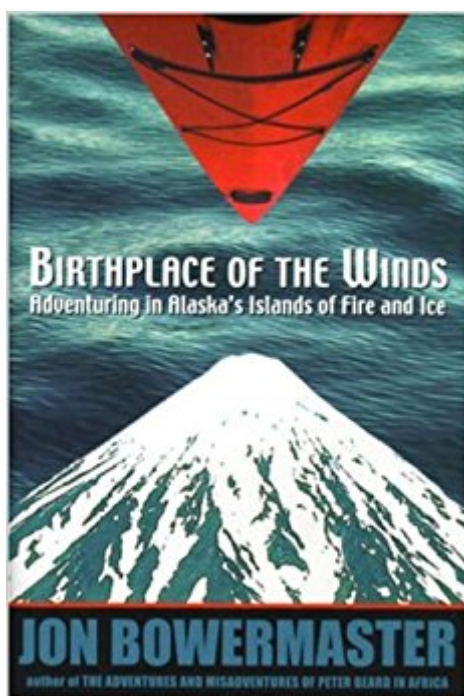


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Birthplace Of The Winds: Storming Alaska's Islands Of Fire And Ice (Adventure Press)



Synopsis

The Aleutian Islands are truly a world apart, a chain of volcanic peaks rearing out of the icy Bering Sea a thousand miles from the coast of Alaska's mainland. Surrounded by some of the coldest, stormiest ocean on Earth, lashed by williwaws or shrouded in a blanket of fog, they are remote, forbidding, challenging -- and breathtakingly beautiful on the rare occasions when the sun burns through the gray sky to reveal them in all their solitary splendor. To veteran paddlers like Jon Bowermaster and his companions, the Aleutians hold a special allure, for these jagged shores and unforgiving riptides are the home waters of the kayak. Their destination is the mythical cradle of the Aleut people, a group known as the Islands of Four Mountains at the heart of this all-but-unknown archipelago. Trusting only their skill, their strength, and the seaworthiness of their fragile two-man craft, the four adventurers spent a month on these windswept, mysterious outposts of North America, risking their lives every time they launched their boats. Even a minor mishap could be deadly: a man in the water could hope to survive half an hour at most, and a team that missed landfall in the fog might be swept away by fierce currents into the trackless North Pacific. The nearest rescuers were 150 miles away -- if the radio worked, if the weather was good, if...if...if. But if the stakes were high, so were the rewards. Bowermaster vividly evokes the adrenaline thrill of facing nature at her harshest, the stunning view of the sunlit Islands from the summit of an active volcano, and the deep, mystical power of the place itself, an ancient stepping-stone between worlds, where humans have hunted for tens of thousands of years but whose only inhabitants now are the mummified bodies of prehistoric Aleuts. By the time the four are picked up, they have discovered much -- about the islands, about the ocean, about themselves. A deft blend of adventure, exploration, and history, "Birthplace of the Winds" is an engrossing chronicle of man against the elements, a struggle at once timeless and utterly immediate, played out before a majestic, merciless backdrop.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bowermaster (The Adventures and Misadventures of Peter Beard in Africa) admits that he is known "more as a `writer' than as an `adventurer.' " And indeed, his superb reporting and storytelling abilities animate and intensify this account of his 25-day kayaking and mountaineering trip through Alaska's Aleutian Islands with four other trekkers. In the glut of Alaskan adventure books of the last few years, this one stands out not just because of the remote Islands of Four Mountains.

Bowermaster's clear vision and clean prose make for many pleasing, writerly moments: his honest catalogue of his own fear ("A certain amount of fear is good, makes you cautious. But how much is too much, before it becomes crippling?"), his interest in the Aleut inhabitants (though they invented the kayak, "the Aleuts shared little boat-building knowledge from island to island... because they were usually at war") and his ambiguous response to the land ("From a distance, it doesn't seem all bad, especially if you like extremes including lousy weather, tidal waves, earthquakes, and volcanoes"). After exploring each island by land and sea and climbing the tallest Aleutian volcano, Bowermaster has produced a remarkable narrative that captures the intense history and beauty of a place most of the world will never visit. 16 pages of photos not seen by PW. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

This engrossing book tells the story of a 25-day kayaker's adventure in the largely uncharted and unforgiving waters of the Alaskan Islands of the Four Mountains. Part of the Aleutian chain, this remote area of the world promised to provide a unique and challenging experience for Bowermaster and his three companions, with no chance of rescue should the four men become lost, injured, or, as described in the most riveting passage of the book (which turns out to be a dream), roll over in their kayak and suffer hypothermia. Bowermaster, author of numerous books and articles on his adventure travels, has written a detailed, if somewhat repetitive, account of his adventures in Alaska. Replete with fascinating information about the history and society of the Aleuts who once inhabited these abandoned volcanic islands, this energetic travel narrative will appeal to both armchair and active adventurers. Recommended for public libraries. (Photographs not seen.) Linda

For a while I only read all I read was about journeys in kayak and other human-powered boats. I plowed through around ten books and this was one of my favorites. The writer describes the nature and history of these islands in a fascinating way, while weaving in various challenges. I especially learned a lot about the sad history of the local indigenous people - how the white man has gone about such encounters is shocking.

Nice account of the wilderness of the Aleutian Islands. Gripping adventure story about the challenges involved in kayaking such a remote, wild place.

I found this to be a good read and was never tempted to put it down. Spectacular scenery and the remoteness of the area is evident and interesting history/archeology is included throughout the narrative. Many details of extreme kayaking and hiking/climbing in cold weather is included. Many will find this book compelling and quite good, so don't let the following cons dissuade you from picking up a copy. It was more of an adventure story and not particularly useful information for planning your own trip. However the bibliography and reading list could be used for this purpose. The author repeats himself quite often in order to give the book its proper length, and tries a little too hard to convey to the reader what tough, strong, and experienced men his team consisted of. I expect many young healthy intelligent people could repeat his expeditions; especially with National Geographic and the best outfitters in the world picking up the tab. Not to mention paying a salary. Also the youngest member of the crew was brought along as an experienced kayaker but as a condition was forbidden from carrying a personal camera so as not to compete with the financiers. I would have told them to 'take a hike' so to speak. I am not an experienced cold weather kayaker but am a U.S. Coast Guard veteran with 3 years of sea duty and must say I had to shake my head at the photos of their overloaded small craft heading into 6 knot tidal currents high wind and 35 degree water temp. But my training was in safety not extreme sport.

As an amateur kayaker, i.e., one who prefers calm water and warm weather, I am nonetheless always fascinated by the paddling tales of people who don't mind big waves, steady rain, freezing temperatures, etc. One of these people clearly is Jon Bowermaster. His book Birthplace in the Winds is the story of a four-man adventure to the Islands of Four Mountains on the Aleutian

archipelago. The kayaking, camping, and adventuring are described in gripping detail. You will also learn a great deal about the Aleuts who used to live on these islands in harrowing conditions. My only reservations about the book are that I would love to have seen more photos plus a couple more maps.

I enjoyed this book for the history chapters more than for the adventure ones, which detail how a four-man crew of kayakers went to the Islands of Four Mountains in the Aleutian Island chain. The history sections are interesting and generally accurate and give a sense of the natural and, later, governmental hazards the Aleut (Unangan) people have faced over the course of their history. The author emphasizes the dangers of the environment and is rightly impressed by the creativity of the Aleut in surviving in this environment. They created the prototypes of the kayaks and gear that the author and all kayakers still use. The Russians treated the Aleut badly, forcing them to hunt for otter for weeks on end, but the Americans were not angels, either. Bowermaster notes how the American government deported many Aleuts during World War II to camps where they were mistreated and many died from hunger and lack of medical care. There is a poignancy to his praise of the Aleut when contrasted to the uninhabited state of the islands he and his crew explore. There are still Aleuts in the Aleutian Islands, although many did not return after WWII. See the Kate Shugak series by Dana Stabenow for an interesting fictional representation of this situation. The adventure chapters detailing the explorations of the author and his crew were not as interesting. A lot of it was about the gear they had and interpersonal tensions. When I was in Fairbanks I saw a documentary with the same name done by this group. It was more interesting because it was visually spectacular, but that doesn't come through as much here. This is worth reading, but isn't as much of a gripping read one might expect.

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