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Troy and Todd Buzalsky with a fine example of a bountiful Old Harbor saltwater haul.

KODIAK COMBOS

the king of kodiak's

OLD HARBOR



STORY AND PHOTOS BY
Troy Buzalsky

Lying on the western border of the Gulf of Alaska approximately 250 miles from Anchorage, Kodiak Archipelago is a group of islands that encompasses over 5000 square miles of the most spectacular terrain in the world. Kodiak Island is the second largest island in the United States and parallels the Katmai coastline to its western exposure. Natives have inhabited the island for more than 7,000 years, and the Alutiiq once called it *Kadiak*...meaning "Island."

Known as Alaska's Emerald Island, Kodiak can be divided into two unique geographical segments. Kodiak City has a population of roughly 6,000 year-round residents complete with road system, school system, university, hospital, marina, and other modern conveniences including Walmart and Big Ray's Sporting Goods. Additionally, Kodiak Island supports six remote villages that include Akhiok, Karluk, Larsen Bay, Ouzinkie, Port Lions, and Old Harbor.

For fishing enthusiasts, it's no secret that Kodiak teems with world-class fishing including halibut, lingcod, yelloweye and other rockfish, Pacific cod, and all five species of salmon: pink, chum, sockeye, silver, and Chinook, appropriately referred

to as kings. If catching big kings is on your radar then the remotely located village of Old Harbor should be on your short-list of destinations, and with the right timing you might encounter 50-, 60-, and even 70-pound kings in the salt.

Old Harbor is located on the southeast coast of Kodiak Island approximately 40 air miles and 70 nautical miles southwest of the city of Kodiak and is accessible by boat or small plane. Rich in history, the town was initially recorded as Staruigavan, meaning Old Harbor in Russian and was the first established Russian colony in Alaska. Russians flocked to the area for the sea otter trade. In 1784 the Russians, led by Grigory Shelikhov, massacred numerous Alutiiq natives off Sitkalidak Island's Refuge Rock; this event is known as the Awa'uq Massacre.

Alaska became the 49th state on January 3, 1959, and five years later the magnitude 9.2 Great Alaskan earthquake rumbled from its Prince William Sound origin throughout the Kodiak Archipelago, destroying the village of Old Harbor and many other villages and communities. Land immediately surrounding Old Harbor lifted as much as 35 feet and dropped 8 feet in other areas, changing the landscape forever.

Today, Old Harbor is a thriving city with a population of 237 year-round residents. The Alutiiq village holds a rich culture with spiritual ties to the land, bonds of kinship and belief, respected elders and community, and the shared practice of a subsistence lifestyle. The people serve as chief stewards

for the hunting and fishing within the area, which includes their subsistence way of life as well as supporting the guiding and charter industry for sportsmen from all over the world.

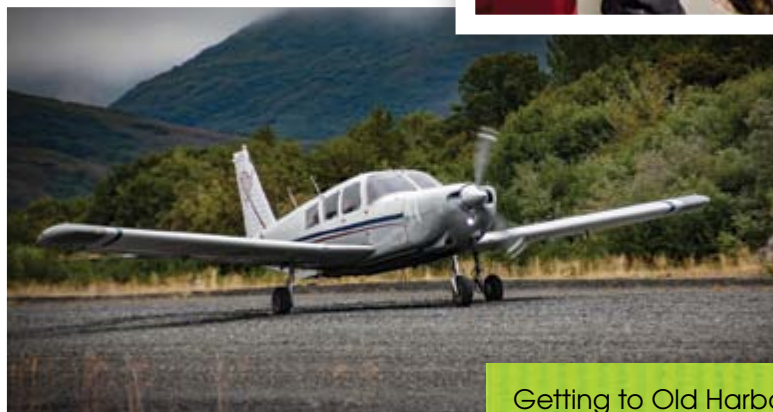
Protected from the Gulf of Alaska by Sitkalidak Island, Old Harbor is a true sportsman's paradise featuring some of the best fishing and hunting opportunities available. It is home to a healthy population of Sitka black-tailed deer, mountain goats, and Kodiak brown bear. Sea ducks are also a plentiful resource and the area is frequented by some of the more coveted species including king eiders, harlequin ducks, Barrow's and common goldeneyes, and surf and white-winged scoters just to name a few.



A native of Old Harbor and guiding since 1988, Jeff not only knows these waters, but knows how to fish them, earning the title "The King of Kodiak's Old Harbor."



Adding to the kill bag, Todd tags a nice 50-plus-pound halibut using a Transformer Series Octopus-Style bait from GOTEM Baits.



Getting to Old Harbor requires either a plane or boat ride.

Old Harbor native Jeff Peterson owns and operates Kodiak Combos, formerly Peterson's Adventures, and has been fishing and hunting the Old Harbor area since childhood, and guiding since 1988. Peterson is a US Coast Guard-licensed captain, a licensed big-game transporter and fishing guide, and a registered migratory-bird guide. He's also a former Marine and village Public Safety Officer. Jeff purchased his first boat at age 13, and 40-plus years of hunting and fishing the areas immediately surrounding Old Harbor makes him one of the most knowledgeable, experienced, and reputable outdoorsmen in all of Kodiak.

When visiting Old Harbor, you can literally experience year-round access to world-class hunting and/or fishing adventures through Kodiak Combos. The name Kodiak Combos is derived from the fact that you can custom tailor your adventure based on your personal desires which might include fishing, transport hunting, duck hunting, or a combination adventure.

"It's not too many locations where your lodge can coordinate this kind of a hunting and fishing experience. We've had many clients shoot a trophy buck in the morning and limit out on kings, silvers, or halibut before the day's out," says Peterson.

Hell-bent on finally fishing Kodiak in hopes of experiencing an authentic and remote experience, we book our adventure with Kodiak Combos for late August, primarily fishing the salt, chasing halibut, lingcod, silver salmon, and even though we're late in the season, Jeff promises that king salmon are a year-round species in Old Harbor. He also assured us that if we were interested in a transport deer it would be a great time of year.

We fly into Kodiak's Municipal Airport (KDK), which is directly across the parking lot from Island Air, our commuter airline to Old Harbor. Island Air has been serving Kodiak's six villages for over 40 years and offers services to Old Harbor twice a day, Monday through Saturday, and once on Sundays. As with all small-craft commuter flights, weather dictates the flight schedule, and nothing is certain.

With little delay we load up our equipment and my brother Todd and I board the Piper Cherokee 6 for our roughly 40-mile journey. The skies are clear, there's almost no wind, and the flight could not have been more clear or picturesque as we flank Center Mountain, fly over Saltery Cove and Ugak Bay, and carve between two unnamed alpine ridges which are typical of Kodiak Island before touching down on the gravel runway of the Old Harbor Airport, which sits to the northeast of the village. Upon arrival we are greeted by Jeff Peterson who exclaims, "I'm looking for Buz-Alaska!" It's Buzalsky I said, but I like the new name, and I can tell instantly I'm going to get along well with our host. We make a short three-minute drive to Kodiak Combos' Old Harbor Lodge where Jeff gives us a quick tour and says, "Let's go fishing!"

Kodiak Combos is a full-service fishing lodge offering three-, five-, and seven-day guide and/or transport services including lodging and meal packages that can be customized to each group's needs. They operate two boats: a 34-foot Ocean Sport Roamer named *Fishy Fishy* and a 26-foot Sea Sport named *Refuge Rock*. In addition, Peterson has a Boston Whaler and an aluminum jet boat to help him facilitate transport hunting as



The two-person team of Todd and Troy nailed some hefty yelloweye rockfish while using a Berkley Gulp Curly Tail Grub.

well as freshwater fishing. During our stay the Roamer was in Kodiak City getting repowered with twin Volvo D4 diesels. This new power configuration will give greater range, safety, and performance.

The marina in Old Harbor sits quaintly in the center of the community. There are a handful of commercial fishing vessels, a small group of charter boats, and a smattering of personal boats that are moored through the season. Directly east of the marina is Sitkalidak Island, which provides protection from the elements and forms the Sitkalidak Passage. Interestingly, Sitkalidak Island not only is inhabited by Sitka black-tailed deer, Kodiak brown bear, and a large colony of puffins; it's also home to a transplanted bison population.

We make it to the fishing grounds before noon which is pretty impressive considering we left Portland, Oregon, earlier that morning. With just two of us fishing, the 26-foot *Refuge Rock* offers tremendous elbow room and is ideal for dropping two downriggers while we troll the fertile waters. Jeff

explains that although the silvers are in, we will drop to deeper water and target the king salmon because kings are available year-round and are considered a much more coveted catch, plus, silvers are also caught at these depths. Although big kings roam these waters, the true trophy kings are most available late April, May, and early June before the fish return to their natal waters.

Running one green-label herring with a Krippled Fishing Lures helmet and the other using an Old Goat Lure, we drop down to the target depth of 70 feet. It's at this point you realize that Jeff has a unique interest in catching fish. Before the herring is dropped, he is laser focused to make sure the bait is spinning exactly how he wants it. He also shares that the Old Goat Lures we are using are prototypes, in search of that perfect baitfish presentation. As we troll Jeff continues to show us other one-of-a-kind lures including his King Kandy Candlefish and whole herring which he has carefully modified to change the shape to get what he considers the perfect king salmon roll. Jeff's diligence and creative mindset confirm to me he is truly "The King of Kodiak" when it comes to pursuing kings. Jeff's personal best king salmon occurred solo fishing a short distance from the lodge, where he single-handedly hooked and landed his 68-pound trophy.

While trolling from the helm Jeff spots a kittiwake floating on the surface and trolls in its direction. He tells us to be ready as he suggests the seabird is sitting over bait. Like the archetypal fish whisperer, as soon as we troll over the immediate area the first Seeker one-piece rod with its Avet MX series reel doubles over, straining from the grip and rip of a king salmon. We had not been in the boat long enough, nor spoke of our game plan, so when the fish hit, my brother and I were not a well-oiled machine, and it showed as the captain was quick to point it out with the certainty of a military drill sergeant. "You'll catch more fish if you work as a team!"

Peterson explains, "What I look for is my fishing groups to work as a team. With my military background I know better teamwork creates better efficiency, and the better we work together in the boat the more successful we're going to be at the end of the day." Teamwork includes getting your bait down as

Kodiak Combos

**CATCH
WHAT'S
OUT
THERE!**

Jeff Peterson founded Kodiak Combos, over 25 years ago in the remote village of Old Harbor, one of six villages on Kodiak Island, only accessible by boat or mail plane from the hub Kodiak city. He is a US Coast Guard licensed and insured captain, licensed big game transporter, licensed fishing guide, registered migratory bird guide with over 25 years of professional service in the industry. Accommodations are provided by The Old Harbor Lodge, operated by Lianna Peterson. The waterfront property was newly remodeled in 2010 and provides all the comforts of home. Amenities include satellite TV, internet via DSL, full kitchen, private bath, wood stove and Toyotomi heater, laundry facilities, long distance phone access, and twin or queen size beds.



IF YOU'VE NEVER BEEN TO ALASKA BEFORE, MAKE IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME! JOIN US IN THE VILLAGE TO FISH AND HUNT OFF THE BEATEN PATH, WITH ALL THE COMFORTS OF HOME!



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quickly and efficiently as possible, and when the fish strikes, getting the fish in the boat. Simply put, land 'em, bonk 'em, bleed 'em, ice 'em, and get fishing...Not necessarily in that order, because "get fishing" happens as soon as possible.

After we manage a couple midsize kings and a silver, Jeff decides it's time to try for some rockfish, so we head out of the protected cove and drop down into some 130-foot water. The seas are calm and flat, the current is almost nil, so we're able to use light presentations. We jig up a handful of smaller black rockfish, and some midsize lingcod that are also released. The bite slows but we do manage one nice Pacific cod, which we will add to our kill bag. On this day, Jeff is fishing just us, so I offered to fillet the fish as we cruised back to the lodge. Kodiak Combos vacuum packs, freezes, and boxes each angler's first 50 pounds of fish and after that there is a small surcharge for additional vacuum packing and fish boxes.

The Kodiak Combos' Old Harbor Lodge sits on a scenic slope on the north part of the village looking over the protected waters of Old Harbor and Sitkalidak's mountainous terrain. From the minute you enter the lodge you feel like you're in Alaska, complete with local taxidermy including mountain goat, ducks, deer, whale baleen, and Jeff's king salmon skin mount from his 68-pound solo fishing adventure. There are four oversized bedrooms that will comfortably sleep seven people, and two of the bedrooms are set up with their own private bathroom facilities. The great room is complete with comfortable sofa chairs and recliners as well as a woodstove, large-screen satellite TV, and strong Wi-Fi. The entry has a dry room to drop your wet gear, laundry facilities, and a full pantry that awaits your snack cravings. The kitchen is well designed, and breakfast and dinners are prepared by Jeff's wife, Lianna, as are the daily sack lunches that go with you in the field. Our first night's meal included roasted chicken, fresh broccoli,

potatoes and carrots, wonderful gravy...and desert. Wow!

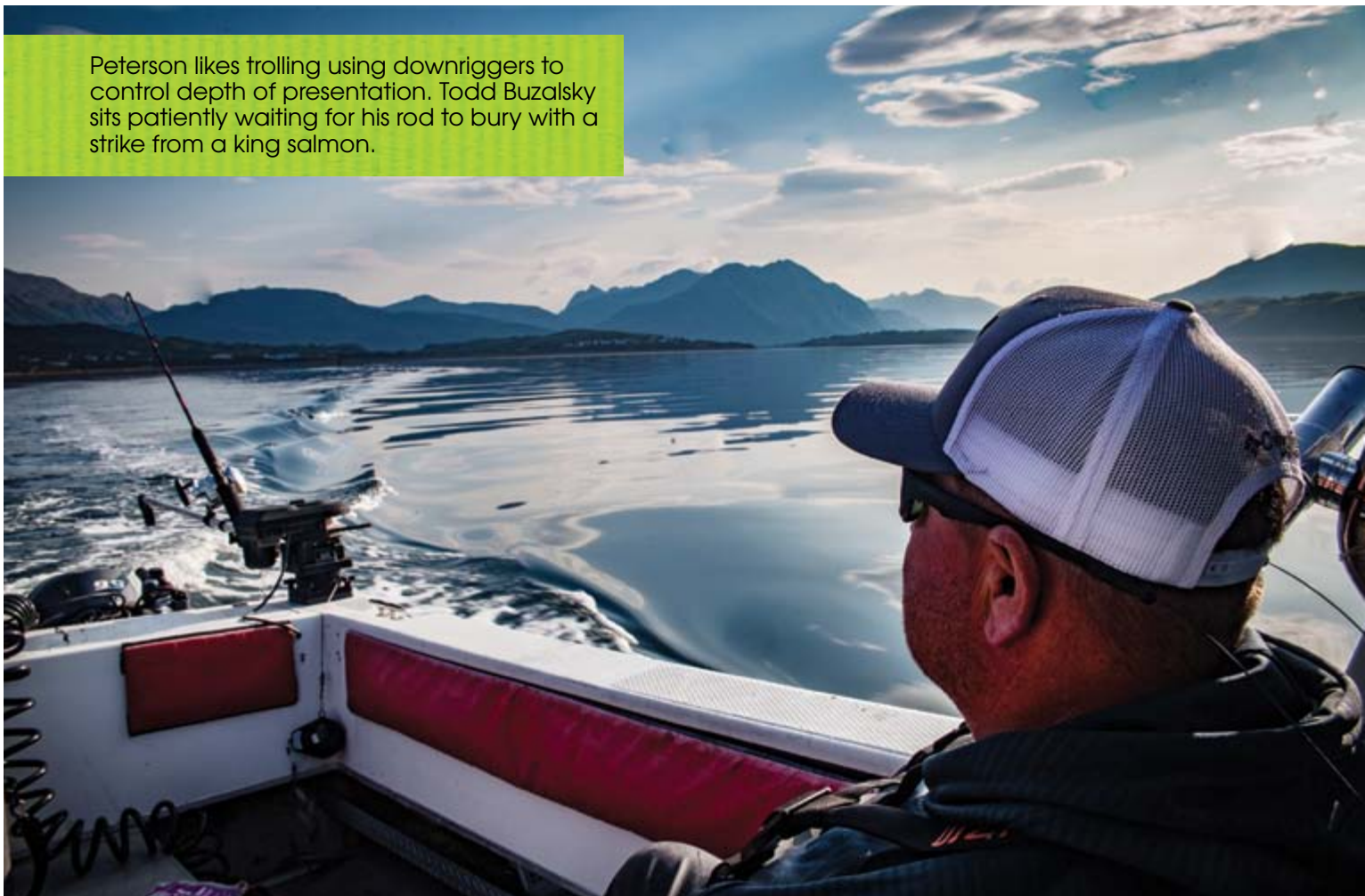
Kodiak had been experiencing some very dry weather before our arrival, and Jeff explains that Kodiak hasn't seen a real winter since 2011. This climate change has certainly put a twist in the fishing conditions, and because of the recent dry conditions that include 40 days without any measurable rain, there are virtually no silvers to be found in freshwater and they are not in predictable areas in the salt.


Our second day starts with a home-cooked breakfast. It's nice to not be rushed out of the lodge to beat other anglers to your fishing spots, so we enjoyed our bacon and eggs and bottomless coffee before our eight o'clock departure time. With Todd and me working much better as a team, we manage one nice king and four silvers before we head out to chase some bottomfish.

Peterson utilizes custom-made Whopper Stopper rods for bottom fishing that are four feet in length and feature roller guides coupled with Avet two-speed PRO EX 30/2 big-game reels...we're talking top-of-the-line gear! I was skeptical at first using a rod with roller guides for jigging, but once in my hand I was impressed with the rod's weight and action. The rod has a nice tip for jigging and great backbone once hooked up. We proved this by landing a 50-pound halibut, several nice lingcod, nice yelloweye, and some big black rockfish. Rockfish in this area are way above average in size and we caught several approaching the 10-pound mark, which make wonderful filets. Grilled ribeye steaks with all the trimmings finished our evening perfectly.

Itching for the freshwater experience, we decide to see if any silvers are entering the local river during the early morning tide swap. The unnamed river is called Big Creek by the locals, and typically supports a good silver run starting in late August through October. Our Big Creek experience was limited to dozens of ocean-fresh pinks, and although enjoyable to catch, they were not our targeted fish. Our evening ocean fishery drew us blanks,

Peterson likes trolling using downriggers to control depth of presentation. Todd Buzalsky sits patiently waiting for his rod to bury with a strike from a king salmon.





Old Harbor sits on a narrow shelf of land at the base of mountains and is as picturesque as it is quaint.



Lingcod proved plentiful in the fertile waters surrounding Old Harbor. Author Troy Buz-Alaska poses with a typical lingcod.

another healthy stack of fillets. Dinner for the night includes delicate pan-seared halibut cooked sous vide style with asparagus, rice, and green salad.


Our time in Old Harbor was much more than a fishing adventure and I continue to reflect on a sign posted on the street that reads, “Respect our way of Living.” The village of Old Harbor emanates a treasured culture connected to its land and resources which in turn supports the lives and lifestyle of the native community and its values. This in turn creates a true sportsman’s paradise. If you are looking for more than just a fishing and/or hunting vacation look up Jeff and Lianna Peterson at Kodiak Combos for that 100% authentic Alaska experience in the village of Old Harbor on Kodiak Island. You, too, can fish with “The King of Kodiak!” For more information go to: kodiakcombos.com.

but when you look at the surroundings, catching was not a requirement. In the spring approximately 50% of Chinook caught are white kings, and dinner for the night included marinated white king salmon, fresh asparagus, salad, and French bread...amazing is an understatement!

With predicted clear skies and calm seas Jeff decides we’re going to navigate to the north. As we enter Sitkalidak Passage thick fog blankets the water making radar an essential tool for navigation. Cruising towards an area Jeff refers to as Jurassic Bay, he shares that he puts well over 1200 hours a year on his boats, and the Sea Sport has been repowered six times since he bought it in 1995. The Roamer is on

its third repower and Peterson explains, “By repowering from single engines to twin engines we will have the capability and range to navigate outside of area 3A and into area 3B which opens the door for a guide to target two halibut per person every day, with no Tuesday or Wednesday closures.” This will be a game changer and guaranteed to put more fish in the box as well as greater chances at trophy-sized halibut.

In and around Jurassic Bay the bite is the best we’ve experienced. We quickly land a half-dozen silvers and move into deeper water hoping to find some nice lingcod and halibut. The rockfish were thick, and again very large. As we are grinding out our rockfish limit, we managed two beautiful yelloweye pushing 20 pounds, three large lingcod, and two 20-pound halibut to fill our kill bag for the day. Again, for the return trip Jeff hands me his custom Phil Wilson fillet knife and we make quick order of



Troy Buzalsky makes home in the Pacific Northwest and after 36 years still actively serves in the fire service as a Battalion Commander. Troy writes the monthly Boats column in Fish Alaska and also photographs and writes about his fishing adventures. Recently Troy was given the name Buz-Alaska which seems fitting. He can be reached at troybuz@comcast.net.