

A moody, gold-lit morning greets kayakers exploring the islands of the Great Bear Rainforest.

# IN THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT BEAR

An eight-day sea kayak expedition exploring the islands of British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest take paddlers into a wild, wonderful world.

WORDS AND PHOTOS JUSTIN WALKER



**I** AM IN the moment; a tranquil period of time and space, this is when my sea kayak and I are one with the ocean, moving with the swell and tide as me and a group of fellow paddlers float alongside the edge of a rocky, densely forested island, synonymous with my current location: the World Heritage-listed Great Bear Rainforest, on the north and central coast of British Columbia. At 6.4 million hectares, this region is famous as one of the largest temperate rainforest areas in the world. It is wild, it is remote, and it is incredibly beautiful, especially when experienced at sea-level, over a week of kayak-based island hopping, interspersed with some of the most pristine beach campsites you will ever experience. Yes, it is a world (and more) away...

### In the beginning

Usually, all big adventures start small, but this is not the case with this eight-day journey; a first evening catchup at Shearwater Resort, on Denny Island, a 10-minute ferry ride from Bella Bella, is spent meeting Bev and Jenna (see Guiding Lights, page 49) from Spirit of the West Adventures, as well as everyone in the group introducing ourselves to each other. Impressively, my fellow paddlers are rich in kayaking experience; George, Claudine, and their daughter Gabrielle, Cynthia, Susan, Debbie and Dean, Steph and Dan – and me – all share plenty of paddle time.

Jenna and Bev soon have us all clutching dry-bags for packing our gear in for the next eight days, along with plenty of advice on what to take and what not to. It's always hard on a kayak expedition to know what to bring as, in this case especially, we have to allow for all our food and water (there is little to no freshwater on the islands of the Great Bear Rainforest), as well as the (essential) camp comforts, such as chairs, tarps, cooking gear, etc.

Looking at my three dry bags – and even after years of big paddle trips – it's hard to get my head around the fact I will fit all my clothing and gear (and cameras) into them (see "All the gear and some idea" sidebar). Later that night, after our catchup dinner, I surprise myself with minimal swearing and stress and actually

**Our group of paddlers stay close to the towering cliffs of an island before moving into more open water.**

**First camp at Serpent Island was a spectacular hint of what was to come for the expedition team.**

**Spirit of the West Adventures guide, Bev Marshall, enjoying being in her favourite place, and showcasing it to her fellow paddlers.**

manage to fit all the gear I wish to carry in those three dry-bags. Wonders will never cease...

### A journey to the beginning of beyond

How do you fit eight sea kayaks – six singles and two doubles – all the food, water, cooking and camping gear, plus 12 paddlers and two crew on one boat? Well, you don't, which is why Frank Brown, a senior member of the Heiltsuk Nation from Bella Bella, has two boats for just such a purpose.

Our packing process is incredibly well organised by Frank, Bev and Jenna, with the rest of us following their guidance as we carry, lift, load and tie down all our watercraft and our gear. Frank's boat is, literally, adorned by sea kayaks, with a smaller boat towed behind that is carrying a few more of the group's kayaks. It's an impressive sight, and more so when I stand to consider it's only taken us a couple of hours at most to get every single thing packed and accounted for, before we leave the dock at Bella Bella.

Our plan is to be dropped off by Frank at our first island campsite, and this entails a two-hour journey in the boat, which is excellent as we get to hear from Frank about the deep ties the Heiltsuk Nation has with the Great Bear Rainforest, and its economic and environmental stewardship of this beautiful region. Frank is the founding director of the Heiltsuk Integrated Resource Management Department,

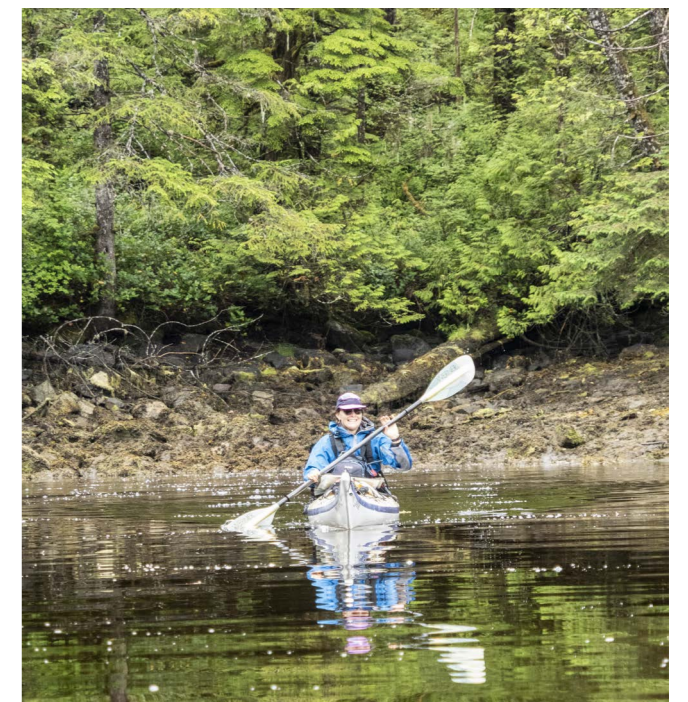


and director of the Land and Marine Stewardship for the Coastal First Nations-Great Bear Initiative. He is also a driver of the resurgence in ocean-going Indigenous canoe journeys.

Yep, they are big titles, but it is a big job – and one that is very close to Frank's heart – looking after this incredible ecosystem via a conservation economy based around fisheries and timber, with strict controls on harvesting; the ecosystem based management (EBM) that utilises Indigenous and non-Indigenous science and knowledge. This sees around 10 per cent of the forest harvested, and fishing is similarly strictly controlled, all with the aim of maintaining the environment and its wildlife (as an example, the estimated 2500 salmon runs that happen each year are vitally important to not only grizzly bears (salmon comprises up to half a grizzly's diet) but also other marine life and vegetation), while benefiting its original inhabitants and their communities. In short, it's impressive – as is our first destination...

### In the belly of the serpent

We reach Serpent Island in the middle of the afternoon and, if this is what we have to look forward to for the next week and a bit, I am already super stoked. Like so many islands in this region, Serpent is rocky, while also being heavily forested, with spruce, western red cedar and hemlock, but in this case, it also has a split running





## WHAT IT TAKES THE GEAR YOU NEED FOR A PADDLING ADVENTURE

The success of a multi-day sea kayak expedition in remote regions hinges on having the right equipment, an experienced team, and ample food and (especially) water. Going on a guided expedition with an experienced company such as Spirit of the West Adventures means you get the benefit of its many years of expertise in planning, preparing and then executing successful trips.

For this eight-day epic, the key inclusions were enough food and the right amount of water. Bev and Jenna said the company has calculated closely how much food is consumed per person on each trip and it worked perfectly – we ended up with ample food and some left over.

Water is even more important: for this trip, the total amount of fresh water, carried in water bladders (a 10L dromedary) was 250 litres. That equated to 25 litres, per day, per person. No, we didn't drink 25 litres each a day, but this also has to allow for cooking of three meals per day, coffee and tea, and hygiene purposes. Again, this proved accurate.

In terms of camping gear, lightweight tents, sleeping bags (and mats) and compact fold-down camp chairs were all standard-issue, with the camp chairs highly appreciated by this writer (and the rest of us, I reckon).

When it comes to apparel, this is nearly always a persona choice as some people prefer warm weather, while others are comfortable in cooler conditions. Having said that, there is a standard list of gear that we needed, including waterproof over-pants, waterproof jacket, warm (down) jacket for evenings, a beanie, merino base-layers (and socks), water shoes and sun protection, in the form of wide-brimmed hat and long-sleeved lightweight shirts. It is actually surprising how little apparel you need on an expedition such as this. The key is a spare, dry, set of clothes for evenings around camp, allowing you to (mostly, inclement weather and no rain-shelter pending) dry, or at least air-out, your paddle apparel. The only thing I would pack next time is a pair of dedicated dry pants for when in the kayak. My rain pants did okay keeping me semi-dry but once water got in the kayak cockpit, I usually ended up with a wet backside (and legs when getting in/out).



Bev, Dean and Deb paddle in to our lunch spot on Goose Island, with more islands, and the rugged Coastal Mountains topped with clouds, in the distance.

right through the middle. The small beach at the entrance to this channel is where we initially unload all our kayaks and gear. To start with, I think there's not enough room for us all, but a short stroll deeper into the channel sees a beautiful large sandy beach on one side, and this is where we'll set up, once we lug all our gear and kayaks around.

I am at first intrigued as to why we are moving all our stuff so far up the beach, until Bev mentions just how high the tides are here – up to 11 metres – which means that, by the time high tide arrives, our sandy walkway through the channel will be deep under water. Coming from the east coast of Australia, where tides vary only minimally, the thought of that much water rising and falling is incredible.

Once our tents – and our camp kitchen – are set up, we venture out for our first paddle. It is fantastic to finally get in the boat and we do a small circumnavigation of the island to get our kayak-legs into action. Already, I cannot stop staring; the islands themselves are amazing, with a sharp cut-off tree line defining the high and low tide marks, nearly like a razor has been run horizontally along the base of them. I also wonder how those trees actually stay rooted to the island; the soil base looks very shallow, but these trees also look very hardy, with roots intertwined between cracks in the rocks for a secure hold on terra firma. We also spot our first (of what will be many) sea otters, with the curious marine mammal popping its head up to check us out.

### Routines rule for optimum fun

Our planned route for the next seven days is primarily northward from Serpent Island so it's an early start the following morning, which also happens to be our first morning of what will become the regular post-camp routine. This can make or break expeditions

but, thankfully, we're all experienced at multi-day paddle journeys and, under the expert guidance of Jenna and Bev, soon have it all down pat. Packing down tents, enjoying a fully cooked breakfast (and awesome coffee), loading dry-bags, carrying kayaks to put-in points near the water (the kayaks are incredibly heavy when fully packed, so are moved close to water before that) filling kayaks with said gear and food (a fun, sometimes challenging game of Tetris each and every time, to fit it all in) and water bladders (each kayak carries two 10L dromedaries, or 'droms' as they are called) are then loaded into the seat area, either between your legs or behind the seat. And then, finally, it is time to paddle. All-up, it's around a two-hour process, and then the fun stuff begins...

### Crossing ahead

We island-hop today, and also tackle our first, of what will be many, open water crossings. These are a different adventure to the inter-island paddling where we are often on the sheltered side of an island, but are a fun change regardless, with Bev and Jenna doing their best 'herding cats' impressions as they keep us paddlers in-between their two kayaks on the open water. Luckily for us, on this day (and most of the following) the wind, tide and swell are working in our favour and the open-water crossings are achieved seamlessly.

Spider Island is our lunch stop before we move toward Tirquet Island and spot our first raft of sea otters, hidden in a large kelp forest, that check us out from a safe distance. Then, in the early afternoon, we tackle some bigger swells as we make our way to the day's final destination of Superstition Point.

If you could imagine the most kayak camp-friendly site for an overnight stay, an image of Superstition Point's beach would pop in your head immediately. Turning around the point's headland, we see a beautiful, wide arc of sand and driftwood, the physical

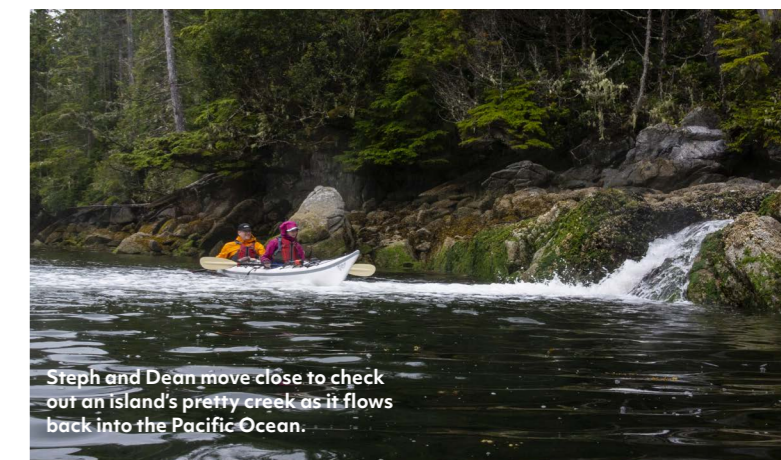
incarnation of a dream campsite. It is simply brilliant, and a welcome sight for us after a big day on the water. The next (fun) part is all of us scrambling around looking for that ideal tent site. This is, interestingly, not without its challenges; checking where the previous night's high-tide mark is (usually signified by a 'line' of seaweed) ensures that you can set your tent up above that, with no worries of being flooded in the night. Scoring the additional bonus of a driftwood 'table' or drying rack for your damp paddle clothes is the other potential bonus of starting your tent-site search as soon as you can!

### It's called a rainforest for a reason

Reading our suggested packing list before the expedition, I noted carefully the mention of the chance of rain – something not unexpected in a rainforest environment, of course, but one I had nearly forgotten about after the first two days of warm, sunny paddling weather. This was (and I knew it) a false sense of smugness that was about to be sharply blunted; Bev and Jenna had mentioned that the forecast for the next few days was for light rain, trending to showers, and this proved exactly the case halfway through the night when the familiar pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof of my tent woke me.

Our plan is to spend just the one night here at Superstition Point, and then tackle what will be our longest day of paddling north to the next viable island campsite. I love an early start, so am up at 4.30am, as requested, only to find that one of our party is slightly ill, which sees me (and everyone else) sent back to bed for more sleep – something I never argue against.

From the sunshine and blue sky of yesterday, this morning's misty weather and near-monochrome tone is a stark contrast, but one I am enjoying as I sit on my camp chair, swapping tall tales with Dean, Claudine and George, sipping coffee. I am a cold-weather fan, so when Bev and Jenna say we're heading out into the mist for a day-paddle to explore nearby islands, I am pumped. If anything, this misty weather is more what the Great Bear Rainforest is all about; it provides a fantastic atmosphere as our group paddles out for our day of exploration. The subtle, muted sound of droplets on my waterproof jacket, and the glassy-grey surface of the water are the ultimate reminders of the wild place in which we are at this moment. Even our voices are quietened, as if to shout would be to shatter this feeling of peace and tranquillity as we drift into the mist.



Steph and Dean move close to check out an island's pretty creek as it flows back into the Pacific Ocean.



Paddling through a narrow inter-island channel on a mist-shrouded day of exploration.

### In the zone

Waterfalls, pristine creeks and the richness of the islands' intertidal zone are all highlights of today. An intertidal zone is where oceans and land meet between high and low tide (when it is exposed/out of the water), and the Great Bear Rainforest islands contains an incredible richness of marine life in this zone. We spend plenty of time slowly cruising, checking out the many colours and sizes of starfish, jellyfish, and sea anemones here, while I still sometimes float gobsmacked by that razor-sharp delineation between the dense forested layer of the island, and the rock face below it, that signifies the high/low tide mark. It is a brilliant day on the water, showcasing all that these islands are renowned for.

We return to a beach that now has a few more kayakers camped on it, along with a large cruiser anchored offshore. Our fellow kayakers are actually paddling wooden kayaks, something I love, and are, when we return, fishing for their dinner. Yep, as I said, 'tranquillity'.

The owner of the large cruiser paddles to shore not long after we arrive back, and brings with him a canine companion, in the form of a small, scruffy terrier. Our conversation reveals he has been visiting this island for many years, having brought his grandchildren to this beach on a number of occasions. He also, kindly, offers us water and/or supplies, but we decline, only because we already have all we need. A few of us, though, do imagine what it'd be like with a couple of sundowners on the rear deck of his boat – and, at this midpoint of our journey, a warm shower...

### The intertidal zone of the islands contains an incredible richness of marine life.



The southern beach on McMullen Island was covered in a huge amount of driftwood.

### The longest day

After two days at Superstition Point, our biggest day is here. With the scarcity of camp-friendly beaches in the southern islands, we are facing a huge 32km paddle today, with McMullen Island's pristine beach as our target.

The 4.45am wake-up call is a jolting start but, again, more great food and coffee provides the fuel we need for this wet and wild day and we're soon on the water. It is a fantastic mix of paddling through hidden, narrow inter-island channels, and through or around the abundant kelp forests underneath us, where we spot numerous sea otters (including one that is floating asleep as George drifts close by) combined with some awesome open water crossings. It is during the last of these that Steph has an unplanned chance to showcase her Red Bull-esque kayak skills when her and her kayak nearly get airborne off the crest of a large wave.

We reach calmer waters not long after, before rounding a large curving headland to be greeted by another pretty beach, a very welcome sight after a massive day on the water.

It is not long after we set up camp that we get the news from Bev and Jenna that McMullen will be our camp for two nights, owing to strong southerly winds and a big swell that will prohibit us paddling to Goose Island the following morning. The sleep-in the following morning is bliss, as is the leisurely chill-out around camp, only interrupted (in the best way) by a visit from a group of Heiltsuk Nation children from Bella Bella (on Frank's boat), who are undertaking an island clean-up, where all types of ocean detritus (read: everything from plastic bottles to huge buoys, and even the occasional fridge!) is removed. It's a brilliant initiative; Marvin Paul (one of the youngsters) is proud as punch when he tells us what they are doing, along with the fact that whoever picks up the most rubbish also gets a pizza party after. Dale Brown is one of the leaders of the group, and he informs us that the clean-up runs over two 10-hour days. Impressively, over the past two years, the initiative has removed an estimated 320 tons of marine debris.

After our catch-up with the kids, Steph and Dean suggest a bit of island exploration, so we all trundle into the dense forest to explore McMullen more closely, with Bev and Jenna mentioning the beaches on the other side being worth checking out. Their recommendation proves more than justified; when we emerge, around 15 minutes later, at the southern part of the island, the beach we step out to is nearly totally covered in driftwood. Massive tree trunks are piled on top of each other – and over the beach's rocky bluffs. This haphazard stacking of huge tree trunks is the ultimate demonstration of just how wild the ocean and weather can be here and is another reminder of just how insignificant us humans are in such an environment. Just amazing.

### Chasing the goose

I wake to sunshine – the first we've seen for a few days, and, with its inherent warmth, it is very welcome – even for this cold-weather fan; being able to finally dry some clothes out, along with the tent fly, is very welcome. It's a big morning for us as we have to tackle our longest open water crossing, from McMullen to the northern coastline of Goose Island.

Close to a week of paddling in all sorts of conditions, along with a kayak-friendly tailwind and tide, sees our group confidently knock over the long crossing to Goose before a mini-celebration



### GUIDING LIGHTS THE LIFE OF A KAYAK GUIDE

Bev (above right) and Jenna (left) have been kayak guides for a number of years, with Bev notching up 11 years on the water, and Jenna six, with Bev having worked for Spirit of the West Adventures for six years and Jenna for four. Both guides proved excellent on the trip, with loads of knowledge of the area, as well as how the ocean works when you're in a kayak (Bev even did an outdoor class, using 'sand waves' to represent how the ocean's swell works), along with producing some magic meals each day and night, something you wouldn't think possible on a remote trip such as this one.

So, what drives people to become kayak guides? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the main driver is a love of the outdoors – and especially the water – and that inherent passion for marine adventures was clearly evident in both guides throughout the expedition.

Bev and Jenna cited these outer coast trips as their favourites, with the ruggedness of the Great Bear Rainforest region a big drawcard, along with being able to get away from the hustle and bustle of 'normal' life. Plus, they enjoy watching clients peel away layers of their personality to reveal their true selves when back in a natural environment such as this one, with Jenna using guided school trips as an example.

"Spirit of the West Adventures takes out groups from private schools or schools out of this region and we see them arrive being very much surrounded by social media and worrying what they look like, and things like that," she says. "Then, the teacher takes away all their phones and they have no access to what they look like or what's going on in the social media world.

"To see that in real time, once you're on day for our five, then they are starting to throw seaweed at each other, having a laugh and just being natural," she laughs.



Last camp at Snipe Island showcased all that is amazing about camping and paddling in this region.

Bev, Steph and Dan take advantage of the final morning's magic conditions to enjoy a beautiful sunrise paddle around Snipe Island.

of sorts at a lunch spot on the island's eastern coastline (after being serenaded by a group of 'dancing' sea lions along the way). As I sit, chowing down on another scrumptious meal, I take the chance to gaze back across to the Coastal Mountains, far in the distance behind a jumble of islands stacked up behind each other, below. Incredibly, I can see a few snow-capped peaks, such is the clarity of the air here, and note the proximity of those big peaks to the Pacific Ocean; the Great Bear Rainforest and its islands are really an amazing part of the world.

Full and content, we all squeeze ourselves back into the kayaks for the final leg to our last camp at Snipe Island. For most of us, this is a slower journey as we all seem content to savour the last day in the kayaks in this incredible region.

That tailwind has stayed around, so we make very good time, and then it's the last search for a nice tent-site. Snipe Island is close to a number of other islands and offers more foot-borne exploration for some of our party, while others take the chance to, well, take it all in, I guess. And that's me, for sure; sitting in my camp chair, watching the colour of the water and sand change as the sun sets behind us, is just magic.

That magic is matched much later – in the middle of the night, in fact – when I answer the call of nature and step outside my tent to be bedazzled by one of nature's greatest shows: a clear, star-flooded night. The myriad stars and Milky Way are shining oh-so bright tonight and I stand there for longer than I realise, just taking in where I am, and what I am seeing.

We kick off the final, sun-drenched morning with a flurry of activity as we unpack, then repack, all our gear in preparation of Frank's arrival to pick us up. Steph and Dan, with Bev, take the opportunity for a beautiful sunrise paddle, while I take a last batch of photos.

Unsurprisingly, the journey back to Bella Bella, then Shearwater Resort, is a quiet one as we all digest what we've experienced. Dinner that night back at Shearwater Resort is also a quieter time (well, until Dan knocks us all out of the park with his epic performance at the bar's Karaoke night!) while the next day is one of laughing over shared memories and new-found friends.

Not all adventures finish on such a high, fun note, but this one, where we all bonded over a love of paddling and exploration, is one of those that does.

### Sand in my coffee

It's a week back at work and I'm opening my Spirit of the West Adventures coffee mug lid to take a sip, when I cop a grain of sand in my teeth. And that's all it takes to bring those memories of eight days in a kayak, in one of the world's wild places, rushing back.

The Great Bear Rainforest expedition reinforces what I (and I am sure all other paddlers) love about sea kayaking: paddling a kayak in the ocean is a simple process – it's just you, the kayak, and the ocean. And there's beauty in that simplicity, as it offers a deep sense of being a part of something far bigger as the tides and swell govern your path.

It'd be easy to say for those who don't like wild camping, and sometimes wild weather, to think again about tackling a big trip such as this – but please don't do that. Kayaking the islands of the Great Bear Rainforest, exploring their incredible beauty, and experiencing the waters surrounding them, you will have the absolute time of your life. I know I did. **A**

The writer was a guest of Destination BC and Spirit of the West Adventures.

### FACT FILE

**The adventure:** Spirit of the West Adventures runs the Kayaking the Great Bear Rainforest trip over eight days. It is an expedition-style trip for paddlers 14 years and above. The company also runs a number of other guided paddling adventures in BC, ranging from expedition-style, to family-focused, through to luxury based, throughout the Canadian summer and autumn.

For more info, see [www.kayakingtours.com](http://www.kayakingtours.com)

**Getting there:** Air Canada flies direct from Sydney to Vancouver. See [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)

**More info:** British Columbia is an outdoor playground for adventurous travellers. See [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)

