

Globe Life

British Columbia

Sea kayaking on Vancouver Island's wild West Coast

First a sheltered cove. Then the giant waves, jagged headlands and submerged reefs of the outer coast

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‘She's not coming,’ my wife, Christine, announced as we sat down to dinner. ‘I tried to talk her into it, but there was no way.’

What? I'd talked to my mother-in-law, Isabelle, only days earlier, and she had seemed enthusiastic about joining us for a sea-kayaking vacation on the remote northwest coast of Vancouver Island.

Okay, maybe not enthusiastic, but she hadn't said “no” either. To be fair, Isabelle is a non-swimmer with a healthy fear of water, but I had assured her that paddling a sea kayak is no more difficult than walking. And I promised to watch out for her. Now, she was balking?

Deciding on an escape that suited everyone had not been easy. Our three-year-old son was a veteran of wilderness journeys, but this year there was a pregnant wife and water-phobic mother-in-law to consider as well. What adventurous activity could we all tackle together?

The solution arrived in the form of an e-mail from a long lost friend. It had been two decades since David Pinel and I last met. Back then, we were young ski bums, hanging around Nelson, B.C. Now a marine biologist with 18 years of experience guiding in Kyuquot Sound, Dave has just bought a sea-kayaking base camp there, and wondered if I was interested in visiting.

Comfortable beds and large wall tents would be a back-saver for Christine. Gourmet food and a spacious kitchen shelter wouldn't hurt either. The region's protected waters seemed perfect for introducing Isabelle to paddling. And David had a young son, Morgan, the same age as Bodi. And me? The words “outer coast” were all I needed to hear.

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So I chose to ignore Isabelle's change of heart, and booked all four of us for a week in June. Eventually, after weeks of delicate persuasion, Isabelle reluctantly agreed to come.

By the blessings of geography, David's camp on Spring Island offers the best of two paddling worlds. It is perched at the mouth of Kyuquot Sound, and its western shores face the open Pacific, while the inner beaches open upon calm, sheltered waterways.

It was the outer waters that drew me. If you have ever paddled on [British Columbia's](#) outer coast – exposed to the open ocean winds and swell, beyond the protection of islands, fjords or headlands – you'll know this realm possesses its own special magic.

Balanced on the thinnest of margins, between two enormous biospheres – the endless blue sea and the green temperate rain forest – the outer coast can be at once terrifying and profound, volatile and serene. Raked by winds, pounded by mountainous waves, dotted with jagged headlands and submerged reefs, perpetually doused in foam and mist, the outer coast does not, at first glance, appear enticing to the kayaker.

But paddle here just once – rising and dropping with the breathing ocean, senses on high alert – and you'll be hooked. There is something primordial about bobbing in a tiny kayak on the edge of the Pacific, where one is literally staring into the void. Somewhere out there, beyond the cries of the gulls, more than 8,000 kilometres away, lies Japan, but in between lurks an incomprehensible vastness. On such a powerful stage, human life feels refreshingly insignificant.

We arrive on Spring Island as lengthening days and clearing skies begin to warm B.C.'s coast. Bodi and Morgan dash through island meadows pretending to be airplanes while Dave and I buck driftwood logs that have washed ashore during winter, chopping and stacking them for firewood. Isabelle plants tomato and lettuce in a summer garden and Christine collects enormous horse clam shells to mark the island's maze of pathways.

Later, we all go for a hike, finding the interior forest a tangle of green; ferns, moss and lichen dripping from tree limbs and rocks. Passing a massive cedar, we measure its circumference to be 12 arm spans (or about 20 metres) and Dave estimates it is more than 1,000 years old.

On the island's far side, while the toddlers play with shells and crabs, we comb the beaches for the infamous Japanese fishing floats made of green glass. A gale has been blowing for several days, and large waves crash into the black volcanic rocks while foam streams away from headlands. Unfortunately, I doubt the chaotic scene is doing anything for Isabelle's appetite for paddling.

The last time Bodi went kayaking was in Argentina. Only eight months old, he happily nestled on his mother's lap while I paddled our double kayak. Much bigger and more active now, there is no way he could share a cockpit with anyone, especially his pregnant mother. Luckily, the double kayaks on Spring Island come with spacious centre hatches, which double nicely as child seats.

The second morning Christine and I set off to explore the sheltered waters inside of Kyuquot Sound, with Bodi tucked in the hatch between us. Dave follows. He has Morgan in his centre hatch, and Isabelle up front. The big boat is more stable than she expected, and Dave's calm presence is reassuring.

“My father came over from Scotland in a boat as a very young boy,” I hear her explain. “And he told us as young girls that if we didn't want to drown, then stay away from lakes and rivers.”

After a long pause, she adds, “But this doesn't seem too bad. Not yet anyway!”

The boys spy a raft of sea otters (recently returned in abundance to Kyuquot after being hunted to near extinction in the late 1800s) and point excitedly. But the gentle to and fro of the boats is calming, and before long, both have fallen asleep in their hatches.

We continue onward, exploring sea caves and vertical rock stacks that line nearby shores. Before long, we spot a black bear wandering a beach in search of crabs and other treats. Bouncing between her legs is a very young cub, no larger than a household cat.

To my surprise and delight, Isabelle – a golf and curling fanatic – is hooked on the technical details of kayaking. She fastidiously follows Dave's coaching, “Loose grip on the paddle, generate power from the torso with rotation.” Later, over a dinner of halibut steaks and mango salsa, Isabelle lets slip that she would be interested in paddling a single kayak. All by herself! But only in the protected waters of the harbour, mind you. What a difference a few days makes.

One morning we sensed our group was ready for more

Toward the end of the week, we launch an armada of kayaks after a leisurely breakfast. This time, Isabelle joins me in a double. The plan, as always, is to simply see what the ocean will allow.

Dave and I have already paddled around Spring Island several times, exploring long sections of exposed coastline. With swell exploding over submerged rocks, creating “boomers,” I once again felt the exhilaration of the “outside.”

On this morning, Dave and I both sense that a journey to the outer coast might be within our group's reach. Gently inching toward the channel, we let the others follow, trying to gauge their comfort. As the swell gently builds, perhaps 30 centimetres in height, I feel Isabelle's grip tighten on her paddle. Dave asks how she is doing. Just fine, she nods. We near the final islet. Beyond lies open ocean. If we keep going, we will commit to traversing a kilometre of open coast before we can tuck back into sheltered water again. Dave checks if everyone feels okay to go on. He gets a solid round of grins.

I steer our big double into the swell. Soon, a fresh sea breeze blows across our bow. The waves passing beneath build to two metres in height, lifting us gently up and down as mountains of water pass beneath. There is the distant roar of breaking waves along the rocky coast. Gulls wheel overhead and a sea otter pops up to have a closer peek at our strange boats. This relatively calm summer day offers only a quick peek at the wonders of the outer coast, but that is all it takes.

Dave paddles close and snaps a picture of Isabelle atop a wave.

“I need to get a copy of that,” she whispers after he paddles off. “My friends will never believe me otherwise.”

Special to The Globe and Mail

If you go...

- The journey to the remote northwest corner of Vancouver Island is an adventure in itself. From either the Campbell River or Comox Valley airports (served by [Air Canada](#), WestJet and Pacific Coastal), you can rent a car or, if you have a group, book a shuttle (www.conashuttle.com; or Campbell River Airporter, 1-250-286-3000) to Fair Harbour where a water taxi (voyagerwatertaxi.com) will pick you up.
- Alternatively, book passage on the historic MV Uchuck (www.mvuchuck.com) – originally a minesweeper that has been retrofitted to carry 100 passengers and delivers freight to remote communities along the outer coast.
- Or, Air Nootka (www.airnootka.com) offers a spectacular, 45-minute scenic coastal flight from Gold River (89 kilometres west of Campbell River on Vancouver Island).
- West Coast Expedition runs trips for paddlers (and non-paddlers) of all abilities from a fully catered base camp on Spring Island. Rates start at \$1,339 for four-day base camp trips. For more information, visit www.westcoastexpeditions.com.

Kayaking with kids?

- Safety is paramount. Everyone should wear life jackets at all times. Try to find a model that fits your child comfortably – otherwise, he or she will want to take it off. Carry extra warm clothing, and exercise extreme caution in judgment. If you have any concerns about conditions or your ability to handle them, stay on shore until things improve.
- Make sure your child is wearing a wide-brimmed hat, even on cloudy days, and slather on lots of sunscreen. Sunblock clothing is also great for kids.
- Snacks can be a lifesaver, or at least a “frustration-saver.” Since you can't always pull over when kids get

fussy, the distraction of nibbles often helps. You may also want to bring a boat on a string, or a piece of kelp, to drag in the water and play with.

- A blanket is also good to have along in case your child decides to bunker down for a nap.
- Infants can be carried in the lap of the front passenger of a double. Toddlers and children will do better in their own centre hatch. Give them half a paddle so they can be involved in paddling if they choose.
- Older or bigger children can do well in their own front cockpit with an adult behind. There are smaller double kayaks available that make this less strenuous for the adult.
- Use the kayaks as a vehicle for getting to fun destinations for exploring on shore. Spend plenty of time wandering, both onshore and through the intertidal zone.