

THE EASY *wildlife*

When you've travelled halfway around the world to go bear spotting, the stakes are high. But at this five-star wilderness lodge, it's not even past breakfast before the bears come out to play. By Lisa Perkovic

The boat leaves Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge's dock at 9am. There's a hush in the air, the engine dampened by mist curling down the mountains. The water stays calm, yet our hearts are aflutter.

We're told Vancouver Island's black bears don't mind the light drizzle that starts to fall. After all, this is temperate rainforest country, with lush pine forests as far as the eye can see. Today, I can't even spot the trees through the mist, surely less than ideal bear spotting conditions. Just as my heart starts to sink... the call goes out. Bear ahoy!

Our first Canadian black bear ambles along the water's edge, unbothered as we sidle up to his empty beach. It's 9.15am and Tofino's bear watching tour boats haven't even warmed up their engines so we have the cove to ourselves. Out on the prow, we're soon too close for binoculars.

The sky clears as he noses rocks out of the way, digging at crustaceans uncovered by the tide. A crab darts off, but quick as a flash it's scooped up in sharp claws. Satisfied chomping echoes across the water. It's bear breakfast time as he bulks up after winter.

Ten minutes later, we're inside the heated cabin of our launch doing our own chomping. Guides unpack chunky peanut butter bliss

balls straight from the kitchen, along with Yeti mugs of coffee and hot chocolate. Tucked under blankets, binoculars at the ready, we're onto the next cove.

Four more bears, two bald eagles circling above, a grey whale, sea otters bobbing with their babies tight on their chests, plus colonies of seals round out our Sights of the Sound tour. One of the lodge's signature, inclusive experiences, it's just about the easiest wildlife tour I've encountered. We tick the bear sightings off the list before the breakfast spread is even cleared back at the lodge.

Our triumphant return up the 11km Bedwell River fjord takes us back into the mist, where the lodge has this quiet part of the UNESCO-listed Clayoquot Sound Biosphere to itself. Accessible only by boat or seaplane, 25 glamping tents peek through the trees. Some are tucked right up in the tree line, others dotted along forest boardwalks with balconies perched over the river.

It's certainly the first over-water rainforest tent I've ever stayed in. Rug-covered hardwood floors, canvas walls, gas fireplace, king-size bed, ensuite with heated floors, and an outdoor shower – the tent bridges the gap between luxury and the great outdoors in serious style. At night with the fireplace on,



and the hot water bottle thoughtfully tucked into bed at turn down, this is as cosy as it gets. Each morning, we roll up the tent flaps to a waiting thermos of hot tea and curl back in bed to watch the river sweep past. We're not in luck bear spotting with the in-room binoculars but we've been told the open-air hot tubs on the spa deck are another top place to spot them.

That's where we end up in the afternoon, with cold Canadian craft beers and another pair of binoculars. No one is brave enough to try the cold plunge tub, but the heated tubs and their 180-degree river views are well-visited. I'll never experience such blissful wildlife watching ever again. Guests wander over to ease muscles sore from horseback trail rides, archery lessons, and for the adventurous, canyoning up at the Bedwell Falls.

Alongside hikes, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, disc golf and even rock climbing, these activities are all part of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge's all-inclusive experience. With roughly 70 staff on-site, there's a 2:1 ratio to guests at the start of the season. Group activities are small, usually two to four people at a time, with itineraries customised based on interests, physical fitness and one's appetite to get out in the great outdoors.

Guests with gusto are off adventuring morning and afternoon, returning for meals, others prefer to soak up the scenery and the serenity from the Healing Grounds Spa. A relaxation massage is included in your stay, with facials, exfoliations, wraps, yoga and Pilates on the menu too. Each day guests turn up to lunch with faces fresh from a local Pacific seaweed treatment or a Canadian clay mask.

The spa isn't the only place we indulge in local produce. The Cookhouse sits in pride of place between river and estuary, a refurbished log cabin with roaring fireplace, antler chandeliers and an open kitchen stocked with fresh produce brought by boat from Tofino each week. The chefs keep the fire stoked and their grills hot all day long, and in the crisp early summer weather, this is the toasty epicentre of our stay.

Days start with avocado toast and brioche egg and bacon buns. Lunch could be a delicate kitchen-garden-picked radish and kale salad, or steaming artisan gnocchi. Three course dinners showcase local line-caught fish, Canadian beef and, on one special night, a spectacular ode to humble campfire s'mores with torched marshmallow and smoking chocolate ice creams.

We take two of our four dinners outside, in the glamping dining tents set up specially for two. With our own fireplace, and a view out to the stars, it's a table setting to remember. Matched wines from the collection go on the antique buffet table, and certainly show the influence of Australian owners Baillie Lodges, with heavy hitting South Australian reds having their place alongside Pacific Northwest drops.

When it's time to leave, there's one last unique experience that awaits. A horse-drawn wagon whisks us back to the dock where our seaplane is at the ready. It's a 45-minute flight through the Sound, past snow-covered mountains and glacial lakes, back across to the mainland. It's a dramatic departure that matches the tone of a place where we're all just scratching the surface of the incredible wild around us. ♦

Travel file

clayoquotwildernesslodge.com

01. Serene vistas from the lodge's rooftop lounge 02. Stand-up paddleboarding on the stunning Bedwell Lake 03. Waterfront views from glamping tents 04. The bears come out to play 05. Majestic Bedwell Sound 06. Open-air hot tubs prove popular for wildlife watching 07. Vancouver Island provides a rich backdrop for hiking 08. Well-appointed tents dot the wilderness 09. Contemporary cuisine from the restaurant. Images 01 & 05-08 © Jeremy Koreski

