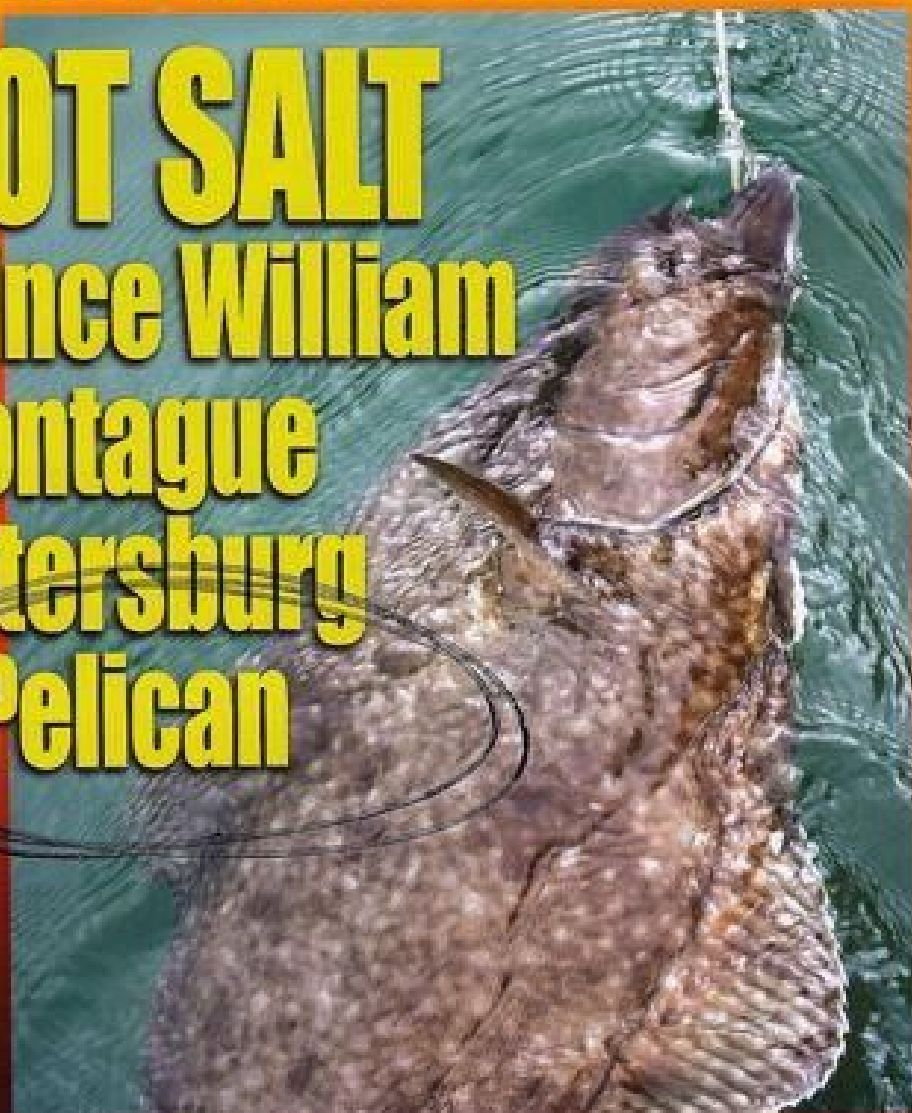


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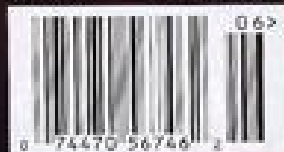
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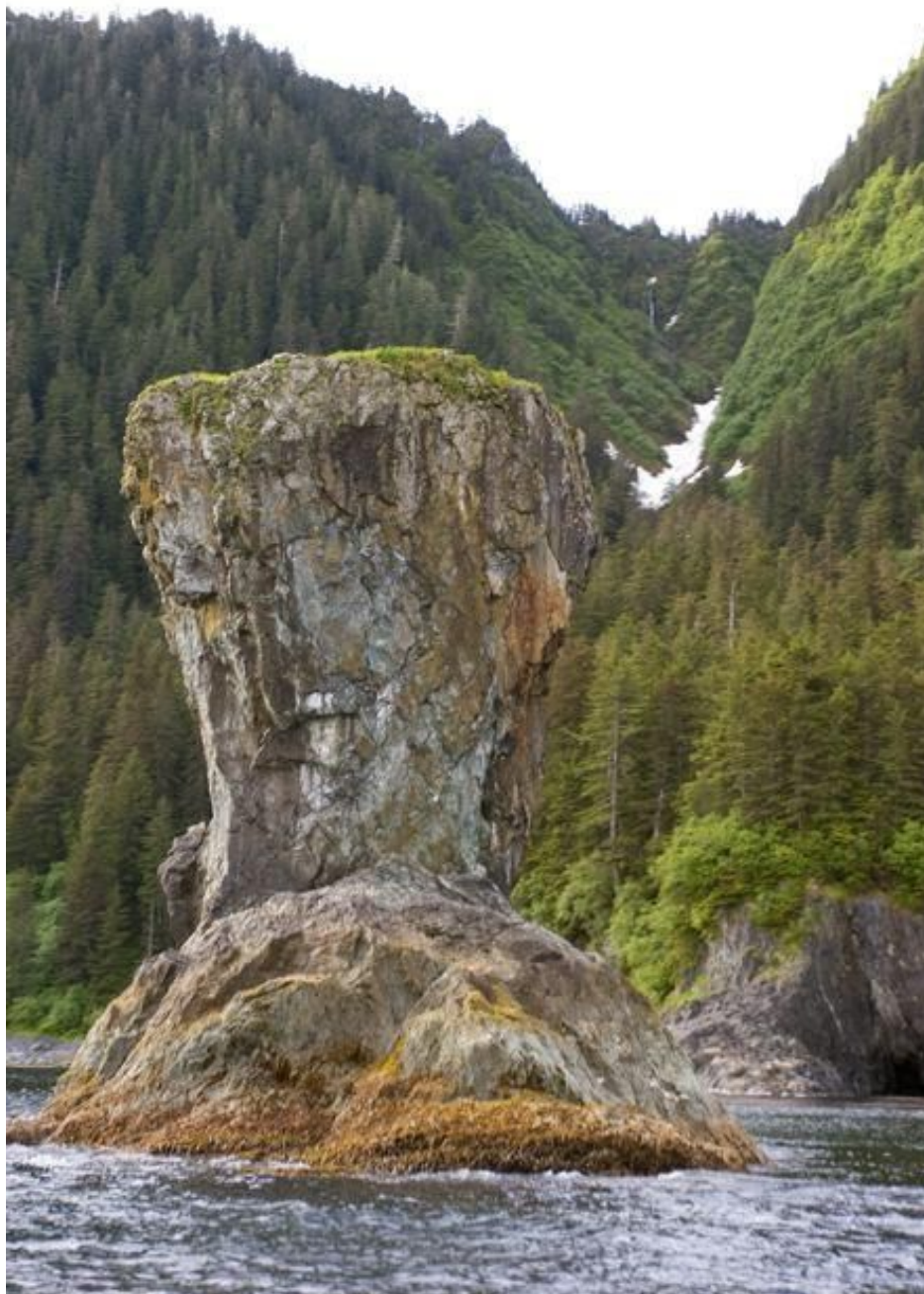


Fish Alaska Travel

Story and photos by Andrew Cremata

Telling Stories:

Stepping back in time to an unspoiled
Alaska in Pelican



Tooth Rock looms from the depths.

There is a place imagined where the Alaskan ideal is realized. As a boy the image of this place is what made me dream of traveling to this American frontier.

In those dreams, there was a place which emerged from the sea as though it was born of the salty waves. Ragged pilings draped in barnacle and seaweed dripped heavy with the surf. Vessels that braved distant oceans were moored within these rustic confines, the sweet stench of an ebbing tide wafting over their creaking bows. Thick coats of paint and weathered wooden planks hinted at stories born from steep ocean swells and massive fish hauled over the rail.

There is such a place in southeast Alaska-a place where fishing itself is history.



The strangest part of flying into Pelican was not seeing it from the air. The floatplane landed just to the north of town, in Lisianski Inlet, and glided on

waves around a steep jetty. As though passing through some hidden portal, Pelican slowly came into view.



An eagle sits perched next to the harbor in Pelican, Alaska.

What appeared to be a flock of fifty bald eagles were twirling in a chaotically organized melee, intermittently dropping to the water to snatch some unfortunate prey. This was the foreground of a surreal scene, the backdrop of which was sheer mountainside. In between was Pelican, a town which owes little to terra firma. This is a place built from the sea, teetering on tall wooden pilings. I couldn't help but wonder if it was all bolted to the mountain somehow.



In the center of it all was my destination, the Highliner Lodge, owned by Steve and Jill Daniels. The lodge is a modern oasis amidst the rustic setting of Pelican. The restored facility was once Pelican Wet Goods and Steam Bath, but now boasts a contemporary atmosphere with a full-service kitchen, fish processing room and suites designed to cater to a wide-range of potential guests.



The Highliner is the vision of Captain Steve, and owes its name to his more than 30 years as a successful commercial fisherman. A "highliner" is a designation given to the longliner who brings in the most fish. Upon our meeting, it was easy to see why he chose the name.

Captain Steve's spirit is inextricably linked to Pelican's otherworldly character. As a senior in high school he visited his mother in Alaska, a commercial handtroller with a 16-foot boat.

He spent his summer working with her on the boat, and on one calm, glassy, perfect Alaska day, a 54-pound king salmon set Captain Steve's future in stone.

To hear him tell the story is one of the highlights of staying at the Highliner, and any attempt to duplicate it here would pale by comparison. But it was the events of that day over 30 years ago, which prompted Captain Steve to buy a boat and move to Alaska.

When the animated tale reached its conclusion, captain Steve simply said, "Why wouldn't I want to be a commercial fisherman in Alaska?"

On land, Steve is calm, friendly, diminutive, refined. He also exhibits a healthy sense of humor. A firm handshake and the capacity to look you straight in the eye is something you come to expect from most folks living in Alaska; Steve knows the importance of both traits. He is a family man, a wrestling coach, a conversationalist.

On board his vessel, the captain emerges. Steely and chiseled with skull polished and bare, his eyes beam wide with drive and energy. Even his physical characteristics change; his stature becomes exaggerated, his face takes on the countenance of one helplessly driven to a single quest. In the ocean his nature is elemental, and there is only one enemy to be dealt with - the fish.



Alaskan Ideal

On the first day of fishing the morning air was crisp. Outside the front of the lodge you could hear waterfall's torrents crashing down the mountainside on the opposite side of the inlet, well over a mile away. The beating wings of bald eagles cut the air as they passed overhead-a rhythmic backbeat of displaced air.

Fast-moving clouds at 1,000 feet hinted at rougher seas beyond the confines of Lisianski Inlet. After a hearty breakfast, Captain Steve said we wouldn't be able to fish the ocean, but we could head northeast toward Glacier Bay to a recently discovered halibut hole in which he had found success.



On board the boat, Jill and Steve's son Ryan Ward would act as first mate. His daughter Ali Daniels also made the trip, along with Steve Harvey and Jorge

Pacheco-two longtime fishing buddies from California who had visited the lodge before.

Interior waters were calm as we motored through the inlet past Elfin Cove into the wider expanse just south of Glacier Bay.



Humpback whales were breaching on all sides of the boat. Captain Steve was telling stories from his commercial days-some humorous, and some downright frightening.

He told a tale of one of his first mates pulling a gun on him many years ago when his vessel was in jeopardy and they were one life preserver short. When disaster was averted, the mate tried to laugh it off as a joke, but Steve was not amused.

"That's why I never carry a gun on my boat," he said.

We anchored in 150 feet of water where Ryan and Steve baited the circle hooks in a stylized fashion I had never seen before. It was a technique born from commercial experience, Steve would explain. Within minutes of hitting bottom I had the first bite.



A strong current made the going slow, but when the first halibut appeared boat side, Captain Steve went into action.



Photo opportunities are not an immediate concern for the good captain. Steve's first priority is the proper handling and care of the fish.



Captain Steve gets a handle on a barn door halibut.

Captain Steve had his harpoon ready (no guns allowed) for the 40-plus- pound 'but. After a clean shot below the eye, he tied the fish off the boat, reached over with a large blade and sliced the gill of the big fish. Deep red plumes dispersed into the water carried away by the current. He would let the fish bleed out completely before reaching over the rail secure the fish with a massive shark hook, hoisting it on board gutting and gilling the fish, and hogtying the halibut head to tail.



It was a dizzying scene of dexterity and will. Afterwards, he stood over the fish, hands on his hips with his chest protruding forward---eyes down, chin held high. I began to pity the opponents of his wrestling team.

Every fish was treated this way, and when their life-force had completely vanished, Ryan would pack the fish on ice, ready to process.



I have never witnessed such respect and care for the final meat product from any charter fisherman. But then, Captain Steve is a commercial fisherman in a charter captain's hat.

It was on this first day that I had the hot hand. Three more halibut were soon on board, each bigger than the last. The largest topped out at over 80 pounds. Pulling gigantic flat fish out of deep water in a fast current is a masochistic enterprise. In between fish, I took some timeouts to rest.

Spanning the horizon were a myriad of water plumes reaching skyward. Humpbacks were everywhere, and their spouts looked like distant steam trains billowing white smoke as they traveled around our point of view.

At one point I tried to count the columns of water, attempting a complete turn. I lost count at 130, only halfway around.

The abundance of wildlife only adds to the mystique of Pelican. Tourists roll into southeast Alaska aboard cruise ships during the summer months-a swelling tide of polyester jackets and plastic cameras. Many lament the lack of wildlife seen on their journey.

Maybe those same animals have figured out there are no cruise ships, tour busses, cars, or even roads in Pelican, and have chosen to congregate where they can enjoy a little peace.

When the fishing quieted down we motored to a new spot. The action was slow but two harbor porpoises circled the boat for over an hour, intermittently calling out a high-pitched chirp.

A mother sea otter happened by with a pup firmly clenched to her chest. As we approached for a closer look, she pulled it along toward more perceived safety, away from view, just another glimpse into an unspoiled world.



A mother sea otter and pup pass by.

Ali napped as we headed back to the lodge. Jorge and Harvey had moderate success on the first day, but I had developed a reputation of fishing prowess, mostly due to the luck of the draw.

All of which would change the following day.

The Pelican Experience

Jill Daniels is bright, energetic, and the perfect complement to Captain Steve. Her touch exists all over the Highliner Lodge, from the full kitchen suites, to the ample game/television room.



Jill took me on a tour of Pelican from one end to the other-not exactly a long walk. Bearded fishermen spilled out from Rose's Bar as we ambled past. Rose's has all the charm and atmosphere one would expect from a longtime local's Alaskan tavern. This has been a haunt of commercial fishermen since Pelican's

more rough and rugged days. One can only imagine the stories hidden within those spirited walls.

Like all things in Alaska, Pelican is slowly changing. As the commercial fishing industry faces tightening regulations and scarcer fish, many have had to rethink their chosen profession.



Pelican Harbor viewed from the Highliner lodge.

Jill explained the Highliner was an opportunity for change. The lodge was a chance for her and her husband to be on the forefront of a new era for Pelican, whose population has dropped off in recent years.

Jill took me to see Roscoe Max, a resident of Pelican since it was little more than a newborn dream. Roscoe helped build and shape the history of the town, and the glint in his eye hints of untold stories.

He worked in the fish processing plant in 1944, weighing fish and doing whatever it took to get by. He showed me some photos from those days-the eyes of a younger Roscoe staring back, surrounded by scores of massive stacked halibut. Roscoe knows the history of Pelican-both the things commonly known, and the things hidden. Tragedy befell more than one resident of Pelican in the days before guardrails were built along the boardwalk. There are some harsh realities to living on the fringe, and Roscoe has survived it all. Later that night, Roscoe sat in front of his place, listening to blues music and tapping his feet-the Mississippi Delta sound a surprisingly appropriate soundtrack to the rust-hued metal rooftops and slick, green algae-weathered boards creaking underfoot.



Back at the lodge, Ryan was filleting halibut, cutting it into portions, and vacuum sealing the stark-white final product. With mouth watering, I made my way to the dinner table where Chef Skip Conger was preparing Duck a l'Orange, one of many gourmet meals prepared daily.



Cortni Guesanburu served our food, one course after another. We were joined by Steve's son Joe and more stories commenced.



Fishing stories are something I know a little about and, in my experience, things usually have a tendency to go haywire. I had no idea the following day would be fodder for more tales of personal mishap and shame.

Into the Ocean

I awoke to heavy rain battering the metal roof. Pelican lay outside my window bathed in a glossy sheen. Breakfast was waiting; eggs Benedict, coffee, orange juice-get the day started off right with a big morning meal.

Captain Steve said we would attempt some ocean fishing. He informed us that it might be rough for a while, but the waves were supposed to lie down. Besides, this was the day to go after king salmon, and if that didn't pan out, he knew a spot where there were some really big halibut.

It was obvious Captain Steve wasn't messing around.

Folks in Pelican like to say they are "Closest to the Fish!" By which they mean it is a short ride around Chichagof Island out into the deep blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Nearby are common routes for commuting king salmon. These fishing grounds have traditionally been some of the most productive in all of Southeast, not only for salmon, but other pelagic and bottom fish as well.

The rain slowed as we traveled north. All the talk about rough water had me a little worried, but it seemed as though the day would be still and calm.

With this thought running through my head, we turned west into a narrow corridor that tapered to a bottleneck. In this place the air was heavy with moisture as thick fog curled around mountaintops and was cradled within rocky crags.

A sea lion propelled itself from the water as though stretching to get a better look. It shot us an incredulous glance and slowly sunk back into the water. When the boat slowed I lifted my eyes-I will never be able to explain the feeling of utter fear and dread I had in that moment.

I must explain that my typical day of fishing involves a pair of waders, a campsite and a cooler of beer. I like the quiet of fishing for lake trout along a mountain lakeshore, or fly fishing for grayling on the delta of a stream. I was not prepared for what I saw as we emerged from the constricted inlet.

A series of small barrier islands surrounded us. Terrible, surging swells breathed heavily between their rocky shoals. A sudden gust hurled froth from the rabid waves onto the windshield of the boat, coating it with a wet, salty varnish. Captain Steve casually flipped on the wipers, looked over at me and said, "I think it'll be alright." As he stood glaring through the glass, he pushed the throttle forward and drove us headlong into the tempest.

Jorge and Harvey were toward the back of the boat holding a relaxed conversation, and Ryan had chosen this moment to nod off. Captain Steve must have noticed I was gripped with panic, because he started to tell me stories of narrowly averted horrors on the water during his commercial days. It was obvious he was having a little fun at my expense-he would get the chance for more.

By the time we starting trolling for kings the wind was dying down. Big rollers were still rocking the boat, making the shoreline rise and fall in and out of view. With lines in the water I was able to focus on the fishing rather than my fear of imminent death.

Just like the day before, my rod was the first to bend double, but I was a little quick with the hook-set, and whatever it was got away.

When the next fish bit just a few minutes later, there was no doubt as to when to set the hook because there was no I chance to set the hook.

Sixty-pound braided line went screaming from the reel so fast I thought the gears might seize. I grabbed the rod and held the tip high, but I have never witnessed a salmon pull line with such ferocity. I looked over at Captain Steve and his eyes were wild. Something told me he was thinking of the 54-pound king he caught with his mother all those years ago.

But the pulling wouldn't stop, and my fear of the ocean instantly changed to one of losing this one-time-shot lunger king. The latter fear instantly materialized as the line popped from sheer stress.

I could see the disappointment in the faces of Jorge, Harvey, and Steve. Speculation abounded on what type of fish it might have been, but we all knew the truth. It was a fat king of the sea, the big one, the one that got away. I could taste saliva in my mouth and wondered what I could have done differently. But Captain Steve's gear is sound, the technique was solid.

Big fish are big for a reason.

Harvey was the first to actually land a king, and Jorge followed suit. I still tasted saliva and started to feel a little lightheaded.



I fished in the Pacific Ocean once about ten years ago. It was out of San Diego, fishing for yellowtail. It was the only time I had experienced seasickness.

I recognized the symptoms and, recalling breakfast, decided to lie down and see if I could get my head straight. I must admit to a new fear-that of appearing like a lightweight to Captain Steve, who I was sure had never even considered seasickness to be an option.

During the short nap the king salmon weren't biting and the waves were starting to shrink. Captain Steve moved the boat further offshore into 350 feet of water. He wanted something big--something heavy to heave from the water. The runaway king had whetted his appetite and, in Captain Steve's world, the fish never win.

When we set anchor I got up and dropped a line. As the bait slowly sank, and sank, and continued to sink, all I could concentrate on was the rocking of the boat.

An hour passed and I could sense Captain Steve becoming agitated. He began to pace and stopped telling stories. It was then I felt the sudden urge to hug the rail and embarrass myself in front of two men from the Lower 48 and the toughest Alaskan I'd met in my 13 years in the state.

Everyone had a hearty chuckle at my misfortune except for Captain Steve, who was not in the mood for frivolity. Jorge asked if I was chumming the fish, but the gods of fishing found this to be one joke too many, and my rod bent double in a flash.

Captain Steve's face lit up until he realized it was a chicken halibut. The disgusted glare I got afterward could have been prompted by disdain for my illness, or the grotesque scene of a man intermittently reeling and puking.

I felt better with an empty stomach and a fish on the boat, and I soon had another chicken on board. As I reeled in the second fish, a pod of orcas passed the boat in almost a single file for a good ten minutes. Mere feet away, the whales would surface in intervals.

Just after their passing, Harvey said he was getting a bite.

Captain Steve leaned forward as though sensing something. When Harvey's rod bent it was obvious this was no chicken. With no current to speak of we all knew he was tethered to a real, bona fide, barn door.

Steve was already running to grab his harpoon, grinning from ear to ear.

He was coaching Harvey, who was patient with his retrieve, coaxing the halibut in one pull at a time-slow, deliberate, steady.

As the ghostly underwater shape took form, Captain Steve readied himself for the kill. With his hands firmly gripping the harpoon, totally fixated on the rising fish, he reminded me of a well-adjusted version of Captain Ahab. This was no white whale-this was just another fish-but each fish brings with it a sense of perfection. For Captain Steve it comes naturally.

The halibut topped 130-pounds. Jorge soon brought in an 80-pounder of his own. I was feeling almost 100 percent as we cut through the water en route to the Highliner. Captain Steve was back to his old self, smiling as he told another story. Jorge and Harvey sipped on beers and exchanged high-fives on the stern of the boat. Ryan nodded off with his head perfectly upright.



(From left to right) Jorge, Ryan, Captain Steve, Ali, Harvey, and Jill pose after the last day on the water, The author's green hue prevented him from appearing in the photo

Up ahead, the grey Southeast clouds steadily rolled over Chichagof Island and Pelican. A place one would presume was created from imagination-a rare corner of southeast Alaska where the past and present mingle seamlessly. A place where character lives, stories still matter, and there is absolutely nothing better in the entire world than catching fish.

Andrew Cremata lives in Skagway, Alaska and was honored with the Alaska Press Club's award for Best Sports Columnist in 2007 and 2008 for his longtime column in The Skagway News, "Fish This!" An ideal day for Andrew consists of catching fish, eating fish, beer, and sleep. In that order.



The author with a nice halibut on a day when things went well.

