

Over the past 25 years, British Columbia's salt-water sport-fishing industry has undergone substantial evolutionary change. All but gone are the days of rudimentary fishing camps with small aluminum boats and minimal creature comforts, thanks to a pair of ambitious business partners who arrived on the scene in 1988 with two Boston Whalers and a problem to solve.

## **Oceans of Fortune**

It was in the summer of 1981 that Rick Grange, a co-owner of an international corporate security company, ventured for the first time into the marine wilderness of the British Columbia coast to experience its raw beauty and superlative Salmon fishing. There on the water, far from the reaches of city life, it occurred to him that fishing excursions to this region might represent a unique form of corporate hospitality for his firm's growing list of clients. He set his sights on the Queen Charlotte Islands, where he discovered waters alive with five species of Pacific Salmon.

"I went up there with a friend and the first time we dropped our lines we had a double header," he recalls. "One was a 57-pound Chinook Salmon and the other was 52. We caught and released about a hundred Coho on that trip too."

In addition to an abundance of Salmon, the Queen Charlottes also offered consistently good fishing for large Halibut, not to mention frequent sightings of whales and other marine life. Surely it was here, he thought, that he could provide an unparalleled experience that would have his clients wanting to return time and again, but only if he could address two lingering concerns; their absolute safety on the water and their extreme comfort when the fishing day was through.

## **Early Days**

In preparation for the first summer of operations in 1988, Grange and business partner Brian Legge purchased two Boston Whalers, top-of-the line fishing tackle and survival suits, hired a couple of seasoned guides and booked blocks of rooms at a lodge on Graham Island. When the first group of anglers arrived, they were welcomed as members of The West Coast Fishing Club, a name chosen to stimulate a kindred and exclusive atmosphere and to help establish a forward-thinking culture of conservation-minded angling.

"We determined from the very beginning that we would put more fish back in than we took out," Grange recalls. "We started charging people ten dollars for every fish they caught, which we matched and then used to buy tanks for the Marble River Hatchery on Vancouver Island. Since that time we've raised enough money for the hatchery to rear over two million Chinook and Coho fry and re-populate nine different river systems."

While the inaugural season was a great success on the water, the Spartan nature of accommodations, lackluster meals and lack of privacy remained problematic. "I took Ken and Marilyn Thomson fishing and it was embarrassing to me that the lodge where we were staying had shared washrooms," says Grange, referring to the heads of Canada's wealthiest family and the Thomson Corporation media empire. "I just thought 'there's got to be a better way.'"

A better way soon became obvious – to construct a land-based lodge from which the penultimate fishing experience could be offered. In the meantime, the interim needs could be met by acquiring a floating lodge. After purchasing a five-year-old converted barge, they spent the summer of 1989 expanding and renovating its interior to high standard of rustic elegance, including ensuite bathrooms for each of its 12 guest rooms and an expanded kitchen and dining room. Named the North Island Lodge, it went into service in 1990 in Beal Cove of the lee side of Langara Island, the northernmost point in the Queen Charlottes. By this time however, work had also begun nearby on a land-based lodge that would exceed all existing standards of comfort and service.

### **Breaking Ground**

Henslung Cove on the south shore of Langara Island was once the site of a re-fuelling station for commercial fishing vessels working the remote waters of the Queen Charlotte Islands, whose name was officially changed in 2010 to Haida Gwaii, meaning “islands of the people” in the language of original inhabitants. With its dock facilities intact and a rocky plateau high above, Grange and Legge believed they had found an ideal location for a small five-star resort hotel with a commanding ocean view.

They soon acquired 35 acres overlooking the cove where they would reinforce the docks, install fuel tanks and build a marina, fish cleaning and refrigeration facilities. Work began on the site in the summer of 1989 and focused initially on the construction of a road up the steep grade from the dock to the building site. Within a year they completed the rudimentary foundations of what was to become The Clubhouse.

In the summer of 1991, The Clubhouse staff welcomed their first guests into ultra-comfortable surroundings and offered an eclectic array of superb food and wine. In each subsequent season, guests returned to discover that the facility had expanded during the winter months, as did the fleet of Boston Whalers, in which guides could safely circumnavigate Langara Island. Increasing numbers of corporate groups, including some from Fortune 500 companies, willingly paid a premium to make annual forays to Langara Island, confident that The West Coast Fishing Club would guarantee an experience by which memories could be made and relationships strengthened.

### **Move to Masset**

Although business continued to improve each year, it soon became apparent that there was yet another element of the product offering that required attention - the matter of guest transportation between Vancouver and Langara Island. The norm among lodge operators was to transfer guests arriving by scheduled aircraft at Sandspit airport onto buses and then to float planes, a lengthy and cumbersome process. “It was by far the weakest link in our customer service delivery” says Legge. “A changeover could take anywhere from three hours to eight hours, depending on weather and logistics.”

Once again, they began to look for “a better way,” including using chartered aircraft from Vancouver to a rarely used airport farther north at Masset, and then helicopters to the lodges. Although more costly, the move worked well and added another dimension to the experience, with the helicopters affording guests streamlined access to the lodges and first-glimpses of land and seas that thrilled their imaginations. With the bar again raised, other lodge operators had little choice but to join the exodus to the Masset airport and the use of helicopters.

By all appearances, The West Coast Fishing Club appeared to have established unprecedented standards in all facets of its operations, and had been instrumental in ushering in a whole new era and mindset in BC's sport-fishing industry. But then came disturbing news.

### **Building an Outpost**

In the spring of 2000, Fisheries and Oceans Canada announced that it was considering a zero-possession limit for Chinook Salmon in the waters off Langara Island. It was a potentially devastating blow, with much of the appeal being the ability for guests to take home ample tasty reminders of their experiences on the North Pacific. By this time though, cash flows were sufficient for construction of a third lodge, one that would be close to Langara Island, but outside the proposed regulated zone.

A site at Port Louis on the west coast of Graham Island was chosen for a small lodge that would serve as an outpost to The Clubhouse. In the event of a possession ban, lodge managers would simply load Clubhouse and North Island Lodge guests into helicopters and take them to Port Louis. Here the seabed dropped sharply to create deep holes where bait congregated and kept the migrating Salmon in the feeding grounds for extended periods. Although Grange and Legge could only commit a million dollars for the construction of what became "The Outpost," the result was a remarkable combination of rich leather and wood surroundings in a stunning setting.

As an added bonus, the onerous possession ban didn't materialize, meaning that The Outpost could operate independently as a third lodge for The West Coast Fishing Club, and one that was much needed owing to steadily increasing demand from a client base that now hailed from throughout North America. When it opened in 2001, The Outpost became the Club's most distinctive facility, offering groups of up to 16 guests an exclusively luxurious environment, along with incredible fishing in utter solitude on the wild west coast of Graham Island.

### **Latter Day Evolution**

By 2001, The West Coast Fishing Club had seemingly brought every manner of service excellence to bear, including the establishment of new headquarters just steps away from the south terminal of Vancouver International Airport, where staff could see members off and provide assistance upon their return. But Grange and Legge still saw room for improvement, a task they assigned to Rick Grange's 24-year-old son.

As newly appointed director of sales and marketing, Brian Grange went to work on some new initiatives, including upping the ante with respect to the Club's culinary program by tapping into Vancouver's reputation as a North American destination for food-lovers. In 2003, some of the city's most celebrated chefs made guest appearances in the kitchens of The Clubhouse and The Outpost. On the success of these occasions, the David Hawksworth and Friends Culinary Adventure was initiated in 2007, an annual five-day event that featured daily interactive cooking classes with the owner of Vancouver's famous Hawksworth restaurant and other celebrity chefs. It was an overwhelming success and became an annual marquee event for The Clubhouse.

Grange also drove efforts to further enhance the Club's corporate responsibility program by establishing an annual fishing tournament to raise money for BC children's charities. The inaugural Fishing for Kids tournament attracted many eager participants to The Clubhouse, including well-known business leaders and NHL hockey players. After the Vancouver Canucks signed on as partners, the event took on an even higher profile, and as of 2013 had contributed over \$5.2 million to children's charities, most recently to the Canucks Autism Network.

But as the news of Lehman Brothers' collapse rocked boardrooms and banks in late 2008, the Club's management team huddled to decide how best to weather the ensuing storm. Anticipating reduced numbers of visitors, many other lodge operators began to consider ways to cut costs and pare down services. Grange and Legge saw things differently.

"We knew that the same demand from our US clients was not going to be there," recalls Legge. "So we took a look at all of our fixed costs and concluded that we needed to change the model, but not compromise on service. We decided we could be as good or better as we had always been, but with a reduced number of guests and a slightly shorter season."

The capacity of The Clubhouse, which had been designed to accommodate 52 guests, was immediately reduced to just 40, while The Outpost was trimmed from 16 to 12. "It provided better value for our guests," says Legge. "The dining room and common areas all worked better with fewer people so we stayed with it."

### **Quarter Century Reflections**

Beginning with a vision to tame, but not taint a tiny portion of marine wilderness, The West Coast Fishing Club has led the transformation of BC's sport-fishing industry, introduced novel ways for human hearts to meet, and has been a part of personal, corporate and family histories for more than a generation.

At the same time, it has become an industry torchbearer for corporate responsibility, community and economic development, and environmentally friendly operating practices. For the most part, its culture of conservation-minded angling prevails among long-time members, many of whose children and grandchildren now accompany them on their marine wilderness odysseys, and have similarly come to understand the delicate balance of the Pacific, and the necessity of taking their turn as her stewards.

Grange and Legge agree that its success is ultimately owed to legions of staff members, whose diligence and attention to detail have done the bulk of the heavy-lifting to redefine British Columbia's saltwater sport fishing industry. As for the lighthearted atmosphere of kindred spirit that prevails in the properties themselves, there can be only one primary source; the thousands of like-minded souls who return annually from all points on the continent to test their skill against some of the most explosive species of sport fish on the planet, inextricably linked through the commonality of their adventures.

And if things continue to go as Grange and Legge envisioned back in 1988, The West Coast Fishing Club's traditions will be preserved long after they are gone, and in a manner by which future generations will be assured the same rare privileges amidst the

enigmatic beauty of Haida Gwaii - shared adventures far beyond the norm, and far beyond their wildest expectations.