

# If you go down to the woods

Suzanne Morphet enjoys more than the bear necessities on a wildlife-filled wilderness cruise in British Columbia

“We won’t see wolves,” said our captain emphatically early in our voyage into the Great Bear Rainforest on

Canada’s West coast. No problem; most of our small group have come for the scenery and the bears, either the grizzly bears behind the area’s name, or the white spirit bears that live nowhere else in the world.

Wolves thrive here too, but they’re elusive and rarely seen. So as we left the mother ship on our third evening and pattered to shore in zodiacs, bears were top of mind.

The mouth of the Kynoch River is about 600km north-west of Vancouver, within the Fiordland Recreation Area, a part of the Great Bear Rainforest where glaciers gouged deep inlets long ago, and granite walls tower 1000m above the water. It’s also prime grizzly bear habitat.

In late June, the grasses and sedges in the river’s estuary form a brilliant green carpet. Bears spend their days digging up roots and tearing off shoots while waiting for salmon to return to the river in late summer.

“Don’t point if you see one,” warned our naturalist, Briony Penn. “Your arm looks like a rifle and they’ve seen that before, sadly.” Instead, Penn shows us how to signal a bear by putting her fists on top of her head to look like ears.

A few years ago, a conservation group bought the guide-outfitter’s licence for this part of the coast, abruptly ending bear-hunting by foreigners. Since then, bears have become bolder, no longer hiding from people, according to our captain, Kevin Smith. “They’re not the scary animal that Hollywood would like you to believe,” adds Smith, who’s been sailing this coast as owner of the Maple Leaf for the past 10 years.

Earlier, he guided us ashore where we explored the estuary, saw grizzly tracks, examined tufts of bear hair caught on tree bark and poked at bear scat with a stick. We’ve seen everything but a bear itself.

So when a deer races out of the estuary pursued by a black and tawny wolf in full flight, we’re gobsmacked. A wolf? This wasn’t on the agenda!

Of course, there’s no agenda when you’re in the wild and the Maple Leaf is not like a cruise ship that always knows where it will be on any given day. All Smith had promised was to put us “in the path of magic and let it happen”.

It’s happening now. “Run deer, run!” I urge silently, not sure why I’m siding with the deer. Wolves are efficient killers, but soon, the wide-eyed deer reaches deep water and swims safely to the far side of the inlet.

The wolf gives up, but instead of disappearing into the bush, he paces the rocky shoreline for several minutes. If a wolf can scowl, this one is scowling. Our adrenaline pumping, we’re now fully alert to the possibilities this remote rainforest offers. Bigger than Switzerland, with snow-capped mountains, fast-flowing rivers, cascading waterfalls and 1000-year-old cedar trees — not to mention bears, wolves, whales and other wildlife — it’s a naturalist’s paradise, a throwback to our prelapsarian world.

The next morning we eat Mexican-style scrambled eggs and toast on deck under a blue sky. The Beattles are singing *Here Comes The Sun* from the wheelhouse and First Mate Greg Shea is hauling in two crab traps squirming with life.

“Those are the biggest crabs I’ve ever seen,” exclaims our chef, Steve Letts, as Smith reaches in, pulls two out and holds them up for inspection. We count 24, all with shells at least six inches across, the minimum legal size for eating. But Smith is feeling generous and throws the smallest one back. “Don’t mess with us again!” he

quips. That night we feast on butter-drenched crab. We’ve been eating so much seafood — prawns and salmon were on the menu earlier — that we’re running short on white wine.

“Dreary and uninteresting,” wrote Captain George Vancouver when he charted this coastline more than 200 years ago. Obviously, the great mapmaker didn’t have nearly as much fun as we’re having, and understandably.

Vancouver’s four-year expedition was filled with hardships we can only begin to imagine. His ship, *Discovery*, ran aground on a falling tide and came close to being flooded; one of his officers died after eating mussels that were likely contaminated by “red tide” or algal bloom (we pass the bay where he’s buried); and Vancouver’s boat was cramped, with more than 100 men sharing living quarters.

There’s only 14 of us on the *Maple Leaf* — nine guests and five crew. It’s a comfortable 92-foot, two-masted wooden schooner, with space on deck to lounge on warm days and cosy rooms below deck to escape bad weather.

When it was built in 1904 the *Maple Leaf* was



(Clockwise from top): Young bears in the Nekite River; travellers with Maple Leaf cruises; a wolf catches salmon in the Great Bear Rainforest; the river oxbows amid dense forest. Pictures / Supplied; Kevin J. Smith, Maple Leaf Adventures

considered the most luxurious pleasure craft on the Pacific Coast. She even had electric lighting. During World War I her lead keel and brass were removed for the war effort. Later, she was converted to a halibut liner, where she repeatedly outfished newer boats in the Bering Sea.

“We never saw the *Maple Leaf* but heard all the stories about her,” recalls Donalda Redford, who has fished along this coast with her husband for more than 20 years and is now on-board to explore it again, this time in style.

The *Maple Leaf* was restored as a pleasure craft in the early 1980’s and today her sleek lines,

gleaming white exterior and mahogany trim get admiring looks whenever she pulls into port.

Our only port of call is Klemtu, a small First Nations settlement of 420 people. We need to refill our water tank. We visit their Big House where potlatches take place, breathe in its sweet cedar scent, learn about the family clans — wolf, raven, eagle and whale — and admire carved totem poles.

On our fifth evening, we finally meet our first bears; a mother and her cub. It’s not the heart-in-the-throat experience we had with the wolf, but it’s exhilarating in a different way. They’re grazing peacefully in an estuary and show no fear as we

watching from a few metres away. When they swim past us an hour later, they’re so close we can see milk on the cub’s muzzle from nursing.

“Don’t look at your watch,” Joan Langley tells Donalda after a late four-course dinner to celebrate our last night together. Seventy-five-year old Donalda is usually the first one to bed; 73-year old Joan, from Massachusetts, is one of the last in the sack. A few photographers on board have put together a slide show and want everyone to watch.

We ooh and aaah as our week flashes by — the wolf chasing the deer, the mother bear standing on hind legs, dall’s porpoises playing in the boat’s



## Checklist

### BRITISH COLUMBIA

#### GETTING THERE:

Air New Zealand has three direct flights a week from Auckland to Vancouver. See [www.airnz.co.nz](http://www.airnz.co.nz)

#### GETTING AROUND

Maple Leaf Adventures offers summer trips to the Great Bear Rainforest. [www.mapleleafadventures.com](http://www.mapleleafadventures.com) for schedules. Whiskey Cove Bed and Breakfast and Cabin Rental is a fun place to stay the night before you board the *Maple Leaf*.

#### ONLINE:

[www.greatbearstours.com](http://www.greatbearstours.com); [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)



wake. We laugh at Mark and Briony jumping off the bowsprit for an early morning swim, Greg pulling in an empty crab trap, Steve sucking the brains out of freshly caught prawns. We re-immense ourselves in natural hot springs, revisit the Big House and re-hoist *Maple Leaf*’s sails. Snowy mountain peaks, emerald green estuaries, red-headed mergansers and red-footed pigeon guillemots come and go.

It was a smorgasbord and now we’re sated, ready for home but grateful for a week in paradise. ● Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Maple Leaf Adventures.