

On golden lake

Houseboat heaven in British Columbia

SUZANNE MORPHET

A stand-up paddleboard leans invitingly over the porch railing of our houseboat as we motor out of Sicamous, British Columbia, known as Canada's "houseboat capital". There are also several tidy bundles of firewood so, whatever the weather over the next few days, we are prepared.

As it's almost September, the northern summer is nearly officially over. But houseboat season on Shuswap Lake goes for another month. The hot days of summer are long gone and the water temperature has dropped.

Leaving the marina, we pass dozens of other houseboats tied to their docks. Some of the names, such as Ship Happens and Boat a Licious, conjure up images of what it must be like here in July and early August, when up to 300 houseboats would be on the lake and the mood surely gets festive.

Because of its unusual shape — imagine the lower-case letter H drawn by someone with a shaky hand — Shuswap Lake has more than 600km of shoreline. Still, I'm looking forward to experiencing this popular recreational lake during a quieter month, when children are back at school, the grape harvest has begun, and nights are chilly enough to put that firewood on the deck to good use.

While one of our small group does the driving, the rest of us check out our floating hotel. The level of luxury is pretty astonishing; the top deck has a large hot tub with swim-up bar. From up here, we get big views down one arm of the lake and the forested slopes on either side.

One floor down, the bridge deck has three bedrooms, each with queen-size beds and flat screen TVs, a bathroom, and an outdoor eating area with barbecue. On the main deck are six smaller bedrooms, a couple of bathrooms and a cosy living area with fireplace and TV.

There's also a full kitchen but we've hired a chef and caterer to fill our fridge and prepare our meals. The Shuswap region's long, hot summer days yield a bounty of fruit and vegetables sold at farmers' markets, along with homemade jams, jellies, chutneys and marinades.

About an hour after leaving Sicamous, we pull up on to a gravel beach to anchor overnight. Hungry Cove is part of Shuswap Lake Marine Provincial Park and one of 23 park sites around the lake.



ALAMY



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Aside from one other boat, we have the beach to ourselves. After a hearty dinner, a few of us make a small fire onshore and discuss plans for the next day.

During the night, low clouds move in and we wake to soft rain. It's tempting just to hang out, read and enjoy the hot tub all day, but there's too much to see and do. After breakfast, we motor further up Salmon Arm and pull in at a beach with road access.

Guy, our Australian friend, has arranged to go mountain biking with a couple of local cyclists, while we visit nearby wineries with a tour company.

"All the experts in the Okanagan said no grapes will ever grow up there," Graydon Ratzlaff tells us as we arrive at Recline Ridge Winery, the second largest in the area, harvesting 2.5ha here and an additional 6ha nearby. Determined local vintners proved the experts wrong, planting grapes that ripen early and can endure cold snaps.

"We've seen overnight lows down to minus 21C," says Ratzlaff, who has won numerous awards with grapes you're not likely to find in BC's famed Okanagan region, or anywhere else in Canada on large acreages. "Varietals such as Ortega, the Madelines' Angevine and Sylvaner,

Siegerrebe and Marechal Foch are all favourites of the local vineyards."

At Sunnybrae Vineyards and Winery we learn the winemaker is also the musical director at a local church. And here, the wine is not aged in barrels but steel casks with American or French oak chips. Sitting on the deck overlooking Shuswap Lake, we snack on cheese, grapes and olives, washed down with a bottle of Sunnybrae's fruity Marechal Foch.

Light rain doesn't stop us from going for a hike later in the afternoon. Margaret Falls is at the end of a lush green canyon near our houseboat's anchorage. Entering the canyon, the trail follows a creek to its source, with large cedar trees standing guard either side. In summer, visitors would see tiger lilies and thimbleberries in blossom.

This evening the rain stops, and the setting sun paints the sky with broad strokes of pink and purple. It's a fitting finale to a weekend that will soon be over and feels like an invitation to return to explore more of Shuswap Lake's natural beauty.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Shuswap Tourism.

Fun in the sun on Canada's Shuswap Lake, above; Margaret Falls, far left; delicious offerings at Sunnybrae Winery, left

Checklist

Twin Anchors and Waterway are the biggest boat-hire companies on Shuswap Lake; houseboats sleep from six to 30; from about \$C1200 (\$1230) for three nights in low season. Blue Water offers lower-budget options. More: twinanchors.com; waterwayhouseboats.com; bluewaterhouseboats.ca. Ways2Ride offers guided mountain or join locals on rides or hikes through the Shuswap Trail Alliance. More: ways2ride.com/trips; shuswaptrails.com. Noble Adventures offers wine-themed tours. More: nobleadventures.net. •shuswaptourism.ca



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