

"I'm afraid that this wine can no longer be certified organic."

After two hours of our trampling, all that remains of the mashed fruit is a slimy pool of husks and stalks; the juice has filtered through a hole into a second tub, where it's ready to be decanted. It will mature in barrels for a year, then be sold in the cooperative store.

Despite my nail polish, our juice tests at an ideal 13 percent potential alcohol. The *mousto*, or first pressing, is cloudy and sweet. Helping herself to some of the juice, Marika shows us how to make *moustalevria*, a jelly, by mixing in flour, walnuts, sugar, cinnamon, and lemon geranium—although by this stage most of us frankly are too tired to listen.

That night I drink in my last Cretan sunset with Vámos's mayor of 19 years, 72-year-old Yannis Hatzidakis. "When I was a lad, agricultural activities were hard work. But with today's subsidies, farmers spend more time in the café. Vámos S.A. is helping preserve skills that otherwise may disappear." The venture has also bolstered a sense of community, since farmers and craftspeople profit as much as landlords and shopkeepers. "Yes, the old people here still feel like it's their village," Hatzidakis notes. And so do the tourists, I think to myself, who are always made to feel at home in Vámos.

London-based writer **RACHEL HOWARD** is working on perfecting her *kalitsounia*.

TRAVELWISE ■ **Best For:** Inquisitive, easygoing, and reasonably active adults with an interest in culture and nature. ■ **Basics:** VAMOS SA, Vámos, Apokoronas, Chaniá, Crete; tel. from U.S. 011-30-825-23250, fax 011-30-825-23100; e-mail vamosa@otenet.gr; www.south.travel-greece.com/crete/xania/vamos (the web address is as of press time; a new website is in development). The village is in Crete's northwest quadrant, between Chaniá and Réthymnon. These "village experiences" last one to three weeks; the author's five-day experience cost around \$460, which included lodging and all activities but excluded meals and airfare.

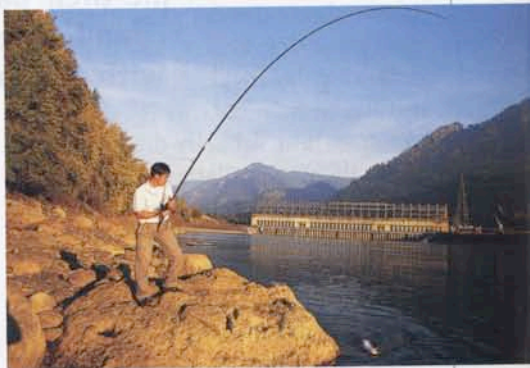
FISHING

Sturgeon Ahoy!

Angling for these ancient fish has become big sport in the sturgeon-rich Columbia River Gorge.

BY ROBERT McMICHAEL

Under a bright morning sky in the Columbia River Gorge below Bonneville Dam, I watched my brother Geoff the fish biologist fillet a 20-inch-long shad, thread a braided nylon leader around it as if he were tying up a pork roast, and attach a big hook to



A sturgeon gets hooked at Bonneville Dam.

the line. He then dropped this elaborate bait into the jade green Columbia River from his boat, and we waited. For about five minutes.

A tug on the line, and a sturgeon, which had sucked the shad off the river bottom then pointed its barbeled nose skyward and propelled itself through some 30 feet of water, blasted its huge body vertically out of the river and landed on its side with the splash of a Ford Fiesta dropped from an airplane. A nine-footer weighing about 400 pounds, it pulled our boat downstream nearly a mile before it finally surrendered.

Fishing for enormous sturgeons in the Columbia Gorge has become one of the fastest-growing adventures in the Pacific Northwest, thanks to a burgeoning population of these fish. The setting is unbeatable—towering basalt formations plunging steeply into the river make this one of the most exotic landscapes in

North America—and going after these mammoth fish, which anyone with a fishing license can do, is exhilarating.

I've driven approximately 650 miles from the San Francisco area for the thrill of fishing for these relics, which emerged around 250 million years ago and remain biologically unchanged: Protected by coarse skin and five rows of cartilaginous armored plates called scutes, sturgeons look prehistoric. Like salmon, the other big game fish here, and the shad we used for bait, sturgeons are anadromous: Born in freshwater, they usually migrate to the ocean to live but return to their natal rivers to spawn; most sturgeons in the Columbia River, however, never leave. With a documented life span of more than a hundred years, many sturgeons spawning in the gorge today were born before Bonneville Dam was completed, in 1937.

I know I'm almost at the appointed rendezvous spot with Geoff when I cross the Columbia River on the Bridge of the Gods and enter Washington State. To my left, downstream, I see Bonneville Dam and its humongous orange-and-white steel towers. To my right is a vista so natural and undisturbed that it's easy to imagine explorer Meriwether Lewis piloting his pioneering flotilla toward the Pacific Ocean on a bitter fall day in 1805. When Geoff arrives, I follow him to our campsite in beautiful little Beacon Rock State Park, named by Lewis and Clark for the gigantic volcanic plug—shaped like the tip of a bullet and made up of geometrically fluted basalt columns—that juts up from the river shore.

The next morning, as the rising sun works to lift the mist from the water, we anchor just below Beacon Rock in the best white-sturgeon water in the gorge. Of the two major species of sturgeons found in North America, green and white, anglers seek the white for its size and taste. The meat is exquisite. In the Columbia River sportfishers routinely catch and release "oversize" sturgeons, which can measure up to 12 feet long and weigh over 700 pounds. Local regulations

allow fishers to keep ten sturgeons between 42 and 60 inches long—fish that are too young to breed—per year.

Geoff promptly catches the first monster, but it isn't till around noon that I hook my first, which takes so much line out so quickly that Geoff hastily instructs me to tighten the drag on the reel in order to create more resistance. I must have tightened it too much because a moment later the line snaps and the fish is gone. We think we'll never see it again, until we spot it jump farther downstream, the bait flapping just outside its mouth. By dusk we have lost three more big fish, so we decide to call it a day.

Back on the river early the following morning, within minutes of dropping my bait I watch my rod twitch, then abruptly double over. We wait to catch sight of a high-jumping sturgeon, but minutes pass with no jump. I worry that this one has shaken the hook loose; upon cranking in some line, though, I feel the monster's presence.

At the ten-minute mark it still hasn't

River Lodgings

Camping offers the most direct experience of the Columbia River; Beacon Rock State Park has 29 tent sites. Two hotel lodgings that are worth a visit are:

■ **Columbia Gorge Hotel** (800-345-1921; www.columbiagorgehotel.com)

The gorge's best known historic lodging, this genteel country inn (40 guest rooms) perches right above the river.

■ **McMenamins Edgefield manor** (800-669-8610; www.mcmenamins.com/Edge/index.html) This village-like complex is my choice for a unique and just-plain-fun place to stay. Located at the gorge's western edge, in Troutdale, Oregon, the manor was converted from a poor farm built in 1911. Today it features its own distillery, winery, brew pub, movie theater, restaurants, gardens, and a tiny golf course. — R.M.

shown itself, although two six-footers jump nearby, probably irritated by the commotion. After another 26 bicep-burning minutes, feeling I'm about to get my first glimpse of the thing, the line snaps like a tiny hair trying to tow an elephant. The rod instantly jerks straight, quiet and empty. Because the fish never jumped, Geoff guessed it to be wiser and older—maybe 12 feet long and weighing 700 or 800 pounds—than the others who wasted energy clearing the water.

That afternoon we watch a friend of Geoff's, Fred, hook a nine-footer, which

After 26 bicep-burning minutes, the line snaps like a tiny hair trying to tow an elephant.

this time does the spectacular leap and splash the species is known for. Fred pumps and reels furiously, his face turning beet red and enlarging considerably. Sweat beads at his temples, which look ready to explode.

After 20 minutes of this, he finally landed the fish. As he reeled it in toward the boat, the sturgeon lolled on its back without even a wiggle—a dramatic departure from the ferocious fight it had put up. We took pictures, then removed the barbless hook from the sturgeon's mouth and watched it recover, gliding silently back to the river bottom. We looked at one another, catching our breath, shaking our heads, and thinking wonderingly about the next time.

TRAVEL WISE ■ **Best For:** Adults in good shape with some fishing experience. ■ **Basics:** Sturgeon season on the Columbia runs year-round (with occasional closings), but the big sturgeons are sought May-August. You'll need a fishing license and sturgeon tag, available at local tackle shops. Fishing outfitters include Sturgeon Frank (800-432-0631), Ken's Fishing Adventures (503-663-1274), and Dan Ponciano Guide Service (360-573-7211). A useful website for Columbia River sturgeon is www.worldstar.com/~dlarson/sturgeon/SturgeonoftheColumbia.htm.