

Stunning! Cruising B.C.'s last unspoiled rainforest

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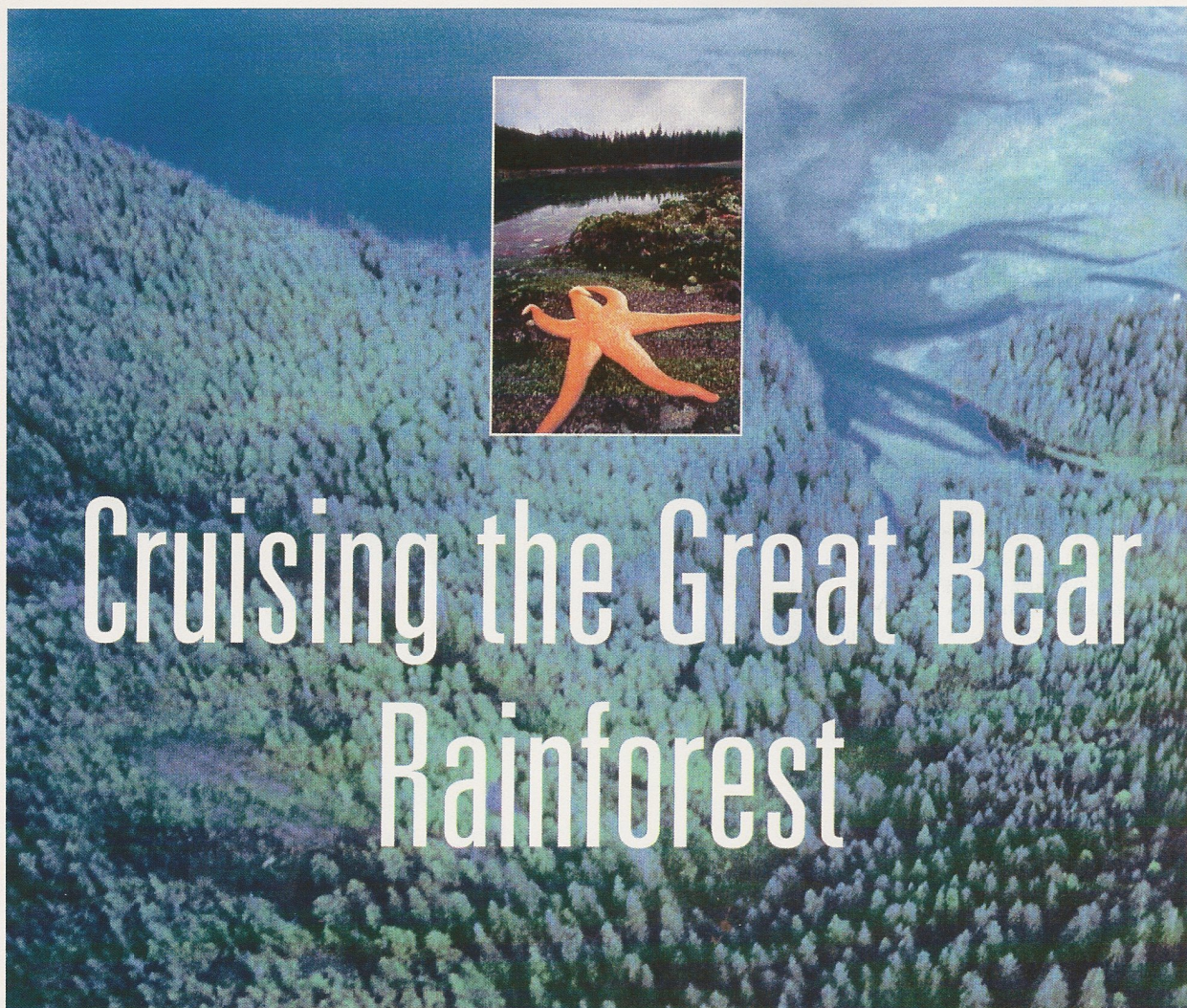
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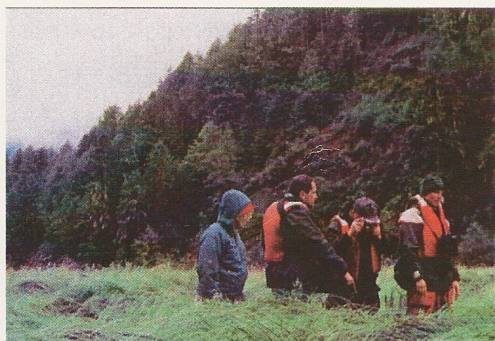


Cruising the Great Bear Rainforest

Aerial view of the rainforest; Brightly-colored seastars line the shores.

Story and photos by Marianne Scott

It's impossible not to be awestruck by the unspoiled beauty of one of the world's last great rainforests



The rain doesn't stop the mighty eagle from diving straight into the fjord and, talons outstretched, snatching a fat salmon from the rising tidal stream. Clutching the silvery fish, the proud raptor lands on an exposed reef and, with its yellow beak tearing away bloody strips of pink flesh, glowers at our Zodiac with disdain. Misty, ragged rain clouds smooth the sheer granite rock faces and droop low enough to skim the inky water. Nearby, a determined black bear claws the muck on the salt marsh. The tasty silverweed roots she's after are laden with minerals, supplementing her diet of returning salmon and wild berries.

Down the estuary, the anchored SV Duen is silhouetted against the dark green rainforest. Her skipper, Michael Hobhis, has loaded his passengers into a sturdy inflatable to give us a close-up look at the wilderness of the Central British Columbia coast. The cliffs sport scores of ribbon-thin waterfalls. Everywhere, fresh water gurgles, sluices, runs, trickles, drips and seeps, nourishing the islands' thick upholstery of red cedar, Sitka spruce, Western hemlock and Douglas fir.

Rim of Fire

Clad in foulies and gumboots, we're at the very rim of the continent where the eastbound Pacific plate subducts under the North American plate. The collision pushed up the snow-crowned Coastal Mountains behind us and gave birth to dramatic volcanoes from California to the Aleutians.

It's part of the "Rim of Fire" encircling the Pacific Ocean. Earthquakes can occur where the crustal plates crunch together. Glaciers scraped and sculpted the terrain repeatedly; then, when the last 3,000-foot thick ice began melting 15,000 years ago, the troughs between the mountaintops filled, creating the deep waterways where we now float. The islands' topsoil only thinly veneers the hard bedrock.

Unspoiled rainforest

Although aboriginal peoples have lived here for thousands of years, followed by fur traders, fishermen and

cannery operators, this is one of the last great unlogged, coniferous rainforests in the world. Captain George Vancouver, who first charted the coast in 1793-94, would easily recognize the virtually unchanged landscape. This temperate region lies on the far western edge of B.C.'s Cariboo country and is home to the Heiltsuk and other tribal groups.

Environmentalists eager to keep the area from being logged have recently renamed this fertile vastness the "Great Bear Rainforest." Although some see that name only as a marketing ploy, there's no question the coastal region between Vancouver Island and Alaska — twice the size of Switzerland — is prime territory to large numbers of grizzly, black and the prized, white Kermode bears. Their numbers and need for complete protection are hotly disputed; for the moment, however, the region is wild and unspoiled. And that's why we've traveled great distances to be here.

Ecological adventure

We had begun our ecological adventure at the docks in Bella Bella, an ancient fishing village on Campbell Island. All of us four Canadians, one American and two Italians — were eager to explore this remote region, which generations of tribal groups have shared with the abundant salmon, bears, seals, whales and eagles. The Italians aboard might have thought "Bella Bella" meant the town was "doubly beautiful," but the

settlement's moniker is a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) adaptation of the tribal name "Bil-Billa." From 1833-43, the HBC ran Fort McLoughlin here, one of its earliest western trading posts. Bella Bella is reachable only by boat or plane. The B.C. Ferries' Queen of Chilliwack sometimes stops here, as well as some freighters carrying cargo north on the Alaska water highway. To reach Bella Bella, we had all flown Pacific Coastal, the only airline servicing the area. A short taxi ride had taken us and our gear to the docks, where we helped haul the luggage aboard the Duen and then listened carefully as skipper Michael Hobhis explained the safety features aboard the robust sailing vessel. We also met co-skipper and naturalist Cheryl Pirie.



A charming Oyster Catcher is just one of the unusual birds in the area.

Ship's proud past

Duen, a 50-foot gaff-rigged, pitch-pine ketch (LOA 72'), began life in 1939 as part of the Norwegian fishing fleet and has an illustrious history ("duen" is Norwegian for "dove"). Built to withstand the North Sea's heavy gales, the 55-ton heritage ship not only caught fish, but during World War II,

Also smuggled 38 resistance fighters to the Hebrides, away from the Gestapo then occupying Norway. After 30 years of commercial fishing, Duen was transformed by new owners into a private sailing vessel and used to circumnavigate the globe. Michael and Manon Hobbis acquired Duen in 1986 and converted her into a passenger-carrying eco-cruiser that meets Canadian Coast Guard standards. They have continually upgraded her, installing a new engine and adding a pilothouse.

Before threading our way into the maze of sea-arms and islands, Michael ties up at the Bella Bella Native Fish Plant to purchase three, 15-pound spring salmon. While waiting for him to collect this bounty, the passengers get acquainted. My “roomie,” Beverly Godwin from Los Angeles is on her third Duen voyage. She tells me a typical three-week rainfall in central B.C. equals the annual precipitation in LA. Italian photojournalist, Davide, is photographing the region for an upscale travel magazine. Paolo is a Milan banker on holiday. Two Calgarians, Margaret and Elizabeth, are cruising the Duen for the second time. And Daniel, a former priest, is our resident philosopher. We roam around the deck astounded by the abundant fish doing somersaults in the bay around us. It’s nearing the end of August and the salmon are returning from their Pacific migrations to spawn in their home rivers. We traverse Lama Passage past Dryad



The falls in Kynock Inlet. On an adjoining rockface, the passengers found ancient aboriginal pictographs.

Point’s lighthouse northwest to Seaforth Channel, nipping into slender Reid Passage between Cecilia Island and Don Peninsula to avoid the ocean swells rolling into Milbanke Sound. Trees grow right up to and just above the waterline, making it look as if a careful landscaper has clipped the bottom branches perfectly flush but - it’s salt

water doing the manicuring. To avoid fighting a current that can reach four knots, the skipper has timed our passage to run with the ebb. Crows, gulls and red-beaked oyster catchers pick away at shells, seaweed, seastars and crabs covering the exposed banks, reminding us of an old native saying, when the tide is out, the table is set.”

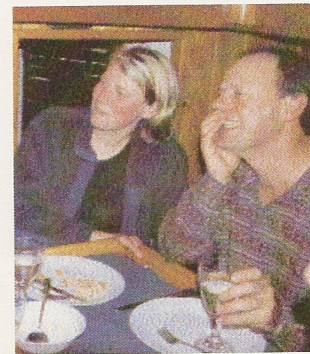
In late afternoon, we anchor in protected Oliver Cove and watch Michael deftly debone a salmon for dinner. We crowd around the dining table next to the galley and, along with some good B.C. wines, thoroughly enjoy the freshly-baked filets. After a competitive game of Scrabble, with some of us leafing through the Duen's extensive library of naturalist books, we sleep, worlds away from city noise and lights. The next morning, after a hearty breakfast of eggs scrambled with leftover salmon, we take the long run up Mathieson Channel, wind on the nose, motoring with the four-knot tidal current. We anchor in Kynoch Inlet, near a copious waterfall. Next to the cascading cataract lies a pile of ice remaining from winter from which Michael scoops a bucket or two to keep our salmon fresh. On the flat surface of an adjoining rock- face, we see red, aboriginal pictographs that may have been painted centuries ago. Could they contain a warning against the feared, maraudin Haida warriors from the Queen Charlotte Islands?

Hosts share their wonder

Over the next several days, we take advantage of Michael's and Cheryl's vast knowledge of these waterways, plants and animals. Completely attuned to the region, they point out animals and features we'd miss. One morning, after a rain shower, we clamber across a barnacle-encrusted rocky beach covered with

rackweed and enter the still streaming forest. The greenish-tinted light is filtered magic. Michael shows us a bear trail to follow, making it easier to penetrate the thick undergrowth. Without the trail, the woods would be impenetrable. My boots sink into shin-deep mats of chartreuse-tinted Menzies heckera moss. Greyish-green lichens abound with what seem like miniscule red flowers. "That's lipstick cladonia," explains Cheryl, "and those red tips are spores, also known as fruiting bodies." She also points out the abundant skunk cabbage plants (named for their smell), their fleshy, hefty leaves now decaying and leaving behind deep pits in the spongy moss carpet. "These plants have many uses," she continues. "Haisla natives used the leaves as burn poultices, to line cooking pits or as food wrappers. And the bears, when they come out of hibernation in early spring, eat the shoots to deconstipate." As we carefully step among fallen branches and small trunks on their way to nourish the next generation of profuse greenery, Michael flags wild blueberry and red huckleberry bushes. "I've got a pouch here," he urges, "and remember we're having cheesecake for dessert. Pick as many as you can and don't eat them all here." After collecting our dessert topping, I'm intrigued by a wrinkly, ragged, foot-wide light-green leaf lying across the low branch of a great

spruce. Rain fills and beads its dents and pits. It's a lungwort lichen, so called because of its resemblance to lungs, and was once used by the Sechelt and early Europeans to treat tuberculosis and pneumonia. Today, the presence of lungwort and other lichens demonstrates an absence of pollution. We travel through Sheep's Passage to Mussel Inlet and anchor at Poison Cove. It's here that Captain Vancouver lost crewmember John Carter after he ate poisonous mussels. But we're not deterred by this sinister event and dinghy up into Mussel River. Michael handles the 30-hp engine with ease nimbly maneuvering around to allow us a close view of the cliff faces, striated with white intrusions, and exhibiting smoothly eroded bulges like rolls of fat. Rainwater chatters down the rock. We watch a young eagle with his tattered brown feathers watch us in turn. Completely unafraid, he stiffly hops up the cliff side as we get closer. "It's not an eagle, but a turkey," jokes Davide, bringing forth gales of laughter.



Captain Michael Hobbis and co-skipper Cheryl Pirie laugh over a tall tale over dinner.

Life, fertility, continuity

Suddenly, the water around us seems alive. It's hard to distinguish what's moving in the grey glitter. Michael kills the engine, we fall silent and concentrate. Scores of triangular fins slice the surface. Thousands of chum salmon, which can measure up to a metre, are returning home after a two-to-seven-year ocean journey, programmed to swim up river, spawn and die. Their decaying carcasses beef up bears for hibernation, fatten eagles, gulls and crows for the long winter, and donate nutrients to forests.

We go ashore in the river delta at low tide, tramp the sedge grass laced with silverweed and yarrow (hugely popular as a native medicinal), and find wolf tracks. A bear has left scat and evidence of digging. Eagles of all levels of maturity spread their wings overhead, perch on bare branches or sit far away on the beach. We are surrounded by life, fertility, continuity. We're part of a great chain of being. Awesome!

Let it rain

The following day, we truly understand the enchantment of being in a rainforest: the heavens have opened (at least five metres of rain fall here annually). Michael spreads a huge tarp across the boom so we can be outside without drowning. After hours of reading natural history books and feeling a bit stir crazy, I escape topsides. Recognizing that I usually observe nature only when the weather's fair, I ask myself

how rain changes the landscape. Fat raindrops plop into the bottle-green seawater, creating endless intertwining circles like so many Olympic Rings. Then I see it. As each drop hits the brine, its surface tension lasts a split second before its contents explode. But during the milli-seconds the molecular skin holds, each drop resembles a silver bullet, a pearl. Unexpectedly, the water is bursting with shiny, silver, scattering pearls. I'm mesmerized. Never again will I complain about rain while afloat.

Delighted, I go below. Michael and Cheryl are demonstrating sushi-making, part of the excellent grub we've enjoyed since arriving. They know sailors travel on their stomach, so we've tasted French toast, three-cheese pizza with salmon and broccoli and hot scones with thick-cut shrimp. Wine enlivens dinner and animates discussion.

Too soon the week-long trip nears its end. We enter Finlayson Channel south of Susan Island, then transit Oscar Passage. For our last night before the drop-off in Bella Bella, we anchor near the De Freitas Islets. Another waterfall. A sandy beach covered by ancient tree roots. Hundreds of Bonaparte gulls, already dressed in winter plumage, float by. Peace. David and Paolo climb into yellow kayaks and set off to visit the pods of seals lounging on the flat islets. At dusk, Paolo returns, wet, cold, but blissful.

"Las focas, las focas," he murmurs. "It's those seals. We just don't have anything like that in Milano."

Plan your own fantasy eco-trip

Michael and Manon Hobbis are committed to eco-tourism as a viable way of preserving the environment. They also offer popular cruises to the Queen Charlotte Islands and Southern Alaska. Book early! The Duen carries only eight passengers.

Find out more by contacting Duen Sailing Adventures Inc. at: P.O. Box 398, 1168 Damelart Way, Brentwood Bay, B.C. V8M 1R3 (250) 652-8227 or toll-free: 888-922-8822.

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Marianne Scott, a Victoria-based writer and bluewater sailor, has eco-cruised New Zealand's Fiordland and British Columbia.