



KINGS at the QUEEN of HAIDA GWAI!

British Columbia
destination is world class

by BILL DePRIEST

The Pacific Northwest has always held a special place in my heart. The sprawling forests and clusters of tiny islands featuring majestic wildlife and geography are unique and breathtaking.

I have been to Alaska many times to fish salmon and halibut. The trips to the Pacific Northwest usually feature great fishing, a bit of rain and some awesome bites on salmon and halibut. But adding ultimate family value to each venture to the Pacific Northwest is that one doesn't need professional skills or outlandish equipment to succeed.

Thus, needless to say, when we had the opportunity to hook up with Queen Charlotte Safaris, we jumped at the chance. At Queen Charlotte Islands, we could enjoy an experience where a family with kids could go to catch lots of Chinook salmon, nice halibut and great rockfish. Yet all could be so comfortable that my wife could enjoy the trip and even feel pampered.

After watching their reports, I knew this was the place for us.

I met Valerie Hoperich early in my career at the magazine at a trade show up north. She was representing her lodge and booking trips. She was great to speak with as she had a passion for the Queen Charlotte Islands and what they had to offer.

As we flew into Sandspit Airport we could tell right away we were in for an amazing adventure. On the approach we could see the remote nature of the place. The lack of homes on the island gave us the early inclination. Valerie had told us that it was a special place when we set up the trip, but when you witness a full 10 miles of beach without another soul in sight, it really hits home. Bald eagles stand as sentinels along the tree line that parallels the shore.

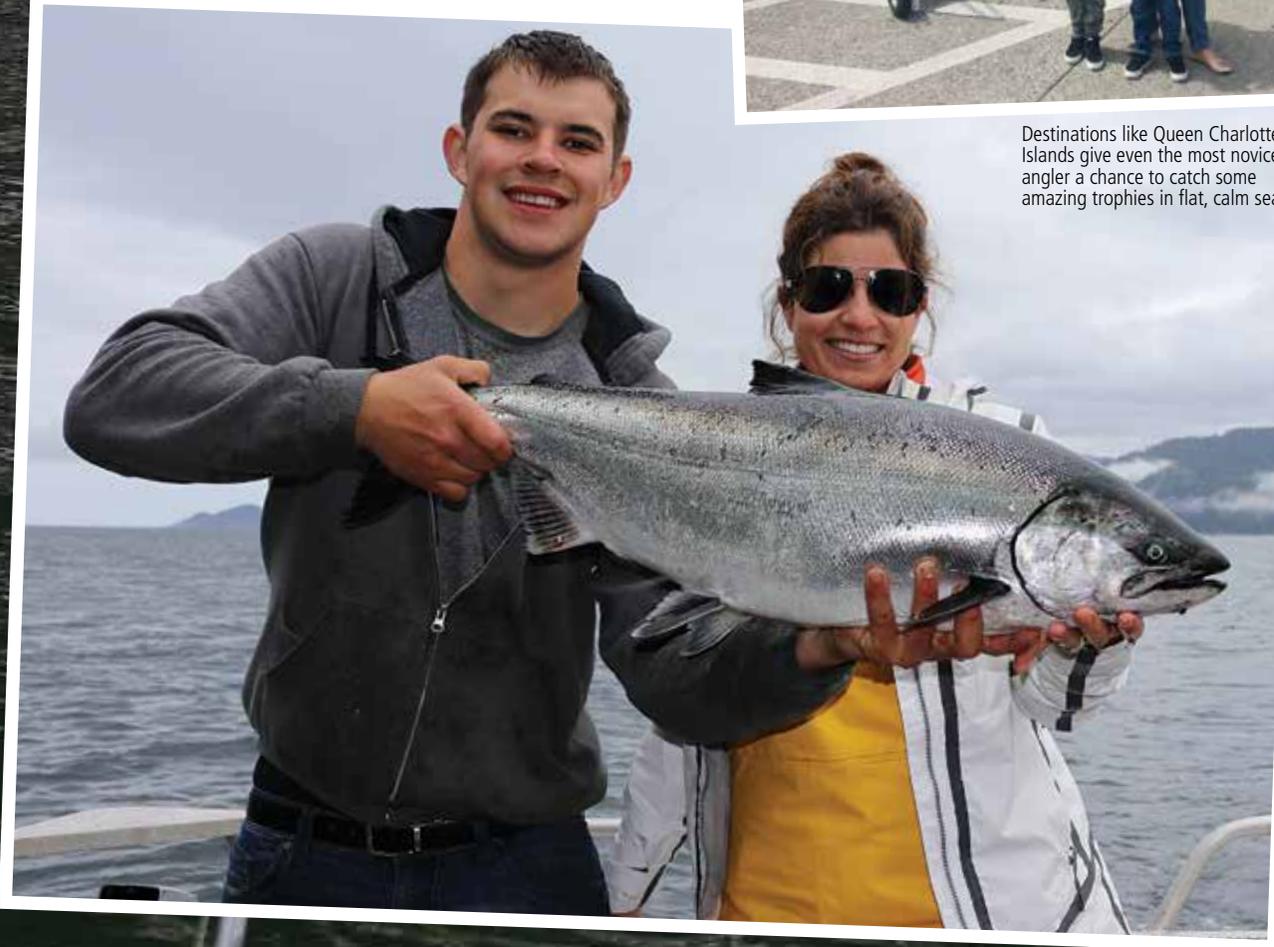
The short drive from the airport to the lodge was full of anticipation for my two sons who were on the trip. The tides are pretty dramatic in this area and the boys were able to go out on the beaches for hours and collect shells. You could walk out some 200 or 300 feet onto ocean bottom at low tide.

We enjoyed appetizers and listened to Valerie give a quick welcome talk, providing us all the details about the lodge and what to expect over the next few days. It is so nice when a lodge owner takes the time to greet the guests and make them feel at home. I have noticed over many years that lodges and businesses seem to run smoother and have better customer service when an



The flight to Sandspit is not only short but you get the amazing aerial views of the Queen Charlottes.

Destinations like Queen Charlotte Islands give even the most novice angler a chance to catch some amazing trophies in flat, calm seas.



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owner is on site. This lodge proves that point.

The rooms, we discovered were very comfortable and clean. They had that nice wood lodge feel while still keeping a very upscale presence. The main lodge area was a great place to meet up and tell fish stories while enjoying some drinks and conversation.

The first evening we had an amazing dinner consisting of prime rib and some tantalizing appetizers and desserts. Lodge guests sit together, family style, creating a friendly environment that builds camaraderie among visitors.

The first morning we headed down to the docks to meet the boats, where courteous captains awaited with big smiles and tales of the big kings they had caught just days before. Valerie chose to utilize a fleet of Thunder Jet boats at the lodge. Her reasons were simple but practical.

As mentioned, there are large swings in the tide. The Skidegate Narrows, which is the pathway to the most productive side of the island, has some extremely shallow spots—especially at low tide. Other lodges with non-jets have to fish around the tides but with the Thunder Jets, you leave at the same time each day and return the same time each day. That



Trophy halibut are not uncommon in the waters around the Haida Gwaii Queen Charlotte Islands.

way your fishing time is never compromised. Likewise, these boats are extremely fast and get you to the fishing grounds quickly and comfortably.

They also are very well set up for fishing, featuring a rear driving station for the captain so he is always in the cockpit rigging gear and getting you hooked up.

When I first learned about fishing in BC the one thing that stuck out to me is these crazy-shaped mooching reels used to troll salmon. To be honest, I didn't want to use them and that works out fine for those more familiar with conventional tackle.

But on this adventure, Valerie and the skipper of our boat insisted we try. And I have to say, the first time I pulled on a salmon with a mooching reel I was hooked. My family and I used them exclusively for the rest of our salmon fishing on the trip. The fish fight better on them and it's a little more one-on-one between you and the fish.

Each exhilarating run is felt in your hand, each headshake is felt to your core as the king salmon tries to escape. These special set-ups also tend to keep the salmon on the hook, even when they are jumping clear out of the water. They also troll for the salmon, which makes for fast and furious action and gives the captain the chance to stay on the school.

The ride through the narrows is the most beautiful tour I have ever experienced—anywhere! The wildlife and sheer lack of human presence is incredible. Our captain was from the local Haida Nation tribe and he was

able to give us the grand tour including pointing out some of the ancient burial sites for chiefs of the tribe. The Haida people have been in these islands for more than 13,000 years. You may recognize the place by the name of Queen Charlotte Islands, which it was known as for years. However, in 2010, the islands were renamed the Haida Gwaii out of respect for the founding tribe.

As we came out the other side of the narrows, we quickly made a short jaunt out to Cartwright Sound and started early on the bottom fish. The morning is a great time to get out for these species and we used jigs and lighter rods, which made the experience so much fun. While jigging we caught trophy halibut, lingcod and all sorts of rockfish, including the famed yelloweye. I even jigged up a nice king salmon on a lingcod jig!

Once we had our limits we shot over on a quick five-minute ride



A day's catch of beautiful king salmon or "Springs" as the locals call them.

to the salmon grounds. For me, the best part is that you fish them in what I would call glassy lake conditions; the grounds are completely protected from weather.

If you have guests who don't do well with rough seas then this place is a game-changer. My wife is one who cannot handle rough seas and is seasick prone. In these waters she did not have any feelings of seasickness.

So, spoiler alert. Most locations in the Pacific Northwest either don't have good salmon fishing in protected areas or you cannot fish them legally in such spots. Not the case at Haida Gwaii!

We ended the day with limits on the bottomfish, a bunch of salmon and I actually caught a BC Grand Slam. That meant a king salmon, a yelloweye, a lingcod and a halibut all in the same day. I have to say that is some pretty amazing fishing!

The variety really adds to the trip, as well as the liberal possession limits in this area. At the end of day one we knew that we were



Mooching reels are the preferred method in BC. For good reason as they add excitement to the catch.



Crabbing is another great aspect of the day with your guide. Best part is, you get to eat them for dinner!

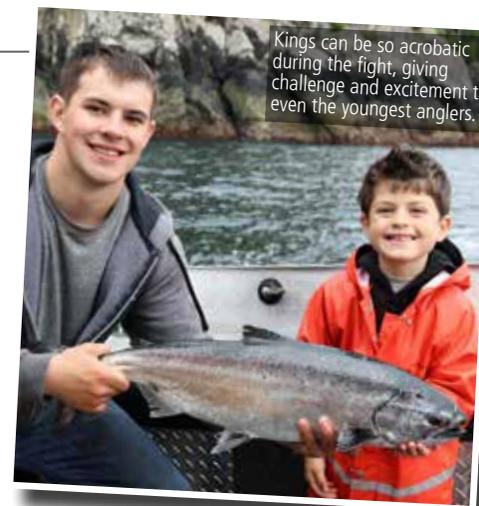


in for some full boxes of fish—the family and I had sore backs. We even got to pull crab traps for a wonderful cookout at dinner that night.

After dinner the chef brought out salmon carcasses to the beach and we all met for a show that we had been promised. Shortly after arriving, you could hear the bald eagles calling from the trees. It started with a couple and soon became a flock. The boys were amazed as five or six eagles landed right in front of us to feast, swooping down and fighting for the salmon.

When you come from where we are in SoCal, the sight of a bald eagle is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Seeing so many, so close in one place was majestic and clearly worth the price of admission! Dinner was filled with some great stories from the day's catches, and all the guests went to bed with smiles on their faces and full stomachs.

An interesting fact about the salmon in this area is the ones you catch are transitory fish, meaning they are traveling through and fattening up, not waiting to enter a river and spawn.



Kings can be so acrobatic during the fight, giving challenge and excitement to even the youngest anglers.

This makes them bright silver, full of energy and the best tasting salmon I have ever eaten.

The Haida Gwaii Islands also have the longest run of kings in North America. Unlike other areas where the spawning run is only four to six weeks, here the season lasts 12 full weeks running from May to September.

Regulations also have you fishing with barbless hooks, giving you the opportunity to catch and release kings until you find the ones you want to keep. This gives you the best opportunity of catching a "Tyee" (a trophy king over 30 pounds up there).

What's more, the angling pressure is minimal. On the busiest day we saw four other charter boats and a couple of local fishermen. What a nice change from crowds of boats all vying for the same school of salmon.

Each day we were there, the pattern was repeated with large catches of both salmon and bottomfish. The king salmon bite improved each day to where it was easy limits for most boats. Unfortunately, we lost a really large one that was sure to be a Tyee. (But that's what next trip is for.)

On the final night, Valerie passed



The Queen Charlotte Safaris Lodge overlooks the gorgeous bay.

out custom Queen Charlotte Safaris pins for the guests with outstanding accomplishments such as a Tyee salmon pin, released halibut over 100-pound pin and the coveted Grand Slam pin. I was lucky enough to receive Grand Slam and halibut over 100 pins, while my son Cole received his pin for his Grand Slam.

I highly recommend you give Queen Charlotte Safaris a shout and get up there and experience the seclusion and magic of the Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlotte Islands a place *National Geographic* named one of the top trips of 2015. Check them out online at www.qcsafaris.com. For information call 877-815-2892. 🇺🇸

