



RON THIELE

## great white hope

**Rare glimpses of white Kermode bears are one of the treasures of the Great Bear Rainforest—and if we're careful, our endless fascination with them might just help preserve their environment.**

**By Andrew Scott**

Our guide has led us through a broad estuary, its plant life tinged with autumnal russet and gold, to a stream by the edge of the forest where we are nearly deafened by raven honk and eagle screech. There's been plenty of rain the past 48 hours on northern B.C.'s Princess Royal Island, and the water is loaded with thrashing pink salmon, or "humpies," and some larger chum. Salmon carcasses litter the forest floor; most are missing their heads or have had their roe stripped. The former is a sign of scavenging wolves, but the latter is of more interest to us, because it's bears that seek this particular delicacy.



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We are here—15 tourists and four crew members—“bear-waiting,” a key activity when exploring the Great Bear Rainforest. This Nova Scotia-size swath of near-inaccessible wilderness is the last of its kind on Canada’s west coast. We’re an international crowd, from Switzerland, England, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and North America, and for eight days we will live aboard the 21-metre ketch *Island Roamer* and cruise among remote islands, fiords, mountains and river valleys.

Our skipper, Randy Burke, owner of Bluewater Adventures, has 23 years’ experience. Our guide, Marven Robinson, has one of the world’s more unusual job descriptions: spirit



bear guide. He’s also tourism and wildlife director for the Gitga’at Development Corporation. The ultimate hope for some of us is to spot a Kermode or “spirit” bear, a rare genetic variety of black bear with cream-coloured fur, found only in certain parts of B.C.’s north coast.

Much earlier that morning the wolves had howled for half an hour, an eerie serenade that woke us at our anchorage in Cameron Cove. We’d spent the previous day in Wright Sound watching humpback whales, two of which seemed to be sleeping on the surface. Squads of black-and-white Dall’s porpoise had raced toward us like tuxedoed waiters homing in on a big tipper, anxious to ride the bow wave of the *Roamer* and test the hydrodynamics of her hull. Later we’d cruised down Whale Channel to Ashdown Island, where the landscape opens up to Caamaño Sound and the storm-swept outer

coast. The rich smells and high-decibel complaints of 200 Steller’s sea lions drifted over the boat from a haulout on some nearby rocks.

Now we’re settled on mossy stumps and boughs, as conspicuous as escaped parrots in our bright Gore-Tex jackets and Helly Hansen rain gear. Why would a bear stick around after getting an eyeful of us, I wonder? We’ll be waiting awhile, Robinson says, encouraging us to remain tranquil and quiet. I suspect that really he just wants us to drink in our surroundings, let our frenzied urban minds wind down and our senses become attuned to the complex rainforest rhythms. There’s a lot going on. The arrival of the salmon is the key event in the cycle of life here, bringing nourishment for all creatures and the chance of future survival.

Robinson relates to us a myth his people have about the spirit bear. Raven, the creator, decided to turn the earth into the green land it is today. As a reminder of the purity of the old world of glaciers and snow, he went among the black bear tribe and made every 10th member white. Marven’s auntie, though, knows a different creation myth: Raven originally created all bears white but decided to turn

**Top: Kayaking peaceful waters in northern B.C. Bottom: Their cream-coloured fur makes Kermode bears spiritual treasures in First Nations culture.**

RANDY BURKE

# TRAVEL

## Bear Necessities

In April 2006 the spirit bear became one of the official species of British Columbia (along with the Pacific dogwood, Steller's jay and the Western red cedar). B.C. Lieutenant Governor Iona Campagnolo declared the Kermode bear "a magnificent symbol" that "speaks to the majesty, uniqueness and mystery of our province."

Over the summer of 2006, 200 seven-foot white fibreglass bears, decorated by local artists, began appearing on urban street corners all over B.C. as part of the Kermode Spirit Bears in the City project ([spiritbearsinthecity.com](http://spiritbearsinthecity.com)). Posed on two legs like cuddly teddies, one paw raised in unlikely greeting, they were thought by some to trivialize the bears and mislead visitors about their behaviour. Tourists loved them, though, and their eventual auction raised funds for the BC Lions Society. **wl**



nine out of 10 bears black after he had covered the world with trees so that they would blend in better with their new surroundings.

As if to emphasize the success of Raven's techniques, the forest around us falls suddenly silent as, out of nowhere, a gigantic female bear appears on the far side of the stream, only 20 metres away. For a long moment we are all frozen in time, breathless, thoughtless, watching. Then the air rushes back into the scene, and the bear—black, but quite possibly the mother or sister of a spirit bear—goes about her business, catching fish, tearing them open, taking a bite here and there, and leaving the dying bodies scattered around.

## A Whiter Shade

We'd first met Marven several days ago at Hartley Bay, a car-free Gitga'at First Nation hamlet nestled beside Douglas Channel, where the houses are linked by sturdy boardwalks and the villagers use fat-tired ATVs to transport their gear. Hartley Bay is the hub of the Great Bear region, reachable only by boat or float plane, and Marven has noticed more people passing through as a result of a historic land-use agreement, endorsed in February 2006 by three major environmental groups, as well as by First Nation, industry and government leaders.

New protected areas were created, a third of the land base declared off-limits to logging and the rest subjected to "ecosystem-based management," which is undefined at present but must be put into effect by 2009. A week after my visit, the spirit bear would become B.C.'s official mammal (see right).

Aboard the *Island Roamer* we continue our search for the real thing, alternating conversation and reading with long bouts of scoping the shoreline. Our group is keen, and perseverance pays off. We see more black bears, and someone spots a tawny-hued coastal wolf loping along the rocks in search of food. These unusual car-

nivores crack open shellfish, catch salmon, kill and eat black bears, and swim from island to island after black-tailed deer, their main prey. They may even

**Top left: The Island Roamer. Top right: Close encounters with black bears. Bottom: Whale-watching from the deck.**



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## TRAVEL

be a subspecies, genetically distinct, having evolved in these coastal wilds undisturbed for thousands of years.

The *Island Roamer* is a perfect platform for viewing wildlife: stable, slow and comfortable. Fitted with eight small double cabins, three shower-equipped heads and a book-lined lounge, the vessel is both intimate and roomy. You can get to know your fellow travellers yet still have solo space to relish the vast horizons. The days are interrupted regularly with Cate Shaw's fine cooking—stunning halibut and salmon recipes, prawn pasta, chicken Marbella, short ribs, exotic vegetable dishes, fresh breads and endless divine desserts—all produced from a tiny but well-equipped galley. Two naturalists (marine biologist Kitty Lloyd and Jen Pukonen, a graduate student in ethnobotany) double as deckhands when they're not answering questions.

Most mornings and evenings we launch the *Roamer's* three single and two double kayaks, load up the inflatable and head off to patrol the shoreline, spotting otter, mink, eagles, herons, ducks and shorebirds of all kinds. Late one afternoon six of us paddle up the Khutze River, then disembark to examine the estuary, an extraordinary expanse of grasses, sedges and other plants heavily foraged by bears. Our view—and, presumably, that of any large predators—is obscured by chest-high vegetation, so as we walk across the flats we clap our hands and call out politely to notify everyone of our presence. But the only evidence of animal activities we see are mounds of fresh poop and large holes that appear to have been dug by powerful, root-seeking creatures.

Then, motoring down Princess Royal Channel one morning, an affable Swiss banker (whose 300-mm camera lens happens to be worth more than my pickup truck) shouts, "Spirit bear at 2 o'clock." You couldn't impose silence and obedience on a group of tourists more quickly if you menaced them with an AK-47. There is the bear, walking cautiously along the shoreline. We are some distance off, in a large boat, but the bear seems apprehensive, and after five minutes or so disappears back into the forest. With the close encounter at Cameron Cove fresh in our minds, this sighting feels almost like an afterthought, though we manage to buzz with excitement for hours.

### Go, Cubs!

For a week we see and experience astonishing things. At Kitkiata Inlet, dozens of mysterious rock carvings or petroglyphs—sun faces, ancient eagle masks, alien stick figures—gaze up at us from the stones. We start one day with a soak in the hot springs at Bishop Bay, then struggle through thick undergrowth to explore the spooky ruins of B.C.'s first pulp mill at Swanson Bay. A colder soak results when Randy noses the *Roamer* up to a waterfall that drops straight into the ocean and Cate climbs out on the prow for a better look. At night, travelling through a swirl of

### IF YOU GO

Princess Royal Island is 520 kilometres north of Vancouver and 200 kilometres south of Prince Rupert and is accessible only by boat or air.

**Ferries** run from Port Hardy on Vancouver Island to Prince Rupert, through the Inside Passage; more information is available at [bcferries.bc.ca](http://bcferries.bc.ca).

**Bluewater Adventures** offers the eight-day Great Bear Rainforest trip on June 2 and 10, August 25, September 2, 11, 17, 19, 25 and 27, 2007. Price, including all meals, wine and excursions (but not tips or airfare to and from the vessel, which we boarded at Kitimat and disembarked at Bella Bella) is \$3,190, based on double occupancy and depending on departure date. Itineraries vary. They also offer voyages to Haida Gwaii, Southeast Alaska, Northern Vancouver Island and Knight Inlet, Desolation Sound and the Gulf Islands. Call 604-980-3800 or 1-888-877-1770, or visit [bluewateradventures.ca](http://bluewateradventures.ca).

**The Raincoast Conservation Society** is one of many groups working to save B.C.'s rainforest. [raincoast.org](http://raincoast.org).

For more information about travel in northern British Columbia, including Princess Royal Island, contact **Northern B.C. Tourism** at 1-800-663-8843 or [nbc tourism.com](http://nbc tourism.com). **wl**

phosphorescence, our breath is taken away by two nearby humpbacks, a mother and calf, their spouts and tails outlined in spectral neon green.

And the best is still to come. Now we are at the estuary of the Mussel River, deep in Fiordland Recreation Area. The landscape has changed yet again; rock bluffs, scoured by waterfalls and daubed with clumps of red and yellow vegetation, tower overhead. We spot mountain goats. There is snow on the high peaks, even a remnant glacier. It was around the corner from here, at Poison Cove, that some of Captain George Vancouver's crew members ate tainted mussels. One of them died.

We see grizzlies immediately: a mother and cub playing together on one riverbank, and two—no, four, wow, make that six!—sub-adults fishing and tussling together on the other. Our anchor chain scares the three-year-olds off, but mum and cub pay us no heed. We break out the kayaks and Zodiac and head upstream. The young bears haven't gone far and soon become used to our presence. We watch as they play-fight and feed on the plentiful salmon. One comes rushing toward us, intent on a splashing fish; through binoculars the animal appears to be about to join me in my plastic container. We are nearly swamped by waves of adrenalin.

After two hours of unbelievable grizzly close-ups, we finally tear ourselves away and return to the boat. Tomorrow is our last full day with the *Roamer*, and we'll spend part of it exploring the Kitasoo First Nation village of Klemtu on Swindle Island and part hoisting the sails and trying to catch the first breath of wind we've had in days. I get a chance to take the helm and, with Randy standing close by to explain some rudiments of navigation and instrument reading, actually guide our vessel through a narrow, shoal-strewn passage.

That evening, cosily tucked into our anchorage in Rescue Cove, we attempt to pin down the most memorable moments of the trip. But there are too many, really. Instead we all agree on something more important: to support the efforts of those who continue the work to protect the Great Bear Rainforest from mankind's relentless encroachment. **wl**