



SEE THE PHOTOS: Celebration goals! Demons' party rolls on in Cottesloe

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## Untamed country with premium touch

**Suzanne Morphet**    The West Australian  
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Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, Canada. Plenty of nature. Credit: Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge./Supplied



Morning has broken at Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge on Vancouver Island’s remote west coast.

From the deck of my canvas tent I watch half a dozen people in kayaks and stand-up paddleboards glide past, the calm water of the Bedwell River estuary reflecting the mountains and trees around them.

Sitka, a black mutt, has taken up his usual position on the grass overlooking the estuary.

And now, here comes the mother merganser that I spot every morning with six red-headed chicks hitching a ride on her back as she swims against the current.

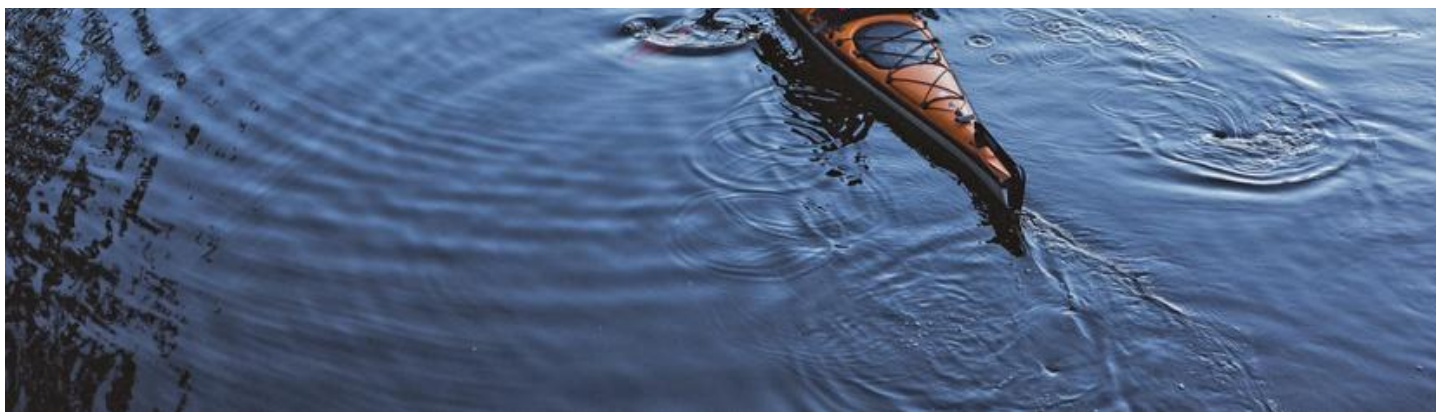
In this wild little corner of Canadian paradise, all is well.

Yet, before arriving, I was dearly afraid it might not be.

You know how it feels to return to a much-loved place and find it a little less lovely than what you remembered?

Perhaps the big or little changes that resorts often undertake to “elevate” the guest experience push it into unwelcome territory.





 Kayaking on the tranquil waters is soothing yet invigorating. Credit: Supplied/Supplied

I first visited Clayoquot Wilderness Resort in 2008 for a women's only fly-fishing weekend and found it both delightfully rustic and luxuriously comfortable – a difficult balance to capture.

I didn't catch any fish that weekend, but I fell in love with this off-the-grid property and all it offered – horseback riding through old growth forest, flying by float plane to an alpine lake to fly fish for trout, reading by the outdoor fireplace on comfy couches, watching for bald eagles while soaking in the hot tub, and sleeping in a tent that contained a real bed topped with a feather duvet.

Gratifying too, was knowing the place was so wild that black bears were as much a part of it as the dogs that staff kept to send the bruins on their way. In fact, that weekend a bear clawed his way into The Cookhouse one night and wreaked havoc.

So when I learnt that this iconic Canadian retreat had been bought by an American investment firm and was being managed by Australian luxury hospitality company Baillie Lodges, I worried.

Worried that the \$2.15 million makeover during the first year of the pandemic, when it remained closed, would turn it into something too sleek and sophisticated for this wild place.





The Cookhouse at Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge is reflected in the Bedwell River estuary. Credit: Suzanne Morphet

Under Baillie's management, the antique furniture and beds were given to residents of a nearby First Nation and replaced with king-sized beds and contemporary furniture. Local artisans were asked to provide items that reflect the west coast, such as decorative wooden bowls by First Nations carver Moy Sutherland.

But for me, the most important thing that Baillie's has brought to Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, as it's now called, is executive chef Asher Blackford, who worked most recently at Baillie's Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Blackford – who considers himself an artist with food as his medium – creates dishes that are as beautiful as they are delicious.

He wants eating to be an extension of the other experiences guests have, but it's fair to say it's an experience in itself. "I call it 'the art of eating'," says lodge manager Sarah Cruse.

One afternoon my friend Chloe and I join Justin, one of the resort's knowledgeable guides, for a foraging expedition in the forest. With Asher's "grocery list" in hand, we fill containers with bright orange salmon berries, we pick Siberian miner's lettuce from the sun-dappled forest floor and snip the young tips of hemlock branches. Finally, Justin carefully lifts a delicate licorice fern from where it's anchored in moss on a maple tree.



 A mother merganser gives her brood a ride on an early morning swim in the Bedwell River estuary. Credit: Suzanne Morphet

"Take a small bite," he cautions, exposing a woody root. "It's very potent."

The next evening we feast on a six-course tasting menu, featuring freshly caught salmon, prawns and Dungeness crab. The wild lettuce we picked adorns the Dungeness crab in a dandelion sauce. The salmon berries brighten a platter of spot prawns, while the hemlock

tips lend a mouth-cleansing sorbet with the subtle scent of grapefruit. And that licorice fern root? Asher used it to flavour colourful macaroons.

Of course, we didn't spend all our time eating. One day we hiked to Penny Falls (named for the wife of a prospector; these mountains were mined back at the turn of the 20th century), and jumped from a log into the clearest, coldest natural pool I've ever come across, and in the most amazing shade of emerald green.

Another day we rode horseback through the forest, crisscrossing the fast-moving Bedwell River, with the snow-covered peaks of Strathcona Provincial Park looming beautifully in the background.



📷 Crossing the Bedwell River in June when meltwater from the glaciers in the mountains above cause high water levels. You might get wet feet, but it's nothing the horses can't negotiate. Credit: Suzanne Morphet

When my horse, Cuff, veered away from the pack part way across the river and water reached his belly, then poured into my boots, I trusted that he knew what he was doing. He did.

And we spent a memorable day boating in Clayoquot Sound (which the Bedwell River flows into) looking for bears, whales and sea otters. Clayoquot Sound is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which means any development here should be sustainable and conserve the area's ecological biodiversity.

Which brings me back to Baillie Lodges and the remainder of its three-year plan for Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge. Still to come is a significant refurbishment of The Cookhouse

to accommodate more guests and provide better views of the Sound, and changes to The Healing Ground Spa.

It sounds a little ominous, but Baillie Lodges have – just like me – a heart full of love for Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge.



 Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, Canada. Credit: Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge.

In 2022 the lodge will be open from May 12 to September 28.

Stays include luxury tented accommodation, gourmet meals, premium wines, beers and spirits, guided experiences and one 60-minute massage per person. Peak season rates start at \$1830 per night per adult. Children six and older are welcome at reduced rates when sharing a tent with an adult. Arrival is by float plane from Vancouver or boat from Tofino.

[clayoquotwildernesslodge.com](https://clayoquotwildernesslodge.com)

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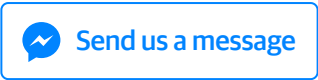
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