

OUT OF TOWN BY MATT PURDY

Alaska

Banana Boat Blues

You get the water and the peanut butter; I'll get the bread and the bananas," my sister suggested as we entered the Anchorage grocery store. Over the winter, she had earned a free trip to Alaska by raising money for cancer research, and when she and her boyfriend broke up a week before the trip, I was the beneficiary.

She was a little upset to be going with me instead of what's-his-name, but I was too excited about all the Alaskan salmon I was going to catch to be very sympathetic. Still, I offered my best approximation of big-brotherly counsel.

"Life is like fishing," I told her. "One percent is the thrill of having something on your line, the other 99 is just drifting around drinking cheap beer and waiting.

"It just happens," I continued, "that what you had on your line this time turned out to be a clump of algae or, you know, a stick or

something." She looked at me blankly. "Speaking of sticks, I'll go get some marshmallows for the campfire," I said.

After I had collected all my food items, I found my sister in the produce section carefully inspecting the bananas for the optimal balance of green, yellow, and brown. "Pick us out some winners," I said, slapping her on the shoulder.

Stocked with provisions, we headed out of Anchorage for the one day of fishing that our schedule allowed. I couldn't have been happier to get out of the city. Flying to Alaska and hanging around the city of Anchorage is like going to a seafood restaurant at the beach and ending up with deep-fried, frozen fish: They both try to sell themselves as something unique and local, but, in the end, a city is a city and a fish square is a fish square.

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PHOTO(S) BY THE AUTHOR

We drove south down the Kenai Peninsula until the highway tapered off to one lane of gravel, which led to a small marina where we stopped to rent a boat and pick up some fishing tackle. I selected a handful of five-dollar spoons and spinners and took them up to the register. The cashier looked them over as he rang them up. "Most lures are meant

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to catch fishermen more than fish, but it looks like you did pretty good," he confided with a wink.

"Well, you know, I like to fish," I said modestly. A moment later I realized that I may have escaped the city, but I was still a tourist. For all his sincerity, the cashier might as well have been a waiter with a towel draped over his arm complimenting my choice of wines.

We selected a sprightly ten-horsepower skiff of late-'70s vintage and headed out onto the bay. On the water, we saw some

salmon jumping, ate lunch, and even saw some of the birds that fly under water that my sister had read about in the travel guide, but we had no luck fishing. I pull-started the outboard and tried to move to another spot, but as much as the old ten-horse revved and gurgled, the boat didn't go anywhere.

The engine was running fine, but the transmission seemed to be stuck in neutral. We paddled toward a gas dock until a charter boat pulled alongside and offered us a tow. "I see your problem," the boat's captain called out as he threw us a line, "you've got bananas in your boat."

"Bana ... huh?" I looked down. Indeed, several bananas and banana peels left over from lunch were prominent on the floor and seats of our rowboat.

"Oh yeah. Bananas," I said with a forced chuckle. The old fisherman was having some fun with the hapless tourists.

"Get rid of them 'nanas and

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you'll be all right," he reiterated as he left us at the gas dock.

A dockhand came out to meet us. "You know anything about outboards?" I asked.

He surveyed the situation. "There's bananas in your boat, eh?" he observed.

I wasn't sure what the locals found so amusing about our choice of snacks, but I guessed that up here in the land of whale blubber and bear meat, only wimps and tourists ate bananas.

Inside the gas-dock shop, two teenagers who looked like brothers were working at the counter.

"We had bananas in our boat," my sister told them, feebly recycling the joke.

"Did you really?" the older brother almost shouted.

"Why? Is that an Alaskan tradition or something?" I inquired. "I thought those guys made that up just now."

"You don't fish much, do you?" the younger brother asked.

I studied the boy for a tense moment before conceding, "not in Alaska."

"It's just a silly superstition, really," the older brother explained, "but, boy, this sure supports it. A lot of mornings you'll see bananas left behind on the docks because the charter-boat captains won't shove off with them on board. You have to keep the spirits happy. There's lots of spirits around here," he said, sweeping his hands out to both sides. "You know, Indians and all."

"But don't worry," he continued with a gleam in his eye, "if they were really upset with you, you'd have hooked the beauty of a lifetime, fought it right up next to the boat, and then, as soon as you got a glimpse, lost it into the depths forever. Just so you'd know what you could have had. That's what would really keep you up at night."

"So how do we get on their good side and catch some fish?" I asked, biting my tongue to keep from adding, "Mister Medicine Man."

He asked what we were using

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for bait and I told him we'd been trolling spoons. "That sounds all right," he said, rubbing his chin and nodding. The younger boy gave him a confused look. "You could catch something on a spoon," the older kid assured him.

The younger boy looked uncomfortable for a second, then turned to us and blurted out, "We use herring. Everyone around here uses herring — and for the price of one of them spoons, you can get a whole mess of 'em." Here was the real medicine man. Unfortunately, the advice came too late for us, since both our outboard and our afternoon were shot and I had to have my sister back at the Anchorage airport the next day.

After dropping my sister off at the airport, I still had 24 hours left in Alaska before my flight home. Following the advice of the honest kid from the gas dock, I headed north toward Denali National Park and Mt. McKinley instead of returning to the coast in hope of a better day fishing. I left around nine at night and soon found myself driving into an endless, summer-solstice sunset behind the distant mass of North America's highest mountain. It was easy to see why Alaska natives had named the mountain Denali, meaning "The Great One."

With steering wheel in one hand and camera in the other, I snapped photos in all directions — the fiery mountain sunset through the windshield, the silhouette of a moose sipping the sky's reflected glow from a pond on the driver's side, a rainbow in the grey skies over the scrub pines on the passenger side.

As I continued along the empty highway listening to strange chant music on the one radio station I could tune in, the sky became more and more colorful as the mountain grew larger and larger. Finally, I was no

longer just a tourist: I was one with this place, one with The Great One.

Everything was so calm and colorful, so far removed from everyday experience, that I thought perhaps I had allowed my rented Ford Escort to wander into the path of one of Alaska's all-business, double-trailer semis, and my spirit was now travelling out of my flattened carcass toward "The Light."

Around 1:30 in the morning, the sky finally faded into the gray dimness that passed for night. I pulled onto a deserted gravel road and slept soundly, all brain-chatter blotted out by a single image of the glowing mountain. In the morning, I woke to rain and the mountain had disappeared into the clouds.

Back in North Carolina, I passed on the usual drugstore one-hour photo centers and took my two rolls of film to a real photo-finishing shop. When I returned the next day to pick up my prints, I was told that one of the rolls I had handed in was blank. Had my journey toward the light actually been some sort of dream, a spiritual experience that couldn't be captured on ISO 200 film? I took a look at the set of prints that did come out: all double exposures. I had used the same roll of film twice. Beautiful, once-in-a-lifetime shots overlapping and on top of other beautiful shots — nearly all ruined.

Flipping through the stack of prints, I found a shot of the deserted highway cutting through the pines and leading up to the distant peak of Denali; bars of sunlight bursting from behind the 20,000-foot mass of rock and salmon-pink snow to turn the clouds on either side orange as molten lava. It was a nice photograph, but it would have better captured the sense of awe and oneness that I had felt on the road that evening if it hadn't been double-exposed with a snapshot of me, sitting in the stern of our rented skiff, looking happy as a chimp as I snacked on a banana. •



Matt Purdy has lived in Chapel Hill since 1997. He also writes for his website, watsoncrombie.com.