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B.C. fishing club's amenities rival that of a top hotel

BY ELAINE YONG, SPECIAL TO CANWEST NEWS SERVICE OCTOBER 30, 2009



IF YOU GO

The West Coast Fishing Club www.westcoastfishingclub.com has four properties in the Queen Charlottes.

All-inclusive self-guided 4 day/3 night fishing trips at the Clubhouse start at \$4,425 per person (double occupancy). Package includes flights from YVR, accommodations, gourmet meals, pre-dinner cocktails, wine and beer at dinner, fishing gear, fish vacuum packaged for flight home.

David Hawksworth and Friends Culinary Trip - \$5,500 per person (double occupancy, 2009 pricing) Includes: flights from YVR, 4 nights accommodation at the Clubhouse, gourmet dining and host bar, culinary courses, guided fishing with equipment, fishing licenses, fish vacuum packaged for flight home.

A buffet-style lunch of carved ham, hearty tomato sausage pasta, and a few slices of prosciutto does not mix well with an afternoon of fishing, if you are prone to seasickness. With rolling three metre swells off the northern tip of the Queen Charlottes, my queasy stomach is protesting. I'm grateful for the Dramamine cocktail I downed before getting on board.

As a guest of the West Coast Fishing Club on Langara Island, I will have plenty of opportunity to test out my novice fishing skills over the next couple of days -- that is if I can stomach any more time on the water. Based on today's rocking and rolling experience, the cosy confines of the Clubhouse are looking more and more appealing. And just to be clear, this definitely isn't your grandpa's fishing shack -- think understated luxury.

The wild north side of the Queen Charlottes has made a name for itself as a world-class saltwater fishing destination. And for decades, serious anglers have been flocking to remote Langara Island for the prolific runs of chinook, coho and the chance to land a giant north Pacific halibut. A handful of rustic lodges and floating resorts are nestled in Helmslung Cove on the southwest corner of the island, built specifically to cater to the fishing crowd.

The Clubhouse, one of the West Coast Fishing Club's four Queen Charlotte properties, breaks the mould with service and amenities that rival a top boutique hotel. The West Coast-style cedar shingle lodge is perched on Langara's highest point, with breathtaking views from every window. "Where else can you see eagles flying above and eagles flying below?" quips marketing director Brian Grange.

There is a great room with cosy leather club chairs tucked around a stone fireplace, the well-appointed guest suites -- with room for 39 guests -- feature comfy duvets and white fluffy bathrobes, plus two hot tubs nestled in one corner of the expansive front deck are perfect for an apres-fish soak.

It has come a long way from the original West Coast Fishing Club, which was just that -- a club for people who loved fishing. More than two decades ago, a couple of Ontario businessmen, one of them Brian Grange's father, entertained clients by booking rooms at other Langara Island fishing lodges, but they used their own boats, equipment and guides. In 1990, a prime piece of land became available and construction on the clubhouse began. Since then, the lodge has evolved into a five-star destination resort, paired with five-star cuisine. As the younger Grange explains, "You can't have a premium resort without premium dining."

The turmoil in my stomach calms down just in time for dinner -- a fantastic four-course meal prepared by resident executive chef Ryan Stone. There is the pleasing poached quail's egg in a smooth and creamy parmesan polenta. The local Queen Charlotte halibut in the chowder goes down like silk, highlighted with hints of fennel. A rich and decadent beef short rib is served alongside buttery foie gras mashed potatoes. By the time we get to dessert, I barely have room for more than a few bites of the dense chocolate brownie with homemade peanut ice cream. It's easy to see why the former Marriott Pinnacle chef has been given the nod to represent Canada in the 2011 Bocuse D'Or.

His new gig in one of the most remote corners of the province hasn't come without its unique challenges. "You have to be creative and organized. Even if you don't need something, you plan ahead and order it anyhow," explains Stone. He stocks the 25x25 foot freezer, expansive wine room and dry-goods cellar by barge at the beginning of the year. Twice a week, his stores are replenished with 800 pounds of space on the flight from Vancouver.

Hard to believe for Vancouver locavores, but up here in the extreme wilderness, the 100-mile diet isn't impossible. Of course, there is a bounty of beautiful seafood literally at the doorstep. But surprisingly, fresh herbs, carrots, lettuce and beets come from Massett, a mere 20-minute flight by helicopter. Club owner Rick Grange is the proud keeper of three greenhouses and farm fields, overflowing with lovely produce. The long daylight hours this far north pumps up production to tropical proportions -- there were nine harvests of lettuce this year.

Chanterelle mushrooms are found in abundance in the wild and impossibly juicy tomatoes are sourced from a secret supplier somewhere in the Queen Charlottes. Chef Stone laughs as he recalls one of his initial conversations with the owners, "They told me when I started they get these amazing tomatoes in the Charlottes. I was like 'yeah, right'. But these are the nicest tomatoes I have ever worked with, and that includes time in California and Australia."

Even one of Canada's top chefs, David Hawksworth, raves about these tomatoes, calling them "unbelievable." And I have to agree with him. Simply dressed with an olive oil and vinegar dressing, they are bursting with flavour. He actually makes me swear not to disclose the location because he doesn't want his fellow chefs in Vancouver getting their hands on them. Perhaps he plans to feature them in his new soon-to-be-opened restaurant at the Hotel Georgia.

For now, Hawksworth gets plenty of quality tomato time during his annual trek to the clubhouse. An avid fisherman, the youngest inductee into the BC Restaurant Hall of Fame first visited about eight years ago for a stint as guest chef. But now, he captains an entire culinary adventure trip every year, complete with interactive cooking classes and nightly gourmet dinners. There is even a visiting sommelier to discuss wine pairings as you dine on the fruits of your labour.

The man who emerged as a leading culinary talent during his seven years at Vancouver's West restaurant doesn't mind sharing the spotlight. This year, he even convinced good friends and fellow chefs celebre Vikram Vij and Diva at the Met's Dino Renaerts to join the fun, though it really wasn't all that difficult. "They come up once, and they are like 'Oh my God, now I know why you love it here!'" laughs Hawksworth.

The hands-on classes are geared toward fresh seafood, giving guests imaginative suggestions on what to do with the fish they (hopefully) take home. Hawksworth even demonstrates his secret technique for absolutely wonderful poached salmon. A beautiful translucent pink, the delicately scented fish, served alongside pickled beetroot and a savoury bacon cabbage horseradish, just melts in my mouth. It is the most succulent salmon I have ever eaten.

As Hawksworth explains, it is cooked for about 40 minutes in infused olive oil that is warmed to just 40C. "The oil is warm enough to cook, but not in a way that changes the texture of the fish. The flesh is moist and soft, with no moisture loss."

The culinary adventures have been such a huge success for the West Coast Fishing Club, it is now expanded to a series of six weekends, each hosted by a different chef. Expect household names, including Lumiere's Dale MacKay and Vancouver Magazine's Chef of the Year Robert Belcham.

It's all about catering to a different crowd, especially in tough economic times when the traditional corporate crowd is shying away from swish weekends away. According to Brian Grange, couples are most interested in the cooking school, though often the die-hard fishermen end up donning aprons while the wives bring home the salmon. "We can create any experience in the Queen Charlottes, and we want to open it up to people who wouldn't have thought they would enjoy a fishing lodge."

I couldn't agree with him more, though it is a bit difficult to hold a coherent thought as I am pummeled into sweet submission by the resident massage therapist. Yes, there's even a mini spa here, and an exercise room for burning off a few calories, if you can drag yourself away from the dining table.

And then there is the fishing, which is still the prime reason most people make the trek to Langara Island. I have to admit, it really wasn't all that appealing to me when I first got the invite to visit the Clubhouse.

But by the third day here, I am finding myself surprisingly hooked. Of course it helps that the sun is out and the seas around Coho Point are mirror-like, no anti-nausea medication needed. Plus the "candy boat," which supplies a never-ending stream of snacks to guests who stay out all day, is offering up steamed Dungeness crab accompanied by bottles of white wine.