

Into the Wild

I'M LYING IN A BUBBLING HOT TUB treating myself to a restorative soak and feasting my eyes on the wilderness beyond the window.

On the far shore of Barnard Harbour, kayakers paddle over silvery-blue water, leisurely following the shoreline. On the dock, outside the window, two birders sit with an open guidebook between them, studying the forest through binoculars.

As if on cue, a bald eagle with a snowy white head—it could be the same one that perches in the big cedar behind the lodge—flies into range, circles twice and vanishes into the trees. Otherwise, stillness fills the air at King Pacific Lodge on Princess Royal Island, on the wild coast of northern British Columbia.

I expected to be out and about this afternoon, my last on the island. Stealing among lacy ferns and ancient cedars in the Great Bear Rain Forest. Or sailing the length of Whale Channel, keeping an eye peeled for orcas and humpbacks. I could have been fishing for salmon, too, the original reason I booked a week here. But now, alone with my thoughts, I'm reminded that this is not your father's fishing lodge.

Fifty years ago, the traditional fishing lodge catered to hard-core anglers indifferent to fripperies like 400-thread count sheets and healthy cuisine. Yet King Pacific Lodge is a 21st-century escape. Aimed at the discriminating—and well-heeled—traveler, it gratifies contemporary tastes, pairing wilderness with urbanity, rusticity with luxury and eco-savvy adventure with full-course gourmet meals.

"You've seen what it's like when millions of people overrun sensitive places like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon," says President Michael Uehara, a friend and associate of owner Hideo "Joe" Morita, son of the late Akio Morita, co-founder of Sony Corporation, and a dedicated environmentalist.

"Joe believes that tourism in fragile ecosystems like this one has to be limited in numbers," says Uehara. "We think that 17 rooms and 28 guests is just the right balance between too few and too many."

The striking beauty of British Columbia is on the doorstep at King Pacific Lodge

By Anne Z. Cooke





This page and previous page: King Pacific Lodge, built on a salvaged Navy barge, summers in Barnard Harbour on Princess Royal Island. The interior of the Great Hall, with its rock-clad fireplace, pays homage to local First Nation and Tsimshian art and natural elements. Right: Outdoor adventures offered at the lodge include fishing, kayaking and helicopter tours of the striking landscape of British Columbia.

A “floating lodge” built on a salvaged U.S. Navy barge, King Pacific Lodge is self-sufficient, bringing equipment, food and all supplies from outside. It’s non-polluting, too, shipping every scrap of waste, from the last uneaten lamb chop to processed sewage back outside. And like the whales, it migrates, wintering in Bella Bella and summering in Barnard Harbour, some 75 miles away.

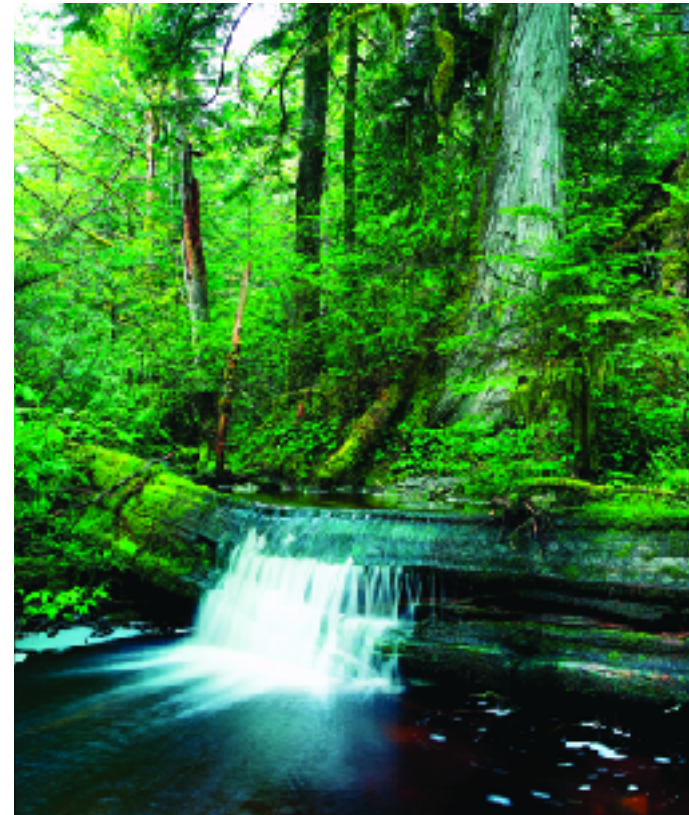
“After we leave, you’d never know anyone had been within 50 miles,” explains Marlene Berg, our kayaking guide, as we paddled over to Cameron Cove. “All you’d see is wilderness.”

It was early August when I flew to Vancouver and on to Bella Bella, to catch the King Pacific Lodge-chartered float plane for the last leg of the journey. Flying over forests, mountains and fjords, we splashed down in Barnard Harbour and taxied to the dock, where the staff waited with smiles.

After checking into my room—luxurious but uncluttered—I change into jeans and join the other newcomers for a tour. On a large floating deck, the Lodge is paneled in warm red and yellow cedar, with pale hardwood floors, coffee-colored slate in the entry and tall glass panels facing the bay. Peeled log beams, an airy cathedral ceiling and a stone fireplace highlight art-glass fixtures and stylized red-and-black Tsimshian art. In nearby lockers we find our rain/survival gear, hanging in our sizes and labeled with our names. Lightweight, waterproof and bright red, the jackets, pants and boots will keep us warm and dry while fishing and boating, the main attractions on Princess Royal Island.

Finally we gather in the Great Hall for an orientation. Most guests have already planned some activities: the float plane and kayaking trip to Foch Lake, for instance, and several helicopter fly fishing trips. And a lucky few have reserved spots on the Kermode “spirit bear” adventure.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF KING PACIFIC LODGE



This outing, a hike led by a Gitga'at guide from the local First Nations community at Hartley Bay, goes to a bear-watching platform where you may see a rare white bear, which makes up an estimated ten percent of the native black bear population. Normally the bears live solitary lives in the forest. But in September, when the salmon swim upstream to spawn, they gather from miles around to fish. Sightings of white bears aren't guaranteed, of course, but chances are pretty good.

Other recreation—kayaking, canoeing, hiking, wildlife watching, spa treatments and ocean fishing—is easy to arrange on short notice and a series of activities is available every day. So I pour a glass of wine, nibble a crab cake and nestle into a cozy spot to sit and mingle with my fellow guests.

A varied group, they include Greg Burr, a teacher and artist from Vancouver, who says he had no desire to catch a fish, much less to kill one. But he is itching to unpack his watercolors. "I'd much rather kayak or paint the scenery," he says as we watch the evening sky turn pink.

Honeymooners Ken and Susu Notare, newcomers to wilderness, hope to do it all. I hike to Whalen Lake with them, and they show me their honeymoon suite. Twelve-year-old Robert Cotter, traveling with his mother and grandmother, sees not just one whale, but too many to count, and some sea lions, too. And I venture out with novice kayakers Roger and Corky Gelder, from Atlanta.

"I'm mostly here to watch the whales and go to the spa," says Joelle Benioff, with her husband Russell, retirees from San Francisco. "But I do love salmon. So I'll keep Russell company when he goes fishing." (Russell, who will spend every moment on the water with Ryan Bowes, his favorite guide, will reap the benefits, taking home a half-dozen kings and silvers, filleted, vacuum packed and quick-frozen, compliments of the Lodge.)

I try my hand at fly fishing and it is as good as anything the fishing lodges of yore could have offered. Contrarian that I am, however, it's salmon fishing that I'm hooked on. Imagine the rush when 20 pounds of feisty fish grabs your hook and runs with it. Still, when my thoughts drift back to those days on Barnard Harbour, it's not the fish I remember, but the sound of waves slapping the boat and the quiet forays into hidden bays. At this wilderness lodge, the quest is the thing.



This page: King Pacific Lodge leaves the notions of dad's fishing lodge behind, incorporating luxurious necessities, from massage treatments and gourmet cuisine to first-class service, into the daily routine.

Open May to October; closed in winter. All-inclusive rates for a seven-night stay start at US\$7,650. Three- and four-night stays are also available. Included are roundtrip flights between Vancouver and King Pacific Lodge (via Bella Bella), meals and snacks, beverages, fishing and sports equipment, water sports, ocean fishing, wildlife cruises and hiking, and salmon packing for transport. (Spa treatments, helicopter and float plane outings and Kermode Bear trips not included.) For more information or to make a reservation, please call King Pacific Lodge at 888.592.5464, or visit www.kingpacificlodge.com.