Full Circle

Michael Palin

Photographs by Basil Pao

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Extract

ALASKA, USA

DAY 1: *Little Diomede Island, Bering Strait*

It's mid-morning in late August and I'm sitting on a rock in the middle of the Bering Strait.

I'm not the only one here. As well as the six other members of my film crew there are a hundred and eighty-two Inaluk Eskimos for whom this mile-long granite outcrop is home. Down below me they go about their business. Fishermen dismember walruses, cutting the precious meat into fat, stinky chunks which they conceal beneath shrouds of plastic sheeting like objects in a murder investigation. Their wives spread the skin of the walrus out to dry on wooden frames, alongside braided lengths of seal intestine, strips of herring and morsels of beluga whale. Others repair boats, tarring and painting and tinkering with outboard motors. Most of the sixty children who live on the rock spill noisily onto the school playground for a lunchtime break. A handful of men in hard hats disappears into the treatment plant beside the huge water storage tank that dominates the small, steep waterfront settlement.

From my precarious perch I look down at the messy jumble of huts with something approaching despair. Everyone else on this rock seems to know what they're doing and why they are here.

I try to concentrate – Nigel is pointing his camera expectantly and Fraser's wind-baffled sound boom is aimed at me like a cattle prod. A documentary series waits to begin. Yet, as I sit here, I feel less like a television presenter, more like Alice in Wonderland.

Only five days ago I was filming in a cupboard in Buckinghamshire with John Cleese and a tarantula spider and now here I am, just short of the Arctic Circle on a Monday morning, looking across at a Russian rock where it is Tuesday morning – the explanation for this twenty-four hour time difference being the invisible presence of the International Date Line which slices through the Bering Strait not much more than a stone's throw away. The Russian soldiers staring out at me from across the water have already had the day I'm having.

Now the wind is strengthening, carrying the sickly, pungent smell of seal blubber up the hill towards us. It also carries the smell of changing weather and I'm aware that we cannot stay up here for much longer. I must focus my mind and try to make sense of all this.

The rock I am sitting on is called Little Diomede Island and it is the most extreme north-westerly possession of the United States of America. It lies just south of the Arctic Circle at a latitude of 65.40° and is separated from the Russian territory of Big Diomede Island by a narrow, racing, two-and-a-quarter-mile channel. A few thousand years ago, before the end of the Ice Age, Diomede was part of a huge land bridge, across which, many scientists now believe, came the first human inhabitants of the Americas. The Russian mainland is only 30 miles away and the American mainland even less. Asia and America come as close to each other here as London is to Oxford, and in winter, when the sea freezes, it's possible to walk from one continent to the other.

The Bering Strait is the northern gateway to the Pacific. From here the great ocean swells southwards until it extends 11,000 miles from eastern shore to western shore and covers one-third of the surface of the planet. Many people have explored its islands, or sailed down the Asian or American coasts, but I have never come across anyone who has been full circle, who has followed the countries of the Pacific all the way round. I hope to be back on Little Diomede one year from now. Or however long it takes to circumnavigate the Pacific Rim.

Once I've confided my intentions to the camera I feel better, clearer in my mind. But as the rising wind licks around this bleak and treeless cliff so there rises in me a dawning apprehension of what is to come, of how much there is to do, and how little I will see of my family in the year ahead. I look around the crew and wonder if they are thinking the same thing but they are already packing up the gear, hoisting bags onto shoulders and starting to pick their way through the grassy rocks down towards the village and the sea. We're off.

The village into which we are descending is called Ignaluk. It is the chief, indeed the only settlement on Little Diomede and

within it are evident all the contradictions and complications of Eskimo life. The weather is fierce and pitiless. There is no shelter from the elements apart from the huts they build themselves and the few modern public buildings provided by the government. Living is still largely subsistence, and hunting methods ancient and traditional. Puffin-like sea birds called auklets are caught in nets at the end of 12-foot long poles. 'We basically scoop them out of the air,' one man told me. They hunt whales, though nowadays they shoot rather than harpoon them. When the first ice of winter, the 'slush ice' as they call it, comes down from the north, they lie in wait for the polar bears that come down with it. It's a hard life, but none of those I've met would dream of abandoning the island.

Eskimo culture is emphasized in school and in the local council. Alcohol is banned here, as in many communities in western Alaska; the Eskimos have a low tolerance of it. Half the population worship at the local Catholic church. Their Eskimo names have American counterparts – I've met Eskimos called Andy, Marlene, Orville and Anne-Marie. They may not have fridge-freezers (they bury food in the permafrost instead) but they do have satellite television and it's not long before word gets around that one of the actors from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is on the island. The last thing I have to do before leaving one of the most remote corners of the world is to sign autographs.

DAY 3: *Nome*

'You will find a magic city,
On the shore of Bering Strait;
Which shall be for you a station,
To unload your Arctic freight.
Where the gold of Humboldt's vision,
Has for the countless ages lain;
Waiting for the hand of labour,
And the Saxon's tireless brain.'

The Goldsmith of Nome
Sam Dunham

Breakfast at Fat Freddie's restaurant in Nome, a very whacky town, taking pride in bizarre statistics such as the fact that it is 75 miles away from the nearest tree. It lies on the south-west coast of the 200-mile-long Seward Peninsula, named after George Seward, the American Secretary of State who bought Alaska from the Russians in 1867 for 7.2 million dollars. (Even though this worked out at roughly two cents an acre it was not a popular purchase and the territory was referred to at the time as 'Walrussia' and 'Seward's Ice Box'.) We are quartered at a sea front hotel called the Nugget Inn which lies on Front Street next to the Lucky Swede Gift Shop.

There were in fact three Swedes who, in 1898, struck lucky in nearby Anvil Creek and started a classic gold-rush which in two years turned a stretch of Arctic desert into a city of 20,000. There are different versions of why it was called Nome, all of them suitably eccentric. One Harry de Windt who passed through in 1902 and described the gold-mad town as 'a kind of squalid Monte Carlo', claims that it derives from the Indian word 'No-me' meaning 'I don't know', which was the answer given to early white traders when they asked the natives where they were. The most popular explanation is that Nome came about as a misreading of a naval chart on which a surveyor had noted a nearby cape with the query 'Name?'.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings Nome has survived ninety-seven years of fire, flood and disease and though its population has settled down around the five thousand mark, it doesn't seem to have lost any of its spiky individuality. From the outside, the clap-boarded Nome Nugget Inn looks like a fair-ground attraction, with carved figures of doughty moustachioed gold-panners and the obligatory multi-branched milepost: 'London 4376, Siberia 164'. Inside, it's a cross between a bordello and a natural history museum. The burgundy walls around the narrow reception area are hung with picks, shovels, harpoons, an Eskimo drum made from dried walrus stomach, a fishing float, even an entire kayak. A stuffed ptarmigan scratches itself above an old-style Western bank grille and the skins of grizzlies, wolverines and Alaskan lynxes lie flattened on the back wall like the bodies of cartoon characters who have just run into it.

I take a walk up Front Street, clutching my place-mat from Fat Freddie's which is full of useful information. 'Nome has thirteen churches, three gas stations, nine saloons and eight points of interest.' All I can see at the moment is a large number of unsteady people weaving their way up the sidewalk, occasionally shouting some blurred greeting.

'You Korean?' is the one that throws me most.

Over the counter in a gift shop across the street I get talking to Richard Benneville. 'Sure there's a booze problem,' Richard nods across the street at a cluster of watering holes – with names like the Board of Trade, the Polaris, the Breakers Bar, the Bering Sea Saloon and the Anchor Tavern. 'Those bars on Front Street take ten and a half million dollars a year.' But he doesn't believe Diomede-style prohibition is the answer. 'The modern Eskimo is changing. They have their own corporations now. They can make up their own minds. There used to be two Alcoholics Anonymous groups here, now there's twenty-two.'

Later, Jim Stimpfle, a local businessman, enlarges on the changes, though with the discretion of a real estate salesman he refers to the Eskimos by their politically correct name: 'This is not a native American town. It's a gold-rush town. A town of outsiders, laid out on the traditional US grid plan. That's why Nome is special and that's why property developers like it.'

Two hundred thousand dollars for a property on this bare windswept coast still sounds a lot until one remembers that Alaska now has more than gold. Huge oil resources lie beneath the rock-hard permafrost. Already the share of the Permanent Oil Fund, which is what Alaska gets back in royalties, stands at thirteen billion dollars. Not only are there no state taxes but every Alaskan man, woman and child gets one thousand dollars a year back from the state government.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the locals express great affection for this wild place. They emphasize the lack of crime; the fact that, despite appearances, you can safely leave your door unlocked at night.

And, as Nancy Maguire, editor of the impressive local weekly, *The Nome Nugget*, reminds me, 'Our drunks are the friendliest in the world'.

DAY 5

I drive a little way out of town along the beaches to search for what remains of the Golden Sands of Nome which once attracted a stinking tented city of thirty thousand prospectors. Today, under cold grey skies, the description seems only ironic. The foreshore is grubby, more grey than gold, and there is a tidemark of bleached wood spars which I imagine must have been swept over from Russia, as there are no trees here.

But these unpromising surroundings do not deter eternal optimists like whippet-thin Andy and his thirteen-year-old son Rob. They sleep in a little shelter on the beach and pan laboriously by hand. Rob is sensible and articulate and after a brief conversation convinces me that there is absolutely nothing more normal than to spend an entire summer with your father, scraping grains of gold off a windswept Alaskan beach. He regards the financial rewards as quite sufficient enough to compensate for the lack of school chums. He reckons he can clear six and a half thousand dollars in a good summer.

Further down the beach, an Englishman by the name of Stan Cook uses sea water out of a high-pressure hose to dig out the sand. He's scoured a snaking six-foot channel down the beach but scoffs at suggestions of environmental damage.

'One storm'll put all this lot back.'

When I ask him how much gold he's found he laughs coyly, 'If I told you I'd be lying.'

Stan and the other half-dozen prospectors working this stretch may appear to be oddball recluses but he assures me that most of them meet up in the pub at the end of a day. And lie to each other.

On the way back, in a desolate landscape, broken by rickety cabins jacked up on oil-drums and discarded dredge buckets from previous gold mining activities, we stop for a beer at the Safety Bay Inn run by a lady with two-tone vanilla and chocolate-coloured hair. Dollar bills are stuck on the ceiling and the lavatories are marked 'Women' and 'Animals'.

DAY 6

Overnight a powerful storm rolls in from the north. I hear the rain and wind beat against my windows and when I peer out I can see the Bering Sea is agitated and alarmingly close; long, rolling white-tops rush at the sea wall like lemmings.

Wake with a dry cough, incipient sore throat and constipation. Roger prescribes me various preparations from the homeopathic remedy kit he carries with him in a smart little case. There seems to be a pill for every ailment, physical or spiritual, including one for homesickness. It's a bit early for that yet.

Down to breakfast. Fat Freddie's is a warm, fuggy diner on the edge of the continent which produces fry-ups all day long. These seem to be largely consumed by big men with beards and baseball hats wearing fleece-lined Gore-tex jackets and given to staring out to sea and not saying much. The waitress takes our order, adding chirpily that fresh fruit is off today. I flick through a copy of the *Tunnel Times*, published in Anchorage, which describes itself as the official organ of a group lobbying for nothing less than 'the most ambitious construction project in the history of the planet'. This turns out to be the digging of a railway tunnel beneath the Bering Strait which would connect North America and Asia. It raises the prospect of some tantalizing rail excursions. Waterloo to Grand Central. Windsor to Washington. Bangkok to Bogotá.

I admire their audacity. Make a mental note to include them in my will.

Spread out some maps. At this moment an intercontinental railway could solve a few of our problems. We have to try to work out the quickest way to get on to our preferred route round the Pacific – anticlockwise down the Asian side and back up through the Americas. Because much of Siberia is inaccessible wilderness, the most northerly landfall we can safely make in Russia is on the Kamchatka Peninsula. The United States Coast Guard has offered to airlift us through the Aleutians – a necklace of islands stretching 2000 miles out across the Northern Pacific – if we can get ourselves to their base on Kodiak Island, a few hundred miles south of Anchorage.

DAY 7: *Kodiak Island*

I confess I've never heard of Kodiak and was chastened to learn that it's the second largest island in the USA (after the Big Island of Hawaii) and the country's second largest fishing port. It has a jagged squiggle of a coastline, slashed by sharp, steep cliffs and headlands which are green, thickly-wooded and dramatically beautiful in an Alpine sort of way. That we are now well and truly on the volatile Pacific Rim is grimly clear from the natural disasters that mark Kodiak's history. Nearby Mount Katmai blew in 1912 with a force greater than that of Krakatoa. Five cubic miles of material were blasted into the air and the ash that fell on Kodiak choked salmon in the streams and plunged the island into total darkness for three days. On Good Friday 1964, the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in America created a tidal wave, which swept into Kodiak harbour at a height of 35 feet destroying the fishing fleet and flattening the downtown area.

This Sunday morning the town looks serene and neat and well-scrubbed and oddly un-American. I put this down to the dominating presence of the sky-blue domes and white clapboard walls of the Holy Resurrection Russian Orthodox Church. Kodiak was originally settled by Russians who, with the British, Spanish and French, were setting up trading posts on the Alaskan Pacific coast before the United States was even created. There is still a full congregation for this morning's Divine Liturgy, a service which lasts several hours. Most of it is sung, and very beautifully too. The cherubic anthem is hypnotic, gentle and compelling. Although the ritual, the priest's vestments and the architecture are thoroughly European, the Stars and Stripes hang against the iconostasis alongside likenesses of the saints, and in our prayers we are asked to remember not only 'all those suffering from the disease of alcoholism' but also 'our armed forces everywhere'.

This reminds me of our appointment with the US Coast Guard. All being well, we shall leave for Attu, at the end of the Aleutian chain, on Tuesday morning. That leaves us a day and a half to try and cover some of the attractions of Kodiak. Down

at the harbour an outfit called Uyak Air offers a sporting menu that includes 'Scuba Diving', 'Horseback Riding', 'Fly In Fishing' (whatever that is), 'Kayaking' and 'Bear Viewing'. As my guidebook describes the Kodiak Brown bear as not just big, but the 'largest terrestrial carnivore in the world', there's really only one option.

I climb aboard the steeply-angled fuselage of an Uyak Air De Havilland Beaver float-plane. The pilot is Butch. That's his name, Butch. Early thirties, laconic, except when extolling the virtues of his aeroplane, he could be straight out of a *Biggles* adventure, as could his machine. Like so many aircraft that ply the world's remote places, the Beaver is no longer new – this one was built thirty-three years ago. Butch describes it, without irony, as 'a really good rough weather aeroplane'. Fortunately, we're spared the rough weather this time and, skimming the mountains at 3000 feet, we're treated to the sort of view you rarely get from commercial airliners. Ridges and peaks rise up to meet us then plunge down and away in a folded carpet of green that spreads itself around turquoise bays and quick, tumbling rivers.

Sixty miles south-west of Kodiak city we touch down on Karluk Lake and turn towards a small wooded refuge called Camp Island. We're met by Scott, the local ranger, and shown the tents and plain cedar cabins we shall be sleeping in tonight. Butch is soon away, racing up the lake and turning steeply off to the north-east. Peace reigns. There is barely a sound besides our own voices.

Scott reckons that, with the weather holding, we should stand a good chance of sighting bears. He and Kent the carpenter (who seem to be the only two running the place) load us, and the only two other guests – a very jolly German couple called Siggi and Rosie – into two aluminium dinghies which take us half a mile away to the point where a small river enters the lake. Scott, rifle slung over his shoulder, though he vehemently disproves of bear hunting for sport, leads us through shoulder-high banks of fireweed and extols the richness of the lakeside life. Apart from the Sockeye salmon and the Red-breasted Merganser ducks that feed on their eggs, we should see beaver,

otter, weasel, deer and eagles. All I can see at the moment are black flies, which gather in such persistent clouds around our faces that we all end up wearing the anti-insect equivalent of beekeepers' bonnets. The first time I see any bears – a broad-shouldered fat-backed mother trundling down the stream with two cubs in tow – I am so impressed that, without thinking, I whip the net off my face for a better view. Within seconds, squadrons of flies home in on my eyes, lips and nostrils.

The bears are less than a hundred yards away and we are advised to keep quiet and not attempt to move any closer. (As usual, the experts are divided when discussing wild animal behaviour, between those who insist they wouldn't hurt a fly and those who saw them rip someone to pieces only last week.) There are not many Kodiak Brown bears left, maybe two and a half thousand on the whole island and, though they can roam up to 50 miles, Scott knows the regulars in this river. Olga, the female we first saw, is now sitting back, staring down intently at the brisk stream spilling around her great haunches. Food is abundant at this time of year as the river is bulging with red salmon returning from three years at sea to spawn in the same river in which they were born. Fully-grown bears like Olga will eat about thirty of them a day.

Another two females come sloshing up the river with yearling cubs in tow, distinguished from the adults by their collars of white fur. Maggie, the leading female, makes a grab at a passing salmon which darts away. Instead of waiting for another, she doubles back and galumphs off after it. Eventually she finds something to her satisfaction and collapses on top of it, front paws out like a cat when it traps a mouse. Then, with delicate precision, she lifts the salmon, tugs the skin off with her teeth and carries the fish back to her cubs.

It's our cameraman Nigel's birthday today (on *Pole to Pole* it was celebrated while watching a belly dancer in southern Egypt) and we've smuggled a couple of bottles of champagne onto the island to celebrate. Timed perfectly to coincide with this moment of rejoicing, my incipient cold, which I have been trying to hold at bay with an alphabet of vitamins, finally hits with a vengeance. I take to my bed and end the day sneezing

and snuffling in my tent beside the lake as the sounds of 'Happy Birthday' drift out over the water.

DAY 8: *Camp Island*

This morning I feel awful. I long for a hot bath, clean clothes and solitude. As I unzip the tent and emerge snuffling like Badger from *The Wind in the Willows*, I'm aware of a scuttling in the long grass, from which, after a short pause, the heads of two foxes peer out, one a dark ash-grey, the other russet, and regard me curiously. Their ears prick backwards and forwards, alert and wary. Scott is cooking omelettes as I reach the main cabin. He says there are three foxes on the island, Emily and two cubs. They're pretty tame but we should on no account feed them.

I see Emily again as we are leaving for another visit to the bears. She's down on the foreshore, rather daintily turning over pebbles with her stick-thin forelegs. Fraser says that last night he caught one of the foxes trying to prise open a bottle of champagne which he'd left among the rocks to cool.

Three o'clock. The float-plane to take us back to Kodiak was expected two hours ago. We're all packed up and ready to go. The weather has certainly deteriorated since yesterday but the cloud cover is still above the mountains.

Six o'clock and we're still here. There is no radio or telephone with which we can contact the outside world. The splendid isolation of Camp Island is beginning to lose some of its charm. Siggi and Rosie remain stoically calm, but they aren't on their way around the Pacific Rim via the Aleutian Islands. Scott cooks a fine meal of Sockeye and halibut with rice and chopped vegetables. Kent can be heard in the distance sawing and banging until well after dark. Basil thinks he's chopping up previous visitors.

When it becomes clear that no one is coming to collect us today, we unpack and settle down to another night beside this beautiful lake, so delightfully far from the insidious temptations of plumbing, drainage and laundry.

DAY 9

Tuesday morning. My head still feels as if it doesn't belong to me. Breakfast has a doomy air to it. No omelettes from Scott today, just a realistic assessment of our predicament. Visitors have been stranded here on seven separate occasions this summer. The only radio with which we can contact the outside world is in the nearby Parks and Wildlife Department hut but it is behind locked doors and Scott has no key. He is prepared to kick the door down only in the case of a 'life-threatening' emergency. Roger, our director, is not a happy man. He looks bleakly down at his filming schedule. 'Would a job-threatening emergency count?'

Later: Roger is writing a stiff letter of complaint to whoever it was that led us to believe we could be in and out of here in twenty-four hours. Otherwise a certain listlessness has set in. Vanessa (Roger's assistant) sits beside the pebbly beach, draped, like a dowager, in an anti-mosquito veil, reading Homer for her Open University course. Basil has his blow-up doll out. (She's an inflatable version of the tortured figure in Munch's *The Scream* and he plans to photograph her in every place we visit.) Nigel is trudging round the island, Rosie is making a home video, and I am in the woods, looking out from the picturesque, triangular, red-cedar lavatory hut at a bald eagle wheeling and turning above the lake.

Later: There *is* a radio which Scott can listen in to, although he cannot transmit from it. He has managed to pick up word that Kodiak city is fogbound. The only good news is that if no planes can leave Kodiak, our coastguard flight will not have left either.

The bad news is that the wine has run out.

DAY 10

We have now been marooned here for almost two days. The weather is worsening. Cloud and rain are descending and we can barely make out the low mountain horizon which we have all been scanning instinctively for so long.

Desperate situations breed desperate solutions. There is a plan that we should try to walk out from here to the town of Larsen Bay, 12 miles away. Scott reckons we would be risking injury and further delay if we tried it. He says that most of the grassland is bog. Kent flatly contradicts this. He claims he has made the journey before and 'it's like a walk in the park'. It sounds sheer unadulterated lunacy to me but there is an understandable fear that if we do nothing we shall not only lose our coastguard flight but also jeopardize our plans for filming in Siberia, which will then affect plans for Japan and so on.

The argument is temporarily decided by the increasingly poor weather conditions, as bad for walking as they would be for flying. Then, as the afternoon fades and we are resigning ourselves to a fourth night on the island, there comes the sound of a distant engine and, when we least expect it, the Beaver approaches low from the north.

Apparently there has been a brief lifting of the fog in Kodiak, fog that came down so low that, as Butch put it, 'if you'd dug a hole in the beach you'd have found fog in it'. Now the immediate problem is getting us back. There are strong winds and a forecast of heavy rain, so no time for fond farewells. My relief is tinged with a little sadness as I catch a last glimpse of the foxes on the shore gazing as curiously at my departure as they had at my arrival.

The journey back to Kodiak, at times, is perilous. We tumble about in the buffeting air currents and are flung around in the thick of ugly, unavoidable black clouds but relief replaces fear as we break through the last low barriers of mist and catch a glimpse of the flat-grey waters of the harbour below us. Butch becomes a national hero and the thirty-three-year-old Beaver the best plane in the world. Back at the hotel, the little box-like room with its smelly floor tiles is Paradise.

There is a message waiting for us. It's from the US Coast Guard. Their plane left this morning.