

Kayaking Canada's Inside Passage

Karin A. Kinsey

Paddlers head out into the mist with Hanson Island in the background.



by KARIN A. KINSEY

Kayaking through the deep waters off Vancouver Island, I felt lulled by the steady rise and fall of water droplets as they fell from my paddle.

Suddenly a series of graceful arcs cut across the water. Little strings of silver jumps appeared everywhere. Dolphins!

Our guides were as happy and surprised as we were. "Pacific white-sided dolphins," Sarah explained. Gregarious and acrobatic, they're smaller than bottlenose dolphins and are identified by a white streak or stripe along their sides. "It's unusual to see so many of them," she commented.

The dolphin sighting seemed a good omen as we began a six-day sea-kayaking adventure through Canada's Inside Passage, a glacier-carved waterway stretching from Vancouver Island to the west coast of British Columbia. The trip, organized by Sea Kayak Adventures, would allow us to explore the picturesque islands that dot the rugged Canadian coastline, along with a striking array of wildlife.

MOST OF ALL, I HOPED TO SEE ORCAS — OR KILLER WHALES as they are often called. These black-and-white behemoths of the sea have been the stuff of legends for centuries — a presence made apparent by the many carvings on lodges and totem poles that still remain from the original native inhabitants.

Three distinct populations of orcas have been identified — *resident* orcas, *transients* and *off-shores*. Although orcas are popularly referred to as "killer whales," that name is really based on the feeding habits of *transient* orcas, whose diet includes numerous marine mammals — seals, sea otters, dolphins, porpoises, and even whales. Transients tend to move silently in groups of two or three to more easily surprise their prey, often covering large expanses of water in search of food. The *resident* communities of orcas, such as those in the Northwest and off the coast of British Columbia, are found in larger pods and dine

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The striking dorsal fin of an orca surfaces near kayakers.

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almost exclusively on fish. Less is known of the third group — the *off-shores*. These orcas, which also appear to be fish eaters, travel in groups of 30–60 individuals and are rarely seen in the more protected coastal waters. The three populations seldom intermingle and are not known to breed with one another.

The distinguishing characteristics of the orca family are its distinctive black and white markings and its towering dorsal fins, which in a mature bull can be as tall as six feet. The dorsal fin of a female is usually more curved, rising two to three feet out of the water.

Our group of 11 paddlers and three guides met up in Port McNeill, a small town at the tip of Vancouver Island. On our first day we loaded up a van for the short drive to our put-in site at Telegraph Cove, a one-time fishing village that's become a popular destination for whale watchers, divers and fishing charters.

Each of us brought our own gear — lightweight nylon or polypropylene clothing, a sun hat and adequate rain gear. Other recommended items included rubber paddle gloves, binoculars and a camera. Sea Kayak Adventure provides tents and self-inflating pads, sleeping bags, sheets and three waterproof bags for storing personal items.

In age, our group ranged from the early 30s to late 50s. Like myself, most participants did not have extensive kayaking experience.

TO PREPARE FOR OUR TRIP we loaded up the kayaks with a week's worth of supplies, including water and food, sleeping bags, tents and all our personal gear. We each received a bright yellow life vest, a blue rubber kayak "skirt" which would fit snugly around the cockpit, and a pair of wetsuit booties for our feet. "Be prepared to get wet," the guides advised.

Our point of departure is the picturesque coastal community of Telegraph Cove.

Except for two of the guides who used singles, the rest of the group would handle fiberglass two-person kayaks. The guides showed us how to pack and carry the boats, how to use the rudder and steering system, and paddling techniques.

As we set off, our ocean-going kayaks made a colorful display — light blue, green, yellow and magenta — bobbing against the backdrop of this quaint boardwalk community. With smooth waters and clear skies, it was a perfect day for the start of a new adventure.



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Left: Kayakers watch a female orca and baby cross their path.
Inset: A bright smile greets another day of paddling.
Bottom: Sunrise at Kaikash Beach.
Opposite: Back on dry land.

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We began our journey by heading down Johnstone Strait, the wide channel of water that separates Vancouver Island from the maze of inland waterways and small islands off the coast of mainland Canada. As we made our way through the tiny islets, our guides patiently taught us the art of reading tides, currents and changing weather patterns. For example, by noticing the direction of the bullkelp floating on the water's surface, we could determine which way the current was flowing. Today we were actually traveling against the current and into a light wind. By getting an earlier start tomorrow we would have the flow of water on our side.

After stopping for lunch at a small beach, we continued to our campsite for the evening, Kaikash Beach. Last year the guides had witnessed an unusual event in the shallow waters just offshore — several orcas rubbing their pectoral fins along the sandy bottom.

We pitched our tents and, after a well-earned happy hour, enjoyed a dinner of salmon, tortellini, broccoli and green salad, plus a freshly baked spice cake from a Dutch oven. The staff proved to be as skilled in the kitchen as on the water.

AS DUSK FELL WE COULD SEE THE SILHOUETTES OF FISHING TRAWLERS and hear the drone of salmon purse seiners hauling in their huge nets. A family of sea otters frolicked in the kelp beds just offshore before retiring for the night.

A call from one of the guides broke the tranquillity of the evening. "Shhh.... listen," she said, directing our attention to



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a point off to our right. In front of one of the fishing boats, an orca jumped completely out of the water. We watched in amazement as several dark dorsal fins moved past us towards a rocky outcropping on the opposite side of the beach.

We scrambled up the smooth gray rocks for a better look. As we stood in the twilight an orca spyhopped straight up out of the water! We shrieked wildly, waving our hands over our heads — "We're over here!"

Again, the orca jumped straight out of the water as we cheered and waved. Curious about the commotion, the orca rose out of the water one more time. We continued jumping up and down, brandishing our arms in the moonlight.

The next morning we paddled down the strait to Robson Bight (Michael Biggs Ecological Reserve), established in 1982



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as a marine sanctuary for killer whales. Although the area is off-limits to boaters, it is often possible to see whales passing by on their way in or out of the reserve.

As it turned out, the whales were busy fishing and socializing that day and did not cross our path — this according to the whale “channel” on our two-way marine radio. Instead we enjoyed a day of leisurely paddling and returned to our campsite with a large salmon — the gift of a generous fisherman. That night we feasted under the stars.

The next morning we took advantage of the calm water to cross Johnstone Strait. After checking with traffic control over the radio, we formed a tight formation of kayaks, one next to the other, instead of being strung out in a long line. “To a large cruise ship we’d look like a few matchsticks if we were in a line,” said one of our guides.


When our guide shouted “paddle,” we set off with a vengeance, swiftly crossing the two nautical miles to Hanson Island. Stopping for a leg-stretch and a gorp snack — a yummy trail-mix of nuts and tasty M&M’s — we explored several tidal pools where we found sea cucumbers and giant red-and-purple starfish clinging to the slippery bottom.

As we headed out into Blackney Passage a message came out over the radio. “A humpback whale,” our guide Mary-Anne explained. “It’s in Johnstone Strait and heading our way.”

A LOUD KABOOM CAUGHT OUR ATTENTION as a huge spout exploded in the distance. Gradually, the huge mammal moved towards us, its giant fluke creating a spectacular display of waterworks. We watched as it passed by us, on the other side of the channel, its long body undulating along the waves.

For our third night, we camped above a sandy beach on tiny Compton Island. Our guides invited those who were not too travel-sore for a short exploratory journey around the island. We passed peaceful inlets and bald eagles perched high in

CONTINUED ON P. 120



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KAYAKING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, from p. 35

their nests.

The next morning we paddled around Swanson Island, known for its black-bear population. Twice that morning we saw small bear cubs foraging among the rocks as we quietly slipped by.

At lunchtime we pulled onto a mass of stone and grassy knolls called Twist Island. Here we stretched out on the sun-baked rocks like a bunch of happy sea lions catching a snooze. The afternoon was spent maneuvering through the islands on a sea as calm as glass. We passed the bobbing heads of curious seals and watched as white-sided dolphins and Dall's porpoises leapt up only to quickly disappear again.

On the fifth day we pointed our kayaks towards home, retracing our route through floating islands of tangled kelp. At the top of Hanson Island we explored a favorite haunt for seals and sea lions, aptly nicknamed "The Orca's Lunchroom."

As we rounded the island we hit our first rain shower. Paddling hard, we headed into a small beach so we could put on our rain gear. Then, in a steady downpour, we recrossed Johnstone Strait and set up our final camp on a wide spit of land that jutted out into the strait. As we huddled under a wet tarp that evening, more than one person reminisced on the fine qualities of a hot shower.

On the last day we took one more paddle along the strait before returning to Telegraph Cove. As we approached our final destination we picked up speed, the lure of civilization strangely comforting.

As I pulled my kayak out of the water for the last time, my eyes instinctively scanned the horizon for unusual splashes or spouts. Already, I was planning my return trip. ■

Sea Kayak Adventures offers trips through Canada's Inside Passage from June through September. Six-day trips cost \$990 per person; three-day itineraries are \$495. For details: Tel: 800-616-1943 or 208-765-3116; E-mail: info@seakayakadventures.com; Website: www.seakayakadventures.com.

PORTUGUESE CASTLES AND WINE, from p. 39

"Ferreira," "Taylor," grab your eye from almost anywhere in town.

More than a dozen big port producers — all with equally massive banners — maintain lodges (or adegas) along the river, and offer tours and tastings. However, the lodges primarily function as a place for the port to mature and be bottled before it is shipped out to be sold. At one time, the new wine floated in on romantic-looking barges (a couple of which are still moored in the river). But today, port makes its journey from the quintas (wine estates) in the Douro Valley by truck.

Oporto makes a great place to explore on foot. Its major landmark, the lacy and lovely Luís I Bridge, was designed by Gustav Eiffel, and looks so similar to his Parisian tower that you can easily recognize its creator without being told. A tour of the stock exchange is a must because of its exquisite Arab ballroom; and the Church of São Francisco merits a visit because of its gilded, elaborately carved wood interior. Travelers with more modern concerns can stroll past the English-language school where J.K. Rowling taught when she began to write a book about a kid named Harry Potter.

Some of the loveliest rural areas in all of Europe surround Oporto. A drive out to the village of Amarante, its centuries-old houses marching up the steep hills on either side of the River Tamega, gives travelers a chance to taste some of the best of the region's vinho verdes.

Those looking for love might want to dash into Igreja de São Gonçalo, where touching the statue of a saint tucked away to the left of the altar is said to guarantee a wedding. The poor saint's face is but a shadow of what it once was, its features worn away by those with lonely hearts.

The region offers several other delightful towns including Guimarães, birthplace of the country's first king; Ponte de Lima, famous for its Roman bridge; and Viana do Castelo, where lovely folk art can be found.

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KAYAKING CANADA'S INSIDE PASSAGE — *Travel Tips*

- The summer months are the best time of year to see orcas in the Northwest and British Columbia since that coincides with the salmon runs in the straits.
- Participants need to be able to paddle four to five hours a day. In addition, people should be able to help carry fully loaded, 150-pound kayaks from 10 to 50 yards over gravelly beaches to stow them above the high-tide mark.
- "Keep at least one set of dry clothes at all times," avid kayakers recommend. Synthetic and wool clothing work best because they do not retain moisture, they dry quickly, and they are warm even when wet.
- Pacific Coastal Airlines has daily flights from Vancouver to Port Hardy airport, which also serves Port McNeill.
- To access Vancouver Island by car, the most direct route is via the Tsawwassen-Nanaimo ferry just north of the Canadian border. Reservations are recommended, especially for travel on holiday weekends.