Extreme Takeout

Three couples take their boats from Seattle to Japan, via Alaska and Russia, on the Great Siberian Sushi Run.

By Mike Werling

(From left to right) Steven Argosy, Roberta Williams, Tina Jones, Ken Williams, Braun Jones, Carol Argosy

PARTICIPANTS (WILLING AND OTHERWISE) & BOATS:

- **Ken and Roberta Williams, Seattle.** Boat (Nordhavn 68): *Sans Souci.* Retired. Ken is the founder and former CEO of software company Sierra On-Line Inc. Roberta was a well-known computer game designer.
- **Steven and Carol Argosy, Mystic, Conn.** Boat (Nordhavn 62): *Seabird.* Retired. Steven owned a manufacturing company, and Carol was an executive.
- **Braun and Tina Jones, Alexandria, Va.** Boat (Nordhavn 62): *Grey Pearl.* Braun is semi-retired, running his own private equity firm with his son, and Tina is a former real estate agent.

OK, so the Great Siberian Sushi Run goes like this. You start in Seattle, head north, then west, then south and 5,276 nautical miles later you're done. That puts you in Osaka, Japan. Easy enough, right? Did I mention the run is made during summer, when the prevailing winds are against any boat attempting the feat (hence the GSSR's designation as the "wrong way gang")? Did I mention the inter-island effect in the Aleutians that kicks up violent and unpredictable wind and currents? Yeah, well, on the upside, at least it's not winter when things are even worse.

It's really a circumnavigation, this sushi run, but nobody's calling it that because it's being done in dribs and drabs — if 500 miles here, 1,000 miles there can be considered a drib or a drab.

So the participants hit the water without any official sanctioning. No squadron of race officials and rescue boats and hangers-on. No Larry Ellison-like backing, though there is an oracle, but they call him a weather guy. And no swords, which Japanese customs officials asked about. Really.

Most people — city folk, anyway — can't go 5,276 feet (that's almost a mile) without seeing a sushi place, and yet these three couples (and a rotating cast of crew) saw fit to travel that many miles in search of the stuff. Granted, they have done more — a lot more — than hunt for sushi, but the Great Siberian Let's-Try-To-Do-Everything-Under-the-Sun Run doesn't fit as nicely on a logo. And get this: One of the couples doesn't even like seafood all that much. Menus in Japan get very small when you rule out the items plucked from the sea — or made from horse meat, as they found in one Japanese restaurant.

For those of you who are seafood fans, Steven Argosy says a trip to the Land of the Rising Sun is worth it: "You have not had sushi until you have had it prepared in Japan."

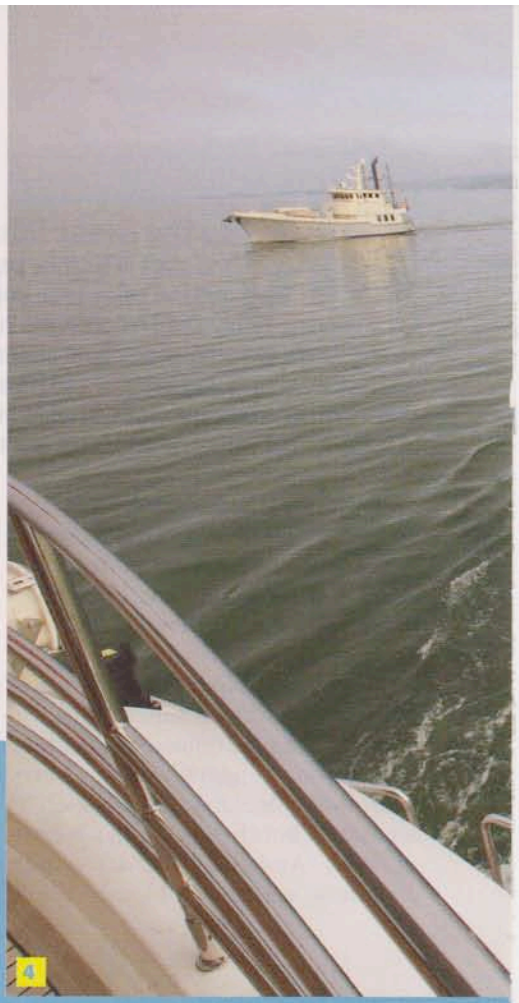
Oh, I almost forgot. The three couples were relative strangers before they started planning this journey. No longtime friendships that had previously held up under fire. No unspoken bonds that might come in handy in an emergency.

"We really didn't know each other prior to the trip," Ken Williams said. "My sense is that if we lived next to each other in a major U.S. city, I don't know that we'd really hang out. We're all different people from different backgrounds."

See, it all started when this one guy — we'll call him Braun Jones, because that's his real name; nobody innocent to protect here — approached these other folks and said, "Hey, let's do something crazy." I'm paraphrasing. (Jones was only secondhand mad; John Kennelly was the original bad influence, but he's not on this journey.) The stories they tell are close enough to each other that no one is obviously "blaming" anyone else — especially now that they've had so much fun and have since continued to Hong Kong (the Great Chinese Kung Pao Run?) — but if a finger-pointing flow chart had to be assembled, it would go something like this: Steven blames Carol (and Ken) blames Roberta blames Tina blames Braun.

Braun really can't be blamed, though. He spent his high school years in Japan while his father was serving in the Navy. Nostalgia's tug — much like a 40-knot headwind — is hard to resist.

OK, so now you know what it is (not in a June Cleaver in "Airplane" sort of way), who the players are and what boats they're using (see sidebar). On these pages, you'll see their route and read about trip highlights — straight from their blogs. We'll start in Alaska. Try to keep up.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Trip Highlights

SANS SOUCI: One terrific reason to be in Adak is the Aleutian Sports Bar and Grill, affectionately nicknamed for its initials: The ASBAG. Be careful with the pronunciation. It's the only game in town for dinner or pubbing in Adak, and the GSSR crew did our part to boost its revenue.

SANS SOUCI: As we hiked around the area [on Attu], we saw the shallow trenches dug by American soldiers in World War II. **[1]** It was a strange feeling, standing in an American trench, looking up at the hills where 65 years ago the Japanese had controlled the hills and exchanged fire with the American soldiers. It was inconceivable, but it did occur.

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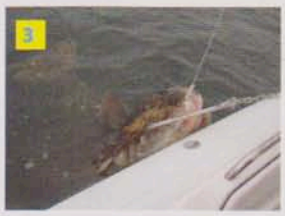
GREY PEARL: We finally bid adieu to Dutch Harbor and set off for Adak. On the way, we stopped and anchored in a beautiful bay on Adak Island. We stopped primarily because resident consultant and fisherman Bill Harrington on *Sans Souci* told us we could see a B-24 Liberator (bomber plane) wreck from WWII near the beach. **[2]** We landed our dinghies on the black-sand beaches and set off in search of the plane. We hiked over a nearby berm, and there was the plane several hundred yards away with a herd of reindeer in close range.

SANS SOUCI: The fishing went very well. Too well, in fact. Almost immediately, the guys caught a 30-pound cod. They then caught a 45-pound halibut. That's when they captured this guy [a 250-pound halibut] and disaster struck. As they were pulling in this monster, they put the gaff (like a giant fishhook on a chain) in him, and he rammed into my inflatable tender. Pop! **[3]** The gaff popped our own tender. One of the tubes went flat, and the halibut was still fighting. Luckily, the tender wasn't sunk, but it was leaning. The halibut wasn't giving up. It started pulling the tender, and gave the guys a tour of the bay, including almost dragging them onto a reef. Throughout the episode, there was quite a debate over whether or not to just cut the fish loose. With 20/20 hindsight, that option should have been more seriously considered.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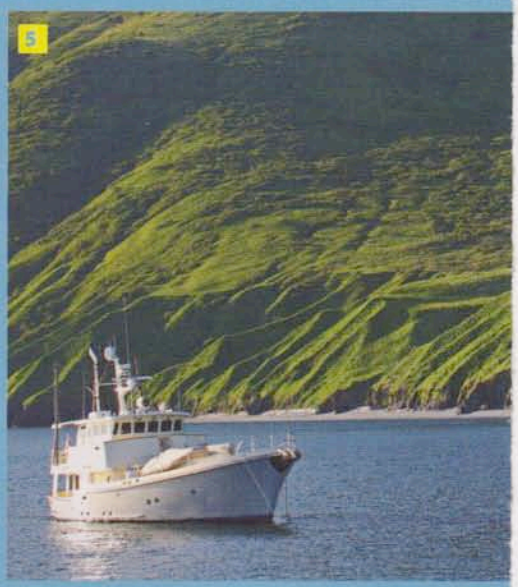
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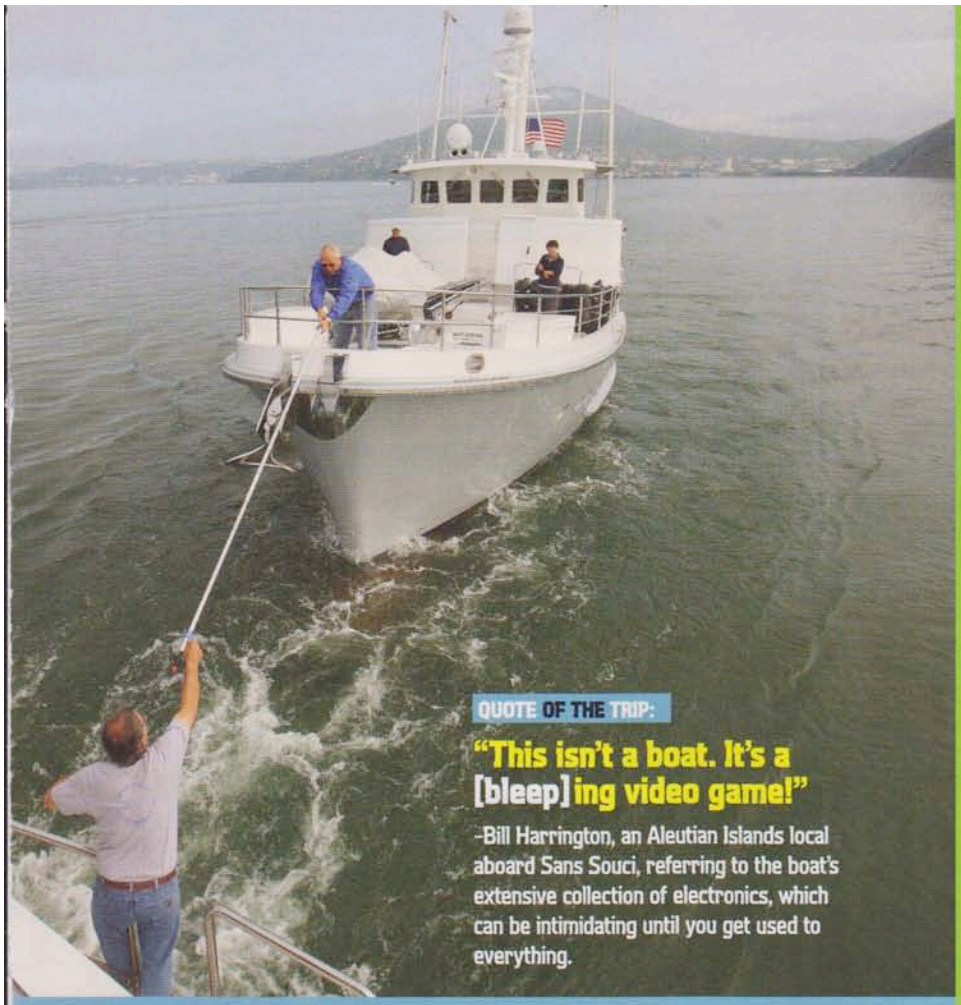


QUOTE OF THE TRIP:

"This isn't a boat. It's a [bleep]ing video game!"

–Bill Harrington, an Aleutian Islands local aboard Sans Souci, referring to the boat's extensive collection of electronics, which can be intimidating until you get used to everything.

CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT

Planning for a trip this long takes months, and deciding what to take or leave behind can be difficult. The GSSR participants all say they over-prepared and haven't run into a situation where they were lacking something they wish they'd brought along. Here is some of the technology they're most happy they have — in addition to radar, sonar, chartplotters and all the usual boating suspects:

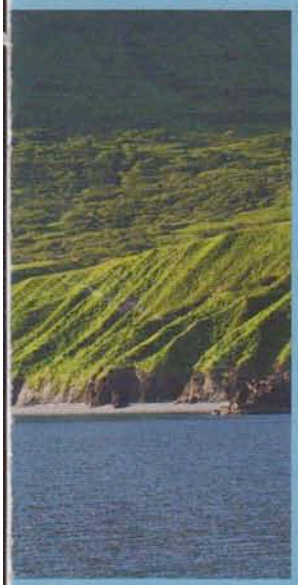
Satellite — VSAT and Iridium. The group was able to stay in constant contact with the outside world via e-mail and post their blog entries on the Internet.

AIS transponder. "Critical especially as we got closer to Japan and the crowded traffic lanes," Steven Argosy said, even though he was surprised at the number of ships without AIS signals.

Google Earth. "There are no cruising guides," Ken Williams said, "but Google Earth allows us to see exactly where we're going."

Weather routers — the human variety. The group used a couple of land-based weather spotters to supplement what they found on their own and what they were experiencing firsthand.

Simon Monitoring System. Williams said 250 items on *Sans Souci* are monitored constantly — a big contributor to peace of mind.



Whether rafting up [4], sitting at anchor in Alaska [5 & 7], patrolling abandoned neighborhoods on Adak Island [6], or landing a monster fish [8], the GSSR participants had a great summer.

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ExtremeTakeout: The Journey

[SEABIRD]

It is interesting cruising at night in Alaska. The sun sets very late, and it really does not get dark until about midnight. Then it starts getting lighter around 3 a.m., so in the course of a day, there is really very little "night cruising," which is great.

8 [SANS SOUCI]

Our biggest challenge in navigating around Japan has been all the fishing gear. Roberta and I took the second shift running the boat, and throughout our entire shift (3 to 9 p.m.), we dodged an endless stream of the little flagpoles marking fishing gear. During daylight, they are fairly easy to dodge, and we've decided we can safely run within a few yards of them without fouling our props. Unfortunately, they are not all the same. Most have poles that stick up from the water, but some just have a ball floating at water level. Some have radar reflectors on them, making them easy to spot on radar, but most do not. The big freighters ignore them and just run them over, whereas if we wrap one around a prop it would mean putting a diver in the water. Given the warm water we are now in, this wouldn't be a big deal during the day, but at night it would be a real headache.

6 [SEABIRD]

We are now hundreds of miles to the west of Attu, the last of the Aleutian Islands, and have crossed the international date line. That itself is kind of weird, as just prior to crossing the date line, at noon, it was Thursday. A few minutes later, after we crossed the line, it was 12:02, but now it was Friday.

6 ATTU

ADAK 6

7 PETROPAVLOVSK

8 TOMAKOMAI

7 [SANS SOUCI]

As we approached Russia, we shut off *Sans Souci*'s sonar. If there were subs in the water, I didn't want the Russians thinking we were looking for them (which we weren't). As far as I know, we were just being paranoid, but our assumption was that all communication between the boats was being monitored. Whether it was or not, who knows?

We were parked next to a Russian battleship. They had soldiers on deck for our arrival. I suspect we must have looked very strange to them. It felt totally bizarre standing 20 feet from the Russian battleship. The soldiers were smiling, so we figured we were OK. Once ashore, we discovered that we had arrived on "Navy Day." The navy was there showing off its battleships, bombers, fighter jets, etc. We were offered tours. I found it amusing, in that prior to our arrival I had mentioned in the comments section of my blog that I was going to work hard to not see anything controversial. We're a guest in Russia, and I didn't want to see anything they didn't want me to see. Suddenly, here was a Russian battleship inviting us aboard for a tour. How strange is that?

6 [SANS SOUCI]

Entire neighborhoods [in Adak] are sitting and decaying. They are spooky to drive through. Waterfront homes, with their entire neighborhood just shut down, are waiting for the wind to destroy them. One resident described it this way: "The homes survive until the first hole is opened into a residence — a window breaks or siding is ripped off by a windstorm. As soon as the wind finds an opening, it is all over. The next storm rips the home apart."

OSAKA 9

9 [GREY PEARL]

One Saturday evening [in Osaka] we were invited to what we thought was a yacht club party. Much to our surprise, it was a party held in our honor. We enjoyed the company of several yacht club members over trays of sushi and pizza, plus beer, wine and sake. Ken brought several GSSR T-shirts, hats and such as gifts for the members. They set them all out on display. They seemed to get really excited when we explained our logo (a polar bear standing on top of a piece of shrimp sushi, facing backward symbolizing the wrong way gang). Then the map on the flipside that shows Japan as our ultimate destination. Was it possible that they or we felt even more honored? Later, the dockmaster announced that the yacht club members must play "rock, paper, scissors" to determine who got what of the trophies. Hilarious. Of course, they asked if we played such a game in America.

2 [SEABIRD]

After Pelican Bay, we stopped for a couple of nights at anchor in Dundas Bay, tucked way back where most would never find it. It was recommended by Ken's friend John, who is kind of a local up there, as he has been cruising in Alaska for 20 or more years. Dundas had to be the most beautiful anchorage we have seen to date. It is long and thin, and you are surrounded by towering mountains on three sides. It was flat calm, and the shoreline was abundant with bears and even a wolf. We got really close to some of the bears, who did not seem the least bit affected by our presence — other than an occasional licking of their chops, keeping us at a distance.

GLACIER BAY

KODIAK

PELICAN BAY

DUTCH HARBOR

SEATTLE

3 [SEABIRD]

Bill Harrington, a local aboard *Sans Souci*, explained that Kodiak is the last of the "tree" islands. After Kodiak, the trees disappear and the islands are mountainous and covered with low, green shrubs. It is almost prehistoric looking. We anchored inside Malina Point on Raspberry Island for the first night after leaving Kodiak. The weather was spectacular and it was kind of strange seeing Carol sitting on the aft deck at 10 p.m. with sunglasses on reading her book.

1 [SEABIRD]

I need to mention Rose's Bar at Pelican Bay (near Glacier Bay). Rumor has it that when you get there, they try to get you drunk, lure you to dance on the bar and then proceed to pull down your pants! I tightened my belt to the max before going in and kept a wary eye on the customers. Carol, Gloria (a friend of Ken and Roberta) and Roberta ended up bartending for Rose while she sat at a table with friends. Just as we were leaving, Rose wanted to know if I would stand up on the bar. I think she was half kidding, but I instinctively grabbed my belt as we left. Good thing I don't drink. I think in the old days I would have jumped up there without thinking twice.

4 [SANS SOUCI]

It's been interesting on the docks [at Dutch Harbor]. A few boats behind us is a big wooden fishing boat, probably 90 feet long. Bill mentioned that it was built in 1913 and commandeered during World War II for use dropping depth charges on submarines, and did take out a submarine. Last week, there was a sailboat here that was working on a circumnavigation. This week, in roughly the same place, there is a sailboat headed to the Northwest Passage. We haven't seen anyone who is here "just hanging out." This is a place you come to for a reason, and whether it is commercial fishing or exploring the world, if you are here, you are probably doing something interesting.

The Saga Continues...

The adventure didn't stop in Osaka for these intrepid travelers. That was merely a winter layover. They continued on to Hong Kong and are devising a scheme for 2011. To keep up with *Sans Souci*, *Seabird* and *Grey Pearl*, and maybe interact with the participants, visit their blogs: kensblog.com, seabirdlrc.com, greypearl.talkspot.com. Do you have a long-range cruising story of your own? Let us know about it at editorial@seamag.com.