



A fishing lodge with a difference

by

Les Palmer

Aboard the charter-boat Cruiser VI out of Homer, we're trolling for king (chinook) salmon in Kachemak Bay. Rich Green and Joe Crowley, both from Virginia, have already boated a king. Now they're waiting for me. I've missed one chance pressure is on.

I've fished with Rich and Joe for two days, in which time we've become friendly enough that they now feel free to deride my fishing ability. Rich is chanting. The mate, Cody Sheffield, says nothing, but there's something in his facial expression now that wasn't there before I lost the fish. The captain, Steve Novakovich, remains friendly, helpful and unmerciful.

I'd be home, taking a nice nap right now, if you hadn't lost that fish, he says. Next time, remember to keep the tip up.

After a while, the good-natured ribbing becomes just so much background noise, like the muttering of the diesel engines and the cry of gulls. I try to focus. It has been nearly a year since I caught a king salmon. I've paid my dues.

One thing that makes this fishing so special is that only a few charter-boat skippers know these kings are here. Most of the Homer charter-boat fleet is fishing for halibut today.

On a glassy sea, we troll along a wilderness beach. We haven't had a bite for 30 minutes. The few other boats that had been fishing nearby have left.

We all see it at the same time. The rod tip dips an inch, then snaps upward as a fish pulls the line from the downrigger clip.

Fish on!

I pull the rod from the rod holder. Steve knocks the engine out of gear. Cody reels up the downrigger weight. Line melts from the spool.

It's running! I yell.

Steve shifts into reverse and steers toward the fish.

The fish turns and runs toward the boat. I reel like mad, trying to catch up with it. Now it's under the boat.

Don't let the line get in the props! Steve yells.

I jab the rod down into the water and keep it there while making my way to the other side of the boat.

The fish is still there.

It's tiring now. After a brief struggle, it comes to the boat, and Cody nets it. Well worth the wait, the fat chinook is 26 pounds of gleaming silver.

But the kidding isn't over. I'm holding the fish for a photo, when Rich says, Finally.

And Steve says, When you're old, it takes a little longer to do things.

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In the spring of 2004, my younger brother, Ben, came to Alaska to help remodel my house. Not wanting his visit to be all work, I arranged for us to go fishing on the Cruiser VI.

Though Ben lives in Washington state, he had never caught a halibut or a king salmon. And though he has spent a good deal of time on and around boats, I knew he had never been on one like the Cruiser VI.

Unlike most Homer skippers, who fish only for halibut, Capt. Steve fishes for both halibut and salmon, often on the same day. King salmon come into Cook Inlet year-round. I figured that Steve, who has fished the waters around Homer for more than 20 years, could put us on kings if anyone could.

I wanted to surprise Ben, so I hadn't told him anything about the Cruiser VI. It's a 29-foot Blackfin, a trim yacht that was built in Florida for fishing offshore in the Atlantic. A real fishing machine, it's the only charter boat in the Homer harbor with outriggers, 33-foot extenders that give it a wide spread of baits, an advantage while trolling for salmon. It cruises comfortably at 25 miles per hour, and is a joy to fish from. In the Homer small boat harbor, it stands out like a Maserati in a used-car lot.

On the appointed day, Ben and I found Capt. Steve already aboard his boat. Friendly as a Labrador, he invited us aboard and poured us cups of coffee. While he prepared to get underway, I caught Ben looking over the boat the way a guy checks out an attractive woman.

What do you think? I said. Nodding and grinning, Ben said, A little different.

That was no bland comment, no nice, or interesting. Ben was brain-damaged in an automobile accident 25 years ago. Since then, he has become a minimalist when it comes to descriptions, but for those who know him, his short phrases are loaded with meaning. When he said the boat was a little different, he meant it as a sincere compliment, rarely given, and synonymous with another of his descriptive phrases, the best.

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The best well describes the way Steve Novakovich and his wife, Roma, do things.

The typical Homer charter outfit takes fishermen out for a day of halibut fishing, for which they charge about \$250. Some take combo trips and salmon take on more or bigger boats, larger lodges and more headaches.

But Steve and Roma are different. They scaled back and shifted their emphasis from quantity to quality, going for the high-end of the fishing/lodging business. They let their guests decide what they want to do. When the fish are available, and if the customers wish, every trip is a combo trip.

We used to take large groups, and hired skippers to run other boats, Steve said. Now, we take six people, at most. They enjoy it more, and so do we.

The same thinking went into the Emerald Pines Lodge, on the hill above Homer. Instead of a larger lodge, which would require several employees and be to some degree impersonal, the Novakovich's held down the size so they can give everything their personal touch.

Unlike other lodges, we went from large to small, Steve said. We found that the experience we wanted to share with our guests was best provided by just Roma and me.

Roma cooks and runs the lodge, while Steve plays chauffeur and skipper. They like to pamper small groups. Many of their guests return year after year, discovering more to like about the Homer area with each trip.

Steve doesn't just take people fishing. He likes to stop in at the remote village of Seldovia, or at an oyster farm on Kachemak Bay. Weather allowing, he goes to the south end of the Kenai Peninsula, a wild place where you can fish and watch whales at the same time.

For a break from fishing, there's no end of things to do on and around the Kenai Peninsula. You can watch bears, kayak in quiet coves and fly over glaciers and mountain goats. Or you can cruise Homer's souvenir shops, or visit the impressive Pratt Museum and National Maritime Refuge headquarters.

At dinner, while you're eating one of Roma's delicious meals, Steve will tell you where he

caught the 34-1/2 inch rainbow trout that's hanging on a nearby wall, or tell one of his countless stories, such as, We were fishing for halibut with whole herring, and something took one of the baits. A 12-year-old boy took the rod. This sea lion pounds bad, he ran across the deck and nearly knocked me overboard.

I cut the line.

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On a calm, sun-spangled sea in June, the Cruiser VI is 30 miles due west of Homer. Visibility is good enough that we can look across Cook Inlet and see three volcanoes. Four of us are on a quest for the wily halibut, newly weds Todd and Paula Hamilton of Raleigh, N.C.; King Cooper, of Tacoma, Wash.; and me.

One of the biggest tide changes of the year occurs today, more than 25 feet. Most boats are anchored up, fishing with heavy rods and reels, and using 3-to 5-pound sinkers to reach bottom in the strong tidal current. Capt. Steve is being different again. By GPS and depth sounder, he positions the boat at the up-current end of a long knoll, about 100 feet below us, and lets the boat drift with the current.

We'll be drifting at about the same speed as the current, so we can reach bottom with 4- to 8-ounce jigs,

he says. I don't know why the other charter guys don't do this, Steve adds. It lets us fish in any tide, and with light tackle.

Cody baits our hooks with chunks of octopus. We free-spool the jigs to the bottom and start fishing.

Compared to fishing with traditional halibut gear, this is child's play. Within minutes, we're all reeling in halibut. Judging from the way its fighting, mine feels like at least a 50-pounder, so I'm surprised when it's only a 30-pounder.

They fight like tigers on this light tackle, Steve says. And yet, we've brought many to the boat that weighed more than 200 pounds.

For the next two hours, we reel in one halibut after another, most of them in the 20- to 40-pound range.

For at least an hour, I can't get my jig to the bottom without a fish grabbing it. I catch the two I want to take home, and stop. Todd fishes a little longer, and pulls in a 91-pounder.

Feeling tired and satisfied, we ask Steve to take us in.

Have mercy, Captain, I say. We've had all the fishing we can take.

He grins, starts the engines and heads the Cruiser VI toward Homer.

If You Go

The Emerald Pines Lodge's season runs from mid-May through August. Halibut and king salmon are available all season; silver and pink salmon, July and August. Lingcod can be retained only after July 1. Other available species include Pacific cod and rockfish.

The lodge's rates include meals, lodging and fish processing, as well as boots, rain gear and all fishing gear. Maximum group size is six. The most popular package is five days and six nights, for \$3,250 per person.

Homer, the Halibut Fishing Capital of the World, is on the Kenai Peninsula, 226 miles (by highway) south of Anchorage. Most guests of Emerald Pines Lodge fly into Anchorage and rent a car for the scenic drive to Homer.

ERA Airlines has scheduled air service from Anchorage to Homer.

For more information, contact:

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(Bio)

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