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So Near Yet So Far: B.C.'s Spectacular Kyuquot Sound

*Just Two Hours from Vancouver,
Anglers Find World-Class Fishing
for Salmon, Halibut and Lingcod*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DOUG OLANDER

In recent years, reports of some of the hottest fishing seen in decades have percolated out of the west coast of Vancouver Island. Believe them.

But forget the generalities; let's get to the chase. Last August I went up to Kyuquot Sound, on the northwest side of the island, to verify these reports firsthand. The result? Check out these stats for four anglers over three actual days of fishing (two about half-days and two full days).

First half-day: Full limits of triple chinook salmon — eight in total — and many more released. One fish in the high 20s; the rest, 30 to 46 pounds. All caught in about three hours. Seldom able to get a second line down before a salmon hit the first.

First full day: Once again, trophy chinook caught and released — limits of eight and more — all in the morning. In the afternoon, 25 hours devoted to halibut fishing, with a 96-pounder hoisted.

Second full day: We targeted lingcod, easily catching limits (12) of 15- to 20-pounders; many more in the

With diazoc averaging 30 passes, it was easy for the angler here to agree with Capt. David Murphy to release this "Brite eye" off Kyuquot Sound.

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First full day: Once again, trophy chinook caught and released - limits of eight and more - all in the morning. In the afternoon, 2 1/2 hours devoted to halibut fishing, with a 96-pounder boated.

Second full day: We targeted lingcod, easily catching limits (12) of 15 to 20-pounders; many more in the 20-40 pound range released.

Nonstop action most of the time-mostly impossible to get stuck in the rocky bottom because a lingcod would charge out to grab white Powerbaits or other plastic tails before they could hang up.

Second half-day: Three hours of halibut fishing produced five flatties up to 90 pounds. The long/short of it, then, is this: Fishing just doesn't get much better. I say that having fished pretty much all over the coasts of Alaska and British Columbia as well as many warmer climates.

Of course, as every fisherman knows there's no assurance that the action will be this hot next time around. That said, the fishing off Kyuquot Sound (pronounced "Ki-YOU-kwat") pretty much resembled our experience day in and day out, during most of last summer.

"We keep waiting for it to slow down," Capt. David Murphy told us on the second morning of our visit, as he spun the 26-foot walkaround Pursuit with twin Yamaha 200 four-strokes to get into position for a fast-idle-speed troll.

David says that the consistent salmon fishing of the past few years has in fact been getting better and better. "This (past) summer is the best we've ever seen here in nine years," says the guide. That's how long David and his sister, Marilyn, have been operating Murphy Sportfishing in Kyuquot Sound each June through August. And in general, a couple of summers of mostly fine weather have also helped the averages.

Indeed, the Pacific on our visit varied from a light chop to flat calm. So the sort of action we saw on a sustained basis is pretty amazing: Why has it been so good here - and what are the chances that action will continue?

Salmon Freeway at Rush Hour

Ocean conditions, always critical to the success of any salmon year class, are a primary factor accounting for such good fishing. Unusually warm north Pacific waters in the early 1990s produced weaker year classes of salmon, thanks not only to the water temperature but also its byproducts, notably hordes of rapacious Pacific mackerel (that in normal years seldom swim farther north than California) with a taste for salmon smolts. Warmer temperatures also mean less coastal upwelling; hence less nutrient-rich waters, reducing overall productivity.

Cooler water increased the survival rate. That has spelled greater abundance of salmon

B.C.'s Cannery Option

Actually, you *can* take it with you. It's entirely possible for visiting anglers to take frozen fish on flights headed home. But it can be a hassle, and, especially if you're traveling alone with gear, you may be limited to a rather modest amount. Of course, as checked baggage within your allotment, the price is nice. But anglers willing and able to spend some money can skip the hassle and enjoy their salmon smoked in any number of styles, and either canned (which I can recommend) or professionally cleaned and vacuum bagged (to keep perfectly well for up to a year, they claim). The product is then FedExed to home or office. Given the cost of high quality fish (when one can even find it) in markets, more and more anglers are opting for the cannery route.

For most who fish British Columbia, that means St. Jeans Cannery and Smokehouse, which has been in the business for more than four decades and each year processes literally tons of sport-caught salmon and bottomfish from resorts up and down the coast. These lodges - which include Murphy's - are set to ship anglers' catches to one of six St. Jeans depots, or you can bring it to their facility at the south terminal, Vancouver International Airport. Ultimately it all goes to the plant in Nanaimo, which covers 2 acres.

For more information on B.C.'s cannery option, call 250.754 2185 or visit www.stjeans.com Whatever you plan to do with your fish, be advised that if an angler wants to keep full limits, and if the fishing's as hot as it has been, that's a lot of fish: eight salmon of which four may be Chinook, three halibut, plus lingcod and other bottomfish. Make sure you can use what you keep!

in recent years and, presumably, again this year when four and five year-old fish return to their streams of origin. (It's a good bet that Chinook averaging well over 30 pounds are mostly four-year-old fish.)

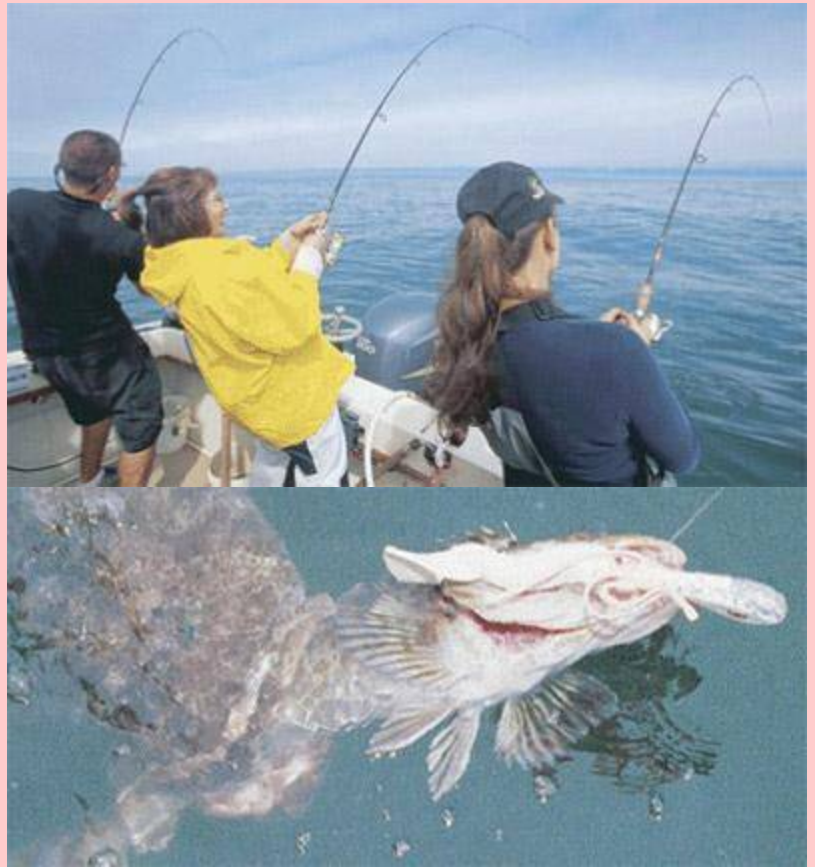
By virtue of its geography, Kyuquot is well-situated to take advantage of this increase in coastal productivity. During the summer, most mature chinook salmon are migrating somewhere, and many pass this area. Stocks returning to major rivers in the lower 48 (from California's Sacramento to the Oregon/Washington border's mighty Columbia) and Alaska, as well as many to British Columbia's Fraser and Skeena rivers and countless other streams, end up heading north or south along northern Vancouver Island. Also, David pointed out the nearly convergent contour lines on a nautical chart showing the sheer canyon walls just offshore of Kyuquot - rising from depths of more than 4,000 feet barely a mile off the Brooks Peninsula, just north of Kyuquot. That means that many migrating fish preferring to feed along the upper continental shelf edge are further bottlenecked into a smaller area near shore.

In other words, think of the waters off Kyuquot as a salmon freeway at rush hour. The kind of action I saw certainly bears out that analogy. The upper "lanes" are habituated largely by coho (silvers) - less sought when trophy chinook (kings) are the order of the day. (Not only are coho smaller but also, part of the season off Kyuquot, anglers have been allowed to keep only hatchery coho, which are readily identified by absent (clipped) adipose fin. At times, wild coho outnumber their hatchery raised brethren many times over.) More than once we'd have to pick up and run farther offshore since the coho were so thick that often getting a lure down past them into their larger relatives was nearly impossible.



Normally, chinook feed beneath the silvers - In 60 to 200 feet of water or even deeper; hence the popularity of downriggers. Each of the five Murphy Sportfishing boats is equipped with three Scotty electric downriggers. But - I suppose because the waters were so replete with voracious salmon in competition - at times, chinook were well up in the "coho zone." For example, at one point during our first day out, I was trying to lower a spoon on the port downrigger when I had to pause to help land one fish of a double hookup. Moments later, we spotted a big king whacking at the spoon that fluttered lazily at the surface just 20 feet behind the transom! I thought about all the hours trolling that many salmon fishermen put in just to hook one chinook of that size.

No worries here about baitfish being yanked off hooks or hands smelling of old herring all day, as is so often the case when pursuing Pacific salmon. Despite a great abundance of bait in the water (typically herring offshore and both herring and needlefish - sand lance - near shore), thin spoons, plastic squid and Tomic lures account for all the salmon aboard Murphy lodge boats. (The profusion of baitfish in the water, by the way, showed with the salmon we caught - all were porkers in prime shape.)



It's a ling eat ling world, as a 30-pound female refuses to give her prize - the 5-pounder just reeled up from bottom.

Break Out the Harpoon

Thank heavens for bottomfish.

Without 'em, Kyuquot anglers would end many fishing days very early, since salmon limits this year could be filled out in an hour or two. (Provincial law requires single barbless hooks, so catch-and-release fishing is a snap.)

Most anglers - not surprisingly - want to target kings first off. Then guides usually head to nearby halibut grounds in about 100 feet of water. Depending on the anglers' wishes, they may go for broad, gravelly humps or plateaus that rise from surrounding deeper waters to produce

off the spool in a series of emphatic runs back toward bottom. "Maybe it's not that small" the angler mumbled, as a smile spread over his face. About 20 minutes later, we could see the brown, diamond shape of a halibut.

"Looks like a good 80 pounds," the skipper said as he prepared to send a

As with halibut, these smaller fish make the best eating, and larger fish are always females. One male Ling can and will fertilize the eggs of many large females, so we felt good about keeping only smaller

mostly "eating-sized" chicken halibut of 15 to 25 pounds or to some deeper spots where the big barn doors hang out. Limit catches of halibut are common on the chicken grounds.

flying harpoon head through the fish. On the scales back at the dock, the flattie turned out to be just 4 pounds shy of the century mark - a keeper on the big side.

fish. We caught our limit of 12 for four anglers early on, but by catching and releasing (these bottom dwellers have no swim bladder and are not at all incapacitated by depth changes),



Dropping to deeper waters takes more time/effort, but monsters occasionally topping the two-century mark lurk here. Marilyn points out that the lodge encourages the release of halibut larger than 100 pounds and offers those who do so a conservation plaque; smaller fish, she says, are much better eating and less valuable as brood stock.

With the idea of going one on one with a beast roughly the size of a Mini-Cooper, my son, Gabe, opted for the deeper spot on our first full fishing day - a hump rising from 280 feet of water to about 170 feet. There, he dropped the preferred rig of our captain, a hefty scrap of salmon from the cleaning table, hooked onto a 510

Despite the intensity of the Chinook action, perhaps our fastest fishing of all came the next morning when - again with David - we ran upcoast a ways to a mighty rough neighborhood, in more ways than one. With wash rocks and barely submerged reefs all around us, I was glad to be with a guide who had local knowledge. The Lowrance X104 plotter/sounder showed ridiculously sheer ledges and cones pockmarking the submarine terrain.

Such terrain off British Columbia and Canada is home to one of the most avaricious of toothy predators in any ocean, the lingcod. And David had assured us this was the time to get them, here, during the tide change. The significance of his words hit home when

we actually hooked, fought and released many more that morning. We'd brought lighter gear with us, and catching lings on 8- to 12-pound spinning and levelwind reels is definitely the way to go for real sport.

Lings have a pugnacious nature, evidenced several times when a big hungry female would latch onto a smaller lingcod intending to make a meal of it. One 30-pounder hung on right to the boat and let go only when Gabe Bogagrippped the small ling in its jaws and pulled the big fish's head well out

Mustad treble. That went onto Matt's standard halibut rig - a Shimano Torium reel on a stout 7-foot Talora rod and 100-pound Power Pro.

After our first few drifts, we had little to show for our efforts. Then, Gabe's rod gave one good dip as the treble hook bit in.

"Something small," Gabe announced, as he cranked fairly easily - for the first few minutes. Then whatever he'd hooked decided to decline his invitation to visit the boat, and suddenly line began melting

three of our group put down three jigs and, at just about the same instant, were hanging on to rods bent double. Soon three long, brown, dagger-dentured shadows loomed next to the boat under the gray surface that reflected the morning's low overcast sky. Two were in the 30-pound range, so David turned them loose. With a thrust of their powerful tails, they darted back to their current-swept lairs.

We'd already agreed that any lingcod we opted to keep would be in the 12- to 20-pound range.

of the water. Even then, when he held the "little" {8-pound) ling at the surface, the determined female kept charging up, trying to take it away, as fired up as a big marlin on a teaser bait.

As the tide started moving, the tiny; bite slowed, but then we started picking up small yelloweye of 5 to 10 pounds. Surprisingly, we didn't catch many other species.

Whale of a Tail Provides Spectacular Send-Off

On our last morning, we opted to fish the chicken halibut grounds, using lighter rigs for more challenge. After catching a few to about 25 pounds on 12- to 20-pound braid, my daughter, Rachel, proved that not all halibut that prowl these near-coast humps are chicks. After a good fight on 20-pound, she brought to the boat a fish much larger than we'd figured. As David scrambled for the harpoon, the halibut took off in a long run just under the surface - unusually horizontal for a halibut. Turns out the fish was hooked just above the eyes, in the head - and barely! Rachel played it carefully and skillfully, and ultimately prevailed.

That proved to be our closing act. The clock was ticking, and the Harbour Air Beaver floatplane would show up in a few hours to fly us back to Vancouver. As if in some grand parting gesture, a huge dark shape rose well away from the boat, thundering down with a splash. A



Visiting Kyuquot Sound

Kyuquot Sound (a tribal term - probably of the Nootkas - meaning "land of many winds") is about 180 miles west-northwest of Vancouver. Within this expansive, official wilderness area made up of islands and inlets is the First Nation village of Kyuquot.

You'll have to either boat or fly in since no roads extend this far. Many drive their own cars or rent one up the island most of the way. Ferries make the 1 1/2-hour run regularly from Vancouver across Georgia Strait to Vancouver Island at Nanaimo. From Nanaimo, figure a scenic drive of about four hours north via Highway 19 through Campbell River, then west on smaller paved roads and finally on a logging road to Fair Harbor at the top of Kyuquot Sound, where a Murphy Sportfishing boat will be waiting to pick you up. Alternatively, you can fly into either Nanaimo, Comox or Campbell River and rent a car from there.

The other choice is a straight fly-in. This is the route we chose.

leaping humpback whale. We watched in awe as it repeated the process a couple more times, then continued the show with a new act: The animal would thrust its tail, the size of our boat, from the surface and bang it down with great force.

After the Beaver lifted off the quiet waters of the bay in front of Kyuquot Village, another afternoon of bluebird weather meant superb views of the Kyuquot area. Little wonder, I thought, at its productivity - with deep water coming in so close to the nearshore waters dotted with islands and kelp beds. It was also hard not to compare this remote coastal wilderness on the northwest side of Vancouver Island with much of the Alaska coast I've visited over the years. It seems so far from everything, yet it's really near; to get here, we'd had to travel just a couple of hours from Vancouver (and it's not much farther from Seattle). Now we had the same quick trip home - which made leaving Kyuquot Sound as easy as it was difficult.

booking a Harbour Air floatplane out of Vancouver to get the four of us up there no fuss, no muss, though it's pricier than driving. While several floatplane services operate from Vancouver, I'd flown Harbour on other trips and could vouch for their professional and safety-conscious standards. Also they have service right out of the downtown Vancouver terminal, which is really fantastic for visitors who want to take some time before and/or after their fishing trip to enjoy Vancouver. It's one of my favorite cities in the world, and, in the summer when the weather is often sunny and mild, not spending a few days here would be a shame. Including the five-minute, free Harbour Air shuttle ride from the downtown floatplane base, we were back in our hotel room just 2 1/4 hours after leaving the dock in Kyuquot.

The main drawback to flying in is the threat of weather delays. Indeed, we were to fly out to Kyuquot at 9 a.m. Though Vancouver was bright and sunny, reports indicated the coast remained socked in. In fact, the fog didn't begin to lift enough to promise access "holes" through the ceiling until about 10.30 a.m. If you opt to fly in, I strongly advise trying to arrange an early-afternoon departure both ways; there's far less chance of fog enshrouding the coast at that time than during the morning or toward dark.

Getting to Vancouver in the first place is, of course, easy enough. We flew American Airlines, but many domestic and international carriers serve Vancouver International.

Timing

Murphy Sportfishing offers several coastal fishing options. The Kyuquot operation generally starts up in the latter part of June and runs until early September. Chinook fishing can be (as we saw) surprisingly strong that entire time; large coho in numbers move in during August. More large halibut tend to be around during the first half of the season, but anglers can catch them anytime.

Contacts

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