

IN THE

WOOD

EMBRACE

OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

Passengers watch for wildlife from the bow of expedition catamaran Cascadia in the Great Bear Rainforest.



Photo: Jonny Beirman/Maple Leaf Adventures

## Maple Leaf Adventures' expedition catamaran Cascadia takes passengers into the heart of a unique part of the world.

By Linda Barnard

In the pristine and remote Great Bear Rainforest, on British Columbia's north coast, you can hear the exhalations of humpback whales in the morning and be lulled to sleep by waterfalls tumbling down mountain faces at night.

There are no through roads and no cruise ships in this protected area roughly the size of the Republic of Ireland. Small vessels are the only way to explore the rainforest, islands, mountain-lined fjords and rivers of this area 650 kilometres north of Vancouver.

I visited this remarkable place on the expedition catamaran Cascadia, the newest of the three vessels in the small-ship fleet owned and run by Victoria B.C. ecotourism company Maple Leaf Adventures.

Kevin Smith, company president and co-owner, was our expedition leader. As we began the voyage, he reminded us we were travelling in "a unique, very, very special corner of this one blue planet" – home to First Nations people since time immemorial.

Eighteen passengers from the U.K., Germany, the United States and Canada set out from the small Kitimat marina for our eight-day trip into the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest.

With 12 cabins, lots of windows and deck space seating, plus a salon that was our lounge, dining room and hangout hub, Cascadia is roomy and comfortable. Thanks to twin hulls, it was a smooth voyage.

On-board sous-chef Mara Jernigan nailed it when she called the 138-foot vessel "a little floating boutique hotel."

We sailed through deep channels bracketed by glacier-topped mountains into estuaries, milky blue bays and close to shallow rivers where spawning salmon fought to survive and create the next generation.

We learned about culture and history from Haisla First Nation guests Louisa Smith and Liz Robinson, who joined us for part of the trip. They helped us connect with their traditional territory, the Kitlope, the last stand of protected and unbroken temperate rainforest on the planet.

I also learned from a remarkable book in the ship's library written by Smith's late brother, Xenaksiala elder and author Wa'xaid (Cecil) Paul and British Columbia writer Briony Penn. Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid were filled with his teachings and stories.

Wa'xaid, who called the Kitlope "The Cathedral," often sailed with Maple Leaf Adventures, sharing his knowledge with passengers.

On the first day of our trip, Smith explained that what we would see and do couldn't be planned. Everything would be dictated by tides, weather and the whims of wildlife. The daily itinerary Smith posted in the salon was known as "Plan A."

We hoped to see the extremely rare white-coated black bear known as the Spirit Bear or Kermode bear. The official mammal of British Columbia isn't an albino animal; it's the result of a genetic mutation, and only lives in the Great Bear Rainforest, where it has significant cultural meaning to the First Nations people here.

Onboard naturalist Janet Winbourne cautioned us against getting our hopes up. We were a few weeks off the peak of the annual salmon spawn that draws the cream-coloured bears out of the woods to fatten up for winter. She was right.

What we didn't see hardly mattered, given the natural wonders we did encounter. On an early morning excursion on Cascadia's two tenders, we watched a group of elusive sea wolves reunite with spine-tingling howls on a white-sand beach. This rare marine species lives primarily on seafood. Unlike other wolves, it swims to hunt. We were thrilled to watch one paddle for shore from a rocky islet.

**For some of us, days began with a sunrise kayak excursion, while others met in Cascadia's salon over coffee and a pre-breakfast of home-made granola, fruit, and yogurt.**

Cascadia captain Jeff Harvey called it "W Day" when we followed up the morning sea wolf excursion with a trip along the aptly named Whale Channel. The heart-shaped sprays from the humpbacks were so plentiful, we lost count. The animals made slow, graceful arcs out of the water to breathe, their tails rising last. Some humpbacks breached in astonishing displays.

For some of us, days began with a sunrise kayak excursion, while others met in Cascadia's salon over coffee and a pre-breakfast of home-made granola, fruit, and yogurt. Smith and Capt. Harvey conferred about our day ahead at an

A pre-breakfast kayak trip with onboard naturalist Janet Winbourne.



Photo: Linda Barnard



From top left, clockwise: Kevin Smith, Maple Leaf Adventures president and co-owner, was the expedition leader on this trip. | Passengers enjoy lunch on Cascadia's rear deck. | Cascadia's two tenders get passengers close to nature. | While we didn't see a white Spirit Bear in the Great Bear Rainforest, we had so many other wildlife encounters that we weren't disappointed. | Relaxing in the top deck hot tub on Cascadia.

interactive navigational map. (We followed the day's route on a wall-mounted big-screen TV.)

The day ended with Cascadia at anchor. We'd meet for a pre-dinner glass of British Columbia wine, beer, or the cocktail of the day on the back deck or in the salon. There were unbreakable glasses for those who wanted their sundowner while soaking in the top-deck hot tub.

Cascadia was built in New Zealand in 2007 and purchased and updated by Maple Leaf in 2019. It joins the company's converted heritage tug, Swell, and the circa-1904, 92-foot schooner, Maple Leaf. The vessels sail a variety of expedition routes in B.C. and Alaska.

Cascadia is the largest of the three, with a crew of 10. My cabin was comfortable and simply furnished, with First Nations art on the walls and lots of storage. I was a big fan of the heated bathroom floor. Because Maple Leaf believes Wi-Fi takes

passengers away to the world outside the ship, guests are on a weeklong digital detox. It felt strange at first, but within a day or two, I didn't miss it.

We ate well. There was a hot breakfast such as wild salmon Eggs Benedict, followed by a mid-morning snack, usually eaten on the tenders. Vegetarian guests were also well looked after. Lunches were wraps, burgers, stews, and curries. A savoury treat like locally smoked wild salmon and Vancouver Island cheese was laid out at about 3 p.m. Three-course dinners were accompanied by excellent B.C. wines and included local seafood like halibut and albacore tuna.

Passengers who began the trip as strangers soon became friends. Sharing the experience of being immersed in the fragile beauty of the magnificent Great Bear Rainforest brought us together quickly. It also gave us a common goal: a desire to ensure this wild place remains protected and stays as it is forever.

## IF YOU GO

Three Maple Leaf Adventures small ships sail to the Great Bear Rainforest from April to October. Trips run five to nine days and include all meals, wine and beer. Rates start at \$5,750 (CAD).

## GETTING THERE

Air fare is extra. Passengers take a 100-minute flight from Vancouver to Terrace, British Columbia. A 45-minute shuttle transfer to the marina at Kitimat is included.

**For more info, visit  
MapleLeafAdventures.com**

*Linda Barnard was a guest of Maple Leaf Adventures and Destination BC, which did not preview this article.*