

Weekend *Travel*

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BEAR NECESSITIES

So what is Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's Canadian hideaway *really* like to visit? *Yvonne Gordon* goes off-grid on Vancouver Island

The grizzly bear cub rears up on his hind legs to full height and lets out a high-pitched squeal that echoes down the river and through the forest. He's with his mother, who has been fishing for salmon in the fast-flowing river.

We're watching the bears from a nearby viewing tower when we spot another mama grizzly crossing the river with her two cubs. She's eyeing up a huge salmon the first mother has landed. They start to fight. As they wrestle, the sound of their deep roars fills the air.

The cub, too, rears up in threat at the interloper, but at just about a year old and only a couple of feet tall, he's not that threatening — so the gesture takes on a slightly comical tone. However, when this grizzly yearling grows to full size, weighing up to 270kg, there won't be anything amusing when he stands up to an enemy.

Seeing these scenes unfold right in front of us, in a wild stretch of British Columbia, Canada, far exceeds what I'd expected on a bear-watching tour. It's just one of many incredible experiences during my few days of exploring on Canada's west coast, mainly on Vancouver Island, which is an easy hop from Vancouver itself.

I see the bears with a small group on a day trip with Homalco Wildlife and Cultural Tours on the traditional land of the Homalco First Nation (*homalcotours.com*). Although the tour set out on Campbell River on Vancouver Island, we spend a couple of hours crossing the Salish Sea by boat and motoring up the Bute Inlet on the BC mainland to this remote area.

There are no towns or roads, just thousands of trees, forest trails, rivers, salmon — and grizzlies.

Leaving the boat, we drive along the Huckleberry Trail to the river where the bears are fishing, and spend the next few hours watching grizzlies from the open trail and wooden towers dotted along the river bank. It's the classic wild Canada scene — tall evergreen trees stretching up both sides of a valley and merging into black mountains; with a fast-flowing jade-coloured river rushing over logs and beaver dams.

"Grizzly bears spend 16 hours a day searching for food. They need 30,000 calories," says our First Nations guide Antony Paul, who explains how the bears are stocking up for hibernation.

My heart races as we watch them walk slowly along the



PICTURE: SERGIO VILLALBA



river bank, seemingly cool and relaxed — but Antony tells us that, although they move slowly to conserve energy, these huge predators can run at speeds of 50kph.

Back on Vancouver Island, we take the road for the west coast, passing old-growth cedar and fir forest, signs for deer and bear and more vans topped with surf boards and canoes than I can count.

The island hit the headlines recently, with news that Prince Harry and Meghan Markle stayed for several weeks this winter, before returning to the UK to announce that they would be stepping back from their royal roles.

It's no surprise that they chose this place for a peaceful escape. You can walk or run on miles of beach or rugged Pacific Coast trails, cosy up in luxury coastal lodges or even get around in style by floatplane for an almost-private jet experience without the big budget.

On Vancouver Island, I swap the roars of grizzly bears for the thundery backdrop of Pacific Ocean waves at the cosy Wickaninnish Inn (see factbox) on the Tofino Peninsula.

My room has driftwood furniture and a bathtub overlooking the rocky shore and, with rainforest all around, it's a peaceful coastal escape. The inn overlooks the beach and at sunrise; I make out the silhouettes of dawn surfers on the waves.

Tofino is a Canadian surf town — the main street is lined with surf shops, galleries and gift shops twinkling with the obligatory crystals. There are plenty of camper vans with board racks; even the pharmacy is selling surf boards. Perhaps local doctors issue surf prescriptions — 'take two large waves daily before breakfast, followed by two more after evening meal...'

Like the bears, people here move at a relaxed pace — perhaps conserving energy for surfing. Queue for a small-batch locally-roasted organic coffee, and you'll probably overhear conversations about the surf and whether the waves are "cooking it" today.

On the dock, tiny white float planes sit tied up alongside boats. From here, we take to a traditional dugout

+ Take three: Pacific trips



Wild things

See wildlife like grizzly bears, salmon, eagles and whales close up in Bute Inlet and learn more about the Homalco First Nation territory with Homalco Wildlife & Cultural Tours (*homalcotours.com*).



Cool canoes

Take a cultural canoe tour in a traditional wooden canoe alongside a native guide from Tofino at T'ashii Paddle School (*tofinopaddle.com*).



Super views

For views of the open Pacific Ocean as well as Barkley Sound and the Broken Group Islands, spend a few hours walking the 8.4km coast-hugging Wild Pacific Trail loop (*wildpacifictrail.com*) in Ucluelet.

cedar canoe for a trip to Meares Island with T'ashii Paddle School (*tofinopaddle.com*). As we walk through the ancient forest, our native guide Thomas Zarrelli tells us all about his people, Nuu-chah-nulth, which means 'people of the mountains and the sea'. He also talks us through their traditional ways of using trees for everything from basket and rope-making to canoe-making, practices which all go back thousands of years.

Further south in Ucluelet, the natural elements are celebrated at Pluvio restaurant and rooms (*pluvio.ca*) — the name itself is short for Pluviophile, someone who loves rain, which is a good thing to love, as apparently the rain that comes in with the Pacific 'weather bombs' is measured in feet and not inches around here.

Pluvio's kitchen is closely connected to the outdoors. Chef (and owner) Warren Barr tells us they were growing herbs in the kitchen garden but had to move them up to the roof to stop local deer eating them.

He takes us to his favourite foraging spot at Shipwreck Cove where we look for salal berries and huckleberries along hedgerows and climb over driftwood logs which



What to pack

Weather can vary along the Pacific coast, so bring layers including a waterproof outer layer, plus the usual outdoor gear — walking shoes, sun lotion and water bottle. Bring a camera or phone and spare batteries/powerpack if photographing the grizzly bears.



Natural wonders:

A grizzly wades through the water (above); the picturesque harbour at Tofino



PICTURE: TINAION BC/TED HESSER

GET THERE

KLM flies between Dublin and Vancouver via Amsterdam Schiphol (*kfm.com*). Vancouver Island can be reached by ferry (*bcferries.com*, from €12 one way and €40 for vehicles, book in advance) or floatplane. Yvonne was a guest of Tourism Vancouver Island and KLM. For more information, see *vancouverisland.travel*.

WHERE TO STAY

The Wickaninnish Inn (*wickinn.com*) is a boutique luxury hotel overlooking the Pacific Ocean and surrounded by rainforest. Rustic, elegant rooms have sea views and gas fires and you can order a picnic for outings. In Vancouver city, for traditional old-world glamour in a handy downtown location, check into the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver (*fairmont.com*).

just washed up in a storm — and could just as easily wash out in the next. We're looking for tasty seaweed — Warren has tried them all and knows what is tender when cooked (bladderwrack), what works in a salad (kelp) and what is just gross.

Turkish towel tastes as bad as it sounds: "You can chew on it for six hours and nothing happens," he smiles.

Back at Pluvio, Warren recommends tonight's roasted pork belly dish with an apple cider and garum glaze, caramelized turnip, sweet potato, puffed quinoa and bitter greens. Why? "It's like a crispy, sour, umami punch in the face," he enthuses.

It's hard not to feel a strong connection with nature everywhere on Vancouver Island, which is more wild and more relaxed than I expected. It's just under half the size of Ireland but the population is only around 800,000 - a lot of that centred in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia. It's not difficult to get to either — I flew to Vancouver with KLM, with an easy transfer in Amsterdam Schiphol, and then a two-hour ferry hop with car from Vancouver to Nanaimo.

You can organise plenty of nature experiences here, but the best ones are not always planned. On the way back from the grizzly viewing, a neighbouring boat radios us to say they've seen orcas, so the captain of our boat diverts our course.

We soon spot the orcas, two at first, then another and another. It's a pod of five, and we are mesmerised as we see them breach, then blow puffs of mist and dive down. Their tails go high into the air as they disappear below the surface and we head back to shore, exhilarated and ready for the next adventure.