



ON THE WESTERN EDGE OF VANCOUVER ISLAND IS AN ANCIENT FOREST, A BEVY OF MARINE LIFE, UNFORGETTABLE KAYAKING, AND EVEN AN ESPRESSO BAR...THIS IS

The espresso machine hisses like a steam locomotive, while I stretch a creaky back unaccustomed to being shoehorned into a cramped kayak shell. Having navigated the bumpy roads across Vancouver Island's rugged spine en route to a sea kayaking adventure in wild Kyuquot Sound, I hadn't expected to be paddling up to an espresso bar. However, here in Kyuquot village the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well. With a flotilla of kayaks bobbing next to the dock, the young barista Tammy Billy is hard at work, while our guide Dave Pinel, who co-owns West Coast Expeditions with his wife Caroline, unfurls an ocean chart to plot the day.



KYUQUOT SOUND

STORY BY Andrew Findlay

"This is the social hub of Kyuquot Sound," Pinel says, as he shares a laugh with a group of local natives lounging on the dock, along with Eric Gorbman, the American kosher chef and proprietor of both the Kyuquot Inn and the Java-the-Hutt coffee bar.

However, as much as I enjoy a good brew, wildlife—not civilized shots of espresso—drew me here. Kyuquot Sound forms a half-moon shaped indentation along the west coast of Vancouver Island and although much less renowned than Nootka and Clayoquot sounds to the south, it is no less spectacular. Roughly divided between the traditional territories of the Kyuquot and Checleset first nations, the Sound is ringed by steep sided mountains that plunge into a sea sprinkled with tiny islands and islets, providing sheltered waters ideal for both marine life and safe sea kayaking. Pinel has spent 15 seasons guiding trips around Kyuquot—it's like his second home. West Coast Expeditions' base camp is on Spring Island,

smack in the centre of the Mission Group archipelago; islands with groves of massive cedar trees the size of VW Beetles surrounded by crystalline inter-tidal pools where every square centimeter of available real estate is occupied by life. In Kyuquot Sound marine life gets in your face; it's everywhere.

That must have been Captain James Cook's first impression when he explored these same shores in 1788; he encountered not only ancient native culture but also rafts of sea otters thousands strong inhabiting the protected shallows, around the islands and inlets. The discovery sparked a destructive trade in fur pelts destined for the fashion houses of European and Asian aristocracy, and in mere decades the entire Pacific Northwest population of otters teetered on extinction. In places like Kyuquot the marine ecosystem was thrown out of balance, like a tottering house of cards. In this case the key card was the otter whose favorite food is sea urchin, an

invertebrate that attaches itself to the holdfast of kelp. This common plant is key to biodiversity, a source of food and habitat for myriad fish, insect, crustacean, and shellfish species, in turn providing prey for marine mammals and larger fish further up the food chain. However without otters to keep urchins in check, kelp forests can be wiped out creating what scientists call “urchin barrens,” and that’s what happened here. In the late 1960s and early 70s scientists relocated nearly 100 sea otters from southern Alaska to Kyuquot Sound. It was a surprisingly successful intervention; these thick furred, naturally curious little creatures have made a remarkable recovery, now numbering more than 3000 in the Kyuquot region alone. Consequently some scientists believe this has allowed the kelp forests to return with vigour. Nowadays Kyuquot feels like a veritable wild kingdom. Last night we fell asleep to the ghostly breathing of a humpback whale that ventured into the darkness

These two must be pausing between sea urchin snacks. Soon we’re pulling ashore on Lookout Island. We push through a wall of dense salal that fringes the beach before entering what feels like some fantastic lost arboretum. Sitka spruce soar as straight and tall as the masts of a schooner, but it’s the stuff underfoot that is truly mesmerizing; a forest floor thick with electric green moss that gives the sensation of walking with springs on the feet. In a mysterious way that only undisturbed nature can, this island invites silence and contemplation. An hour later, we’re paddling toward Double Rocks. As Lookout shrinks behind us I sense the timeless power of the ocean rolling beneath the kayak, nothing but a thin synthetic skin of a hull that separates me and the sea, and—it suddenly occurs to me—the creatures that live within it. Double Rocks looms closer and I hear what sounds like the cacophony of a dog kennel; dozens of overlapping sea lions form a mass of flesh on Double Rocks that glistens in the sun, somewhat unpleasantly reminiscent of tourists sunning themselves on a crowded beach at an all inclusive beach resort. Three massive males flop into the water threateningly and Pinel cautions us to keep a respectful distance from these territorial mammals. I have no desire to challenge this directive.

The wind picks up slightly so we turn our bows 180 degrees for the exposed crossing back to Lookout Island. Someone in our group spots the graceful arch of a humpback in the distance. We stop paddling and watch, counting three whales in this pod that is travelling straight toward us. Two more surface, raising their tail flukes and diving into the depths. We carry on somewhat warily now. Then, a few paddle lengths to the starboard of a kayak piloted by a retired nurse from Victoria, one of these Leviathans breaks the surface in a silent arc unimaginably graceful for an animal that weighs nearly 40 metric tonnes full grown. The nurse screams and an involuntary panic courses through our vulnerable group that’s floating around in glorified Tupperware containers.

However, as far as I know a humpback has never attacked a human. Of course the reverse is a different story; these whales were once indiscriminately hunted in an astonishingly wasteful industry based partly on the perverse desire to churn whale oil into cosmetics. So, it is incredible to think that these intelligent, wonderful creatures would still wish to approach us so closely, in a gesture of curiosity and, it seems, friendship. Like the sea otter, humpbacks are another good news story, having made a comeback and now frequently visit Kyuquot Sound. Last summer in a single day, Pinel counted 17 humpbacks; 10 years ago one or two would have been cause for celebration. Buzzing from the day’s close encounters, we turn back toward Spring Island.

That night after a supper of salmon baked over an open fire, I sip a glass of red wine and sit with Pinel around the campfire. Sparks spiral upwards into a darkening sky.

“The more time you spend around these islands the more they become a part of you. It’s such a rich place,” he says, as stars slowly emerge, illuminating the night one by one.

Later, making my way by headlamp back to my tent, I think I hear the ghostly echo of an exhaling humpback somewhere out there in the blackness. ●

Scenes from a tour with West Coast Expeditions: gourmet fare, intertidal exploration and kayaking the waters of Kyuquot Sound.



of a Spring Island cove. Today, we’re paddling toward Lookout Island, on the lookout for otters, before making the crossing to Double Rocks where stellar sea lions haul out to laze in the sun.

Fortified with caffeine, we skirt the western shore of Spring Island, the briny smell of the sea as sharp on the nose as a fish market. Forests of bull kelp bob in the water like a confusion of spaghetti noodles. Below the surface, iridescent seaweed

sparkles with cobalt blue caught in submarine shafts of sunlight. We pass a reef of volcanic rock revealed by the ebbing tide; starfish, sea stars, periwinkles, urchins, anemones and other unrecognizable creatures compete for space. Pinel stops paddling and pulls out his binoculars, pointing at a pair of otters periscoping among the kelp and watching us.

“Sea otters remind me of teenagers,” Pinel says, “they spend a third of the day eating, a third of the day sleeping, and a third of the day grooming.”

IF YOU GO

For information on base-camp and expedition-style sea-kayaking trips in Kyuquot Sound go to westcoastexpeditions.com; 1-800-665-3040.