

BRITISH COLUMBIA



Passing Cloud, an eight-passenger schooner, takes travelers on eco-adventures along British Columbia's ruggedly beautiful coast in Canada. Shown here near Eucott Bay.

PHOTOS BY NORMA MEYER

Call of the wild

By schooner, on foot — an adventure-filled trip to Great Bear Rainforest

By Norma Meyer

We are tracking grizzly bears in British Columbia's remote Great Bear Rainforest when we stumble upon an adrenalin-inducing lair: there's a claw-dug "daybed" where an XXXXL furry body recently rested, next to a gory bodiless chum salmon head and other snacked-on salmon carcasses.

Grizzlies must be near (again, why am I doing this?) so led by our naturalist we bear-sleuth on, following sedge grass trampled by sharp-fanged predators and plentiful piles of bear poop.

"This is prime grizzly bear viewing territory," murmurs Russ Markel, captain of our eight-passenger schooner Passing Cloud, anchored nearby in snug Cascade Inlet. Markel has bear spray tucked in a pocket and repeatedly calls out, "Yo bear" so as not to surprise a 900-pound lumbering carnivore. Soon we investigate a decrepit abandoned fisherman's cabin where bears have partied — first hint, the jaw-mangled Pilsner beer can; second hint, what once was a stove. The grizzlies (and human corpse I expect to see inside) are MIA.

Back in our inflatable Zodiac, we glide toward sleek Passing Cloud, the lone vessel in this narrow glacier-carved fjord spectacularly lined with hundreds of waterfalls plunging off sheer granite cliffs. To greet us, our endearing chef stands on the boat's bow playing "Amazing Grace." On bagpipes. Wonder what the grizzlies think. I'm on an Outer Shores Expedition, an extraordinary 305-nautical-mile, eco-adventure up Canada's wild western coast.

For nine days, I share Passing Cloud's tight quarters with eight strangers — and luckily, they're super-great folks. There's two baby-boomer couples who are

passengers and the four-person crew of Outer Shores founder and marine biologist Markel; 27-year-old first mate Joel White who anticipates needs like Radar on MASH; naturalist Volker Deecke who is a notable whale expert and also studying bears; and chef-bagpiper Graham MacLennan, who whips up to-die-for deserts — chocolate pots de creme — in ramekin cups. We quickly bond (one tiny ship bathroom equipped with a "privacy fan" makes for forever friends) as we serenely sail hours each day and land by Zodiac to explore moss-cloaked forests draped in stringy witch's hair lichen and maybe hiding hobbits with bears.

OUTER SHORES EXPEDITIONS

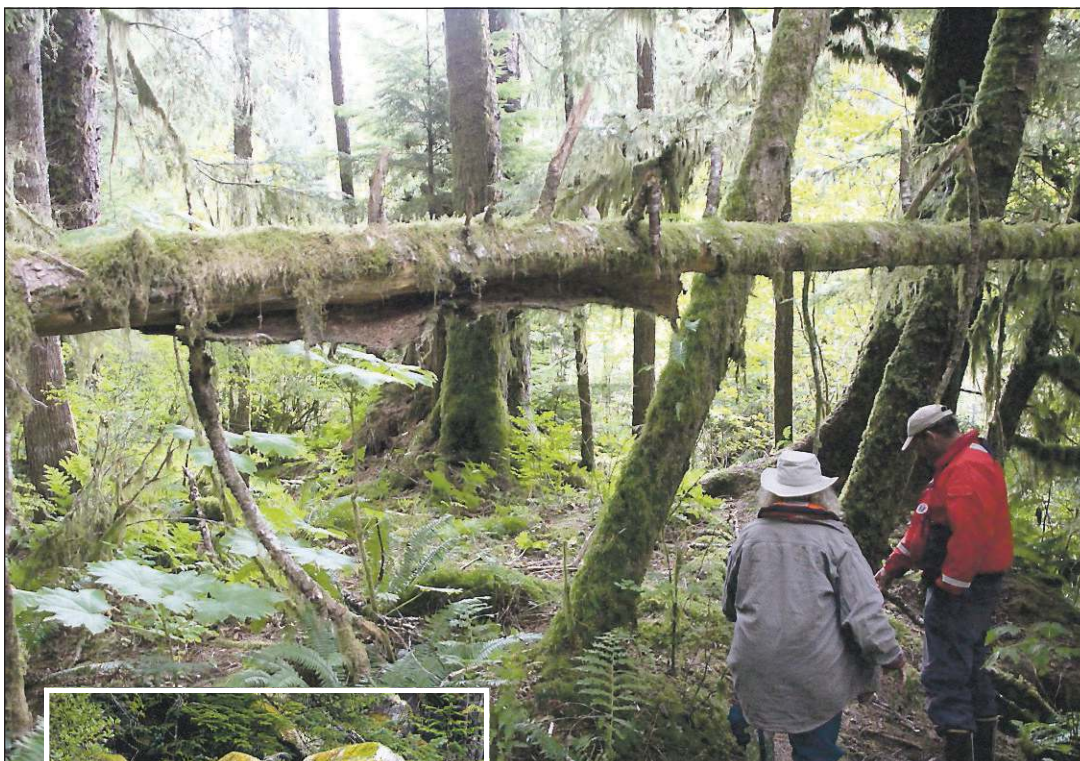
What: Tour company offers a variety of trips, all aboard Passing Cloud along Canada's Pacific coast.

Information: 855-714-7233, www.outershores.ca

So much to sea

Day one launches the maritime magic. Some 20 orca whales accompany Passing Cloud throughout the afternoon, mesmerizing us with acrobatic dives. We eavesdrop on their chirping and singing conversations when Deecke lowers a hydrophone into the waters of Johnstone Strait and explains what the magnificent giants are "saying." Humpback whales next dance a ballet of flukes. We learn how to calculate when they'll resurface in a chorus of blowing spouts.

Every day delivers new wonders. A gray whale, a minke whale, sea otters, sea lions, 21 species of seabirds, Dall's porpoises leaping alongside our 70-foot schooner. Near Penrose Island, we walk on a fantastical white beach of sea shells that musically tinkles with rolling tides. Elsewhere, on a towering cliff's wall, we examine painted red ochre pictographs left by long-gone First Nations people. On Calvert Island, after a steep wilderness hike unveils dramatic ocean vistas, we descend to a sweeping pristine beach where our chef has laid out guacamole and chips and vegan coconut treats atop a granite boul-



Naturalist Volker Deecke, above right, and passenger Charlotte Meadows follow clues to find grizzlies in the Great Bear Rainforest along the Kwatna River. Salmon leftovers from bears are crucial to fertilizing the rainforest. A black bear, left, ambles along Eucott Bay in the Great Bear Rainforest, one of the most pristine wilderness environments in the world.

der facing colonies of rock-clinging giant green anemones.

"This is the most stupendous experience," passenger Charlotte Meadows, a dietitian from Virginia, tells me midway through the trip. "I don't ever want it to end."

She and her husband booked the expedition to celebrate their 65th birthdays.

We're on a repositioning voyage that varies from Outer Shores' usual itinerary for the Great Bear Rainforest, the 250-mile-long gem that is the planet's largest tract of unspoiled temperate rainforest. Normally passengers go to locally operated "bear viewing platforms" where the animals often congregate during salmon season. But we're DIY for finding black-snouted beasts.

Which means multiple bear

recons. In tangled woodlands above the Kwatna River's muddy banks, we tromp in our gumboots past colossal paw prints, a smorgasbord trail of gnawed salmon dragged in by bears, scads of scat and a tree trunk snagged by a passing grizzly's brown fur. I feel eyes on us.

"We are now guests of the bear hotel," Markel intones.

Please don't call room service. Deecke assures that bears are typically afraid of people, then details an experiment where scientists put the scent of a beaver's anal glands on a post with a camera to lure bears so they could be filmed. This is day six on the boat; with infrequent short "ship showers," I'm pretty sure I give off that same whiff.

Bear encounter

Safely back in the Zodiac,

spawning-bound salmon nearly jump into the raft and bald eagles majestically soar one-by-one from the tops of ancient Sitka spruce and red cedar trees. I lose count after the 18th eagle in the parade. Later, on our aft deck, we gaze at fluorescent pink skies illuminating mountaintops and again clink silver wine goblets in a toast. ("Oh no, that's bad luck! Each time you do that a sailor dies," Deecke reminds.)

From dawn to lights out, Ph.D.s Markel and Deecke enthusiastically teach us about the fragile ecosystem and every living thing we encounter. (I now know how barnacles have sex.) Markel also gives a nightly "Chart Chat" to discuss the next day's travels before we retreat to quaint-sized staterooms.

On day seven of nine, we socialize with our first human. An older solo sailor named Kevin joins us soaking in the natural hot springs of Eucott Bay. We eventually leave in our Zodiac from where — huge thrill! — we spot not a grizzly but a black bear. Only the hefty creature is rambling on the grassy shore toward Kevin. (Here's where I ponder: Maybe we can just watch the bear for a while; gray-haired, swim-suited Kevin surely could "look big" as we've been coached to do in a pinch.) We yell to Kevin; both he and the scared bear scam.

Our final night aboard Passing Cloud is emotion-choked. It's been an enthralling adventure with strangers who became family. Says passenger Rick Verbeek, a Toronto emergency room physician: "Trip of a lifetime doesn't even come close to describing what I experienced in the last week."

The next morning as we part, it's bear hugs all around.



Zodiac excursions bring Passing Cloud's passengers to far-flung havens, like this islet's beach of shells that chimed with the gentle waves.