Boat Stops In Kodiak After Northwest Passage Trip

Wednesday, 17 September 2008

MV Geraldine owner and captain Walt Jones stands next to his boat, which he just took through the Northwest Passage. Jones and a crew that included his wife, Kip, his boss and his boss' son made the trip, which will end when they reach Sitka in a couple weeks. You can read more about the Geraldine and the Joneses trip at their website, www.mvgeraldine.com. (Photo by Casey Kelly/KMXT).

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Casey Kelly/KMXT

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The past two summers have seen record low sea ice levels in the Arctic. Scientists with NASA and the National Snow and Ice Data Center say that as of last Friday, sea ice covered 1.74 million square miles of the Arctic--the second lowest level on record. The melt off means increased shipping traffic through the Northwest Passage, a route that goes over the top of the world, and has long been talked about as an alternative to the Panama Canal. But it also means an increase in the number of cruise ships and recreational boaters in the region. One such boat stopped in Kodiak this week. KMXT’s Casey Kelly has more.

Walt Jones is the owner and captain of the Geraldine, a 46-foot former Maine lobster boat that he converted into a yacht over the past two years.

(Walt 1 :10s “…is kinda yes, in both directions.”)

Jones is a tall man, maybe 6’3” or 6’4”. Not exactly the type of guy you’d expect to be comfortable in the cramped, 400-square feet of living space aboard the Geraldine. But have him give you a tour and clearly he is. Just listen to him describe the pilot house/salon:

(Walt 2 :09s “…everything happens right here.”)

Below deck there’s a small galley, a pair of staterooms, and two tiny bathrooms. It’s in this space that Jones, and a revolving door crew including his wife Kip, his boss, and his boss’ son have spent two and a half months, journeying across the top of the world.

They started in Southwest Harbor, Maine in late June and arrived in Kodiak Sunday night. Their final destination is Sitka, which they hope to reach in a couple weeks, and where the Geraldine will stay permanently. When asked what in the world possessed him to try such a trip, Jones says, because it’s there.

(Walt 3 :21s “…of doing the Northwest Passage.”)

Kip Jones was aboard for the whole trip up until Nome, when she flew back to the family’s home in the San Francisco bay area for a little break, and to take care of some personal

business. She rejoined in Kodiak, and says despite the close quarters, there’s been little if any tension. Something she attributes to the home cooked meals she prepared every day.

(Kip 1 :17s “…it was particularly important.”)

Besides the Joneses, there’s Walt’s boss Pat Robertson—not the televangelist—and his son Shane, who joined up in Newfoundland. Walt, who worked high-tech jobs in Silicon Valley before becoming the major fundraiser for the nonprofit and nondenominational CityTeam Ministries, says it’s easy to take a leave of absence from your job when you invite your boss along for the ride.

(Walt 4 :07s “…I was his boss on Geraldine.”)

Pat Robertson departed in Unalaska. Shane Robertson will leave once they reach Seward. Throughout the trip Shane served as the unofficial mechanic, fixing the Geraldine’s engine anytime she broke down. He says there’s a huge sense of pride having gone through the Northwest Passage, which is still mostly ice with only the tiniest slivers of open water to navigate through.

(Shane 1 :17s “…that is a huge highlight.”)

However, Walt Jones says the most difficult part of the trip wasn’t going through the ice, which actually calms the ocean. The toughest part, he says, was the Bering Sea.

(Walt 5 :07s “…and was pretty rough.”)

Conditions for the trip turned out to be a little less ideal this summer than they were last year. But Jones says there were still three other boats under 60-feet that made the trip. He says as far as anyone knows, there have only been 34 boats in history that have done it. But he expects that it will become more common in the future.

(Walt 6 :29s “…getting ready for traffic.”)

The Geraldine left Kodiak Tuesday, heading to Seward. From Seward they were planning to cruise past Columbia Glacier and make a few stops in Prince William Sound. Then continue on to their final destination of Sitka.

I’m Casey Kelly.