

Lets Go Fishing (in Alaska!)

– by Ben Wong

Without a doubt, one of my favorite fishing vacation destinations is here: Alaska! And if you speak with any fisher who has visited Alaska, get ready to get an earful! Hawaiian anglers in search of an adventure to catch their own fresh salmon for their favorite Lomi Salmon recipe have been making trips to the 49th state an annual visit. They never come back home to Hawaii with an empty fish box. These fishermen and their families would be the first to tell you: Try it once and you'll be hooked!

Just the adventure of being in a climate so very different from Hawaii will reset your perspectives. Truth is, Alaska wildlife has only 3 months to live it up. During the summer the birds, bugs, mammals, and fish are everywhere. The rest of the year... not so much. In fact, the most effective game warden in Alaska is the weather! Snow and rain has a way of discouraging people from fishing and hunting out of season.

My introduction to an Alaskan fishing safari came about when two good fishing friends invited me to become part of a 10-person vacation that they were planning. Boy, was that first trip unforgettable! We fished for Red (Sockeye) salmon for the bbq grill on the Russian and Kenai River. We snagged Keta (Chum) salmon to harvest their ikura (roe) at the saltwater entrance to Tonscina Creek. We all took a boat charter to Montague Island to catch our daily limits of Coho (Silver) salmon and Halibut.

But here's the deal: This may not be the ideal way for everyone to experience Alaska on his or her FIRST trip. Why? Things to consider:

On this trip we outfitted ourselves. We purchased our own waders, boots, foul weather gear, gloves, fishing licenses and specialty fly-fishing gear. We booked accommodations at 3 different locations, some we now know we wouldn't stay at again. We studied and were mindful of the unique fishing regulations existing from one location to another. (Game Wardens in Alaska have no sense of humor.) We traveled with our fish cleaning knives and our Foodsaver machine to process and freeze what we caught for our trip home... at the end of every day of fishing. Then we had to find a big freezer. There were some days when we got back to base camp between 9pm and 10pm, spent the next 2 hours plus cleaning fish, making dinner, getting a shower, taking a nap, and then we would be back in the van on our way to another fishing location by 5am. After 5 days of this schedule, some of us were dragging! Some in our fishing gang were good-naturedly wondering where the "vacation" part of "fishing vacation" had gone. We often tease my friends who planned the trip about our "Fishing Death March" experience!

Don't get me wrong. I had a great time. As you know, I've been lucky to visit Alaska many times, to many different places, and my often repeated comment is this: If I'm traveling with the hardcore fishing gang, it doesn't matter where we end up. We always have a great time!

However, if one is traveling with friends who are part-time fishermen and are visiting Alaska for the first time, my advice is this: Go to a fishing lodge! That way you can avoid

investing in waders, boots, fishing gear, foul weather gear, learning fishing regulations, traveling with fishing knives, freezer bags, etc.

And note this: All fishing lodges are not created equal. There's a big difference between lodges that feature ocean fishing versus lodges that feature river fishing. If the salmon in the river aren't cooperating, there aren't many other options. With a lodge that showcases ocean fishing, the boat captain has a multitude of destinations to hunt for King (Chinook) and Silver (Coho) salmon. AND the Halibut, Ling Cod, Rockfish, Chum (Keta) salmon, Pink salmon, and many other tasty species end up on your hooks as well.

I've been to at least 7 different lodges. They were all great experiences as far as I was concerned. But if I'm traveling with my elderly father-in-law, wife, kids, or part-time fishing friends, there are some lodges I would choose over others. Here's why:

Many fishing lodges are more like fishing camps. They cater to a crowd that's primarily men. They offer great experiences for their clients. But I have witnessed more than once, when one of the lodge guests had brought their spouse or their children along for the first time, that by the end of the trip the wife and/or kids seemed to be disappointed. Chances are they were expecting the "vacation" part of "fishing vacation" to be more than a fishing boat, sandwiches, and a cabin to sleep in.

Over the last seven years, my visits to Alaska have been to El Capitan Lodge. "El Cap" is owned and operated by Hawaii expatriates. Owner Nani Van Valin, 1982 graduate of Kamehameha High School on O'ahu, along with her husband Scott, have just recently celebrated their 25th Lodge anniversary.

First impressions, as they say, are everything. After a floatplane trip from Ketchikan, the lodge grounds come into view showcasing the flower-potted walkways, 6 boat moorage, first class cabin accommodations, and sports bar with indoor and open-air fireplaces. It already feels more like "vacationing" than "fishing."

Over the next few days, the El Cap experiences begin to add up:

Coffee is delivered to your cabin every morning with a reminder that breakfast will be ready in 30 minutes.

Complete weather gear and fishing equipment, plus fishing licenses are provided. You really don't need to travel from Hawaii with much more than sneakers and a jacket.

Your boat captain, most of whom are from Hawaii, will take your party of 4 to hook up with Halibut, King Salmon (aka Chinook, which runs in June), Silver Salmon (aka Coho, which runs July – August), rock fish, ling cod, yellow eye rock fish, and more.

And when you return from the trip, your only responsibility is to have your picture taken with your catch. No fish cleaning for you! The staff and crew will fillet, pack and freeze all that you catch for your trip back home.

All you have to do now is head to the bar to relax with a drink and enjoy the appetizers (Dungeness crab, El Cap caught shrimp, oysters, etc.) offered before dinner.

And speaking of dinner! Tablecloth service and wine pairings in the El Cap dining room is standard procedure. And if you're lucky enough to be there when LGF visits, you'll be

treated to a culinary treat from a visiting celebrity chef from Hawaii. Check out on-line (www.elcapitanlodge.com) those LGF episodes which showcase the special El Capitan menus created by Chef Bev Gannon of Hali'imaile General Store Restaurant on Maui, Chef DK Kodama of Sansei Restaurant in Honolulu, Chef Hiroshi Fukui of Hiroshi's Eurasion Tapas in Restaurant Row, Chef Russell Siu of 3660 on the Rise, and Chef George Mavro.

Some of my most memorable adventures at El Capitan include glacier sight seeing tours aboard one of their Island Air Airlines floatplanes. These float planes also deliver us to remote rivers and lakes that expose the pristine beauty of Alaska paired with the zen-like activity of fly fishing for Rainbow Trout, Cut Throat Trout, and Dolly Vardens.

If visiting Alaska IS on your "bucket list" here are some things to consider:

Who are you taking with you? Like I said, if it's the boys I'm fishing with, we'll be happy anywhere. But if you're treating family to that once-in-a-lifetime Fishing Vacation, choose carefully.

How much does it cost? The most inexpensive way to go is to follow the footsteps of my friends who planned my first trip. But you may sacrifice some of the "vacation" part of "Fishing Vacation."

Lodges are pricy. This is not a casual purchase or an easy adventure choice for many of us. Make informed decisions to insure that your traveling guests all return with the sentiment "I want to do this again!" as opposed to "Been there, done that."

If you shop lodge prices you will find that their range reflects the value of their customer service and the quality of their fishing vacation experience.

Air travel expense can be managed by picking up an Alaskan Airlines Credit Card before you make reservations. Each year as a cardholder you will receive a "Buddy Pass." This year, that means if I pay for a round trip ticket on Alaska Airlines from Honolulu to Ketchikan (or any Alaska Airlines destination), my traveling partner will be charged only \$99 plus taxes and fees. Plus first piece of luggage flies free.

One more budget consideration: Be prepared to leave gratuities for lodge boat captains and staff, just as you would on any boat charter and at any resort.

I've said this many times to many people. I wish everyone I knew could experience a Fishing Vacation trip to Alaska. Take your family, friends and camera on a vacation to the 49th state and you'll have much to look back and smile about for many years.

If I can help answer any other questions about my trips to Alaska, give me a call (808-387-4666) or drop me an email (letsgofishinghawaii@gmail.com)

The Let's Go Fishing show premiered in Hawaii in 1969. It is broadcast on FOX affiliate KHON, cablecast on Time Warner Oceanic's Hawaii CW, and on-line at LGFHawaii. Both the "Let's Go Fishing Cookbook" and the double DVD collection "The Best of Fishing in Hawaii and Beyond" can be purchased on-line.