

The 6.4 million hectares of the Great Bear Rainforest are home to three species of bear, including thousands of iconic grizzlies. Spotting one is no guarantee, but pack a sturdy pair of walking boots and a lot of patience and you might just be rewarded, discovers **Ally Wybrew**

Bear needs
Two grizzlies munch on sedge grass in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest

IN

SEARCH

OF

BEARS

IN

BRITISH

COLUMBIA

MY bare feet dangle centimetres above the Pacific Ocean as the Canadian sun sinks between pine-speckled slopes. As the hues darken and reflect off the water of Blackfish Sound, a slither of darkness cuts into the glassy flatness. Then the knobby prism of a humpback fin breaks for air.

I've lost count of the number of whales I've seen in two days here, on the fragmented edge of British Columbia. At the homely wooden cabins of Farewell Harbour, on the banks of Berry Island in the Broughton Archipelago Marine Park, it feels as if I've been transposed into a Constable canvas. But it's not the whales I'm here for. Or the sea otters. Or the wolves. I'm here for the crown jewel of North American wildlife: the grizzly bear.

Grizzlies are an iconic animal, the sort the WWF promotes alongside leopards, elephants and orangutans when its donations need a boost. They grace the sides of salmon tins and whisky labels and are Hollywood's ursine of choice. Many an A-lister has faced off against Bart, the huge Kodiak bear (a grizzly subspecies) who stole hearts alongside Brad Pitt, Anthony Hopkins and Robert Redford in films including *White Fang* and *Legends of the Fall*. Seeing one of them in the wild has been on my bucket list ever since Little John and Baloo were anthropomorphised by Disney decades ago.

But it didn't happen today.

"Bear viewing is challenging," Tim and Kelli McGrady, the owners of the cabins, tell me. "It's not like it used to be 20 years ago." Here, in the southern tip of the sprawling 6.4 million hectares that make up the temperate Great Bear Rainforest – a place that's home to at least three different species of bear – things are changing.

A boom in local aquaculture has negatively affected the salmon population, likely driven by disease and infection carried to them as they commute past hatcheries. Fewer salmon means fewer bears fishing in the rivers. In 2019 and 2020, Tim didn't see a bear feeding on salmon for the first time in 30 years. He doesn't think it's affected their population, however, just their eating habits (numbers aren't tracked reliably; estimates put 29,000 grizzlies in Canada, most of which reside in BC). "Bears are incredibly adaptable. They feed on sedge in the estuaries, along the margins of the rivers on berries and they're voracious diggers," he explains. Grizzlies need to store a million calories to hibernate each winter, meaning ingesting 40,000 calories a day during a process called hyperphagia (it puts *Man*

Bear country

Clockwise from right: Farewell Harbour Lodge on Berry Island; a grizzly bear strolls in the tidal area of the Great Bear Rainforest; humpback whales socialise in Blackfish Sound



THE QUIET IS UNSETTLING FOR AN URBANITE, BUT THERE'S COMFORT IN KNOWING IT'S BOOSTING OUR WELLBEING

v. Food efforts to shame). Historically, the Marine Park's tributaries have been a slam dunk for sightings, as beyond the banks, spotting a grizzly seems much like finding a needle in a particularly spiky, silver haystack.

But the change puts pressure on guides. Navigating guests on a 90-minute Zodiac journey, 20-minute jeep ride and 30-minute hike through the dense wilderness gives visitors expectations over and above those set by videos of fluffy, lumbering Yogis. I certainly came with them. Earlier that day, as I crouched off-balance on a patch of root-riddled moss, my calves starting to cramp and a wave of fatigue setting in, it was hard not to feel deflated. It had been nearly four hours of squatting by the riverbank and, aside from the slapping of zombie fish (salmon whose bodies are decaying as they make their last upstream punt) and the occasional eagle call, all was quiet.

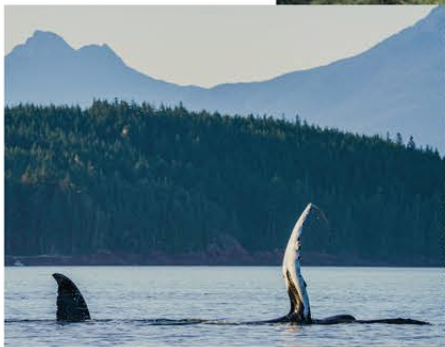
What's worse is that we knew they were nearby. On the way to our viewing point, we passed 'rub trees' (trunks the bears gyrate against to clean their fur), 'bear beds' (smooth, inverted domes in the forest floor where they nap after gorging) and clumps of skunk cabbage, a laxative ingested post-hibernation to get things moving.

There was something invigorating about the quiet, though, because a trip like this isn't *all* about the bears. Our group was made up of people from across the world who wanted to break away from their daily routines, and we've been under 'bear rules' since we stepped off the rib: stay single file, stay close and, if you *must* speak, whisper. The quiet is unsettling for an urbanite, but there's comfort in knowing it's boosting our wellbeing.

Studies have shown that spending just two hours a week immersing your senses in nature (known as *shinrin-yoku* in Japan) reduces stress biomarkers such as cortisol, which dropped 21 per cent per hour in a test conducted on city residents exposed to nature.

Despite today's disappointment and the season's challenges, overall the McGradys are optimistic about the future of their furry friends. "The First Nations are doing a lot of work around habitat restoration and habitat protection," Tim tells me. "So we hope that, in conjunction with the decline in the number of fish farms, we'll see an increase in salmon returns."

The next day, it's a 7am wake-up call, followed by another Zodiac-hike-crouch itinerary. Our small group, led by wry-humoured guide James Hallett, sits on a mammoth tree trunk bisecting the stony riverbank. Fifteen minutes into our silent vigil, a twig snaps. I turn to watch a fuzzy bronze ball flop off the earthy bank ●





Bear faced
 Clockwise from right:
 a grizzly takes a dip in the
 Atnarko River; a Kermode
 bear and her cub pause
 from eating barnacles
 at Gribbell Island; Steller
 sea lions on rocks near
 Princess Royal Island

into the stream, ten metres away. It just might be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. James tells us she's roughly four years old and 165 kilos. She's also rubbish at fishing. Even my untrained eye can see she's struggling, repeatedly slapping the surface of the water, then opting for the easier targets of half-dead chum salmon stranded in the shallows. She's munching on the skin, eggs and brain, but leaving the flesh – a rookie error, apparently. "She's young and hasn't learned to store as much as she can at this stage," Hallett explains. I'm only half listening. After all, there's a bear mere metres from me.

We're spoiled with an hour of watching her splash around, unfazed – but not unaware – of her spectators. She's playful and surprisingly expressive. I can see the frustration on her face as the slippery fish evade her claws. It shouldn't come as a revelation, though. After all, humans share 80 per cent of their genes with bears. Biologist Doug Chadwick's book *Four-Fifths a Grizzly* talks extensively about how closely humans are connected

with animals. "We're at least four-fifths every mammal on the planet," he writes. "Most people know we're 98–99 per cent a chimpanzee in terms of identical genes, but many have no idea that we share 50–60 per cent of our genes with fish."

The return hike is over springy, burnt-orange bark and the mood in the group is one of stunned awe. Tendrils of sunlight stretch between branches covered in old man's beard lichen and huge, overgrown tree stumps with springboard holes cut in the side show the scars of a long logging history. You don't need to be super fit for this kind of excursion, but you do need to be mobile. Clambering in and out of ribs and negotiating the uneven forest terrain requires a level of stability. Patience is also key. Flying from Vancouver to Port Hardy means taking a 19-seater plane whose schedules are at the whims of the fickle coastal weather.

It's hard to know the future for grizzlies. Though it's illegal to hunt them in BC, monitoring numbers is all but impossible without a lot of financial investment. And issues such as climate change, aquaculture and human encroachment will have an impact. Tim believes 2024 will be a key year. "In 2022, we felt like we were back on the upswing. We had a couple of rivers where they were very active, and we started seeing bears fishing again."

I leave Farewell Harbour armed with a strange sense of peace. I found my Bart, and she wasn't a big screen illusion, but a real, living creature that made me feel human in a way I never have before. 🐻

Farewell Harbour's programmes start at C\$4,245 per person based on double occupancy. farewellharbour.com



BA flies direct to Vancouver from Heathrow and Gatwick airports. ba.com/vancouver

BURDOCK & CO

Tuned into the elements like some kind of cosmic radio, chef Andrea Carlson's dishes are so embedded in the push and pull of earth and soil, it would be of no great surprise to find she had roots where most have legs. In this dinky dining room, even the shortest seasons are honoured (BC's spotted prawn is harvested for only 30 days a year and Carlson wouldn't miss it). Bad-ass women continue front-of-house where uber-cool GM, Jordan Westre, can guide you through the region's raciest natural wines.

burdockandco.com



WHERE

TO STAY

Fairmont Hotel Vancouver

Tell any Vancouver-ite you're staying at the Fairmont and be met with the impressed raise of one or both brows – after all, you're kipping in the city's most storied pad. Make sure you say hi to Ella and Elly – the hotel's very own labradors (above) making mischief in the lobby. ba.com/fairmont-vancouver

Words: Hannah Ralph; Photographs: Hakan Burcuoglu; Janis Nicolay; Sarah Annand; Jennilee Marigomen; Knauf and Brown/Mark Yammine; Marlon Soriano; Kyle Thacker



KISSA TANTO

If *Blade Runner* and *The Godfather* had a restaurant baby, it would look like this. Occupying a sultry second floor loft in Chinatown and filled with booths lit by banker lamps, it describes its Japanese and Italian influences as 'doing a little dance' and the first page of the menu is just as flirty – "Thank you for coming," it says. "You look perfect." Order a Midori Sour and the pot-luck omakase menu. kissatanto.com

ASK FOR LUIGI

"No one feeds you quite like Ask for Luigi" – and that's straight from the horse's (Michelin's) mouth. Coming in as 'recommended' on the inaugural guide, this retro-modern Italian caff is made for *Lady and the Tramp*-ing spaghetti *cacio e pepe* with someone attractive and sharing an olive oil pound cake with whipped ricotta, or Patron XO Café-soaked tiramisu. Wood panelled walls make it an Instagrammer's dream. askforluigi.com

COMO TAPERIA

Vancouver is hot on its Asian, Italian and BC influences, but there's a Spanish revolution over in foodie Mount Pleasant. Another Michelin recommendation, this funky tapas bar serves the city's most moreish side plate – fried aubergine discs with spiced honey and rosemary – and has sherry or vermouth, dangerously, on tap. Come during Happy Hour, where you'll get a glass for free. comotaperia.com



So tasteful

Clockwise from top left: Burdock & Co's warm ricotta and persimmon pudding; the resident labradors at the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver; Kissa Tanto's octopus salad; Kissa Tanto; Como Taperia; the dining room at Michelin-starred Published on Main; venison at Published on Main

FULL? HERE'S WHERE TO WORK OFF THE FOOD

GRANVILLE ISLAND

The most visited tourist attraction in Canada – take that, Niagara – Granville Island has a huge waterpark, and knockout shopping seven days a week.

CAPILANO SUSPENSION BRIDGE

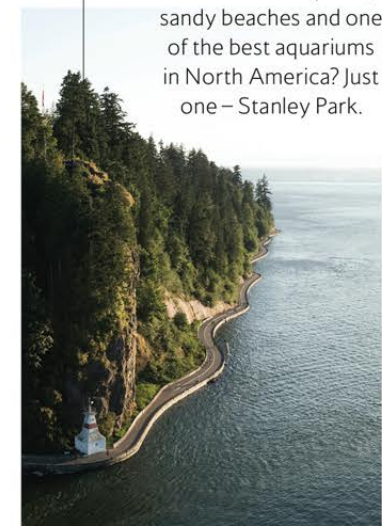
Slung high above the Capilano River in North Vancouver's densest forest, this 137m-long wobbler is decorated in thousands of fairy lights during winter.

HARBOUR AIR SEAPLANES

"Has anyone flown a seaplane before?" shouts the pilot from the cabin. "No? Great, me neither!" Expect banter and bird's-eye-views on a stunning 20-minute flight above Vancouver's North Shore Mountains.

STANLEY PARK

How many city parks have 1,001 acres of natural rainforest, First Nations totem poles, sandy beaches and one of the best aquariums in North America? Just one – Stanley Park.



VAN LIFE

The grizzlies aren't the only things looking for a satisfying feed. Your hub for a BC bear adventure is 'The Couve' and, if you stay a few days, you can enjoy the fruits of the province's debut *Michelin Guide*

PUBLISHED ON MAIN

Of the eight Vancouver restaurants that were given a star in the *Michelin Guide* last year, this Main Street stop could well be the mightiest. It's a big room – seating some 100+ covers – and, unlike many Michelin-approved joints, portion sizes veer on the generous. Its chef, Gus Stieffenhofer-Brandson, has Big Viking Energy – beefy and covered in tats. But it's his 11-course tasting menu that saw Published on Main top Canada's 100 Best Restaurants list for 2022. While everything is certifiably plate-lickable, the candied salmon snacks take the crown. publishedonmain.com

