

CANADA SECTION

PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

PRINCESS ROYAL ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Wild, handled with care

A lodge floats amid adventure, sights, and solitude, protected inside a massive rain forest

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

"It's so peaceful and so quiet," said Gisela Pierburg from Switzerland as she stood on the dock at King Pacific Lodge gazing out at a placid bay ringed by ancient rain forest and uninhabited islands. "Here, it's really like the wild west. This is something we don't have in Europe, no way."

The first thing to strike many visitors at this wilderness lodge in British Columbia's Inside Passage is the pure silence, save for the occasional cry of a bald eagle overhead or the poof of a humpback exhaling in the bay. The lodge sits in the middle of the Great Bear Rainforest, a 4.4-million-acre park established in 2006 that covers an area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park.

Built on a barge, this floating lodge, with its spa, two-story stone fireplace, and cathedral ceilings, gets towed 100 miles down the coast each spring from its wintering grounds in the port city of Prince Rupert to Princess Royal Island on the province's central coast. From May to September, it is moored next to a cascading waterfall in Barnard Harbour,

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Paddling in Hecate Strait, British Columbia, are guests from the floating King Pacific Lodge, seen moored to Princess Royal Island.

It's wild: heli-fishing, hikes, whales, kayaks . . .

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a horseshoe-shaped bay that's backed by the Coast Mountains and surrounded by impenetrable forest, where emerald-green moss engulfs the cedar and fir trees.

Guests here can explore high-alpine ice fields, remote rivers teeming with salmon, and uninhabited islands with white sandy beaches and wildlife found only in this part of the world. The Kermode bear, or "spirit bear" as it is known by the local Gitga'at people, wanders the forests and can often be spotted hunting for salmon spawning in the area's rivers come September. What makes this black bear unique is its ivory coloring, the result of a double-recessive gene.

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"In First Nations' tradition, the Raven created the world and created man, and the legend is that the Raven made every 10th bear white to remind him of the time when the land was covered in ice and snow," said Norm Hann, who developed King Pacific Lodge's adventure program, trains its guides, and runs customized trips in the area through his company, Tantalus Adventures.

When I visited in July, the guests ranged in age from 13 to mid-70s, and included a honeymoon couple, a family celebrating their nephew's graduation, and travelers from as far away as Brazil and Pierburg's homeland. We arrived at this classy, rustic resort by floatplane from Prince Rupert, an hour away.

After a champagne welcome and lunch, we branched off in different directions for an afternoon of adventure. Some kayaked around islands where seals and sea otters played, hiked along pristine rivers in search of black bears, or trolled for salmon and halibut in nearby fiords. Others went on helicopter adventures, accessing remote rivers to hook salmon or trout, or getting dropped off in the wilderness for guided hikes to peaks yet to be named.

My companion and I visited Hartley Bay, a Gitga'at community about 45 minutes north of the lodge by boat. Our guide, Daryl Robinson, grew up in this village of 180 people, which can only be reached by private boat, ferry, or floatplane. The Gitga'at, members of the Tsimshian First Nations, make up a third of the lodge's staff.

Robinson led us around the boardwalk community — there are no roads — introduced us to residents, and showed us the village's three cedar-carved totem poles. We also visited the Gitga'at Cultural Centre, a wooden structure that houses traditional copper shields, woven baskets, and petroglyphs. The building serves as a meeting place where members pass on their traditions, stories, and Sm'algayax language.

"Most people want to learn about their ancestors, so while we still have breath, we have to teach them about their land and culture," said Helen Clifton, the community's matriarch, when we met.

Claire Hill, a local artist, runs the only bed and breakfast and welcomes visitors traveling on their own. He offers five rooms with satellite TV and wireless Internet in a waterfront home decorated with traditional copper shields.

Visitors to the area can also visit Kiel, the Gitga'at nation's seaweed camp not far from Hartley Bay, where the elders go in May to harvest seaweed and dry halibut, or Old Town, the site of the community's fall coho camp on the Quaal River, where visitors can see ancient petroglyphs. After Hartley Bay, we had hoped to go for a boat ride through Cornwall Inlet, a remote fiord that leads to a recently built, traditional-style long house and an ancient native burial site. But with the sun dipping, we decided to make our way back to the lodge, stopping to troll for salmon and halibut along the way.

Robinson was a commercial fisherman for 19 years and grew up in Hartley Bay, so he knew everything about fishing here.

"I'm going to put on a cloverleafed hoochie and a light-green flasher with a 10-pound cannonball," he said as he prepped one of the rods. "I'm dropping it down to about 93 feet."

"How do you know how deep to go," I asked.

"Old Indian trick," he replied, flashing a crafty smile. "It's called a gauge," he confessed, pointing to the fish finder on his boat.

We caught eight salmon in an hour and a half, which we thought

If you go . . .

How to get there

Fly from Boston to Vancouver then to Bella Bella to catch an hour flight by floatplane to the lodge on Pacific Coastal Airlines.

North Pacific Seaplanes
250-627-1341
northpacificseaplanes.com

Daily flights to Hartley Bay depart from the Seal Cove Seaplane Base in Prince Rupert. \$257 round-trip, including 40 pounds of luggage.

What to do

Spirit Tours

Hartley Bay
250-841-2602

Kermode bears and First Nations' sites around the area.

Tantalus Adventures
604-898-8338
tantalusadventures.com

Sea kayaking, bear watching, whale watching, fishing, hiking, and cultural tours.

Where to stay

King Pacific Lodge
888-592-5464
kingpacificlodge.com

Open May through September. Rates from \$4,750 include round-trip transportation from Vancouver, accommodations, all meals, open bar, use of lodge facilities, and all guided activities except helicopter and floatplane excursions, spa services, Kermode bear viewing, and conservation fee.

Claire's Bed and Breakfast

Hartley Bay
250-841-2727

Five comfortable rooms in a waterfront home. Including three meals, \$150 a day.

was impressive, until we heard another guest's tale of adventure.

"This was one of the 10 best days of my life," said Kelly Cook, a dentist from Tempe, Ariz., after a day of heli-fly-fishing on the remote Quaal River. "It was like 'Jurassic Park' meets Babe Winkelman [a renowned angler with a national television show on fishing]," he went on excitedly. "The trees had huge leaves and I caught as many fish as I wanted to in the first 15 minutes. The first 18 casts, I got 12 fish!"

Fly-fishermen practice catch-and-release here, but guests who hook pink salmon, coho, and Chinook in the saltwater realms can keep up to eight fish a week, depending on the species and time of year. The lodge's chef can prepare your fish for dinner, or the staff will freeze-dry and package it so you can take it home.

At the end of the day, guests headed for the lodge's Jacuzzi, steam room, or spa. Others fished from the dock or lounged in oversized chairs and leather couches in the living room, while the setting sun poured in through the large windows, lighting up the red and yellow cedar walls and the slate floors, giving everything a warm glow. With a maximum of 30 guests, people get to know each other quickly as they share stories of their daily adventures while gathered around family-style tables in the dining room.

bles in the dining room.

After a day of paddling around islands where the wide, sandy beaches looked like they belonged in the Caribbean, we visited Hermann Meuter on Gil Island, a 10-minute boat ride from the lodge, where he runs an orca research laboratory called Cetacealab with Janie Wray, his wife.

"We're doing a population study to find out how many whales use this area," explained Meuter, who knows the names of every whale pod that passes through and is creating a photo catalog. With the possible threat of an oil spill from a rig in the Hecate Strait, about 40 miles away, and the potential for contamination from the area's Atlantic salmon farms, "We want to find out about the whale population before anything happens, so we can figure out the impact it could have."

"Hermann is considered part of the family now," said Robinson. "He's our 'Dances With Whales.'"

Meuter and Wray have placed hydrophones around the area to monitor the whales as they journey through here on their annual migration from Mexico's Sea of Cortez to Alaskan waters.

"They are acoustic animals," said Meuter, putting on a CD of whale recordings for us to hear. "They have 10 to 12 different calls in their repertoire . . . and we can hear them up to 20 or 30 nautical miles away."

Meuter and Wray live on the island year-round, 24 miles away from their closest neighbors at Hartley Bay. After getting permission to build on the island from the Gitga'at chief, they constructed a house-laboratory using driftwood they found and milled on site. They cook on a propane camping stove and a wood stove, and have satellite Internet for keeping in contact with the outside world. Their micro-hydro plant generates the power they need to run their lab equipment and a television they occasionally use to watch movies. A claw-foot bathtub sits in front of the house under the tall trees, overlooking the remote bay, and is perched over a fire pit that is used to heat their bathwater. There's plenty of privacy here and during the wintertime, it could be months before they see another person.

"I can live here with my dog, my wife, and the whales and be happy," said Meuter. "Janie is very social. She takes off every four months or so and sees friends and family, and comes back with her batteries recharged. If we're allowed to stay here, we are going to grow old here."

As we waved goodbye to Meuter and his husky, Nitkos, and headed back to the lodge, I thought of something Helen Clifton had said when we met her: "You look outside and you wonder how long it will be like this. How long will the water be pure? How long will the fish be pure?"

With the Gitga'at and others like Meuter and Wray overseeing the area's wildlife and resources, this slice of British Columbia's wild west coast should remain pure for generations to come.

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KARI J. BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Cheryl Reece (left) and Rebecca Sandy of Hartley Bay, B.C., watch the Tsimshian Storm ferry arriving from Prince Rupert.

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