-style charter company and their vessel *Sea Star*. I first met Captain Meyer for coffee at The Dane in Upper Ballard in early spring to talk about getting up there.

“We’re really busting our butts to get ready for the season, but we’re on schedule,” she told me. Both professional and down to earth, there was one more trip to the yards before she and Captain Teevin would deliver *Sea Star* to Southcentral Alaska. They’d then receive clients for different legs up and down the Prince William Sound and Kenai Peninsula for the summer. Fortunately for me, a spare berth had my name on it for a leg.

“Surprisingly, there just aren’t that many people up there doing what we’re trying to do,” said Captain Meyer. “If you want to actually experience Prince William

Sound or the Kenai Peninsula and get a real boating experience, your options are super limited.” To learn more about this determined crew giving their all for a fledgling charter company operating in one of the most remote parts of Alaska was part of the draw.

Additionally, I was keen to experience a proper expedition-style charter aboard the singular *Sea Star*. I’ve plied Alaskan waters as an exhausted Race to Alaska (R2AK) sailor, aboard a flotilla-style charter with Northwest Explorations, and as a commercial deckhand trying to fill the hold with salmon in Prince William Sound. But never had I experienced a private berth with en suite head (complete with shower) and a professional chef taking care of the meals, while also seeking that more intimate, fewer-than-a-dozen-clients feel. A challenge for this hybrid chartering world I was entering would be to balance the luxurious and rugged, relaxation and adventure. Could the balance be struck, especially with the lack of an official standard to lean on?

Of course, my thoughts turned to my own selfish boating aspirations. What would it take to explore this remarkable part of the world on my own hull someday, be it sail or power? When talking about The Kenai, we’re talking about hard work in terms of effort and preparation but also big rewards with world-class experiences. How would I grow as a mariner with this trip? I vowed to keep my notepad close.

Finally, and most pressing, I felt a deep yearning to know what The Kenai experience was all about. For all my love for and travels of the 49th state, I had yet to visit this famous part of it. Captain Meyer was correct in that there really is no easy way to get out there. While it’s simple enough

Below: Weather was clear, sunny, and more than 80 degrees Fahrenheit (about 26 degrees Celsius) for most of the trip. Morning fog and low lying clouds like this dissipated quickly under Alaska’s famous midnight sun.



unrealized daydream of many for years.

Flash forward to 2019, and I stand on the bow of *Sea Star*, formerly *Aquarius*, as she deftly makes her way through an ice field toward Northwestern Glacier of Kenai Peninsula, Alaska. The seals are pupping and watch us from their floating ice haul-outs. The hulking blue and white mass of the glacier looms above as a chill wind picks up. A three-story-sized chunk crashes into the sea with a thunderous boom, an echo of the gunshot in Texas that set off a series of events that led me here aboard a North

THE CHARTS

Use this article as a supplement, not replacement, to navigation systems and published charts.



KENAI

SEWARD

FINISH

START

HOMER

4th Anchorage:
Midnight Cove

6th Anchorage:
McMullen Cove

5th Anchorage:
Taz Basin

3rd Anchorage:
Tonsina Bay

1st Anchorage:
Port Chatham

2nd Anchorage:
Sunday Harbor

to take a train from Anchorage to Seward or to fly into Homer, the protected wilderness in between has precious few access roads. Seaplane drop-offs for anglers and kayakers, or day tours from Seward to the glaciers and back are the most common ways. I'll confess, to have a shot with one of the few chartered vessels that go to those wild waters and lay anchor made me salivate.

My curiosity could only be sated one way; to strike north with *Sea Star* and experience it all for myself.

HOMER TO KACHEMAK

You know you're taking a plane Alaska-style when there's no security checkpoint for the walk-on dual prop and Senator Lisa Murkowski is talking policy in hushed tones on her cell phone in the terminal. After a short Ravn Airlines ride from Anchorage to Homer, I met Captain Meyer and Engin, a

paying client from Turkey who joined the adventure. Retired with a travel bucket list and an avid shutterbug, Engin was eager.

"People keep asking me why I travel so much and I just tell them you have to live your life!" He laughs. "I love traveling alone or with a buddy. People ask me if there is trouble with the family, and I say there is no trouble! We have an understanding, it's healthy."

Fortunately, Captain Meyer turned us loose on the beach-themed spit of Homer for a bit of acclimatization. This was the last speck of civilization for the duration of the trip, and we poked among the many souvenir shops and art galleries. Even though I'd never been to Homer, I had a hunch of a place we had to go—the Salty Dawg Saloon, an unassuming fisherman's bar I'd heard about through the grapevine.

Engin and I bought each other rounds and struck conversation with the locals, mostly commercial fisherman getting started on

their second rounds by noon. Notably, the Salty Dawg's interior is coated with dollar bills with names scribbled on them, pinned on top of the other so barely a square inch of wall is visible.

"What's the deal with the dollars?" I asked the bartender. The fisherman next to me answered for her.

"Back in the day, fishing buddies wanted to buy each other rounds but weren't always in town at the same time," he explained. A fisherman would instead write his buddy's name on the money and pin it up. "If you walked into the bar and saw your name on a dollar, it was yours to take to buy that drink, with your friend who was out there still." These days the dollars are gathered at the end of the year as tips. Naturally, Engin and I put a few on the wall.

Ultimately, the crew was ready for us, and we were whisked aboard *Sea Star* at last. I finally met Captain Erick Teevin face to face, who gave me the distracted but friendly "we'll introduce ourselves properly later" skipper on-the-go greeting I've always respected.

Sea Star tore out of Homer and right into a 20- to 30-knot headwind, and it wasn't two hours before cell phones went dark and I felt like we were off the grid. Currents and countercurrents swirled like mad off the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula. We'd be heading north and east from thereon.

"It is often pretty nasty here," said Captain Teevin, seemingly always on the verge of a I-love-this-stuff grin. The first moorage was in the shelter of Port Chatham, a cove on

KENAI CRUISERS

NORTH PACIFIC EXPEDITIONS

If you want to experience South Central Alaska, namely the Kenai Peninsula or Prince William Sound you have limited options by boat. If your own boat isn't ready or you'd rather not go the big cruise ship route, your options are even more limited. North Pacific Expeditions is one of the only expedition-style options available. Clients get the intimate adventure feel of a charter with the private staterooms with en suite heads (and showers) and ace crew and chef. You can find out more about trip options, pricing, and the company below.

Web: northpacificexpeditions.com // **Phone:** (206) 886-8107

the edge of Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park. Both Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park and Kachemak Bay State Park are extensions of the Kenai Mountains, so while the legal designations vary, we were very much on The Kenai right off the bat.

EXPEDITION STYLE LIVING

Of course, I got my *Sea Star* tour eventually. The four staterooms below and aft are all named after native birds, and I settled into Kittiwake aft and port.

"We did a lot of work around here," Captain Teevin pointed out where the aft master stateroom was transformed into two client staterooms. Each of the four staterooms have an en suite head with shower, and combined host a maximum of 11 clients (with plans for 12). Interestingly, when NPE can accommodate a solo traveler they give him or her the full stateroom for a standard rate instead of charging them more for the empty berths.

From the client staterooms below, one travels up a flight of stairs to the large main salon, which is filled with padded seating, a sound system, a book shelf brimming with Alaskan information, and relevant charts Captain Meyer mounts on the wall. From here, one can venture aft to the dining salon (complete with large table, mini fridge, and hot beverage bar) or forward. Going forward, one passes the galley where I met our chef, Greg Claus, busy at work. Keep going and one ends up in the wheelhouse where Captains Teevin or Meyer (or both) stand watch.

"Safety is all about redundancy," explains Captain Teevin. "We've got doubles, and even triples and quadruples, of radar systems, VHF radios, GPS, AIS, you name it." From the wheelhouse, you have access to the engine and crew quarters below or you head out to my favorite spot aboard, the bench-style padded seating of the foredeck. It's on the foredeck, hot mug of coffee in-hand, where I spent most of my time aboard with camera and binoculars at the ready.

I'm always amazed at how quickly one falls into the exotic rhythm of life aboard. Generators on at 0700 hours, a soft alarm. Breakfast at 0800 hours, a firm alarm. Captain Meyer mounts the relevant charts on the wall to show where we've been, are, and will be. I ready my things for the day; camera bag, a day pack with a few layers, and apply sunscreen. Because I expressed interest as a boater, I was soon getting orientations on how to start the engines and weigh anchor with the windlass like a new crewmember.

The meat of a day aboard is spent underway with transits between noteworthy



Clockwise from top left: Captain Tracy Meyer leads a shore trip to an abandoned mine. Local water rise foiled our attempt, just a part of the adventure; One of the many waterfalls of Cataract Cove cascade down the mountainside; *Sea Star* at anchor in the Kachemak area.

locations generally ranging between two to six hours. It became clear that, while a skeleton of an itinerary forms the basis of a day, variables from weather conditions to client preference have the final say. For example, we paused for an hour or so near a mother and calf pair of humpback whales working the eastern side of Gore Point on day three. Another mother-calf duo approached. The four joined forces to cast a single bubble net before parting ways. While we sat at near idle a respectful distance away, sometimes they approached so close that the sound of their breaths caused you to start in surprise.

The old fish smell fills your nose.

Sea Star usually ends up at anchor in the late afternoon, which gives the chef some time to prepare dinner while the clients are usually offered either a skiff trip to shore or kayak use (weather permitting). While moored at Tonsina Bay on day three, Engin and I hopped in a tandem for his first kayak ride to explore a hidden lagoon and the many small islands. The following morning, Captain Meyer took us further afield where around 30 seals were hauled out. A sea otter raft of about 20 individuals bobbed nearby as well, sheltered among the rocks

Below (left to right): From upper left, clockwise: Captain Teevin, Engin, Captain Meyer, and Chef Claus together on the bow near Aialik Glacier; Dramatic ice calving at Northwestern Glacier.





Left to right: A pair of commercial fishing vessels were the only other boats seen on this day in Kenai Fjords National Park; A raft of sea otters is found near Tonsina Bay at low tide, sheltered among the rocky islands from weather and predators.

at high tide. A sleeping mother otter with pup almost drifted to us before she awoke. With an indignant squeak and giant black eyes wide open, she paddled slowly away.

ON TO THE FJORDS

The Homer to Seward direction ramps up the intensity as the terrain becomes more and more fjord-like. The first glacier we saw was the Petrof Glacier on day four, a non-tidewater glacier tucked in the mountainous backdrop. A tease of what was to come.

It was also on day four that we steamed through Nuka Passage, Nuka Island to starboard, and left Kachemak Bay State Park behind. We were officially in Kenai Fjords National Park. The feeling of being in the big leagues settled over us as

mountains stopped gracefully dipping into the sea and started diving with utter abandon. Any moment not spent on the foredeck soaking it all in felt like a crime, a guarantee to miss something truly spectacular be it flocks of puffins, more humpback whales, or yet another stretch of the nonstop landscape masterpiece painting we navigated through.

A highlight of the day was always the family-style dinner at sheltered anchorages. Talk wandered naturally from what we were going to see tomorrow to Turkish politics and continued until the summer sun set around midnight.

A little over halfway through the trip we reached Northwestern Glacier, our first tidewater glacier. In true expedition-style,

Sea Star didn't shy away from the action, edging close in the ice field. We arrived mid-afternoon and had the whole place to ourselves.

"The day trips from Seward literally have 30 to 45 minutes scheduled for the glacier," explained Captain Meyer. "We can stay here for hours if we want." Turns out, we did want. You miss much of a glacier's behavior when it's treated as a thing to gawk at for a few minutes and get bored by. To appreciate a glacier you need hours to let your eyes be tricked by the scale of the ice; the different textures from smooth surfaces to spikey towers. When you see ice calve, you need to feel the wake under the hull and wonder where the next weakness in the structure lies. You need to worry about the great ice giant's future, the moraine sandbar representing the glacier's ancient maximum several nautical miles behind.

The journey through Kenai Fjords National Park included Aialik and Holgate glaciers, also epically sized tidewater glaciers. A trio of orcas, two females and a calf, distracted us for hours as they worked the shore for salmon. Cataract Cove was another incredible visit, essentially a massive granite wall over which several waterfalls cascaded, fed by an alpine glacier hidden from view. Captain Teevin push *Sea Star's* nose right into the spray, the expedition-style way.

DOES IT WORK?

As I nursed a farewell beer with Engin at the Seward Brewing Company on day seven, I started to reflect on whether I found the answers I originally sought.

As far as the cast of characters was concerned, I was not disappointed. Somehow juggling the conflicting roles of being at their client's service while also acting as leaders and stewards is no easy feat. In more ways than one, that Captain Meyer both drives *Sea Star* and acts as sommelier with wine recommendations aboard perfectly encapsulates how NPE rolls. That these professionals (varied resumes abound) have coalesced around *Sea Star* is a perfect pairing.

Does it all work? Unequivocally yes. Like the many seemingly contradictory roles the crew succeeds in balancing, expedition style somehow does it all without making hard concessions. If you're a creature of comfort, the luxurious salon, your private stateroom with shower, and the chef's diligence will be much appreciated as you dip your toes in the unfamiliar. If you're after the rugged experience, *Sea Star* still plies through 30-knot winds like the commercial fishermen and the kayaks are at your beck and call. Even gluttons for punishment will appreciate the

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IN COMMAND



CAPTAIN ERIK TEEVIN

Captain Erick Teevin is the founder and owner of North Pacific Expeditions. His background includes decades at Boeing as a software and electrical engineer, a professional mariner with stints captaining the *North American* commercial tender for Ocean Beauty Seafoods, lift manager at Telluride Ski Resort, Colorado, and more. You can find Captain Teevin in the off season as a volunteer skipper aboard the historic wooden steamship vessel *Virginia V* in Seattle.



CAPTAIN TRACY MEYER

Captain Tracy Meyer has spent the bulk of her life as a mariner, first on the University of Washington sailing team and then as a Surface Warfare Officer in the U.S. Navy for eight years. Meyer brings a lot to the table aboard *Sea Star* with her 100 Ton Masters License, 200 Ton Mates License, NOLS Wilderness First Responder credentials, and countless other skills including acting as naturalist and sommelier.



CHEF GREG CLAUS

Claus is a rotating chef aboard *Sea Star*. Originally from the Mansfield, Ohio, area, his culinary career has taken him all over the country and ultimately to the Pacific Northwest where he's been a part of many high-profile culinary projects. "I do all the cooking at home too," he said. "I learn something new every time. That's part of the fun!" The author of this article vouches for his excellent meals ranging from themes like "ode to the spruce tip" and decadent desserts. You can reach him at chefclaus@gmail.com.



Left (top to bottom): Aialik Glacier of Kenai Fjords National Park is awe-inspiring; Stellar sea lions lounge, the big male watching over his harem; An orca hunting salmon along the shore. Like orcas in Puget Sound, resident Kenai populations tend to feed heavily on salmon runs while transient pods go for marine mammals.

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hot tea and coffee in the dining salon aft.

As far as growing my own knowledge, I feel far more informed than I would've thought. Not only will captains Teevin and Meyer eagerly talk boat with you, but they'll even show you how to start the engines and weigh anchor if you ask them. They have that instructor bent, further reinforced by their new boating operations workshops during relocation runs and in Puget Sound during the off-season. A scouting trip with NPE combined with extensive preparation and resources like the book *Exploring Alaska's Kenai Fjords* by David WM. Miller should set you, and me, up for cruising success.

To my most pressing questions about what The Kenai experience was all about, it was mid-beer sip in Seward when I realized this was a place to be felt, not explained. Descriptors like rugged, wild, and the like are apt, but my attempts at such prose are inadequate. In isolation, other artistic mediums aren't up to task either. It's easy to find jaw-dropping photography of the region, but even the most excellent of them seem lacking. What is the visual of a feeding humpback mother without the sound

of her calf's breath? What is the sound of its breath without the old fish smell? To wax poetic of calving glaciers is a start, but what is the description of a fjord without the funneled gusts of chilled wind sending sensual goosebumps up your arms? What are the goosebumps without the dread that the glaciers could be gone in our lifetimes?

Finally, no description of *Sea Star* is complete without the good-natured banter of the crew, the post-dinner chats of whatever you please, and being on the hook under the midnight sun. A morning beer ritual with a friendly Turk aboard. The inner body high when appreciating that you haven't seen any other boats in days. Experiencing The Kenai expedition-style hits a person at every level and left me both speechless and with so much to say. If you have a shot, I say go for it. Just leave the guns and roses in Texas.

