

KAYAKING IN CLASS

STORY AND
PHOTOS BY
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MOTHERSHIP KAYAKING COMBINES COMFORT
AND CONVENIENCE WITH WILDERNESS ADVENTURE.

I'M ALONE ON THE AFT DECK of the motor yacht *Columbia III*, enjoying a glass of Shiraz and watching an amber sunset saturate the islands of the Broughton Archipelago, when I hear the noise. Like a steam locomotive gathering way, the distinct chuffing sound grows closer until I sight a vertical plume of water 100 yards astern. The unmistakable geyser is an adult male killer whale undulating on the surface, headed directly towards the boat.

My first reaction is to go get my camera, but in doing so I know I might miss the experience. Sometimes it's more important to be in the moment, so I lean against the mahogany rail and watch the massive creature get closer with each exhalation of briny mist. About 50 yards away the leviathan submerges for a longer than normal interval and I wonder if that's the end of the show. Just then, he surfaces off the port quarter. His entire mass arcs on the surface for a suspended moment; his slick, black dorsal fin protrudes skyward, wobbling under its own mass. And then he's gone, leaving only a foamy wake on the surface and a permanent impression in my mind.

The rush of such a close encounter is hard to shake. As the chill evening air sets in, I abandon the open deck for the warmth of the ship's salon and try to absorb the majesty of the experience. Reclining on a luxurious green leather couch by the fireplace, I have time to reflect that it is rather splendid to enjoy nature's magnificence without having to endure excessive hardship and personal sacrifice. Indeed, from the comfort and convenience of *Columbia III*, I've seen and experienced more wilderness adventure in five days than I have in years of "roughing it". And in a moment of self-realization, I have to admit that this civilized style of adventure tour really agrees with me.

My shipmates concur. A mixed bag of Europeans, Canadians and Americans, most guests are outdoorsy types who still want wilderness adventure, but of the kind that includes certain comforts and amenities. For them, kayaking from a custom-built, classic luxury yacht is an ideal combination.

"You can enjoy the intimacy of nature from a different angle in a sea kayak, says Finn Carstens, an upbeat Dane from Copenhagen. "There is a steady stream of highlights in this part of the world — kayaking with whales, picnicking with eagles, hiking inter-tidal shorelines — but at the end of the day you have an extremely well-equipped boat picking you up, complete with private cabins, hot showers and gourmet meals."

Such is life aboard *Columbia III*. The first morning aboard, I wake to the heartening smell of robust coffee wafting down the hatchways. Reluctantly, I roll out of my berth and come on deck, only because my body's need for caffeine wins out over sloth. Midway through breakfast, our skipper, Ross Campbell, advises us of the day's agenda, which starts with a tour of the U'Mista Cultural Society Museum in Alert Bay, home to a remarkable collection of Kwakwaka'wakw cultural artifacts, many of which were recently returned from the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The masks on display here are beautiful and haunting works of art, many with seemingly preternatural qualities that engender humility, if not a certain unease.

After a few hours ashore, the familiar rumble of the ship's diesel engine announces our departure. The morning is cool and cloudy with fog shrouding the mountain peaks to



KEITH LANIER SETS OFF FROM *COLUMBIA III*
FOR A DAY OF ADVENTURE KAYAKING IN THE
BROUGHTON ARCHIPELAGO.



Upper: Kayaks beached on the shore of an abandoned native village.

Lower: Ross Campbell, skipper of Columbia III, navigates the vessel through the confines of the Broughton Archipelago. A former helicopter pilot and West Coast tugboat captain, Campbell brings a rare degree of professionalism and passion to every cruise.

the east and west of Johnstone Strait. The raw wilderness has a Jurassic feel of foreboding that gradually recedes as morning sunlight starts filtering through the clag, exposing saw-tooth ridges and snow-capped peaks in the distance.

As the land- and seascape transform from ominous to idyllic, we are joined by an inquisitive pod of Dall's porpoises. From the foredeck, we can look straight down on them as they play, riding our bow-wave for several minutes. Shortly afterwards, Miray, Ross's daughter and our kayak guide, sights a humpback whale further east in the Strait. We motor over and soon make out the animal's distinctive fluke rising above the surface where it hangs vertically for a graceful moment before slipping beneath the waves. "Ooohs" and "aaahs" ensue.

"Such sightings are common in the Inside Passage," says Campbell. "The Johnstone Strait is a major

highway for whales and other sea mammals; it's not exceptional to see all varieties, including orcas, humpback whales, Dall's porpoise and Pacific white-sided dolphins."

Once inside the Broughton Archipelago, there are fewer big animal encounters, but the natural beauty of the islands is a wonder in its own right. Situated at the mouth of Vancouver Island, "The Broughtons" are a labyrinth of largely uninhabited islets and secluded channels, which are ideal for sea kayaking.

We reach our first drop off in a quiet anchorage and Ross and the crew begin unloading the kayaks we've been piggybacking on the upper deck. As we set off to explore our new environment, the first thing I notice is the abundance of marine life clearly visible in the shallows. With each dip of my paddle I coast over a cornucopia of colourful creatures, including orange plumose

anemones, purple starfish and red rock crabs, to name just a few. Then there are the molluscs. It seems every variety of bivalve — from mussels and oysters to scallops and clams — competes for sub-aquatic real estate. In the intertidal zone, rocks are encrusted with a continuous carpet of barnacles, which make a steady snap, crackle and pop when exposed at low tide.

Above the ragged shoreline, nature is determined to make inroads anywhere that can sustain life. Gnarled shoreline pines grow horizontally out of cliff faces — others grow in the direction of the prevailing winds. Occupying the moss-draped branches of these indomitable trees is a sizeable local population of bald eagles. When not standing sentinel over their nests, they are a frequent sight overhead.

After a couple of hours of easy paddling, our guides Miray and her husband, Luke Hyatt, lead us toward a gleaming white beach in a sheltered bay. But what appears to be sand from a distance is actually huge volumes of crushed clamshells, a telltale sign of an abandoned native village. The name of this village is Mimkwamlis and Miray explains that the Mamalliculla people who once populated the area subsisted largely on a diet of clams, and the discarded shells — referred to as midden — accumulated over several centuries. She adds that, when combined with ash and soil, midden deposits build up at the rate of approximately a foot every 500 years; the embankment on this particular shoreline rises up some 15 feet.

Most such abandoned villages reveal little else in the way of human habitation, but Mimkwamlis still retains a log-pole entrance arch to a longhouse, as well as the remains of a toppled totem pole, now being reclaimed by surrounding forest. Despite being covered in moss and protruding saplings, the carved shape of a human face, a bear and a river otter are still discernible beneath the growth. Regardless of one's spiritual beliefs, it is hard not to feel a profound sense of presence and impermanence here.

Gathering our thoughts, we push off the beach for a short paddle to

where *Columbia III* is waiting for us. The wind has been picking up steadily out of the west all afternoon and I am grateful we don't have to paddle back into it. Indeed, having a mothership that can drop off in one location and pick up in another is one of the great advantages of mothership kayaking. What's more, I can look forward to a hot shower, clean clothes, fresh sheets and an exquisite sit-down supper.

Lying in my berth that evening, the sound of water lapping against the hull is a gentle tonic to a stimulating day of incredible experiences. The combination of fantastic sea kayaking, wildlife encounters and anthropological wanderings is almost overwhelming and I want to latch on to a few images I can store in my mind for posterity. On a philosophical level, I feel I've reconnected with nature on some primordial level, while also getting in touch with myself — part of which is at peace with the idea of luxury wilderness adventure. 🐾



WHAT'S IN A NAME? *Columbia III*, is a wooden motor yacht imbued with significance for many on the West Coast. The third in a succession of hospital ships built for BC's Anglican Diocese, she was commissioned in 1955 to provide much-needed medical and social services to remote logging camps and coastal communities and served in this role until her retirement in 1968.

In 1990 *Columbia III* was restored to her present remarkable condition by Bill McKechnie of Victoria, who later sold her to a buyer in the U.S. She returned home in 2003 when purchased by Ross Campbell for the purpose of operating live-aboard kayak tours. Together with his wife, Fern Kornelsen, and their three adult children/crew, Tavish, Farlyn, Miray, and the latter's husband, Luke Hyatt, the family business provides five- and seven-day cruises between May and October. Depending on the time of year, *Columbia III's* cruising grounds include Desolation Sound, the Broughton Archipelago and BC's Central Coast in the area commonly referred to as the "Great Bear Rainforest". Geared primarily for beginner and novice kayakers, Mothership Adventures also offers dedicated wildlife and historical cruises, as well as private group charters. For more information, visit their website at mothershipadventures.com.

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