

An aerial photograph of a Norwegian fjord. In the foreground, a long, narrow pier extends into the water, with a large cruise ship docked at its end. The water is a deep blue, and the surrounding mountains are covered in green grass and patches of snow. The sky is clear and blue. The text "THE ULTIMATE" is overlaid in the center of the image in a white, serif font.

THE ULTIMATE



TEST

Exploring the Bering Sea's Aleutian Islands Proves an Ultimate Character Test for a Fleming 65

*STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY GEORGE SASS SR.*

Dutch Harbor, number one in the nation for pounds of seafood landed, as seen from Ballyhoo Mountain



Many of us have seen the reality TV series, “Deadliest Catch,” which describes life aboard commercial fishing vessels working the Bering Sea. Scenes of 40-foot waves crashing over the decks of these 100-footers as the crew wrestles with 700-pound crab pots make one wonder why would anyone want to work, much less live, in this part of the world. I was about to find out, as I was headed west along Alaska’s Aleutian Islands on the way to Dutch Harbor with Tony Fleming and crew aboard his Fleming 65, *Venture*.

SPIRIT OF VENTURE

Tony’s yacht certainly lives up to its name, as it now has over 50,000 miles under its keel, many of which have been far-away, remote destinations. For 10 years *Venture* has served not only as Tony’s personal passage maker, but also as a test bed of new ideas and equipment for the company’s line of luxury motoryachts.

Venture is hull number one of the Fleming 65 series and was commissioned in early 2005, yet it runs and looks like a new yacht thanks to meticulous maintenance and a series of upgrades, many of which have been incorporated into Fleming’s production line. To date nearly 40 Fleming 65s have been built and delivered. Although Tony has retired from running Fleming yachts, he continues to provide feedback to his management team based on his real life cruising experiences.

During these ten years Tony has taken *Venture*—or perhaps it should be said that *Venture* has taken Tony—from California to Alaska, from British Columbia to Mexico’s Sea of Cortez, through the Panama Canal, up the East Coast and New York Waterways to Quebec City, exiting the St. Lawrence Seaway en route to Nova Scotia, returning west through the Panama Canal and stopping in Costa Rica on its way to the Galapagos Islands. Other voyages have included the exploration of the Queen Charlotte Islands, a circumnavigation of Vancouver Island, and a further exploration of Alaska.

A British expat, Tony’s cruising horizons extend to Europe, and he originally planned to take *Venture* across the pond. But during the recession that began in 2008, a 65 hull became available at the yard

in Taiwan, and he instead commissioned *Venture II*, sistership to *Venture*, to be based in southern England. Equipped with new systems the company was eager to try, *Venture II* also served as a test bed for future production boats.

The most significant changes included a Sea Torque Bolt-On Shaft System (BOSS) designed to reduce vibration and shaft drag, a fly-by-wire electro/hydraulic power steering system, and an ultra-sonic antifouling system. In addition to exploring much of Europe while participating in several European boat shows, *Venture II* made an epic voyage to Iceland, stopping at the fascinating Faroes along the way.

Venture II was sold in 2013, allowing Tony to focus on upgrading his original 65 and exploring more of the Pacific Northwest. The BOSS shaft system was retrofitted, as was the fly-by-wire power steering system. This new steering system eliminates long runs of hydraulic lines, thereby reducing the chance of failure due to fluid leaks. According to Tony and his captain, Chris Conklin, it also provides a more precise feel at the helm. Including the autopilot, the system has two backups. Nearing its ten-year birthday, *Venture* was also outfitted with an all-new Furuno electronics package, which offers improved intuitiveness and features touchscreen technology.

DESTINATION: BERING SEA

Having already cruised the Inside Passage, Tony wanted to see even more of Alaska and decided on a four-month, 5,000 mile voyage that would take him to Kodiak Island and eventually to the Aleutian chain, where he would enter the notoriously treacherous Bering Sea. Few cruise ships or private yachts journey into these waters. He explains, “My reasons for cruising are primarily to visit places of interest that are impossible or difficult to get to by conventional transport.” So during the winter of 2014/2015 he began planning the ultimate test for his well-traveled cruising yacht.

Fortunately for me, part of his plan included an invitation to join him for a part of this exciting endeavor. This would, in fact, be my fourth extended cruise with Tony, as I was aboard *Venture* for the 2007 FUBAR event, cruising from San Diego to La Paz, as well as his 2010 voyage to Iceland from Scotland on *Venture II*.

I had also joined him in 2011 to explore the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia. During these many miles of passage making, I was able to observe first hand the benefits of Fleming’s design and approach to boat building. This ambitious voyage to Dutch Harbor would answer any remaining questions I may have had about what makes an ideal passage maker.

First impressions are always important, and here Fleming doesn’t disappoint. Tony and I agreed to meet up in the fishing town of Sand Point on Popof Island, part of the Shumagin chain east of the Aleutians. As I manhandled my duffle and camera bags down the long pier lined with tough-looking, weather-worn fishing boats, I easily spotted *Venture*. With her low profile and sweeping sheer, she was the prettiest boat in the harbor. And while she was the only

Above: A Sand Point fisherman repairs his nets. Right, Clockwise: Eagles keep watch over Dutch Harbor; Tony checks out marine hardware in a Dutch Harbor general store; An entrance to a WWII underground hospital on Unalaska Island; Venture stands out amongst the fishing fleet in Sand Point.



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PROVIDE SHELTER FROM THE IT CREATED 40-KNOT FUNNELS

Left: English Bay's mountains appear to be sprayed with green velvet. Below: Tony's drone captured Venture's crew in Dora Harbor.

REMOTE ANCHORAGES

The inhabitants of the Shumagin Islands are hard working, friendly people who are all connected to the fisheries industry. Glen Gardner, the mayor of Sand Point as well as a commercial fisherman, met me at the airport when I first arrived and presented me with a wonderful, illustrated book about the area's local history and fishing heritage. Armed with this book, I walked the docks trying to identify the stern pickers, bow pickers, set netters, and purse seiners. Crews were busy getting their nets and vessels ready for the opening of salmon season, and yet they took the time to say hi, answer questions, and even offered a free salmon or two. Based on the shipshape condition of the fleet and the cheerful mood of the captains, it seemed there was good money to be made fishing these Alaskan waters.

Anxious to begin our exploration of the Aleutians, we headed 60-miles southwest to Volcano Bay, where we anchored in 45-feet of water surrounded by steep mountains. While we thought the high terrain would provide shelter from the wind, it had the opposite effect, and instead it created 40-knot funnels that

private yacht amongst these commercial ruffians, she nonetheless looked salty enough to fit in with these big, bad boys. Indeed, Tony later told me he had been busy giving tours of *Venture* to local fishermen who were curious to know what he was doing up here and where he was going.

Hopping onboard with my bags and backpack was easy, as *Venture* provides boarding gates on two different levels as well as wide side decks stem to stern. Entering the main saloon, I felt like I do when I return home from a long trip.

Tony and Chris wished me a warm welcome aboard, and I stowed my gear in the port guest cabin, sharing it with Chris. Also aboard was Christine Edwards, a longtime friend of Chris' and self-appointed research director and tour guide.

Like all Flemings, *Venture's* interior combines luxury with purposeful details that make sense while at sea. The beautifully crafted joinerwork features rounded, sculpted corners that not only look like works of art, they're sensible. Handholds are located everywhere. High quality cabinet, drawer and door latches keep things where they belong, and smartly designed inserts keep dishes and bottles safe when things get rough outside.

I remember a particularly dicey passage on *Venture II* in the North Atlantic on the way to Iceland when we were falling off the faces of 15 to 20-foot breaking head seas. Upon our arrival, the only damage was one bottle of beer that lost its cap, a cracked wineglass, and a broken filament in a light bulb in the forward cabin.

blew throughout the night. Chris set the anchor watch, and the next morning we saw from the track we had been dancing around quite a bit, although not dragging.

Because *Venture* typically spends more time on the hook than at marinas when cruising, much attention is paid to its primary ground tackle and back-up systems. *Venture's* main anchor is a 132-pound stainless steel Ultra attached to 400-feet of ½-inch chain. *Venture II* in Europe carried a large Rocna as its primary anchor, which also worked very well. *Venture's* secondary anchor is a stainless steel, non-hinged, plow type with 380-feet of chain, and two Fortress F-37s with chain and rode are stowed in an aft locker.

Before this trip, the original Lofrans dual gypsy windlass was replaced, as it was showing signs of heavy use and age. Indeed, it was discovered that its main shaft was slightly bent, possibly from the time the anchor got hung up on rocks in the Galapagos, damaging the anchor shaft and rendering it useless—a perfect example of why redundancy and backups are so important when cruising in far away places such as this.

HAVING CHOICES

The next day we covered another 60-miles, stopping for the night in the inner anchorage of Dora Harbor on the southwestern side of Unimak Island. We were now officially in the Aleutian Islands. Typically, *Venture* cruises at 10-knots with her twin 800-horsepower MAN engines burning a total of 12 gallons per hour.

This Page: High winds and threatening clouds welcome Venture to Volcano Bay. Opposite: The author was kept busy filleting salmon given to Venture's crew by local fishermen; Captain Chris signals Tony while weighing anchor in Volcano Bay.

“CLOUD FORMATIONS LOOK LIKE ALIEN SHIPS ABOUT TO LAND.”



As we were approaching the narrow Iliasik Passage, we saw an ocean tug towing a large barge miles ahead of us. We could have slowed down to about 5-knots and followed it through the pass or do what Chris did, and bring *Venture* up to its high cruising speed of 16-knots to pass the tow in open waters. At this speed, these MANs suck 55 gallons per hour, so there has to be a good reason to run this fast. But given how many miles Tony cruises, there are more than enough reasons. He and Chris recall an offshore passage along the north coast of California when the weather threatened to close the entrance to Eureka Harbor. They ran *Venture* at 16-knots for five hours until they safely got into port, which was closed for five days soon after they arrived. Strong currents throughout the Pacific Northwest can also be a challenge, and if one's timing is not right, getting through some of the passes often requires extra power. Chris recalls, "We were at Nakwakto Rapids doing 10-knots through the water but staying even with the shore. Luckily we had plenty of reserve power to safely get through."

A fleet of 20 small fishing boats joined us at our anchorage, and a couple of them came by to say hello and ask about *Venture*. We were surprised to learn that many of these captains had full time jobs in the lower 48 states during off-season. One fisherman was a college professor, another a ferryboat captain. Even after they admitted to not having a productive day, we were offered free, fresh salmon. My cardiologist would be proud of our diet that week.

The winds are strong and steady in this part of the world, and the shoreline is not especially hospitable, so we decided not to launch our dinghy. But my past experiences with Tony and Chris taught me a few lessons about yacht tenders. *Venture's* primary tender is a 14-foot RIB with a 50-horsepower outboard. This 700-pound inflatable is ideal for ferrying four or five people between anchored vessels or to shoreside docking facilities. But it is impractical at other times. Dragging it up on a beach is difficult, and if the tide goes out, dragging it back in the water can be impossible. For beaching, *Venture* has a smaller, soft bottom inflatable with a 4-horse outboard that can be wrestled easily. *Venture's* low side decks and gates make launching, retrieving, and boarding safe and easy.

UNFORGETTABLE UNALASKA

Our next day's destination, beautiful English Bay on the northeastern tip of Unalaska Island, would finally take us into the Bering Sea. With 125-miles to cover and an ideal weather forecast, we raised anchor at first light, finding the fishing fleet



had already gone. Leaving the Pacific Ocean through Unimak Pass, we were surprised by the early morning, calm waters of the Bering Sea. A sunny sky, 3 to 4-foot seas and 15-knots of wind made for a beautiful day at sea. But after a few hours the wind and seas built, and as we passed between islands the funnel effect created 35-knots of wind that blew the tops off 8-footers. Here *Venture* showed her Fleming pedigree. Her low profile and center of gravity, coupled with her long keel, contribute greatly to her seakindly motion. Chris recalled one of his favorite passages, "We were running down the coast of Nova Scotia surfing in 12 to 14-foot following seas with the auto pilot on, and I'm just sitting in the pilothouse with a cup of coffee in my hand. *Venture* seemed to be on rails."

After a restful night in beautiful English Bay, we arrive in Dutch Harbor early the next day and tie up at the new Carl E. Moses (CEM) Boat Harbor. The only private yacht along the docks lined with 100 to 150-foot fishing boats and ocean tugs, we were the smallest vessel. The harbormaster kindly drove us to the airport, where we rented a small SUV and then explored "downtown" Dutch Harbor, or more correctly, Unalaska. This deep-draft, ice-free port ranks number one in the nation for pounds of seafood landed. Pollock, cod, halibut, crab, sole, rockfish, herring, and salmon from the Bering Sea fill the town's processing plants, and refrigerated containers stacked high along the shore wait to be shipped to worldwide markets.

The Aleutians have a rich history, especially for their role during World War II. We drove to the top of Ballyhoo Mountain (1,634 feet) to see the ruins of Fort Schwatka, the site of a major artillery position attacked twice by the Japanese in 1942.

Later in the week we meet Mayor Shirley Marquardt, an energetic woman who has a deep knowledge of Alaska's fisheries industry. While she admits the thrilling scenes and colorful characters of the "Deadliest Catch" series have gained a worldwide audience, she prefers to promote the more attractive, economically sound reasons for living here. While not a tourist destination, Dutch Harbor's regional airport, modern hotel, good restaurants, and availability of provisions and supplies attract a number of adventurers like Tony Fleming and his crew.

Best of all, the natural beauty of the Aleutians are matched by the friendliness and generosity of its people. Cruising as far as the Bering Sea, *Venture* once again passed the ultimate test, taking Tony Fleming and his crew on another unforgettable voyage. ■