



GETTING OFF THE BEACH

First R2AK paddleboarder Karl Kruger to cross 1,900 miles of Northwest Passage

By Ian Haupt
Photos by Liv von Oelreich

Karl Kruger grew up in New York's Adirondack Mountains, where he learned from his half-Algonquin abusive father, a hunting and fishing guide, to paddle, climb and hike. He left home at 15 and, after finishing high school, he moved to California to teach windsurfing. He graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in environmental science. Then he moved to Orcas Island and started a sailing charter business.

Twenty years later, in February, Kruger sat in his truck behind the Orcas Island Library waiting for a ferry. His \$15,000 paddleboard was strapped to the roof of his truck as he used the library's Wi-Fi to enter our Zoom call. He was headed down to Seattle with his friend and business partner Elyn Oliver to give a talk at a boating event. He met Oliver when he gave a talk at a Race to

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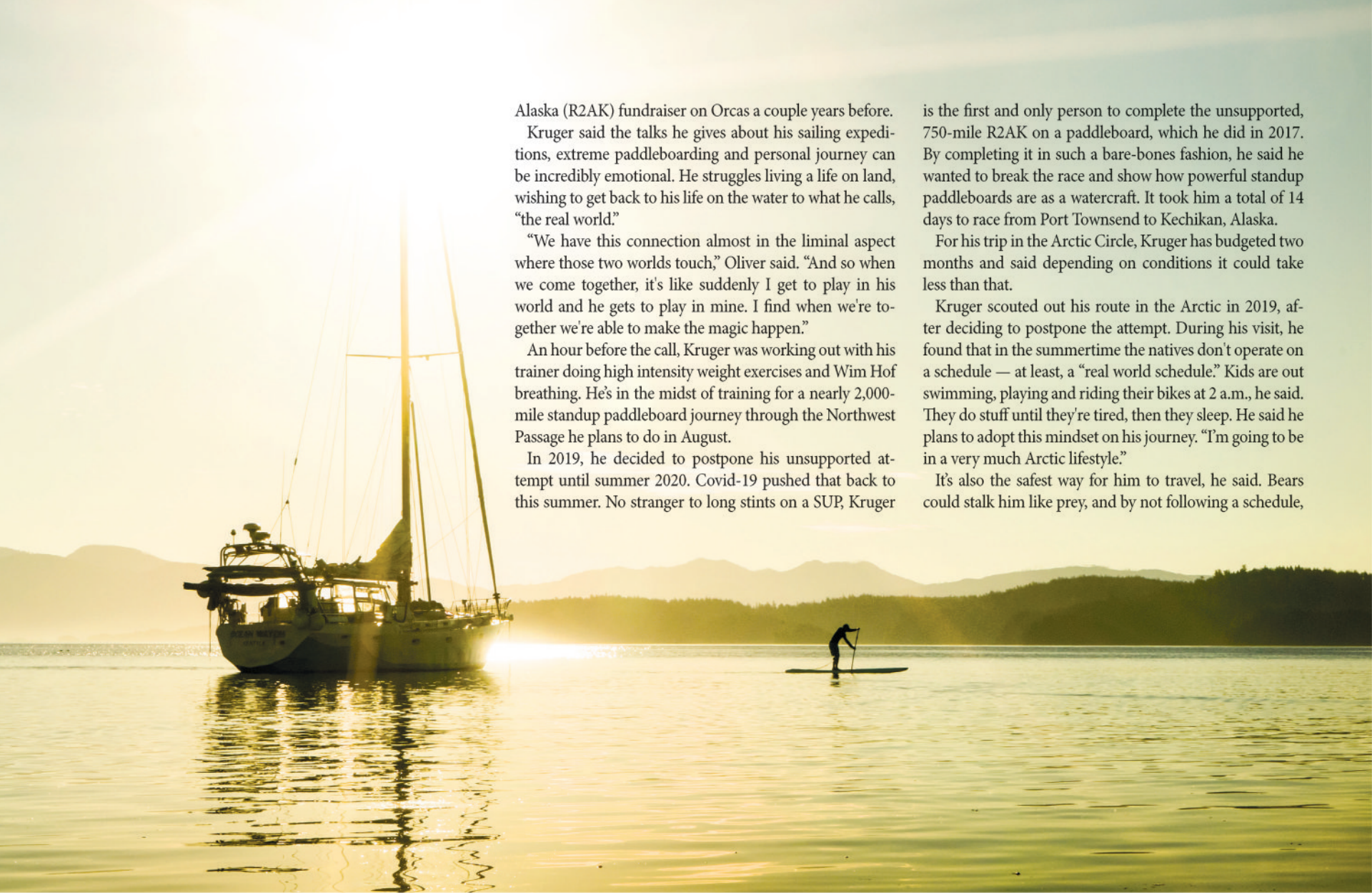
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Alaska (R2AK) fundraiser on Orcas a couple years before.

Kruger said the talks he gives about his sailing expeditions, extreme paddleboarding and personal journey can be incredibly emotional. He struggles living a life on land, wishing to get back to his life on the water to what he calls, “the real world.”

“We have this connection almost in the liminal aspect where those two worlds touch,” Oliver said. “And so when we come together, it’s like suddenly I get to play in his world and he gets to play in mine. I find when we’re together we’re able to make the magic happen.”

An hour before the call, Kruger was working out with his trainer doing high intensity weight exercises and Wim Hof breathing. He’s in the midst of training for a nearly 2,000-mile standup paddleboard journey through the Northwest Passage he plans to do in August.

In 2019, he decided to postpone his unsupported attempt until summer 2020. Covid-19 pushed that back to this summer. No stranger to long stints on a SUP, Kruger

is the first and only person to complete the unsupported, 750-mile R2AK on a paddleboard, which he did in 2017. By completing it in such a bare-bones fashion, he said he wanted to break the race and show how powerful standup paddleboards are as a watercraft. It took him a total of 14 days to race from Port Townsend to Ketchikan, Alaska.

For his trip in the Arctic Circle, Kruger has budgeted two months and said depending on conditions it could take less than that.

Kruger scouted out his route in the Arctic in 2019, after deciding to postpone the attempt. During his visit, he found that in the summertime the natives don’t operate on a schedule — at least, a “real world schedule.” Kids are out swimming, playing and riding their bikes at 2 a.m., he said. They do stuff until they’re tired, then they sleep. He said he plans to adopt this mindset on his journey. “I’m going to be in a very much Arctic lifestyle.”

It’s also the safest way for him to travel, he said. Bears could stalk him like prey, and by not following a schedule,

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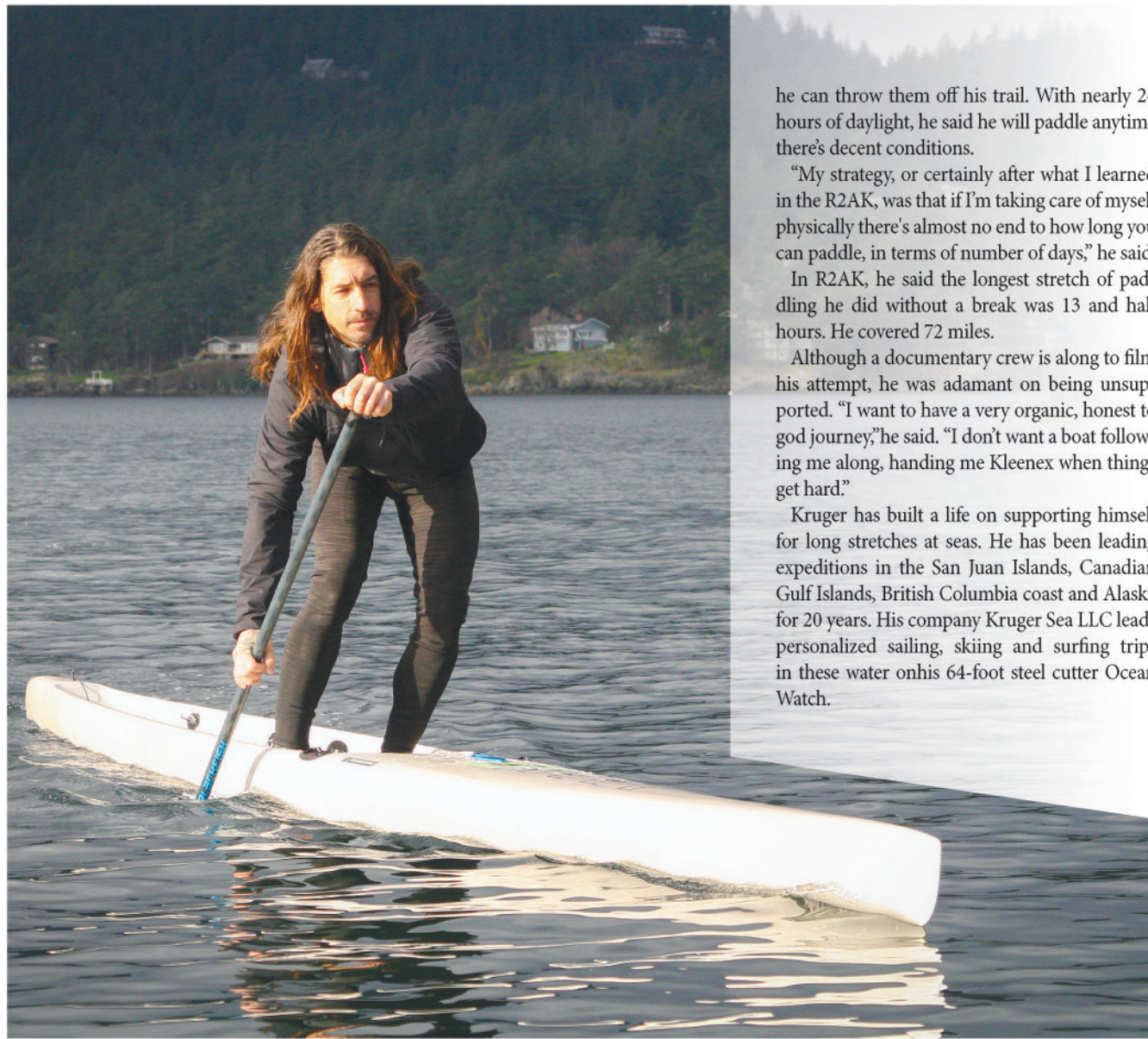
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he can throw them off his trail. With nearly 24 hours of daylight, he said he will paddle anytime there's decent conditions.

"My strategy, or certainly after what I learned in the R2AK, was that if I'm taking care of myself physically there's almost no end to how long you can paddle, in terms of number of days," he said.

In R2AK, he said the longest stretch of paddling he did without a break was 13 and half hours. He covered 72 miles.

Although a documentary crew is along to film his attempt, he was adamant on being unsupported. "I want to have a very organic, honest to god journey," he said. "I don't want a boat following me along, handing me Kleenex when things get hard."

Kruger has built a life on supporting himself for long stretches at seas. He has been leading expeditions in the San Juan Islands, Canadian Gulf Islands, British Columbia coast and Alaska for 20 years. His company Kruger Sea LLC leads personalized sailing, skiing and surfing trips in these water on his 64-foot steel cutter Ocean Watch.

This company recently rebranded as he thought his previous company Kruger Escapes was ill-named. "When I go and do these things, it's not an escape at all," he said. "The world I value more deeply is that one."


His whole life, he said, people would say "Welcome back to the real world," when he returned from his adventures at sea, and he became sick of it. "No, actually, this is the fake one — all this crap that humans do — this is the made up one. That out there is the real shit."

The company will be taking on a similar focus, he said, but with a deeper focus on expeditions. He's got a busy year ahead.

In April, he's leading a ski trip in the Prince William Sound. He's racing Seventy 48, a 70-mile, human-powered race from Tacoma to Port Townsend, for the fourth time three days before R2AK. He's won the SUP division three times in a row, and said it would be a nice 50th birthday present to himself if he can win it a fourth time. Then he's captaining a Walker experimental Trimaran for R2AK, which starts June 13. From there, he's heading up to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, for his Northwest Passage attempt.

The goal is to paddle 1,900 nautical miles from Tuktoyaktuk to Pond Inlet, Nunavut.

"Getting off the beach, starting is the hardest thing," he said. "It's scary. Everything in the whole wide world is an unknown. You're leaving behind your life; your work, your family, your friends. You're hitting a stop button on everything."

But it's what he loves. 

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