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Luxury Canada

How I embraced the wilderness the easy way

ISLAND

Bridget Harrison goes kayaking riding and bear-spotting from a stylish lodge on Vancouver Island

first idea had been a family RV holiday After my son's GCSEs we would do something really wild and year-old brother deep into the forests of Canada, miles from civilisation, casting our phones away in exchange for hiking boots and playing cards. Then my husband reminded me that we are rubbish at wilderness. On the only RV trip we have attempted in Sweden the boys spent the whole time playing Minecraft on their iPads and when my husband tried to empty the chemical toilet he sloshed its contents all over himself in front of some appalled motorhomes on the pitch next to us. Then, when we tried camping "wild",

serial killer hiding in the woods. Still, in my mind I am a great adventurer and my dream ingredients for a holiday would always be lakes, mountains and forests. So when I spotted Clayoquot Wilder ness Lodge while researching places to stay on Vancouver Island after visiting relatives in Canada, I found my Shangri-La: a hotel perched on a distant fjord at the head of a vast forested Sound — that fingers inland from Vancouver Island's wild Pacific coast. It's a place where tier-style" tents and get to do

it took us an hour to light a smoky, hope-

less fire and I spent a sleepless night con

vinced we were going to be set upon by a

guests stay in luxurious "fronrugged activities such as kayaking and canyoning, with guides, equipment and picnics all laid on. Here was a wilderness experience that didn't require wilderness knowhow. Just the place for my husband and I, who are champions at buying Arc'teryx anoraks but have no clue how to paddle a river and would really rather someone else nut un our tent.

The Clayoquot Sound, which includes temperate coastal rainforest, ancient conifer forests, ocean waters and rocky coastal shores, has been a Unesco-protected biosphere reserve since 2000. The lodge is located in the middle of the sound's protected area, at the end of a seven mile-long fjord, the Bedwell Sound, behind which lies the Bedingfield mountain range.

Most guests arrive skidding onto the waters of the sound after a 45-minute seaplane journey from Vancouver. We arranged to be picked up by boat in Tofino. Vancouver Island's buzzy west coast surf town. Leaving our hire car in the marina, we sped off up the wide glittering waters of the Clayoquot Sound past

wild, tree-covered islands. Forty minutes later we were standing on a jetty with nothing around us but emerald water, hemmed in by steep forested slopes that

were cloaked in mist. "Welcome to the house of Mother Nature" said our greeter, a woman with shining eyes who was dressed in outdoorsy gear and had two large hunting poodles at her feet. She turned out to be the hotel's general manager, Sarah Cruse, "Pause, look around. Breathe," she said. And we just stood there, mesmerised by a deep oxy-

For this "major treat hotel" I had insisted that my sons give up their phones and there had been a lot of frantic Snapchatting on the boat. Now it felt as if we had come over the rainbow, not only from Snapchat but the whole teeming, angsty rest of the planet.

No one was mourning the aborted RV trip either when we were shown to our tents, which were huge, styled in beiges and creams, with leather

chairs, an iron stove and woodclad bathrooms with underfloor heating. There are 25 of these at the hotel, some perched on the sound's edge, the rest, including ours, strung along a boardwalk that winds through dappled forest on the edge of a glacial river, the Bedwell, here calm and glassy. Each has an open-air shower so you can bathe under the forest canopy. This was our kind of camping.

The lodge was acquired in 2020 by the boutique luxury group Baillie Lodges, which has a portfolio of remote ecoconscious properties. Last year it installed a 1.000-panel solar farm at Clavoquot.

there are no single-use plastics on site. It is only open from May until the end of September. At the lodge's heart, set in a clearing where the Bedwell weaves quietly into the sound, is its stone-built Cookhouse, a dining room with a great fireplace and huge windows. Adjacent is a bar, roof terrace and spa area with two cedar hot

Despite arriving in our high-spec anoraks I had been quietly panicking about not having the correct kit for our stay. so I was even more excited to find a row of equipment rooms lined with waterproofs, hiking boots and wellies, cycling gear, riding tackle and wetsuits.

Eager to get adventuring, my 16-yearold — now phone-free and already noticeably more "present" — and I commandeered two mountain bikes and bumped off along a forest trail by the river through tall cedar, spruce and fir trees, which were festooned with wisps of green lichen. It was as if we had arrived in a magical land. We came across a clearing, and stopped to lie on our backs and look up at the sky. Back by the Cookhouse, my 14-year-old and husband were getting busy at a circle of large "recreation tents" set around a firepit. In one, a pool table and stacks of board games. In another, a piano, drum kit and guitars to borrow.

We had been warned that there is scant mobile reception at the lodge, and wi-fi only in the bedrooms. Fine by me. But how striking and pleasant it was to be in a place where no one was staring at a device. It was which powers the entire operation, and : more wonderful still to see my boys en-

thralled by corn hole, a traditional bean bag-throwing game set up on the lawn.

At Clavoquot vou could easily do noth ing but contemplate the ever-changing greens of forest-meets-water. Or, upor booking, you can sign up for "signature activities" such as kavaking, hiking, canyoning, riding, archery, fishing and a half-day ghts of the Sound nature hunt by boat Each trip is led by knowledgeable, outdoorsy staff and included in the price of your stay.

Wanting to miss absolutely nothing in our three-day visit, I rose at 6am each morning to join a hearty German guest for a body-tingling guided plunge into the chilly sound. The boys, meanwhile, had hot chocolate delivered in Yeti mugs to their tent door. We all set out with gusto on our family kayaking trip, led by a young Canadian. We glided quietly up the clear Bedwell, peering down to a kaleidoscope of stones and reeds. Then we paddled ou across the sound to a beach strewn with massive blanched tree trunks. This was once the sheltered winter camp of the Ahousaht First Nation community, on whose ancestral lands the lodge is located. Along with the Hesquiat and Tla-o-quiaht bands, they have lived, hunted and fished the Clavoquot Sound for 4.000 years. They still own and steward much of the

helped bring 76,0000 hectares of forests into protection from commercial logging After lunch it was into a powerful Titar speedboat to search for black bears, which at low tide forage for seafood and berries

wilderness around it and have this year

near the sound's edge. Even though Vancouver Island has a healthy population of 8,000 to 10,000 bears, we didn't believe we would actually get to see any, until our two beady-eyed guides spotted one in the distance. Drawing up quietly in the boat, we watched in wonder from a few metres away as the bear ambled around, turning over stones with its furry paws before vanishing back into the forest.

Out past Tofino and into the ocean proper, we circled a rocky island teeming with braving sea lions and spotted the slick black heads of passing lone female sea otters and seals — then, to our collective gasp, the graceful arch of a feeding humpback whale that briefly rose up in the choppy water. Heading back up the sound, we diverted past a band of male sea otters. which unlike females, we learnt, live in groups. Floating on their backs with their feet in the air for warmth, they looked like a bunch of lads in a swimming pool. Then -iov — the sight of another bear on a strip of shingle munching on a branch of huckleberries. Over dinner that night we decided we had never had a day like it. Or visited a place so casually abundant in wildlife.

All meals were included in the package. Breakfast would perhaps be an omelette with foraged forest mushrooms, while the lunch menu offered freshly caught fish, local steak from grass-fed cows, risottos and salads from the kitchen garden. Evenings started with a cocktail and canapés. before a three-course meal paired with wines. This could be salmon, boysenberry. bayleaf and dashi followed by seared scal-

lops with fennel, leek and endive, then a pomegranate semifreddo with a halva and tahini whip. The executive chef Ben Godin is a Canadian who trained in Scandinavia (including at Noma) and Australia, and puts a focus on local, seasonal ingredients. Fresh from the ocean and fresh from the ground," as Cruse put it. Every meal was simply exquisite, a twice-day event that drew the four of us together as we sat, anticipating the next exciting dish, discussing our adventures.

Our next escapade was my 14-year-old's dream: a burn through the forest on powerful ebikes, wearing wetsuits, to a steep gorge, where the Bedwell cascades over rapids and waterfalls. We took to the water on paddleboards before switching to wading, clambering and sliding down rocks to reach the freezing, roaring underside of a glacial waterfall

Perhaps the most affecting trip of all, however, was when we headed up river into the Ursus Valley to an area of old growth forest, a two-hour hike from the lodge When much of Vancouver Island was heavily logged in the Sixties and Seventies. this place remained untouched due to its remoteness. Up here in the quiet pinescented air we wandered the ancient forest of cedars and spruce, pressing our fingers into bouncy olive-coloured moss on tree stumps and embracing the towering elephantine trunk of a 1,000-year-old sitka spruce. Mark Brophy, our guide, an expert in bears and polar research, pointed out how fallen trees were nursing saplings

cavern under the tangled roots of a toppled tree, where a black bear would curl up in winter. Emerging from the trees, we came upon a quiet spot on the river, so still it looked like turquoise stained glass. A place where salmon would soon come to snawn Brophy told us.

"I think this is what heaven looks like," husband said.

"I want to stay here for ever," my 16vear-old said.

If only we could have. On our last day we headed out early for a horse ride along the river's edge followed by a climbing lesson on a cliff of granite. It felt the ultimate luxury to present ourselves at the kit houses for each activity without the stress — and lottery — of organising them independently. Indeed, considering what they would have cost, our meals too, at this high standard, helped to make the hotel's price tag feel less eye-watering.

You can do even flashier things at Clavo quot if you want to go full Succession meets-PGL. There's a helicopter ride to the top of Mount Ursus, 1,220m above the lodge, to dive into a turquoise glacial pool while a guide lays out a spread of charcuterie and champagne, or heli-fishing, helihiking and private day-long picnic tours We had been thoroughly spoilt without all this. And, strikingly, the boys had not once mentioned their phones. "Take a bit of this away with you, keep it in your hearts and be kind." Cruse said back on the jetty sweeping her arm to the forests, as she bid us farewell. My son has a better idea. A among the Jurassic ferns, and showed us a : gap-year job at the lodge as a pot washer



Mackenzie Sound, British Take it from Lily Allen, a recent

guest: these are some of the most remote, luxurious and private rooms on the west coast where an overflowing bucket list offers humpback whale and grizzly cub sightings, helicopter tours, wild fishing and glacier hikes, bracketed by just-caught seafood and visits to the floating spa at the edge of the rainforest. etails All-inclusive doubles from £3,000 (nimmobay.com). Fly to Vancouver

Skoki Lodge, Lake Louise,

Can you hack these historic log cabins without electricity or running water? After a day's hiking the Rockies or gazing across turquoise Lake Louise, you'll return to a lit wood stove and reserves of warm water for bathing. The main restaurant serves a hearty breakfast then packs you a luxe lunch and puts on a three-course spectacle at dinner, with plenty of (phew) wine and beer on hand. Details Full-board doubles from £356 (skoki.com). Fly to Calgary

Seal River Heritage Lodge, outside Churchill, Manitoba You've come to Churchill for one reason: polar bears. So stay in a discreet bungalow on this Hudson Bay estuary where the bears wander past, oblivious to visitors (including the belugas offshore). The well-fenced compound offers wildlife safaris and northern lights-viewing between multi-course meals. ils Seven nights' full board from £9,550pp, including flights, transfers and excursions (exsus.com)

s-Monts, Quebe Midway between Montreal and Quebec City, a rare full-service home to beavers, bears and blazing forest colours in

all-season resort splays out in the hills above Lake Sacacomie, autumn. Rooms are simple, with focus placed on the view through picture windows and terraces. The indoor pool is a

gem in winter; the beach a boon Details Room-only doubles from £170 (sacacomie.com). Fly

Resort, Cariboo, British

The "Chilko Experience"

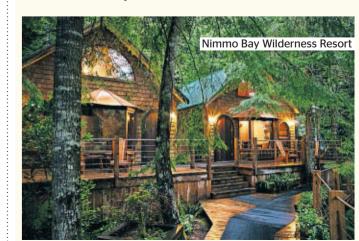
translates to your own log cabin in the treetops with views of a ten-acre pond. They're outfitted for couples or large families, with kitchens and bunk-bed cabins, and access to a central hub for dinners, sport and a wood-fired hot tub. Mountain hikes take place in the Cordillera range, where brown bears roam. But you might see moose from your bed first. **Details** All-inclusive doubles from £1,882 (chilko experience.com). Fly to Vancouver

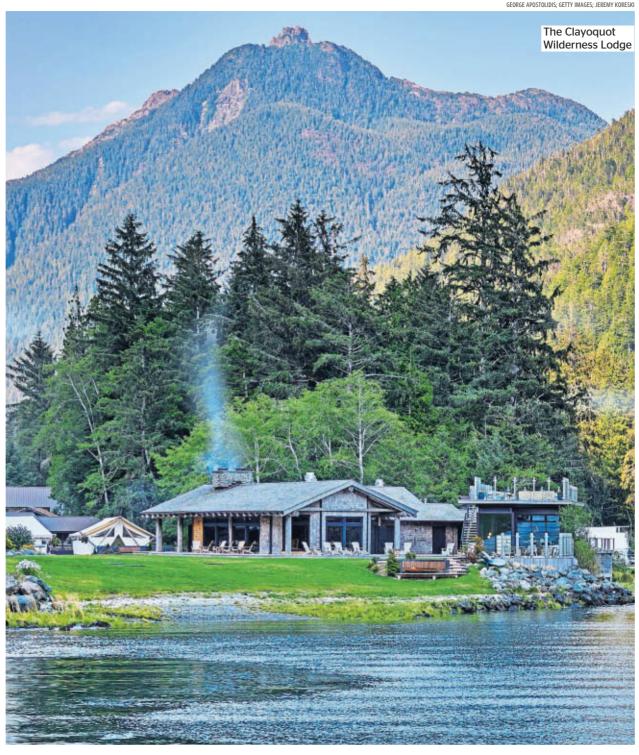
Mysa Nordic Spa, Saint Peters **Bay. Prince Edward Island** This quaint Atlantic island was never what you'd call "cool" until Mysa, an 18-acre Nordic spa and sustainable stay, opened on the Gulf of St Lawrence in 2022. Cottages have private terraces a few steps from the thermal baths, barrel saunas and fire pit — and an all-day waterfront restaurant that pickles its own veg and smell of baking bread. **Details** Room-only doubles from £190 (mysanordicspa.

com). Fly to Charlottetowr

Klahoose Resort, Homfray

Creek, British Colun This spot between Mount Denman and the crystalline waters of Desolation Sound is sacred to the native Klahoose people. Clean air and wildlife are promised on its immersive tours to salmon runs and the Great Bear Rainforest, led by indigenous guides. Orca and eagle sightings are common even from the wide windows of the wood-panelled eco-cabins Is Three nights' allinclusive from £1,964pp, including cultural and wildlife tours (klahooseresort.com). Fly to Vancouver Ellen Himelfarb







a guest of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, which has all-inclusive doubles from £1,556, minimum stay three nights (clayoquot wildernesslodge.com Fly to Vancouver

