

Vancouver Island

A World Before Man

A Greentours Itinerary

British Columbia is truly a land of sweeping forests, endless mountainous and unspoilt rivers and lakes and nowhere is this truer than on Vancouver Island. Fabulous Coastal scenery, incredible Coastal Temperate Rainforests, and habitats hardly touched by man 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 good 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 and Cathedral Grove

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 is ancient forest around a spectacular gorge, 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. At Cathedral Grove the moss and fern-laden understory is peppered with giants – Western hemlock, Yellow Cedar, Western Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, Amabilis Fir and Sitka Spruce - these are some of the largest trees in North America. Red Squirrels scold us as we watch Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Pacific Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Cathedral Grove has an eight-hundred year old Douglas Fir that stands seventy-six metres tall and has a circumference of nine metres. Other stops may include the torrent smoothed rocks of the Kennedy River, and the small town of Port Alberni for home-made icecreams and coffees, before we make our way to Middle Beach Lodge, beautifully situated on a small forested peninsula with coves in easy walking distance either side.

Days 3 to 5

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

The Pacific Rim National Park is full of wonderful trails. One such takes us through rock pools with a stunning array of large almost lime-green anemones, whilst various gulls and Common Loons will be offshore. An incredibly scenic trail takes us round a spectacular headland, through contorted and twisted Red Cedars, to the Amphitrite Lighthouse. 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 sea-going 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 abundant Black Bears along the rocky coastline of the Fortune Channel. 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.

Days 5 & 6

Zeballos, Stamp Falls and Nootka Sound Sea Otters

At the superb Stamp Falls we will walk along the edge of the spectacular gorge, where shoals of huge salmon can be seen gathering below and jumping the falls. A good spot for American Dipper, too. After lunch we will drive to remote Zeballos for two nights at the Cedars Inn

We'll take a morning boat trip out from Zeballos. Our local boatman will soon have us meeting our first unimaginably cute Sea Otters; we could even see them in Zeballos 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 bought 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. Sometimes we'll see them nuzzling their chests – blowing air into the fur to warm up. Sometimes we'll see them holding purple spiny sea urchins, clutching the urchin with their front paws as they swim on their backs, watching us all the while. We'll head for Nuchatlitz Inlet, whose name

means 'backed against the mountains' in the local language. 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. There can be a lot of Sea Otters in the waters of Nuchatlitz Inlet and we'll likely see rafts of them wrapping themselves in strands of kelp, so that they can rest up or even sleep without drifting away. There are close to a thousand Sea Otters now in this area – a wonderful success story, not least for the kelp forests which are now also making a comeback on Vancouver Island's west coast. Zeballos is a great place to see 'Beach Bears' (Black Bears) foraging along the shoreline. We'll see a number of them on our boat trips all busy 'beach-combing' – it is great fun watching them turning over rocks in search of a tasty snack.

Black Bears may also be seen catching salmon at the river inlet by the harbour close to the Cedars Inn after the salmon run starts – which may be when we are there! Trails through the forest here will allow us to look for Ruffed Grouse, or if we are lucky the rare Sooty Grouse, and we'll note the vertical lines of drilled holes in tree bark that are the indications of Sapsuckers (woodpeckers) feeding. Tasty Red Huckleberry, Himalayan Blackberry (introduced from India via England), Thimbleberry and Oval-leaved Blueberry line the trails. Nearby a small estuary is home to burgundy, orange and pink starfish! Ochre Starfish, here are mainly purple but with a few bright orange ones scattered amongst the waves too. This species was heavily hit by a viral plague (sea star wasting disease) possibly brought on by warmer temperatures in 2013, but the population has started to make a good comeback. Perhaps we'll check our trap camera which we'll have sited in the hope of getting images of the Cougars or Wolves which are seen from time to time around Zeballos.

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 once on land we'll visit the U'mista Cultural Centre, which is one of the longest-operating and most successful First Nations cultural facilities in BC. It 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 Prince of Wales team 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 on the perfectly formed rocky islets just out of the harbour. 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 out from Telegraph Cove 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 trips off Nootka Island we'll also have a chance to see the West Coast Transient pods and these have an altogether different feeding strategy, they prey on sea mammals such as sea lions and young whales. We'll have plenty of time amongst the Orcas and will gain an insight into the behaviour we'll be witnessing as well as learning about their lives so well-known now. If conditions permit the captain will switch off the boat's engines, and we can gently drift among the Orcas, watching their movements and activities, and after a short while, getting the hang of correlating these with the bleeps and whistles we will hear from the underwater microphone. A magic experience. 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. We'll visit the museum at Telegraph Cove where there is an excellent display with seal and bear skulls side by side for comparison, amongst other things.

There'll be time to wander trails around the island. Indigo-hued Steller's Jays are common, and maybe we'll see a 'beach bear' or two.

Days 10 to 12

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

On Day 10 we will transfer to Campbell River and spent 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 forest 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 *Isoetes macrospora* to tree boles and branches. Bigleaf Maples *Acer macrophyllum* 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 seafood restaurant on the sea front.

An eight 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 via bus to a series of viewing platforms. The Orford River offers some of the best Grizzly Bear viewings on

the West Coast and we can guarantee that this 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 glacial silt in the water.

On reaching land, we will be met by our Homalco first nations guides, 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 60 down to 10 metres, Grizzly Bears catching and feeding on Salmon. We have three hours here, and will finish by eating a lunch of freshly made wraps, home-made muffins, tea coffee, and hot chocolates. 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 alpines such as King Gentian and orchids like Slender Bog Orchid.

Day 13

The Ferry to Vancouver and a taste of Vancouver

We'll catch the morning ferry back to the mainland, giving us time to see a little of, and dine out in the city of Vancouver which often appears in the top three city destinations in the world alongside Melbourne and Vienna.

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

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