



hooked on haida gwaiii

FLOATING IN THE FREEZING WATERS OFF THE COAST OF BRITISH COLUMBIA ARE THE QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS. WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF LOCAL SPECIES, THEY'RE A TRUE PARADISE FOR FISHING, AS **MARISA MARSDEN** FINDS OUT...



WRITER PROFILE

NAME MARISA MARSDEN
AGE 26
INFO Traveling has been an untamed passion for Marisa ever since she first sat on a Spanish beach, cramming sand into her mouth, when she was just six months old.

“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 sounds of Led Zeppelin. “This always gets them,” he confidently announced to his group of slightly bemused apprentices. Sure enough, seconds later the telltale sign of a twitching rod made us all leap excitedly to our feet and stagger around the boat like confused zombies, attempting to counter the six-foot rolling swells. Then 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 most northern and remote archipelago, the Queen Charlotte Islands. Closer in distance to Alaska than to the maple-leaved mainland, these islands have long been a draw to ‘in-the-know’

anglers, driven by the challenge of big game fishing. The big game that they come for is the mighty Chinook salmon (also known as spring or king salmon), a particularly fine example of which was currently hurtling away from our boat at break-neck speed.

The trick, as we were slowly discovering, is to let the fish run, with our trusty guide swiftly turning the boat to make up some of the ground. Then, the second it pauses to rest, reel like your life depends on it, pulling the line in from the sea and easing the fish towards the boat. This courting exercise can go on for hours with some of the feisty, larger specimens, although luckily for our inexperienced arm muscles, most of our fights lasted just ten to 15 minutes.

As quickly as he’d been hooked, my Chinook escaped. Chris explained that they use barbless hooks in order to make the experience more ‘sporting’ (allowing more to escape) and to ensure the survival of the fish that are released. Disappointed with my efforts, I took my seat at the helm.

CATCH OF THE DAY

We had chosen to stay at the Clubhouse, part of the West Coast Fishing Club, partly due to their superb ‘Catch and Release’ policy, protecting the fish of the Langara Island waters. Guests are allowed to take home four Chinook and four Coho salmon, and with any fish weighing over 30lbs (known as a Tye) guests are encouraged to release the beast, ensuring a strong gene pool and enjoyment for future generations of anglers. This strong eco-initiative had appealed to me, although on losing my prized catch due to the eco-conscious practice of using barbless hooks, I was for a while having second thoughts.

After a 13lb (6kg) Chinook was successfully ensnared by one of my fellow students, and following a few more escaped fish, it was my turn again and I leapt to my feet with renewed determination. The hook was set and the fish was on its way. Chris announced that it was not the prized Chinook but a fair-sized halibut – fine by me, as I pictured it on my plate, with a crusty herb topping, oozing with lime and

"THE HOOK WAS SET AND THE FISH WAS ON ITS WAY. I PICTURED IT ON MY PLATE, WITH A CRUSTY HERB TOPPING, OOZING WITH LIME AND BUTTER"





A Coho salmon



Releasing the catch back into the wild



39 butter. Halibut are, quite literally, the monsters of the deep, with the lodge record weighing in at 300lbs (150kgs). Fish this big wouldn't even see the inside of the boat, as their colossal size and weight make it impossible. My halibut, meanwhile, weighed a measly 9lbs (4kgs), but as Chris reassured me, the best fish for eating are between 8 and 15lbs. Lime and butter here we come!

As the sun sank into the endless ocean, the crimson horizon slowly revealed the rugged outline of Alaska's southern tip. Wearily mesmerised by our proximity to a land of such vast wilderness, we turned the boat towards shore and our minds switched to thoughts of steamy showers and blazing fireplaces. Back at the Clubhouse, other guests began to return from the sea, beaming with weary smiles and tales of their catches (and naturally, stories of the fateful 'fish that got away'). We pricked up our ears to the news that a fellow fisherman had had an unforgettable run in with a much bigger angler... an orca, which had been watching

the day's action from afar and had decided it was his turn. Like a bolt from the deep, the monochrome monster had lunged at the salmon as the fisherman pulled it aboard the boat, missing his free meal by just a whisker.

Over dinner, further animal encounters were plentiful, with breaching humpbacks and swooping bald eagles all making

protection of the Gwaii Haanas National Reserve.

This collection of 138 islands is the first landmass reached by hundreds of migrating Chinook, Coho and Chum salmon as they make their journey from their Arctic feeding grounds to spawn in the rivers of the Pacific Northwest. The historical importance of the islands' immense wildlife population is strongly represented in the artwork of the native people, the Haida.

Populating the islands for more than 13,000 years, the Haida have developed a rich and complex culture, influenced by the abundance of the land and sea surrounding them. Intrinsically

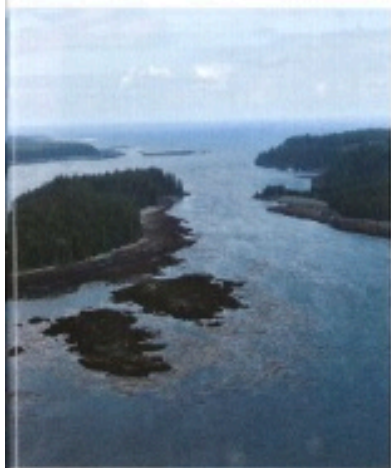
"THE ARCHIPELAGO IS BECOMING EVER MORE POPULAR AMONG TRAVELLERS LURED BY THE CHARM OF BACK-TO-NATURE ADVENTURES"

an appearance. Known as the 'Galapagos of the North', the Queen Charlotte Islands boast over 20 species of whale, 1.5 million birds and an unequalled number of fish. Just over 5,000 people call the islands home, mainly residing on the larger landmasses – Graham and Moresby Island. The rugged and wind-whipped southern tip is teeming with wildlife, all under the

linked to legends of their animal neighbours, the Haida consist of two main clans – Eagles and Ravens, denoting a complex social class system. Prior to the arrival of European explorers, the Haida occupied more than 100 villages throughout the islands and were skilled traders, with established links with the mainland. Although only small clusters of Haida remain on

the islands, their gifted carvings and unique designs are available throughout British Columbia. On the north shore of Graham Island, further evidence of their talent is visible in ornate totem poles, although most are now in a state of decay. Totem poles represent family lineages and tell the story of groups who lived in the area. The large totem poles on the shore are carved from whole cedar trunks, whereas smaller, hand-held models are made from the rare argillite stone – a dull grey rock, which shines black once cut, and is only found on these islands.

Commonly referred to by western Canadians as Haida Gwaii, the Queen Charlotte Islands received their anglicised name from Captain George Dixon who landed on Langara Island in 1787. His ship, the Queen Charlotte, was named in honour of the wife of King George III and he bestowed the name on his new discovery. Thirteen years earlier, Spanish sailor Juan Perez sighted the islands and conversed with the natives, who sailed out to him on enormous canoes, but did not record his discovery or claim the land for Spain. Today, the archipelago is becoming ever more popular among travellers lured by the charm of wooden retreats, back-to-nature adventures and the prospect of the great outdoors.



ISOLATED IDYLL

A long hidden secret, held by the residents of British Columbia, the Islands are now beginning to attract travellers from abroad. With two direct flights from Vancouver to Masset with Air Canada Jazz and Pacific Coastal Airlines, as well as helicopters or seaplanes waiting to whisk guests away to a remote fishing lodge, the islands are a great option for a combined city and wilderness experience. A more leisurely alternative is the ferry from Prince Rupert, which takes eight hours and is a visually stunning adventure in itself.

We opted for the short, two-hour flight north from Vancouver, before connecting with the helicopter owned by the West Coast Fishing Club. Soaring into the air above the caramel stretches of sand, the vast wilderness unfolding below was simply breathtaking. Later in the trip, we flew down the untouched western coast of Graham Island and landed on an isolated, horseshoe-shaped bay. After a delicious picnic, we set to the task of beachcombing – the prized find being colourful glass spheres which were used by Japanese fishing boats to weigh down their nets. Rare but not impossible to find, these mystical globes vary in size from a ping pong ball to some larger than a football, with the most esteemed

treasure of all being a purple orb, belonging to the nets of ancient royalty. Our group found one small, muddy-green glass globe, which washed up well in the foamy swell, accompanied by countless shells, sand dollars and driftwood.

On our flight back to the Clubhouse, we circled a large lighthouse precariously perched on high cliffs on the northwest corner of Langara Island. As the helicopter touched down and we scuttled away from the spinning blades, we were warmly greeted by the lighthouse keeper and his over-enthusiastic dog. We were soon to learn that both man and dog's keen excitement at our arrival was well warranted – neither had left this remote corner of Canada's most far-flung archipelago in over eight years! As the contented animal bounded around our legs, you could certainly see the grin on his lips as he rejoiced in our company. Our tour of the lighthouse included ascending several narrow ladders up to the gargantuan, eight-foot-tall lens itself, which can be seen by ships over 45 miles away. On waving goodbye, I pondered the remoteness of this magical land and the effect on the people who live here. No doubt the stresses and strains of everyday life centre around sheer survival on these last rugged outcrops of civilisation, as opposed to the corporate deadlines of the city, and I imagine their joys are found in the singing humpbacks and soaring eagles rather than Hollywood's latest offering. I wondered if the lighthouse keeper would be open to swapping lives...

Back at the Clubhouse, we were treated to the cuisine of a visiting guest chef from one of the most respected restaurants in Vancouver. With added value at every step (including filleting and cleaning your catch and freezing it in convenient packages for your trip home), the West Coast Fishing Club is leading the way in luxury fishing expeditions on the islands. Dinner was eagerly awaited by all guests



Langara Island's remote lighthouse

and did not disappoint. Locally caught crab was followed by succulent pork belly, oozing with flavour. Wonderfully fresh fish had been a staple on the menu so far, so sampling some of British Columbia's prized pork was a real treat.

Meals were taken in a stunning, open-plan dining room, surrounded by windows, displaying the captivating natural world like prized paintings on a wall. Conversation soon turned to the source of the fish served at the lodge. Sadly, although all produce at the Clubhouse is sourced in British Columbia, fish caught by staff or guests need to travel down to Vancouver to be verified before they can return to the lodge and be served from the kitchen. It would have been wonderful to enjoy meals straight from our fishing lines but this was not to be.

Our journey home loomed and as we said our goodbyes, I felt an urge to kick-start a new life – one surrounded by endless ocean and boundless sky, balanced on the edge of the world.

Days later, back in London's modern metropolis and the daily grind of emails and telephone calls, one message caught my eye. The new Clubhouse record had been set with a 35.4kg Chinook salmon,

info box.

West Coast Fishing Club offers three- or four-night trips from Vancouver, staying at the Clubhouse on Langara Island, between May and September. Prices start at CAN\$4,425 (approx. £2,450) and include return flights from Vancouver to the islands, accommodation, all meals and more fishing than you can shake your rod at! www.westcoastfishingclub.com

VISA

British passport holders do not require a visa to enter Canada.

HEALTH

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, rabies and tetanus should be considered depending on the nature and length of your trip.

a veritable beast of the angling world. Photographs of the gigantic fish alongside the boat proved its size; a head like a small suitcase and a body well over the size of a domestic fridge. And in true West Coast Fishing Club style, the fish had been measured, checked and released back into the ocean. Fishermen from all over the world, both experienced and newly 'hooked', must be checking their calendars and bank funds, keen to make the trip in search of this recently released monster. I know I am certainly one of them. ■