

The wilds of Canada

Pacific Yellowfin in Desolation Sound

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CHARTERS ZIP PAST TO ALASKA, BUT THE FJORDS WEST OF VANCOUVER OFFER A WEALTH OF WILDLIFE AND SCENERY – WITHOUT THE CROWDS ITS NEIGHBOUR ATTRACTS

At short intervals flares light up the faces of fir and hemlock forests. When each bright missile smoulders out, it transforms the wilderness around the inlet where *Pacific Yellowfin* is moored into a powerful, hulking presence. A man from a rented dayboat is missing after an ill-judged rock dive. The coastguard patrol and local launches motor this way and that, as do our captain and first mate. For the middle of nowhere, help has arrived fast and

bountifully. But it becomes clear the search will not have a happy ending.

Then, faintly at first, the aurora borealis shimmers over West Redonda, like light from a secret city in the wilderness beyond the island. Nature's display dwarfs the man-made light show and is so brutally beautiful, so cold to the tragedy unfolding around us that it thunders both the glory and precariousness of what it means to be 'in the wild'. It also underlines the







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importance of exploring such regions with knowledgeable, capable guides and good advice.

The classic motor yacht *Pacific Yellowfin* and her crew offer arguably the safest way to explore Canada’s little-known Desolation Sound. Not only has captain and owner Colin Griffinson picked a highly skilled staff (and clearly you’re never far from phoned-in help here) but the boat herself has proven survival skills. She began life as a US Army minelayer in 1943, was contracted by the CIA and allegedly used for espionage during the 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion. She was bought by an oil magnate and sensitively converted into a yacht before Griffinson took her on (she’s now for charter and sale with Fraser Yachts). With her warm, characterful interior and classic lines, she fits perfectly into this landscape.

‘I first discovered the area alone, on a 6.4 metre boat, which I took from Vancouver to the top of the Sound,’ he says. ‘I fell in love with the

place. I bought a 21.34 metre fishing boat, upgraded it into a yacht and eventually traded that boat for the *Pacific Yellowfin* – a 34.75 metre, 12-guest motor yacht. This is where I have spent all my summers since I bought her – and where I now also offer her for charter.’

Desolation Sound is a maze-like network of channels off the Pacific mainland, discovered by George Vancouver in 1792. It is a fjordland of sage-green glacial waters, rich with salmon, crab and prawns; and peaks thick with cedar, Douglas fir and hemlock, from whose shade bears roam to fish at oyster crusted beaches. ‘I describe a *Pacific Yellowfin* charter as an adventure on an expedition ship, not a cruise on a superyacht. This is luxury for the intrepid,’ says Griffinson. ‘We return from a kayak trip to a glass of Champagne, or stewardess Jessica will make you a cocktail at the bar while (chef) Milan turns your catch into sushi before your eyes.’



Right: human life in the sound is as fascinating as animal life. Frontier-feeling Refuge Cove on West Redonda Island is a useful stop-off, as is Cortes Island Museum. Opposite: one of the greatest experiences of the sound is simply its glorious isolation



There are so many corners of Desolation Sound to explore that Griffinson recommends spending at least 12 days. Our September tour covers a few of his favourite spots. Cortes Island Museum (cortesmuseum.ca) at Mansons Landing on Cortes Island, offers an excellent grounding in Sound history. The museum was opened in the 1930s by May Ellingsen, a descendent of the first man to buy property on the island, in 1887. It features taxidermy of local wildlife, plus displays on native tribes and historical residents – brief biographies of pioneers, immigrants and loggers, painstakingly preserved by Lynne Jordan, who now runs it. ‘I’ve been here for about 12 years, but my husband’s been here 35. I’m still considered a newcomer,’ she says.

This old-family frontier feeling way of life is evident when motoring north east, through the glorious fjords to Refuge Cove on West Redonda Island. It has a little boho café – evidence of the hippies who moved here

later on – an old clapboard store for provisioning, as well as refuelling, although larger vessels might have difficulty getting on to the dock.

We venture to Pendrell Sound, the inlet that nearly bisects neighbouring East Redonda Island. Because of the depth, minimal tidal exchange and protection from prevailing winds, water can reach 28 degrees in summer and is still a pleasant temperature in September. Griffinson recommends spending at least a couple of days here, especially if you have children; and bring toys: *Pacific Yellowfin* has a custom-made 12 metre slide deployed from the top deck, plus water trampolines, water-skis and much more. Kayaks are a must for exploring the island and checking out ancient pictographs on cliff faces – *Pacific Yellowfin’s* mate Dominic is a qualified instructor.

The following day we motor to the north west reaches of Desolation Sound and moor off Shoal Bay. We take the tender east, just off Jimmy



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Judd Island and rapids that produce a series of whirlpools. Not only are they fun to ride in a rugged tender (with an expert skipper like Griffinson), but the spinning water also gives hake ‘the bends’, distending their stomachs and floating them to the surface. Bald eagles swoop down to catch the easy meals – in summer the eagles can number in the hundreds.

On another trip from Shoal Bay, the tender takes us to the entrance to Shirley Creek on Phillips Arm to catch fish of our own. Chinook salmon pause here on their way to spawn, and it’s rare not to make a catch. But the real joy is the scene: the misty green enormity of the surrounding topography and the perfect calm of the waters, broken only by jumping fish. Vancouver Island, a landmass about the size of Ireland, protects Desolation Sound from sea conditions. So while tides and currents are a serious matter, it experiences no waves and (also thanks to her heft and 9.14 metre beam) there has never been an incidence of seasickness on *Pacific Yellowfin*. We shuttle back with our catch – which Milan later transforms into a risotto.

A local boat tips us off that two brother orcas have been spotted in the nearby Nodales Channel. Chasing Chinook salmon south, these are ‘residents’, a local variety of orca that eat only fish, although ‘transient’ orcas, which eat only warm-blooded animals such as seals and dolphins, are also often spotted here. The latter tend to breach more, particularly after a kill, and hunt in pods. In any case, the oil calm of the water is



perfect for watching them break the surface. Humpback whales are also frequently seen in Desolation Sound – the best places being in Calm Channel. Dolphins are so common *Pacific Yellowfin* doesn’t stop unless there’s a pod of 50 or more.

‘This is a beautiful area for all kinds of nature based photography,’ says wildlife photographer Michael Poliza. ‘In the course of the year you



Above: one of the best ways to explore the islands is by trail bike – *Pacific Yellowfin* carries six Honda Ruckus scooters. Right and opposite: the wildlife is plentiful and includes orcas, bald eagles and salmon. Top: when the salmon run, grizzly bears enter the creek system



have dolphins, humpback whales, grey whales coming up and down the coast, plenty of eagles, orcas – there's not that many places in the world where you can reliably photograph orcas.'

Desolation Sound also has sought-after wildlife on dry land. Still moored at Shoal Bay, Jack Springer of Campbell River Whale Watching picks us up in his taxi boat. We are headed to Orford Bay in the north east of Desolation Sound – a native Canadian reservation where we'll see grizzlies. He peppers the journey with bear trivia: their mothers teach them to fish so grizzlies have different techniques – some are good and some are bad. Those that are inept but big simply steal fish from smaller, more skilled bears; if a bear charges a group, stay together – he's trying to get one of you to peel off. But our main concern is not whether a bear will catch us; it is whether we will catch sight of a bear. 'Do your research on where the bears are at the time of the year,' says Springer. 'These bears come here in September and October, so it's a very short season. I would also stay away from the large groups – we do 12, that's the max. If you do large groups you don't get as close.'

On land we are greeted by two guides from the local Homalco people, who drive us to viewing huts, set on long stilts. After a short fruitless wait, we set off towards the next hut, when Springer spots something. We get out by a creek and watch a dark, mature male grizzly stroll towards us with the special gravitas of bulk. He gets within three metres

– close enough to reveal terrifying claws – sniffs the air then crosses to the other side of the creek. Moments later a younger, reddish male passes at a greater distance. Back aboard the boat we celebrate with a seafood feast of salmon and Dungeness crab the crew has caught (bring crab pots and prawn traps, and you can feed yourselves with little effort).

For a last taste of Desolation Sound, we visit Read Island, near the middle of the region. We picnic on rocks at Hotel Bay, with Susan and Tangira Gilbert, the wife and daughter, respectively, of local woodcutter Tom Gilbert. Susan shows us an abandoned wooden house nearby and the hawthorn, hazelnut trees, redcurrant bushes and bay trees that surround it, all vestiges of a time Hotel Bay was a lively stop-off for passing loggers – as well as, reputedly, a hideout for shady characters. Those who remain are families that have lived in the region for generations, and more recent additions such as Gilbert, who have come to seek solitude.

We follow the peaceful sojourn with a tour of the island on *Pacific Yellowfin's* six fat-wheeled scooters; as the sunlight flickers through the 200-year-old Douglas firs, it is easy to understand Gilbert's point of view – this is a very special corner of the world. Those who benefit from its pristine beauty – locals or visitors – have Alaska's well-publicised assets to thank for distracting attention from its neighbour. But for raw, surprising, bountiful nature there can be few places in the English-speaking world so ripe for exploration as Desolation Sound.