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Country

'Destination fly fishing' doesn't come much cheaper than a trip to British Columbia. With fabulous scenery and a run of over 60 million salmon each year, a trip to the Fraser River should be on everyone's calendar.

"Do these boats shift?" we asked as our guide, Dean, started the 400hp water-jet engine.

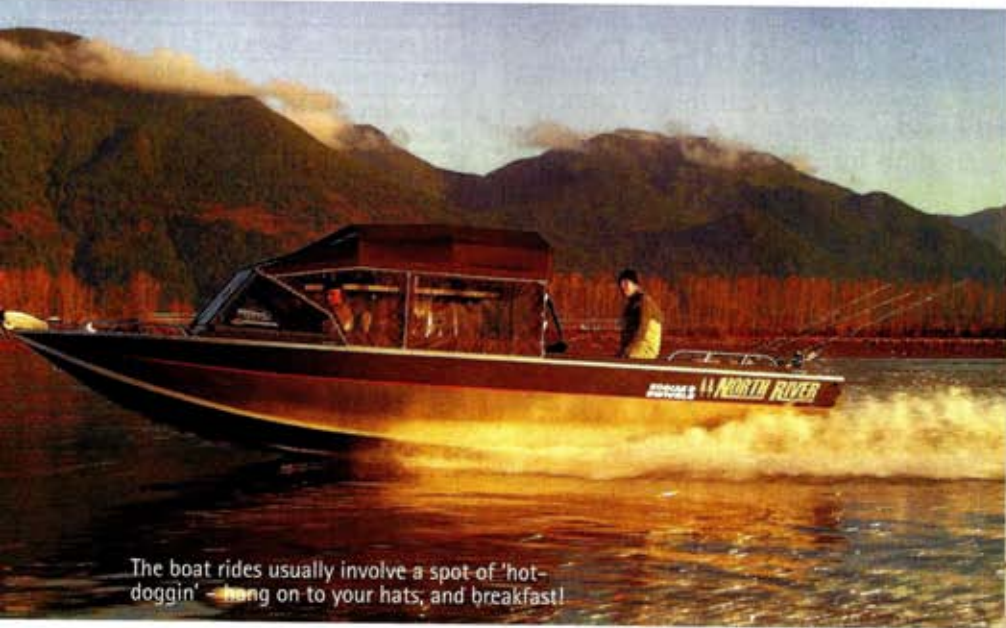
Without replying, he gave a sly grin and casually uttered: "Hang on, gentlemen."

The Fraser is a big river. We're not talking Towy big. Nor are we talking Tay or Tweed big. We're not even talking Thames big. It's 1,000 miles long and at Chilliwack, 30-minutes' drive north of the American border, is about half a mile wide. You can see why we need a boat now... and a powerful one at that.

The Fraser River and its many tributaries offers an astonishing array of fishing. To coin a phrase, it really is an angler's paradise. There are five different species of salmon, steelhead (sea-run rainbow trout), cutthroat trout, dolly varden (a type of charr) and white sturgeon.

This means that the visiting angler can visit at any time of year and be confident of catching fish.

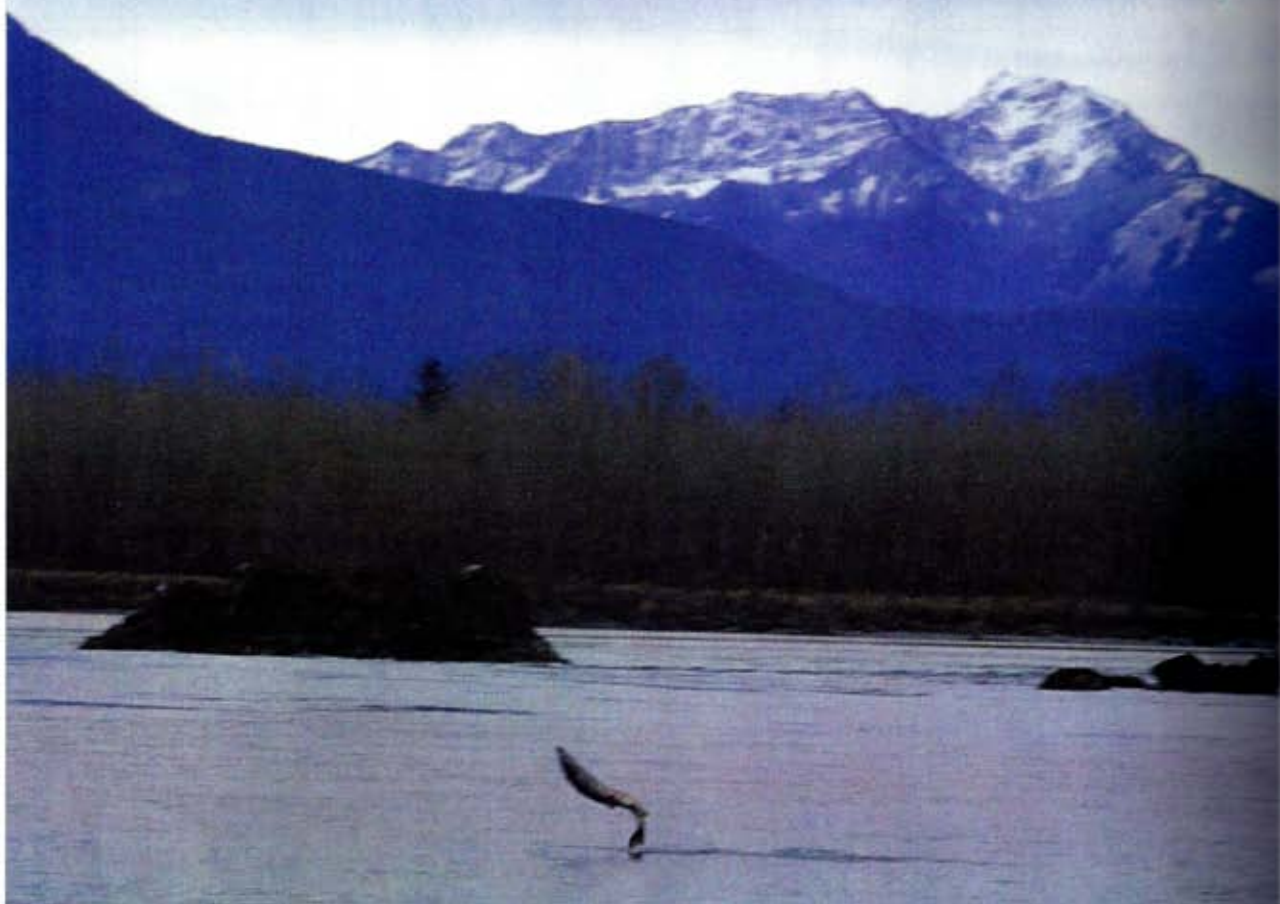
We visited in mid-November. The trip was to include five days of fishing for coho and chum salmon on the Fraser River and its tributaries. Chum salmon were second on the hit list and, as they



The boat rides usually involve a spot of 'hot-doggin' — hang on to your hats, and breakfast!







average 10lb to 15lb, we wondered why.

The apparent reason for this is that there are so many of them, and they are so easy to catch, that local anglers at this time of year tend to concentrate on their more elusive cousins, the coho. So many chum and so easy to catch? Sounded alright in our books!

Upon our arrival at the hotel we were given the bad news: The main river was

allowed us to spot hundreds of fish holding up, and to sight fish with weighted flies. All the time we fished, huge chinook, chum and coho swam right under our rod tips, under the boat, even into our legs while wading. In any one day we saw more Pacific salmon than you would see Atlantic salmon in a lifetime. No joke!

On the first morning, we discovered the meaning of the word 'frustration'.

depending on water height, time of day or for no apparent reason at all!

The afternoon came and a rethink was in order – we wanted a fish on the bank. After a short ride, thanks to speed not distance, to a powerful run on the Harrison, Dean beached the boat and we hopped out onto the gravel, this time with a change of tackle and tactics.

Chum prefer faster water than the

Over the next few days we fished hard for the coho salmon. At times we were literally surrounded by beautiful, head-and-tailing silver fish.

running at five feet above normal level, and when the river is so wide that's a fair bit of extra water to say the least. In this situation the salmon become widely spread and to find pockets of fish, a lot of moving about during the day can therefore be needed.

Due to the high water, our fishing efforts were concentrated on the Harrison River, a tributary of the Fraser where the crystal-clear backwaters

Accurate casts to a pod of silver coho saw them either drift nervously downstream or completely ignore the sparsely tied Gold Head patterns. Cast after cast resulted in a complete lack of cooperation from the fish. We wondered if they would actually ever take at all.

Apparently, the coho salmon is one of the most finicky of the Pacific species. They will switch on or off

coho. Because of this, our clear-tip lines were exchanged to the fastest-sinking tips we had available. The trick is to cast upstream and let the line sink as deep as possible, retrieving slowly as the line drifts past you.

As the pink or purple marabou flies swung across the current tight to the riverbed, every so often a bump would be felt. Resisting the temptation to lift the rod was essential to avoid foul



Evening light on the Harrison River – stunning



Fry patterns work equally well for coho salmon and cutthroat trout.

hooking one of the thousands of fish, and it took some practice to wait for a vicious grab.

Chum salmon are certainly hard on tackle. They didn't often run at pace, but preferred to bore down deep and use every bit of power possible – arm-aching all the way!

Half a dozen or more chum later and the light started to fade... the last of the evening sun seemingly setting fire to the pine forests, accentuating what was the most awe-inspiring scenery any of us had ever witnessed.

The following morning Gregg (Dean's number two), convinced us that to stand a real chance of a coho the water would need to drop and in the meantime we should try for a sturgeon on the main Fraser. Hardened fly fishers we may be, but he wasn't going to let us leave without having a go.

Sturgeon are often referred to locally as dinosaurs, for the simple reason that they are prehistoric. One of the few freshwater species to survive the last ice age, they can live for up to 200 years and are known to attain weights of more than 1,500lb (the average is more like 150lb), mainly from a diet of dead salmon, eggs and small fish.

Watching nodding rods may not be everyone's idea of fun, but when you lift into a fish that is more than capable of pulling you out of the boat before cartwheeling across the river, you'll change your mind – guaranteed.

Over the next few days we fished hard for the coho salmon. At times we were literally surrounded by beautiful, head-and-tailing silver fish but, apart from one take, we found ourselves back at the faster water for some chum carnage. Yes, they may not be as pretty or as challenging as the cohos but, for a group

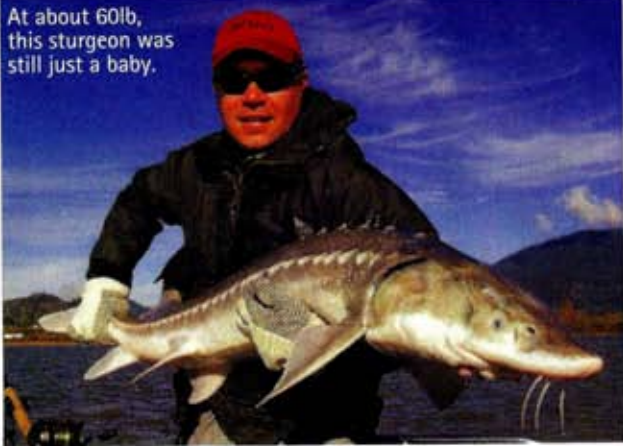
of Brits, fighting more than 10 15lb fish in an afternoon is pretty damn good fun.

Over the last 10 years or so, 'destination fly fishing' has really taken off and is now big business. For most of us, dreams of battling bonefish in the Bahamas, tackling the giant sea trout of Argentina or pursuing the Russian



Cohos are the most sought-after salmon species on the Harrison River – it's easy to see why.

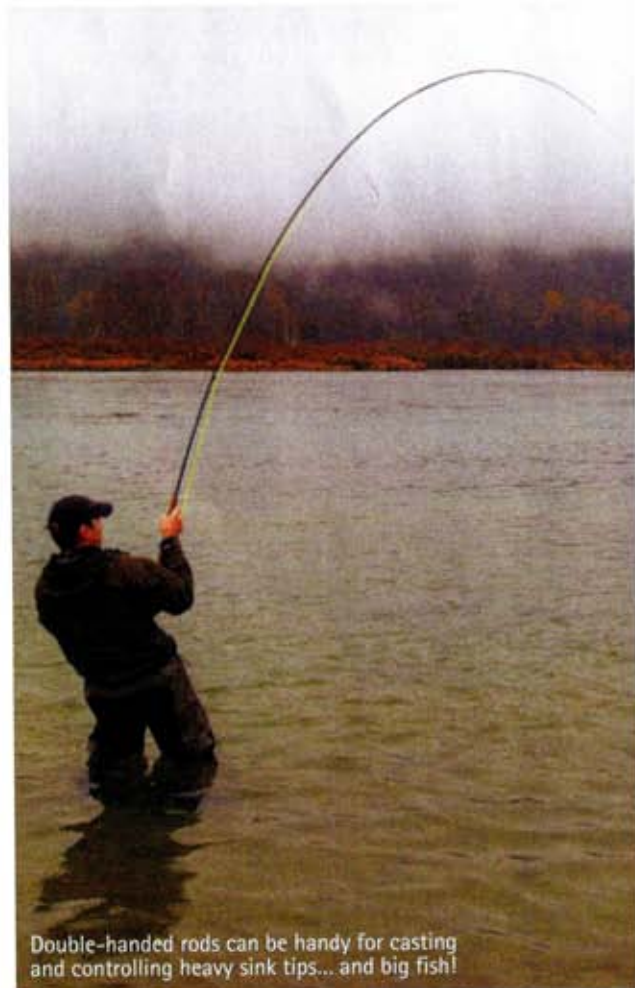
At about 60lb, this sturgeon was still just a baby.



salmon are just that – dreams. When you're talking upwards of £2,000 per week, excluding flights, it becomes a trip of a lifetime, and a mere one week long at that.

The difference with British Columbia is that for around £800 you can get your hotel, flights and fishing all-in and, when you're there, living is cheap. Put it this way, a week in BC works out at little more than a week's fishing in Ireland.

The scenery, the guides, the food and the variety of fishing make it one of the world's top angling destinations. Yes, there's the slight downside of a nine-hour flight into the bargain, but once there you will love it – it's worth going for the boat ride alone.



Double-handed rods can be handy for casting and controlling heavy sink tips... and big fish!

Fact File

Contact: Great River Fishing

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Great River Fishing is known as one of the best guiding companies on the Fraser River. The six, custom, jet boats are all fully covered and heated and the guides are fully licensed and insured.

Your week can be tailored to suit, depending on the time of year, weather or target species. You have seven different rivers to choose from and, as mentioned before, a bewildering array of species! Stunning lake fishing is also available for wild rainbows and huge bull trout

Prices: Four days of fishing, four nights of bed and breakfast and a picnic lunch on the boat, based on four people sharing two rooms, is approximately £490 per person

Flights: We flew to Seattle and hired a car; the drive from there to Chilliwack is about three hours. We booked through www.ebookers.com, but it's worth shopping around. Flights booked a couple of months in advance are available from under £250 return!

Alternatively, fly to Vancouver and Great River Fishing can arrange for you to be picked up at a little extra cost without the need for hiring a car

Prime Times

Chinook: Mid-June to mid-July

Coho: October to November

Pink: Every odd year (2005, 2007), September to October

Chum: September to November

Sockeye: August

Steelhead: Mid-March to mid-April and September to October

Trout: February to May

Sturgeon: All year round

Rhombus Hotel

The Rhombus is ideally situated in the heart of Chilliwack, meaning that you can walk to the bars and restaurants. Great River Fishing will pick you up from the hotel each morning, after a breakfast filling enough for a starved grizzly bear



Capital Restaurant

We visited several restaurants while staying in Chilliwack but this one was by far the best! The Chinese seafood was just spot on and better than most top-class UK restaurants for the price of a British pub lunch