

THE AUSTRALIAN

• ISSUE 10 •

Travel + LUXURY

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A venerable safari
camp is reborn

WAVE HUNTERS
Indonesia's greatest
surfing odyssey

NATURAL HIGH
Canada's coveted
wilderness lodge

CUTTING EDGE
Cruising Norway
in an icebreaker

THRALL OF THE WILD

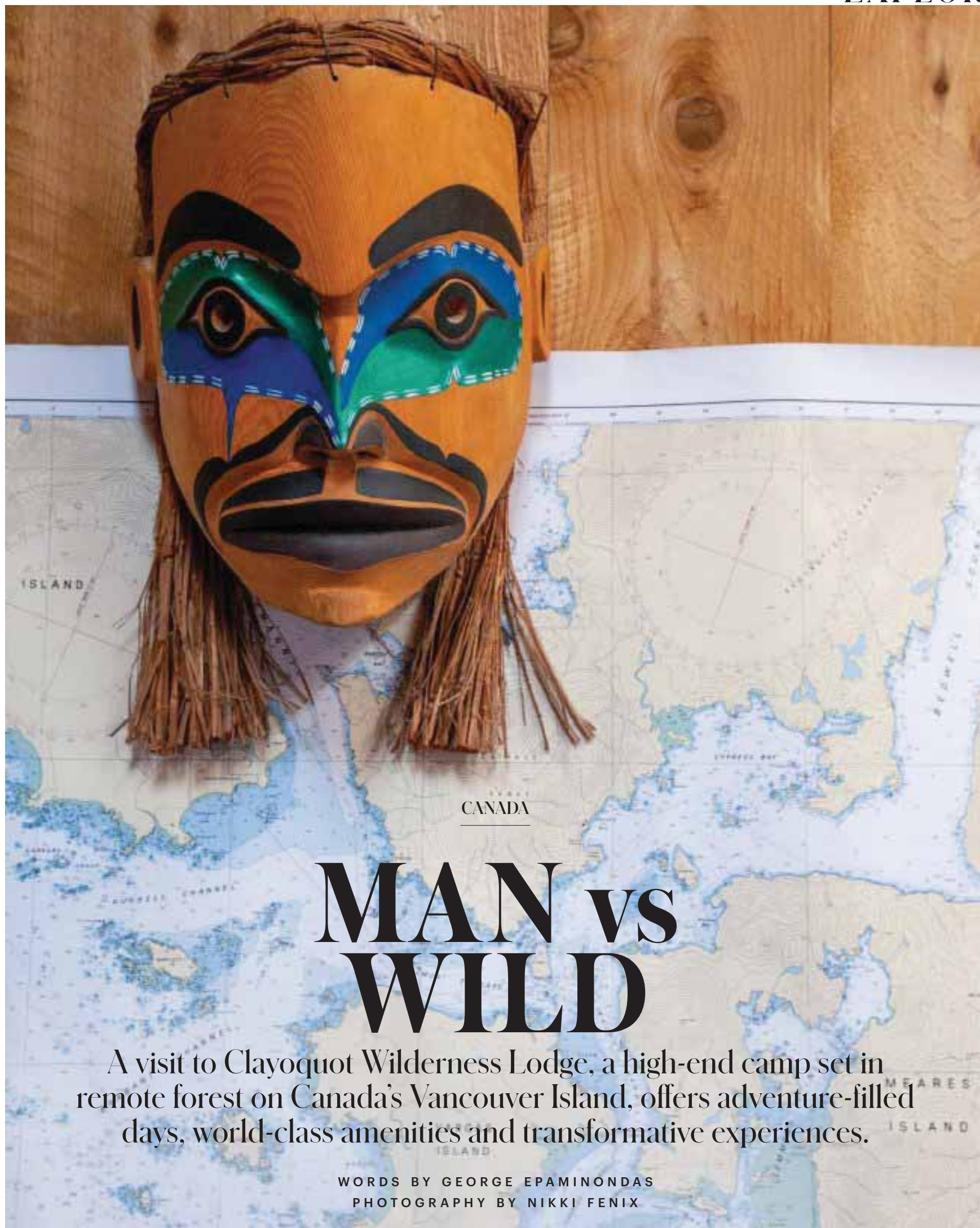
*Epic adventures from
Africa to the Arctic*





EVERGREEN ZONE

Guide Mark Brophy leads the way in the Ursus Valley, renowned for its towering old-growth forest. Right: An Indigenous mask carved from cedar has pride of place at the lodge's activity centre.



CANADA

MAN vs WILD

A visit to Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, a high-end camp set in remote forest on Canada's Vancouver Island, offers adventure-filled days, world-class amenities and transformative experiences.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIKKI FENIX





Some people are attuned to the call of the wild, hiking to the loftiest peaks, diving to the darkest depths and spelunking in the deepest recesses with religious zeal. Others need to be nudged out of their cashmere cocoons. As a longstanding member of the second group, I was initially apprehensive about exploring Vancouver Island, a pristine wilderness off Canada's Pacific Coast, without so much as a carabiner. But on a five-hour rainforest trek, I went from Mr Bean to Bear Grylls. We had biked, hiked and bushwhacked through brambles with an astute guide who instructed us to use small shuffling steps when crossing hazardous riverbeds. I didn't heed his advice. Instead, I foolishly raced ahead as though I were jaywalking on Sydney's Elizabeth Street, and found myself adrift in waist-high water. I'm a liability, get me out of here.

Eventually, I reached the opposite bank, with soaked clothing and a bruised ego. On the positive side, my slipping point became an inflection point – a lesson on endurance, perseverance and living in the moment. Small epiphanies were a regular occurrence on this adventure-filled trip. Admittedly, as a guest at Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge I wasn't exactly roughing it. With 25 safari-like tents and next-level trappings, the lodge is the *ne plus ultra* of glamping. Accessed by seaplane, boat, or helicopter, it's set amid old-growth conifer forests, snow-topped mountains and a richly biodiverse habitat. Eagles swoop overhead, salmon surge through rivers and black bears forage for eels, fish and berries. Further afield are grey whales, sea lions, otters and occasionally orcas. Even a die-hard urbanite like me could not help but be moved by this Henry David Thoreau fantasy.

From the plane, the infinite trees appeared as densely packed as cocktail picks. Our arrival was impeded by inclement weather – it's a temperate rainforest after all – but the welcome was warm. "You're in the house of Mother Nature now," said lodge manager Sarah Cruse reassuringly. With her benevolent gaze, and accompanied by her grey hunting poodle, Toby, Cruse instantly set the tone of my stay. Clayoquot Lodge opened in 1998 but since 2020 it has been managed by Baillie Lodges of Australia. As you would expect from Hayley and James Baillie, the

visionaries behind Longitude 131° in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Silky Oaks Lodge in the Daintree among others, the lodge has been spiffily updated with plush quarters, daily-changing menus, and experiences that are more nuanced than standard nature camps.

You don't need to be a member of the Gore-Tex gang to find the activities here rewarding – they span everything from canyoning in crystal-clear waters to abseiling through spruce trees. Conveniently, the team will kit you out for every mission. The next morning, I was standing on the banks of the Bedwell River in neoprene kayaking livery that resembled early *Comme des Garçons*. Above us, a thin strip of snow bisected the alpine terrain. Below, the moss-green water undulated softly. The camp's name stems from Clayoquot Sound, the vast ocean inlet whose banks it traces. Untouched by time, this coastal ecosystem teems with riveting life. As I discovered my bearings in the kayak, a pine marten popped up from an embankment to see what all the commotion was about. A type of weasel with a bib of cream-coloured fur, he looked like he was wearing an orange cardigan.

"Cute but carnivorous," said guide Sadie Gibbs, confidently gliding through the water in her kayak. Fervent about this precious haven, Gibbs was typical of the lodge guides. She is an adventurer with the heart of a poet and the mind of a scholar. "There are 60 types of seaweed and multiple types of algae and barnacles," she said as low tide revealed painterly striations of rock in the cliffs above the river. Gibbs spoke animatedly about the reproductive rituals of barnacles – they possess one of the longest penises in the animal kingdom, relative to their body size, did you know? – and all the creatures who cling on for dear life in tidal pools, including anemones, sea stars and urchins. Beneath us floated fried-egg jellyfish, with eerie translucent bodies and yolk-yellow centres that recalled my early breakfast.

To visit this lush region is to follow in the footsteps of three First Nations communities, the Ahousaht, the Hesquiaht, and the Tla-o-qui-aht, who have been stewards of this land for generations. We kayaked past the Ahousaht's summer and winter camps, the latter shrewdly protected from the elements. Later, on a Zodiac tour of the sound, we sailed by burial grounds for First Nations chieftains. "There are lots of conversations about what reconciliation looks like," said Gibbs as we approached a raft of male sea otters feasting on urchins. The crafty critters pack their own sharp tools and swathe themselves in kemp to stay toasty in the water. We also spied California grey whales on their northward migration, fluking their tales to dive before emerging again. The resurgence of the whales, the hunting of which was banned in 1939, is one of the success stories in cetacean conservation, we learned.

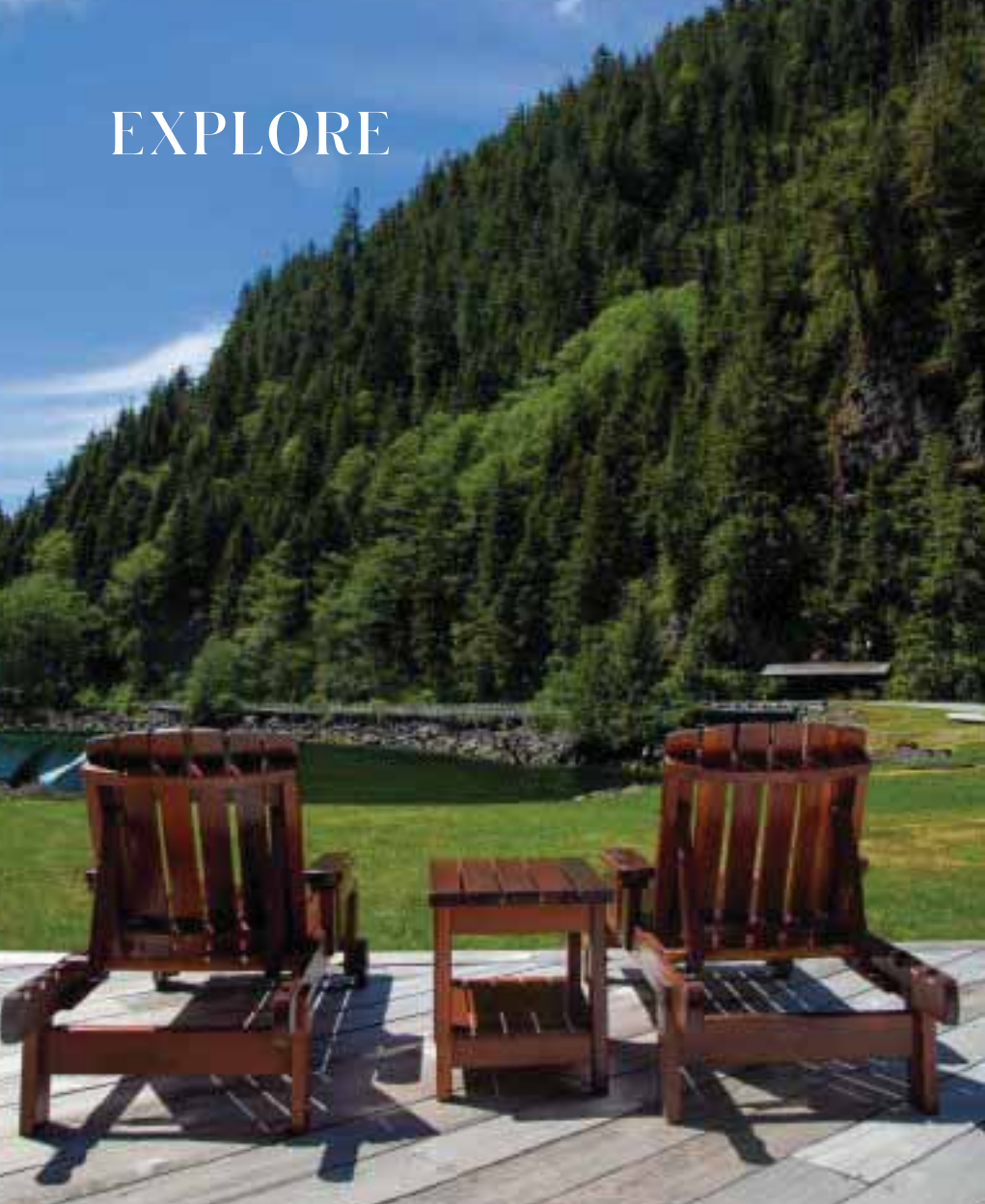
On a refuelling stop in Tofino, a picturesque fishing village, I strolled past waterside bars and eateries brimming with revellers during the

SOUND ADVICE

Left: Guide Sadie Gibbs on a kayak tour. Below: A young guest eyes the wilderness outside the lounge. Opposite: A cedar boardwalk connects the lodge's tents, including these common spaces.



EXPLORE



TREE CHANGE

Clockwise from above: Adirondack chairs on the terrace outside the restaurant; a Maple Bacon Sour; the walkway to the guest tents; the Cookhouse's baked halibut in tamarind broth.



HORSEPLAY
Wrangler Gillian
Delure takes Odin to
the water's edge.





PITCH PERFECT

Tents feature cast-iron stoves, cosy furnishings and Indigenous objects and artworks.

early summer season. Surfers, anglers and loungers gravitate here from almost everywhere. The island is home to five types of salmon, including chinook and sockeye, as well as albacore tuna, halibut and steelhead. To protect wild salmon, First Nations groups and conservation organisations are advocating to wind back salmon farming, but it's an ongoing debate. Vancouver Island has long been an ecological battle ground. In the 1980s and '90s, protests sought to block the decimation of the rainforest by the logging industry. The so-called "War of the Woods" culminated in the summer of 1983 when more than 800 people were arrested. At a café in Vancouver a few days earlier I met a woman who assembled here in the early '90s. "We won," she told me, beaming. "We got it."

Ravenous after an action-packed morning, back at the lodge I made a beeline for the Cookhouse. With its focus on wild, harvested and sustainable ingredients, the restaurant offers a scintillating taste of Vancouver Island. The kitchen squad is led by chefs Olivia Bolano and Mark Ota, partners in both life and work who met here in summer 2019 and whose menus are filled with freshly caught fish, scallops and crabs, foraged mushrooms, and locally grown and greenhouse vegetables. Virtuous but delicious. And, as you might expect in the Pacific Northwest, the food is steeped in multicultural influences. During my stay, I dined on Mexican-style prawn ceviche, steamed bao with pork belly, and lavender pavlova.

Adjacent to the restaurant is the Ivanhoe Lounge with floor-to-ceiling windows framing one of the most staggering views in British Columbia, a composition

of lake, forest and alpine majesty. Manning the bar was Aussie expat John Affleck from Melbourne. "I've bartended for 10 years but I've never had an office like this," he said, gesturing to the verdurous scene outside. When they're peckish, bald eagles regard the estuary as their smorgasbord. "I saw one take a duck the other day!" As we chatted a disoriented hummingbird flew into the bar and was gently released. Among the signature drinks served here are the vodka-fuelled Rhubarb Collins, gin-focused Bedwell Bramble and a Maple Bacon Sour with bacon-washed whisky, Chartreuse, egg white and candied bacon. All winners.

On another crisp morning, I saddled up with wrangler Gillian Delure. The lodge offers top-notch care for its stable of 22 horses, including regular vet visits for equine physical therapy. "If you don't have a healthy horse, you won't have a good business," Delure told me as we trotted along a narrow trail festooned with thimbleberry and salmonberry. I appreciated the elevated vantage point – from a saddle you view the landscape in an entirely different way. My horse, Karson, was a well-behaved Arab, while Delure rode Odin, a feisty Norwegian fjord who playfully pawed the water. *T+L's* photographer was on Dusty, a quarter horse with a proclivity to bolt headfirst into bramble, but Delure was quick to correct him. Being gently guided back onto the path is what this place does so well.

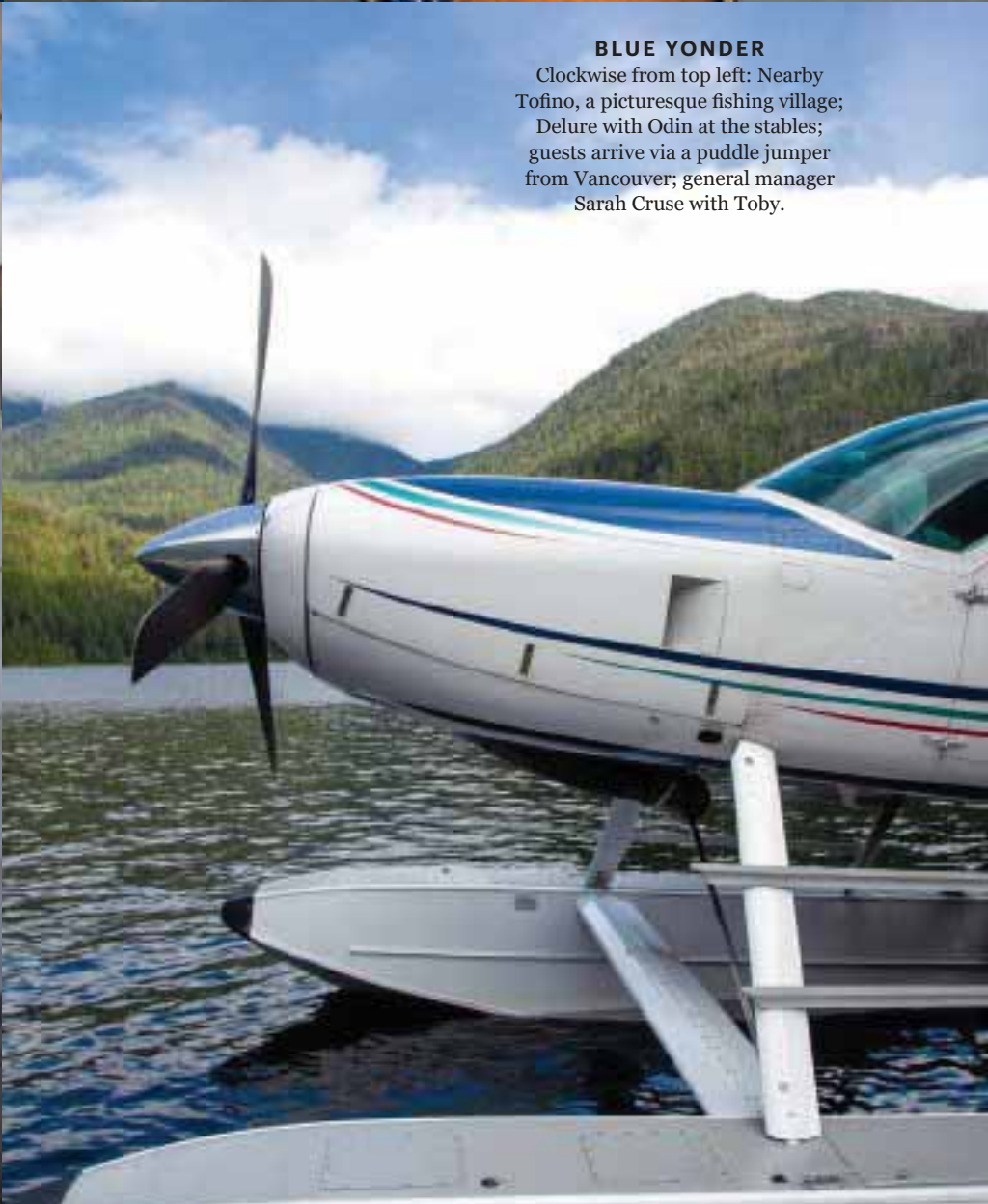
The most immersive experience was the Ursus Valley trek, and not merely because I ended up in the river. "I like to call it the Clayoquot quadrathlon," said guide Mark Brophy as we set off. We started on e-bikes, hiked muddy terrain in rubber boots and hiking poles, crossed rivers in wetsuit booties, and cut our way through prickly scrub. Brophy, a polymath in white Crocs, led the way with infectious enthusiasm. Trained in medical science and animal physiology, he pointed out medicinal plants embraced by Indigenous groups, scouted for bears in hollowed-out trees and guided us to a grove of towering Sitka spruce almost 500 years old. Fish may not grow on trees, but it's fish that made all these trees grow so resplendently. "It's a salmon forest," Brophy said. "The forest thrives because of the nutrients from dead salmon."

In a lavish epilogue to the hike, we headed back to camp by helicopter. But that wasn't the only extravagance at Clayoquot. I dipped into a cedar hot tub, enjoyed a vigorous massage and lolled around my waterfront tent with a book. Warmed by cast-iron stoves and draped in natural fibres, the canvas tents convey the impression that you're at once inside and outside. That duality continued elsewhere. A private outdoor cedar-clad shower was a sublime way to start the day. One moment I was admiring a bentwood box designed by First Nations artist Moy Sutherland, the next I was trying to figure out what a small canister was in my bathroom. A deodorant? No, a bear horn. You won't find a mini-bar or food in the tents, lest they attract ursine visitors, and you soon learn the timid animals are not a concern.

With rustic buildings, horse-drawn carriages and vintage tugboats, the aesthetics of the lodge could be described as pioneer chic. Yet this little house on the prairie has a coolly modern edge. At breakfast one morning, a waitress asked whether I preferred my macchiato wet or dry – we could have been in a café in Melbourne's Collingwood. The tents are connected by cedar boardwalks and include social spaces, such as a games room. "We pared back the interiors and added a more contemporary look," Hayley Baillie told me. Plans are under way to renovate additional elements, including the restaurant. "We'll make the most of the sound-side positioning and open up the design to welcome the outside in and create that seamless experience," she added.

Staying at Clayoquot Lodge was, for me and many of the other guests I connected with, a powerful antidote to urban burnout. Navigating the dusky forests, soaring slopes and fractured islands helped slow the incessant whirring of the monkey mind. It was a sensory reset, a speed healing of the citified soul, I didn't know I needed. "We're not hiding from life here, we're engaging with it," said Sarah Cruse as we said our goodbyes on my final afternoon under an endless cobalt sky. "We have the unbelievable location where you truly connect to all kinds of ecosystems. It brings you to an enhanced place and helps us become better humans." 🌲

The writer was a guest of Baillie Lodges and travelled with the assistance of Vancouver Tourism and Air Canada. The lodge opens May to September 2023. Rates start at \$C2900 per tent per night. clayoquotwildernesslodge.com



BLUE YONDER
 Clockwise from top left: Nearby
 Tofino, a picturesque fishing village;
 Delure with Odin at the stables;
 guests arrive via a puddle jumper
 from Vancouver; general manager
 Sarah Cruse with Toby.