

Travel

The last great wilderness

The vast, open spaces of Canada's British Columbia can make you feel very small, but very much alive, discovers Rosie Paterson

Photographs by Allison LoBalbo





ACCORDING to legend, the Homalco First Nation people are descended from brave men and women who survived a great flood by tying their canoes to the top of Place that Grows. Today, the vertiginous mountain in Canada's British Columbia is known as Estero Peak. Directly opposite it is a six-bedroom, western spruce and Douglas fir lodge that once belonged to Catwoman actress Michelle Pfeiffer and her Hollywood producer husband, David E. Kelley (*Big Little Lies*, *The Lincoln Lawyer*). Starting this spring, the property—which is only accessible by seaplane from Vancouver (about one hour) or speedboat from Campbell River (about 25 minutes)—will be available to rent on an exclusive-use basis. It is the only one in the area with a private lake, which, incidentally, the Homalco people believe is populated with orca (or killer whales) that swam across during the flood.

The handsome home—named Fawn Bluff—is now owned by David Tuchbant, a Paris-based entrepreneur who plans to run it as a non-profit organisation. The money made will go towards Holmaco First Nation projects including a much-needed trauma centre to counter the consequences of decades of colonisation and federal-government residential schools—which, shockingly, only shuttered in the mid 1990s.

‘There are four orca whale clans that patrol the waters here’

‘The orcas are why I’m in “BC”,’ says Mr Tuchbant, a keen diver and marine mammal enthusiast—who is now equally dedicated to ensuring his latest project becomes a valuable community asset. There are four orca clans that patrol the waters here, but they rarely mix and have unique behaviours and communication techniques. Transient orcas also frequent the area. One lunchtime, aboard Fawn Bluff’s powerful motorboat, we spot a pod swimming close to the shore—the somewhat menacing sight of distinctive, tall, black dorsal fins slicing through the water like a hot knife through butter at odds with their slow, languid pace. Some male orcas have dorsal fins reaching up to 6ft—3in taller than the average British man.

The waterways that snake their way east of Vancouver Island, around myriad islands →

Wall of ice: the writer comes face to face with the end of a glacier during a paddleboarding and canoeing trip across a lake



and past Fawn Bluff, are known as Bute Inlet—47 miles long with a maximum depth of more than 2,000ft. Grand mountains rise dramatically on either side, which means that there's limited shoreline for landing and, in parts, where extreme tides are squeezed through the narrow passages, turbulent whirlpools form.

As well as orca, humpback whales, sea lions and bald eagles call this extraordinary wilderness home. We come across multiple humpbacks—including one, in the upper reaches of the fjords, at dusk. The tell-tale motion of its arched back and stumpy dorsal fin breaking the water's surface precedes a pause, then there is a hulking motion as it pushes its 60,000lb body downwards and, finally, the tail fluke, perfectly perpendicular: captivating enough to keep us watching long after night has bled the day's light from the sky.

‘He’s correct: there’s nothing to his left or right—for more than 155 miles’

Wildlife phenomena include the annual herring spawning that takes place in early spring and turns huge patches of water a cloudy white. However, the majority of visitors travel as summer gives way to autumn in order to watch grizzly bears emerge from the forest to feast on plump salmon on their own spawning mission. All Pacific salmon start in freshwater, migrate to the ocean and then return home to spawn and die—roughly five years later. They are big—much bigger than a pre-packaged fillet on your supermarket shelf might lead you to believe. We journey upstream from Fawn Bluff, first by boat and then on four wheels—accompanied by Homalco guides. The forest is eerily still. Haunting.

From our raised viewing platform, surrounded by chain-link fences, we can see the fated salmon swimming listlessly in the water, barely quicker than the tide. Some have already spawned and died, their bloated bodies pushed to the creek's edges. Seagulls peck at their eyes and eggs, but it is ravens, we're told, that indicate bears and there are plenty of them. They watch. They wait. After a short while, a mother bear appears on the far bank with a fuzzy cub in tow. For the next 30 minutes, she inspects the already dead salmon (they're often too far gone to be of any safe nutritional value) and splashes through the water in pursuit of the ones still alive. She must eat about 12 to 15 fish every day in order to put on the weight necessary to survive



Facing page: British Columbia's wide-open wilderness stretches as far as the eye can see.

Above: Diving in: Anne-Cécile Blanchot and the writer plunge into Fawn Bluff's private lake

hibernation; if successful, she will consume the equivalent of 28 McDonald's Big Macs. Her cub—already the size of a large labrador—makes a valiant effort to help, but is clearly better suited to chasing squawking gulls. When it momentarily struggles to jump back onto dry land, the group has to stifle a chorus of maternal 'awws'.

Although it is rare to spot grizzly or brown bears close to the lodge, we're advised to sleep with our windows and doors firmly shut. Solo walks along the 4km (about 2½ miles) of lichen-carpeted trails are also frowned upon, so you should ask to be accompanied by Chef Kwin, whose cooking

is so fantastical that a Michelin star is surely on his horizon. He will point out edible plants and flowers, including salmon berries that spoil within minutes of being picked, and the rhubarb, elderflower, lilacs and roses he has planted to make into cordials and syrups, before heading off to harvest bladderwrack seaweed and make his own soy sauce. A spidery waterfall tumbles down in front of the lodge's front door—part ornamental, part practical. If it runs dry, then the staff know that their water supplies are low.

Swimming in the lake—after a picnic lunch surrounded by dancing teal and crimson dragonflies—is encouraged. Braver souls →



Gone fishing: British Columbia's grizzly bears emerge from the forest in search of the plump salmon that form a large part of their diet

can plunge off the dock and straight into the bracing ocean. Inside, there's a central, open kitchen, living and dining space and a separate living room with floor-to-ceiling picture windows. Everything is big, from the double-height ceilings and dramatic stone chimney breast to the squashy leather sofas and walk-in showers. First Nation art adorns some of the, mostly wooden, walls. I develop a dangerous addiction to the Nanaimo chocolate bars left next to my bed most evenings. Size aside, Fawn Bluff is undeniably cosy; it cocoons you from the fickle elements outside. Somewhere smaller or sparser might not have made me feel so safe when surrounded by quite so much Mother Nature.

I—like many travellers, I expect—turned up expecting to see lots of animals. What I didn't expect, however, was the sheer magnitude of the natural world in which they all live. 'You're standing on one of the great remaining mountain wildernesses,' says Jan Neuspiel, gesturing outwards from his vantage point close to the beginning of a glacier. He's fitted crampons to our feet, swaddled us in safety harnesses, attached us to ropes and coaxed us, past one or two gaping crevasses, to the top, with measured and unflappable enthusiasm.

Our starting spot, an icy picnic site in the middle of the glacier, further down, could

be really close or really, really far away. It's impossible to tell when everything around us is brilliant white. What is clear is that Mr Neuspiel is correct: there's nothing to his left or right—for more than 155 miles. There are no villages or towns, no roads and no infrastructure (bar the odd, off-grid cabin that



In the melting pot: Swiss-cheese fondue is the perfect fuel for climbing a glacier

caters to adrenaline-seeking heli-skiers) and, as such, the mountaintops and the glacier have never been given names. The man who pilots our helicopter—from Fawn Bluff to the glacier, via a glacial lake the colour of milky turquoise—is called Bastion and he grew up in the Swiss Alps. He prefers the solitude of British Columbia, but returns regularly to smuggle back impressive quantities of proper Swiss cheese—some of which he cooks up in his grandmother's fondue pot, next to the helicopter, to help fuel us for our climb.

There are some places, such as Amalfi, Italy, that are best appreciated from the water; in British Columbia, it's only possible to get a sense of scale and appreciate its vast, untouched expanses from the air—the glacier-fed rivers that cut through canyons so deep they swallow sound; the mountains stacked behind mountains stacked behind mountains until distance loses all meaning. I have never felt smaller—or more alive. 🐉

Fawn Bluff is available on an exclusive-use basis from CAD\$26,250 a night (about £14,000), plus a 5% goods-and-service tax. The price includes a dedicated staff team, all meals, a selection of wines and spirits and guided activities. It excludes flights, transfers and helicopter excursions (www.fawnbluff.com)