

Ideas for 2021 — Canada’s ultimate wilderness glamping retreat

Seaplanes, bald eagles and bear encounters on an eco-adventure in Vancouver Island’s untamed ‘back garden’



Coastal scenery surrounding Tofino Inlet

ALAMY

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Saturday April 11 2020, 12.01am BST, The Times

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e’ve only just started unpacking in our vast tent when we hear the muffled commotion outside and a word that stops me midway between suitcase and wardrobe: “bear”. It’s not screamed in alarm, but rather whispered in

incredulity by the family next door, who are outside on the path that separates canvas from conifers.

We slip out tentatively to join them. And there, up in the trees no more than 20ft from us, stands a magnificent black bear, eyeing us from his hillside eyrie. A minute later he's gone, loping off into the forest, consumed by the shadows.

No wonder that during our check-in earlier at Clayoquot Wilderness Resort we were given strict warnings not to keep food in our tent (bears have an excellent sense of smell). There's also a siren by the bed to be used in an emergency (there are wolves, mountain lions and cougars here too), plus a whole sheaf of instructions on what to do should you have too close an encounter with the wildlife.



The cookhouse and outdoor lounge at Clayoquot Resort

These are precautionary — bears have never entered the tents and no guests have been savaged (to date). They are, though, an important reminder that this is the untamed but enchanted back garden of Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

An hour by seaplane from Vancouver, Clayoquot feels a world away. And the journey is part of the adventure: skimming the water to search for whales; traversing the nibbled coast of Vancouver Island; riding the thermals of the conifer-clad mountain peaks, home to glaciers and aquamarine lakes. Then, reaching the valley of the meandering Ursus River, you splash down 40 minutes inland from Tofino town in magical Bedwell Sound.

It was here in the 1990s that Rick Genovese, who used to fish in Clayoquot Sound, fell in love with the wild beauty of the place. Having bought 160 acres in neighbouring Quait Bay, where he built a floating lodge, he added a tented wilderness outpost at this spot, in the mouth of the Bedwell River. That was 20 years ago, and while the floating lodge no longer exists (and neither, sadly, does Genovese, who died of cancer in 2017), Clayoquot and his vision live on.

Genovese had dreamt of protecting the delicate rainforest ecosystem while allowing guests to unplug, reconnect with their travelling companions and immerse themselves in the great outdoors.

The original rustic tents in his family-friendly eco-resort have been modernised since then — they now offer glamping with a capital G (last year a luxury family tent sleeping up to eight opened not far from where the bear put in his impromptu appearance) — but the spirit of Clayoquot remains true to Genovese’s ethos.

On the bridge where Genovese would jump into the icy river water, a plaque that nods to the Kevin Costner film says it all: “They said if you build it they will come . . . so he built it and they came, to witness this remarkable field of dreams.”

For three glorious days we unzip our tent door on to that dream — the water right below us, often with a seal or two bobbing in the bay; the 5,000ft Ursus Mountain, among other glacial peaks. The great outdoors is not just beautiful here, it beckons, with a raft of activities from kayaking and surfing to horse riding and heli

adventures. So while the lack of phone signal and patchy wifi are a shock to my teenage son, he is soon enraptured by the idea of fishing and scaling the natural rock-climbing wall and an enormous tree.

They're not quite the activities I would choose — I'm much more wildlife and walks — but that's the great thing about Clayoquot: families can split up for individually guided activities whenever they fancy. So off Christian goes to grapple rocks and branches, while I dress up like an orange Michelin man in warm outerwear and take to the water with my guide, Carly.



A black bear and cubs

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Down the seven-mile fjord of Bedwell Sound we speed and out into Clayoquot Sound, with its many inlets and islets, the clouds clinging to the Douglas firs, spruce, hemlock, elders and cedars on the shore, creating an almost ethereal beauty. Our eyes are drawn to the wildlife performance in the water — sea otters floating on their backs, including a mother with a baby on her tummy, pop one by one below the surface as we approach, while a colony of sea lions on the rocks

emit guttural growls. A bald eagle swoops by, ducks skim the water and porpoises emerge right beneath the bow of our boat.

We moor at Flores Island for a picnic lunch on the beach and walk through a forest full of lichen-clad, buttress-rooted trees and 200-year-old red cedars, banana slugs clinging to their mossy roots. The slugs will paralyse you if you eat them, Carly says, licking one 3in monster to show how her tongue is temporarily numbed.

Back at sea, in view of Mariner Glacier, we spot the telltale sight of whale spouts. On approach, it turns out that we're in the presence of a mother grey whale with her calf, diving down with a flip of their tails before re-emerging several minutes later.

Could the day get any better? It could. Close to camp Carly spots a black bear slinking along the coast, standing on its hind legs to reach berries on a tree. Then we spot a larger black bear rummaging under rocks farther along the shoreline.

Cutting the engine, we drift to within 10ft of him, so close that we hear not only the splash of his paws in the water, but his snuffles as he feasts on his seafood supper. As he patrols the shore, a smaller, female bear emerges from the forest. There follows much deep breathing, known as chuffing, in an ursine stand-off.

The female is protecting her cub, which we now spy swinging on the uppermost branches of a tree, which she climbs midway, waiting before the male ambles away.

So there's plenty to tell when I return to find my son back in our cosy white tent, one of 25 strung along the shoreline or in the rainforest. His fingers have been rubbed raw from reaching the top of the rock wall so many times, and he tells me enthusiastically about his new-found love for fishing.



Canoeing in the estuary

That prompts us to make a hasty change to our schedule the next day to squeeze in a fishing trip. It's no problem to do so; the activities directors are happy to change plans. And so we take to the water again, Christian intent on making a catch, me just happy to share this moment in such a scenic setting. The fish are slow to bite, but it doesn't matter one jot.

Then, just as we're sniggering at a sea lion, looking for all the world like a serene lady doing breaststroke, we feel the simultaneous tug of a fish on each of our lines. Our brace of copper rockfish are hauled in, snapped for the camera, then returned to the water not far from a colony of seals galumphing clumsily into land.

We have a chance to do a bit of galumphing ourselves later, after we've squeezed and squirmed our way into wetsuits before paddleboarding up Bedwell Canyon. There, where the icy glacial meltwater hurtles down the mountainside, we moor our boards and clamber over rocks, hurling ourselves off the highest ones into water so cold that you gasp when it smacks you, inadvertently sucking in mouthfuls and being surprised at how pure it tastes.

Up the river we go on foot, following the long and difficult route that salmon take to spawn, skirting rapids, negotiating tiny caves and rounding rocks as we fight the current. At the top of a series of falls we watch the water cascading down in a frothy helter-skelter, the rocks on either side rubbed smooth by its force. It's quite a journey those salmon make to return to the place they were born.



A grey whale
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Back at base camp there's no salmon on the menu because it's becoming increasingly endangered, particularly the chinook (this is the first year that there will be no salmon trawling, even on the normal catch-and-release programme). Food has to be shipped in three times a week by boat, but because Clayoquot is a member of the foodie group Relais & Châteaux, every meal is a masterpiece.

In the atmospheric timber-roofed Cookhouse, with its old fireplace, antler chandelier and First Nations canoe, we eat scallops, plus an amazing pork-and-apple creation that arrives theatrically in a smoke-filled glass dome. That's

followed either by 35-day cured beef, a divine lamb curry or the best black cod I've tasted, served on a sizzling hot stone.

There are family tents for private dining, as well as the main restaurant, but our favourite perch is at the counter, watching the chefs at work. Here, helped by the knowledgeable waiters, I do my best to work through the local Okanagan wines.

Yes, Clayoquot is far from cheap, but it is all-inclusive. So unless you choose to take a helicopter expedition or want premium alcohol (why would you when the inclusive wine list is so good?), everything is covered, including activities (which are pretty much on a private basis), tips, laundry and a massage in the waterside spa, which has hot tubs and a sauna with a view.



The tents, too, are pretty special, most with en suite bathrooms, as well as propane-heated, cast-iron stoves (although the camp is usually open only from May to September, it does get chilly). The wooden floors and much of the furniture, from the headboards to the wooden chest and table, are made from fallen trees. So are the boardwalks between the trees.

And while it's not strictly speaking a ranch, Clayoquot certainly gives the top American ranches such as Paws Up and the Ranch at Rock Creek a run for their money (we preferred it to both). Like ranches, it has its own horses, which were

shipped in by barge and live there year-round. And so, on our last morning, I take the reins with a wrangler, Tim, while Christian heads off in a different saddle altogether for a mountain-bike adventure.

Over dry creek beds flanked by conifer-lined hills we go, our horses picking their way gingerly among the rocks before we reach glacial rivers. In the forest the trees are packed tightly together and lichen hangs down. The only sound is the warbling of the Pacific wren.

Tim points out the wooden “tent in the tree” built by biologists as a base to study salmon, and also the spot in the woods where Scarlett Johansson married Ryan Reynolds in 2008. There’s more than romantic history in these woods; we pause at Walter Guppy’s cabin — he was a Tofino local who started mining here in 1938. There were actually three goldmining rushes by the Bedwell River from the 1860s; the site Clayoquot stands on was once known as Bear City, with a brothel, post office, taxi service and an inn. Now the mining and logging have stopped, and in 2000 the Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Region was formed to protect nine valleys.

Just as I’m reflecting on Clayoquot’s new incarnation of wealth as an upmarket eco-resort, our horses stop dead in their tracks and refuse to budge. The Pacific wren falls silent and the horses become wild-eyed, tossing their manes as they glance wildly about. Is it another bear? Perhaps, but for now, as I peer through the trees, this one escapes me.

Jane Knight was a guest of Clayoquot Wilderness Resort, which has three nights from £2,700pp all-inclusive (wildretreat.com). The Inspiring Travel Company has seven nights in Canada from £7,399pp, including four nights at Clayoquot in a deluxe hillside tent, three nights at Rosewood Hotel Georgia in Vancouver, seaplane transfers and flights (inspiringtravelcompany.co.uk)