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SURF TIDE

Unusually big Turnagain waves thrill kayakers, surfboards.

by TIM MURRAY
Daily New Reporter

BIRD POINT - the incoming tide boiled around the rocky point and into a shallow channel, cresting into a gray, foaming breaker roughly 5 feet high and 50 yards across.

Kayakers George Beirne and Tyson Peterson, bobbing in the 38-degree water, know Alaska's waters can be dangerous. This was a different white-water challenge altogether. Turnagain Arm's bore tide was running at its highest level in 18 years. They planned to ride the tidal waters in boats no bigger than a bathtub, kayaking into the maw of a briny, hissing wave unlike anything they'd paddled before. Talk about being stoked. "Yahoo!" Beirne, 24, hollered. The kayakers dipped their paddles into the water and maneuvered their boats closer to the oncoming wave, rumbling toward them at 10 mph. When the wave hit, it swept up the kayakers like matchsticks caught in the swirl of a toilet bowl. Peterson's kayak collided with Beirne's and rolled, rinsing Peterson in silty surf cold enough to kill. Amped with adrenaline he barely noticed. "That's the wildest surfing I've ever done," Peterson, 24, said later. "The wave was just a huge pile of water." Beirne, an expert kayaker like Peterson, said the wave was the fastest water he's ever paddled. "I was just hanging on, trying to stay upright and hooting and hollering," he said. Their ride lasted for at least a minute, after which the bore lost its shape and flattened out. The kayakers paddled to shore, hoisted their boats on vehicles and drove farther up the arm to head off the incoming tide yet again. When the wave reformed, they were there to catch it, even as gray dusk settled into inky night. Try that at Bonzai Pipeline.

The Turnagain and Knik Arms of Cook Inlet have the only regularly occurring bore tide in the United States. Potentially visible twice every day, the bores occur with each incoming tide, usually six to twelve undulating swells 2 to 3 feet high. The unique waves are generated by strong tidal action when a large mass of water is squeezed into a shallow, narrow inlet. Opposing winds, like the strong southeasterlies that blow through Turnagain Arm, usually increase the wave's size.

Last week, the bore tide in Turnagain Arm was the biggest in recent memory, the result of a rare celestial alignment and a blazing full moon. For thrill-seekers like Peterson, Beirne, Lolly Moss, Marc Wisdorf, Paul Wunnicke and John Markel, the epic tide was too good to ignore. They rode the bore almost daily last week, a daring water rodeo they dubbed "The Bore Tide Follies". While kayakers have ridden the bore for years - Jim Diehl and Bill Queitzsch, among others, did it years ago - the first known surfboard ride in Turnagain Arm happened only last month.

During a late October bore, Moss donned a wetsuit and, atop her 9-foot Ocean Storm surfboard, caught the wave. In the days that followed, Wisdorf and Wunnicke also surfed the powerful bore surge. The wave Moss surfed Oct 21 was lumpy and rough, but last Wednesday she got the ride of her life on a rolling breaker the color of weak coffee. The 40-something Moss estimated her ride at a seemingly endless 2 minutes. "I was just surfing and surfing and surfing and surfing," she laughed. "I was going

'yea!' It was fun." Wisdorf was one of several who witnessed Moss' historic bore ride. "She was the only person on the wave, and she was just smoking up the arm" he said. A day later Moss caught yet another wave, this one a glassy Pacific Ocean-like roller. Moss swept down the face and carved a graceful turn at the wave's bottom, just like surfers at legendary locales as California's Steamer Lane and Hawaii's Sunset Beach.

Moss and her fellow Girdwood surfers had been trying for years to catch the bore tide, lugging their surfboards down a steep trail, often in terrible weather, only to find waves waves too small and misshappen to surf. But last week, thanks to a new stretch of Seward Highway that runs right along the water's edge and the historically high bore tide, the surfers caught their wave. "This could be a mecca for surfing," said Moss, only half in jest, referring to highway pullouts that come within yards of the narrow water channels where the bore reaches its greatest heights.

Wisdorf, a beginning surfer at 38, caught his first wave last Thursday. It was his fourth attempt. "The first time, I chickened out when I saw how big the wave was," he admitted. "When the wave stood up I said 'Oh s---!' and paddled for shore. It was intimidating." On Thursday, though, Wisdorf was back in the water riding a "squirrely" 5-footer that held the power to carry him all the way home to Girdwood. "A big rush," he said. Like his fellow wave riders, Wisdorf is a confessed adrenaline junkie. he once rode in-line skates down the Turnagain Pass at 50mph, without brakes. Still, surfing the bore is among the wildest things he's done, Wisdorf acknowledged. "But what else is there to do at this time of year?"

Turnagain Arm, notorious for its dangerous sandbars and churning water, is no playground, which the kayakers and surfers were quick to enforce. "If you don't know what you're doing," Peterson said, "it's a very hazardous place to be." To avoid dangerous pockets of soft sand, the boaters tried to put in where the shoreline was rocky and firm. "We scamper over the sand real quick," Moss said. "We don't spend any time on it."

They also wore appropriate gear - dry suits, wet suits, helmets, gloves, booties, life vest - and never ventured into the water alone. Once in the drink, among the biggest dangers is the constantly shifting channel bottom. In some places the water is several feet deep, in others only inches deep. "You never know how deep it is because it's silty," Beirne said. Taking in a mouthful of Turnagain Arm water is like brushing your teeth with sandpaper, he said. "When you're surfing a wave you can sometimes feel the boat drag across the bottom, and if you rolled you could break a paddle or, worse, your neck." The dangers, though, proved no deterrent to the crew. "I like to push it," said Beirne, who's trained in swift-water rescue and CPR. "You only live once."

With the bore tide continuing to run strong, more and more motorists are stopping along the highway to watch the surf. The boaters are more worried for those folks than they are for themselves. Don't venture in, they cautioned.

"I don't want to get kicked off the water because someone bites the bullet out there," Moss said.

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