

SOARING THROUGH THE ALASKAN SKY: SMOKEY BAY AIR

*Chief Pilot Talks Bear Tours, Adventures, Pizza & The Tools Of Transport
Journeying From The Base Of Homer*

[Aerial View Of A Volcano From The Smokey Bay Air's Cessna Plane \[Courtesy/Smokey Bay Air\]](#)

On the craggy southern end of Kachemak Bay in [Alaska](#), the only way in and out of three coastal villages is by airplane. Which begs the question: Will that pizza still be hot when it arrives from the mainland?

As it turns out, the expedited pizza delivery is a service that [Smokey Bay Air](#) of Homer provides for the residents of Seldovia, Port Graham and Nanwalek, Alaska both during the on and off season

In 2011 Smokey Air was bought by Homer Air, another local air transport company. The combined air service owns and operates four Cessna planes that do all the puddle jumping from Homer, a fishing town of 5,000 on the north side of the bay on the Kenai Peninsula, to the three towns on the south end, about 20 to 30 miles away.

“They can order a pizza here in Homer, and they can usually have it delivered in an hour,” comments Autumn Hostetler, director of marketing for the Smokey Bay Air and Homer Air.

This is how it works: After the customer pays for the pizza over the phone (\$13), a cabbie rushes the pizza to the airfield (\$12), the Smokey Bay plane totes the pizza over Kachemak Bay (\$14). Add in all the hops and that large pepperoni pizza runs around \$39.

Considering that there are no roads to service the remote end of the peninsula, all mail, produce, packages, freight, and dry goods have to be flown in from the mainland. Amazon orders? Those go by air, too. Livestock? Roger that.

Matt Milosky, assistant chief pilot for Smokey Bay Air, comments on some of his more primal passengers: “Pigs and goats every now and then, but mostly roosters. There’s a high demand for roosters.”

Milosky has flown his share of harrowing missions. Earlier in his career he flew air service in the Northern Mariana Islands of the Pacific Ocean. Now he moves cargo, people and even animals around the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska.

Alaskan bush pilots like Milosky are legendary in these parts. Also, the remoteness of the work makes flying intrinsically dangerous. Companies like Smokey Bay Air operate all over the state, putting remote passages in touch with the infrastructure of the outside world. Smokey Bay Air's planes cover as much as 126 miles in a single trip.

The Kachemak Bay – of which Homer sits on the northern end – translates from the native Aleut language as “Smokey Bay”. It is an area of pristine waters, rugged snowy mountains, and dramatic fjords.

When he's not flying through the picturesque beauty, Milosky is watching Alaska's volatile skies and wondering what summer storm – or even a wild animal -- might jump out in front of his plane.

“Landing in remote parts of Alaska has its challenges. The weather can change at a moment's notice and maintenance isn't immediately available if you need it,” Milosky comments. “It takes a special amount of planning and preparation.” Last minute checks include checking the fuel, closing up and securing all cargo and passenger doors, and briefing the passengers on safety information.

“However, no matter how much planning you have done you can never really plan on what the wildlife is going to do. I have had bears run out in front of me right as I am about to land causing me to have to quickly find a new spot.”

The grizzly bear is native to these parts and about 600 still live, fish and procreate on the Kenai Peninsula, according to recent estimates. An adult male can grow nearly 800 pounds, making it an imposing force that would have no trouble killing a human, although such attacks are extremely rare.



During the summer, the company conducts bear tours, where the pilot will take as many as five tourists per plane, with a maximum per passenger weight of 270 pounds. Tours can be booked out two years in advance but the company is sometimes able to accommodate next-day bear tours. The pilot takes them into Katmai National Park or Lake Clark National Park, the heart of bear country. When they spot the bears from the air, the bush pilot will put the plane down on a nearby beach and change hats into a wildlife guide. Getting up close to a [grizzly bear](#) is intimidating at first, Milosky notes, but before long he discovered how to interpret whether they were aggressive or docile. Raised hair, ear position, huffing, salivation: These are the signs of aggression Milosky watches for.

Living in close proximity to one of the most feared natural predators on the continent is just another day in the life of these Alaskan pilots.

“Our pilots are trained to read the bear's behavior,” Hostetler said. “So, if you know

how to read the bear – you can tell if they are coming at you because they are coming aggressively, or because they are just curious.”

Smokey Air pilots lead tourists to within 50 yards of the bears, and if the bear chooses to come closer, they will let it. Sometimes those bears get within 10 yards of the tourists. Pilots have marine flares that can be used to scare the bears away if they come too close or threaten the party, but they have never used them. Bear viewing trips cost \$625 a person with a two-person minimum.

All said, aside from the fact that the glaciers that carved the features of this land have retreated, the roughhewn inhabitants, both animal and human, continue to chisel a life on the southern end of America’s wildest state. As Hostetler, an Alaskan transplant who left the corporate rat race in the lower-48 several years ago, points out: “The scenery is to die for, too.”

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Make Sure To Check Out:

[Oceanview RV Park](#), a First Class Recreational Vehicle park located on the right side of the Sterling Highway as you first drive into Homer. Discover beach-combing treasures, tide pools at low tide, bonfires, and lovely walks.