

Fish Tales

story by Jeff Arthur
photography by
DHS Communications.

Visitors come from
around the world
to fish in Northern
Saskatchewan. And for
many, it's the guide who
makes the experience.



The man from Kansas City has heard all of Joe Martin's stories. For that matter, Joe's heard all of his stories, too. Yet every summer when the float plane turns its nose toward Lake Athabasca, the man's fond wish is to spend a few days in Joe's company.

Joe is a fishing guide at Athabasca Fishing Lodges. He and the Kansas City guest have had good times together, like the time they pulled in a 64-pound Northern Pike. That's the largest Joe's caught in his 50 years on the lake. But it's not always about the fishing; they trade stories and learn about life from each other.

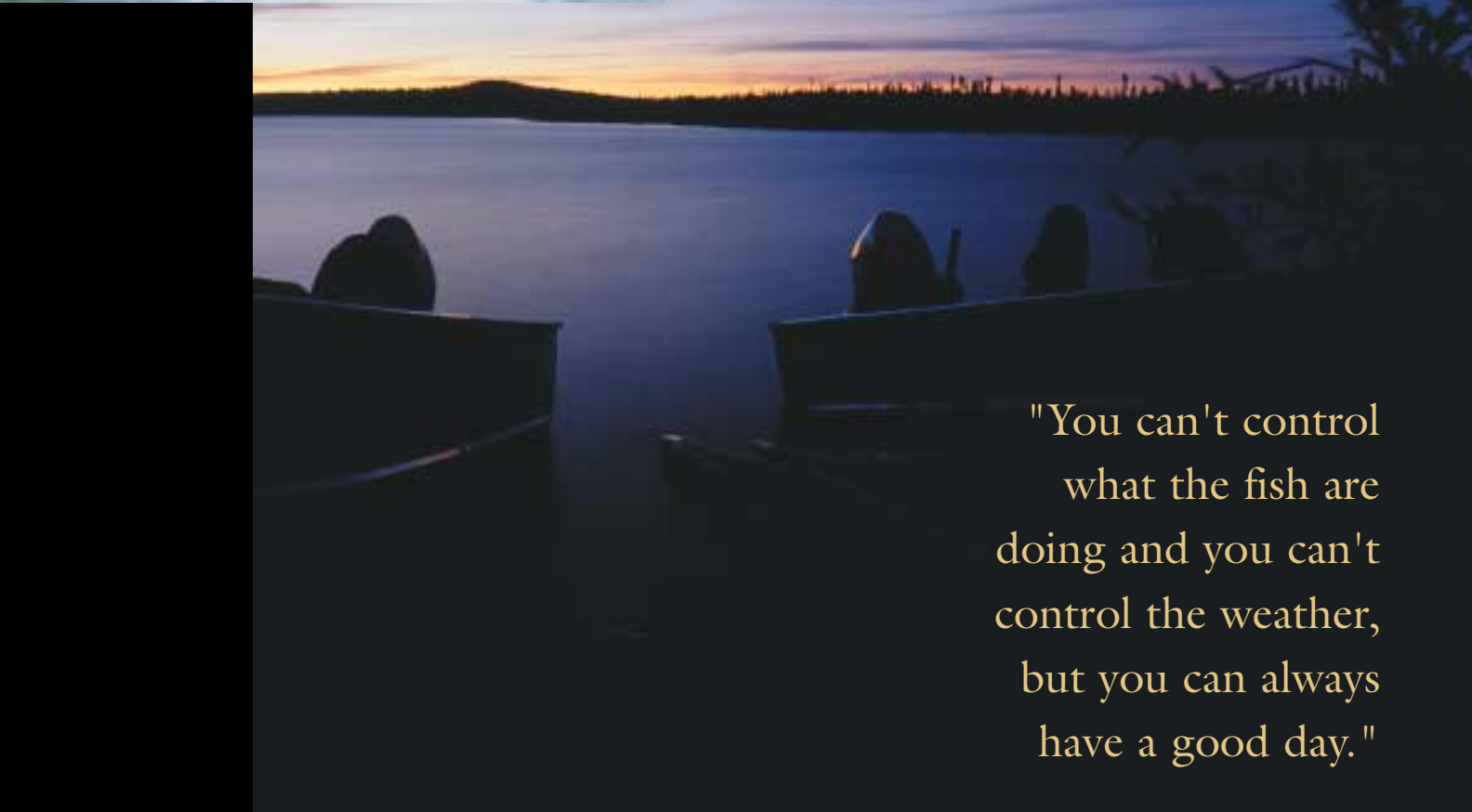
"Every time he comes, he asks for me. He likes me." Joe pauses, revising his observation, "We're good friends. We have a lot of fun together."



The life of a fishing guide isn't for everyone. It's 90-100 straight days on the boat, a three-month stretch from the beginning of June to the end of August. You spend each day preparing the boat and equipment, teaching people how to fish, entertaining guests and cooking. And you're expected to know where the fish are all the time.

"You get out on the lake in the summertime, you get a lot of fresh air, eat fresh fish," Joe counters. "Fishing is my life and I like guiding - it's a good job."

Veteran Scott Lake Lodge guide Ken Johnson agrees. He starts to get excited about the beginning of May when it's time for him to put seven years of guiding experience and a lifetime of fishing to good use. "I've been fishing for as long as I can remember and as a guide you need that extensive fishing knowledge. One thing about guiding, though; I thought I knew a lot about fishing until I started guiding, then I realized just how little I knew."



"You can't control what the fish are doing and you can't control the weather, but you can always have a good day."



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A guide must know how to do a lot of little things right, says Laurie River Lodge co-owner Brent Fleck, but they aren't much good if they can't catch fish. "First and foremost, they have to have knowledge of the local species of fish. There's an awful lot of people who know how to fish, but the trick is to parlay that into the ability to teach other people how to fish. A guide's job is to take the secrets they know and give them to their guests."

There's no substitute for experience in guiding. When you have guests spending \$2,000-\$4,000 for a week-long fishing trip, Fleck says, you need guys who know where to find the fish.

Phil Wiebe, guide at Minor Bay Lodge and Outposts, believes you almost have to think like a fish. Every species has seasonal movements. You need experience on a specific body of water to find the little weed beds they're feeding in at various times of year. Even with global positioning systems and fish finders, the guide has to have a plan of attack.

"You can't control what the fish are doing and you can't control the weather, but you can always have a good day," Phil says. "I've been on that lake since '95 and there hasn't been a day when we haven't been able to do some fishing."

On tough days, the skills of the exceptional guides shine through. They have the interpersonal skills to read their guests and have the right attitude in the boat. One of Fleck's most important jobs as a lodge operator is matching guide to guest.

"It takes a special kind of personality to start over every four or five days. You have to totally re-learn the guest," Fleck says. "As a guide, you have to know how to pace the guest. Some guests will come in and they just want to rip some lips for as long as they're here, but you also have to see when someone's had enough and needs to find a quiet stream somewhere."

Cleanliness and appearance can be a factor for new guests, particularly women. But the most important tool in a guide's kit is open communication. "If there's anything you don't like, tell your guide," Joe Martin urges. "I've had some good arguments out on the boat, but we always talk it out. The only way you're going to learn about each

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other is if you start talking."

Most clientele at northern lodges are not from the fishing crowd, and even though it can get "a little scary with all the lures flying around," Wiebe thinks it's more fun teaching the newbies. "They're exhilarated to be out there. You get the whole range of emotions when you bring in a big fish. A lot of them are in shock - one guy brought in a 50-incher and didn't say a word for about three hours; another guy couldn't stop talking.

"Then there's the guys who lose a big fish. Some of them scream, cry, get angry, get depressed. You've kind of got to put yourself in the guest's shoes and try to pick them up."

Most agree it's important for a guide to be responsive. "It can be a real downer when they [guides] seem like they don't care about a huge catch,"

Wiebe says. "For me, I'm ecstatic to see that they're having a good time. You have to remember they don't have the big Pike in very many places in the world. They come up here and catch a 30-inch fish and to them it is a big deal. They're freaking out. That makes my day."

But for many guests, the highlight of a day in the boat is the shore lunch. Gone are the days when guides threw a fresh fish fillet into a pan of sizzling lard. Now they take a box full of spices, vegetables, pasta, chicken, even bottles of wine for their guests. The shore lunch is an occasion, a time to get to know each other.

"They're friendly people," Joe Martin says of his guests. "We cook for them and treat them good and they treat us good. You know they'll be back next year." 🐾

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