

# Travel

YVONNE GORDON



## Ancient forests and grizzly bears

As Canada reopens its borders to visitors, *Yvonne Gordon* writes about experiencing nature and wilderness on Vancouver Island

Meares Island by canoe; below, a grizzly bear

# 26

PARTY TIME  
MAURITIUS IN  
FULL SWING  
ONCE AGAIN

**W**e pointed the canoe towards the island, a stretch of land covered with a thick forest of tall, dark green trees.

As we approached the water beneath us went from sky blue to a rich green, as the trees blocked the sun and their shadows were reflected in the water. Steering the canoe around a fallen tree trunk, we pulled up at a small wooden jetty. There were birds cawing in the trees above. We had arrived on Meares Island, off Vancouver Island in British Columbia on the west coast of Canada.

I was exploring this wild landscape on a small group trip, pre-Covid. Five of us spent an hour paddling from the town of Tofino in a traditional Nuucanut dugout canoe, which was 6.7m long and carved from a single red cedar log. We were on a First Nations canoe tour (€60pp;

tashiipaddle.com) and Thomas Zarelli, our Nuu-chah-nulth guide from T'ashii Paddle School, was taking us on a paddling tour to the island, a Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation tribal park. He told us that Nuu-chah-nulth means peoples of the mountains and the sea, and how canoes such as these were used for hunting and fishing a hundred years ago – going to sea for long whaling expeditions that took months to plan.

We set off along the boardwalk and admired the huge western red cedar trees, some lit up by shafts of sunlight coming down through gaps in the canopy. On this Big Tree Trail the massive cedar trees can date back more than 1,000 years. As we walked along Thomas told us about the culture and traditions of the indigenous people of the area, and how in the past every part of a tree

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**Travel east to west and the buildings fall away, replaced by old-growth cedar forest and remote coastal communities**

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was used for a different purpose. Strips of bark were used to weave things such as watertight baskets or rope for hunting and fishing and the trees were always sustainably harvested to promote new growth. Thomas pointed out berries that can be eaten, and told us that the trees can also be home to bears, wolves and cougars, and how humans are just one tiny part of the whole ecosystem here.

We stopped at a cedar tree that was maybe 1,000 years old. The bark was twisted at the bottom, the roots emerging intertwined like huge piles of rope. The ancient tree was hollow inside so you could step in. Thomas told us the legend of an 8ft female ogre who lived in the mountains. The story goes that she would come to the village looking for children that were out of sight of their parents, put them in a basket lined with the spikes of a sea urchin and then put the child inside a tree hollow and save for later . . .

The forest also has Sitka spruces with scaly barks and western hemlocks. At the end of the trail is a huge cedar tree called the Hanging Garden as it has so many plant species, mosses and fungi growing out of it. It's thought to be between 1,700 and 2,000 years old. We spent a beautiful few hours immersed in nature. On our paddle back to Tofino we saw a bald eagle and a heron flying along the shoreline and a seal in the water, a reminder how wild this coast is.

Like the rest of the Canadian province of British Columbia, Vancouver Island has lots of wilderness, ancient forests and rocky Pacific coast. The island is just a seaplane or ferry ride across the Strait of Georgia from Vancouver city, but it's a world away from the shiny glass and steel towers. This is land where you can see bears, whales and eagles or get lost in wilderness. Travel east to west and buildings fall away, replaced by old-growth cedar forest and remote coastal communities.

In the west coast town of Tofino, where we started our canoe trip, there was a small jetty full of tiny seaplanes. I watched a plane land and pull up to the jetty. A guy got straight out and slammed the door, looping a rope around a cleat before walking off, as casually as if he'd just parked a car in a supermarket car park. Tofino has a relaxed surf-town vibe, a slow pace of life, where locals in shorts and flip-flops queue for small-batch roast coffees and discuss today's surf.

Our overnight base was the Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino (doubles from €332; wickinn.com), a rustic inn where



**Clockwise from left: viewing grizzlies; a boardwalk on Meares Island; a traditional dugout canoe; the driftwood bar at Wickaninnish Inn; and a seaplane landing at Tofino**



huge picture windows overlook rocky shores and coves full of driftwood, and the noisy rollers of the Pacific provide a thundering soundtrack as they hit the shore in perfect surfing sets. The name Wickaninnish is from a Tla-o-qui-aht chief and means “he who no one sits in front of in the canoe”. The inn is surrounded by coastal rainforest and lots of things, from the bar to clothing hangars, are made from driftwood.

The area is also a Unesco biosphere reserve. At the nearby beach, where you might spot a sunrise or sunset surfer, the sands are also popular with bears, wolves and cougars. Out to sea there are seals, sea lions and orcas; the hotel is popular for storm-watching too and each room has huge armchairs, a fireplace, books, binoculars and a balcony from where you can listen to the waves rolling in.

We ate at Pluvio, a small restaurant in Ucluelet where creative tasting menus use seasonal ingredients – all local and many foraged or grown on site – in exciting combinations. Outside there are beds full of herbs, vegetables and edible flowers and the restaurant chefs forage along the nearby seashore, while inside everything is made from scratch, right down to homemade vinegar and miso.

A starter might be poached local sidestripe shrimp with nootka rose and saké dressing, salted plums, shaved radish and horseradish; with mains of slow-cooked pork shoulder chop with miso glaze, Okanagan stone fruit, crispy potato pavé, mushrooms and summer truffle (tasting menus from €52, doubles from €129; pluvio.ca).

The food and few days of relaxation set us up for an exciting end to the trip – a tour to see grizzly bears. It was a two-hour boat trip from Vancouver Island across the Salish Sea to the Bute Inlet with Homalco Tours on the land of the Homalco First Nation (from €242 for day-long tours; homalcotours.com). On the way our guides talked to us about the benefits that sharing their First Nations culture to visitors has brought to their community.

The Bute Inlet is remote – there are no roads, so you can only come by boat, helicopter or float plane. After we docked we got on a small bus to go into the forest to find the bears. The guides briefed us to stay close to them and not to make noise. We were in grizzly country. I could feel my pulse race.

As we approached the river we saw our first two grizzly bears. We got out of the bus slowly and approached the river bank. The huge bears were close, but busy looking for salmon so, thankfully, ignored us. They ambled along slowly, a mass of brown fur carried on giant paws. They were stocking up for winter hibernation, spending 16 hours a day searching for food.

We drove along the trail to a wooden viewing tower, where we could watch more grizzlies from a platform. A male bear jumped off a log into the water after a huge fish. Then a mother bear wandered nearby with her two cubs. She seemed very relaxed – rooting a little for fish, then turning to walk the other way. She wasn't interested in us and we were able to observe without making any impact, just a tiny part of this amazing natural world – and now that Canada has just reopened its borders to visitors again, one that is slowly opening up again to be experienced.

*Fly from Dublin to Vancouver with Air Canada from €570 return; aircanada.com. See vancouverisland.travel*