

Vancouver Island

A World Before Man

A Greentours Itinerary

British Columbia is truly a land of sweeping forests, endless mountains and unspoilt rivers and lakes and nowhere is this truer than on Vancouver Island. Fabulous coastal scenery and incredible coastal temperate rainforests combine to provide a home for a rich array of fauna and flora that reaches its zenith in the large mammal populations. Both marine and land mammals can here be seen more easily and in better numbers than perhaps anywhere on the continent.

Day 1

To Vancouver

Our flight lands in Vancouver in the afternoon and we'll head straight to our hotel handily situated for the morning ferry journey.

Day 2

Ferry to Vancouver Island, Tofino via Little Qualicum Falls

We'll catch the morning ferry for Vancouver Island which takes two hours to cross the straits. En route we'll see California and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, and there's a chance of a cetacean or two. We'll head for Tofino but there's a great break in the journey! Following an early lunch on the ferry we'll have time to stop at Little Qualicum Provincial Park on the way. Here ancient forest surrounds a spectacular gorge and waterfall, the huge Red Cedars interspersed with Western Hemlock, Large Leaf Maple and Arbutus trees with their strange peeling bark. Wandering Vancouver's old-growth temperate rainforests is an experience that will leave you awed.

Days 3 & 4

Tofino: Pacific Rim Provincial Park, Boat trips for Black Bears and Gray Whales

The Pacific Rim National Park is full of wonderful trails. We will visit rock pools with a stunning array of large almost lime-green anemones, whilst various gulls and Common Loons will be offshore. Scenic coastal trails take us through old growth forests and overlook the coast, through contorted and twisted Red Cedars, and twisted Shore Pines. Some are over eight hundred years old and more than twelve metres around the base. Some are Culturally Modified Trees – the local Yuutu?it?ath people would harvest cedar planks and bark over centuries without killing the tree. Myriad fungi decorate the mossy woodland floor including orange-yellow stacks of Chicken-of-the-Woods. There are many viewpoints from which we'll be able to watch for seagoing wildlife. Gray Whales, Humpback Whales and Orcas are all possible, as well as Steller's Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbour Porpoises. The birding is excellent too with elegant Black Oystercatchers, Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots.

We'll take to the boats here. Clayoquot Sound has a population of around two hundred Pacific Gray Whales that spend April to November in the area. We'll have the chance to get close to this oddest looking of the great whales. Humpback Whales will also be on the agenda again and we've another chance of Orcas though sightings are only every couple of weeks here. On a second boat trip, we'll look for Black Bears along the rocky coastline of the Fortune Channel. There are good numbers. We'll cruise along narrow channels between islands thus ensuring that when we see the bears they'll be close to us! We'll also see Sea Lions, Harbour Seals and, as everywhere, Bald Eagles and Great Blue Herons. Wolf sightings are possible – we had amazing views in 2019. We may visit a local hatchery, where, if the salmon are running, Black Bears (and Sea Lions!) are drawn to the fish, and call in at some hot spots for migrant warblers.

Day 5

Transfer to Port Alice

We will break our journey at the superb Stamp Falls where we will walk along the edge of the spectacular gorge. Shoals of huge salmon can be seen gathering below and jumping the falls. A good spot for American Dipper, too. The end of our journey will be at the tiny settlement of Port Alice - a picturesque community built on a mountainside with excellent views of Neroutsos Inlet from every vantage point, as well as being the self-styled Sea Otter capitol of Canada!

Days 6 & 7

Port Alice, Stamp Falls and Neroutsos Sea Otters

We'll take a six-hour boat trip out from Port Alice and have a picnic lunch while we are out. Bald Eagles are common around the harbour. Our captain Ron will soon have us meeting our first unimaginably cute Sea Otters; we could even see them in the harbour. These lovely animals have returned in numbers to the Pacific Coast after being driven to the verge of extinction. They have increased dramatically in numbers in recent years which has been great news for the underwater kelp forests as the Otters prey on their main herbivore; the sea urchin. The study of the change in habitats brought about by the return of the Sea Otter has been fundamental in elucidating the idea of Trophic Cascades, an important concept now in ecological understanding. We are likely to see hundreds of otters, often in large rafts, with mothers keeping plump cubs afloat on their stomachs. Sometimes we'll see them wrapped in strands of kelp or holding purple sea urchins, clutching the urchin with their front paws as they swim on their backs, watching us all the while. Black Oystercatchers feed on the rocky shore, groups of Surf Scoter loaf in little bays and Belted Kingfishers hunt along the shore. The black backs of Harbour Porpoises surface from time to time around us and huge Steller Sea Lions stealthily approach seal colonies. Neroutsos Inlet is a great place to see 'Beach Bears' (Black Bears) foraging along the shoreline, and birds include Common Loon and Red-throated Loon, Storm Petrels, various Grebes and maybe even Horned Puffin.

This area offers one of the best opportunities in Canada to view features typical of karst landforms. Our second day will be an adventure inland, to see geological oddities such as the Devil's Bath, the largest cenote in Canada at 359 meters in diameter and 44 meters in depth and the Eternal Fountain - a stream resurgence waterfall that flows into a swallet (a stream sinking into a separate cave below the waterfall). Steller's Jays and Red Crossbills are common and shyer birds such as Ruffed Grouse could be seen. Red Squirrels scold us as we watch Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Pacific Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Mornings and evenings will be great times to walk out from our accommodation along the peaceful seafront, where Humpbacks and Sea Otters, Seals and Porpoises are not uncommon sights.

Days 8 & 9

Alert Bay Island: Orcas Boat Trip and the U'mista Cultural Centre

We will take a morning ferry over to Alert Bay, situated on a little island sandwiched between 'mainland' Vancouver Island and Malcolm Island. We'll keep an eye out for cetaceans, and sea birds. We will visit the U'mista Cultural Centre, which showcases the famed Potlatch Collection of ceremonial regalia and masks taken by Canadian authorities in 1922 during the potlatch ban era. The return of the potlatch artefacts not only provided U'mista's name ('the return of something important') but also sparked a general trend toward repatriation of First Nations and cultural artefacts. The cemetery on the main street of Alert Bay is also known as the Namgis Burial Grounds, and hosts generations of totem poles, alongside more familiar stone crosses. Bald Eagles nest here, and we might see Downy Woodpecker, Varied Thrush and Violet-Green Swallow.

Our wildlife cruise will be with the experienced Sea Smoke crew who know these waters and their cetaceans so very well. Almost as we leave the harbour playful Dahl's Porpoises will be with us and they'll be around throughout the trip. These fastest of cetaceans are marked with similar black and white markings to Orcas. Common Seals haul out rocky islets. As we pass wooded islands, Bald Eagles gaze at the scene from beautiful Shore Pines draped with mosses. We'll soon come across Humpback Whales as this is an important feeding area for these charismatic leviathans. The boat trips in the Johnstone Strait are well-known for their guaranteed wildlife shows with pods of Orcas frequently observed at close range. These are exceptionally dynamic animals and every encounter seems to reveal a new facet of their daily lives – it is astonishing just how well one can see these incredibly powerful inhabitants of the island's seas. The Orcas we'll likely see in the Alert Bay area are part of the 'East Coast Residents' pods that usually feed on fish, however one can see Transients; on other trips we'll have a chance to see the West Coast Transient pods who have an altogether different feeding strategy; they prey on sea mammals such as sea lions and young whales. As we watch them small groups of Rhinoceros Auklets swim nearby in rafts, some with beaks stuffed with small silver fish. We'll encounter huge sleek Steller's Sea Lions swimming under the surface of the crystal-clear water eyeing us disdainfully as they pass. Steller's Sea Lions are not much smaller than a Grizzly Bear.

There'll be time to wander trails around the island. Our hotel is perched right on the water and on still nights you can hear the blows of the humpback whales offshore. Walking the quiet coastal road is a great way to go sea watching, with Humpbacks, Sea Otters, Sea Lions, Seals and Porpoises all close to shore along with Black Turnstones, Harlequin Ducks, Loons, White-winged and Surf Scoters, Belted Kingfishers and of course Bald Eagles.

Days 10 - 12

Campbell River; Bute River Grizzly Bears, Elk Falls and Strathcona Provincial Park

On Day 10 we will transfer to Campbell River and spend the afternoon at Elk Falls Provincial Park following the trails upstream. The large pools of clear water and further waterfalls (Moose Falls and Deer Falls) are breath-taking. We'll walk amongst magnificent huge old-growth Douglas-firs, some of the towering moss-covered trees are four hundred years old. Wavy-leaved Cottonmoss, Step Moss & Oregon Beaked Moss give a rich green glow to the forest floor and trailing Cat-tail Moss to tree boles and branches. Bigleaf Maples are draped so completely with lichens and mosses that the bark is nearly invisible; they carry a greater load of mosses and other species than any other tree in the region. On one or two nights we will head into Campbell River for supper at a restaurant on the sea front.

A nine-hour boat trip will take us through the stunning scenery towards Bute Inlet on the mainland. Aboard a comfortable, high-speed covered vessel we will be taken on to the traditional territory of the Homalco First Nation then via a bus to a series of viewing platforms. The Bute River offers some of the best Grizzly Bear viewing on the West Coast and we can (nearly) guarantee that this particular part of the tour will be the experience of a lifetime. There are excellent chances of spending time with pods of Orcas and/or Humpbacks en route, and Bald Eagles, Marbled Murrelets and Rafts of Surf Scoters and Western Grebes are likely. As we near Bute Inlet the water turns a mesmerising turquoise due to the load of fine glacial silt in the water.

On reaching land, we will be met by our Homalco first nations guide, who will drive us the short distance to a series of viewpoints and covered raised wooden platforms from where we will be able to watch, from a distance of sixty down to ten metres, Grizzly Bears catching and feeding on Salmon. We have three hours here, and will have a lunch of freshly made wraps, home-made muffins, tea coffee, and hot chocolate. Even more opportunities for birding and whales on the return journey!

Strathcona Provincial Park, designated in 1911, is the oldest provincial park in British Columbia; a rugged mountain wilderness. Mountain peaks – some perpetually mantled with snow – dominate the park. Lakes and alpine tarns dot a landscape laced with rivers, creeks and streams. We will follow a well-made trail through wonderful subalpine habitat. Only 2.5 km, this short trail will take us all afternoon as there is so much to see, Steller's and Gray Jays are common, and there are some late flowering alpinines such as King Gentian and orchids like Slender Bog Orchid. Butterflies include Mourning Cloak.

Day 13

Quinsum River Hatchery and the Ferry to Vancouver

In the morning we will visit the fascinating Quinsum River Hatchery where we can see returning Pink Salmon spawning in the river as well as the hatchery itself where eight million salmon eggs are hatched annually. If the salmon run is on, this of course attracts Black Bears and Bald Eagles both of which we have good chances of seeing.

Day 14

Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary then afternoon departure from Vancouver

In the morning we'll visit the Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary which in mid-September is at its busiest with wildfowl and waders. Groups of Snow Geese and Ross's Geese should already be arriving whilst overhead Northern Harrier and Sharp-shinned Hawk are likely. The variety of waders present can be impressive at this season and should include both Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper and both Dowitchers. Sandhill Cranes pass through Reifel in some numbers at this time of year. Our flight departs Vancouver International Airport in the afternoon.

Day 15

Arrive Europe

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the report from our previous tours to Vancouver Island. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk

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