



# Bluewater Adventures

## Orcas, totems & grizzlies

### Highlights

- Orcas in Johnstone Strait
- Knight Inlet Bear Viewing
- U'Mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay
- Totems at Village Island

### ABOUT THE COAST

Extending north along British Columbia's Central Coast lies the largest remaining areas of pristine old-growth coastal forest in North America. Conservationists and tourism operators are struggling to protect this remaining wilderness. Whales, bears and salmon require this wilderness to flourish.

The forest industry however, wants to log the old-growth areas, in order to preserve present rates of harvesting and to protect coastal forestry jobs. Cruise ships pass quickly along the famous Inside Passage, most their passengers unaware of the amazing wildlife close-by.

Aboard our 68' sailing vessels, guests get the opportunity to observe, first hand, the fascinating orca and renowned grizzly bear. Naturalists share their knowledge about these species' habitats and behaviors. You will be thrilled by nature's strength and learn about its fragile balance.



At the northern end of Vancouver Island lies a maze of islands and waterways, full of wildlife, beautiful scenery, and the history and traditions of the Kwakwaka'wakw people (Kwakiutl). The Pacific Ocean funnels into the protected waters of Johnstone Strait creating strong tidal currents, and incredibly nutrient-rich waters. Millions of salmon, returning to spawn in the mainland rivers, must converge to pass through the Strait. Groups of orcas (or killer whales) hunt the salmon in the passages. Grizzly bears roam the shores and estuaries waiting for the fish to swim upstream and spawn.

The wealth of life and food attracts a variety of marine mammals, seabirds, eagles and anyone interested in spectacular natural history. The Johnstone Strait area once supported tens of thousands of Kwakwaka'wakw people, shown by the many remaining village midden sites in the area. Now, only a few villages remain inhabited. However, the culture and traditions remain intact. In the old villages, proud totem poles can still be found. The modern Kwakwaka'wakw in Alert Bay, preserve their heritage in wonderful carvings, canoes and masks. This area forms the southern end of what conservationists call the 'Great Bear Rainforest'.



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## CULTURAL HISTORY

Very close to Robson Bight is the old Kwakwaka'wakw village of Mimquimlees. In 1921, police arrested the elders holding a "potlatch" ceremony here, and confiscated their prized ceremonial masks. The potlatch is a community event to witness changes in status (weddings, deaths, achievements). The government outlawed the ceremony believing it would help native people gain a good work ethic and speed their conversion to Christianity. Many of the masks and priceless pieces of art were then secretly sold to museum collections across North America.

Today, at Mimquimlees, with permission of the band, we will see elaborately carved totem poles and the remains of native "great houses". Inhabited for perhaps thousands of years, the village withstood attack, disease epidemics, and the laws banning the "potlatch", before abandonment earlier this century. The Kwakwaka'wakw people from most of the old villages moved to the government cannery town of Alert Bay. The excellent U'Mista Cultural Centre now holds some of the famous potlatch masks and other interesting artifacts. Today in Alert Bay, children are once again being taught the native language, traditional dances, and art and family stories.

## BIRDS

This area has a very rich and varied bird population. Many people will be amazed at the number of bald eagles we see on the trip. Colorful seabirds such as oystercatchers, pigeon guillemots and rhinoceros auklets are common and we see large numbers of smaller water birds, such as phalaropes. With the help of interested trip members, we will keep a list of the birds and animals we sight during the trip.



## WHALE WATCHING

The waters of Johnstone Strait are considered the best place in the world to observe orcinus orca (killer whales). For a few months of the year these beautiful marine mammals are present on a daily basis. We should have excellent opportunities for observation and photography of whales. A few of the exciting whale behaviours we have seen from Island Roamer:

- Orcas swim over to the boat, surface, giving us a chance to see their full bodies under the water, and sometimes roll on their side to look at us.
- Breaching is when an orca leaps clear of the water and falls back with a huge splash. (What a challenge to capture this activity on film!)
- Orcas often spyhop, raising their upper bodies clear of the water to look at the above-water environment.
- The ship's hydrophone (underwater microphone) enables us to hear orcas vocalize - communicating under the water.
- Large numbers of orcas congregate in Johnstone Strait a few times each summer. These 'superpod' groups are extremely exciting; Johnstone Strait is considered the core killer whale area. However, we could encounter orcas at any point during the voyage as they travel miles every day. Some of our anchorages are chosen so that we may hear orcas swim past. This is truly a unique opportunity to see whales in the wild.



## RESEARCH

Whale researchers come from around the world to study orcas at the northern end of Vancouver Island. There are ongoing research projects based near Robson Bight and at 'Orca Lab' on Hanson Island.

During the voyage we expect to talk to researchers about their fascinating work. Each year we support research efforts by contributing identification photographs and underwater recordings. Bluewater Adventures also supports specific projects financially.

## ROBSON BIGHT

Along the shore of Johnstone Strait at the small bay called Robson Bight, are special "rubbing beaches". The orcas sink to the bottom and slide along the smooth pebbles of the beach. The whales are easily disturbed while "rubbing" and because of its unique nature, Robson Bight has been protected and is now closed to visitors. It is named the Dr. Michael Bigg Ecological Reserve, after the pioneer killer whale researcher.

## NATURAL HISTORY

People with a keen interest in natural history will thoroughly enjoy this trip. Each voyage is accompanied by a highly experienced naturalist who will give talks, slide shows, and lead shore excursions.



## BEARS

Black bears are frequently spotted among the islands on these trips. They like to roam the shore, feeding on crabs and other intertidal organisms. However, it is the opportunity to see grizzly bears feeding on spawning salmon that makes this trip unique! It is a classic wildlife experience.

There are few places in the world that can provide consistent, safe and incredible grizzly bear viewing. Glendale Cove up Knight Inlet is one of them, and has now become one of British Columbia's premier wildlife viewing sites. Forty-seven individual bears were identified here in 2001, all of them attracted by a run of pink salmon that averages 500,000 fish.

This remote location is up a coastal fjord that extends deep into the coastal mountains. The bears have become used to humans watching. They often feed in sight of raised viewing stands or along the shores of the estuary where we can watch from our small boats. A local lodge built the viewing stands along the river and spawning channel, and local guides accompany our group. Grizzly and brown bears are the same species (*Ursus arctos*). The name "grizzly" comes from the silver tipped grizzled hairs that these brown bears develop as they get older. They are found only on the mainland in British Columbia and are usually elusive.

With the arrival of late summer migrations of spawning salmon, many bears concentrate around the rivers. Salmon is their main source of protein for the winter hibernation. Grizzly bears range in colour from darkest brown to blond. They have a prominent hump over the shoulders, which is actually an enormous set of shoulder blade muscles used in digging up roots and plants. This hump is one of the features used to distinguish them from black bears.

Now scientists have discovered that bears and salmon provide the major source of fertilizer in the coastal forest. Evidently, each bear may distribute the remains of 700 fish, providing 1600 kilograms of natural, nitrogen-rich fertilizer. Thus, a Sitka spruce grows to 30% larger near a salmon bearing stream. The grizzly bear has no enemies except man, however our collective impacts are pushing the grizzly ever closer to extinction.

# ITINERARY

On all our voyages we intentionally keep our itineraries flexible to take advantage of wildlife sightings, weather and tides, and the interests of the group.

**Day 1** - This trip starts and finishes in Port McNeill, BC. Guests will meet in the morning at the top of the Cab's Fuel Dock on the Port McNeill waterfront. Upon boarding "Island Odyssey", cabins will be assigned and an introductory safety briefing will be completed. We expect to discover our first pod or group of whales the first afternoon. Guests will learn about the behaviour of these fascinating creatures, listen to them calling on the ship's underwater microphone, and learn how to identify individual animals. Each night we anchor in a secluded anchorage.

**Day 2** - We will spend this day among the islands at the western end of Queen Charlotte Strait exploring for different species of marine mammals, walking a remote beach and observing a variety of sea birds.

**Days 3-6** - Our focus these days will be on the waters of Johnstone Strait, the core orca watching area. We expect to have multiple encounters with the orcas. Humpback whales are usually in the area, and Dall's porpoise often come over to the boat to play on the bow wave. We will visit the modern Kwakwaka'wakw community of Alert Bay to visit the U'Mista Cultural Centre and see a fascinating collection of potlatch masks. If we have a good wind, we expect to raise the sails and enjoy the silence and beauty of sailing. There will be time to explore the protected waters using our stable, sea kayaks that we carry onboard. At the entrance to Knight Inlet is the abandoned Kwakwaka'wakw village of Mimquimlees. With permission from the local native band we will explore the old village to discover fallen totem poles and a rich heritage. With a good low tide, we may explore the shore for different species of colourful sea stars, anemone, and algae. We often hike into the coastal forest to see big trees and learn about the forest plants.

**Day 7** - Mid morning we return to Port McNeill to complete our voyage. Participants can catch afternoon flights back to Vancouver.



## CONTACT US

For additional information specific to your trip contact our office and request for a Bluewater Adventures Reservation Package.

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