

West Coast fishing closer than you think

Gerry Feehan

We were anchored, rods in the water, minding our own business when another boat pulled up, threw out four lines and unapologetically commenced to angling in our path.

Matt, my guide, was indulgent. “Not great etiquette,” was all he said.

Within a few minutes, the other boat hooked into a rather large specimen, and things got crazy. The captain handed his surprised customer the jerking rod and began frantically bringing in the other lines. Mayhem ensued.

Matt still just smiled. In the frenzy of reeling in their fish, the other boat's line became ensnarled in ours and snapped off all our gear. “Predictable,” said Matt, but still didn't lose his cool. That's when I decided Matt must be a very good father. Patience with the little ones.

We were fishing for sturgeon on the Harrison River, in BC's lower mainland. Fortunately, before this fishing fiasco, we had landed our own goliath. It had taken us thirty minutes of hard fighting to bring that two-meter monster to the boat. So I was content—not to mention rather tuckered—and didn't really care if we caught another.

I always assumed one had to drive 12 hours, then take a ferry or a float plane—maybe even sleep on a boat—to go fishing on the west coast. Wrong. Harrison Hot Springs Resort is just inland from Vancouver and provides amazing access to all types of angling: salmon, steelhead—even big pre-historic sturgeon.

And getting there from central Alberta is

easy. Flair (Edmonton & Calgary) and Westjet (Calgary) offer direct flights to Abbotsford International Airport. From there the resort is a leisurely 45-minute drive. So within a couple hours of jumping on a plane, you can be casting for your own behemoth.

Harrison Hot Springs has plenty on offer besides angling. After a tough morning of fishing, I was torn. What to do? Soak in the hot springs? Stroll the lakeshore esplanade? Kayak? Hike one of the amazing local trails? Indulge myself in a local pastry?

I settled on the pastry—and a search for the elusive Big Foot. Harrison Hot Springs is the sasquatch capital of Canada. The local museum offers a fascinating and immersive journey through sasquatch history and folklore. The word sasquatch is an anglicized version of the Sts'ailes First Nation word sa:sqets. The ‘people of the beating heart’ have a deep-rooted spiritual connection to the ‘hairy man’ whom they view not as a monster but as “a revered, powerful guardian and caretaker of the land”, a being that can vanish into the spirit realm and reappear at will.

Fortunately, it's not hard to spot this mysterious creature around Harrison Village. Just follow the Sasquatch Trail. Giant replicas abound around town—and a handy map shows where to find them. This is a place where ancient cherished belief meets modern joyful myth. Suffice to say the sasquatch has made a large footprint on the community.

From Harrison Lake (the largest in south-



Gerry Feehan sturgeon fishing on the Harrison River. (Photo by Gerry Feehan)

western BC), the Harrison River runs for only a few kilometers before merging with the mighty Fraser. The confluence is a hot spot not only for fish but for those that enjoy a piscatory repast. Every winter thousands of bald eagles converge here to feast on spawning salmon—the world's largest winter bald eagle gathering. The menu changes with the spawn: chinook, chum, pink, coho, sockeye. All five salmon species. The buffet lasts from October through March. Winter is special here. It's the quieter, more serene, peaceful, majestic season. The ‘Season of the Wild’. And for 2026 this annual winter celebration coincides with the 100th anniversary of Harrison Hot Springs Hotel.

The Resort Hotel has five hot minerals springs pools of varying shape, size and temperature. I know. I tried them all. And one can't help but feel important sauntering past a roaring fire in the lobby clad in a cozy bathrobe and slippers before slipping al fresco into the soothing waters.

The iconic Copper Room was quiet when I sat down to dinner. For a century, folks have dined and danced the night away on the parquet. Tonight it was just two little girls sashaying to the live music. I sampled the tuna and salmon sashimi appetizer and followed that up with a big bowl of clams. A little heavy on the seafood, but hey, when in Rome.

With an afternoon flight home the next day—and just a short commute to the airport—I had time to explore before hitting the highway. I walked the lakeshore and found the spot where the hot springs originate, a trickle of ochre bubbling out of the dark forest canopy. Out on the lake a great blue heron stalked minnows in the shallows while a harbour seal looked on enviously. Framed

by the distant snowy peaks, the pair offered a fine portrait.

On the way out of town, I stopped at The Spirit Trail, a short, peaceful loop that meanders through an old-growth cedar forest. Along the path a local artist has adorned many of the towering sentinels with handcrafted masks. The juxtaposition is intriguing, fanciful, somber—and just right.

A day earlier, waiting for our monster to hit, Matt and I were shooting the breeze about his background as a fishing guide, mechanic and hockey dad. He also brought me up to speed on the white sturgeon. Endangered, these massive creatures can live up to 200 years. The fishery is now strictly catch and release. Reel it in, take a quick pic... and let 'er go. We were sitting back in quiet reflection, enjoying a perfect day, when the rod bent sideways—and the game was afoot.

Half an hour later the fish was resting calmly in shallow water. We jumped in. Matt scanned our specimen for an embedded marker. He found none. That meant we were the first to catch this big gal. He implanted a probe in its bony back-plate for future tracking. As the big beauty slowly retreated, another sturgeon surfaced from the deep, leapt from the water and landed with an enormous splash. Startled, I asked, “Why do they do that?” “I don't know,” replied Matt, “maybe just for the fun of it”.

A couple months ago a friend of mine flew one-way from Edmonton to Abbotsford for \$23. When's your trip?

Gerry Feehan is an award-winning writer and photographer. He was hosted by tourism-harrison.com, bcsportfishinggroup.com and destinationbc.ca

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