

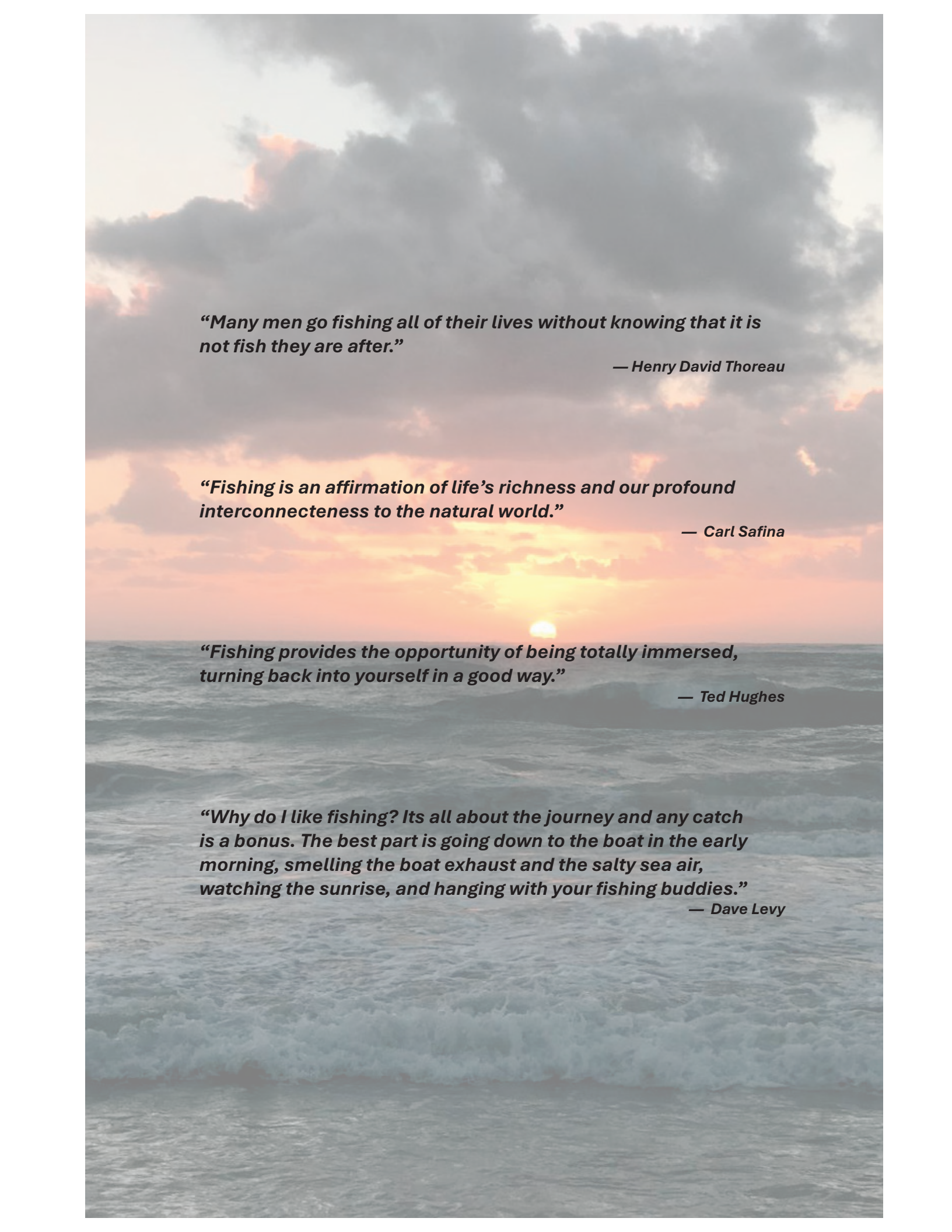
SWIMMING
UPSTREAM
A FISH BIOLOGIST'S JOURNEY

D A V I D L E V Y

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A vertical photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sky is filled with large, dark grey clouds, some of which are illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a warm orange and yellow glow. The sun is a bright, glowing orb just above the horizon line. The ocean below is dark with white-capped waves breaking in the foreground.

“Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.”

— Henry David Thoreau

“Fishing is an affirmation of life’s richness and our profound interconnecteness to the natural world.”

— Carl Safina

“Fishing provides the opportunity of being totally immersed, turning back into yourself in a good way.”

— Ted Hughes

“Why do I like fishing? Its all about the journey and any catch is a bonus. The best part is going down to the boat in the early morning, smelling the boat exhaust and the salty sea air, watching the sunrise, and hanging with your fishing buddies.”

— Dave Levy



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A LIFETIME OF FISHING



I remember fishing with my Dad on the St. Lawrence River for pike, perch and bass and trolling for bluefish off Massachusetts which were good fighters and good eaters. We also went ice fishing on Lake Memphremagog east of Montreal although the details are sketchy. The

photo shows me in the yellow toque, a lifelong friend, Barry Krumholtz in the brown Baklava and my brother Bob. The latter two had highly successful careers as physicians while I pursued a lifetime of fishing.

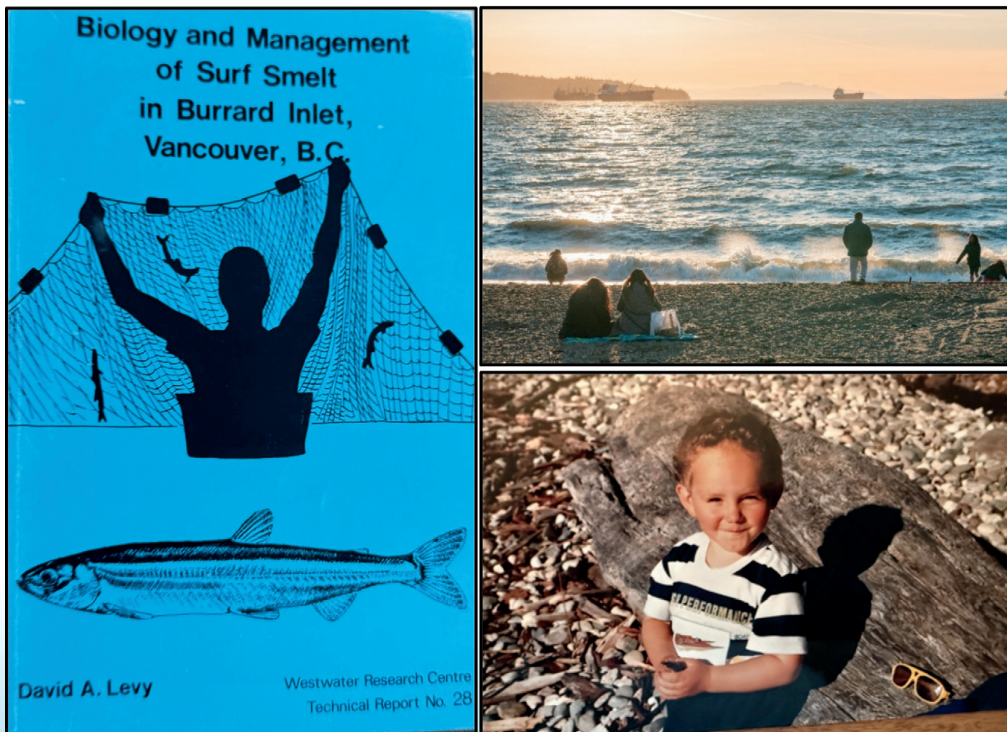
These early experiences ignited my interest in anything that swam. The first serious fishing I undertook targeted salmon in the Salish Sea adjacent to Vancouver. Initially the pickings were slim, but over time and with the advice of friends, I learned how to catch salmon. I pursued fishing strategies described in a book by Charles White called: "How to Catch Salmon: Advanced Techniques."

Fast forward 20 years when I began working at the University of British Columbia and encountered Europeans and Asians who were fishing for surf smelt on evening flood tides. I obtained smelt nets and chest waders and determined that the most productive fishing area was Wreck Beach.

We set our nets perpendicular to shore and lit a bonfire. Often, a couple of hours would elapse with nothing, then all hell would break loose, and you would have a netful of wriggling smelt. At the end of the evening, after the tide had turned, we would regroup at someone's apartment for a smelt fry and complete annihilation of the host's kitchen.

The Latin name for surf smelt is *Hypomesus pretiosus* and the word *pretiosus* means “precious”, in reference to their delicious flavour. We cooked them like small trout after they were cleaned, dipped in egg and flour, fried up in a hot pan, and drizzled with lemon juice. Smelt fishing was low tech, required minimal fishing skills, cost next to nothing, was a social affair and provided some of the best fishing that I ever experienced.

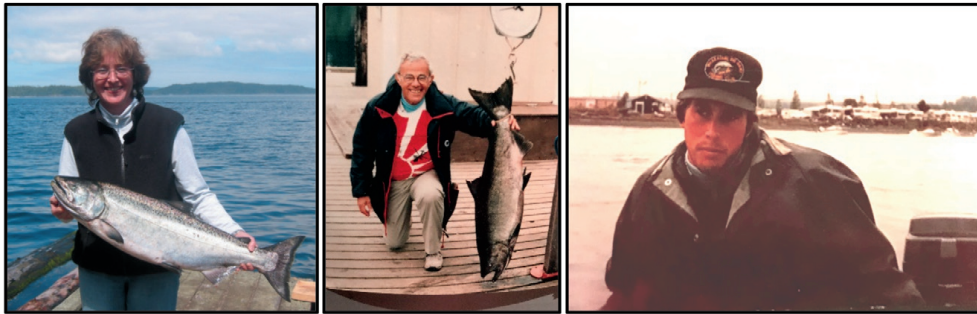
I became interested in the biology of surf smelt and determined there was little scientific information. I waded in and embarked on a surf smelt study at Wreck Beach, assisted by four enthusiastic summer students. Wreck Beach is famous since it is a nude beach, but that was a distraction for our research. One of the students owned a large German Shepherd which she brought to our sampling site and that was the end of any unwanted harassment.



My fishing opportunities expanded when my wife Karen and I purchased a 24-foot sailboat that we christened “Sludge” in view of her humble beginnings (see Crusin’). We cruised up to Pender Harbour and caught

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coho under sail, a challenging and satisfying feat. One day there was a pack of boats anchored beside Thormanby Island mooching live herring. We trolled through the middle of the pack and picked up a chunky spring (Chinook) salmon then sailed on towards Vancouver. The surrounding fishing boats cheered us on.



We had a family friend from Montreal, Mickey Gold, who was very keen on salmon fishing. His daughter Harriet had moved to Vancouver, married, and produced 2 boys, one of whom is my godson, and the other is Karen's godson. This provided Mickey with ample excuses to visit Vancouver, and every time he showed up, he and I made our way to Campbell River and fished with a professional guide and good friend, Mike Barker, out of a 15-foot Boston Whaler with tiller steering. One of Mickey's trademarks was an uncanny ability to tell jokes. Due to the internet, joke telling has become a lost art and Mickey perfected timing, accents, cadence and follow-ups that would keep Mike and I in stitches.

My two closest fishing buddies are Itsuo Yesaki (aka Its) and Hermann Enzenhofer. Hermann and Its fish steelhead in the Vedder River and both are ace fishermen. In Hermann's case he always catches the first fish, the heaviest fish, the most fish and the bragging rights that go with.



We previously worked together in the Fraser River conducting SONAR surveys and shared a passion for fishing. We were keen to try fishing in Haida Gwaii and investigated the numerous high-end fishing lodges that provide some of the best salmon fishing on the planet. I called up Herman and Its. “Sorry to tell you this guys, we are going to need second mortgages to afford a fishing trip to Haida Gwaii”.



We let it sit for a while, then Hermann called up excitedly one day, saying he had located a reasonably priced outfit in Masset called “Jerry’s Fishing Charters”. Jerry was a semi-trailer driver from Alberta and had purchased several apartments that were formerly owned by the Canadian military. We signed up and flew to Masset. Jerry turned out to be an intolerant red neck with lots of rough edges and prejudices. He was nasty towards his clients, but they nevertheless put up with his unfriendly behaviour because the salmon fishing was so good.

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There were more customers than boat places, so Jerry called for backup, and we were introduced to Peewee who is Haida and has spent most of his life fishing for spring salmon close to Masset. Peewee showed up with a 25-foot welded aluminum fishing boat with twin Yamaha outboards. Immediately there was good energy on board, and we ended up returning to Masset for many years and always fished with Peewee. Peewee never used a fishing net and relied on his commercial fishing skills to gaff any fish into the boat. I would watch and cringe, lest he knock the hook out of the fishes' mouth. However, that never happened.



Peewee was an artist and assisted Reg Davidson, a famous Haida carver. Peewee introduced us to Reg who explained his craft. The totem pole that Reg was working on during our visit now stands in Vancouver Airport. “The Raven with a Broken Beak” is inspired by a Haida legend in which Raven attempts to play a joke on a blind fisherman. Raven dove into the sea to steal the bait from the man’s halibut hook.

The old man’s fishing line caught Raven’s beak and quickly broke it off. Unsure of what had happened to his hook, the blind man asked his daughter to put the bill on a stick and raise it up above his house. An ashamed Raven emerged from the sea and tried to reattach the beak to his face, but it slipped and instead became attached to his chin, causing even more shame.

We enjoyed great fishing in Haida Gwaii and would fish hard for 3.5 days, fly back to Vancouver, and then want to go fishing again the next day. This is not unlike other addictions that can take over your life.

The holy grail of salmon fishing is catching a Tyee: a spring salmon over 30 pounds. Hermann caught one on our first visit that took a few runs before flipping onto a kelp bed making the fish easy to retrieve. Its hooked one and had it on the line for about 20 mins before it broke off. This induced a severe black funk that settled over the boat.

In 2011 we returned to Haida Gwaii brimming with anticipation. We started by trolling through a heavy downpour before the clouds parted and the sun poked out. It was flat calm, an unusual sea state for Haida Gwaii. Peewee suggested removing our flashers and fishing the lines with medium-sized spoons. This setup had the advantage that if you hooked something, it would only be you and the fish, with no interference from a flasher.



When the salmon hit, the rod pointed down vertically as the downrigger released. I knew right away that it was a Tyee.

There were no boats around us so Peewee switched off the engines and it was just me and the salmon for around 40 minutes. The reel screamed multiple times when the salmon ran. I screened out of all the coaching, words of encouragement, swearing, sarcastic remarks and joking and focussed on getting the fish into the boat. Peewee gaffed the spring, and a round of high fives ensued. The fish of a lifetime.

We would regularly jig for halibut with good success off Tow Hill near a large sand flat where halibut would sit on the bottom feeding on herring and juvenile crabs. These were “chicken halibut”, relatively easy to catch and perfect for eating.

We had been successful for salmon fishing and each of us had two Styrofoam coolers of frozen, vacuum sealed portions of prime Haida Gwaii spring and coho salmon. We were on our final outing and planned

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to fly out from Masset Airport later that afternoon. Around 11:30, Hermann's rod bent over and he hooked a lunker. There was no way he could control the fish. We speculated about what kind of fish it was. A shark? A side-saddled huge salmon?

After around 45 minutes the fish came up from the depths and we could see a massive halibut. It took all four of us to bring it in using a welded rebar hook and myself securing Peewee so he could lean over the side. After we strongarmed the fish into the boat, it flopped around violently so Peewee hog tied it, and we ran back to port.



We stopped at the commercial landing station and the fish weighed in at 164 lb. Peewee filleted 120 pounds of meat. Now what? We didn't have capacity to transport any fish when Peewee proposed a solution. In Masset, if you donate your fish, the processor will donate vacuum sealing, and the fish would be provided to patients in Masset Hospital. A win-win solution. I kept a large chunk and brought it to a St'át'imc feast in the Interior. The halibut was the first food item consumed and my St'át'imc friends raved about it.

A couple of years later a friend, Don MacDonald who lives in Nanaimo, invited Karen and I to spend a weekend fishing at Ucluelet on Vancouver Island.

We had considerable success on a Friday evening and caught our limit of springs. The next day the rain pelted down and the wind was howling so Karen and I opted out and brought out the Scrabble Board. The rest of the crew including two boys, poked around a sheltered bay having a nice, miserable time catching rockfish. They came back looking like drowned rats and parked themselves beside the fireplace. We woke up early on Sunday and the wind was still howling and the rain was still pelting down. We decided that we would abort the effort and come back another day. The first order of business was to retrieve the boat and load it onto the trailer. There were a few challenges: the tide was out, the boat was heavy, and the launch ramp was steep and slippery.



To get the boat onto the trailer, Don backed the trailer down to the edge of the boat ramp and I muscled/winched the boat until it was properly seated on the trailer. We then jockeyed the boat, trailer and truck and

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picked up maybe 12 inches of cable before the winch froze due to the heavy load. Don surveyed the situation and announced: “Out of the way!”. He then cranked the winch hard, freeing the ratchet and the handle started to helicopter wildly.

Unfortunately, Don’s hand was in the way, and the handle struck his middle finger, exposing around 2 inches of bone at an oblique angle to his hand.

I was shocked and my heart was pounding. I told myself this is no time to panic, get some help and get Don to a First Aid Clinic. I called Mary Lou, Don’s partner, and she drove Don to Tofino for first aid, and from there, to Nanaimo General Hospital where they operated on Don’s hand around midnight.

Karen and I looked after the 2 boys, consulted the tide tables to determine the timing of high tide, hooked up the boat to the trailer, drove to Nanaimo, dropped off the truck and boat, then headed for BC Ferries.

What is the moral of this story? Accidents can happen anytime on boats, some are benign, some can injure and some can be lethal, especially if male egos are involved. It is advantageous and highly desirable to retain a vigilant



attitude of “boat sense” to avoid preventable boating accidents. Our Ucluelet accident could have been avoided entirely just by waiting for the high tide.

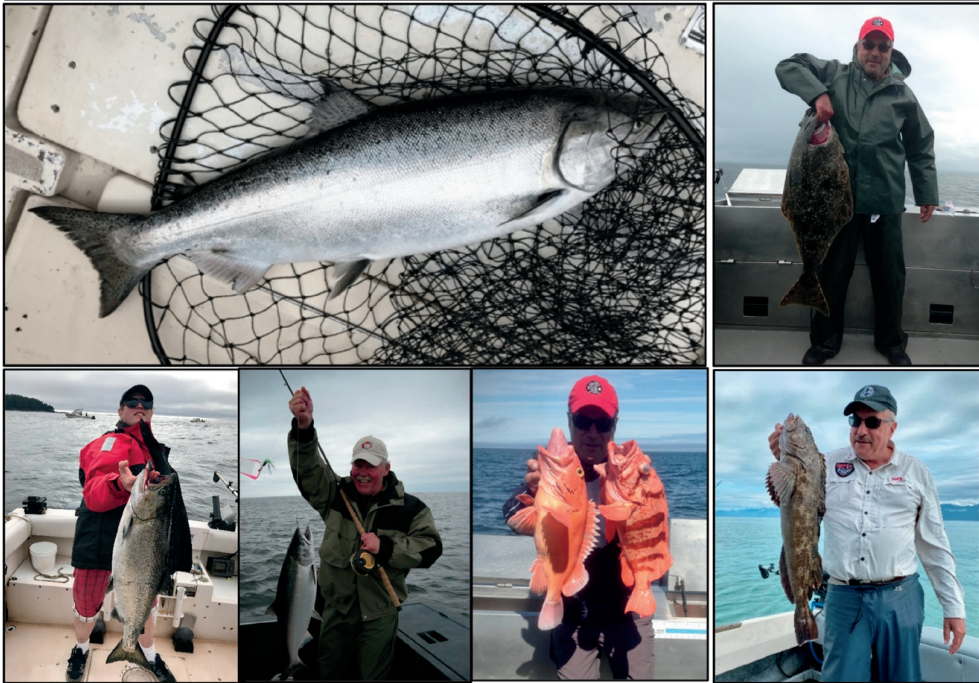
Mike Barker, who guided us 30 years previously in Campbell River, contacted me via LinkedIn to ask if I’d be interested in a “deeply discounted” fishing trip to Kyuquot Sound. Over 30 years, he and I had gone

our separate ways, had families, careers, joys, and sadnesses while I pursued consulting and Mike pursued his guiding business. Over time, fishing in Campbell River slowed down. Mike adjusted by establishing a small fishing lodge and guiding business, Kyuquot Beach House, on Northwest Vancouver Island. To make the business work, he needed to fill up his boats. There was a party of lawyers from LA, and they needed an eighth person. It didn't take a lot of convincing, and I joined the group, sharing with them my best lawyer jokes.

Since that trip we have gone to Kyuquot numerous times and have enjoyed spectacular fishing and west coast scenery.



FISH TANK



LEVY BOYS



STURGEON FISHING





Sport fishing took a dive during COVID and a few of the lodges, particularly those which relied upon American customers, were hurting. Several outfits were offering deep discounts that were too good to pass up. We ended up visiting Nootka Island Resort several times and enjoyed good salmon and halibut fishing.

Hermann and I decided to run offshore one day for some halibut fishing. It was calm with few waves, making for good jigging conditions. Shortly after we dropped our lines, Hermann's rod started to shake. There is some skill required to hook halibut, and it is best to wait 20-30 seconds before setting the hook. Then a tug of war starts and when close to the boat, the fish needs to be carefully measured prior to gaffing. Hermann played it perfectly and was rewarded with a 40 lb halibut, one of the best forms of protein on the planet.

We dropped our lines again and the bite slowed down. We were enjoying the fishing vibe while our guide Shane was trying to unravel a tangled halibut reel. Suddenly he slipped and the entire rig went overboard. This is not a good way to operate, and Shane was choked as the rod and reel belonged to a fellow guide and he had his reputation to think about. Suddenly, my rod tip started to shake and I hooked a halibut.

As the fish was coming in the line went slack. Damn, the fish was off. I kept reeling but there was no fish. I reeled some more and saw that one of the bare hooks had snagged a fishing line.

My explanation for these observations is as follows: Shane's line had gone down and there was line paid out close to the bottom. I then hooked a halibut which swam beside the line while I reeled in. The fish got off and the line was hooked and retrieved by my rod. I admit there are other hypotheses. Shane was ecstatic about retrieving his gear and washed off the reel in freshwater, concluding that his halibut rig was supercharged and would fearlessly catch halibut in future.



It was exciting to see the marine life. While fishing in Haida Gwaii, Kyuquot, Nootka Sound and Knight Inlet we saw orcas, humpback whales, dolphins, sea otters, ocean sunfish and seabirds.



Prawning and Crabbing in Knight Inlet



Mike Barker wanted to expand his business to include prawn fishing experiences in Knight Inlet which he test drove by inviting some fishing buddies who had previously been up to Kyuquot. Base camp was a precariously leaning float home with algae-covered floorboards. We used a “prawn puller” to help retrieve our traps set in 200 – 250 feet of water. Without a doubt, spot prawns are the best tasting prawns in the North Pacific and prawning in Knight Inlet has been productive.

We also set crab traps. After we first arrived, Mike pulled up a submerged blue tank containing around 15 legal-sized Dungeness crabs. While we were at base camp, we consumed quite a few. However, we constantly had crab pots fishing and would introduce the freshly caught crab into the blue tank. We therefore created a sustainable crab fishery, and crab became a staple food item. We tried out numerous prawn and crab recipes. One of the crew, Doug Anzai from Quadra Island, is a superb seafood chef who likes to experiment



Mexico

Over the years I have gone deep-sea fishing in Acapulco, Cabo San Lucas and Zihuatanejo.

Acapulco

I described our fishing experiences in Acapulco in a December 1998 Christmas letter to friends and business associates.

In December, 1998 the Levy family flew to Acapulco for a mid-winter break. Following a Mexican breakfast, it was time to hit the pool at the “La Palapa Hotel” located on the shore of Acapulco Bay. Within 5 minutes we were approached by Angelo, the local water sports agent who lines up SCUBA diving, jet-skiing, parasailing, banana-boating, and deep-sea fishing. My ears perked up when he mentioned fishing,

Angelo asked if I wanted to see the pictures. Sure enough, there were large fish to be had although the charter prices for the miniature Queen Mary’s (many thousands per day) seemed a little prohibitive. In my best Spanish, I asked Angelo if perhaps there were some less expensive boats available, and we eventually settled on the Z Mares III, chartering out at \$200 per day.

The next morning, Angelo took us down to the fishing pier to meet Jesús, el Capitan, and Oscar, the first mate. We set out as the sun rose over Acapulco Bay filled with optimism for a fish. As we headed offshore, Oscar sewed large hooks into the baitfish (mulletts). Oscar and Jesús set-out the two outriggers and we trolled rapidly with 4 @ 200 pound test lines attached to the outriggers and 3 lines dead astern (the first baited with a large vicious-looking squid lure, the second with a bonito flopping on the surface, and a third line with plastic squids (teaser lines) which served as attractors for the other bait lines). It was calm with a rolling swell. Two

hours passed and we slathered on #30 SBF suntan lotion. The boys were getting cranky.

Oscar is on the flying bridge driving the boat, while Jesús is tending the lines keeping us entertained with Mexican fish stories. Jesús looks at the inside outrigger line with a peculiar expression. He grabs the rod, and yards back vigorously. “Martin, marlin, marlin”! he yells, and next thing, a massive black marlin breaks the surface and is tail walking, 50 m behind the boat. Jesús is sending out a staccato, machine-gun fire stream of Spanish invectives, understandable only to Mexicans. Up walking on his tail comes the marlin again, for a third time, a fourth time, and a fifth time!

The marlin disappears. Suddenly, the reel starts to scream! The marlin has taken off and Jesús runs up to the bow of the boat, yelling at Oscar to chase the fish. The marlin comes up again for the sixth time, only now, he is 50 m in front of the boat, moving like a bloody locomotive!

Dave comes to his senses and begins to haul in the other lines and clear the deck. We are in for a scrap. Jesús passes over the rod and instructs me to take a seat in the fishing chair and gives me the 30-second accelerated instructional course on marlin fishing. The principles involve:

- 1. Keep modest tension on the line at all times;*
- 2. If the fish tail walks, reel like hell;*
- 3. Yard back on the rod slowly with clutch engaged; and*
- 4. Reel in as much line as possible on the down stroke.*

Thirty minutes go by, 45 minutes and then an hour. I am drenched in sweat and getting seriously tired! Jesús takes over so I can take a 10-minute break and then I’m “back in the saddle”. I learn the 2-handed version of the upstroke,

which makes life somewhat easier. With an arduous effort on my part for 15 minutes, I take in about 30 m of line. The marlin makes a run and undoes my hard effort in about 30 seconds!

Am I giving up? Never!

After ninety minutes we notice a change in the angle of the line. The marlin is sounding and is now 30 m below the boat. It feels like we have caught the mother of all halibuts. Whereas before, there was some give-and-take between the marlin and me, now we are at a stalemate. We innovate. Jesús puts the rod tip over his shoulder and very slowly hand lines the marlin while I take up the slack on the reel. The plan is to get the marlin close to the boat where we will either hook him with a second rod or else sink in a vicious looking grapple hook tied to a nylon rope. We are getting a little bit frustrated. Jesús has an idea. We'll crank up the tension on



Captain Antonio Romero with a 362 lb black marlin from Cabo San Lucas, Baja California Sur.

my rod and clip it to rod #2 which has a much stronger reel. Jesús clips rod #1 on #2 and drops rod #1 into the water. Next thing, rod #1 is swimming away from us and the line from rod #2 is fluttering in the breeze.

I look up in stunned disbelief. Jesús has taken the rod with a huge marlin attached and HE HAS THROWN IT AWAY! Of all the stupid, imbecilic things I have ever witnessed, this one is the ultimate! Jesús is looking out over the water, on the verge of tears, absolutely dumbfounded.

I recover. “Jésus don’t worry about the fish, it’s not that important” (thinking, Mexicans have been separated from their cojones for actions much less serious than this!). “After all. I am fortunate to have had the experience of playing a big marlin for 2 hours” (thinking, you will be hearing from my attorney, and I will be taking an action against you!). “It’s early, we can still fish some more” (thinking, I now understand why Hemingway committed suicide — he was playing a marlin off Havana for 2 hours and dropped his rod overboard!).

Jésus goes up to the flying bridge to drive, while Oscar sets out the lines again. I notice that Oscar is trying to stay as far away from Jésus as possible. We troll. A pall of depression settles over the boat. I climb up to the flying bridge with 2 Coronas for a heart-to-heart with Jésus. Jésus too, is not all that worried about the fish — he’s worried about the \$US 250 Penn reel and his reputation as a fishing guide. We find an acceptable solution. I will make a cash contribution towards a new deep-sea fishing rig, and (within Mexico) will keep a lid on the story about how we came to lose the fish. We shake hands. Life can resume.

Following our return to port, fried to a crisp, we flop into the hotel pool. Angelo comes over for a full debriefing. He then runs over to some freshly arrived gringos, announcing to all within earshot: “the guy over there caught a huge marlin today!” I am beginning to think that Angelo has an MBA in marketing from Harvard Business School.

Two days later, we again head out on a sister boat to the Z Mares Ill called “Jésus Boat” and meet Capitan Chucho, Mario the first mate, and Armando the second mate. We set out the lines and head offshore, beyond site of land. There are light winds and a rolling sea. “Look over there, the fin

of a sailfish!” “Over there, 2 sailfish!” “Another one over there!”. The place was fishy.

We are sitting on the flying bridge talking with Chucho while the first and second mates do their thing. Suddenly, Mario grabs a rod and sets the hook into a sailfish. We have one! The line goes peeling out. I take my place in the fishing chair and start the classical deep-sea up-and-down fishing and reeling pattern. He's a serious contender but a lightweight compared to the marlin. Armando asks if I would like a beer while I am fighting the fish, thereby rounding out the deep-sea fishing experience. I decline. Within 15 minutes, the fish is beside the boat.

We set out the lines again and troll around. Chucho, who has a sixth sense about fish, jumps down from the flying bridge and grabs the middle rod with the squid lure. A sailfish is following it. He pays out some slack and tries to entice a strike. The fish appears to have moved on.

Suddenly, Mario spots him again, this time following the bait on one of the outrigger lines. He grabs the rod, flicks it out of the outrigger quick-release, and rapidly spools out line from the reel. After ten seconds he throws the switch on the reel, waits for the tension on the line to build, presses his thumb against the spool and pulls back on the rod to set the hook.

“We've got him! Mario you beautiful man!”.

I ran into Jésus at the pier from the first outing and he firmly believes that I am a lucky asset on board and vows to get me another marlin.

I booked the Z Mares III for a final day on the water. I arrive at the fishing pier at 07:00 and am greeted by Jésus. Where is Oscar the first mate? According to some local fishermen,

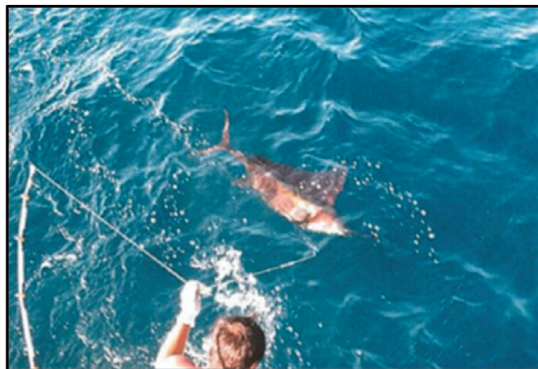
he was seen the previous night drinking tequila with his brothers. We begin a search for Oscar.

The sun is coming up, all the fishing boats have left port, and I am getting extremely impatient. "Listen Jesús, I can be your mate and you and I can fish together". Off we went. I drove the boat which was a shining example of Mexican maritime technology. Two unequal size inboard engines and two undersized rudders combined to make the boat an unwieldy and unresponsive pig. Nevertheless, we are fishing 6 lines in a calm rolling sea.

Jésus spots a pair of sailfish coming in for a close look at our squid lure. He tries to entice a strike. They move over to one of the outrigger

lines. The fish depart. We notice that virtually no one is catching fish today. As we troll around, Jesús spots another sailfish responding to one of our bait lines. He releases the outrigger clip, counts to ten and sets the hook. Nothing happens. He pays out more line and again tries to set the hook. Nothing. He messes with the line for a full 2 minutes, and

then, in a final act of desperation, he whipsaws the rod vigorously, cursing and swearing in Spanish. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz! He's hooked the sailfish! "OK David, tu tienes suerte. Ay caramba!" He passes the rod down to me on the lower deck. I can see the sailfish tailwalking far away in the distance.



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Deep-sea fishing involves a challenging combination of skills and instinct. On our way back to port, Jesús offers me a job as his new first mate. I reply, a la Ritchie Valens: “Yo no soy marinero, soy capitan, soy capitan!”

Tight lines and Happy New Year for 1999!

Zihuatanejo

Karen and I visited Zihuatanejo several times and I heard about fly fishing for sailfish. It sounded intriguing so I arranged a panga trip with Capitan Santiago of Gitana Sport Fishing.

The set up involves a #12 weight fly rod with a huge fly reel, 600 yards of backing and a floating line with at least a 100 lb leader connected to the fly. The set up also includes 2 teasers – a herring covered by a large squid hootchie, but no hook - one long and one short. Once the sailfish is attracted to the teaser, the speed of the boat is reduced, and the teaser is pulled in using a manual hand crank.



When the sailfish is in position just behind the boat, the captain stops the engine, and the fisherman casts the fly and attempts to entice a strike.



We trolled around for a few hours but didn't see any action. Suddenly a sailfish started chasing one of the teasers. I stood in the stern, primed to cast a large bucktail.

Santiago's timing for stopping the boat was perfect, and I could see a large blue sailfish under the boat. I cast out the bucktail, the fish saw it, then Wham! It hit the bucktail and took off like a locomotive and started to tail walk. Alas, the fish broke off after a few minutes. I didn't view this as problematic since this type of fishing is strictly catch-and-release and I chalked up another "long distance release" for the record.

I have since learned that you can flyfish for marlin and dorado – that is an adventure for another day.

Tulum

We enjoyed Tulum and its white sand beaches and stayed in a small beach-side hotel called Cabañas Tulum which served as our base for visiting Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula.

These were R and R visits, not much fishing and lots of beach time. We visited Mayan ruins and went snorkelling in cenotes (natural sink holes covering much of Yucatan).



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My brother-in-law Kevin, an avid hunter and fisherman, showed up in Playa del Carmen on a family vacation at a nearby resort. We found out there was bone fishing to be had in an adjacent lagoon and decided to fish with Ascension Bay Fly Fishing Lodge. The lodge accommodates high end anglers and day trippers, and they had excellent nearly new flyfishing gear for our use.



We headed to the lagoon in a panga: 2 gringos and 2 Mexican guides. Once we reached a spot in the middle of nowhere, they stopped and one of the guides jumped out into 2 feet of water and asked me to follow. Kevin and the other guide then roared off into the distance and we were left at the edge of a hot and buggy mangrove swamp. We arranged to rendezvous a couple of hours later so we could trade places: I would fish from the panga and Kevin would become the swamp rat.

The guide explained the drill. First – safety. The bottom of the lagoon was littered with stingrays that had a nasty spike, and to avoid injury it was necessary to shuffle your feet rather than walk. Second – there were 2 species of crocodiles that were generally docile, but it was recommended not to startle them. I have since learned via YouTube that there are cases of swimmers being attacked by crocodiles in the lagoon.

Bonefish mostly eat shrimp, so we used shrimp flies exclusively. Bonefishing is similar to hunting. You only cast your fly when you see a school of bonefish swimming in a directed fashion. You need a

more-or-less perfect cast to attract their attention. The Mexican guides served as scouts to locate the fish and instructed us when to pull the trigger.



I found bonefishing to be extremely frustrating and ended up flogging the water all day without success. Kevin out fished me: following a day on the lagoon he caught a single small bonefish. We could see bonefish schools but couldn't seem to interest them. Perhaps they didn't like gringos? There are more productive bonefishing areas in the world than Tulum like Cuba, the Bahamas and Florida, but I have already crossed them off my bucket list.

Later during the visit, we hired a guide for a nature tour of Sian Ka'an Biosphere reserve. The boat driver took us to a spot where we could see nostril openings and hear the soft breathing of manatees floating just below the surface.

Virgin Islands

I have 3 brothers and in 2013, we arranged a catamaran cruise in the British Virgin Islands and sailed to Virgin Gorda, Anegada, Tortola and the Soggy Dollar Bar – so called due to its dock-free beach which requires a swim to get to the bar.

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I brought along a hand line and some lures which I dragged behind the cat but only caught small barracudas.



My brothers and I live in different parts of Canada, so we parted ways in the British Virgin Islands and flew back home. I was routed through St. Johns on the American Virgin Islands where I needed to overnight to connect to Miami the following day. I had time to kill and began to investigate fishing opportunities. Sure enough, there was an outfit that catered to anglers: Double Header Sport Fishing. I called them up and asked about their availability and rates: \$1100 for a day trip and \$600 for a half day. \$600 was a little rich and I asked them if they could pair me up with another angler to share the cost.



By the time I pulled into St. Johns no other charter customers had showed. I weighed up the pros and cons of taking a half day trip by myself and convinced myself that it would be unlikely I would ever return and isn't it true that you only live once? Following this rationalization, I signed up for a half day charter with Captain Tyler departing at 2:00 pm.

The Marina is a 15-minute taxi ride from St. Johns, and I hooked up with a taxi driver named Robert who was brimming with information about St. Johns, fishing, his family and island politics. As we approached the

marina, I told him he could have any fish that I caught, and he should meet me at 7:00 pm.

Even within the sheltered marina the wind was gusting and producing white caps close to shore. I anticipated a rough ride. I went down to the dock and met Captain Tyler (ex US Navy) and jumped on board a beautiful looking boat with twin inboards. Before we cast off, Captain Tyler explained that we had 2 basic options: stay close to shore and avoid the brunt of the wind and experience mediocre fishing, or head offshore where we would need to contend with wind, swells and large waves but have a chance at some productive fishing. It was a no brainer – we headed offshore.



We immediately encountered the waves and the swell. Captain Tyler is a superb boat driver, but we still got spray-soaked and spent the entire ride clutching onto the leeward side of the boat console. We stood rather than sat so our legs could function

as shock absorbers. Perversely, I enjoyed the ride. We soon lost sight of land and continued offshore as Captain Tyler scanned the horizon looking for seabirds. After 30 minutes-or-so we encountered a huge flock of thousands of seabirds. We set out the lines and trolled through the middle of the flock and right away hooked a skipjack tuna. The fish was only 5-6 pounds but there was huge tension on the fishing line, and it took me forever to



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land it. By that time the birds had moved away, and we started trolling blindly, not unlike salmon fishing.

After an hour-or-so we saw another small flock of sea birds and set out 5 lines and simultaneously hooked 4 dorados. These fish are jumpers and to see large dorados jumping simultaneously is quite a thrill. Five lines for two fishers is a bit of a management challenge and there was a lot of adrenaline flowing as we boated a couple of dorados.

I was reeling in dorado number three when Captain Tyler told me to leave the fish in the water behind the boat. He then opened a bait tank filled with small fish (“chum”) and scooped them overboard close to the stationary dorado. Within a few minutes several new (unhooked) dorado oriented beside the hooked fish and the captain then brought out a baited fly rod and tried to entice a strike. Nothing happened but I admired Captain Tyler’s creativity.

At that point we had burned 3.5 hours out of a 4-hour charter and the captain decided, “Time to get you a bill fish!”. Love the attitude! We trolled back towards the marina and picked up another dorado, before heading back to the marina. The arrangement with Double Header is the angler keeps the first 10 lb. of filets and Double Header keeps the rest to sell commercially. I gave the captain a well-earned tip and walked up the dock with a plastic bag containing 10 pounds of primo, fresh from the sea, dorado filets. Robert the taxi driver was waiting at the top of the ramp and his eyes practically popped out of his head when I gave him the fish. Now that’s fishing!



Cabo San Lucas

Cabo San Lucas on the Baja Peninsula arguably has the best deep-sea fishing in Mexico. Much of the tourist economy of Cabo revolves around

fishing for marlin, dorado, rooster fish, wahoo and yellowfin tuna. Karen and I discussed a visit to Cabo for deep-sea fishing. Karen showed no interest whatsoever and encouraged me to partner with one of my fishing buddies. However, as the Cabo trip started to crystallize, she flip-flopped and decided to join in provided she didn't have to fish.

I trolled the internet to investigate fishing charters. One of these, Lands End Charters, serves as a broker for 50+ Mexican fishing boats in their fleet and El Torito (Little Bull), caught my attention. I arranged a 2-day charter. El Torito is captained by Antonio Romero who has a reputation as a highliner and one of the best captains in Cabo and I had a good feeling about El Torito.

I walked down to El Torito on Day 1, and we trolled all day. Nada.



As a mature fisherman, I accept that some days you will get skunked. Provided that the gear is presented properly and the captain and crew are trying, I can easily accept getting skunked.

On the second day it was blustery and there wasn't much action for a few hours. We then encountered a stationary pack of boats. A bait ball! We decided to join the fray and successively hooked 2 striped marlins. On our way back to the marina we hooked a third, making for a very successful day of fishing.

We returned the following year, and I shared a charter with a Canadian fisheries biologist, Andy Olsen. Andy is so enamoured with Cabo that he tattooed many of the features of Cabo on his arm including the Arch of Cabo San Lucas, Lover's Beach and the different fish species to be

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found. We hit paydirt on the fishing grounds: 5 marlins in 6 hours. At that point, Andy and I decided to return to the Marina. Antonio turned the boat towards port, but was somewhat incredulous: why would you abandon such good fishing and run home prematurely? I didn't see the point of stressing more fish, even if it was catch-and-release.



While in Cabo I heard about the Bisbee's Black and Blue (Black Marlin and Blue Marlin) fishing tournament that takes place in October. I asked around about joining a team. This is big-time fishing, and many of the boats are valued in \$millions. Some boat owners, mostly Americans, moor their boats in Cabo all year long and are maintained by a Mexican crew in their absence. Some have private jets and spend a few days

fishing in the tournament before returning home. It looked like an interesting event. After going down a few blind alleys, I decided to contact Capitan Antonio to ask for his advice about joining a team. It turned out that he was putting an El Torito team together and they could accommodate a warm body to fill their last remaining spot. Antonio didn't know me from a hole in the ground and speaks only basic English, but we developed a rapport that has evolved into a continuing friendship.

The entry fee for Bisbees ranges between \$5,000 and \$72,500 so having a gringo investor for part of the entry fee was a major plus. Antonio explained that any prize payout (range between \$1 – 3 million) would be proportional to your investment in the entry fee, following subtraction of a boat share and a captain and crew share. I have friends in Vancouver who thought this was a scam and I would be squeezed out of any reward dividend.

However, I had a good feeling about Antonio and the other crew members. This turned out to be a non-issue since we were skunked, as were most of the other entrants. Subsequently in the following year, there were no qualifying marlins caught (greater than 300 lb) and tournament entry fees were returned to entrants.



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There were 7 Mexicans and one gringo on board and as we trolled around, I inflicted my Spanish on the crew members and got to see Baja California del Sur through a Mexican lens.



Karen and I returned to Cabo the next winter and I contacted Antonio to let him know I was coming. After we checked in to our Airbnb, Antonio called up and asked if I wanted to join a fishing trip he had organized for his family. "Por supuesto. Vamos!"

We had a good day on the water and Antonio's nephew, 12 years old, caught his first marlin.

I returned to fish in Bisbees again the next year and Antonio obtained access to a larger boat, the *Don Luis* captained by P  p   de la Pe  a, another highliner fishing captain in Cabo. The boat had lots of amenities including air-conditioning in the main cabin. We again trolled and trolled and trolled and returned to the Marina with little to show for it, save for a great time with new Mexican friends.



While in Cabo, we met Antonio's wife, Betty. Betty and Karen communicated in Spanish and English via Google translation programs on their iPhones and got along well. They asked what our plans were. We were intending to rent a car to visit La Paz and Todos Santos but the car rental agency we booked with was closed tighter than a drum. Antonio said we needed some guides and more ambitious plans to get to know Baja. He had a friend who drove a Honda Civic that we could rent for a reasonable price. Off we went.

Our first stop an hour outside of Cabo was to a dusty little restaurant for breakfast. We were served machaca, which is wind-dried spicy beef served with the usual Mexican accompaniments. We then drove

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to Loreto and the next day we stopped at a few places including a steel church designed and built by Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame. We then overnighted at Guerrero Negro, site of the largest salt mine in the world and toured the mine the next day. Prior to our tour, Antonio received a call from a customer who wanted to go fishing the next day. The distance from Guerrero to Cabo is 920 km so we had a bit of a drive. Antonio and I split the driving, and we drove like bats out of hell, returning to Cabo in the middle of the night. It was a whirlwind tour that we greatly enjoyed, especially the time spent with our gracious hosts. We even learned a new Spanish slang word: “chollero” which means a person from Cabo who is like the spines on a cholla cactus.



Karen and I started a tradition whereby we would do something meaningful each year to celebrate our dwindling number of future birthdays. In 2023 we paid a visit to a good friend, Ellen Scanlan, who lives in San Francisco and did some touristy things including a visit to Alcatraz, eating the best Cioppino imaginable and going to a San Francisco 49ers

football game. It was a great weekend, and we vowed to keep up the tradition.

When I started scheming for my 72nd birthday in 2024, we decided to visit Cabo. We had planned a visit several years prior just when COVID hit, but Justin Trudeau, our prime minister at the time, warned Canadians that now is not the time to travel on vacation. We respected that and postponed our visit. At the same time a colleague of mine who lives in Nanaimo went to Cabo and unbeknown to her, she had contracted COVID prior to her departure. When she tested positive in Mexico, she needed to wait 10 additional days before being permitted to return to Canada. Cabo is a delightful Mexican town, but restrictions to your movements can sour your vacation experience.

Prior to arranging a visit, I asked Antonio when was the best time for tuna fishing and he identified September, co-incidentally the same month as my birthday. We booked flights and an Airbnb and settled in. The next day Antonio connected with me via Facebook and invited me to join a fishing trip he had organized for several friends. My contribution was to pay for the fuel, a most generous invitation. We used a kite to suspend a flying fish lure that skipped across the surface and enticed yellowfin tuna to bite.



The next day I called Antonio who was evidently out fishing and slow to pick up. I asked whether we could go dorado fishing and he answered with a terse: “Si”. I was joined by an American friend, Frank Capo from Chicago, and off we went looking for dorados. Once again, Antonio came through.

Why do I like fishing? It’s all about the journey and any catch is a bonus. The best part is going down to the boat in the early morning, smelling the diesel and the salty air, watching the sunrise, and hanging with your fishing buddies.

