

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Wild by name & wild by nature

SUZANNE MORPHET is immersed in tranquil beauty on a cruise to Vancouver Island



Maple Leaf Adventures guests explore a calm bay by kayak while the mothership is at anchor. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Our seven-day cruise is called Vancouver Island's Wild Side, and by our first evening it's already lived up to its name.

On boarding our ship in Port Hardy on the north end of the island, we learn that the weather looks poor for rounding Cape Scott on the treacherous north-west corner.

Instead, we'll detour to nearby Nakwakto Rapids on the British Columbia mainland for thrills of a safer sort.

When we arrive, the tide is changing and what's normally a calm ocean inlet has turned into a raging river. It's the fastest tidal current in the world, clocked at up to 18 knots, or about 32km/h.

White knuckled, we cling to the railings of the ships' tenders and gape at whirlpools that could easily suck smaller vessels under.

Seagulls circle and screech, looking for an easy meal that's been churned up. Two black cormorants perch on the rocky face of Tremble Island as water surges around it.

Few people ever get to witness these rapids, certainly not those aboard the larger cruise ships that

Steller sea lions rest on Solander Island off Vancouver Island's west coast.



pass by, oblivious, on their way to and from Alaska all summer on itineraries that never differ from one week to the next.

That's why I've opted for a tour with Maple Leaf Adventures, a forerunner of expedition-style cruising on Canada's west coast. If Plan A doesn't work, there's always Plan B . . . or C or D. And aboard the company's newest ship — the 138ft (42m) catamaran Cascadia — it's so comfortable that at times I forget I'm on a ship.

Of course, we've yet to round Cape Scott.

"The seas can be mountains out there," expedition leader Kevin Smith warned earlier. "If it was more than 3m, we couldn't go."

But a couple of days later the weather turns in our favour. If anything, sailing this cape is underwhelming. The seas are almost glassy as we stand on the bow watching humpback whales break the surface, their bumpy backs glistening in the sun.

No highways lead to the north-west coast of Vancouver Island, so we soon leave civilisation in our wake. Other than a few sports fishing boats and the occasional kayak and sailboat, we won't see another vessel or settlement until we reach the First Nations village of Kyuquot about halfway down the coast, which is also our turnaround point.

One afternoon after rounding Cape Scott, the captain cuts the engine so we can view the abundant wildlife on Solander

Island, an ecological reserve off the Brooks Peninsula. Steller sea lions flop on rocky islets, while puffins peel past the ship's bridge on stubby wings.

That evening we anchor in Nesparti Inlet, jagged green mountains rising behind us. "(Know) how rare it is to get here," Kevin says, as we savour the immense silence. Before taking over Maple Leaf Adventures 20 years ago, Kevin worked as a ranger for BC Parks and knows this coast intimately.

"This is as far away as you can get from roads, it's just parks and protected areas, so breath in."

Dining on confit leg of duck paired with BC wine at dinner, we learn that this coast endured more than a century of natural extraction and exploitation.

It started in the late 19th century with the hunting of sea otters for their luxuriantly thick fur. Then came commercial whaling, commercial fishing and industrial-scale logging.

"Some of the worst logging in BC was here," says David Pinel, our onboard naturalist as we approach Kyuquot and nearby Spring Island where he co-owns a kayaking camp.

Other small islands surround this natural harbour, including one that was the summer home of the Kyuquot First Nation. Before smallpox and colonisation, it was a thriving village of close to 2000 people. Today, about 200 people live on a nearby site.

fact file

- Maple Leaf Adventures will offer the Vancouver Island's Wild Side itinerary twice in July, 2022. Prices start at \$CAN6700 (\$7370) per person for six nights/seven days.
- The company also operates two other ships and offers itineraries elsewhere in BC and Alaska from April to October. See mapleleafadventures.com

"All of the Big Houses were dismantled or burned down by the Federal government," Dave says as we pass the original village. "Can you imagine (it) with children playing on the beach and canoes coming and going?" Kevin asks.

We meet some of the descendants of the survivors at Dave's camp when four generations of one family arrive to share some of their traditional knowledge.

While Lana cleans two large chinook salmon, Lucy demonstrates how to weave strips of cedar, Tessie teaches us how to pronounce words from her Nuu-chah-nulth language and Christine tells stories about her early life and arranged first marriage.

"My mother bought me a white dress, but it was too big," she says matter of factly.

Life is slowly improving, according to Dave, who spends his summers here and has been "adopted" by two of the women.

"Now," he says, "the otters are recovering, the people are recovering, the forests are recovering."

Indeed, signs of vibrant life are everywhere, from purple starfish to birds, including a black-footed albatross. One morning, an early riser enjoying the outdoor hot tub spots two wolves on a nearby beach. When our adventure ends a couple of days later in Coal Harbour — BC's last commercial whaling station — we have a renewed sense of hope for this coast and the planet.



Lucy Paivio, who lives in the First Nations community.

