

ISLAND FISHERMAN MAGAZINE

DESTINATION: ZEBALLOS

by Janice M. Stefanyk

Zeballos, a tiny town with a huge history, is located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. This beautiful little ecotourism gem is accessible by making a 42-kilometre drive over a well-travelled active logging road that branches off Highway 19 about midway between Woss and Port McNeill.

Once a busy hub of gold mining activity in the early 1930s, Zeballos had a population of 5,000 and its streets were quite literally paved with gold. So much in fact, that the crushed rock and gravel used as the street foundation was eventually dug up and refined. After the mines closed for the last time in 1948, logging and commercial fishing became the community's lifeblood, and today's population is around 200. About 15 years ago, tourists discovered Zeballos, and it now attracts thousands of visitors a year. Those from Europe are interested in hiking, nature tours and whale watching, while those from the USA and elsewhere in Canada arrive with sport fishing on their collective minds.

Late last July, Larry and I arrived at Zeballos to spend two days with Adrian O'Connor, who has been guiding around Esperanza Inlet and Nootka Sound for several years now. He operates a 24-foot boat with a brand new 225 h.p. Yamaha outboard, so getting to the fishing grounds was quick and comfortable. On the way out, Adrian told us that his favourite spots are Catala Island, Ferrer Point and Pin Rock, and we would start our day at the latter.

Once at Pin Rock, Adrian moved swiftly and efficiently, baiting up with anchovies in Rhys Davis Teaser Heads and lowering the cannonballs. He had no sooner set up the rod on my side than the line popped off the downrigger clip and I was fighting a salmon. It was short-lived, however, for the fish quickly shook free. Adrian was busy re-rigging my gear when Larry's rod popped up. His luck was better than mine, resulting in a nice 18-pound Chinook.

The next two hours were spent catching and releasing several scrappy salmon, and we were surrounded by many other happy anglers doing exactly the same thing. It was one of those memorably awesome days on the water.

That evening we went for a stroll down the main street, where all of the stores have false fronts that create the impression of a frontier town. We also enjoyed a couple of hours at the Zeballos Hotel's saloon style pub, which includes a mini-museum with displays of local artifacts and old tools.

The next morning, after meeting Adrian at the dock, he noticed there were two bananas in my lunch bag.

"No bananas on my boat," he announced firmly.

I protested that a friend from Washington takes bananas all the time and is a very successful fisherman. "As a matter of fact," I concluded, "Paul hooked a 15,000-pound humpback whale at Kano Inlet when he had a banana on board. At least that's what the guide guesstimated it as, because Paul didn't land it..."

Adrian was not the least bit impressed, so the offending fruit was removed and left on the dock. As we raced out to the fishing grounds I mused about the fact that some people feel bananas on a boat creates very bad luck. I came to the conclusion that superstitions are simply part of fishing. Like I always wet the net prior to use, and if I miss the fish I resort to my Grampa's favourite fishing song, which is usually short-lived as by that time I'm being threatened with joining it in the brine.

Our game plan for the day was to fool a halibut or two, so we headed offshore about 15 km. Sorry -- I can't be more specific as it was Adrian's favourite secret hotspot.

After loading our spreader bars with strips of salmon belly and chunks of octopus, we dropped our gear down into the depths. About 10 minutes later I got the first hit. I had hardly started to lecture Larry about my skill and prowess as the Halibut Queen when an ugly dogfish popped to the surface. I redeemed myself within minutes, however, with a 35-pound halibut, the perfect size for those delicious fish and chips dinners we enjoy so much. We prefer the smaller fish and release anything over 70 pounds to help preserve the breeding stock. Male halibut seldom exceed 40 pounds or so, which means that anything larger is a female. The larger the female, the more eggs she can produce, so letting the big ones go is just common sense. Besides, the flesh of the smaller "chickens" is far superior in flavour and texture.

Adrian bled my halibut in the water right beside the boat, a procedure I hadn't seen before but it made good sense. It keeps the boat clean and is much safer than having a huge fish flopping around at your feet. Large halibut in small boats have been responsible for many bruises and broken bones, which is not a pleasant way to end a fishing trip.

After another grand day on the water, while heading back in we stopped to check the prawn traps Adrian had set two days earlier. We were rewarded with a handsome bounty of pink-shelled morsels that became part of our excellent dinner that evening.

Zeballos is a great drive-to destination with a hotel, motels and lodges to accommodate you, and two campgrounds for those with RVs or tents. I suggest stocking up in Campbell River beforehand. There is an excellent general store in Zeballos, and while it can usually meet your needs it may sell out specific stocks if there is a sudden influx of visitors.

Chinook salmon fishing is best from June to September. Coho are more prolific during the summer months, so take along your favourite fly rod for some really memorable action. Sockeye are in during June and chum salmon throughout the fall. The latter provide a very exciting fishery -- they fight well and are outstanding in the smoker. Bottom fishing is great year round, depending on the weather of course, with halibut, lingcod, yelloweye rockfish and other bottom species plentiful.

INFORMATION

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