



Courtesy of Alaska Travel Industry Association/Frank Flavin

Alaskan Odyssey

Sitka shares its splendors

By Meg Nix

Flying over Alaska, the patchy fog reveals sordid islands tattooing the skin of the Pacific, and fog thickens the space between land masses like streaming stretched cotton. From above, where roads are scarce and bridges even rarer, the word “island” conjures a more separate separateness.

Or so I'd thought, prior to traveling to Alaska by sea. Formerly, I'd seen the place as a scattering of communities rather than a composite of relationships. I'd spent one summer in Sitka and wanted to see what made it so tight-knit, so light on its feet despite its distance from the mainland and insistent rain. After booking a room on the M/V Columbia through the **Alaska Marine Highway System {www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs}**, I realize in my comfortable cabin and in the cheerful company of fishermen, scientists, students, and forest rangers, that the spaces between such pristine outposts have lent each Alaskan town their own sense of independence and rock-solid community life.

After otters, whales, and bald eagles have graced the ferry for three days with their frequent appearances, we approach the black mountains of Baranof Island, where the town of Sitka twinkles from behind the hulls of commercial and charter fishing boats. From the Russian Orthodox cathedral in the center of town, to the towering Tlingit totem poles in the alder trees, a string of small shops, restaurants, and bars testify to the independent roots of this 8,000-person fishing village, which was the first capital of Alaska.

Through the doorway of a pale blue warehouse on my way to lunch, a stream of clear water runs from metal tables overlaid with all kinds of fish. Glistening silver salmon and flat 200-pound halibut slide through processors' hands as they move quickly through the motions of the day. At the **Alaska Gold Seafood Producers' Cooperative {spcsales.com}**, the largest and most successful fisherman's co-op in North America, these employees process over 120,000 pounds of fresh seafood a day.

“We are owned by 520 fishermen,” CEO of the SPC Tom McLaughlin explains, watching as small and large vessels, heavy with fish, pull up to the railing to unload. “They deliver their fish to us, which we market and process. Our fishermen are trollers and longliners, meaning they bring us their product one hook, one fish at a time.” The SPC has outposts scattered across Alaska and the Pacific Northwest,

collecting sustainably caught seafood straight out of the salt water. Once the fish reach Bellingham, Wash., they go across the country in all directions, traveling as far as Europe, Japan, and China.

At the SPC and in Alaska, quality control is built-in. Alaska's very constitution mandates that fish are caught through sustainable means. “Plus,” McLaughlin adds, “because fishermen tend to be rather individualistic, the ones in the co-op are very concerned about the quality of the fish they turn in. There's a lot of pride and a sense of ownership for the fish they bring to us.” A trait—I am coming to find out—that's embedded in this town.

A few blocks from the co-op, I meet Collette Nelson at a small tiled table overlooking the channel into Sitka Sound. Herring dart in and out of shadows and fishermen blow their horns towards **Ludvig's Bistro {ludvigsbistro.com}**, supplied by the local fishers and named after Nelson's beloved wolf-hybrid (whose namesake was Beethoven). The walls of the 30-seat Mediterranean restaurant are covered in Moroccan tapestries, wooden wine racks, and tones of mustard yellow and royal blue. It's a cave-like place with the air of the sea filtering in through the open door, where you end up talking to the people at the table next to you as often as the ones at your own.

“I came up to Sitka on a fishing boat during college and fell in love with it,” Nelson says, as a boat reflects light onto her freckles. “A friend told me I should open a restaurant. I thought, I don't know, it's so risky. But the space became available and the community was right behind me, so I did it.”

Another reason Nelson might not have been 100-percent confident about opening a restaurant is that she had considered medical school and teaching. She never went to culinary school; most of her culinary education has been gathered on the road. “My favorite thing to do when I travel,” she admits, “is to knock on a kitchen door, talk to the chef, and say, ‘Hey, can I hang out with you for a while?’”

Currently, Ludvig's is only open seven months of the year. The other five months, Nelson fulfills her passion for travel. “This year, I went back to Spain, and I rented an apartment from an amazing flamenco-dancer/chef. We cooked together and compared recipes. For me to travel around and research the Mediterranean theme *in* the Mediterranean and bring it back to Alaska makes me feel confident that I'm portraying the right thing, that I'm doing it justice.”





Courtesy of Alaska Travel Industry Association/De Young

Undoubtedly, the food at Ludvig's is both authentically Alaskan and justifiably Spanish. The windows fog up with steam from glazed-pot paellas and bacon-wrapped Alaskan scallops cooked with Marsala wine and truffle oil.

My choice when I eat at Ludvig's is The Katlian Special, which consists of a fillet of salmon so white and perfectly flaky, it peels down like pale butter. But serving food in Sitka is about more than just the taste; it's about the place, as well. "Because I was a king salmon fisher-girl in college, I really love serving it and representing the salmon. When it goes down south, it can be impossible to buy because it's so expensive, and a lot of people don't like it because they haven't had it cooked the right way. My biggest compliment is when a local fisherman comes in and orders the salmon."



Fishermen not only fish, they keep all the local businesses alive and well. I plod down to the foggy dock of Crescent Harbor for another restaurant recommendation and find Erik Bahnsen, who fishes black cod in the summer, dives for sea cucumbers in the winter, and has been working with a new restaurant in town, called **The Larkspur Café {larkspurcafe.blogspot.com}**, on their sustainable menu. "You come to Sitka, to places like The Larkspur," Bahnsen says, "and life is just so much simpler. This place boils everything down to the essentials; we literally live on what's wild."



So I venture down Lincoln Street with the open ocean to my portside and snow-capped mountains to the starboard, arriving at the home of both the Larkspur and KCAW FM Raven Radio. A native artist and musician is plucking a ukulele on the porch while locals cavort around Alaskan Ambers and breaded halibut wraps. Inside, a bar of Baranof Island microbrews faces a reading nook with stocked shelves, a leather armchair, and framed prints. The light, lacquered furniture, I find out later, is from yard sales and the side of the road.

Amelia Budd and Amy Kane are as at-home as a chef/owner duo can be. The Larkspur, lit by picture windows and local art, was a happy accident for these roommates who practically finish each others' sentences. "Neither of us had any idea how to open up a café," Kane admits. And Budd finishes, "We loved the radio station and the historical building, which was built in 1909." The station announced a contest for onsite café proposals. It was a late night, they were having wine, and thought, according to Kane, "Wouldn't it be great if someone did that right—with comfy furniture and live music and nice food?" Budd's wish was for some hybrid between the local bar ("where everyone meets everyone in this town") and the library. Their spontaneous proposal

was two pages long and had to be entirely redone. But they won.

"The relationship with the radio station was something that attracted us; they wanted an interactive space in this building," Budd explains with quiet but contagious enthusiasm. "They're putting in a production studio adjacent to the dining room where they'll broadcast live. We'll even have 'on-air' lights facing the tables."

The Larkspur serves what's wild in a space that's calm and quaint without losing its artistic edge. Kane, who helms the kitchen and had her baking head-start at Denver's famed Watercourse Foods, has also worked for shipyards and salmon trollers and built her own wooden boat. "What's really cool is I get to buy seafood—salmon, halibut, black cod, lingcod, local oysters—directly from people I used to work for." The menu includes smoked lox from nearby Petersburg, sausage from The Alaskan Kitchen, coffee from K Bay Caffé, and herbs from Gimbal Botanicals. "And," Budd adds, "we carry local jams and bull kelp pickles from Simple Pleasures, a neat business run by a family with seven kids who pick and can all the berries."

The friends still laugh at how successful their midnight whimsy has become. "We assumed we would hit this insurmountable wall," Kane says, who found their 1,400-pound stove on its way to the dump. "But we just kept plodding along, and we still haven't hit a wall." The table of eight locals feasting on Sitka rose-covered chocolate cake are proof that this hypothetical wall may never come.

John Donne's famous line, "No man is an island," holds much water in Sitka—a town that serves its free spirits as heartily as the common good. There is a flavor of life up here, an appreciation for the majesty of the land and the sea, and a reverence only Alaskans exhibit while harvesting the earth's entities. In this Alaskan town on the water, people function like the water, coexisting in a choreography with other life forms and surviving independently only because they understand their place in a much larger ecosystem. D

Ways to go independent in Sitka:

Go hiking and biking:

The Sitka Bike & Hike sets you up for three hours of history, flora, and fauna; islandfeverdiving.com

Go kayaking:

Paddle, snack, and watch the whales; sitka.org

Go fishing:

For seasoned anglers or amateurs; reelclasscharters.com

Go to sleep:

The Rockwell Lighthouse; **907.747.3056**

Otter's Cove Bed and Breakfast; ottercovebandb.com

Totem Square Inn; totemsquareinn.com



Courtesy of Alaska Travel Industry Association/Frank Flavin