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Joining the Club

JAYNE MACAULAY GETS HOOKED ON OCEAN FISHING AT A LUXURIOUS WILDERNESS LODGE IN CANADA'S PACIFIC NORTHWEST



THE SEA ROCKS THE BOAT as Hans, our fishing guide, securely threads a headless, gutted herring on a fishhook. Salmon, it seems, are prone to smacking prey with their tails before committing to dinner – so keeping the bait fixed is key. Soon a big silver fish twists and thwacks its body against the deck in a hopeless bid to flip back into the ocean. Hans quickly dispatches it with a blow and slips the 14-pound chinook salmon into an ice chest. The lucky angler who caught it will pack it home, frozen, for a feast.

We're far from the madding crowd, just off Langara Island, the most northerly in the archipelago just south of Alaska that was once dubbed the Queen Charlotte Islands and is now officially Haida Gwaii (Islands of the People). It's a two-hour flight from Vancouver to the tiny airport at Masset on Graham Island (Haida Gwaii's largest land mass, then a 25-minute helicopter flight to the West Coast Fishing Club (WCFC) over a temperate rainforest. (The club has three resorts on Haida Gwaii – the Clubhouse and the floating North Island Lodge, both on Langara; and the Outpost, on Graham Island.)

Around our 22-foot Boston whaler, similar dramas are

underway. A fleet of perhaps six white WCFC boats – all in search of chinook and coho salmon – bob on the increasingly rough seas. (In spite of the blustery weather and like the other WCFC guests aboard, I'm warm and dry in a Helly Hansen drysuit.) As I watch, one fisher manfully hangs onto his bending rod while his boat disappears behind a swell. As it reappears, I can see him madly reeling in his line, keeping his line tight.

Not like me. A school of herring, which Hans calls a "bait ball," has the salmon tempted and in a frenzy. To make our lines more inviting, he has also secured herring as bait to our hooks. This is sport fishing, and the hooks are barbless, easy for the fish to escape. By the time I realize the quick tug I feel is a bite, my quarry is off the hook, which I reflexively jerk too late, whipping it over my head. I don't get a chance to refine my technique. One of my companions is seasick, and since the weather and waves are worsening, we pack it in and head for the clubhouse.

The remaining fishers are soon off the water, making or renewing acquaintance and trading stories about the fish that did or didn't get away (or was stolen off their line at the last moment by a sea lion). Bill Young of Texas and



A Boston whaler, in pursuit of the catch of the day, at the West Coast Fishing Club. Inset: young bald eagles taking a lunch break.



his brother, Bob, from California, have been meeting at the club for nine years, usually accompanied by their wives. The club's public tote board indicates Bill has caught 23 chinook and 10 coho to Bob's eight coho today. (A guest can only take home four chinook and four coho per visit, so they catch and release if they want to keep fishing.)

I'm not broken-hearted over losing my fish. I won't be starving at the five-star luxury resort, and there are two hot tubs and a spa to soothe any residual disappointment. I may not be good at salmon fishing (yet!), but I still feel part of the adventure, enjoying the Clubhouse's handsome cedar design, the view overlooking Henslung Cove and the camaraderie of other guests passionate about the sport.

Under a Haida totem in the dining room, we're spoiled by chef Tim Bedford's offerings. The club sources as much food locally as possible, including eggs and greens from Masset's South Beach Gardens and beef from Richardson Farm, both on Graham Island. I eagerly join Bedford's cooking class to learn how to prepare delicate sablefish, or black cod, with kulen (a spicy sausage) orzo. Find the recipe at www.zoomermag.com/health/food/west-coast-fishing-club-recipe; you won't even need to bait a hook. ■

If You Go You'll be issued a fishing licence at the WCFC counter at Vancouver International Airport's South Terminal. Check-in is early, so overnight at YVR's Fairmont or Delta Airport hotels or downtown at the Rosewood Hotel Georgia. You'll fly to Masset in a Dash 8 and by helicopter to the resort. Luggage cannot exceed 25 pounds. WCFC has launched the *Pacific Provider*, off Las Perlas Islands, Panama, a destination for fish such as marlin, tuna and sailfish. There too, the club encourages tag-and-release fishing. ■ 1-888-432-6666; www.westcoastfishingclub.com