

# ESCAPE

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*DESTINATION ALASKA*



## Royal Water

The falls near Waterfall Resort Alaska on Prince of Wales Island.

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## Searching for Salmon Near Prince of Wales Island

A fishing novice heads to one of Alaska's premier fishing resorts

BY JANNA GRABER

I'm not a fisherman, but the sport is an iconic part of Alaska's tradition. When you go there, you fish. So, when friends invited me to join them at Waterfall Resort Alaska on Prince of Wales Island, I jumped at the chance. What better way to experience the state? My lack of fishing experience, though, made me nervous. In the days leading up to the trip, I worry: *What if I can't catch anything?*

The first day on the water, I admit my fears to our fishing guide, Brian. Without hesitation he says, "This is a great place to learn! You'll have a big box of salmon to take home."

I can only hope he's right. >>



Prince of  
Wales Island

The author and her friends show off their catch for the day.

## GETTING TO WATERFALL RESORT

Accessible only by air and sea, the resort is nestled in Southeast Alaska's 1,100-island Alexander Archipelago. From Ketchikan, we take a 90-minute floatplane ride over deep blue bays and forest-covered islands. The flight alone is worth the trip.

The 52-acre Waterfall Resort, once a cannery, has a fishing legacy stretching back more than a hundred years. The resort has been in operation for nearly four decades, and has hosted 60,000 guests. This week, I'm one of them.

### Day 1

The sky is a bright blue on our first full day on the water, and I'm warm in my yellow waterproof fishing gear. I'm the only woman in our group of four, and the only novice.

Brian patiently explains the basics of column fishing. I'm relieved to learn that the resort's guides take care of the hard stuff, from baiting hooks to netting fish and removing hooks. All I need to do is enjoy the adventure.

Waterfall Resort has the biggest fleet of privately owned fishing boats in Alaska, and their 27 boats are comfortably appointed with a heated cabin and a restroom on board.

Learning to fish is rarely graceful, and my fingers fumble to get the rhythm. Eventually, though, I relax, watching sea birds soar overhead.

At first, the bites come slowly. Then someone brings in a large silver salmon, and three more quickly follow. Just when I'm starting to get discouraged, I feel a hard tug. Then the creature on my hook starts running out to sea.

"Start reeling!" Brian yells. "Just keep it steady!"

But this fish is strong. It's all I can do to stand still and keep reeling. I'm sweating now,

and my arms ache as I struggle with the fish. I see a flash of silver, but the fish dives again to 50 feet. At times, Brian helps to hold my line up as my weakened arms tire, but he doesn't take over.

"You've got this!" he says, as the others cheer. Finally, after 10 minutes of struggling, I reel the fish to the boat and Brian nets it.

It's a glistening 35-pound king salmon, the first one we've caught today, and it's beautiful. Sadly, though, king season ended the day before, so my fish is released. But I catch two more silvers that afternoon, and they're added to our ice chest.

Tanned from the sun, I smile through dinner that night, devouring all-you-can-eat local mussels, baked halibut, peppercorn steak, and more.

### Day 2

I wake before dawn at 5:00 a.m. in my cozy seaside cabin. After a good breakfast, we head out to sea. The guides know all the best spots, and they talk among themselves, forming a game plan for the day.

The fish bite early and often, and soon the icebox fills. I'm slower than the others, but I'm starting to feel comfortable. I reel in a few rockfish (which we throw back), and pull up a silver.

Then chaos ensues: We suddenly have one, then two, then three different fish on our lines at once. The fish dive and cross under the boat, pulling our lines together into a knotted mess. Unsure what to do, we holler for Brian's help. In an acrobatic feat I still don't understand, he pushes one line up and another back, trying to untangle them. He gets one loose, and nets the fish. But my line and my friend's are still a jumbled mess. I watch in awe as Brian pulls them in by hand. Not pretty, to be sure, but amazing.

By the end of the day, we're tired and happy. As Brian turns the boat toward home, skimming across smooth water, I can't help but nod off. My friends do the same. The movement of the boat has rocked us all to sleep.

### Day 3

The morning brings fog. Thick clouds sit halfway up the mountains, their peaks poking out from above. Everything is still and almost otherworldly. Packing an extra thermos of coffee, we follow the other boats to sea.

Brian takes us to a deep bay, where halibut are said to be biting. Sure enough, I pull one in, marveling at its flat shape and white belly. But it's too small, so we set it free.

"I've snagged something on the bottom," a companion says. He can't reel the line in.

But Brian thinks it's something else. "Keep reeling" he says.

Then slowly, from the bottom, a 52-pound halibut emerges. No wonder it was hard to reel in. But it's slightly over the size limit, so back it goes.

As Brian sets the fish free, I hear blowing air. Three humpback whales have entered the bay and are feeding on krill alongside our boat. They ignore us and spend the next hour swimming in the bay. I stop and appreciate the moment. I'm floating on the mist-covered sea, surrounded by whales, the call of seabirds, and the wild majesty of Alaska. That, and I've finally learned to fish. Bucket list adventures don't get much better than this. 🐋

*Janna Graber is a Colorado-based journalist and author. She is the managing editor at Go World Travel Magazine, and the editor of three travel anthologies, including A Pink Suitcase: 22 Tales of Women's Travel.*



A beautiful day of fishing in Southeast.