

Luxury Canada

How I embraced the wilderness — the easy way

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

My first idea had been a family RV holiday. After my son's GCSEs we would do something really wild and take him and his 14-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", it took us an hour to light a smoky, hopeless fire and I spent a sleepless night convinced we were going to be set upon by a 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 Wilderness 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 tributary — the Clayoquot Sound — that fingers inland from Vancouver Island's wild Pacific coast. It's a place where guests stay in luxurious "frontier-style" tents and get to do rugged activities such as kayaking and canyoning, with guides, equipment and picnics all laid on. Here was a wilderness experience that didn't require wilderness know-how. 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 put up 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 Beddingfield 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 outdoor gear and had two large hunting puddles 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 oxygen-filled silence.

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 wood-clad 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 eco-conscious properties. Last year it installed a 1,000-panel solar farm at Clayoquot, which powers the entire operation, and



The Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Need to know

Bridget Harrison was a guest of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge, which has all-inclusive doubles from £1,556, minimum stay three nights (clayoquotwildernesslodge.com). Fly to Vancouver



The deck overlooking the Bedwell Sound

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 tubs out on deck.

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-year-old — 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 more wonderful still to see my boys en-

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

At Clayoquot you could easily do nothing but contemplate the ever-changing greens of forest-meets-water. Or, upon booking, you can sign up for "signature activities" such as kayaking, hiking, canyoning, riding, archery, fishing and a half-day Sights of the Sound nature hunt by boat. Each trip is led by knowledgeable, outdoor 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 out across the sound to a beach strewn with massive bleached 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-quiath bands, they have lived, hunted and fished the Clayoquot Sound for 4,000 years. They still own and steward much of the wilderness around it and have this year helped bring 76,000 hectares of forests into protection from commercial logging.

After lunch it was into a powerful Titan speedboat to search for black bears, which at low tide forage for seafood and berries

Seven more wild Canadian lodges

Nimmo Bay Wilderness Resort, Mackenzie Sound, British Columbia

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. **Details** All-inclusive doubles from £3,000 (nimmobay.com). Fly to Vancouver

Skoki Lodge, Lake Louise, Alberta

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 lunch and puts on a three-course spectacle at dinner, with plenty of (pew) 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. **Details** Seven nights' full board from £9,550pp, including flights, transfers and excursions (exsus.com)

Hôtel Sacacomie, Saint-Alexis-des-Monts, Quebec

Midway between Montreal and Quebec City, a rare full-service all-season resort splays out in the hills above Lake Sacacomie, home to heavers, bears and blazing forest colours in 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 in summer. **Details** Room-only doubles from £170 (sacacomie.com). Fly to Montreal

Chilko Experience Wilderness Resort, Cariboo, British Columbia

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 (chilkoexperience.com). Fly to Vancouver

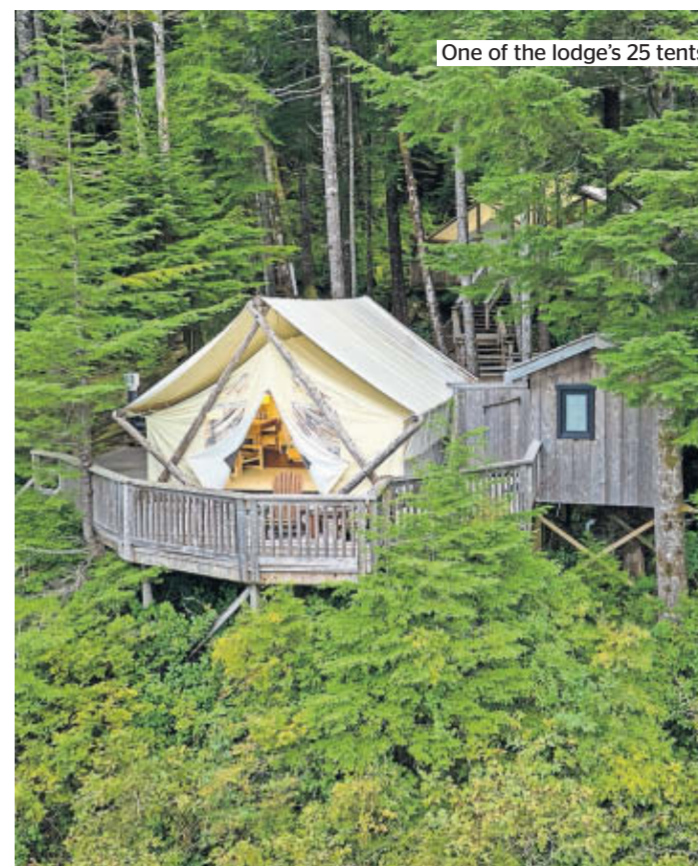
Mysa Nordic Spa, Saint Peters Bay, Prince Edward Island

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 smells of baking bread. **Details** Room-only doubles from £190 (mysanordicspa.com). Fly to Charlottetown

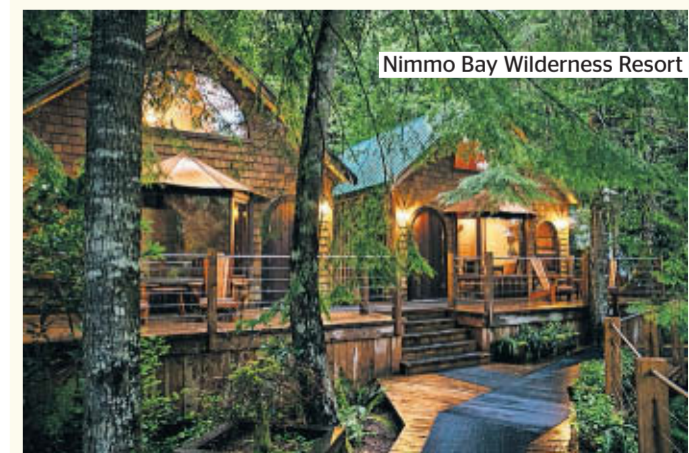
Klahoose Resort, Homfray Creek, British Columbia

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-paneled eco-cabins. **Details** Three nights' all-inclusive from £1,964pp, including cultural and wildlife tours (klahooseresort.com). Fly to Vancouver

Ellen Himelfarb



One of the lodge's 25 tents



Nimmo Bay Wilderness Resort