

THE EMERALD



ARCHIPELAGO

BIKEPACKING

ALASKA'S KODIAK ISLAND



Viewpoint
looking south
atop Kodiak's
Pyramid
Mountain.



Bikepacking the longest highway in America's largest state begins not on a paved road or shimmering asphalt, nor with loose gravel, packed dirt, or even in sand. It starts with a wide glide across the emerald waters of the Gulf of Alaska due southwest to Kodiak Island, where less-traveled lanes through bear, salmon, and king crab country lead to empty white beaches exploding with raw glacial fossils and wildlife.

After cycling 1,000 miles across the state of Alaska from its northern Arctic tip at Prudhoe Bay to the southern point of its rainforested Kenai Peninsula, I reached "Land's End" at the far edge of the Homer Spit, a narrow, five-mile sandbar that stretches out across Kachemak Bay to welcome fleets of small fishing boats and the steadfast *Tustumena* ferry. This titan of the Alaska Marine Highway System — a 3,500-mile ferry line servicing dozens of remote communities between Bellingham, Washington, and the Aleutian Islands chain — is a mighty 296-foot-long vessel that sails multiple weekly routes between mainland Homer and the small harbors of Seldovia and Kodiak, occasionally servicing smaller, more remote ports like Dutch Harbor and Unalaska. The ferry can handle 42 vehicles and over 200 passengers, with room to spare in the tool shop below deck for my fully loaded Surly Disc Trucker.

"Do you need a line?" asked a friendly crewmember, extending a long, rust-colored rope. "Tie it down to this table; it usually gets pretty choppy out there." I frantically struggled to fasten any knot I could remember, looping his rope up around the stem and down behind the seat tube. Another employee's KHS Extended 2.0 electric trail bike leaned calmly against a generator. He pointed to his own singlespeed, black and orange Salsa Journeyer loosely tied against a vise at the edge of a workbench. Having toured all over mainland Mexico and the Baja Peninsula, he was excited to chat with an easygoing bikepacker as opposed to the usual cacophony of personalities



Setting sail for a 10-hour ride aboard the Tustumena ferry.

PLEISTOCENE GLACIATION SHAPED AND SCoured THESE ISLANDS INTO THE BIZARRE SPIKES AND SPURS THAT WE SEE TODAY, AN AWE-INSPIRING SCULPTURE BY THE FROZEN HANDS OF TERTIARY HISTORY.

Cliff view from the tent while dispersed camping on Fossil Beach.



accompanying massive haul trucks and RV camping buses.

“Why am I the only cyclist out here?” I kept asking him. With nearly 100 miles of beach-hugging road system to offer, I couldn’t understand why the countless bike wanderers descending upon Alaska each summer rarely if ever headed in that direction. For all the touring stalwarts living out ruthless gravel fever dreams on the Dalton Highway slicing north and Denali Highway crossing Alaska’s center, this simple detour into a quiet volcanic archipelago seemed to me like an obvious tropical breeze to enjoy. And compared to the northland’s drastic seasonal variance, Kodiak’s temperatures typically only fluctuate by 30°F from summer to winter, with little monthly change in rain or snowfall as well. But even the most traveled and hardest Alaskan bike-packers I’d met hadn’t considered exploring there. Perhaps it’s simply too far out of the way, if it even appears on the adventure cyclist’s radar at all? Could this be the state’s best-kept cycling secret?

SAIL TO TRAIL

The ferry to Kodiak took 10 hours, a small price to pay to avoid another airport bike box assembly. Expecting something like a decomposed port of sunken boats and tattered sails run amok by the island’s namesake grizzly bear, I was surprised to find the bustling community of a quaint and proper harbor town instead. The archipelago as a whole had been inhabited for over 8,000 years before Russian fur traders established its first white settlement in 1784. A census conducted by Russian merchant Aleksandr Baranof in 1795 counted 6,206 Native dwellers on the island, though common thought speculated that Russian oppression and destruction of those Natives had already depleted their population by half. Following the U.S.’s subsequent purchase of Alaska from the Russian Empire in 1867 came broader shifts in focus from pure military strategy to some military but mostly salmon fishing and canning, mining, lumber, and protections for the people and the land of Alaska. Nowadays, the island is home to roughly 13,000 people.

Officially designated a National Maritime Wildlife Refuge in 1941, the Kodiak region is a migratory sky mine of rare birds and aquatic animals. Nearly two million seabirds of 160 different species pass through every winter. Over 600 nesting pairs of bald eagles are constantly flying overhead, populating each beach and borough. All five species of Pacific salmon arrive by the millions each summer: Chinook, sockeye, pink, chum, and

coho, swimming upstream together into endless coastal estuaries to spawn. In turn, more than 3,000 Kodiak bears, the largest brown bears in the world, eagerly await the almost-effortless buffet. The region's plentiful harvest makes the highest bear density in North America — even greater than nearby Denali National Park & Preserve — just slightly less terrifying, knowing these Kodiaks who are nearly twice the size of their mainland cousins are at least well fed and not scrounging for bicyclists. Local lore instilled in me a greatly heightened caution to avoid any close encounters; I kept bear spray at the ready in a stem bag behind my handlebars.

With a delayed departure, my ferry didn't dock in Kodiak until after 10:00 p.m. It was late June, but the usual midnight sun was spoiled by merciless torrents of rain. Despite the late arrival, I was greeted at the buzzing terminal by a member of the Coast Guard named Jasen, my Warmshowers liaison for the week. He was tightly wrapped head-to-toe in bright orange reflective rain gear, thick foggy droplets still pooling together on his glasses. "You're my first bike guest ever!" he said, initially wondering if I'd reached out by mistake. Yet again my disbelief was exclamatory: "Why am I the only cyclist out here?"

We snaked our way through lanes of cars and camper vans waiting to board the ship's overnight return. Traffic was minimal at most and dissipated quickly as we left downtown, surging south along Rezanof Drive. Between mild climbs uniting Barometer Mountain with Womens Bay, Jasen pointed out some of the provincial sociopolitics and points of interest. There were the six windmills atop Pillar Mountain, veiled by the storm but efficiently sourcing the island's nearly 100 percent renewable energy. Then the massive Trident Seafood crane (a topic of much taxpayer contention) and Kodiak Coast Guard Base loomed into view. Despite Kodiak's remote location, the Coast Guard installation there is home to the largest operational unit in the nation. As is often the case, our conversation casually floated between prior bike tours and travel yarns. Having toured on his sage green Surly Long Haul Trucker across his home state of Washington, Jasen felt well-suited to a life of coastal patrol here in the North Pacific.

The next morning provided a glad gift of unbridled sunlight in which to explore the winding inland gravel of Anton Larson Bay Road with an introductory hike up the 2,000-foot summit of Pyramid Mountain. At portions it was a near-vertical rock climb, but Pyramid's peak offered a beautifully unobstructed panorama of my ride ahead. The route seethes in churning

dynamism from the very beginning, with seductive pullouts into dense stands of Sitka spruce inviting photogenic stopovers at seemingly every turn.

FUTURE FOSSILS

While Kodiak does share its ancestral geology with the nearby Kenai Mountain Range, the cycling that each area offers couldn't be further apart. Pleistocene glaciation shaped and scoured these islands into the bizarre spikes and spurs that we see today, an awe-inspiring sculpture by the frozen hands of Tertiary history. Epochs of accumulated ice marched out into the water's edge, forming its deep bays and beloved beaches. I'd easily traversed the frost heaves of mainland Alaska and flat, steady bends of Kenai's Seward and Sterling Highways. While elsewhere in Alaska the gains are much greater in

elevation, they can feel pale in comparison to the short, steep grades of island climbing. No single point on Kodiak is more than 15 miles from the ocean, making for sharp ascents chased with satiating dives.

Pedaling south across the island weaved short, rolling mountains with rainforested seashores more akin to Maui's "Road to Hana" than the polar Arctic. The name "Kodiak" is an anglicized version of *Kadiak*, which is the Russification of the Alutiiq word for island: *qikertaq*, possibly informed by the more specific dialect of the original people of Kodiak, the Koniag Alutiiq. Indeed, locals consider it their "Emerald Isle," with a similarly gentle coastal causeway linking mossy pines to the open ocean. But with this tropical atmosphere comes a flaw that might crush the soul of an unprepared bikepacker (or even a prepared one): rain will likely be a constant companion. It



MAP: HALEY BRUECKMAN

fell in biblical deluge all week, chilled with a salty marine layer of fog. On average, Kodiak is beset by 66 inches of rain each year in the warmer months, equaled by 66 inches of snow throughout the winter. I was drowning in the worst of it.

Right before the road curved east along Pasagshak River, I crept past an immense horse pasture with a small brown road sign marking one of the state's free public use cabins. Just beyond the swinging lumber gate was a picturesque pine dwelling with a covered porch, fireplace, and outhouse. It looked like a miraculous mirage in which to escape the downpour. I checked the lock: it was nonexistent, just a threaded link securing the hefty chain to itself. Gasping out loud to no one, I exhaled, "This is too good to be true."

And that's because it was.

The shelter itself was code-locked for reservation-access only by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Primarily hunters and fishermen rent out the cabins all summer as a place to retire from their long shifts outdoors. I was a few weeks ahead of their season, meaning it was left tauntingly unoccupied. I crowded my hands to the windows for a better look inside: a wood stove with ample stacks of split logs, wooden bunks and tables to lay out on and dry off. The little shack seemed so warm and serene from out there. My longing poured out in puddles onto the porch deck below, trying the door a few more times in stubborn defiance before continuing on down the road.

PEDALER'S PRIZE

The jagged topography finally flattens into Pasagshak State Recreation Area, a thin hairpin of river extremely popular for salmon fishermen and ornithologists. Hordes of trollers waded out among the rocks to cast their lines, though the season was still young and the haul a bit meager. I caught sight of a well-water hand pump tucked away beneath a canopy of dense tree coverage, the driest patch of

land within sight. Parking my bike there to make lunch, I watched a pair of bald eagles perch together in staunch resilience merely 20 feet away, scowling like me at the unlucky downpour.

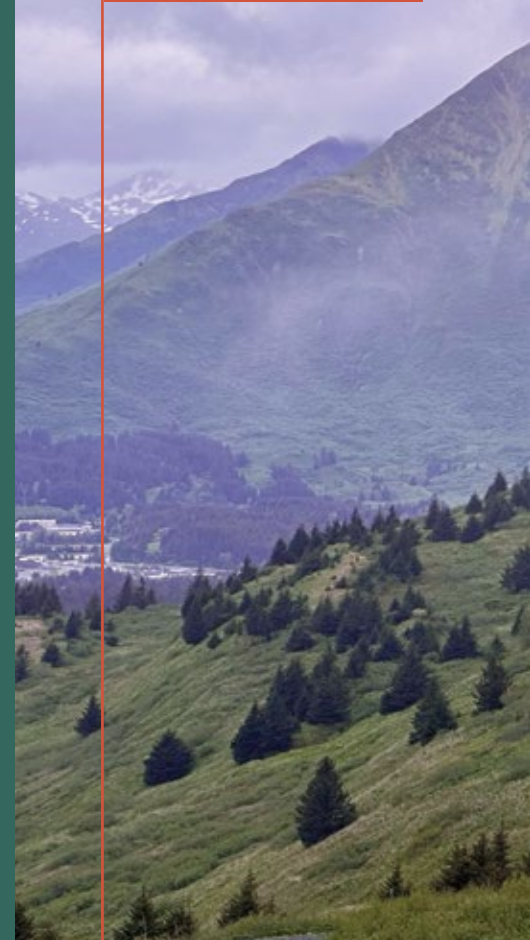
Continuing southeast begins the choicest stretch of the entire journey, brief switchbacks leading to ocean bluffs overlooking the southern edge of Chiniak Peninsula. Just beyond this compressed climb is the adventure cyclist's prize of soft, grassy moors jutting out over two of Kodiak's hallowed beaches. Surfers Beach came first, a common hangout loosely dotted with campers parked in sparse pullouts from which to take in the open view. I pushed my bike out onto the bumbling cliffsides, following muddy tire tracks over trampled grasses where a stone fire ring practically begged for the welcome company of a pitched tent. The roaring power of bombastic waves easily eclipsed the metallic jangle of my weary hub. Idyllic as it was, I knew there was even better dispersed camping to be found.

Edging slightly inland, the road pinballs excitedly from one green crest to the next, with smooth descents shifting rapidly skyward into slow crawls. The surrounding terrain transitioned from soaked clumps of sylvan canopy to windy plains of shin-high scrub. Suddenly I found myself creeping through an eerily underactive launchpad belonging to the Space Force, a branch of the U.S. military somewhere between the Air Force and NASA. Cautionary road signs strictly advised against any sort of sleuthing. "If an alarm is sounding," read one warning, "immediately vacate the premises."

OCEANIC ALPENGLOW

The road system eventually degrades into dirt hardpack that few vehicles dare to venture down, though nothing out of the ordinary for even the most beginner of gravel riders. Mud trenches and rocky pits of rainwater detangle into unspoiled views of Fossil Beach, a perfectly tuned alcove

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Wind turbines above Pillar Mountain overlooking the city of Kodiak, providing almost 100 percent of the island's renewable energy.

of black sand and bright green sea caves. I set off across mounds of dried kelp and tree trunks in search of a souvenir. Ancient rockfall baked with fossilized seashells were strewn about in hapless abandon, soft and porous and crumbling to the touch. The debris collected here was deposited by ancient glacial outwash, predominately late-Mesozoic masses of granite twisted by faults into fjords. Each piece I inspected seemed prone to collapse until one beaming white shell appeared, bleached by time into a pure piece of perfect memorabilia.

A land surveyor named Max was hastily unloading his surfboard from the back of a rental car, fully zipped in the customary black-and-blue wetsuit with a scruffy beard framed by his tightly drawn hood. He was visiting on a work trip, planning a new dock for the island's main fish cannery. "I've been all over Alaska and deep into its heart," he explained. "But any job in Kodiak is an opportunity I sign right up for." Apparently, this place is as uncommon a destination for local Alaskans as it is for bike travelers. He checks a few surfboards in with the airline so that as soon as the workday ends, he can drive out to the south shore and paddle into some action. He said the sea lions get aggressive sometimes and chase him back to the beach. But on this night they were friendly, bobbing playfully in the waves and watching our strange parade through the sand. We scavenged together and built a driftwood campfire to warm up from the hard day, splitting beers and a bag of ripe cherries. Rain fell in a soft mist, though luckily not enough to douse the flame.

Sunsets, when they finally do bookend seemingly endless days, are truly something special. Archipelagic eddies melt beneath the ocean in endless cascades of purple haze and rippling seafoam. Jagged glacial peaks leap up from the water in dramatic spectacle, only to disappear behind pink and orange cloudbursts a thousand horizons wide. It's not just one slice of coast falling away, but island after island of transoceanic

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Stop by the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center downtown for water, maps, and a suspended whale skeleton.



Kodiak, Alaska

WHEN TO GO

I visited on June 23, just after the summer solstice, but the usual midnight sun was spoiled by merciless torrents of rain. Like most northerly states, July and August are the best times to visit. While these may generally be the warmest months of peak summer and bear activity, locals say they've seen temperatures reach 70°F each month from May through September, thus there isn't necessarily a predictably better or worse time to plan your ride around.

LODGING

Downtown Kodiak offers ample choices for conventional hotel accommodations such as Best Western or Compass Suites. Homier B&Bs are also common, with many easy-to-find options.

Traditional campsites are available to the north at Fort Abercrombie State Park and to the south at Pasagshak State Recreation Site. Alternatively, enjoy picturesque, free dispersed camping areas at Surfers Beach and Fossil Beach, though naturally without resources or amenities. Public-use cabins are available upon reservation from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

GETTING THERE

The *Tustumena* ferry sails multiple times weekly between Homer and Kodiak Island. Tickets cost \$91 each way plus \$34 for a bicycle, which is stowed below deck with other vehicles. It's a 10-hour trek with food services and showers available on deck. Alternatively, daily flights from Anchorage take only one hour and average \$300 roundtrip at the time of this writing.

breakers forever off in the distance, each clinging to its last vestige of daylight until the sun is somehow also rising. Low-lying fog lingers to eternity, like a rainbow machine shattering pastel arrays of color into crosshatched prisms of magnetic reformation. With a literal oceanic panorama to fixate upon, I couldn't stop staring.

I made camp there on the beach to watch the sky shapeshift from an indecisive dusk into epiphanic daybreak. Black carbonic streaks bled down from the rock face on either side of my tent, rising 50 feet high or more. Max drove back into town before the rain picked up into a pattering soundtrack that pervaded my tent and tarps. By that point, I'd long since accepted the weather as inevitable. I fell asleep to it, woke up to it, broke camp in it, prepared food in it, numbed into a kind of docile futility.

Retracing my steps the next day offered ample space for exploration as I awaited the late-night ferry back to Homer. Compared to the harsher conditions I'd already survived over the past several weeks, the riding here came with a joyful ease. Uphill slogs flattened out in seemingly no time at all, not to mention the constant reward of a lichened seaside viewpoint nested atop each and every hill. Veering north at the Chiniak Road junction skewed into a loose gravel detour for Starfish Beach. I smiled at the mud collecting once again on my chainstays. Remnants there of an old harbor had given way to the slow rust of time, with forgotten rowboats and barnacle-encrusted timbers setting a picturesque stage for more wildlife sightings. I leaned out over the turquoise shallows for a peek, finding only the reflections of pearlescent shells collected below. More eagles roamed across the water, on a similar hunt for anything that moves.



Viewpoint looking north atop Kodiak's Pyramid Mountain.

Diving backward across the same hills and turnouts drove home just how unknown the island still was among cycling circles. In five days, I hadn't seen one other bicycle, not even a simple townie cruiser. One lone oncoming car, looking oddly familiar, stopped in the middle of the road just before the Happy Beach peninsula at Middle Bay. It was Max, the friendly surfer from the day before, extending a tall, cold can of Modelo from his window. "I was thinking of you like a wet rat in this rain," he laughed. I accepted graciously without hesitation. He was headed south after work for another surf session, while I was returning north for dinner with beers. I'd decided it was time to complete the loop. Food trucks were calling and I was ready to answer.

I balanced heaping mounds of ribs with fried *pancit* from Caboose Barbecue

down the road to Kodiak Brewing Company, pairing it all with German-inspired brown ales, red Oktobers, and smooth porters. Just a few blocks down Center Street, the Tustumena was pulling back into harbor. In an hour or two I'd lash the bike down once again somewhere below deck to continue my journey eastward. Like before, I'd be the only cyclist onboard. The crew would ask how my ride was, and once again I'd grasp for an explanation as to why there weren't more adventurous riders beside me. They would repeat that it's a beautiful place when you can see it, and as the shore fell away, I had to agree. ⚠️

Donivan Berube is an internationally touring music maker, adventure cyclist, and travel writer currently biking from Alaska to Argentina.

FOOD AND DRINK

The food truck scene here is extraordinary. While waiting to catch the ferry from Homer, enjoy the Siren's "Mainly Alaskan" Seafood & Street Food offerings of lobster rolls with doubloons, rockfish sandwiches, Cajun salmon, and fried oysters. The nearby Coal Town Coffee & Tea is a minimalist wooden cabin offering excellent espresso drinks, light pastry, and front deck seating.

Once in Kodiak proper, the newly opened Bean and Bloom coffee shop lies just down Marine Way to the northeast when leaving the ferry terminal. Enjoy a roomful of plants and cacti with espresso drinks and a fantastic portside view.

Two blocks from the ferry terminal are your best food truck options. Try Lani's Filipino BBQ, a highly rated local favorite for traditional Asian dishes. A Million Recipes features creative seafood dishes alongside shrimp po'boys and stuffed portobellos. And Caboose BBQ's soul food menu changes daily, but the ribs on *pancit* is an absolute must.

Kodiak Island Brewery serves wide varieties of craft beer in addition to small-batch distillations of whiskey and vodka, plus homemade juices, mocktails, and fermentations for those who don't partake.

RESOURCES

Just one block from the ferry terminal is the Kodiak National Maritime Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center, a perfect stepping-off point offering free maps and a gigantic, suspended whale skeleton, plus potable water and clean restrooms.

Big Ray's is a humble downtown sports supply store for any last-minute needs in outdoor and camping gear. Bell's Flats Little Store, conveniently next door to Java Flats coffee house, is the final outpost for snacks, alcohol, and gas station fare before continuing south toward road's end.