



# INTO THE RAINCOAST

MOTHERSHIP TOURING THE WILDS OF B.C.'S RUGGED CENTRAL COAST

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The silence is eerie.

We've stopped paddling completely. Watching and waiting. And watching, and waiting. Paddles down, binoculars up.

An overhanging branch shakes high on a towering yellow cedar flanking us on shore. A raptor launches over our sea kayaks and heads up the estuary, the flapping of its wings piercing the silence.





FINALLY. Yet no one in our group of nine paddlers says a thing. They're following the lead of Luke Hyatt and Miray Campbell, our intently reserved guides. We spent most of the previous day plying the Inside Passage in the Campbell's 68-foot, diesel-powered "mothership," then lowered our fleet of kayaks into this desolate freshwater artery penetrating the dense vertical wilderness. We're deep within the fjords of central B.C.'s 'raincoast,' a 250-mile strip of wilderness that stretches from the north end of Vancouver Island to the Alaskan border and encompasses the 8 million-acre Great Bear Rainforest. Biologists call it the largest intact expanse of temperate coniferous rainforest left on the planet. It's a lot to take it in.

The moment feels way too solemn though. "What do they taste like?" I ask Luke, as the bald eagle gains altitude. He doesn't answer.

"It's okay if you've eaten one," I continue, "it doesn't matter that you're

**THE MOTHERSHIP ALLOWS FULL MOBILITY, SHUTTLING DIRECTLY TO THE PRIME PADDLING LOCALES TO DEPLOY THE KAYAKS.**

Canadian and I'm an American, you can—"

"You should be quiet," Luke says.

Tough crowd. But ever the savvy guide and naturalist keen to his surroundings, Luke begins paddling again, cracks a smile and adds, "we'll have a better chance of seeing critters."

I give in to the group's overwhelming silent-observer mode, but it's the critters that are busy doing the seeing. With every few strokes up the river mouth, another juvenile bald eagle, still waiting for its white cap, takes

flight from a perch in the old-growth cedars and Sitka spruce. They're casing the river, scanning beneath the surface. And peering into the moving freshwater, I see that we're also not the only ones moving upstream and attracting the birds' attention. Like staring at an early '90s *Magic Eye* picture, I adjust my focus and the water comes alive. Hundreds of pink salmon dart furiously among the larger chums. The shallow river is a moving carpet of fish. I reach out to see if I can snatch one. Not even close. They're on an urgent, hard-wired mission that began two years ago and will end a few miles upstream when they spawn and die.

We proceed cautiously. The fall salmon run is on, and that means one thing: bears.

More specifically, the spirit bear, the one near-mythical wonder on every wish list of visitors to this forgotten corner of the West Coast. This black bear subspecies, aka *Ursus americanus kermodei*, carries a recessive gene that

turns one in 10 bears a creepy, creamy white shade. I'm determined to spot one of these rare ghosts, preferably from a safe distance. Although in an ecosystem where orcas, sea lions, eagles and bears compete for screen time captured by the rotating cast of international filmmakers and eco-tourists, these odd omnivores aren't even the top of, or most elusive creature on, the local food chain.

The fact that wild coastal wolves prowl the Great Bear Rainforest is testimony to the sheer inaccessibility that has long protected it. The raincoast's remote and rugged topography has left the Inside Passage as the only link to civilization, and the only reasonable thoroughfare to access this labyrinth of nearly 10,000 miles of coastline twisted into an endless series of islets, islands, outcroppings, narrows, waterfalls and fjords.

Simply put, you can't drive here. There are no paved access roads—you'll need a boat.

WHEN OUR PLANE TOUCHED DOWN in Bella Bella, it was clear that we weren't in Vancouver anymore. A deer was bounding alongside the lone tarmac. There is one road here, running from the airstrip to the government wharf, where the Columbia III is waiting with seven kayaks stacked neatly over the covered back deck.

This is a different kind of kayak touring than I'm used to. There is no paring of gear, no stuffing, no skimping. The Campbell family's pristinely restored vessel carries us along the Inside Passage at a steady 8 knots, as we get acquainted with the group of nine Americans and the Mothership Adventures crew of four. Ross Campbell is the skipper, though he jokes he's "just a taxi driver" and that his daughter, Miray, 26, and her husband, Luke, 27, are the real brains behind the operation. They tailor the trips and guide the paddlers, while Ross' younger daughter, Farlyn, 20, is on cooking detail. The Columbia's original 1956 cast-iron, straight-eight Gardner diesel is humming along as we head up the



Fresh salal berries garnish the driftwood lunch spread, top, during a circumnavigation of Stryker Island, while Ross reloads the kayaks back at the mothership.

Mathieson Channel to Kynoch Inlet and the estuary at end of the Fiordland Provincial Recreation Area where the wilds start to unroll. An hour hasn't passed yet and we've seen a bald eagle and a humpback whale.

It's not just this view and the onboard library of taxonomical guides that have turned the Campbells into such ardent naturalists. These Canuck Cousteaus live the true life aquatic. These were kids raised on Sonora Island (in the Discovery Islands between Vancouver Island and the B.C. mainland), who fell asleep to the sound of the monstrous tidal rapid in the Okisollo Channel. They didn't have homecoming dances and SATs as teen-

age concerns; they had 60-ton Limited Master exams for their skipper papers. In the winter, the Columbia III will tie up at the Campbell homestead on Sonora Island. Ross explains how he sprung at the chance in 2005 to purchase the Columbia III as a way to live on the water and stay connected with his children.

"The kids said 'you know boats, we know kayaks,'" Ross tells us. "So I went to the bank to start pursuing the steps to make it happen, and said I'd never stop until I got a 'no.'"

The ship once belonged to the Columbia Coast Mission, begun in 1905 by Anglican bishops to provide medical and minister's services to isolated coastal villages. Eventually, seaplanes and shrinking communities meant there was no need for a hospital boat that served as a de facto community center/chapel/dentist's office.

The ship itself was meticulously restored by a previous owner—down to the brass stove and tongue-in-groove jointed mahogany walls and wide windows in the main saloon—and in the five years they've owned it, the Campbells have continued the Columbia's legacy of connecting people in this rugged landscape. Ross can spin endless stories of people randomly approaching at the sight of the Columbia, carrying vintage photos and childhood memories of having their teeth pulled on board, or watching Laurel and Hardy on a projector in the old chapel.

Though Ross has worked through several true-grit careers—commercial fishing, tugboat skippering, piloting a logging helicopter—his slender build and rapid, articulate speech doesn't scream backwoods heli-logger. The only time he slows down and stops cracking witticisms is when he looks at a black and white photo of a young girl in the wheelhouse and contemplates "those funny threads of time."

THE NEXT MORNING I CATCH A glimpse of how the Columbia III is still connecting people from different times and backgrounds. I climb to the front deck where Ross has us pointed





straight into a granite wall. A nameless high-volume cascade plunges into the sea and the mist is a welcome, wake-up splash to the face. Miray points out a sign of 10,000 years of human habitation with a distinct pictograph high on the wall: red figures paddling a canoe.

It's about time for our own band to take to the water. Ross and Miray have their cable pulley system dialed in, lowering the fleet of Necky and Seaward kayaks quickly to the water, where Luke helps load paddlers from the back deck into cockpits. This system allows full mobility, shuttling directly to the prime paddling locales to deploy the kayaks. We start off with a tour up Fiordland, the glassy surface only stirred by the curtains of water dripping from the thin topsoil/steep bedrock mix anchored by ancient stands of dense alder, spruce and cedar. A mass of snow and ice that's recently tumbled from thousands of feet up, down to the rocky beach we break at, shows us just how the glaciers once carved the towering ramparts and horizontal bands ribbing the sheer walls around us. A stinking, freshly mangled salmon carcass is the only sign of jawed and clawed visitors.

No matter. We get our bear fill

later on, when we head up Mussel Inlet in pouring rain. The tops of the waterfalls 1,000 feet up disappear in the dense cloud ceiling. We see a 5-year-old momma grizzly, plying worn trails through the scrub formed by successive generations of grizzlies following exactly in each other's steps. The prospect of paddling against current, in the rain, into a mother grizzly's kitchen isn't so appealing, so we leave the kayaks to pile in a motorized Zodiac for a closer look. You could hypothetically paddle these inlets unsupported, but the only flat real estate to pitch shelter and start a fire to stave off the wet weather happens to be the best place for the bears to feed.

Luke, Miray and Farlyn are tuned in, communicating with silent hand signals, and spot a small white shape off the right bank. Excitement ripples through the group as we head silently to shore with one thought: *Show yourself, spirit bear!* Farlyn hops out with her Swiss Miss-girl locks swinging out of a Gore-Tex hood, and deflates the expectation when she returns with a large piece of Styrofoam.

The following day we dock in the small First Nations town of Klemtu, where Doug Neasloss delivers even grimmer bear sighting news. Nea-

**ONE BAD MOTHER(SHIP):** Luke checks the boats, at left, during the haul from the central B.C. coast's remote fjords (bottom right) to its rocky islets (top right), stopping along the way at the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais restored ceremonial Big House in the First Nations community of Klemtu.

loss, 27, works for Klemtu's economic development commission and as operations manager for Spirit Bear Adventures. His hefty keychain looks like it could unlock every door in his community of just over 400 Kitasoo/Xai'xais people. Neasloss had just returned from escorting a Japanese film crew up Mussel Inlet, land traditionally claimed by the Kitasoo/Xai'xais. He's been exploring and noting wildlife activity there for more than a decade.

"The worst I've seen in a few years," Neasloss says as he pulls a cigarette from a waterproof case, and an escort convoy of frenzied, collarless dogs herds us through town. He stops to pick up pieces of trash and greet some elderly women, noting how he only saw six bears the day before; Twenty-five or more is standard for this time of year. He chalks up the drop to an alarmingly small pink salmon run the previous year (he estimates about 3 percent of peak capacity) that, whether due to increased ocean temperatures or commercial fishing, caused a stark drop in yearling cubs.

"Once you start losing salmon, you start losing bears," Neasloss says

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of the lifeblood of the coast. “Then you start losing other things.”

Neasloss’ work hinges on the health of his land’s four-legged assets. And as if they weren’t already under enough pressure from trophy hunting, fish farming and clear-cut logging, Ian McAllister points out to me later that “Big Energy” looms as an even larger threat. And those fleeting estuaries we explored in our kayaks, those low-elevation “repositories of biodiversity” will be the first places affected by plans for hydroelectric development and a 400,000 barrel-per-day pipeline to export petroleum from the Alberta oil sands to the B.C. port of Kitimat, introducing oil tankers (and the risk of a spill) to the Inside Passage.

“Canada is turning its back on finishing the job of protecting the Great Bear Rainforest by supporting pipelines and oil tankers,” says McAllister, who’s documented, photographed the area for 20 years, and founded Pacific Wild ([pacificwild.org](http://pacificwild.org)) to educate and work to expand the roughly 30 percent of the Great Bear Rainforest now under some protection in a patchwork of areas. “If we don’t have rigorous protection, if you can trophy hunt for carnivores there and allow oil tankers and pipelines within this fragile and wildlife-rich coastline, then these parks aren’t worth the paper they were written on.”

KLEMTU IS ALSO OUR TRANSITION from the steep fjords to the maze of rocky coastal islands, tide pools and back channels that provide self-supporting sea kayakers a much more do-able touring opportunity with endless camping options. And while I miss setting camp and waking in the soft sand with the rising sun, I think I can handle a hot shower after a damp day and a morning ritual built around Farlyn’s bacon-wrapped egg croquettes, hot coffee, and neoprene socks toasted in the warm engine room.

It’s also easy to forget the main mothership benefit—the amount of ground we’re covering. Suddenly, about 50 miles from Mussel Inlet, we begin a circumnavigation of Stryker Island in our first bit of sunshine, sporting rash guards and even shorts in the last week of August: “This is as warm as it gets—tropical for here,” Luke says.

The paddling intensity picks up as well. We round a point into the first rolling open ocean swell we’ve encountered all trip. The line of boats, even the tandems, gets broken and lost in the valleys and crests. We’ve been in the boats three days straight now and the group blisters are beginning to show. But everyone goes silent, their paddle strokes taking on a bit of urgency as we weave through the “boomers” where swell explodes on rocky shallows. We find a few sharp rock-garden constrictions for quick thrill rides. Before we find a back channel to duck into, Luke pulls out a rod and begins casting amid seamless strokes through the swell. It’s typical of a young couple that reveals quiet self-reliance in peculiar admissions: Luke is teaching himself how to paraglide; Miray was a certified guide at 17; they spent four months in Ireland studying music with a national arts grant—Miray on the flute, Luke on the banjo.

Back in the channel with the wind at our backs, the spraydecks come off and the paddle cadence slows again as we pick up on the flora and fauna, inevitably spawning identification debates. Fortunately, Luke is

a mobile Simon & Schuster guide to every conceivable point of interest to settle each question: *Oh look, soft shell crabs here in the kelp, that’s a loon there, oh that bird, yeah sure, that’s a juvenile pigeon guillemot.*

Luke and Miray are certainly enjoying the paddling. Most of their time is spent prepping trips, working on maintaining the Columbia III or tours that run farther south in the Broughton Archipelago, closer to a home island they’ve seen become almost entirely logged.

And at our final lunch beach, in the McMullin Island archipelago, the group turns giddy and we break into beach games: buoy tossing contests, making didgeridoos out of bull kelp. Miray gives us a lesson in towrope double-Dutch. When I catch my breath, the ‘out there’ awareness sinks in. There’s the immediate shared excitement of reaching a private corner of true coastal wilderness together. Then the view out to the raft of otters ducking into the undulating kelp stalks, the canvas of lone spruce trees topping leopard-spotted xenolith rock outcroppings backed by coastal range whitecaps in the distance, the shrieking cormorants and the laughing call of the loons, the stormy view to sea and the rasp rawness of exposed coast without other boats in the water or a single jet stream across the sky.

You stop focusing on the need to experience one quirky, specific thing—some weird bear, let’s say—and a broader picture entirely sneaks right up in front of you.