

ADVENTURE | VANCOUVER ISLAND

killer journey

Kayaking with Canada's killer whales adds a generous dose of adrenalin to wildlife watching.

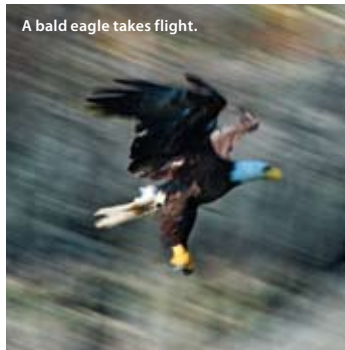
WORDS AND PHOTOS **KERRY LORIMER**







A humpback whale flukes close to kayakers.



A bald eagle takes flight.



Playful Pacific white-sided dolphins put on a show.

//LEFT AND BOT TOM RIGHT: JOHN WAIBEL, SPIRIT OF THE WEST ADVENTURES

When I signed up for kayaking with killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) off Vancouver Island, Canada, I imagined 2 m dorsal fins towering above my kayak, slicing through steely waters to submerge mere metres from my boat and sleek, massive heads – split by matching rows of pointy gnashers – eyeballing me as they spy-hopped alongside me.

Or something like that. I even contemplated carrying a small cloth for wiping the fog of whale breath from my sunnies. To be fair, if anything, at our pre-trip briefing, Breanne Quesnel, co-owner and guide with Spirit of the West Adventures, undersold the chances of copping a film of bodily fluid from a black and white behemoth.

INTO THE ORCA'S REALM

Our group of 12 kayakers was gathered in the saloon of the Heriot Bay Inn on Quadra Island – a quirky pub owned by a co-operative of ageing hippies, most of whom can usually be found at the bar.

Prettily situated on a quiet bay – about mid-way up the east coast of Vancouver Island – the pub acts as the meeting point for Spirit of the West's four-day sea kayaking adventures.

Breanne pulled out a chart and traced our route through a maze of shattered islets and twisted passages, north to Johnstone Strait, and pinpointed our base camp on West Cracroft Island. Spirit of the West's camp is directly opposite the Robson Bight (Michael Bigg) Ecological Reserve, famous as the only place in the world where killer whales come to rub their bellies in the shallows of the pebbly beaches. Many theories have been put forward to explain this unique behaviour, but the prevailing belief is that they do it simply because it feels good.

"We tell people we kayak in the realm of the orcas: we don't promise you'll see them or get up close," said Bre. "But there are around 220 resident orcas hanging out in these waters – the highest concentration in the world."

"And, no," she added, "there has never been a reported incident of a wild orca attacking a human... At least not a reported incident..."

As our briefing unravelled, we adjourned to the bar. Tattooed youngsters, accompanied by silver-ponytailed stalwarts on bass and drums, were singing classic covers in flat tones. Vic Nacci waved me over and bought me a beer. One of the Heriot Bay Inn partners,

Vic operates day trips aboard the *Tenzing*, a retired Navy shore vessel.

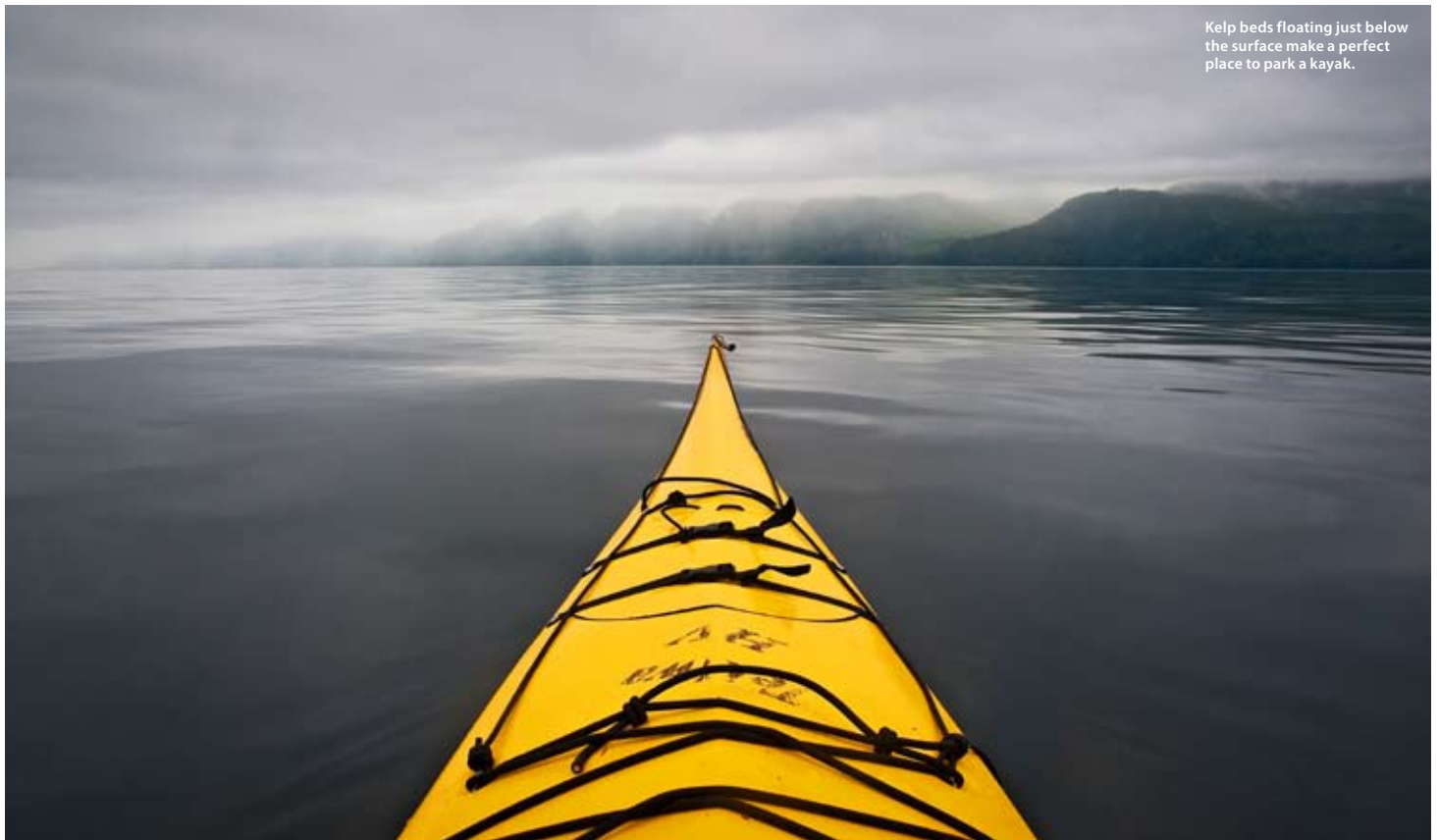
Earlier in the day, he'd taken me for a cruise around the sheltered islets of Heriot Bay. As he'd tossed a couple of pilchards to a bald eagle, which swooped from its tree-top aerie to scoop up the bait fish with yellow talons, Vic had explained how the tides flowing in from either end of Vancouver Island meet at Quadra Island, so that they ebb to both north and south. The immense movement of water through the crazed maze of waterways between Vancouver Island and the mainland creates 5 m tides – some of the biggest on the planet – which make for hazardous conditions for any kind of boat, not least a kayak.

Formidable 15 knot tidal currents cause an upwelling of nutrients that feeds a food chain featuring lush oyster crops, five species of salmon, seal colonies and an abundance of birds of prey. The orcas, he explained, are opportunists, hanging out where the menu flows past.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

An early start the next day saw us loading gear into two large water taxis and nosing into a stiff north-westerly and a short tidal chop. Seymour Narrows gets mentioned

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Kelp beds floating just below the surface make a perfect place to park a kayak.

in the same breath as Cape Horn when it comes to treacherous waters. We hit the Narrows' tidal rapids – among the fastest in the world – and our 10 m, steel-hulled catamaran was tossed violently across the face of a broad whirlpool. We bounced and thudded off the short chop; 4 m waves caused by wind against tide are not uncommon in the area.

Then, as we turned the corner into Johnstone Strait, we plunged into gloomy, low-hanging cloud and the wind and temperature dropped; from now on, our weather would be dominated by weather systems from the Arctic.

As we drew level with the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve we could see orcas breaching and blowing in the distance. The 1248 ha marine reserve was created as a sanctuary to protect the belly-rubbing resident orcas and is off-limits to all boats, including kayaks.

Spirit of the West's base camp is located on the opposite side of Johnstone Strait, on a rocky bluff just above the sea. Half a dozen large tents on wooden platforms each have a view over the Strait. There is a communal eating area, complete with library. Creature comforts include a nature loo, an on-demand hot water shower built from driftwood and

set in a fairytale pine forest, and – the piece de resistance – a cedar-lined, driftwood-fired, saltwater hot tub, set like a wet-edge pool on the top of the bluff, perfect for whale watching in warmth.

Breanne and her co-guides, Alison and Jane, settled us in and briefed us on camp etiquette. We were told to store anything edible or smelly – even toothpaste – in the lockable, steel bear bin, rather than in our tents, in order to outsmart mice (known to chew through Gore-tex), chipmunks and bears. Breanne said they'd never had a bear in camp, though a cougar did once stroll through.

"If you happen to see a cougar, don't turn your back. If it attacks, fight back," she instructed. "Bears are different. If you see a bear, stand aside and let him pass. Be polite at all times. But if he gets aggressive, fight back. At least that's if he's a black bear. Grizzlies are different: in that case, roll up in a ball."

By the time we hit the beach, the sea was glittering in sunshine and the katabatic wind that had been howling for the past 10 days had – miraculously – dropped completely.

I pushed off from the pebble beach in a fizz of cool water. Ribbons of golden sunlight rippled down through deep,

green, clear ocean. Amber tresses of kelp floated suspended, ghostly like the hair of a drowned woman, and diaphanous jellyfish drifted among the kelp fronds. Pine forests, as neat as pencils in a case, reached down to pebble beaches, with snow-peaked mountains rising behind.

Breanne had heard on the VHF radio that whales were heading down the Strait, directly towards us. We rafted our kayaks up among the kelp and waited. In the distance, a puff of mist showed against black mountain. Then the whole pod – about 10 – came into view. Breanne explained it was a 'resting line'. The whales were actually sleeping, utilising their ability to switch off half their brain.

Through binoculars, males with 2 m dorsal fins like kitchen-carving knives gracefully, rhythmically, dived and surfaced, making what must have been about 10 knots. Females, with their smaller, pointier dorsals, swam in perfect synchronicity, the group keeping tightly together. A few pesky youngsters clearly weren't in the mood for an afternoon nap, doing full body-length leaps out of the water and cavorting around their mothers.

This was the A34 pod, one of the 16 northern resident groups, now

recognised as a distinct ecotype and distinguished from the southern residents (located around the San Juan Islands at the southern end of Vancouver Island) and transients (which have no fixed abode and roam more broadly). Each group is genetically and geographically isolated. While transients feed on marine mammals such as seals, residents dine exclusively on fish.

THRILL SEEKING

Okay, here's my confession. I've spent time in Antarctica and so have been rather spoilt for whale encounters, including once spending an hour or so watching a huge male orca spy-hopping a couple of metres from me as I stood on sea ice. I was mesmerised, gazing into the eye of the planet's most efficient marine predator as it repeatedly thrust its snout out of the water to the level of its pectoral fins. (It only occurred to me later that, while I was thinking, 'Wow,' he might have been thinking, 'Snack')

It was a prickly skin adrenaline rush: I was instantly addicted. And like any addict, I was looking for another hit. Getting up close and personal with a killer while in a kayak seemed like it might just deliver the goods.



Guide Ali and the team prepare lunch on a drift log.



The kayaking group in the hot tub at Spirit camp – a perfect whale watching spot.



Parked in kelp, patiently waiting for the orcas.

Of course, I knew my secret desires were both unreasonable and irrational. I know that proximity isn't the point: if you're close enough to cause an animal to alter its behaviour, then you're too close. Apart from the fact the consequences for your subject can be dire – including death – the idea is to watch the animal's natural behaviour in its natural environment.

But, what wildlife watcher – no matter how conservation minded – hasn't wished for, and revelled in, that magic moment when a wild animal approaches, out of curiosity and without fear, crossing the legislated limits, joining the dots of communication between man and beast?

I had no intention of breaking the rules pertaining to minimum approach distances. But if the whales breached, as they are known to do – and in so doing breached those rules... well, you can't blame them if they can't read, can you?

But on this afternoon, they were intent on napping, not rule-breaking and I couldn't deny my disappointment as they passed us on the far side of the Strait, never passing closer than 500 m to us.

SEARCHING FOR KILLERS

Day two dawned damp and heavily overcast. A pod of Dall's dolphins cruised past us as we left the beach. We followed

the coast, exploring the weird between-the-tides world of the rocky shore. We saw feather duster worms and whelks; red, spiky anemones and dozens of gelatinous, electric-purple starfish the size of dinner plates. But no whales.

We rounded a headland and came upon a black bear taking advantage of low tide to forage among the boulders in the intertidal zone. He raised his head momentarily and sniffed in our direction. For 10 minutes, we drifted in silence just off the beach, watching the bear – we'd never have been able to safely approach so close on land. Either not smelling us or not caring, he went back to flipping rocks bigger than my head, one-handed.

We'd barely cleared the beach after lunch on our homeward leg when a massive tail fluke broke the surface and arced in slow motion, trailing glittering droplets, and submerged without a splash. It was a humpback – and only a couple of hundred metres away. The whale blew again – three, four times – then dived. We parked up on a bed of floating kelp, hoping for a repeat performance. The whale obliged, close enough to hear its exhalation. "Ew," I said, as a fug of something sulphurous and fishy engulfed us. "Must be something very dead amongst the kelp." "Nope," said Bre. "That'd be whale breath."

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ANIMAL KINGDOM

A harbour seal (a "curious bald guy," as Jane described him) paid us an early visit the next morning, rolling in the kelp below camp and trying to work us out. We paddled out into a fog that mirrored the water and obscured the horizon so that we seemed to be paddling through a silvery emptiness. The water was so calm, it seemed viscous, like paddling through mercury. Then, as the fog began to lift, the pine forest perfectly reflected in the water and we could see the logging barges, fishing trawlers and pleasure craft that had been sending gentle swells our way.

We spotted the white heads of more than a dozen bald eagles perched in treetops, some of which launched into loping, heavy flight as we passed. We saw dolphins, otters and a Steller sea lion tailed us throughout the morning, looping around us and poking up his large, boxy, be-whiskered head to peer at us with a mix of wariness and curiosity.

We beached the kayaks and lugged them 20 m inland to escape the tide, and set off through the forest. Wisps of fog trailed through the pine branches and left crystal droplets on old man's beard lichens. Though the area has been logged, a few massive western red cedars still stand: eight of us couldn't encircle one with our arms outstretched.

The beautiful view across Johnstone Strait from Spirit of the West.



An hour's hike brought us to a cliff-top lookout, directly opposite the Ecological Reserve. Bizarrely, neither federal nor provincial governments, nor national parks directly manage the reserve. Instead, policing boat traffic and monitoring whale – and whale-watching – behaviour falls to the volunteers of the Cetus Research and Conservation Society.

Robson Bight Warden Program supervisor Marie Fournier explained how the volunteers monitor vessel numbers and contact passing ships by radio, advising them of the perimeters of the Ecological Reserve.

We hadn't seen a single orca all day. Low cloud hung over the water as we headed homeward. Breanne, perhaps reading our thoughts, said, "The whales are hanging out down around Campbell River where the salmon are running. But I've invited them for dinner."

PLAY TIME

I spotted a pod of Pacific white-sided dolphins headed toward us. Before I could retrieve my camera from beneath my kayak's skirt, they were upon us: perhaps 40 animals, each weighing up to 180 kg and 2.5 m in length, travelling at about 20 knots. The only sound as they passed within metres of us was the hiss of speed through water. The ruthless, silent perfection of their hunting proficiency left us all speechless.

After a chill, damp day on the water, the hot tub – with a glass of red – was

the ideal antidote. Just as Bre had promised, we were about to tuck into a Mexican banquet when the orcas turned up, travelling north up the middle of the channel. We watched from the observation deck, listening via hydrophone to their clicks and calls.

Each resident pod has a distinct dialect made up of between seven and 17 calls. Pods with related dialects make up clans. As orcas are attracted to mates with the equivalent of a sexy foreign accent, dialects morph over generations into complex language systems.

On our final morning, we paddled out into a white world of cloud reflected in water and sat, suspended in nothingness, listening and watching. On the far side of the Strait, we could see the spouts of whales. Breanne dipped the hydrophone in the water and we listened to their calls as they belly-rubbed in the shallows. It was easy to imagine the high-pitched squeals emitting from the hydrophone as giggles of delight.

As I sat in silence, I recognised that elusive feeling of connection – that holy grail of wildlife watching. It came as a surprise – we hadn't had any of the close encounters with orcas that I'd anticipated, yet we'd seen whales every day of the trip. Simply being in the realm of the orcas, and the unexpected pleasures of eavesdropping on their conversations and spying on the intimacies of their social life, was just as special.

As I sat in silence, my kayak gently lifting on the swell, I recognised that elusive feeling of connection – that holy grail of wildlife watching.

THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: There are direct flights to Vancouver from the east coast of Australia. Local flights operate between Vancouver and Campbell River, which is a 10 minute ferry ride from Quadra Island. Quadra Island can also be accessed with a combination of ferries and buses, or ferries and self-drive, from Vancouver.

Accommodation: Heriot Bay Inn, Quadra Island. Rooms from CAD\$109 (A\$107.80) per person, twin share. www.heriotbayinn.com

Kayaking: Spirit of the West is Canada's first certified carbon-neutral kayaking tour operator. The company aims to minimise its environmental footprint in all aspects of its business including: sourcing local and organic food; donating 1 per cent of sales to conservation; using earth-friendly cleaning products; porting out all waste, including human; following or bettering wildlife guidelines, and many more initiatives.

Spirit of the West operates four-day Johnstone Strait Ultimate base-camp expeditions back-to-back between June and September. It costs CAD\$1145 (A\$1132.80) per person, twin share, and includes water taxi transfers to and from base camp; kayaks, guides, all meals, tents and sleeping mats. Sleeping bags can be hired.

More info: www.kayakingtours.com

Kerry Lorimer travelled courtesy of the Canadian Tourism Commission and Tourism BC.