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## This Vancouver Island Lodge Offers the Perfect Haven for Unplugging and Recharging

Is the wilderness the center of true civilization? A journey to the remote reaches of Vancouver Island sharpens the senses for exploring beauty.

BY ELLEN MCGAULEY PUBLISHED: MAY 27, 2025

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I feared running into a bear. I pictured an elk wandering into my tent at midnight and ghosts of century-old miners lit by a crackling fire. My imagination is a wild, wild place, and so journeying into Vancouver Island's dense forest, to a lodge only accessible by seaplane or boat, I worried I'd spend four days like Jerry O'Connell's Vern in *Stand By Me*, wide-eyed in the wilderness. I also feared falling off the side of a mountain.

What did not scare me was scarcity of Wi-Fi. But it should have. Not because I found it difficult to be away from DMs and revolving-door social reels (it wasn't), but because slipping into a world governed by red cedars and slow rivers and, yes, bears, sharpens everything. It's like cleaning a haze off of a camera lens. The same senses that imagined drama in this forest were retuned by it.

By the time I left the island, the only fear I had was losing the reset.

**Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge**, a luxury outpost in the Bedwell River Valley, opened more than 20 years ago in the spirit of the gold and copper prospectors who once settled there. It was overhauled and reopened in 2021 by Australia's Baillie Lodges, and their timing was good. Nature-immersive resorts like this one offer an increasingly attractive proposition: disconnecting as a way of reconnecting. (Wi-Fi isn't off-limits at Clayoquot, but it's only accessible in each guest's private quarters.)



Courtesy of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Enveloped in glass, the lodge's Cookhouse and Ivanhoe Lounge serve as scenic gathering spots.

Stepping out of the float plane that lifted me from mainland Vancouver over conifer-thick hills and through slim canyons to reach Bedwell Sound, I'm greeted on the dock by Sarah Cruse. She runs Clayoquot and welcomes guests on arrival. So do her two black poodles, who clearly understand the assignment—they are absolutely frantic in their greeting. "When you spend time here," she tells me, reaching down to stroke calm into Charlie, the younger of the pair, "it doesn't take long before you notice an energy shift. No noise, no clutter."

She calls the 650 acres of nature preserve that Clayoquot sits on "Mother Nature's epicenter," and by the same time the next day, I am deep in the energy shift. I am standing near the top of a mountain, deposited there by helicopter. The pilot put us down on a rocky plateau, where a small table was set with champagne, wine, and heaps of meats and cheeses, the corners of a linen tablecloth tacked down by rocks. It was quite the scene, a plum photo op, but I find myself walking past it. I'm looking at a large boulder a ways down the ridge and—despite it being early June—past a blanket of snow and ice.

"It's just behind there," my guide, Canada native Malena Meneses-Skoda, tells me.





Courtesy of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Log and canvas guest tents afford big views of the river, mountain peaks, and passing wildlife.

Malena chases cold plunges the way the rest of us chase a great estate sale. Days earlier, she'd spotted a small glacial pool from the air. Moments later, we're stripping down to bathing suits and hiking shoes and climbing across the ice for the thrill of an alpine dip. In retrospect, I should have stopped at the table for a swig of something to warm me, but I didn't think of it. At some point that day, I had shifted into play mode—*let's just see what happens* mode.

Two travelers from my group hang back, and that's the beauty of this wild place deep in the British Columbia wilderness. They can settle into folding chairs, mesmerized by the views of the Ursus Valley, some 5,000 feet above sea level, while I sink into glacial melt. Closer to the lodge, guests paddle the estuary. A father and daughter, summer regulars, play cards in the Cookhouse dining room. Later we ride horses, wading into a *Below Deck*-style drama in the paddock that I feel viscerally.

The tension has been palpable, I'm told, since a dashing Paint aptly named Camaro arrived, stealing redhead Fiona from the socially awkward quarter horse (Bear) she arrived with the winter before. Bear, a handsome giant, is heartbroken and deep in his feelings—trail rides had to be adjusted, the situation delicate. Meanwhile, an actual bear has taken to lounging at the far end of the paddock every afternoon, seemingly glued to the drama.



Courtesy of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Cedar outdoor showers open to tall tree canopies.

No one is on their phones. Why would they be?

There are opposing forces at play here, “a grit and a softness,” Sarah notes. My tent, warmed by a gas stove and facing the river, is crafted of sturdy log and canvas with an en suite walled bath and an outdoor cedar shower that smell like the forest. Steady breezes blow through the fjord at night, swaying the fabric against the edges of wood-plank floors. This lulls me to sleep.

At dawn, I settle into an Adirondack with a beanie to keep my head warm, drinking from a thermos of coffee that is delivered quietly before I wake. Thrush and American robins sing as the water flows slowly in front of me. Evenings are less subtle, the setting sun putting on an intense light show on the side of the mountain.





Courtesy of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Soft textural linens and upholstery furnish private quarters, which are warmed with gas stoves.

I see plenty of bears, but at a distance: from the air and from the deck of a boat captained by a seaman named Boomer. They cross my mind on hikes, but there's little space for them: I'm balancing over felled trees—giant red cedars and hemlocks and Sitka spruces—and studying shelves of mushrooms blooming from moss-covered wood and making river crossings on foot, using a pole to keep my balance against the current in knee-high water.

"People forget how messy forests are," guide Melissa Booth says as we marvel at a 100-log pileup further down the waterway. She credits the island's notorious storms, some with winds reaching 100 miles an hour. I think about Florida, where I grew up, and hurricane season. By contrast, in these sparsely populated woods, the trees are both citizens and governors.



Courtesy of Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

Over dinner, a guest at a neighboring table asks about the difficulty level of the hike we'd done that day. The short answer is that it was not difficult. But as I stepped out of the Cookhouse that evening into the waning light, Sarah's dogs bombarding me (tails wagging, butler duties ongoing), I am thinking about the longer answer. That the hike was neither easy nor hard—the forest and river are messy in some places, clear and sunlit in others. You just have to be engaged, constantly reading it, or stand still.

Or slip, as I'd done crossing the ice to that glacial pool on the mountain—my mind had drifted and I fell on a rock. It was a doozy to the shin, but my guides didn't dote. In part because the antidote was there in front of us: that little alpine pool of 40-something-degree water half hidden by rocks. The other reason is because I kept moving. The water was a curious shade of silvery slate blue, and I wanted to know how it felt.



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