

EXPLORING CANADA'S HIDDEN GEMS

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Like many North Americans, Jack and Michelle McKinney from St. Louis, Missouri, were unfamiliar with British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest before they signed on to explore this mythical land of fjords, islands and great river estuaries with Victoria-based Maple Leaf Adventures in 2019.

"When we started researching this trip, it seemed intriguing and was right up our alley because we both love to explore and immerse ourselves in nature," recalls Michelle, reflecting on their life-changing expedition voyage along this rugged coastline aboard the latest addition to Maple Leaf Adventures' fleet, Cascadia, a 138-foot luxury catamaran.

In 2019, Cascadia joined Maple Leaf's other two expedition-style yachts — Swell, a converted tug, and Maple Leaf, a century-old wooden racing schooner that once also fished in the frigid waters of the Bering Sea. Each takes only a handful of guests at a time (eight, 12 and 24 people) for a personalized, safari-like experience.

Driven by increasing demand among adventurous travellers for genuinely transformational experiences in unspoiled and pristine regions that could eventually erode or disappear, upscale expedition cruising has been exploding worldwide. Now, with overseas travel more challenging, spectacular locations closer to home are drawing more attention. Among them is the Great Bear Rainforest, blessed with natural wonders, breathtaking scenery and exotic wildlife, where Maple Leaf Adventures has been operating multi-day conservation-focused voyages since 1986.

A primordial land of fjords, islands and spider-like river estuaries, the Great Bear Rainforest is the world's largest intact temperate rainforest. Named for the endangered Spirit bear (a black bear born with a recessive gene that produces cream coloured fur) that inhabits its thickly forested islands and inlets, this vast, mostly uninhabited archipelago is twice the size of the Serengeti and stretches from the northern tip of Vancouver Island to the Alaska border. This fragile natural environment that environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has called "the last stand of the great North American rainforest" is also home to countless species of birds, marine life and other mammals, including cunning coastal wolves that hunt salmon from streams like bears and swim like sea otters.

The Great Bear Rainforest is so remote that it's one of the few remaining inhabitable parts of the world that is completely black at night on satellite images," says Captain Kevin Smith, Maple Leaf Adventures co-owner and chief executive officer, describing this vast wilderness where bears and wolf packs still thrive as they



Journey into the path of magic

A voyage along the coast of B.C.'s mythical Great Bear Rainforest reveals nature at its most magnificent

Capturing a sunset during a journey on Maple Leaf Adventures' spacious yacht Cascadia. SUPPLIED, JEFF WITKOLLO

have for millennia.

Captain Smith's ethos, "we focus on putting ourselves in the path of the magic," is often rewarded several times a day on both Maple Leaf Adventures' wildlife viewing trips and week-long Alaska and B.C. itineraries that also include fascinating and educational interactions with vibrant coastal Indigenous cultures. Whether circumnavigating Vancouver Island's remote northwest coast, exploring the thickly forested fjords, rugged cliffs and deserted beaches of the Inside Passage and the Great Bear Rainforest, or navigating among the tranquil islands of the Salish Sea, Smith and his crews take guests far off the beaten track in search of unique adventures in locations seldom explored.

Each day aboard a Maple Leaf Adventures trip brings fresh discoveries. Dramatic wild scenery surrounds as you venture deep into the coastal mountain range toward hidden gems like the stunning Kitlope River Estuary that flows within the ancestral homeland of the Haisla First Nation. Surrounded by steep snow-capped peaks, you climb aboard Zodiacs to observe grizzly and black bears grazing among tall green sedges. Meadows full of colourful wildflowers in radiant shades of purple and blue await as you go ashore with naturalists and local experts, highly educated and engaging teachers who love sharing their deep insight and knowledge about the coastal flora and fauna and their passion for the West Coast's natural and cultural history.

You may also find yourself soaking in hidden natural hot springs, admiring ancient cliffside petroglyphs, watching magnificent humpback whales 'bubble netting' and orcas hunting seals, or Dall's porpoises racing alongside your ship. And during evenings on the deck, feasting on freshly caught giant Dungeness crabs, jumbo prawns and other West Coast cuisine inspired by local specialties exquisitely prepared by the onboard chef and paired with fine B.C. and international wines.



Exploring the rainforest with naturalists. SUPPLIED, TANNER STRATTON



Maple Leaf guides guests to watch the rare spirit bear. SUPPLIED, KEVIN SMITH



Or, if you are exceptionally fortunate, as were Jack and Michelle McKinney on their voyage last year, you might spend hours spellbound, quietly observing one of the rarest and most revered creatures on Earth, a ghostly pale spirit bear crouching by the river's edge happily devouring its fill of salmon roe.

"There is no way to truly capture in words this magical part of the world," says Michelle, reflecting on her week-long experience exploring the hidden coves and bays of the Great

Above: The Great Bear Rainforest's cultural history is richly portrayed in Klenit's big house. SUPPLIED, JEFF WITKOLLO

Right: A special encounter with a coastal wolf. SUPPLIED, STEPHAN AGAR

Bear Rainforest's coastline aboard Cascadia. "It's a fairy tale you dream about and get to live in for a special time in your life."



Up close with naturalist Briony Penn

Briony Penn has a Ph.D. in Geography and is an award-winning naturalist, writer, educator and broadcaster who has been accompanying guests of Maple Leaf Adventures cruises for more than a decade. She is well known for her tireless devotion to protecting endangered species and sensitive ecosystems in her native British Columbia. A fifth-generation Vancouver Islander, she currently lives on Salt Spring Island.

What is it about this stretch of B.C. coastline that makes it so captivating and fascinating from a scientific perspective?

This unique strip of temperate rainforest and island archipelago are the last intact northern temperate rainforests with still functioning grey predator relationships. The European temperate rainforests — like in Scotland — have been logged and converted to impoverished places.

What is unique about the Maple Leaf Adventures experience?

Guests come as lifetime learners and we help them form a relationship with the people, plants and wildlife that call this wild place home.

What do guests find most surprising and rewarding during their voyages?

Many people are lured to see the big megafauna of bears and whales, but discover that the highlight of their trip was an intertidal pool or a flowering estuary full of migratory birds.

What is unique about Maple Leaf Adventures' new vessel, Cascadia?

MV Cascadia is providing access to those who might not have been able to manage the accessibility requirements of the other boats (a sailing ship and a tugboat) in their fleet.

About Maple Leaf Adventures

Voted one of National Geographic Traveler's Top 5 of a Lifetime, Maple Leaf Adventures has provided conservation-focused adventures along the Great Bear Rainforest coastline between April and October, as well as tours to Haida Gwaii, the Gulf Islands, Vancouver Island and Alaska's Inside Passage. For more information, visit MapleLeafAdventures.com or call 1-888-599-5323.

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