

We had arrived on an Island called Kodiak Island. I had never heard of this island and was surprised to learn that it was the second largest Island in the U.S.A.

It was a very beautiful island...with great steep cliffs and headlands which were green and thickly wooded. In places it reminded me of Switzerland.

In the past many dramatic things had happened to the Island of Kodiak. In 1912 a volcano had erupted and the ash from the fallout had choked all the fish in the rivers, and plunged the island into darkness for three whole days. Even worse, on Good Friday 1964 the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in America, had created a tidal wave which had swept into Kodiak harbour at a height of 35 feet destroying the fishing fleet and flattening the downtown area. But all that was in the past. When we were there it was quiet, peaceful and staggeringly beautiful.

We were due to stay on the island for only a day and a half and we were meant to be taking photographs of the town, but we decided that that was a bit boring and it would be much more fun to go on a trip 60 miles inland to see if we could find a Kodiak Brown Bear.

These animals are meant to be the largest terrestrial carnivores in the world.

To get to where the bears live we had to travel in a very old aeroplane. It was a pretty rough journey as we were tumbled about in the rattley old machine, but we got there safely and when the aeroplane had gone we settled into our tents. Peace reigned. There was barely a sound besides our own voices.

Later that day our guide took us down to a great lake to see if we could catch a sight of the famous bears. We walked along the side of the lake to where a small river entered the lake. It was all very exciting but the only thing that spoiled our enjoyment were the great swarms of black flies. To protect our faces our guide made us put on what looked like beekeepers bonnets. We looked ridiculous, but at least we were no longer being bitten.

We waited and waited....and then, suddenly, round the bend of the river, we saw them..... a huge great fat backed mother trundling down the

stream with two cubs in tow. We were told to keep quiet and not move any closer. These kind of bears can be very dangerous particularly when they have cubs.

We watched as the mother bear sat back on her great haunches and stared intently at the brisk stream. She was looking for food. At this time of year the river is full of red salmon. Fully grown bears like this one will eat about 30 of them a day.

We saw her suddenly lunging at a passing salmon, front paws out like a cat, then delicately she lifted the salmon out of the water and carried the fish back to her cubs.

The next day the old plane that brought us was due to arrive and take us back to the city so we could catch our flight on to our next destination. But the weather had changed.....a great pall of fog had descended. What were we going to do? There was no radio out ,so we had no way of telling them to wait for us . If we missed our next appointment I would be in terrible trouble with my boss as we weren't meant to be out here in the first place.

But it was no good , the plane didn't come, and we had to settle down and spend another night beside the lake.

The following morning I got more and more worried as the fog still seemed to be hanging like a dense impenetrable curtain over our heads...I had visions of being stranded out in that wilderness for weeks. But then when we least expected it we heard the welcoming drone of a distant engine.

Apparently the fog had cleared over the rest of the island, so once we were back in the air it was safe. The pilot managed it and we got back just in time to catch our next flight. Thank goodness, I didn't get into terrible trouble after all.

## EPISODE TWO

I wake to the sound of lowing cattle. Slept well but was chilly. One thing that hasn't changed since I was last in Russia is the width of the bed sheets...a little wider than the human body but a little narrower than the bed. You tend to wake up like a badly wrapped mummy, with the sheets all coiled around you!

To Breakfast. No sooner have I poked my head round the door of the dining room than I'm met by Igor, our guide who thrusts a spoonful of fresh raspberries into my mouth.

“Tradition!” he shouts “Start the day with a raspberry!”

Peels of laughter and great satisfaction at my lack of comprehension. Igor is also very satisfied with the weather, for today we are to visit the Kronotsky Nature Reserve. It covers one and a half million hectares and the only way in is by helicopter.

We drive to the nearby airstrip where there is quite a crowd waiting by the helicopter. It feels like a family outing.

Take off is a long laborious process but once in the air all is magical. We leave behind the low hills and run north alongside the Pacific climbing slowly to the snowline that rings a spectacular volcano. Quite suddenly we are up over its rim and looking down onto the most enormous, beautiful, turquoise blue lake. Sergei tells us that there are twenty five volcanoes within the reserve, twelve of which are active.

We touch down on a dormant crater and Sergei leads us past a sub-lunar landscape of bleached white quicksand. We are given a lecture on the perils of straying from the track.. But life survives even in the hottest part of this great oozing stew. Sergei shows me a translucent almost jellyfish – like plant, trailing fine white tentacles, which grows around holes from which water flows at a constant temperature of 90% centigrade. It is unique to this reserve.

A spectacular thermal display is on offer in the nearby Valley of the Geysers. This valley consists of a series of fissures through which steaming hot water emerges in various ways. You can almost set your watch by the great spout they call The Giant. This shoots a plume of boiling water almost 100 feet high, once every three hours.

Sergei, having carefully checked his watch, leads me right up to the blowhole. I peer down 35 foot into the earth's crust. An ominous bronchial wheezing rises from the darkness, as if the earth itself is not at all well.

A path leads along by the river to a gorge, one whole side of which is punctured by dozens of horizontal geysers. Some spurt neatly out over the river, others wildly loose off in all directions. The entire 200 foot cliff emits a great wheezing chorus of steam which reminds me of Kings Cross Station in the 1950's.

Nothing is safe and sound and settled here; the earth seems to be in perpetual motion. This is nature at its most extravagant, melodramatic and bizarre.

Our day in the nature reserve ends at a woodman's hut—where we eat rich salmon stew and the mosquitoes eat us.