

## The Exxon factor

In 1989, it looked like there was no way back for Alaska's wilderness and wildlife after the world's worst oil spill. Ian Belcher returns to the scene to find out how successful the clean-up operation has been

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Cold as ice ... life expectancy is 15 minutes if you fall into the freezing water. Photo: Corbis

It looks so serene. So peaceful. So harmless. Across a mill pond sea, under a clear blue sky, I can make out an oil tanker gliding effortlessly past a large buoy and two tooth-shaped icebergs. After a moment's reverie, I steer my kayak into a gentle slalom through chunks of ice, distant fragments of the 10 million tons that calve off Alaska's Columbia glacier every day.

If only it had been so easy 15 years ago. In a bid to avoid bergs from the same prolific source, the Exxon Valdez and its cargo of 53 million gallons of oil, turned out of the shipping lane, made a catastrophic navigational error and ran aground on Bligh Reef, the hazard marked by the buoy. Six sharp jolts announced the world's most environmentally damaging oil spill.

Over the next two months, a malevolent dark blanket of 11 million gallons spread 460 miles into the pristine Alaskan wilderness. It's estimated to have killed a quarter of a million seabirds, hundreds of seals and eagles, 22 killer whales, billions of fish eggs and 2,800 otters. "It was like a war zone," said fisheries technician Nancy Hillstrand, who worked on a remote wildlife rescue station. "We were getting up to 30 otters a day, all screaming."

So 15 years later, after Exxon's \$2 billion clean up involving 10,000 workers and the cleansing effects of countless winter storms, what will tourists find? Have the abundant natural populations fully recovered? Can you still see oil if you dig beneath the pebbly beaches? Is there any trace of the cataclysmic event?

One of the best ways to find out is take a kayak trip. Prince William Sound, with its accessible, dramatically glaciated coastline and safe waters, is perfect for paddling. Instead of panicky oil execs and environmentalists, our eclectic group included an American publisher, IT expert and New York trader, along with a Welsh accountant. We were lead by Erik and Andy, two genial guides straight out of a Pepsi Max commercial.

Our departure point was Valdez, the US's northernmost ice-free port. Life revolves around fishing, tourism, and, as it's the terminal of the 800-mile Trans Alaska pipeline, crude oil. But the town also drips with the unavoidable legacy of the Exxon Valdez. On arrival, the local Star and

Vanguard newspaper was reporting the latest emergency response drill - one of the measures introduced after the spill. And at the Bad Ass Coffee House they still serve a hazelnut and butter rum drink named after the tanker. Slick marketing indeed.

Down at the harbour it wasn't hard to find memories of the tumultuous spring and summer of 1989. And they weren't all bad. The massive clean up, where fishing boats were hired for big corporate bucks, had temporarily made Valdez boom. "It was an oil rush," said Ed Bullock Jnr, who had ferried government officials out to soiled areas, and now skips a salmon boat. "Black gold, Texas tea, Alaska syrup, call it what you will. Some people made a fortune."

We set off by motor launch to the drop-off point, following exactly the same route as the ill-fated tanker. It's an extraordinary setting, with some of the highest coastal mountains of the planet, riddled with glaciers, looming above 21 massive oil storage tanks - the meeting place of America's economy and its great outdoors.

Waterfalls roared down sheer green slopes into the Sound. But our first kayaking strokes pulled us away from this main body of water, towards the chaotic blue grey toothpaste squeeze of the Shoup glacier. The boom of distant calving ice grew ever louder, as if we were approaching a military front line.

When the channel separating Shoup's two bays became too shallow to paddle, we were forced to tramp through the water, pulling heavily laden kayaks. Foregoing wellington boots for open sandals was an early fashion mistake. It was painfully cold. The Welsh accountant squealed and appeared to start crying. Frankly, it wasn't Pepsi Max behaviour.

But it was a salutary lesson. "If you fall in out there you have five minutes before you're unconscious," said Erik, matter-of-factly. "Your life expectancy is 15 minutes."

We paddled to within three quarters of a mile of the gnarled glacier face that now cracked, groaned and roared with rushing melt water. "I know people who kayak right up to it," drawled Andy. "They haven't had children yet. Darwin will prevail."

The first day also gave us a taste of the area's wildlife. Perched on a small island and every surrounding piece of ice, was a colony of 29,000 breeding pairs of kittiwakes. Their raucous cries serenaded us to sleep at a camp site that sounded terrifying - Avalanche Beach next to Bear Alley - but proved as safe as it was beautiful.

From now on, every stroke drew us further into a world resembling a David Attenborough documentary. Harbour seals, sea lions and sea otters popped up inquisitively around the kayaks, salmon rolled close to our paddles and eagles watched from the trees. We saw cormorants, loons and striking harlequin ducks - and all within sight of the super tankers heading to and from the Valdez terminal.

To the untrained tourist eye it seemed hard to believe the abundant wildlife was still affected. But the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council, formed to oversee restoration of the ecosystem using a £492 million civil settlement, paints a less rosy picture. Six of the 21 "injured" species, including herring, cormorants, harbour seals and harlequin ducks, have shown little or no improvement. And while many species have made "substantial progress", just six are fully recovered.

Only conservationists would know. To our group it was an astonishing display of nature that peaked at Sawmill Bay. At its far shore, where a small river snaked back into dense forest, thousands of pink salmon - one of the recovered species - were heading upstream to spawn and die. Next to the churning water, the bank was littered with fish carcasses, nibbled and left by spoilt, gorged predators.

The views kept pace with the wildlife. The only danger was scenic overload. "Where's that?" I asked, as we passed an amphitheatre of snow-licked peaks plunging into a fjord that would have been the jewel of most coastlines.

"Jack Bay," sniffed Andy. "Just another inlet." Just as a 17-mile-long beach was just another campsite.

After a typically substantial meal of steak, vegetables and red wine, I cast my lure into the water and within 20 seconds had hooked a plump silver salmon. Fifteen minutes later, I was dipping its bright orange flesh into wasabi and soy sauce - New York traders travel in some style - for ocean fresh sashimi without the slightest hint of hydrocarbon. After several "s'mores" - biscuits with melted chocolate and marshmallows - I contemplated a panorama of 27 peaks and the most scenic indigestion of my life.

Days passed without a shred of visible evidence of the spill. The nearest we came to witnessing environmental damage was the Welsh accountant's regular campsite toilet reports: "lovely view, good drop zone" and more alarmingly "private, but watch out for nasty barnacles".

In fact, the elements in spring 1989 had been very kind to the ravishingly beautiful north coast of Prince William Sound. Although we kayaked within six miles of Bligh Reef, the slick had flowed away south and west. Instead, it washed up in varying quantities along 1,300 miles of the Western Sound, and the Kenai and Alaska peninsulas.

The latest survey of affected areas in Prince William in Summer 2001, found there was still oil on 20 acres of coastline, including 14 islands. Most of it was light surface pollution, but 20 of the several thousand pits dug discovered "extremely repugnant" sub-surface oil. You won't see it, but environmentalists fear winter storms can release isolated pockets, further injuring local wildlife.

But it's a tiny area in the Sound's 15,000 square miles. As Dr Pam Tuomi, senior veterinarian at the Alaska SeaLife Centre, pointed out: you may spot more research vessels than 15 years ago because the spill focused attention on the crying need for monitoring and data, but "tourists are more likely to see oil on the beach at Galveston, Texas than they are here".

So our six-day, 50-mile paddle, revealed nothing more sinister than an increasingly dramatic landscape. The kayaking isn't for the unfit or lazy, but tired arms were a fair exchange for the climactic views of the Columbia glacier.

Oozing down the Chugach mountains like a fat serpent, it's over five times longer than Shoup. It's also retreating at a far more catastrophic speed: eight miles in 24 years. Cruise ships used to pull up to the face and blast their foghorns to provoke calving. Now a white field of floating ice keeps them eight miles away. We could go a couple closer, disembarking on to pebbly moraine for a 360-degree view juxtaposing vivid green meadows with dazzling snow and ice.

On our last night, perhaps hardened by the wilderness, we fused refreshment with cryogenics, by jumping off small bergs into chest-deep water. It was hardy preparation for an unforgettable final morning when an orca arced past our kayaks, puffins zipped around our heads and a patrol of punchy sea lions jostled us well away from their 500-strong colony. It was the perfect end to a restoration drama.

## Way to go

### Getting there:

Travelbag (0870 8146545, [travelbag.co.uk](http://travelbag.co.uk)) offers 14 nights in Anchorage, Valdez and Homer from £1,012pp including flights, car hire and accommodation.

### Where to stay:

Ramada Inn, Anchorage Downtown (+907 272 7561, [the.ramada.com/anchorage146144](http://the.ramada.com/anchorage146144)). Best Western Valdez Harbor Inn (+907 835 3434, [valdezharborinn.com](http://valdezharborinn.com)). Aspen Hotel, Valdez (+907 835 4445, [aspenhotelsak.com](http://aspenhotelsak.com)).

**Activities:** Pangaea Adventures (001 907 835 8442, [alaskasummer.com](http://alaskasummer.com)) offers the six-day Shoup to Glacier Island kayaking trip for £708pp including equipment, guides and food.

### Further information:

[travelalaska.com](http://travelalaska.com).

Country code: 001.

Flight time: 15 hrs.

Time difference: -8hrs.

£1 = 1.79 dollars.