

Reel 'em in on the West Coast

*Joanne Elves
For the Calgary Herald*

Saturday, October 22, 2005

It is the yell of the guide that startles me into action. My fishing rod is nodding, as if pointing at something in the darkened fathoms. Some careless fish more than 40 metres below our whaler is foolish enough to bite my bait!

“Dumb fish!” I say out loud as I start reeling in the line. “Can’t you tell a cut plug herring from a real one?”

The line gets tighter.

“He’s pulling away!” I say, panicking.

Let ‘em go! “Let ‘em go! Let ‘em go!” says the guide as he manoeuvres the boat to aid in my fight. “When the line goes loose, you reel him again.”

After what feels like a marathon, the chinook salmon gives up the fight, drifting closer to the boat. Todd McIntyre, the lanky, soft-spoken guide, swiftly swoops the net under the salmon and into the boat. The biggest fish I’ve caught to date gasps for air.

I thought I’d be doing the right thing by tossing the fish back in the water. But something primeval happens. I want the line back in the water. I am hooked and I am in fishing paradise.

The West Coast Fishing Club is one of the premier fishing lodges of the Queen Charlotte Islands. With three lodges to pick from, I choose the Clubhouse on Langara Island. The North Island Lodge floats nearby while the cosy Outpost Lodge is tucked into the tree-lined west shore of Graham

Island. If the fishing is bad or the weather is off, I plan to have a massage, use the weight room or hunker down with a good book in a deep leather chair. But that isn’t the case.

We are up at predawn, downing a hearty breakfast. Then into the boot room to don our bright red survival suits and big, black gum boots.

Our boat heads toward Coho Point where many boats congregate. Like seagulls bobbing in the waves, they wait for the tide to turn and the fish to come.

In a couple of minutes, our lines are baited and dropped.

The skies turn glum and the water starts to “get lumpy.” I find the rolling somewhat relaxing, but other fishermen come prepared with seasickness patches taped behind their ears. It is raining but our gear keeps us warm.

McIntyre reminds us we have to “do the time.”

Suddenly, a line cast from another boat jerks and the game is on. The eagles and whales are forgotten, the salmon are back chasing a school of herring passing below us.

After a few minutes, one of our lines has hooked a salmon. A thrilling fight brings a small coho into the boat and, since it is deemed too small by the chorus of women, it is gently set back on its way through the maze of lines. Most anglers seem to keep anything over 6.75 kilograms, but are actually encouraged by most charter companies to release anything over 18 kilograms. A barb-less hook makes the release less painful.

...at the top of its agenda is respecting the resource.

The West Coast Fishing Club operates to catch fish, but also at the top of its agenda is respecting the resource. The club is proudly at the front of the pack when it comes to helping the fish hatcheries and repairing damaged spawning rivers. Along with the neighbouring Langara Lodge, it co-founded the Queen Charlotte Islands Salmon Unlimited Society, which has raised close to \$1 million for the salmon enhancement program.

If you catch an 18-plus-kilogram salmon and release it, the West Coast Fishing Club will give you the equivalent (commercially caught) from a freezer back in Vancouver.

By 7 p.m., the sun is getting soft on the horizon so our lines are reeled in signalling the end of another fishing day. As the dock crew weighs, cleans and stores our catch, we dash up to the lodge. We know there are plenty of fish tales to tell over a delightful meal prepared by Chef Venafro and his team. The food is spectacular.

The Clubhouse is far from rustic with a guest-to-staff ratio of nearly one to one. Attention to detail is apparent from the cappuccino maker to exfoliating soaps in the guest rooms. That's remarkable considering every nut, olive and soup can is barged in two days from Vancouver.

Need to know:

- Langara Island is off the northwest tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands. All charter companies pick up their guests at the Vancouver Airport and include packaging the fish for transport in their fees. For next season, book your charter now.

- Langara Island has three fishing companies to choose from: The West Coast Fishing Club at www.westcoastfishingclub.com; Langara Island Lodge at www.langara.com; and Oak Bay Marine Group at www.obmg.com. They don't all offer the same luxuries as the West Coast Fishing Club — but the fish don't know that.