

# CHASING *the* KING

How I spent three days fishing in Alaska and almost killed the symbol of America.

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NOYES ISLAND, ALASKA –

**I**t started with a nibble, a subtle kiss from the deep that was hard to distinguish from the drag of the current. The wind had picked up, and this close to the open Pacific the tide was just about strong enough to pull the bait off the hook.

Andi, in the middle of a lazy reel, didn't even notice it. It was Harold, our guide, who recognized the subtle, rhythmic bending of the rod. "Pull up and let's see what you have going on there," he said.

Slim and barely 5 feet tall, Andi did as instructed. The end bent furiously as she lifted her pole. "Reel faster," Harold said. "You've got something." But Andi quickly found herself outmatched by whatever had taken hold of her line. It dragged her back and forth, forcing us out of her way.

Harold was not exactly diplomatic as he yelled instructions. "Keep the tension! Follow your fish! FOLLOW YOUR FISH!"

As he squeezed past me I looked over at Andi, who was dancing like the tail of a kite, and asked, "Another halibut?" "I think she has a king," he said.

Every year nearly 700,000 people come to Alaska to fish, about 200,000 of them chasing king salmon, one of the more popular sport fish. More than 1 million are caught in the United States annually and one of the best places in the world to catch them is off the southeastern coast of Alaska, not far from Prince of Wales Island.

We had come here, to the edge of the country, to experience fishing in the great Northwest and to stay at Steamboat Bay Fishing Club, a luxury fishing lodge on tiny Noyes Is-





land. It had been three days, and though we had caught a number of fish, the king had escaped us and frustration was starting to show.

Books are filled with stories of seafaring folk and their obsessions. Ahab lost his leg, and his life, to one. Santiago felt cursed. And while it had not been 84 days for us, the crew on Boat 32 was feeling anxious.

The day before, as we were heading back to the lodge, Andi – in a moment of vulnerable exhaustion – admitted her growing desperation. “I don’t know what it is. I am not a fisherman. But I want to catch a damn king salmon!”

**Steamboat Bay is built** on the remains of Noyes Island Fisheries, a cannery in the Alexander Archipelago, which stretches down the southeastern coast of Alaska. It is one of dozens of fishing lodges in the area specializing in king salmon, including Steamboat’s sister lodge, Waterfall Resort.

To get there you fly to Ketchikan and then take a float plane 40 minutes southwest over the Tongass National Forest, which at 16.7 million acres is the largest in the United States. The islands are densely populated with evergreens and wildlife, and little else. The only sign of humans on most is the occasional logging road.

Our flight was surprisingly drama-free, a relief after the pilot’s briefing. I don’t remember it word for word, but “These things do go down” and “We don’t want any fatalities” stuck in my mind.

Alaskan weather changes quickly, especially over water. It can go from sunny and warm to windy and raining in minutes. In fact, one week after we left, a plane from the same airline left Steamboat Bay and crashed into a

mountain. Thankfully, everyone survived.

We arrived on a rainy Saturday morning, emerging from the low clouds into the small bay, landing softly and pulling up to the docks outside the large, green-roofed lodge that would serve as our home for the next three days. Around it were the remains of the cannery, small cottages of worn wood retrofitted to be staff quarters where the chefs, wait staff and boat captains stayed between shifts.

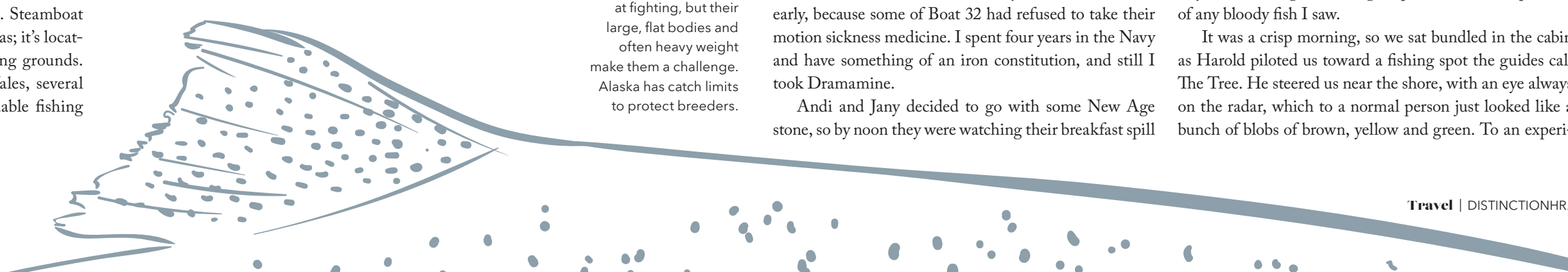
The resort is open June through mid-August, serving basically two groups a week. It’s typically sold out mid-way through the year. It can serve only about 24 guests at any given time, making it one of the smaller resorts. Waterfall, for example, can house about 90 fishermen.

The smaller size allows Steamboat Bay to offer a more personal, customized experience. Everything from boat departure times to four-star meals is catered directly to guests’ desires. The lodge features a full bar, game rooms, and cozy staterooms that include wood-stoves and a view of the bay. Staff members serve guests every meal (and pack pre-selected boat lunches). And if needed, they will even iron and wash clothes.

This kind of service comes at a price. A typical three-day stay at the lodge costs \$7,500 per person. Add in the cost of a flight to Ketchikan, and the float plane, and you can easily spend \$10,000 for the chance to catch some king salmon.

But with that price you also get access. Steamboat is the closest lodge to the prime fishing areas; it’s located only about 30 minutes from the hunting grounds. The next closest lodge is on Prince of Wales, several hours away, which means you waste valuable fishing time in transit.

July in Alaska means 10 p.m. sunsets and a kaleidoscope of colors; guests of Steamboat Bay typically take their drinks out to the pier and watch.



Halibut aren’t much at fighting, but their large, flat bodies and often heavy weight make them a challenge. Alaska has catch limits to protect breeders.

**Boat 32 left the docks** a little late our first day. The weather had postponed our flight from Ketchikan, so we raced through registration, getting our fishing licenses, and headed out to meet our guide.

Harold Yamagata, a Californian with an easy smile and salt-and-pepper hair, spent most of his working career as an engineer. But the 57-year-old was enjoying his semi-retirement driving buses in San Diego and piloting fishing boats in Alaska, a lifestyle that allowed him to spend an inordinate amount of time surfing.

As we headed out to the open waters, Harold walked us through the safety measures and asked us about our fishing experiences. I mentioned that when I was younger I did a pretty bad job of terrifying large-mouth bass in the ponds and rivers of North Carolina.

“I’m gonna have to break you of some bad habits, then,” he said.

I thought he was teasing, but he was serious. Not every fish attacks bait the same way. Halibut are large, dull, delicious creatures that hit the line and then go limp, like a little brother. But they can grow to 300 pounds and have a flat body that creates drag on its own, making them a chore to reel in. Sea bass are smaller but tend to fight a little more on the way up. Rockfish, an umbrella term for several fish, are generally dumb, ugly creatures that would jump into a net if you hung one over the side of the boat long enough.

King salmon, however, nibble at the bait. Trying to set the hook merely jerks it away from them. So you have to recognize the bite and subtly pull the rod up to force them to commit. Making it even harder, king salmon feed with the tide. You might be out all day and get 20 minutes of activity.

“Fishing for king salmon takes patience,” Harold said. “If you spend all of your time thinking, ‘I want to catch a fish. Where is the fish?’ it will drive you crazy. You have to go to a place where you can say, ‘Oh, there is a whale over there’ and ‘Wow, I am in Alaska. This is amazing.’ And as you do that, you just keep reeling and reeling.”

**I was with a group** of journalists, which included Andi Fisher and her husband, Jany Bardeau, a French photographer, and Nyssa Chopra, a luxury travel writer. None of us was an outdoors expert. So we listened to Harold and focused on reeling in our lines and enjoying the scenery.

We did catch more than a few that first day, mostly halibut and sea bass. Unfortunately it all ended a little early, because some of Boat 32 had refused to take their motion sickness medicine. I spent four years in the Navy and have something of an iron constitution, and still I took Dramamine.

Andi and Jany decided to go with some New Age stone, so by noon they were watching their breakfast spill



back into the Pacific. Nyssa held her mud pretty well. Then I snagged a 35-pound halibut that didn’t want to surrender. Harold smacked it in the head with the back of the gaff until it was still.

“Do you ever feel bad for the fish,” Nyssa asked, fighting a rising tide of queasiness.

“No,” he said.

As we headed back to the resort, I bored everyone with tales of my historic fight with the beast. They kept their eyes on the horizon, trying not to get sick again.

Once we arrived at the lodge, the crew immediately started cleaning and preparing the fish. One of the perks of Steamboat Bay is they will send you home with a vacuum-packed box full of your catch. I took home 20 pounds of fish and spent the next month trying dozens of recipes.

As I posed for photos with my 36-inch halibut, the rest of the group went inside to shower and get ready for dinner.

The meals at Steamboat Bay are impressive, with expertly made options like venison pot pie, baby back ribs and pecan-crusted Alaskan halibut. The staff prepares them daily, tailoring the menu to guests’ specifications.

After dinner most of the guests either retire to the game room for cards and pool, or they hang out in the great room exchanging stories. At the end of the first night I sat with a group of middle-aged white men, most of whom ran their own companies, and listened as they discussed the day’s catch. I marveled at one tale that involved an opportunistic thief – a sea lion that managed to steal two salmon right off their lines.

“That must have been cool to see,” I said to one of the men.

“Hell, no,” he said, giving me an odd look. “He got away with my fish.”

**We woke early the next day**, ready for adventure. Everyone took their motion sickness medicine. Nyssa decided to stay behind and get a massage. I promised to take pictures of any bloody fish I saw.

It was a crisp morning, so we sat bundled in the cabin as Harold piloted us toward a fishing spot the guides call The Tree. He steered us near the shore, with an eye always on the radar, which to a normal person just looked like a bunch of blobs of brown, yellow and green. To an experi-

enced guide it was like watching TV. Every so often he would say, “There’s some bait fish,” pointing at a green mass. Or, “That’s probably a rockfish.”

At one point, to tease him, I pointed at the radar and said, “You’re crazy. That’s a pink salmon.”

“Salmon wouldn’t be that deep,” he said, completely serious.

After about a half-hour ride, we reached The Tree. Andi, Jany and I took our positions and started casting and reeling. It wasn’t long before both Andi and I snagged something. Harold was on the other side of the boat, helping her, as I reeled my fish to the surface.

With nothing better to do, I scanned the area. I let my eyes flow over the dark green water all the way to the shoreline, which was filled with large evergreens. There in the distance I could see the small form of an eagle emerge from the trees and head our way.

In Alaska eagles are as plentiful as seagulls and every bit as shameless. Some breeds of fish have a self-regulating swim bladder that controls buoyancy. When pulled from the depths, they fill with air. So if you toss them back into the ocean, they will appear dead until they acclimate to the environment. This leaves those fish floating on the surface, the perfect spot for eagles to swoop down and snatch up some lunch.

Still, the sight of an eagle in flight was beautiful. But as it got closer I could swear it was looking at me. As it circled our boat, I became sure of it.

“Um ... Harold?”

“Just a second,” he said, wrestling Andi’s fish onto the boat.

“OK, but this eagle is doing ... something.”

Just then the eagle swooped down and snatched my rockfish off the surface of the ocean, the fishing line still attached. As it spun out, making a loud whine, my mind raced. Do I stop it? Will it hook the eagle? Is that even legal?

“Guys!!” I said, loudly (and maybe a little panicky), pointing to the bird flying away.

Harold swung around. “Pull the line!”

I did. The eagle let my fish go. As I reeled it back in, my mind drifted to what could have happened. How does one unhook an eagle anyway?

After Harold tossed the fish back into the water, Jany raced to the back of the boat with his camera and waited for the eagle to make another run. After we had drifted about 30 feet or so away, the bird again emerged from the trees and this time snatched the fish from the ocean without incident.

Harold laughed as he watched the eagle return to the trees and then he looked at me. “You haven’t caught any king yet, but you just caught and released a bald eagle. Not many people can say that!”



**“You haven’t caught any king yet, but you just caught and released a bald eagle. Not many people can say that!”**

**– Harold**

**The second day had been** a particularly successful day in terms of catching fish. Boat 32 had managed to pull in three good-sized halibut, another sea bass, a half-dozen rockfish and something called a lingcod that will give you nightmares if you Google it. No one had gotten even a whiff of a king salmon. So as we pulled out of the bay on our final day, Harold laid out the plan. We were going to fish all the trophy spots: Hog Rock, Pineapple, Rockpile, Chicken Hole.

“We are not leaving here without you guys catching a king,” he said.

The wind was up and the chop was rough, so Harold decided we would start on the leeward side of Noyes. The morning was slow going, with long stretches of little activity, but shortly before noon we found a spot where the halibut were biting. Jany was leaning against the cabin when something big hit his line. He started reeling and moved toward the back of the boat. His fish was not moving all over the place, so we knew it wasn’t a king. But it was resisting – hard.

“It’s a halibut,” Harold said. “A big one.”

Early on the guides will warn you that, depending on the fish, it can take anywhere from 10 minutes to more than 30 to reel one in. Hook a big king and you could fight longer. That might not sound all that hard, but in that situation, it is akin to doing curls for a half-hour. Your arms get tired. Your fingers cramp. Your back starts screaming. About 15 minutes into Jany’s fight with the halibut, the Frenchman leaned over the side of the boat, and in a perfectly thick accent, yelled, “Where are you??!!”

Somewhere around the 20-minute mark, Jany and Harold wrestled the enormous fish into the boat.

Stretching about 5 feet in length, and weighing about 50 pounds, it was the biggest thing we had caught so far. In fact, it was too big to keep.

Alaska has an exhaustive and strictly enforced set of laws and rules on how many fish you can take home, and how big they have to be. For 2018, the state mandated that you could keep halibut only under 38 inches or greater than 80 inches. The in-between sizes are breeders, so you have to release them. King salmon have to be 28 inches or greater to keep. Those who fished before July 1 were allowed to take home three salmon. By the time we got to Alaska the limit had been lowered to one halibut a day per fisherman and one single, sad, solitary salmon per trip.

Jany's halibut was probably more than 50 inches, so Harold shoved the beast back into the sea and we all returned to what at that point felt like a hopeless effort to catch king salmon.

We were running out of time and the frustration was starting to show – even on Harold. At one point I snagged a fish and reeled it up to the surface. Harold looked over the side and said, “Oh. Just a sea bass.”

I hadn't heard such disappointment in an older man's voice since my dad found out I'd quit football to play in a heavy metal band. I was tempted to say something to Harold about it, but then I was afraid he would stop baiting my hook and taking the fish off my line, so I just lived with the shame.

**A little after lunch** Harold decided to take us around the southern tip of Noyes to an area known as East Addington, a long, rocky stretch of the island that was somewhat protected from the rougher water but well within sight of it.

The sun had finally come out and a line of low-hanging white clouds perched atop the emerald hilltops that surrounded us. In the distance we could see a whale lazily breaking the water in the middle of about 100 birds floating on the surface.

“There must be a lot of bait fish up there,” Harold said. “That's where we're going. The tide is coming in, so we might get lucky.”

Andi, Jany and I took our positions as Harold sped toward our next spot. There were about a half dozen other fishing boats, including a commercial vessel, in the area. Harold slowed as we neared the whale and told us to drop in our lines. We'd been fishing for about 15 minutes when Jany noticed activity on the surrounding boats.

“They are pulling out their nets,” he said.

“You only do that for king,” Harold said. “This might be our only chance. Keep your lines in the water.”

Almost on cue I felt a slight tug. I teased the line back out and then started reeling in again and then pulled my rod up and the tip bent hard and started dancing. Harold ran over to my side and started shouting instructions. The fish ran back and forth as I reeled, but the fight was not as difficult as I was expecting and



I brought it to the surface in short order.

“It's a king,” Harold said, pulling it out of his net. “It's a smaller one. About 18 inches. We can't keep it, but still nice.”

Jany came over and patted me on the shoulder. “You got one,” he said, laughing.

Just then we saw Harold look at Andi and rush to her side. Jany and I watched slightly dumbfounded as the glow of my modest victory disappeared into the fascination with watching this tiny woman wrestle a fish that really did not want to get into the boat.

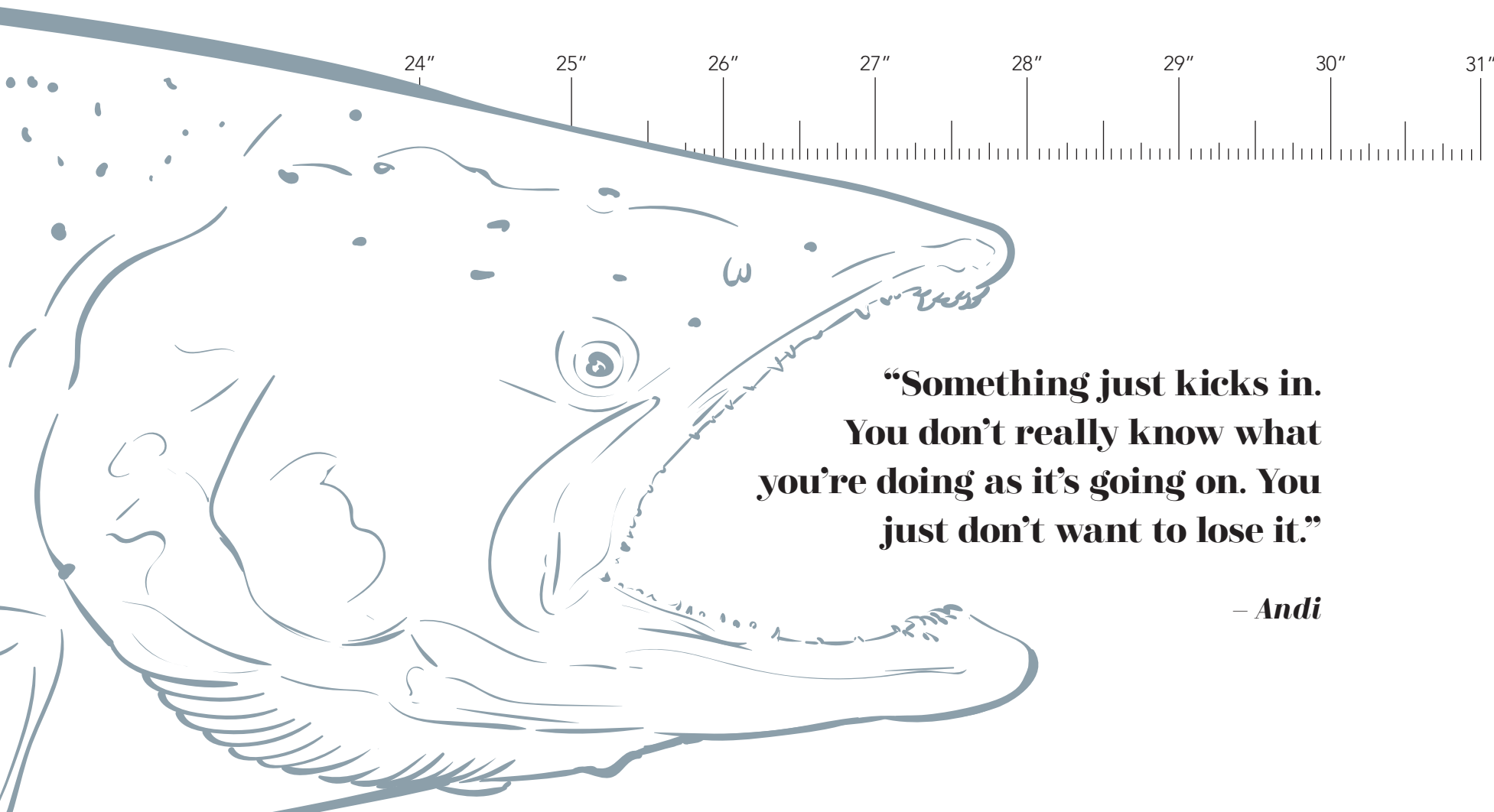
“Guys, put your poles away,” Harold said. “She is going to need to follow this around the boat.” Then he turned to Andi and yelled, “We don't want to lose this one, Andi. It's going to be a keeper.”

The fight took all the energy Andi had left to give. Every few minutes she would pause and shake the cramps out of her hand before returning to the fight. After about 20 minutes of running and jerking and reeling, Harold reached over the side of the boat with his net and retrieved a beautiful 28-inch king salmon.

Jany snapped pictures of his wife, who seemed a bit in shock as she held her prized fish. Harold put the salmon in the cooler and Andi stepped inside the boat to take a break and catch her breath.

It was almost 3 p.m., near time to turn and head back to the lodge, so Jany and I only half-heartedly returned to fishing. The boat's victory had us all laughing and joking about Andi's fight.

Andi Fisher finally landed that elusive king salmon, hauling in a 28-incher on the final day after 20 minutes of running, pulling, reeling, and shaking out hand cramps.



**“Something just kicks in. You don't really know what you're doing as it's going on. You just don't want to lose it.”**

– **Andi**

“I thought it was going to pull you in,” I said.

“It's weird,” she said. “Something just kicks in. You don't really know what you're doing as it's going on. You just don't want to lose it.”

Then she laughed a little and nodded toward our guide. “I was just trying not to piss off Harold.”

We all joined in and started teasing Harold, who good-naturedly accepted it as he put the fishing rods away and climbed into the captain's seat. He turned Boat 32 around and started back for the southern tip of Noyes. The sun was bright and the weather was warming and as we passed through the strait between Noyes and Cone Island, Andi yelled “Look!” and pointed about 50 yards off the starboard side of the boat.

Two killer whales surfaced, their blowholes shooting mist into the air. Then Harold yelled and pointed to the port side, slightly ahead of us. Two more fins were visible. We started scanning the entire area and realized we were completely surrounded by them.

“It's a pod!” Harold yelled.

He grabbed his phone and started recording. “This is cool,” he said.

I grabbed my phone and moved back to the fantail to get a better view. Jany was shooting away with his camera. Andi moved to the side of the boat and stared out at the majestic black and white creatures.

“What a great way to end this trip. Thank you!” she yelled to the whales swimming along with us. “Thank you! Thank you!” ■