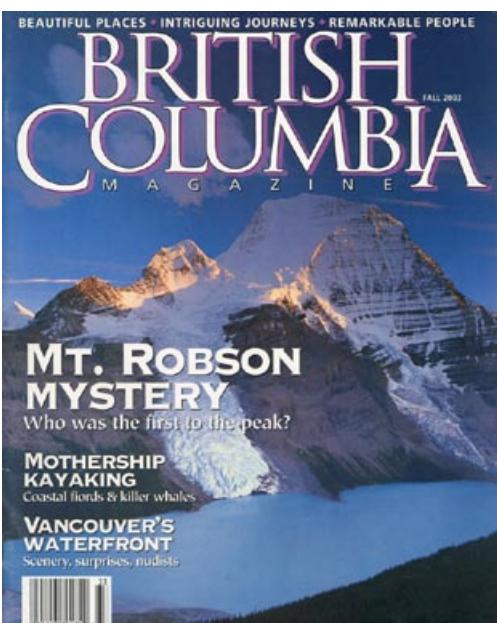


Mothership Kayaking



by JENNIFER GAZE
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Paddlers explore spectacular coastal fiords of the Inside Passage by day, cozying up by night in the protective cradle of the Columbia.

Listen!" shushes our guide, Sharon Comeau, as she holds up one hand. Though we can barely make out the yellow tips of our kayaks in the thick July fog that blankets the channel. We listen, spell-bound, to the eerie and unmistakable 'wooosh' of whales surfacing as they pass, heard but unseen, before us. Our pod of adventurers, three Americans and six Canadians, has signed on to the mothership Columbia III for a six-day kayaking tour of Johnstone Strait and the Broughton Archipelago. An eclectic group - an architect, office manager, lawyer, judge, retired househusband, art dealer, travel writer, teacher, and town mayor - we have come with a common purpose: to experience the raw beauty of the backwaters of British Columbia's Inside Passage that carves its way between Vancouver Island and the ragged edge of the mainland. Some 200 million years of tectonic plate movement, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes have created the powerful, mountainous landscape of B.C.'s coastline. Dramatic fiords, gouged out by glaciers moving from Interior ice fields, finger their way into the rugged western coast, creating a mecca for marine mammals and kayakers alike.

And what better way to see the sights than from the comfort of a mothership. By day we will paddle the island-strewn fiords and inlets in sturdy double kayaks, happy in the knowledge that, by night, we return to hot showers, gourmet meals, and dry beds aboard the handsome 21-metre Columbia. Boat's master Bill McKechnie has lovingly transformed the historic vessel into an all-weather cruiser that carries kayakers to otherwise hard-to-reach parts of the coast. There is no gear to pack, no tent to set up, and routes are planned so paddlers travel with the tides and current, never retracing the same path. We board the Columbia late Sunday afternoon from Port McNeill, a sleepy harbour town on Vancouver Island's northeast coast. Sharon Comeau, our head guide and McKechnie's partner, introduces us to naturalist-guide Kyla Graham and skipper Brian Sylvester. As we stow our gear in our cabins, the engines come to life and we head to our first night's docking in Alert Bay on nearby Cormorant Island.



Kayakers relax on Columbia III, anchored at Burly Bay

While the crew bustles about the ship, passengers wander down the road into Alert Bay. Some 1,100 Kwakiuti Indians and non-natives live here amid a curiously appealing mix of tumbledown cottages, rotting wharves (the docks are undergoing extensive restoration), a wonderful gingerbread church, a row of gaily painted pink, yellow, and blue houses, shops, a hotel, and two restaurants.

Our ragtag group makes its way along the waterfront to the old cemetery, where new and old totems grace the spaces between the graves. There is something serenely natural about the fallen, decaying cedar totems returning to the earth, a process much like, well, life and death itself.

We amble back to the sanctuary of the Columbia's cozy salon, and end the night chatting amiably over steaming mugs of tea and hot chocolate before heading to our bunks for the night.

After motoring through Weynton Passage and across Blackfish Sound, we anchor in Dong Chong Bay on the backside of Hanger Island. Today, we hope to drop in on Springer, a spunky orphaned killer

whale that rescuers brought up from Seattle to release into her genetic pod here in Johnstone Strait. Her portable net pen is anchored nearby.

Sylvester and Graham winch our kayaks down from the Columbia's roof while we don life jackets. Comeau teams us up, coddling each pair into double kayaks and securing the spray skirts. She adjusts our foot peddles, positions cushions behind our backs, distributes water bottles and paddles, and gently pushes us into the sea.

Our first short excursion around the bay gives us a feel for the kayaks, while our ever-watchful guides gauge our paddling experience (or lack thereof). We glide around the whale pen searching for a telltale fin - but we know in our hearts that Springer is gone. We're disappointed to miss a whale sighting, but happy to imagine her reunited with her kin.

Whales are in no short supply the following day. We paddle to the Cracroft Islands and scramble up a moss-carpeted rainforest trail to Eagle Eye, a whale observation point overlooking Robson Bight. Summer researchers here observe killer whales that come to rub their bellies on gravel beaches in Robson Bight (Michael Bigg) Ecological Reserve. Peering through binoculars, we spy whales heading down the strait: three, four, and then six orcas. Two juvenile males veer toward shore, foraging about 18 metres below our perch.



Kayakers from the mothership Columbia III explore intertidal life in Burly Bay off Mackenzie Sound, north of the Broughton Archipelago.

Another pod comes into view and soon there are 30 or 40 of these magnificent marine mammals breaching, fishing, and playing. It is a riveting sight. I have spent many summers kayaking the West Coast without even a sighting. After lunch on shore, we paddle back to the Columbia and, incredibly, encounter 20 more whales. We can hardly believe our luck.

A former single-kayak purist, I find the teamwork of piloting a double surprisingly pleasant and I look forward to each day's outing with different partners. We paddle close to sheer walls in the channels between islands, marvelling at the colourful sea life clinging to the rock. Peering into the crystal waters, we spot starfish the size of ball catcher's mitts, sun stars in hues from bright orange to maroon, dogwhelk, trumpet sponges, urchins, sea cucumbers, lions mane jellyfish, mussels, plumose anemone, and huge gardens of bull kelp where spider crabs hide among the bronze fronds. Rounding a channel bend, we sometimes spot bald eagles or startle flocks of Bonaparte gulls, Pacific loons, Brandt's cormorants, auklets, herons, kingfishers, guillemots, or oyster-catchers (which, we learn, actually feed on clams).

We catch a ride in the mild, mid-channel currents, lulled by the melodic plip-plop of our paddle blades. Orange and purple starfish clinging to craggy walls above the tide line look like strings of decorations set out to celebrate our arrival. Skirts of cedar and fir trailing to the water's edge appear precisely trimmed, as if by a master gardener.

After a day's paddling, we often congregate in the wheelhouse as Sylvester navigates the Columbia along the watery highways to our next destination. More often than not, thick layers of grey stretch across the West Coast canvas, but we are snug as bugs in our mothership. I wince at the sight of rain-soaked campsites where kayakers cocoon in damp tents or huddle under tarps sipping hot drinks to keep warm: been there, done that.

Each day brings new delights and closer camaraderie. We watch a porpoise and Pacific white-sided dolphin dance in the wake off the Columbia's bow. We trap crabs in an isolated bay and feast on our succulent catch, and devour chocolate s'mores on a secluded beach under a star-studded sky.

Comeau introduces us to the local history of each area we explore, providing insight into what coastal life was like for both First Nations people and non-native pioneers who settled the isolated communities. Our stop at Village Island on the

fourth morning is rich with culture. As we paddle into the bay of the abandoned Mi'mkwamlis Village, a colourful raft of visiting kayaks lines the white midden beach, created by centuries of discarded clam and oyster shells. Above the beach, a few crooked houses with gaping doors and windows occupy an overgrown meadow. Decomposing totems lie hidden in the tall, sweet grasses. Salal, blackberry, and salmonberry choke the many deer paths and fresh bear scat is evident along the trails.

Campbell River native Tom Sewid greets us. He is dressed in his traditional greeting regalia: a fine wooden headdress, blue-and-red button blanket splendidly decorated with his tribal totems, beaded shirt, and apron. We sit on logs before the remains of the longhouse - two large entrance poles topped by a lintel - as Sewid shares stories of the village's Kwakwaka'wakw people.

He explains the importance of the potlatch ceremony, a native celebration rich in tradition, dance, and song. It brought great honour to the host who bestowed gifts on his guests, thereby disseminating wealth among the people; sometimes, unbestowed gifts were destroyed - beautifully carved copper shields tossed into the sea - to demonstrate the giver's largess. Misunderstood by observers, the potlatch was outlawed by the Canadian government in 1884.

Hearing of the final forbidden potlatch on Village island in 1921, when ceremonial items were confiscated and several participants jailed, I feel uncomfortable in my white skin. After more than 50 years and lengthy negotiations with the government, the Kwakwaka'wakw finally brought their artifacts home, under the condition they would be displayed in museums built by the native people.

We saw these impressive masks and coppers at the U'Mista Cultural Centre on our first stop in Alert Bay. ("U'Mista" refers to those returned home after being held captive by another tribe.) I remember the quiet dignity in the raftered space that houses these treasures; there are no protective glass cases here. "They have been imprisoned long enough," said former curator Gloria Webster, "now they need to be free."

After an afternoon paddle past the old burial islands surrounding Village Island, we clamber aboard the Columbia and head across Knight Inlet, through Spring, Retreat, Arrow, and Spiller passages into the Broughton Archipelago. We negotiate our way through tight passages where the reflections of salal and evergreens bleed onto the water, making the entire landscape a wash of multi-hued greens. As we head ever north and east, we see fewer boats and even fewer people.



Bill McKechnie leads a hike through a rainforest on West Cracroft Island

On our final morning, the sun breaks through the clouds as we power back to Port McNeill. We collect on the Columbia's bow, soaking in the day's warmth and beauty. Rounding a bend, we catch sight of a log in the channel. As we draw closer, the log sprouts ears, transforming into a large black bear swimming from island to island. We watch as he pulls himself from the water, performs a vigorous shake, and slowly disappears into the salal.

Our luck with wildlife sightings on this trip is remarkable. As we leave Queen Charlotte Sound, the radio crackles with report of a humpback whale in the area. Cutting the engines off Malcolm Island, we slow and spot not the heart-shaped spout of a humpback but the telltale fins of orcas heading straight for us: three huge males, eight females, and young. The pod is led by the boat of noted orca researcher Graeme Ellis - his presence suggests that the orphaned Springer may have joined the pod.

The whales pass quickly by our starboard bow and head north up the channel. It is a splendid farewell as we prepare to enter Port McNeill harbour - each of us returning home today with the recollection of magical, unspoiled places still within our reach.