

Nature's Disneyland

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by Diane Bisaro

You've never been to Disneyland?"

Although it's a question, it sounds like an accusation.

My daughter shakes her head and helps herself to a cookie.



Happy times at Spring Island. Photo: Sandi Munro

"Nope. My mom's never even been there," she says.

"That's soooo weird," her playmate exclaims. She looks at me aghast, like I'm from another planet.

My daughter shrugs her shoulders.

"We do other stuff," she says.

"Like what other stuff?"

"I dunno. Hiking, kayaking...."

She stuffs the remainder of her chocolate chip cookie in her mouth and jumps up.

"Come on, let's go outside and play."

Don't get me wrong. Considering that 70% of Americans have visited Disneyland, it must have something going for it. For me, it's more about following tradition. Every tribe has its own traditions and patterns for raising children. My parents never took me to Disneyland and their parents never took them. Never mind that this may have had something to do with a limited

budget, I like to believe that my ancestors possessed great insight and inherently knew that family vacations void of long line-ups, malls and fast food joints were a good thing. My parents took me to wild places instead where nothing stood in orderly rows. I learned to play in the mountains, rivers, lakes, and the sea.

Since the birth of my own two daughters " (currently aged 11 and 13), I have looked for wild places to play as a family outside the confines of our own backyard. This has been of particular importance given that we live in the city. In an urban setting, outdoor experience is too often limited to parentally supervised play in paved-over playgrounds and organized sporting events, leaving little time for adventure and spontaneity. Children need spaces to climb on rocks, balance on logs, play in streams, dig in the earth. Needless to say, I am a strong believer that play in wild places makes for a sound mind, body, and spirit.

As a family, we have wandered with dairy cows on the lush slopes of the Dolomites in Northern Italy, swum among brilliantly colored tropical fish in the azure waters off Akumal, searched for berries and made bull kelp horns in the shadows of the ancient totems at Ninstints on Haida Gwaii, and stroked the underbelly of an enormous Mola-Mola on our annual paddling trip to Kyuquot on the untamed West Coast of Vancouver Island. There is always a story, an adventure, and a lesson about the power of nature.

And while there are countless places that make for adventure-hushed valleys, towering snow-topped mountains, tree-lined lakes, fast-moving rivers-the sea and the shore are definitely among our family's favorite playgrounds. And what better way to explore than by kayak? Every summer, we paddle and explore in Kyuquot Sound, a wildly beautiful area on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island.

We first visited Kyuquot in 1994 when we were invited to join friends and their children on an eco-tour called 'Sea Otter Odyssey'. The tour should have been called 'Downpour Odyssey' because we spent the entire week wandering in the rain and the thick fog made it almost impossible to discern sea otters from driftwood. But for everyone in our group, it was a great adventure.

We spent hours exploring the incredibly rich tide-pools. Decorator Crabs, Gum Boot Chitons, Hooded Nudibranchs, Moon Snails, Sunflower Stars, Purple Sea Urchins, Aggregate Anemones, Sculpins, and Penpoint Gunnels. We saw Eagles, Cormorants, Oystercatchers, and Pigeon Guillemots. We hiked along lush, unkempt trails and walked on secluded windswept beaches. We feasted on fresh salmon and visited with people from the remote village of Kyuquot. We heard stories about their ancestors who roamed the area long before Juan Perez and Capt. George Vancouver ever set sail on the Pacific. And on the day of our departure, the sun skulked from behind the clouds and we leapt at the opportunity to go paddling. The experience was magical and from that day on, we were hooked.

Going to Kyuquot has since become ritual, a pilgrimage-a Shirley MacLaine sort of thing-but fortunately not too many people know the route. Our journey typically begins in Campbell River where we rendezvous with Rupert Wong, a biologist who runs West Coast Expeditions. Our group is intimate, our family and friends who share our love for the outdoors. The route from Campbell River to Kyuquot Sound is roughly three hours on dusty logging roads and a half-hour boat ride on the exposed West Coast. Indeed, the ride itself is an adventure.



Nicole tries the hands on approach. Photo: Sandi Munro

Rupert makes base camp on Spring Island, one of the many islands that dot Kyuquot Sound. Spending time on Spring Island is like taking a step back in time, from the modern world to an ancient, more enduring one. We happily exist without the material trappings of urban life. Our homes are tents, nestled on beds of moss under canopies of massive Douglas Firs and Western Red Cedar. The children have complete freedom. They climb on rocks and up trees, play in the waves, dig in the sand, explore and learn. All of us, but especially the children benefit from our trips to Spring Island and our cherished relationship with Rupert. He has taught the children life-long outdoor skills and shared insight and knowledge, fueling our fascination and respect for nature.

Furthermore, Rupert has shared his love of kayaking and, consequently, we have become enthusiastic paddlers. Our day trips have allowed us to explore much of the rugged, unspoiled coastline and many of the picturesque islands in the Sound. The water teems with life and we often watch sea otters feeding and rafting in the kelp beds. The place is untamed, the encounters unexpected. Like the day we encountered what we originally suspected was an injured porpoise. The animal appeared to be in distress, flipped on its side and flapping its pectoral fins on the surface of the water. Quietly, we nosed our kayaks towards the animal. It immediately became apparent that this animal was definitely not a member of the dolphin family! The fish was upwards of 12 feet long and must have weighed at least a ton. Its gigantic head was almost a third of its total body length. We were absolutely wide-eyed. It was a most curious looking creature. My daughter Megan, who was eight at the time, instinctively reached out her hand and stroked the great fish's belly.

"It's so smooth and slimy!" She squealed.

"What is it?"

"An alien fish," one of the kids in our group announced, "and I bet the slime is poisonous!"

"Touch it, Mom," prompted Megan.

"No way, I think it's a pig fish," my daughter Nicole exclaimed. "Half pig, half fish It's Pygmalion!"

"Actually, I think it might be a Mola- Mola," suggested Bill, our guide. Although he had never encountered a Mola-Mola in these waters, he had seen them in Baja. Back at Spring Island we learned that the Mola-Mola, or Sun Fish as it is also known, was likely doing what Sun Fish do-floating on the surface of the sea in an attempt to absorb some heat from the sun. And no, the slime was not poisonous! It was a memorable paddle, a bunch of kids and adults bobbing up and down in kayaks, the sun, the sea-smelling air, the banter, all of us in awe of a big fish.

Our yearly visit to Kyuquot Sound always includes an excursion to the Brooks Peninsula, northwest of Kyuquot. The Brooks is a raw and untamed tract of land that juts out into the Pacific. It's an incredibly unique place, existing outside the confines of time. An endless stretch of secluded white sand pushing up against impenetrable brush and old-growth forest, mountains shrouded in mist, waves pounding against the sandy shore. Here we pass the day hiking to the falls in the Nasparti Inlet, beachcombing, digging in the sand, sun bathing on the smooth warm rocks, and riding the waves. Boogie boarding, surf kayaking-what an adventure! Surrounded by emerald green water, waiting in anticipation for the sea to swell, the surf gathering speed and force, the frantic attempt to climb aboard the wave and finally, the rip-roaring ride into shore. The sensation is intense and unforgettable and so too is the majestic beauty of the Brooks Peninsula.

I am grateful that my parents took me to play in wild places. The mountains, forest, and sea. Unpredictable places that touched my soul and shaped my attitudes. And while I cannot predict whether a sense of wilderness will stay with my own children, I know their insights and experiences would be very different had they hung around the city. By playing in wild places, they have had time to climb, tunnel, dig, and wander. They have learned that the world is diverse and in nature, diversity is the norm. I can only hope that this understanding will help them to be tolerant and forgiving, fundamental requirements for living life in harmony. And one day, they too might look for wild places to play. Places that fortify the mind, body and the spirit.

© Diane Bisaro is a writer and outdoor enthusiast who lives with her family in Vancouver, BC.