

Magic on the water

Wildlife and wild sights
on an Ocean River Sports tour

By Suzanne Morphet | Photos by Don Denton



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It’s one of those steely grey Victoria mornings when it might rain or it might not.

Either way, we’re ready for an adventure on the water off Oak Bay.

Brian Henry, the owner of Ocean River Sports, helps me and two girlfriends launch our kayaks from his dock at the Oak Bay Marina.

“We’ll go past Jimmy Chicken Island,” he says, referring to the name locals gave Mary Tod Island more than a century ago, when it was home to a man who was known for stealing chickens.

Today the island forms part of the breakwater that shelters the marina.

Gliding between it and Turkey Head Point, we feel a light breeze as we enter the exposed waters of the Salish Sea.

Just like Jimmy Chicken, the waters around here have a reputation. With a tide that rises and falls as much as three and a half metres every six hours, this strait can look more like a whitewater river than an ocean. Rips, eddies and currents that sweep past at up to three metres per second can easily flip a novice kayaker.

We’re all comfortable in kayaks, but going on a guided tour with Ocean River Sports — and the man who started the company 39 years ago when a kayak was about as rare a sight as a sea otter — seems like a smart idea.

“We put over 2,500 people on the water on tours every year,” Brian assures us. Very few ever capsize and those that do usually involve a macho man trying to prove something, he adds.

Ocean River’s sleek red Delta kayaks feel more stable than they look and they respond quickly when we use the foot rudders to change direction.

We’ve signed up for the Oak Bay Shoreline Tour, a 2.5-hour tour offered daily from June 1 to September 7.

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"I tell my guides, 'Don't do the same tour every day or you'll get bored,'" says Brian. "Different group, different route."

Given the relatively calm water today and our previous experience, Brian wants to show us the Chain Islets, a cluster of rocky islets, and Great Chain Island, half a kilometre offshore.

"It's incredible what we have here," he muses, explaining that the Chain group is part of the Oak Bay Islands Ecological Reserve that was created in 1979 to protect nesting seabirds, rare meadow plants and a rich marine habitat flourishing with fish, crabs, urchins, octopus, orcas, porpoises and harbour seals.

In the late 1980s, these islets were home to the largest breeding population of glaucous-winged gulls in British Columbia.

"The next largest was on the roof of Value Village downtown," jokes Brian.

Approaching the islands, the surface of the water ripples. "We've got some current coming at us," he warns and we change course slightly to compensate.

Powering through it, we enter a calm area and suddenly we're surrounded by seals, their heads popping up like submarines. Baby seals have been known to climb onto kayakers, but these are adults and, even though they're clearly curious, they keep their distance.



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We're admiring their friendly faces when we hear a noisy flapping of wings and squawking sounds.

"Bald eagles," says Brian, pointing to the rocky shoreline of Great Chain Island ahead, where several large brown birds are fighting over a dead fish. Landing on the island is prohibited so as not

to disturb the wildlife or trample the vegetation.

Looking back at the city we left just half an hour ago, I can see masts marking the marina where we launched, but it feels like we're a world away.

"It's magic out here," says Brian, reading my thoughts.

Once the fish fight is over and one plump juvenile eagle has claimed the booty, Brian motions ahead. "We'll loop around these islands. Not too close, though. We don't want to scare anything off."

One large rock is completely covered in black cormorants and we learn that three species of these diving birds thrive here, including a migratory population of Brandt's cormorants.

Turning back towards Oak Bay the sun comes out, bathing a large Coast Guard marker in the middle of Mayor Channel in soft light.

"You may not know it, but we're being ferried across," Brian tells us, using the same word that river paddlers use when they set their craft on an angle to the current and allow it to effortlessly carry them across.

Our return isn't quite effortless but it's easy. In no time at all, familiar landmarks come into focus.



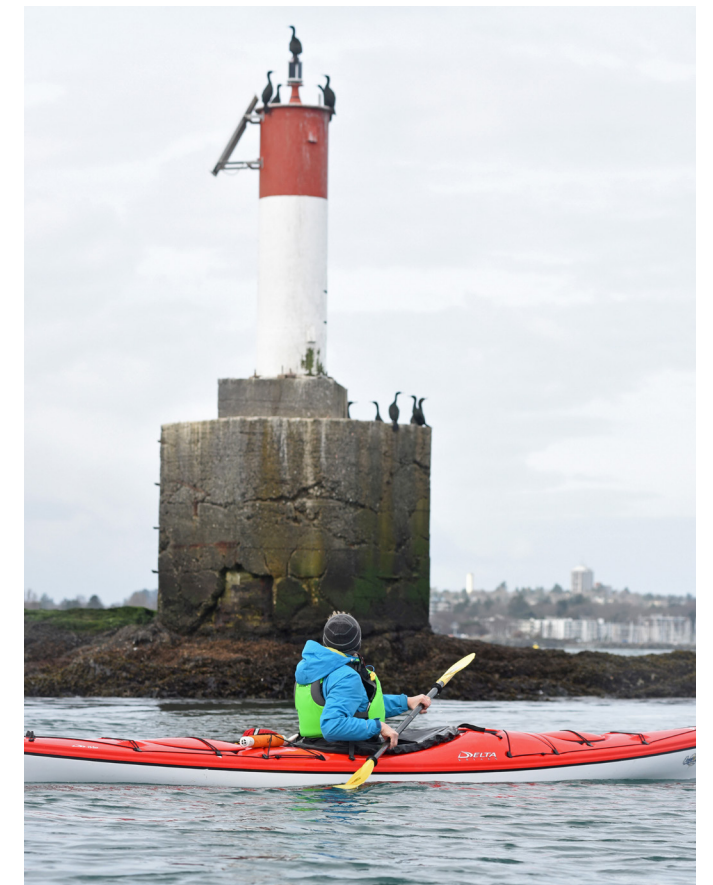
The Oak Bay Beach Hotel rises prominently to our south while Willows Beach and Cattle Point spread out to the north.

"Do you know why it's called Cattle Point?" asks Brian. "Boats would drop off cattle there and let them swim to shore," he explains, referring to the early days of the Hudson's Bay Company and its local farming operations.

Too soon our tour is over, but we're already talking about doing another one.

Ocean River Sports also offers a Discovery Island Kayak and Hiking Tour, where it shuttles people and kayakers to the island on a custom aluminum boat. Guests explore the calm intertidal zone between Discovery and Chatham islands by kayak and hike the trails on Discovery, where Takaya the lone wolf lived for many years.

It's funny, but after not using my own kayak for the last couple summers, I'm now eager to get out in it again. There's nothing like experiencing a new place to reignite an old passion. Thanks, Brian! 🐾



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