

A dream trip to take on fresh water giants



MONSTER: Steve Holloway (left) and tour guide CJ Mussel hold up a white sturgeon caught by Chris Dulley who took the picture

ONE of my close friends and fishing pals, Steve Holloway, recently celebrated his 60th birthday. His lovely wife Pam, knowing I fish abroad a lot, asked me if I could arrange a surprise trip for Steve to fish for white sturgeon in British Columbia, something he had wanted to do for many years.

The next favour she asked of me, would I be willing to accompany him. Having fished for chinook salmon in the same area two years ago, I couldn't wait for the opportunity to return to this beautiful region of Canada and do battle with the great white sturgeon, a fish I had never had the chance to catch.

These fish are almost prehistoric, reaching lengths of four metres, weighing more than 1,000lbs and living for around 100 years.

After a nine-hour flight from Heathrow, we landed in Vancouver and less than two hours later arrived in the town of Chilliwack on the Fraser River, where we checked in at the Coast Hotel.

On our first morning, after a huge plate of eggs, bacon and home fries, we were ready to start fishing.

Our guide Mark, boss of Cascade Fishing Adventures, was waiting outside in the sunshine with his pristine 22 foot jetboat sitting on a trailer towed by a powerful truck.

It was a very busy Saturday on the river, with hundreds of people and boats milling around, but Mark, being a professional guide, had the edge on most of the others and quickly got us away.

This year was a record sockeye [salmon] run, with 25 million expected to run the Fraser River, most of them in August.

The banks were lined with anglers wading up to their chests, casting weights with long leaders and bare hooks, snagging fish as they swam past.

It was clear that fishing and anglers are the lifeblood of all the towns along the Fraser, including Chilliwack.

After catching some baitfish, which apparently are known as pike minnow, from the back of the boat, Mark headed down river to fish by the gravel barges, a spot he claimed consistently produces big fish.

We baited up with fresh salmon on one rod, pike minnow and "stink bait" – dead, rotting salmon pulled from the river – on the other two.

Despite plenty of knocks we had none of the solid pulls we were told to expect from sturgeon, so after several frustrating hours we moved to a new spot.

Within 10 minutes one of the rods, which were in holders off the stern of the boat, bent towards the water. I grabbed the rod before it disappeared into the river, and struck into a fish.

The fight was amazing and we realised quickly that these were no ordinary fish. Mine tore off down river, jumped several times and forced Mark to slip the anchor and give chase.

After about 20 minutes and giving 200 yards of line, I eventually got the fish under control, bringing it to the side of the boat, where Mark slipped the barbless hook out so that we could admire it and take pictures.

This was a stunning fish of more than six foot weighing about 140lb, shark-like with an underslung mouth, solid muscle, rows of spines along its back and flanks, enormous fins and tail. I couldn't help but wonder how on earth we would cope if we hooked a big one.

Day two brought some bad weather, with a drop in temperature due to the wind and rain, the weather there being very much like our own. Mark decided to head further up river to get away from the hordes of people.

Despite the weather we had a great day, catching four fish, Steve's 150lb being the best of the bunch. We lost several fish as well. The bigger ones seemed to know where the snags were and, of course, sometimes the fish just throw the hook.

We spotted a black bear on the bank, but he didn't seem too keen on having his photograph taken, and ran into the dense cover.

The place was paradise, with turkey vultures soaring overhead, the occasional bald eagle and osprey putting in an appearance.

The mountains either side of the river were covered in seemingly impenetrable forest, the peaks in the distance still had snow on them, making a beautiful backdrop.

Mark decided to put us with another of his guides on day three – CJ Mussel.

CJ turned out to be every bit as good as Mark, and just as good company. The sun was shining again and before long we were into fish. Steve kicked off the day with a beautiful fish of 150lb which CJ decided we should bring on to the boat and lay in a sling he has specially made for the job.

CJ had the head and I grabbed the tail as we hauled it onto the boat and laid it in the sling, ready for photographs.

CJ and Steve lifted the fish up for the camera, and I took the shot, at which point the fish slapped Steve across the face with its tail causing him to drop it back into the sling.

The sling was a tarpaulin stretched across 50mm dowels, the fish broke the timber into several pieces and although we managed one picture, CJ and Steve were forced to return it to the river before any more damage was done.

It was my turn next and, before long, one of the rods tried to jump out of the rest, causing me no end of problems trying to free it as the fish was a big one.

After 30 minutes of mayhem and with the help of a butt pad, I managed to subdue the fish, bringing it to shore about 100 yards below where we hooked it.

This was the one we had been waiting for, 7ft 9ins long and 240lb, it laid in the shallows and allowed CJ to slip the hook.

As CJ cradled the fish, I climbed into the water. Exhausted after the fight and barefooted, I climbed down into the river where I almost fainted as the sharp rocks dug into my feet.

We eventually got the pictures with me and the fish, happy but exhausted after the fight. We finished the day with five fish, the smallest around 50lb and the biggest 240lb, a great day.

We saw the occasional bank angler and Native Indian setting their nets, but for the most part we were alone in the wild.

We landed eight fish, with several more than six foot and 150lb, losing another five to snags or bad luck. These fish jumped like tarpon and fought like yellowfin tuna. There cannot be any other fresh water fish in the world like the sturgeon.

We had a fantastic trip and are already talking about returning next year.

We finished off our adventure on Thursday morning with five hours of chinook fishing from the bank, known as "bar fishing" locally. We used a static-fished lure, which spins in the current, attracting the chinook, one of the few salmon that actually feed on their way up river.

We hooked three salmon but lost all of them in the fast water, but never mind there is always next year!

We booked our holiday with Angling Direct, visit their website – www.anglingdirectholidays.com – if you are interested in this or other trips.