

By Nicole A. Bonham Colby

KETCHIKAN, Alaska – Step onto the dock in Ketchikan and feel it – the rhythm of an island life. Time spent in a place where all roads circle back to center; where the day's schedule ebbs and flows to the tides, daylight hours, and Alaska Airlines flight schedule. No corporate time clock or freeway traffic here. And any industrial noise is that of an occasional floatplane or the slap of a fishing boat's lines flying ashore.

Bound to a single, sprawling community that stretches some 35 miles from one end of the developed road system to the other, residents of this Alaska town and associated rural borough appreciate a refined sense of cohesiveness that comes from living together in some isolation. At once gritty, eclectic, and yet strikingly civilized, there is something in Ketchikan's island life that speaks to most everyone.

On a winter evening, residents gather at the traditional Saxman Tribal House for a monthly night of music and local arts – the ingredients that lend to a recipe of sanity for the impending winter and sublime cast of increasingly reduced daylight on misty shores. A homemade dessert gets you in the door free of charge and soon the fragrant cedar-built tribal house is glowing from the warmth of a hundred or so local souls thankful for another year of hardscrabble fishing, the close of a successful summer cruise season, and the anticipation of the holiday shopping that will attract outer islanders to Ketchikan's storefronts.

A cross between coffee klatch and beat bar, the Monthly Grind is held only during the winter and its shoulder seasons. The program reflects the eclectic mix of politics and demographics that make up Ketchikan. Someone – isn't he a welder from the shipyard? – stands up and reads a love poem. A local doctor tells a funny story. The woman from the hardware store

strums a familiar tune on the guitar and soon the town collective comes together in mind and voice to celebrate the close of one season and open of another.

Island life poses a cyclical method of living, with concrete starts and finishes dictated by nature and mankind, alike.

In early springtime, area quilters emerge from their colorful piles of fabric for the annual Quilting in the Rain show in Ketchikan. The juried show typically attracts hundreds of visitors and marks yet another offshoot of a creative life that is island bound. Where knitting may have caught fire as a revisited national pastime, in the Panhandle town of Ketchikan, it's the quilting needle that many locals favor. Fabric and textile arts are another common thread that crosses the community's divergent socio-economic and political boundaries to connect what is a very opinionated and colorful populace. Whether coffee-cart barista, local politician, or big-city émigré, members of the Rainy Day Quilters Guild tell their island stories with needle and thread.

On occasion, there are days in Ketchikan when the water of the Tongass Narrows fronts the town like a glass mirror, with snow-capped peaks and the bright scattering of houses and shops reflected in perfect, tranquil duplication. Such days also reflect the curious juxtaposition present in the port town: one of historical and simultaneous calm and chaos. It's a contrast of chi-chi coffee houses and rough-and-tumble logger bars; of million-dollar waterfront homes and dockside flops rentable by the week; of the convenience of direct jet service and the perceived psychology of living on an Alaskan island surrounded by hundreds of miles of pure wilderness. Ketchikan presents not just one or two faces, but a multitude. As locals acknowledge, there is enough space, potential, and opportunity for most anyone to find a comfortable niche, whether a long-line fisherman looking for temporary land-based quarters, or a tired and citified executive searching for a connected life amidst Main Street America.

America – in all its variations – is right here.

When the daylight hours stretch until midnight, the body seemingly gains an extra lift of energy. Though scientists may argue the health contributions of the sun, its impact is more than obvious on the streets of this town, where locals soak it up as an elusive tonic during the glorious days of a Southeast Alaskan summer. Early morning coffee is shared over the clatter of a commercial fishing harbor at its height of activity. Locals take off work early on sunshine days to launch their skiffs and runabouts for an afternoon picnic in a distant cove. Visitors fish off the city docks for wild Alaskan salmon. And a few courageous and thick-skinned adventurers dive head first into the cold swells of the Island Passage waterways. Come Memorial Day weekend, a traditional cannon boom kicks off the annual King Salmon Derby and residents crowd to the choice spots for a chance to line their pockets with prizes totaling well over \$50,000.

Typical to the cycle, autumn evolves with September. A pale sky replaces the azure of summer. Salmon on their final run move inland in a glittering show of silver, while fishermen start thinking of gear storage and the potential haul of the next season. Bestsellers are put on hold at the creek-side library for the long winter hours ahead. And the locals settle in, watching a spectacular change of seasons in Alaska from a vantage point like no other.

It's an island life.

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