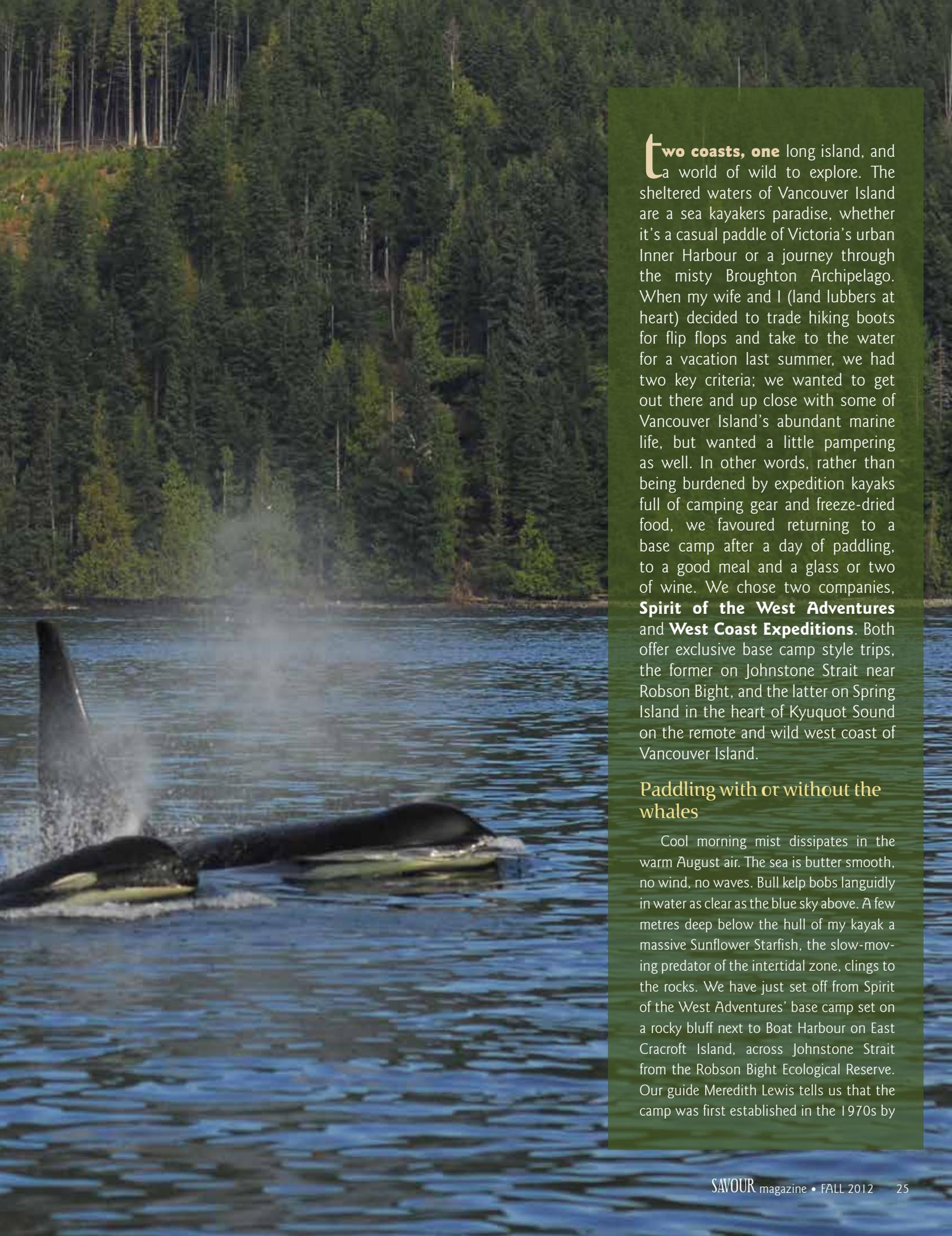


# SEA kayak ADVENTURES

By Andrew Findlay





**T**wo coasts, one long island, and a world of wild to explore. The sheltered waters of Vancouver Island are a sea kayakers paradise, whether it's a casual paddle of Victoria's urban Inner Harbour or a journey through the misty Broughton Archipelago. When my wife and I (land lubbers at heart) decided to trade hiking boots for flip flops and take to the water for a vacation last summer, we had two key criteria; we wanted to get out there and up close with some of Vancouver Island's abundant marine life, but wanted a little pampering as well. In other words, rather than being burdened by expedition kayaks full of camping gear and freeze-dried food, we favoured returning to a base camp after a day of paddling, to a good meal and a glass or two of wine. We chose two companies, **Spirit of the West Adventures** and **West Coast Expeditions**. Both offer exclusive base camp style trips, the former on Johnstone Strait near Robson Bight, and the latter on Spring Island in the heart of Kyuquot Sound on the remote and wild west coast of Vancouver Island.

### **Paddling with or without the whales**

Cool morning mist dissipates in the warm August air. The sea is butter smooth, no wind, no waves. Bull kelp bobs languidly in water as clear as the blue sky above. A few metres deep below the hull of my kayak a massive Sunflower Starfish, the slow-moving predator of the intertidal zone, clings to the rocks. We have just set off from Spirit of the West Adventures' base camp set on a rocky bluff next to Boat Harbour on East Cracroft Island, across Johnstone Strait from the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve. Our guide Meredith Lewis tells us that the camp was first established in the 1970s by

the “interspecies communication group,” a collection of wistful characters who would play instruments and pipe music into the sea.

Earlier this morning, as we sipped coffee and ate our way through stacks of pancakes with blueberry syrup, we heard tell-tale swooshing exhalations. We looked out into the strait in time to see the graceful arc of a humpback whale surfacing, its long spine glistening wet in the early morning sun. We followed the movements of this massive animal, some of which reach 40 metric tonnes in weight, as it travelled with purposeful speed. Near Boat Island, its tail fluke appeared signaling a deep dive then it disappeared into the sea. Buzzing, we returned to our breakfast. Moments later, Lewis shouted, “Orcas!”

Out across the water near the Tsitika River estuary we spotted the spray of spouting whales, like water fountains captured by sunlight in bright relief against the dark green backdrop of the Tsitika Valley. Gathering around the hydrophone, we listened to the ethereal songs of these highly sociable animals, audible through the water even from more than three kilometres away. This was too much for our fellow travelers among them an Italian dentist and his two teenagers, an easygoing Glaswegian couple, a family of four from London and a solo French woman



Guides prepare hearty lunch

on a self-described “orca spirit quest,” all of them reared on a steady diet of spectacular David Attenborough wildlife documentaries and YouTube videos of orcas breaching mere paddle strokes away from unsuspecting kayakers. So, with great anticipation, we took to the water destined for Schmidt Creek at the southern end of the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve. We hoped that our slow moving flotilla might intersect with these cavorting orcas that we’re told belong to the A-5 pod of the northern residents, and are known to frequent these waters. After all, there’s nothing as futile as pursuing an orca in a kayak; we have to rely on luck and the legendary curiosity of these toothed whales which belong to the oceanic dolphin family.

The strait is glassy calm, perfect sea conditions for a crossing. Forty-five minutes into our paddle we encounter a trio of Dall’s porpoises; compact and the fastest of all small cetaceans, they’re able to swim up to 55 km/h. Soon a seiner approaches from the southeast, while a plush yacht, spit-polished white, chugs down from the northwest – morning traffic congestion on the Inside Passage.

“Okay, let’s raft up here and wait for these boats to pass,” Lewis says, taking the opportunity to pass around a chocolate bar snack.

Our kayaks roll over the wakes of passing ships and we scan the water for signs of orcas. However the morning playfulness of the whales has been replaced by something else, likely the pursuit of Chinook salmon (their favorite food) that have been

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**Sea otters and espressos**

The espresso machine hisses like a steam locomotive. 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 line of kayaks bobbing next to the dock, the young native barista is hard at work while our guide Dave Pinel, who co-owns West Coast Expeditions with his wife Caroline and local First Nation resident Bev Hansen-Michel, unfurls an ocean chart to plot the day.

“This is the social hub of Kyuquot Sound,” Pinel says, as he shares a laugh with a group of locals lounging on the dock.

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 on Vancouver Island’s west coast, less renowned than Nootka and Clayoquot Sounds to the south but no less spectacular. Roughly divided between



*Chocolate fondue night at Spirit of the West base camp*

leaping around us like corn in a popcorn maker since leaving base camp. In an hour and a half we approach the cobbled beach at Schmidt Creek. After pulling our boats ashore, the guides lay out a lunchtime spread of tuna wraps, salami and goat cheese. So far, when not paddling it seems we’re eating.

Lewis and fellow guide Pat Friesen monitor chatter from whale watching guides on the handheld radio. They learn that A-5 pod has since crossed the strait close to our base camp and is now tracking northwestwards aiming for Hanson Island, location of the whale research facility, OrcaLab. I laugh at the irony and wonderful truth that wild animals do not exist for our entertainment. However, the Italians are showing signs of frustration, clearly angling for a Discovery Channel moment.

The wind picks up and small waves lap against our kayaks as we chart our way back across the strait towards the prominent sea cliffs on West Cracroft. I enjoy the smooth rhythm and core strength of paddling, a low intensity form of exercise that’s refreshing for me. The rest of the afternoon is spent meandering along the shoreline among sea stacks and floating forests of bull kelp. We pause to observe a black bear foraging for seafood in the intertidal pools, aware but undisturbed by our presence.

That evening back at base camp, I soak in the wood-fired hot tub perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the water. Guide Friesen serves up a plate of candied salmon, goat cheese and avocado roll appetizers, while we listen to the faint mysterious vocalizations of the orcas out there somewhere in the strait.

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*Soaking up the view from the wood-fired hot tub*

the traditional territories of the Kyuquot and Checlesht 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. West Coast Expeditions' base camp is on Spring Island, smack in the centre of the Mission Group archipelago. In 1778 Captain James Cook explored these same shores, encountering not only ancient native culture but also rafts of sea otters thousands strong. The discovery sparked a destructive trade in fur pelts destined for the fashion houses of Europe and Asia, and in mere decades the entire Pacific Northwest population of otters teetered on extinction. Without otters to keep sea urchins in check, kelp (which is the urchin's favored food) can

*Paddling outside the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve*

be decimated and that's what happened here. However in the late 1960s scientists started translocating sea otters to this area from southern Alaska. It was a surprisingly successful reintroduction; these thick furred, naturally curious little creatures now number more than 3,000 in the Kyuquot region alone and the kelp forests have returned with vigour. Last night we fell asleep in our cozy wall tent to the ghostly breathing of a humpback whale that ventured into the darkness 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. Bull kelp bobs 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 and anemones compete for real estate space. Pinel stops paddling and pulls out his binoculars, pointing at a pair of otters periscoping among the kelp.

"Sea otters remind me of teenagers," he says, "they spend a third of the day eating, a third of the day sleeping, and a third of the day grooming."

Soon we paddle past Lookout Island, forested with Sitka spruce as straight and tall as the masts of a schooner. An hour



later we approach Double Rocks and hear what sounds like the cacophony of a dog kennel; dozens of sea lions form a mass of wriggling flesh that shimmers in the sun. Three massive males flop into the water threateningly and Pinel cautions us to keep a respectful distance. I have no desire to challenge this directive.

The wind picks up slightly so we turn 180 degrees and head for the exposed crossing back to Lookout Island. Someone in our group spots the arch of a humpback in the distance. We stop paddling and count three whales traveling straight toward us. Humpbacks were once indiscriminately hunted in an astonishingly wasteful industry based partly on the perverse desire to churn whale oil into cosmetics. Like the sea otter, humpbacks are another good news story; they have made a significant comeback and now frequently visit Kyuquot Sound. Last summer Pinel counted 17 humpbacks in a single day; 10 years ago one or two would have been cause for celebration. Euphoric 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 by the campfire. Sparks spiral upwards into a darkening sky.



*Kayaking the shore of West Cracroft Island*

“The more time you spend around these islands the more they become a part of you,” he says, as stars emerge one by one illuminating the night.

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

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