## The Third Voyage of Lumina

## Cordova and the Salmon fishing industry

## Post 4



Yet another idyllic anchorage for the night

From Whittier we continued pottering around Prince William Sound. This is really a large indent into the corner of Alaska where the western coast of America turns out into the Pacific to give Alaska its characteristic shape. Mileage wise we were only 40 or 50 miles across the mountains to Anchorage and its position surrounded on three sides by massive mountains gives it a remarkably benign weather, often much more quiet than further out as the mountains are so large that they physically block the Pacific low pressure systems that barrel out across from Japan to roll along either on the North of South side of the Aleutian chain of islands This is the weather that dogged us in Kodiak and further out as we were finishing the voyage last year.



A "Bow Picker" fishing with a gill net—it goes from the buoy to the blue boat

We were not arguing as we motored gently along the fjords and between the tree clad islands stopping every now and then to try and catch another illusive halibut or even a salmon. We could see the latter jumping all over the place as they make their way to the spawning grounds in the rivers. The salmon harvest is a really big thing here both for the sport and commercial fishermen. Commercially there are two ways that the salmon are caught, either drift netting with gill nets or seine netting. The industry is highly regulated but in a different way to we are used to in Europe. At home a boat would own a certain amount of quota that enables it to catch a certain volume of individual types of fish. This has two results, one is that the quota then has a value which distorts the ownership in the industry and the second is that it often means that fish that are not in the quota that get caught by accident are thrown away as the fisher-

men are not allowed to land them.

The Salmon management in Alaska is handled rather differently. There are a number of licences for boats and although they are limited there is no charge and it does not seem to be difficult to get hold of one if you want to become a fisherman. Now the interesting bit is that there is a complicated bureaucracy which keeps a daily tally of the catches and

carefully manages the opening of individual fisheries to manage the total catch and ensure the enough fish are able to return to the rivers to spawn. Consequently certain areas would open and close over just a few days and out on the water you would come across a relatively small area that was open and find maybe 20 or 30 small boats out there, all with their regulation length of net spread out across the channel. The interesting part for the yachtsman when you first come across them is to work out where the nets are actually going and how to get through.

These are the gill netters, the 100m or so of net would be laid out with a float at each end and small floats along the top to keep it hanging down in the water. The boats which operate these are called Bow Pickers and are different to any fishing boat I have ever seen. Often operated by just one or maybe two people the net is let out and hauled in over the bow. As they are working amongst an untethered net (not allowed to be anchored to the bottom or the shore) the boats are all powered by Hamilton Jets which originate from New Zealand. With a small cabin at



Mirror calm in the Ursula Channel

the back

they have one or two engines. This is the industry for the boy racer of the ocean. With a couple of Chevvy



Bow Picker at full chat

V8s in the stern they made a fantastic noise and with the general stillness of the weather you could hear them for miles, especially if you are behind with their straight through exhausts in the stern. There were a few, probably older fishermen who had seen the light and converted to diesel truck engines as they were much more economical but this has a downside as well. Apparently one of the most important features of these

boats is their speed and manoeuvrability, by switching to diesel, the whole thing gets heavier and more sluggish, so light powerful petrol engines were generally the norm. The other feature of a jet boat is that it only really works on full power and by the look of the guys trying to manoeuvre them in the harbour, would be quite a handful when you first get on the controls.

After leaving Hobo bay and the gold mine expedition, we traversed the Ursula inlet, a narrow channel behind (surprisingly) Ursula island. This winding waterway about 12 miles long was a delight. Lined by spruce trees it was probably less than a 1/4 mile wide in places with the occasional salmon jumping and many inquisitive otters. There was a lovely anchorage about half way through but as it was still morning we



Abandoned cabin with partially floating dock—Look carefully and spot the sunken fishing boat—the radar dome is the



He had just bought it and said apart from that it was very sound!

pushed on to an equally idyllic spot just a few miles from Cordova our next destination.

After a quiet night listening to the otters calling one another we took the dinghy ashore to have a look at an abandoned cabin. It was in a beautifully sheltered creek, with its own floating dock, however it had fallen on hard times with a sunken fishing boat and another on the shore. Everything was just where it had been left maybe 10 years ago and waits for someone with vision and enthusiasm to take it on.

Cordova is one of those isolated towns

with no road or rail access so is not at all tourist orientated. That does not mean that it is quiet though. With a local salmon area opening up on the Monday we were lucky to find a spot arriving Saturday lunchtime. There were boats everywhere, mainly the bow pickers, all very similar and many identical coming from the same local builders. You had to be careful walking down the pontoon as you needed to cross over the nets being repaired to get to the ramp. The constant drone of the jets was really quite something with boats constantly coming and going.

We walked through the town to the marine store to see if they had any decent line as the replacement genoa lines we had bought in Kodiak (the only braid on braid rope they had) was lovely and soft to handle but not too resistant to wear. Unfortunately they had exactly the same single choice as we have seen elsewhere so will continue to favour with what we have got and keep looking.

On the return we stopped at an old bus/ café selling tacos and beer and indulged in a can in the sun. I wondered if there is actual- Cordova harbour as we arrived—full of boats ly a single old school bus in Alaska that has-



n't had a second life. We got chatting to a local oldish couple who had turned up on their Harley lookalike Honda. They were salmon fishermen and would be going out the next day for the last opening of the season. Unlike the frenzied activity going on in the harbour they were remarkably laid back sipping their glasses of chardonnay in the sun and explained that they only went out when the weather was good these days and spent the winters in Hawaii—I can relate to that way of slowing down!

By now our friends on Hauru had turned up and we arranged to return to the café in the evening as we

had been promised very fine Salmon Tacos. This made a very fine starter to the evening but we had also heard from previous NWP boats that the Brewery and Old Alaska Hotel should also be visited so we did all three. The Brewery was fine but like the cider place in Kodiak, closed at 9pm due to some strange local licencing law so we relocated to the Old Hotel. It was for sale for around a million dollars but probably needed the same spending on it, however you would lose that feel or real authenticity, or rather that



it had not had a penny spent in the last 20 years! We chatted up some well lubricated fishermen to find out how to play shuffle board—a bit like curling on a long wooden table, and then as the evening progressed into grilling them about the Strawberry Channel.

Cordova sits on the mainland side of a channel inside a couple of islands

40 miles long. However the sea end of the channel and the obvious way out for us to the Gulf of Alaska and our southward journey is very shallow with 10 or 12 miles of shifting channels to negotiate before you get to deeper water, However the reward is that it saves about 60 miles off the journey. With hind-sight we were probably talking to the wrong people as our mentors, now being plied with beer are used

to running their jet boats at 25kn and happy so long as they have a foot of water beneath them. The Strawberry channel sounds meek enough and you could imagine someone in a punt with a Panama hat on rather than a 12 litre petrol head in his aluminium skimmer which looks not unlike a Del Boy three wheeler. We were told many times that it was simple, you followed the buoys and when they stopped, by a rock, you did a hard left and followed the "stick channel" round be-



Where else would you expect to find the Alaskan Hotel?

hind some sandbanks and out to sea.

Stumbling out into the twilight at gone midnight I think Jeremy had decided to take the sensible option of the extra 60 miles, but always up for a challenge, I was still in the "how hard can it be" opinion, and anyway what could possibly go wrong?

The following morning I was looking at the plotter wondering about the channel we may be following as apparently the chart was of little use and best left at home. I could see on the AIS that two fishing boats were heading off in that direction. Looking them up on Marine Traffic website I could see that the had 3m drafts so anywhere they can go so can we. I sat there for a couple of hours plotting their position every 5 minutes and indeed they did go all the way out to sea, although they did not follow the Stick Channel, you should have realised by now how it is marked!

So with the tide noted when the two boats were at the crux and the route located I was sure we would be ok. With quiet weather the other problem of such channels should be averted—that of the breaking waves where you meet the open sea and not an inviting prospect if we were going to meet a big swell. That evening after a further conflab over some wine and smoked salmon from our own Lumina smokery, alas not caught by ourselves but given by a local, the decision was made, we at least would go on the lunchtime tide with Hauru favouring the next one in the evening which was higher. By now it was noticeable that the harbour was all of a sudden quite quiet, several hundred of the Bow Pickers had all left to be in place when the fishery opened the following morning. The harbour was nearly empty, you could count the jet boats left on a couple of hands. Despite there being 600 berths there were only some larger fishing boats, yachts and other pleasure craft left in town.

At 1015 am we cast the lines leaving Jeremy and Brendan with a bag of my spare pipe fittings to see if they could connect a local gas bottle to their system. So now we were going to pioneer the Strawberry Channel whilst they did the same complicated navigation with their gas system.

Stay tuned for the next episode.....

Website with all the old blogs



The harbour as we left, virtually all the Bow Pickers have gone to seek their fortunes