

ENROUNTE MAGAZINE - TRAVEL

Fishing in B.C.

Our writer gets hooked on the dinosaur of the sea.

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I'm grunting and wailing, jerking left to right, straining my arms to the point of exhaustion, when my guide yells out, "Someone give her the epidural!" We both laugh and I lose my focus – and my grip on the reel's handle. Under the watchful gaze of a few semi-submerged seals hiding among floating logs, the fishing wire begins to unspool at lightning speed, undoing the last 20 minutes of my hard work. But I keep my grip.

It's 9 a.m. and I'm in a jet boat drifting down a mist-shrouded Fraser River in southwestern British Columbia, near Harrison Hot Springs, locked in a battle of wills with a white sturgeon that weighs more than twice what I do. I'm here to do my bit for the Fraser River Sturgeon Conservation Society, with veteran fisherman and BC Sportfishing Group owner Tony Nootebos, who's leading me on this odyssey that's part sport and part wildlife study. Sturgeons were massively overfished at the turn of the century; now they're being studied, and have been under strict catch-and-release rules in B.C. since 1994.

In their 175 million years of existence, sturgeons have evolved very little, which is why they're known as the dinosaurs of the sea. (But that's also because they're monstrously sized: The brawny white sturgeon can grow to six metres and weigh up to 600 kilograms.) Since they're bottom-feeders, we've put a sinker on our line, then let it drop down onto the riverbed so the hook and bait (a glob of salmon roe encased in nylon) sway freely at the bottom. Each fish Nootebos catches with people like me is microchipped so that the species' migration patterns and speed of growth can be tracked and the location of its habitats mapped.

After Nootebos gives me some much-needed help to reel in my catch, he dons waders and slips into the icy waters to inspect it. "A virgin sturgeon!" he yells and injects a microchip into its neck as I marvel at its

angular, shark-like body, thick whiskers and gaping, expandable mouth. At 2.52 metres long and weighing 136 kilograms, our catch is about 75 years old, guesses the fisherman.

Back at the Harrison Hot Springs Resort & Spa, where I'm staying, I rest my weary forearms while soaking in a mineral pool and muse about that sturgeon being as old as this hotel. And if all goes well, it could live another 50 years. I duck my head underwater and imagine my catch lackadaisically sucking rocks with its accordion mouth somewhere at the bottom of the frigid Fraser, and silently wish it a long and spawn-ful life.