

Thrill fishing in the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia

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Though the guest instructions from the West Coast Fishing Club on Langara Island in the remote Queen Charlotte Islands of northern British Columbia noted that rain gear would be provided, I packed my own - waterproof but stylish and lightweight. Surely it would do for the Queen Charlotte's.

Not!

Five minutes into our first journey into the waves of the North Pacific, reluctantly swaddled in the Fishing Club's bulky but mandatory survival gear, I realized my own suit would have been as much use as a Kleenex in a hurricane.

Braced on the deck of a Boston Whaler, rolling over enormous swells, and buffeted by gale force winds, I was grateful for every millimeter of gear protecting me from the wind and water. The hunt for big salmon in the Queen Charlotte's is a whole different - ahem - kettle of fish.

I grew up trolling from my father's canoe on the St. Lawrence River, fishing calm water - Dad casting his Mepps spinners across the surface and me, dangling a worm on a hook over the side. A huge fish for me then might have weighed five pounds.

In the Queen Charlotte's, that's bait.

At the West Coast Fishing Club, a high-end wilderness retreat, fishing fanatics from around the world regularly haul in Chinook and Cohoe salmon that tip the scales at 25-35lbs. Bigger fish are also caught, but only long enough for a photo. Fish who reach such proportions aren't meant for the freezer.

At the Clubhouse and its sister properties: the Beachhouse, the Outpost, and the North Island Lodge, the fish are feisty and plentiful, the equipment topnotch, the accommodations luxurious and the guides, knowledgeable and endlessly eager. On deck at sunrise each morning, guides drive the boats, cut bait and thread it onto the surgically sharp hooks (barbless to increase the sporting element) and decide when mooching (trolling with a lightly weighted line) is the best strategy or when down-rigging (attaching the line to a heavy weight to sink the bait 20-80ft. under the surface) will produce more fish. Guides grab nets to land the fish, remove the hooks, fill up the fish chest and wash the decks down after every catch. The guests' only job is to haul in the fish.





"We're going to get you a Chinook - that's a promise," my guide Chris said as we headed out for the third day. Just 27 years old, he started his guiding career at 15. Anything Chris doesn't know about salmon fishing isn't worth knowing.

My luck hadn't been great to that point - the Cohoe and pink salmon I'd caught had been too small to keep - but I wasn't disappointed. Rolling through giant waves, feeling the spray on my face, watching bald eagles soar overhead and killer whales and orcas leaping nearby had been more than enough to keep me entertained.

But it wasn't enough for Chris. No guest was going home fishless - not on his watch.

"Women," he assured me, "make the best students. You'll listen when that big hit comes - and that'll make all the difference."

The words had barely left his mouth when the tip of my rod dove downward. Chris yelled, "It's a Chinook! Square up to the fish...reel...reel...now lift! Set the hook and let him run!"

Suddenly sweating bullets in the frigid spray, I bent my knees in the direction of the fish and concentrated every ounce of my being on Chris' voice as he coached, directed and finally exulted when the big fish broke the surface. Alternating between reeling and letting the line run free, Chris and I danced our quarry through the waves. When 18 lbs of shimmering Chinook finally landed in the bottom of the boat, Chris and I did a little victory dance.

No, he wasn't the biggest fish caught that day on Langerra Island - one angler hauled in a 52lb monster for a photo op - but my Chinook was undoubtedly the most treasured. And when he accompanied me home - cleaned, vacuum-packed and snuggled on ice-packs, he represented more than just dinner. He was a taste of the wild, in the stunning Queen Charlotte Islands of the North Pacific.

If you go:

Flights leave early from Vancouver to the Queen Charlotte's so you'll want to book an overnight stay at the airport. The Fairmont Vancouver Airport is a great choice as it offers a shuttle to the flights at the South Terminal.

When you return, you may need accommodations that will provide refrigeration for your catch - and perhaps a taste of Vancouver nightlife after your days in the northwoods! Vancouver's ultra-chic Opus Hotel offers packages in cooperation with the West Coast Fishing Club.

For more information, visit westcoastfishingclub.com, www.fairmont.com/vancouverairport, and www.opushotel.com.

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