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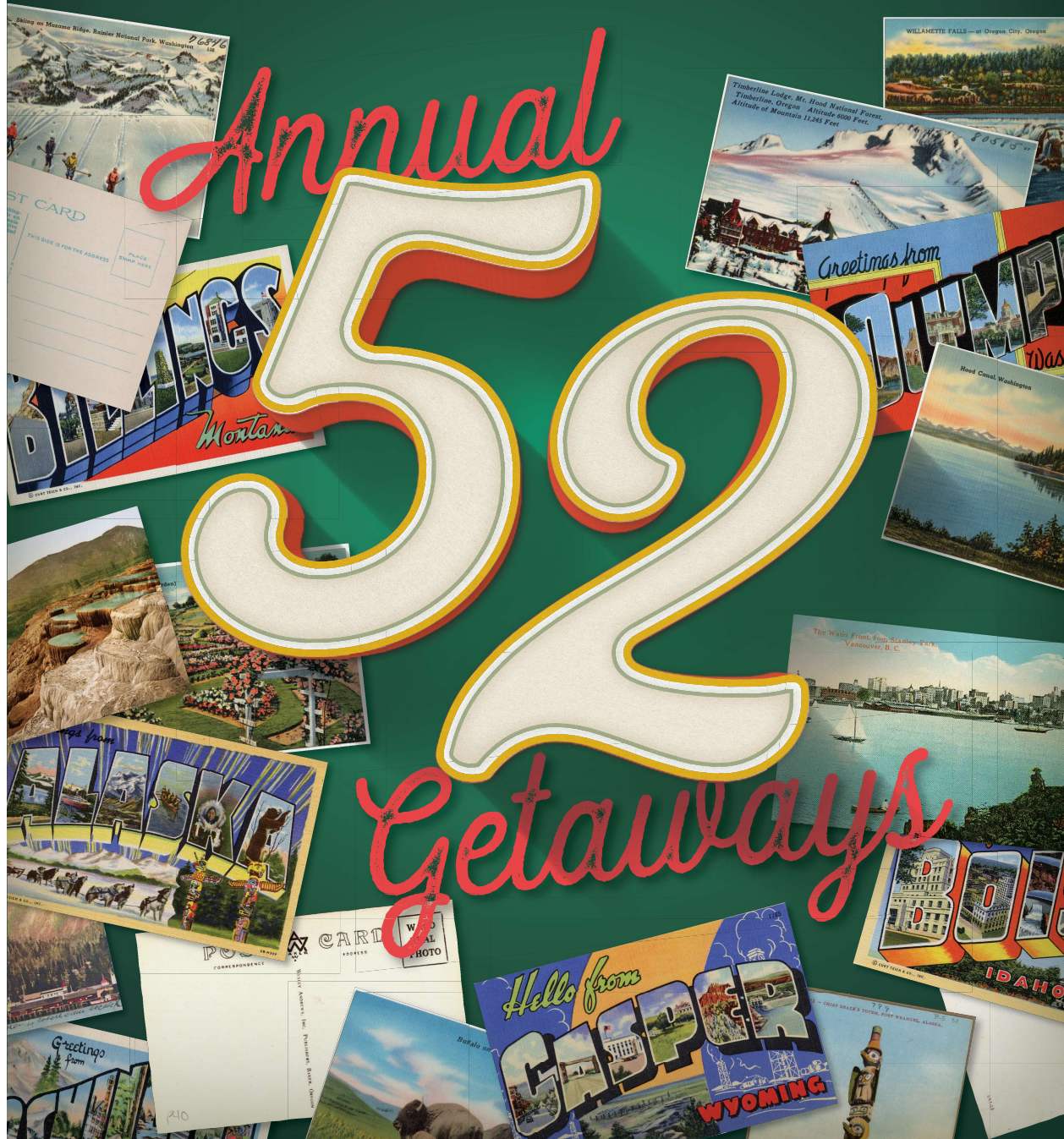
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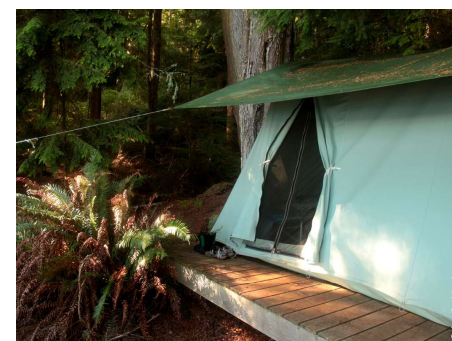


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A Wilderness Kayaking Adventure in the Broughton Archipelago

BY ANNIKA HIPPLE

Sandwiched between the northern end of Vancouver Island and remote mainland British Columbia lies an undeveloped archipelago of spectacular beauty, abundant wildlife and a network of bays and channels perfect for waterborne exploration. I've come to the Broughton Archipelago to spend six days paddling these pristine waters with the award-winning company Sea Kayak Adventures.



At our gathering point in Port McNeill on northern Vancouver Island I meet our guides, Diego and Mario from Mexico and Aleta from British Columbia, as well as my fellow travelers, who hail from across the United States, as well as Ontario, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and New Zealand.

The weather is drizzly and misty, the sea a gunmetal gray as we set off from our launch site at Bauza Cove. As we paddle down the eastern shore of Vancouver Island, a bald eagle surveys us from a tall tree, seals bob in the water alongside others hauled out on rocks and salmon leap out of the water around us. Thick beds of bull kelp float on the surface, trailing golden-brown blades and bulbous bladders that undulate in our wake.

We paddle for about three hours—with a stop for a picnic lunch—to our first campsite, Little Kai, near the mouth of the Kaikash River. It's one of several seasonal camps that Sea Kayak Adventures sets up at the beginning of each summer, with roomy fixed tents, an outhouse, an outdoor kitchen and a dining area. Tired from fresh air and physical activity, I retire early after dinner and tuck into my sleeping bag as rain patters gently on the canvas of my tent.



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The rain clears, and we awaken the next morning to a hearty breakfast and the hope of spotting whales. We paddle to the Robson Bight Michael Biggs Ecological Reserve, a designated sanctuary for threatened northern resident orcas, a genetically and culturally distinct population that regularly frequents these waters. No boaters, including kayakers, are allowed within the reserve, so we turn around at the boundary, unfortunately without seeing any whales.

The salmon are jumping again as we paddle back toward camp, and off in the distance we finally catch sight of a pod of orcas. Mario estimates their number at around 15, though not all surface at once, and all we can see are distant dorsal fins and a bit of their heads. Still, for a passionate whale nerd like me, it's a thrill just to know orcas are nearby.

It's foggy and drizzly again the next day as we leave Little Kai to cross the wide Johnstone Strait, which separates Vancouver Island from the Broughton Archipelago and mainland British Columbia beyond. The passage is a major thoroughfare for cruise and cargo ships, so Diego, our trip leader, radios the authorities to advise them that we are

preparing to cross. Given the "all clear," we paddle vigorously without stopping until we reach the other side, over two miles away.

It's a hard paddle, but once across we're sheltered close to shore as we continue to our lunch stop at Big Bay Beach on Hanson Island. As Diego prepares lunch, Aleta and Mario lead us on a hike through an entrancing temperate rainforest with towering red cedars and Douglas firs rising above a blanket of ferns and mosses.

The sun finally comes out after lunch and we paddle on to Blackfish Sound, arriving at Swanson Island, our home for the next two nights, where we beach our kayaks on a gravelly beach overlooking a sheltered bay. The guides set up the kitchen and begin preparing dinner, and I claim a tent on a wooded bluff overlooking the sound.

I'm inside the tent getting organized when I hear a whoosh of air outside. That's a whale blow, I think, and pull open the tent flaps just in time to see the telltale arc of a humpback's dorsal fin as it sinks beneath the surface. It's a quick glimpse, but an unforgettable moment. It's not every day you can see whales from inside a tent!



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The next day brings warmth and sunshine as we kayak deeper into the archipelago through a series of narrow channels. Diego points out an indigenous pictograph a few feet above the water's surface: a face with a wide mouth and big, googly eyes. He tells us it represents a story told by the First Nations people of the area, about a cannibal spirit who was tricked and cooked to death by the

sons of a local chief. The ashes from the fire scattered in the air, becoming mosquitoes, which consume human flesh as the cannibal did.

Fortunately, real insects are few and far between on this glorious day. The clear water mirrors the blue of the sky. We arrive at our lunch spot by another pristine cove. I'm not alone in taking the opportunity for a refreshing dip after lunch, before we launch our kayaks again for the paddle back to camp.

Although it's time to leave lovely Swanson Island the next morning, we fortunately have another day in the Broughton Archipelago before recrossing the Johnstone Strait back to Vancouver Island. Our destination for the final night is the camp at Big Bay Beach, where we hiked into the rainforest earlier. We're in no hurry as we kayak through morning mist that gradually evaporates to reveal blue skies and sunshine that



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sparkles on the surface of water so clearly we can easily see the marine life below the surface. Once again bald eagles keep watch and seals survey us placidly as we pass.

One last night in this watery wilderness where time moves gently, without stress, then morning dawns, bringing with it another challenging, no-stopping-allowed paddle back across the Johnstone Strait to Telegraph Cove. Though my fingers are numb from gripping my paddle too tightly, it's worth it. I've had six days completely disconnected from the pressures and information overload of regular life, immersed in stunningly beautiful nature and making memories that will linger in my heart forever. ☺

- Book your trip with Sea Kayaking Adventures at seakayadventures.com/british-columbia.
- Learn more about visiting Vancouver Island and the Broughton Archipelago at supernaturalbc.com/places/routes/explore/vancouver-island.



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