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Snorkeling With Salmon on Vancouver Island: A Beginner's Guide

Anyone can fish for salmon in Vancouver Island's Campbell River but it takes a real fan to go fin-to-fin. A guide to snorkeling with salmon, plus where to cast your line, feast on fresh catches and mingle with the grizzlies



IN THE SWIM | Millions of salmon pass through Campbell River each summer and fall

PHOTO: ALAMY

By *James Sturz*

July 7, 2016 11:38 am ET

I GREW UP as a Jew on Manhattan's Upper West Side, just blocks from the culinary institutions Barney Greengrass and Zabar's, which is another way of saying that along with plasma and platelets, salmon is in my blood. My father used to call it "Bar Mitzvah/Wedding fish," by which he meant he didn't want to see or eat it anywhere else, but he also taught me to drape my bagels so not a speck of cream cheese shone through, and he fondly tolerated my explorations of the living room as a 7-year-old in a snorkeling mask. I used to pretend the shag carpet was coral. My mother worried about the lamps each time I traipsed around in fins.

After my father died, in 2013, and we sold his apartment—my old swimming grounds—I felt uprooted and restless in Manhattan, and maybe I even had salmon on the brain. So my wife, Paula, and I planned a trip to the town of

Campbell River, on the northeastern shore of Vancouver Island, which Canadians call “the salmon capital of the world” for the copious fishing and confluence of waters—the river flows into a channel of the Inside Passage—which brings millions of Pacific salmon each summer and fall to spawn. Foodies talk about tracing ingredients to their source, but I wasn’t interested in using a rod and reel. I wanted to get in with them.

We flew to Victoria, and drove three hours up the coast to the hodgepodge of pine-studded suburbs, forests and low-built downtown fronted by sport-fishing docks that is Campbell River. Anglers started arriving there en masse once the Tyee Club of British Columbia was founded, in 1924. To earn membership, you had to catch a tyee salmon—the local name for chinook weighing 30 pounds or more, the sort that make trophy fishermen swoon—from a rowboat with a 9-foot pole and a precarious 20-pound line. For a time, this town reputedly had the world’s busiest floatplane port, welcoming Hollywood types like Bing Crosby and John Wayne, ever hopeful that they’d land a tyee (they didn’t).



A grizzly bear on a salmon stakeout
PHOTO: ALAMY

But I’d crossed the country for another sport, one which also distinguishes Campbell River: snorkeling with salmon. Admittedly, it’s a niche activity. Not everyone thrills to the idea of mingling so intimately with millions of spawning salmon. Seeking instruction from those who do—salmon aficionados, if you will—I joined a tour to the nearby Bute Inlet, for reconnaissance with the grizzlies. A dozen

of us took the two-hour boat ride. Our guides’ plan was to climb lookout towers upon reaching land, but the bears came ambling past us before we had a chance.

We huddled on our side of a very slender creek, as a pair of adolescent bears started prancing and swiping at the water. It hardly took a minute before one of them had a flapping coho salmon in its teeth, water and saliva spraying everywhere. Then I spotted another full-grown grizzly, with two gashed salmon on either side of her on a bed of stones. When bears can afford to be picky, they just eat the roe, skin and brains, because that’s where the fat and protein are. She’d nibble at one carcass, perhaps as an appetizer, before switching to the other as her entree. In between, she’d take a sip of glacial water, have a pee and a crap, and then return for leftovers. I took notes. Back in town, I ate salmon sushi for dinner with Paula but cagily watched my manners.

The following morning I felt ready. Signs in town were estimating the 3.5-mile Campbell River’s salmon population at 1.4 million. I donned my wetsuit and mask (sure, there was time for some smoked salmon for breakfast first). I met up with a tour group to venture into the river. Without any grizzlies here, local guides lead snorkeling excursions. I soon learned, however, that they impose all

sorts of rules, mandating life vests and forbidding fins. I figured that wasn't any way to be with fish, flailing around them like an inflatable tube man blown in from a used-car lot.



Fishing by rowboat in the Discovery Passage

PHOTO: ALAMY

The next day I parked along the riverside road and waded back into the river while Paula held on to the keys. I splashed down on my stomach and started to snorkel. The river is known for its pinks, the smallest of the five North American Pacific salmon species, normally weighing about 5 pounds—but sometimes two to three times that. With a lifespan of just two years, they spend 18 months in the open ocean, migrating as far as the Bering Sea, before returning to within 10 feet of their birthplace to spawn and die. By the time they arrive, the males have developed gargantuan humps and beaked jaws, transforming the most gruesome among them into miniature legless triceratops.

I headed downstream, through a torrent of flexing, finning and churning bodies. Sometimes it seemed as if there was more salmon than water around me. Once they enter the river from the ocean, the single-minded salmon have given up eating. They're so full of milt and roe that there's no room in their stomachs for food. The females dig gravel holes in the riverbed, the males touch their bellies to the females' backs, and then both release into the same depressions. Perhaps, as far as fish go, that is love. But it is also death. The adult salmon will spawn, and then they'll die. Their bodies add protein and nitrogen to the water, which will feed their young. That trumps parenting. Fish of my fish. Flesh of my flesh.

**I headed downstream,
through a torrent of
flexing, finning bodies.**

Anglers from a dozen countries watched me from shore, asking for pointers about where to find the biggest salmon, but it was impossible to be precise. Nor did it seem fair. Inside the water, I felt privileged to see

the intricacies and intimacies of the fishes' world, and to have entered their orgiastic, wriggling throngs. I did laps, wary of letting the current take me too far out. I'd kick my way through fish for a few hundred yards, against the frenzied traffic of gaping mouths and humps and protruding bellies, and then get out of the water and walk back along the road to my entry point. My wife

stood on the riverbank, chatting with a Milanese fly-fisherman in perfectly cut waders. He seemed equally content to discuss recipes as he was to fish.

That night, we ate salmon again, at a barbecue at a First Nations cultural center near town. Near the totem poles on the lawn, slabs of dripping fish pressed between cedar strips stood propped up by an open fire. The Kwa'kwa'ka'wa'kw men talked of their ancestors. I thought of my father and of Manhattan, the place where I'd been born, and of my own life cycle and knew that it was time to leave.

The Lowdown // Seeking Out Wild Things in Campbell River, Vancouver Island



THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Vancouver Island

BRETT TAYLOR

Point Resort shares activities with Painter's Lodge and hosts their spa (*both from about \$130 per night; painterslodge.com and aprilpoint.com*).



REEL FIND | April Point Resort, a nature lodge and spa near Campbell River

PHOTO: OAK BAY MARINE GROUP

Getting There: Campbell River is a three-hour drive from Victoria, Canada, at the southern tip of Vancouver Island, or a four-hour drive from the city of Vancouver, including the two-hour ferry ride between Horseshoe Bay and Departure Bay, outside of Nanaimo.

Staying There: Painter's Lodge has hosted Campbell River visitors since 1929, and can arrange salmon-fishing excursions to complement (or substitute for) snorkeling, whether from a Boston whaler, cabin cruiser or classic rowboat. Ten minutes away by ferry across the Discovery Passage on Quadra Island, sister property April

Snorkeling There: Salmon-snorkeling season in Campbell River runs from early July to late October; August and September are peak months. Destiny River Adventures operates three-hour tours with rafts and all equipment (*about \$97, destinyriver.com*), but the best snorkeling experiences are self-conducted. The easiest entry point into the river is the sandy shore by the Logging Bridge at the junction of Detweiler Road and Highway 28. Beaver Aquatics rents equipment; a 7-mm wetsuit is

recommended (*from about \$46 for full snorkeling gear, beaveraquatics.ca*).

Exploring There: Between Sept. 1 and Oct. 20, watch grizzlies catch and devour salmon on daylong expeditions with Discovery Marine Safaris; the company also

leads orca-watching safaris from mid July through September (*from \$270 and \$136, respectively; adventurewhalewatching.com*). Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre, at the southern tip of Quadra Island, holds traditional salmon barbecues and tours on Saturdays; reservations required (*museumatcapemudge.com*).

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