

By Nicole A. Bonham Colby

KETCHIKAN, Alaska – Undeniably, Ketchikan's most notable feature is its annual rainfall of some 13 feet – feet, not inches. Yet, there is much more to this quintessential Alaskan town than a few thousand raindrops.

Consider that, despite its relatively small size – though a considerable commerce center for Southeast Alaska – the community enjoys large-jet service to Seattle, Anchorage, and beyond several times daily. It's not something that too many communities of less than 15,000 population can claim, even in the more developed Lower 48.

Given Ketchikan's location at the southern tip of Alaska's Panhandle, a resident or visitor can enjoy the eclectic life of a small Alaska town and, less than two hours later, set foot in a world-class, Pacific Rim metropolis. It's a convenient situation that allows for enjoying all aspects of the good life, Ketchikan residents say – immediate access combined with the human connection, comfort, and convenience of a small-town lifestyle.

The People

Ketchikan offers a wide cross-section of cultural diversity, surprising for its size. There are the local Native Tlingit, Tsimpshian, and Haida – the original residents. The community has a strong Norwegian segment, with a Sons of Norway office remaining on the main thoroughfare. The local Filipino community is one of the most active and organized, offering regular potlucks and fundraisers open to the public. In fact, local grocery stores carry a wide variety of obscure and exotic ingredients not typical to a

small town. There are historic Chinese and Japanese cultural segments in Ketchikan, and a growing Latino influence. College kids flood the town during the primary cannery season, hoping for a quick buck, but finding their hefty paycheck from long hours instead.

Local elders are treated with reverence due to the customs of the Native and Asian cultures, and in appreciation of the pioneers who helped settle the state in its infancy.

The Place

Since the Gold Rush days, Ketchikan has been a central commercial waypoint for stocking up on necessary supplies and refreshing the body and spirit while en route to the gold fields, fishing grounds, or logging camps. In the old days, that meant anything from a rare steam bath and shave to a hot meal or evening of frivolity along Creek Street, the town's long-running red-light district that shut down only last century.

Nowadays, Ketchikan's hospitality is finetuned to travel services, food and lodging, and industrial support.

In the mood for authentic Thai, Mexican, Italian, or Chinese food – the genres are among Ketchikan's many eateries, along with those serving up wild Alaska seafood fresh from the boat to the table. The offerings range from an elegantly laid table with a million-dollar view to a no-frills café booth for overnight breakfast. With a well-recognized coffee culture (after all, Ketchikan is the home of Ravens Brew Coffee www.ravensbrew.com, a favorite of locals that pops up in surprising locations around the globe), there are three, full-service coffee houses, with several drive-through coffee shacks serving up fresh java almost any hour of the day.

Given that Ketchikan is a town of hard-working people – from endless hours standing at the cannery slime line to the back-breaking work of a professional logger – it's not surprising that a number of local establishments focus on relaxation. Several Ketchikan businesses specialize in professional spa and beauty services, offering all genres of massage and regenerative therapies. Others focus on a more traditional method of winding down, ranging from classy wine bars that feature distinctive cellars of foreign and domestic wine stock, to the colorful dockside taverns and pubs that promise a curious conversation and tall glass of Alaskan ale.

The Things

Some say that a local hardware store is the barometer of a town's essence and flavor. If so, Ketchikan is a community of character.

For those who enjoy a lingering trip to the local hardware store to catch up on local news and good advice, Ketchikan features three of Southeast's most prominent and eclectic suppliers – where it's possible to buy anything from a bear trap to an obscure, designer paint. Each is conveniently positioned on the waterfront, telling of a time when marine traffic dominated a more contemporary theme of home improvement. Madison Lumber & Hardware is a veritable gathering center in Ketchikan any day of the week, a place where advice flies freely, along with a strong cup of coffee always welcome on a rainy day. Talbot's Building Supply occupies a prominent spot along the waterfront Tongass Avenue, just across from the historic First Lutheran Church. At Talbot's, whatever you need is there somewhere, tucked away in a number of nooks and crannies that tease any hardware store aficionado. Tongass Trading Company, operating on the

downtown dock since the late 1800s, still offers hardware supplies on its ground floor, with the second story devoted to sporting goods and outdoor clothing.

The Lifestyle

Surviving a colorful history of booms and busts, Ketchikan is a survivor and is again on the rise. It's a curious place where a person can live an authentic and balanced life – well connected to a global economy through technology and transportation access, yet protected from the ordinary by a mantle of forested wilderness islands and azure seas.

Nicole Bonham Colby is a former magazine editor and newspaper reporter who fled the Lower 48 a decade ago for the curious life of an Alaskan. She calls Ketchikan home when not traveling as a freelance journalist and senior technical writer for the U.S. Antarctic Program.

###

Story provided by the Ketchikan Visitors Bureau for your use.

Publish as written and with byline.