



Chasing Your Dream Job

The Ultimate 9-To-5 Escape Plan



Melora Koepke



“ Obsessive anglers from all corners of the earth pay top dollar to do what I’m about to do. ”

I landed by private chopper on the helipad at the West Coast Fishing Club’s Clubhouse less than an hour ago, and I’m already suited up in a bright red survival suit aboard a 25-foot Boston Whaler Predator, where three rods bend expectantly into the navy blue water. Each one is fitted with a purpose-built single-action Islander reel, nicknamed a “knucklebuster” for reasons I will soon come to understand.

I’ve never **fished** for anything larger than rainbow trout. But these waters off the coast of Langara Island, on the northern tip Haida Gwaii, a remote archipelago off the northern coast of British Columbia, are home to the legendary tyee: giant Chinook salmon weighing over 30 pounds. This is the best salmon fishing in the world, accessible only by boat or float plane. Obsessive anglers from all corners of the earth pay top dollar to do what I’m about to do.

It’s highly unlikely that you’ll ever venture further off the map than Haida Gwaii. It’s a landscape formed from jagged black volcanic rocks, old-growth cedar forests and beaches never walked upon by human feet. The land’s first inhabitants, the Haida people, were nicknamed the “Vikings of the West” for their fierceness and bravery on the open water. They still live well off the land and the ocean up here, just a few nautical miles from Alaska, and have been pulling sustenance from these waters for over 13,000 years.

For the last 25 years, the West Coast Fishing Club has been doing its part to build the legend, too. Until the WCFC came on the scene, extreme ocean-fishing of this sort was the exclusive territory of obsessive, single-minded fishermen. They came to stay in rudimentary camps and fished for 16 hours a day with cheap equipment in aluminum dinghies powered by 25-horsepower engines, with the ultimate goal of landing as much "blood in the boat" as humanly possible.

But my all-weather gear and the comfort of my vessel -- not to mention the hot shower, fine Malbec, AAA Alberta **steak** and fluffy bedding that are waiting for me back at the lodge -- are thanks to the bold and unique vision of Brian Legge and Rich Grange, founder-owners of the WCFC, who saw the potential for more than a fishing camp up here in the wild Pacific. They also run an innovative catch-and-release program to ensure that the salmon here will run for generations to come, and they've changed the culture of fishing from trophy-seeking bloodthirst to something more enlightened.

Legge and Grange were once the owners of a high end and very successful Toronto-based security company, Intercon. They started the West Coast Fishing Club not as a business venture of its own, but as a hobby that could complement their actual business. As avid sport fishermen, they couldn't think of a better way to bond with clients than on epic outings on the water.

Twelve years ago, they sold their company and took a leap of faith here at land's end to run the WCFC full-time and to build a bare-bones fishing camp into a **luxury adventure destination**.

Brian Legge: Details Man

While the fantasy might be to quit your day job cold turkey and hang a "gone fishin'" sign on your office door never to return, Legge divides his time between several different locations. He devotes several weeks during the season to trips to his three lodges in Haida Gwaii, as well as a week every month to the WCFC's resort-in-progress in Panama. The rest of the time, he's in one of his offices, either in Toronto or Vancouver.

"Intercon was a bigger corporate environment, with a lot of employees, and 12-14 hour days. WCFC is not that intense. Now I travel whenever I want, including during **business** hours. I wouldn't say things are different, except that everything is more fun now. And things are much more relaxed. You would never travel during business hours [at Intercon]. Now I travel during the day. And I'm totally a fair-weather fisherman. If the water is rough or pouring rain, I'll stay in and enjoy resort, because fishing is simply more fun and more enjoyable fair-weather," says Legge.

He enjoys the time he spends in his office in Toronto, working on his favorite aspect of the WCFC operation: logistics. "Once May starts, the lodge is open, and everything is basically out of control," he says. "If I haven't drawn the proper conclusions throughout the winter, I'm going to be in a lot of trouble, because I can't recover gracefully. If motors are breaking, if I don't have right backup, I can't just go to the store. There's no way in. No way out. If anything goes wrong up there, it's a major ordeal."

The WCFC's planning happens from September to May, he explains. Provisioning and supplies have to be in place before the lodge is open -- by then, you've bought your food, hired your staff, negotiated your fixed-wing aircraft contracts, negotiated your helicopters, your boats and your gear.

Every April, he plans the barge run, wherein all the supplies for the season -- things like boat motors, steaks, potatoes, Scotch, cigars and bait hooks -- are floated up on a barge from Vancouver, on a journey that can take anywhere between 5 and 20 days. Staff are flown up on floatplanes, and everything is put into the lodge in a particular, careful order.

An Off-The-Map Success Story

"Somehow, WCFC shifted from a 'let's have some fun fishing with our clients' idea to a multimillion dollar infrastructure to deal with," he says.

"As businessmen, we knew we didn't want it to lose money, but... our focus was on the deliverable, and on offering the package we wanted to have."

Over the last 25 years, Grange and Legge have grown their operation, and they now have four fishing lodges -- three in Haida Gwaii and one in Panama -- where they are building an exclusive bill-fishing lodge in the unexploited Islas de los Perlas.

"I had no real hesitation about making the move into fishing, and it was an easy transition," he recalls. "When we sold [our company], WCFC was already growing and demanding more of my time.

"I had a pretty good idea what I was getting myself into," he continues, but notes that he should have been worried about some things he overlooked. "When we expanded into Panama, I thought it would be fairly easy. It wasn't. We had a handle on luxury fishing in remote locations, and so I thought we had a pretty good footprint for the new venture, and that our clientele would be similar. But it turned out to be a whole different fishery. A bill-fishing guest is a totally different animal than a salmon angler."

One unexpected twist with the 2009 economic downturn: When the Canadian dollar reached parity with the U.S. dollar, the WCFC wasn't as much of a deal, so its U.S. clients thought it was getting to be more expensive, even though prices hadn't really changed.

"We had to recognize that it wasn't a matter of being able to sell our way out of the problem," Legge recalls.

"We had to make quick changes, and re-establish the logistics of running our business successfully. We realized we were not going to sell as many fishing trips as we had in the past, so we cut our model back. It was about four to five hard years." Still, for the last decade-plus, they've found ways to make it work.

"The demand has continued to grow for what we are offering," Legge says. "And what we have is the top end of our business, even though there are a lot [of imitators]."

Legge has advice for anyone considering making the leap themselves into running their dream business from the ground up: "Find something you're passionate about and then find your niche in that passion. It's important not to try to be all things to all people. Find a few things you can be really good at, focus on those and stay to your core on those types of things. Another thing I would say is make sure not to overextend yourself, since you have to be able to focus on creating revenue. Great ideas come along all the time. My partner Rick used to have a great sign above his desk: 'Nothing happens until someone sells something.' I'm a firm believer that in all business, it's somewhat about being in the right place, at the right time, with the right idea -- and a lot of it is good luck. But then you have to know what to do with it."

Speaking of being in the right place at the right time and knowing what to do once you're there, the same advice applies to light-line salmon fishing, it turns out.

Back in Haida Gwaii, the waves are easily five feet high, and the rain is coming down hard and fast. Sam, my boat captain and fishing guide, expertly directs our hardy and graceful 25-foot Boston Whaler Predator at a 45-degree angle into every oncoming wave. We're fishing with light line and unbarbed hooks because it's more sportsmanlike that way, but it doesn't add to my optimism.

An hour later, though, I've caught two Chinooks. My first is exactly the same size as my infant son -- 24 pounds -- and fights for a long, thrilling half hour before I land it. The second puts up an even better fight -- he comes in at a very respectable 17 pounds. Though the WCFC has an innovative catch-and-release program, I elect to keep my first two fish, as I have a bullet smoker in my backyard that's eagerly awaiting thick slices of that fresh pink flesh.

My third catch of the day feels like the big one -- Sam thinks so, too, from the glint I see in his eye when he hands me the rod, after yelling "FISH ON!!!"

A good guide is part mentor, part cheerleader and part wingman -- and Sam's the best. I tug my line free of the downrigger and spend a few minutes reeling in and letting it run. Suddenly, my line goes taut and I see a flash of yellow fur and a thrashing mass of silver and teeth, not 50 feet away, as a sea lion steals my catch.

There are some things in nature that not even the best planning, the best guide or the best gear can mediate. But part of the genius of the WCFC is that after three days, I feel at home in Haida Gwaii -- and I know I want to come back.

If You Go

The **West Coast Fishing Club's** Clubhouse property is located on Langara Island, 900 kilometers northwest of Vancouver. Charter flight from **YVR South Terminal** and heli-transfer are included in the price of the trip.