

THE VANCOUVER SUN

A DIVISION OF POSTMEDIA NETWORK INC.

BREAKING NEWS | VANCOUVERSUN.COM

SERIOUSLY WESTCOAST SINCE 1912

SATURDAY, MAY 11, 2013 | FINAL EDITION

HAIDA GWAI

Nature's in charge in B.C. island getaway destination

MARISA CUGLIETTA

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

"I have an idea," said our fishing guide, Chris. And with that he switched on the boat's radio and the cool, tranquil air was filled with the power-ballad grandeur of Led Zeppelin.

"This always gets them," he said confidently to his slightly baffled apprentices. Sure enough, seconds later the tell-tale sign of a twitching rod made us all leap excitedly to our feet, attempting to counter the six-foot rolling swells. It was my turn. Making a grab for the rod, I paused for a second before 'setting the hook' with a muscle-wrenching yank. "Perfect" said Chris. High praise indeed.

We were salmon fishing in the abundant waters off Langara Island, the northern tip of British Columbia's Haida Gwaii. These enigmatic islands have long been a draw to anglers, driven by the challenge of big game fishing. The prize they seek is the mighty chinook salmon, a particularly fine example of which was currently hurtling away from our boat at breakneck speed.

As quickly as he had been hooked, my chinook had escaped. Chris explained that



The West Coast Fishing Club uses barbless hooks to make the experience more sporting.

they use barbless hooks, in order to make the experience more 'sporting' (allowing more to escape) and to ensure the survival of fish that are released.

This was just one of many thoughtful initiatives driven by the West Coast Fishing Club, the leading salmon fishing operator on the coast. Others include working with local residents to ensure that they receive part of the resulting economic benefits of the

20,000 anglers who annually travel to the islands.

The family-run company's flagship property, The Clubhouse, is perched high above the Parry Pass, a turbulent stretch of water separating Langara and Graham Islands; a channel that sees one of the largest runs of migrating fish on the coast returning year after year.

Guests gathered on the deck as the sun sank towards the horizon; mesmerized by bald

eagles swooping and diving for food. Our own minds soon turned to dinner, prepared by a talented team and anchored to local produce including herbs and eggs from the co-owner's farm in Masset and local island beef. Meals were taken in a stunning, solarium dining room, surrounded by windows, which framed the captivating natural world outside like prized paintings hung proudly on the wall.

The Clubhouse has proven a draw for some of the country's finest chefs, including David Hawksworth of Hawksworth Restaurant in Vancouver, who hosts his Culinary Adventure there every July. Also drawn to this luxury wilderness retreat is L.A. King and Stanley Cup Champion Willie Mitchell, who often heads north to enjoy quality father and son escapes.



Delicious local cuisine is just part of the Haida Gwaii experience.

From his very first trip here with his dad, it was clear to him that this was truly a place where the distractions of the modern world refuse to matter: "With fishing, much like the tide, you have ebbs and flows of activity. Between bites there are moments to truly connect with your fishing partner on a deeper level resulting in incredible memories for the two of you to share."

Over dinner, guests beamed with weary smiles and tales of their catches. We pricked up our ears to the news that a fellow fisherman had an unforgettable run-in with a much bigger angler — an orca that had been watching the day's action from afar and decided that it was his turn to join in. Like a bolt from the deep, the monochrome monster had lunged at the salmon just as the fisherman

pulled it aboard the boat, missing his free meal by a whisker. This tale proved a weighty reminder that nature is very much in charge on the islands of Haida Gwaii, and that its immensely raw and natural beauty will linger much longer than the salmon fillets headed home for the freezer.

If you go ...

West Coast Fishing Club offers three or four night trips from Vancouver, staying at the Clubhouse on Langara Island, between May and September. Prices from \$5,455 (guided) and include return flights from Vancouver to the islands, accommodation, all meals and more fishing than you can shake your rod at! Visit www.westcoastfishingclub.com