



## Going on an Alaskan Fishing Charter?

After speaking with many clients over the years, I have found that many people who book trips on charter boats in Alaska really don't have a good idea of what to expect and how to gear up.

Even though most companies work hard to inform prospective customers, in the summertime most booking agencies and charter businesses are **extremely** busy. Inevitably, there are some people who book a trip (perhaps at the last minute), without really having a good idea of exactly what they're getting into.

If nothing else, these pages are a last ditch effort to prevent another fisherman from showing up in shorts and sandals!

### **Clothing:**

I once heard a group of tourists ask a booking agent, *"Do the fishing boats go out when it's raining?"* If you know anything about Whittier, Alaska, you'll understand why we all shared a small laugh. More than once I have gone from sunglasses and a T-shirt to full raingear in the space of a few minutes.

Alaska weather can change extremely **fast**. The best tactic is to be prepared. Obviously, there probably won't be room to bring a full suitcase, but try to arm yourself for anything! A couple of layers topped with good raingear is rather hard to beat. If you're from a warm place (like Florida or Texas), or if you're fishing early or late in the season (May or late August), I would also suggest bringing along a wool stocking cap. *Yes*, you just might be able to get away with that T-shirt, but you also want to be comfortable under **any** circumstances!

As for footwear, there is no replacement for a good pair of extra-tuffs, but in a pinch just about any ankle high rubber boots will do. Each year, I take many, *many* people in sneakers fishing...they always wind up wet, slimy, and full of blood!

### **The Ride Out and the Fishing Grounds:**

**Also titled...Are we there yet?** This is the inevitable question I receive right after noticing a passenger has glanced at his watch for the third time. Every boat is different, but in general if you're going on a halibut trip out of Whittier, Valdez, or Seward, the chances are good that you're going to travel for a while to get to the fishing grounds. For our charters, I typically travel for two hours at 30 knots to reach the grounds. I wish I didn't have to travel so far (the fuel bills are a nightmare), but that's simply the way it is. In order for me to consistently find good numbers of healthy-sized fish, we need to go where they are.

One of the nice things about Prince William Sound is that it's fairly protected. In fact, I spend most of my time fishing in **really** calm water. It does get rough occasionally though, and this is something you might want to consider. This is especially a possibility if you hope to fish in the open Gulf of Alaska. Generally, in the Gulf you can always expect some groundswell... this constant surge is usually what gives people that queasy feeling. If you do have a tendency to get seasick, start your treatment (Dramamine, etc.) the night before your trip.

### **Whole Boat Charters:**

One of the worst common situations I face onboard is having mixed groups of people with **very** different objectives. *"Mom, Dad, and Daughter"* are on the boat for their first fishing trip. They simply hope to have a good time with one another and maybe catch a fish or two. Meanwhile, passengers *"Frank, Bob, and Eddie"* are on their twentieth trip and want to travel halfway to Hawaii to slay the big ones. There certainly are times when these different parties can be happy together. (Usually, it's when we stake out structure in a calm area that's loaded with really large fish!) Other times, however, things aren't so perfect, especially when you introduce a variable such as strong wind. As your Captain, I'm now faced with the choice of either not putting *"Frank, Bob, and Eddie"* on the best possible spot, or giving *"Mom, Dad, and Daughter"* a little more of a nautical adventure than they bargained for!

The way to go, unless you're fairly durable and easy going, is to book the "whole boat." The trip can be much more enjoyable when we can customize a trip for your entire group.

### **The Fishing:**

Another good reason to book a boat as a group is that halibut fishing isn't always easy. There are times when the best fishing around necessitates using heavy weights in strong current. Cranking up three or four pounds of lead from 200 feet down isn't everyone's idea of a good time. This isn't the norm, but there are times when extra work is the price to pay for that

trophy fish. (Just a side note: The typical range you can expect is a 20 oz. to 40 oz. weight from 100 feet to 350 feet down.)

Contrary to what a lot of advertising would lead you to believe, fish don't always jump into the boat either. Yes, make no mistake, Alaska has some **amazing** fishing. There are times when big fish come up two or three at a time and our limit gets caught by noon. Normally, however, a little time and work is required for nice fish. Patience is the key. On many halibut trips we spend more of our time waiting than catching. Things change fast though, and it's not uncommon to catch nothing by noon and have a limit by 3:00 PM. Nothing is more aggravating than a fisherman who gives up one hour because they believe "*there are no fish here.*"

**Persistence pays off.** Try to find captains that don't sleep well if they're not catching decent fish and give them some faith!

### **Should I Keep That Halibut?**

Everyone wants to go home with **two** halibut.

This is another dilemma that seems to be getting more tricky as time goes on! The worst scenario for me is to drop down on a spot early in the day and have everyone hook into 15 to 25lb fish. Early in the day, these fish aren't too appealing. Fishing is fishing however, and I've seen people throw back small fish all morning and wish they could *buy* them back in the afternoon! I've also seen people keep those smaller fish and then watch enviously as their friends catch much bigger fish later. My advice: I would probably keep the chunkiest of the smaller fish and then hope for the best. There are alternatives, too. If you don't mind keeping fish that are less than grand, you might be able to devote some more time to chasing lingcod, rockfish, and/or salmon.

There are really nice fish out there. That said, realistically, there's also a lot more competition these days! Since the opening of the Anton Anderson Tunnel, the recreational fleet has doubled and I have been seeing more commercial long-line boats trolling the areas we typically fish. The days of throwing back anything under fifty pounds are gone, at least for now.

### **What Do I Do Now?**

You had a nice day and now you have a hundred pounds of fillets to bring home. This is a great situation, but you might want to consider the expense if you're planning on shipping that fish back to the Lower 48. Most ports have businesses nearby that will vacuum pack, freeze, and

ship.... but it *isn't* cheap. However, it's a real shame not to vacuum pack fish that won't be eaten fresh. I recommend that passengers bring a couple of coolers with them to hold iced fish for the trip back home. A plastic bag in the trunk of a rental car isn't going to work, ***trust me***.

Take only what you will eat and can reasonably afford to deal with!

Fishing is my livelihood...

I don't enjoy watching someone keep a limit of sea bass or sharks and then tell me at the dock that they don't eat them.

### **Final Thoughts**

Make no mistake, the halibut fishing in south central Alaska can be nothing short of awesome. But, before you head out and reserve a space, **define your goals**. If you absolutely need to bring home two fish over 175 lbs. to justify the trip, you're probably better off heading to the nearest grocery store. However, if you want to get away, see some amazing sites, spend the day with good people, and have the opportunity to catch some amazing creatures, by all means....join us!

**Remember:** All boats and captains are different. Don't rely on luck...please do some research before you pick a business.