

BRITISH COLUMBIA



Guests of Tweedsmuir Park Lodge drift down the Atnarko River watching for grizzly bears.



Naturalist and guide Ellie Lamb stands beside a grizzly bear 'stomp' trail. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

FROM PAGE 25

the tiny town of Bella Coola, stopping en route to admire the mountain which British fur trader and explorer Alexander Mackenzie called “stupendous” when he arrived in 1793. “We’re at 500 feet,” says Doug pointing up, “so you’re looking at over 8000 feet of mountain.”

At Cedar Creek Regional Park, we feel dwarfed again, this time by giant cedars, some more than 1000 years old. We come to one that’s hollowed out and blackened on the inside. Doug explains the Nuxalk (pronounced “new-hawk”) First Nation people would traditionally smoke salmon or venison inside the tree. These “cool” fires didn’t kill the tree.

Further on, we pause near an old pier jutting out over the milky blue water of the Bella Coola River. A grizzly was spotted here the previous day, Doug tells us. “We have bear envy,” he adds, voicing our thoughts aloud.

When we come to the Nuxalk reserve we stop beside a human-sized figure representing Raven, a powerful character in Northwest Coast Indigenous mythology. According to the Nuxalk, Raven helped bring eulachon, a small fatty fish, into the river to feed the people. The eulachon population collapsed more than 20 years ago for reasons unknown, but every year the Nuxalk honour the fish with songs and stories and await its return.

That afternoon we climb aboard a helicopter to hike in the alpine. “I’m a small guy, but I like to make a big impression,” jokes Richard, our pilot, who lands us expertly on a heather-covered ridge with spectacular views towards the long inlet below.

Returning to the lodge at the end of the day, we learn that a mother bear and her cub had walked past while we were gone.

“We can be out looking for bears for days and then ‘boom’, they’re right in front of your cabin,” laughs Jessib, another lodge naturalist.

The next morning we’re back on



Tweedsmuir Park Lodge arranges heli-hiking tours on the Coast Mountains. Pic: Chloe Berge



In early September the previous year’s snow is still melting on some mountains.



A grizzly bear cub watches its mother hunt for salmon on the Atnarko River.

the river. By now, I’ve seen enough to know that this place is exceptional, bears or no bears. Relaxing, I admire the translucent wings of a dragonfly and smile as the same red-headed ducks we spotted two days ago skedaddle across the river in front of us.

Then I see Krista silently mouthing the word “bear”. I turn and there she is — a mother grizzly with two cubs, standing on a gravel bar. The black-eyed cubs are adorable, rising on their hind legs to get a better look at that funny thing — us — floating

fact file

- Tweedsmuir Park Lodge is open from spring through autumn but grizzly bear viewing season goes from September 1 to October 16 this year. Three, four or five-night all-inclusive packages are available starting at \$C3909 (\$4370) per adult. tweedsmuirparklodge.com/packages/grizzly-bear-safari/
- Pacific Coastal Airlines offers daily direct flights from Vancouver, which take 70 minutes. Driving from Vancouver takes 12-14 hours. Alternatively, BC Ferries offers 10-hour non-stop voyages from Port Hardy on Vancouver Island to Bella Coola several times a week.

towards them. About a minute later they disappear into the bush. That evening we’re still elated, bubbling over with bear talk in the dining room when guess who comes to dinner. The same family of grizzlies we saw earlier. This time, they’re on the lawn, grazing on clover. We watch from the deck, enthralled, until darkness settles in and the bears fade gently into the night.