



FIRST PERSON

Adventure for the ages

When a chance encounter left me feeling age-conscious at 66, I immediately signed up for a new challenge

SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It happened last summer while I was heading to a live concert featuring two oldies but goldies: Neil Young and Van Morrison. I was in Dublin, standing on a commuter train when a woman asked if I wanted her seat. I gaped, incredulous. *Me?* Did I look old? Weak? “No, thanks,” I stuttered.

The next morning, I booked myself on the toughest, most adventurous multi-day kayaking and camping tour I could find in British Columbia, where I live. A few days later, I was flying to the Great Bear Rainforest on the Central Coast, one of the rainiest places in North America, with some of the world’s strongest tides.

I needed to prove to myself I’m still strong and capable, even if wrinkles suggest otherwise.

In Bella Bella, I met our two guides, Bev Marshall and Cait Woolner from Spirit of the West Adventures, and five other guests, ranging in age from mid-20s to 62. I was the oldest at 66.

Over eight days, we would paddle as a group, moving camp most days and exploring some 50 nautical miles of the Hakai Luxvbalis Conservancy, the largest provincial marine protected area on the B.C. coast.

Before getting dropped off at Snipe Island, I asked Frank Brown, our water taxi driver and a hereditary chief from the Heiltsuk Nation, for any advice. “Just roll with it,” he said. “Everything is unpredictable out here.”

Snipe Island looked almost tropical, fringed by a white sandy beach scattered with seashells and trimmed with turquoise water. It was so idyllic, I wondered if I really needed to bring two raincoats, as advised. After carrying everything ashore, including food and drinking water for the week, we pitched our tents in the sand and smiled at our good fortune of having an easy, sunny start.

The last time I did a multi-day kayaking trip, also with this tour

SUZANNE MORPHET

This beach in the Serpent Group was one of the writer’s favourites.

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T10 | TRAVEL

Journey tough but rewarding

ADVENTURE FROM T9

operator, I “glamped,” sleeping in a real bed. There were warm showers and a hot tub.

On this trip, there wasn’t even an outhouse. The guides carried a “boombbox” — that’s a portable toilet — but most of us preferred to do our business below the high tide line, an environmentally acceptable alternative here.

The next morning, we’d loaded the kayaks by 7:30. We had nine nautical miles (about 16 kilometres) of paddling to reach the night’s campsite. The sea life along the way was endlessly entertaining. A lion’s mane jellyfish drifted under our kayaks. Schools of herring hid under ribbons of bull kelp. The flower-like tentacles of green and red sea anemones swayed in the current.

In the distance, we spotted sea otters floating languorously on their backs. When a humpback whale surfaced next to Woolner’s kayak, it felt like we’d hit the wildlife jackpot, even as the paddling started to feel like work.

“Think of it as a marathon and not a sprint,” Woolner suggested the morning we crawled out of our sleeping bags at 4:30 to paddle 17 nautical miles (30 kilometres) over 10 hours. “My ass is sore,” grimaced Anna, from California, when we stopped for lunch. I couldn’t even feel mine.

Still, we enjoyed sunshine and calm seas until mid-week, when Woolner said “big weather” was coming and we would hunker down in the Serpent Group for two days. But first, how about a little paddle?



Top: Camping in the Serpent Group, on a “hidden” beach with abundant tidal pools. Right: Western sandpipers feed on a beach. The birds, called “peeps,” migrate along the Pacific Northwest coast in flocks of thousands.



SUZANNE MORPHET PHOTOS

“We’re just going to toodle around these islands. Nothing crazy,” she said. As we left our sheltered cove, waves exploded off the rocky shoreline. Our boats became bucking broncos. “Cowboy roller coaster!” called Woolner, grinning.

That night, the wind raged and the rain pelted down. Inside my tent, I “flossed” my toes with a sock. The nice, soft sand had become a sticky enemy.

Our final challenge was crossing Hakai Passage, a big stretch of open water.

“We have four miles before we can stop for a break, so make sure you pee now,” said Woolner, offering Gravel to anyone who needed it for the swells ahead.

When we finally waded onto Wolf Beach, I was cold, wet and shivering. But the sky cleared again and we devoured another delicious din-

ner. Some of us even went for a sunset paddle, but not me.

I was content. I had pushed myself and felt hardened, happy and unexpectedly grateful. If I could, I would tell that woman on the train in Dublin, “Thanks, you did me a favour.”

SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF SPIRIT OF THE WEST ADVENTURES, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

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