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THE LITTLE ISLAND NO ONE
WANTS YOU TO KNOW ABOUT

ADVENTURES IN MOROCCO





HERE BE

Off Canada's Vancouver Island, the tales may be tall but the magic is real. Melinda Stevens and shipmates are swallowed up in a tangled green waterworld. Photographs by Jeremy Koreski

DRAGONS

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HOULD YOU EVER SEE wild huckleberries, make sure you grab great leafy bushes of the stuff; the little red orbs taste like the sweetest tomatoes with the tarest of flicks. You can pluck at them for hours, sitting in the back of a pick-up, looking at the forest's shadows and the light that dashes between them any chance it gets.

But this forest, Vancouver Island's forest, is not the kind to invite you in. It's a great green tangle, a giant bed-head scrunch of pine and cedar and hemlock. Bears are here. And great marijuana plantations hide in the glades. Eagles fly overhead, and vultures too. Beavers get busy in their dams, making an almighty mess amongst the lily pads, and shocking the dragonflies who zip off on their electric-blue engines.

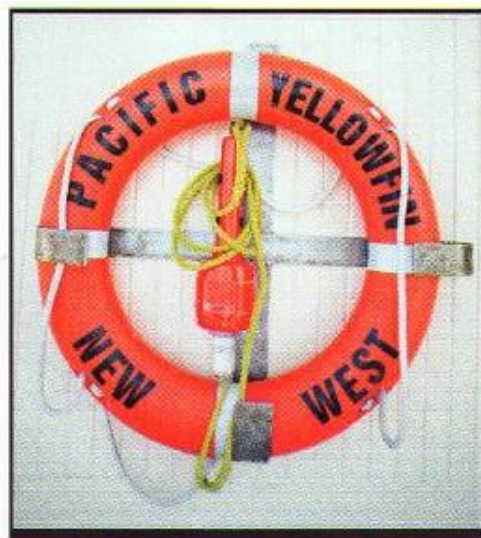
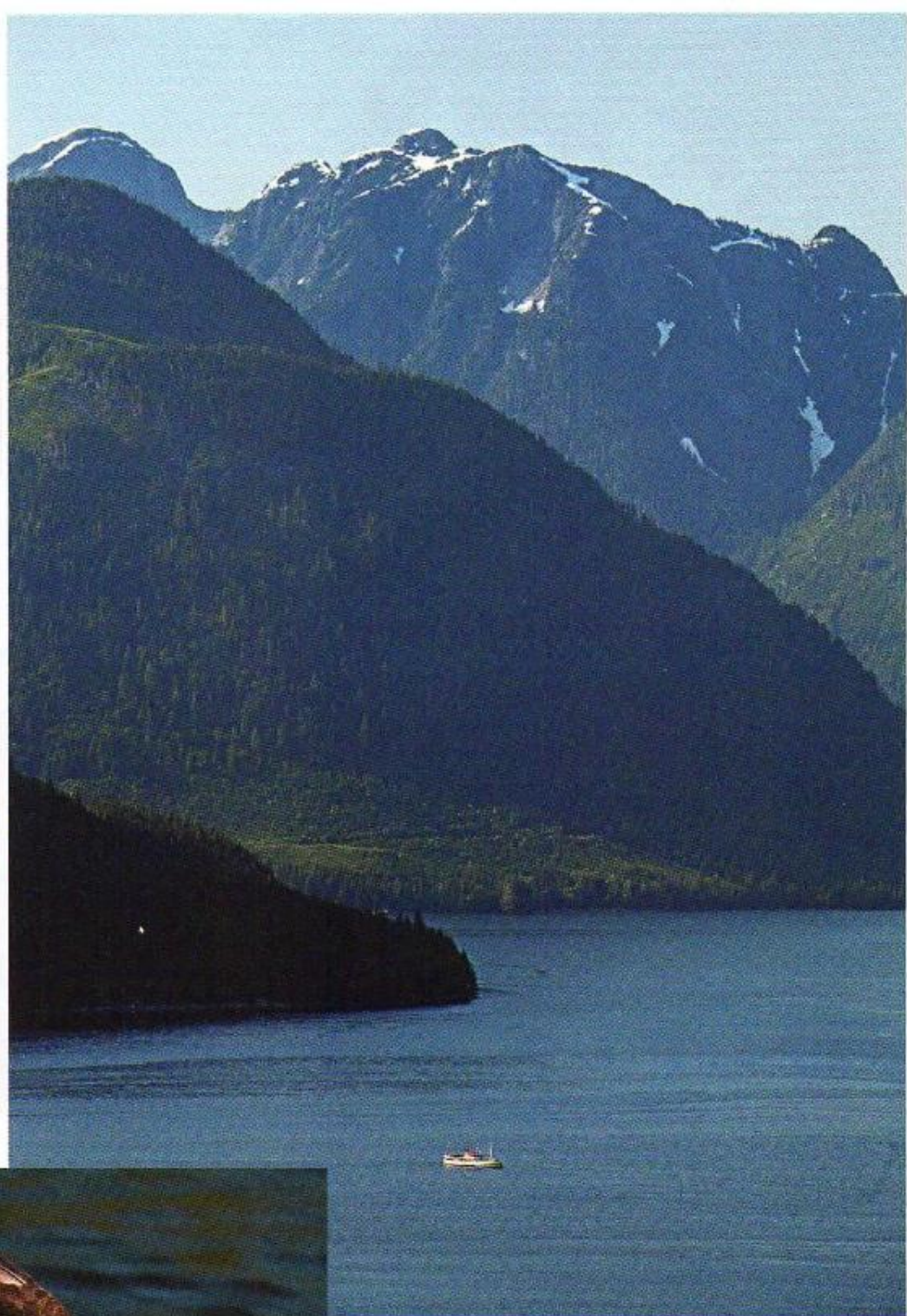
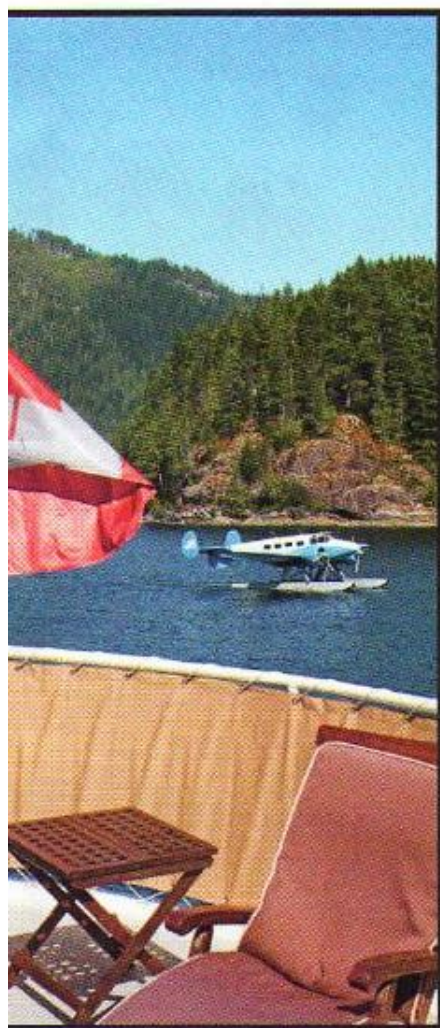
But in the morning, all is quiet. Inky ripples pass by gossip-less along the sides of our boat. An otter raises its sodden head above the water, then dips it below again. The dawn breaks and the mist lifts off the forest, 100 metres high in places, like steam off hot heads. In this bay, all around, nothing but us, this boat, this view, this battalion of trees on all sides, poker-straight and chest-to-chest, marching around mountain peaks with ice-age caps, skirting vast rocks of rusty red, down into the creases of coves and across hidden valleys.

It looks so small on a map, Vancouver Island – an inverted comma of nothingness! And yet it holds a vast, subtle, secret storytelling kind of world. Exactly the kind of world where people go to disappear. And disappear they do. They even have an expression for it here. It's called gunkholing. You want to take a few days off work, sail away on your boat, not answer your phone, and live off the land and sea? Then you've gone gunkholing, dude, and that's totally fine by your boss, no questions asked. You'll find intimations of these wayfarers dotted about – a crab pot with a buoy on top, and a message that reads, 'Keep your sticky fingers to yourself, man!'

They say Vancouver Island is the largest populated landmass off the North American coast. But there's no way you'd know it from here. It's wild and absurd, prehistoric and brilliant, sublime



Clockwise from above: the engine order telegraph on the bridge of the *Pacific Yellowfin*; a haul of Dungeness crabs in a crab pot; a seaplane lands on Shoal Bay; a distant view of the *Pacific Yellowfin* on a remote sound; one of the boat's life-preservers; a bald eagle goes in for the kill. Previous pages, an orca surfaces and spouts in Desolation Sound





and hilarious. Here is Joe, a great-great-grandfather in his Pop-like braces, a fisherman and logger, with his wife Lynn; she runs the local museum, a two-roomer with a stuffed otter in it, the skull of a sea lion and a raffle with a rocking chair as its prize. Over there is the USA's Tupperware heiress, living in a one-bedroom clapboard house at the end of a sandy beach and no one ever sees her. And between this islander and this billionaire? Every permutation of dreamer and wolf-man, back-to-nature kid, artist, sailor, dopehead, Canadian spirit, beachcomber, siren, pelt-hunter and pirate you can think of.

A hotel has just arrived – the horror! – which is probably perfectly nice. But at this point, aboard the most special boat in the most special of temperate rainforests, we have become, in a matter of days, misanthropes. We sail past it, without comment, in pursuit of orcas, a mother and calf. Down goes the aluminium tender, an excited flurry on deck. But not before Jessica makes cocktails. Nothing happens on the *Pacific Yellowfin* without Jessica first making cocktails: Bloody Caesars so large they're practically in vases, not just with giant amounts of vodka and clam juice, but

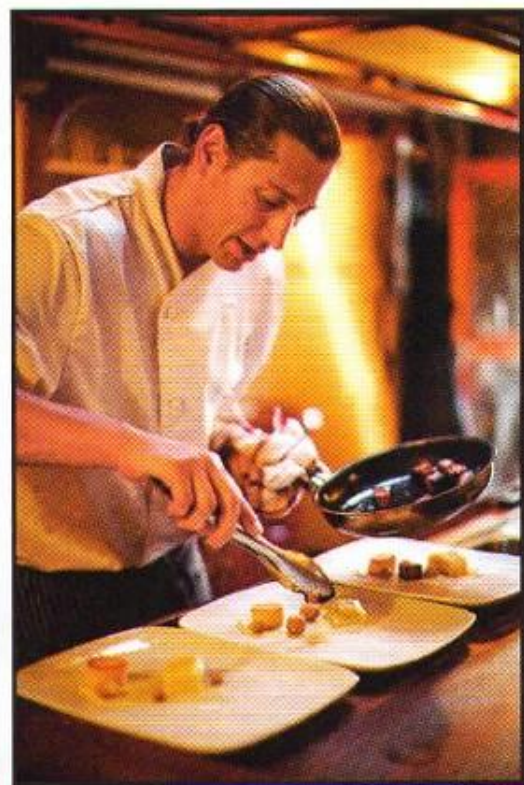
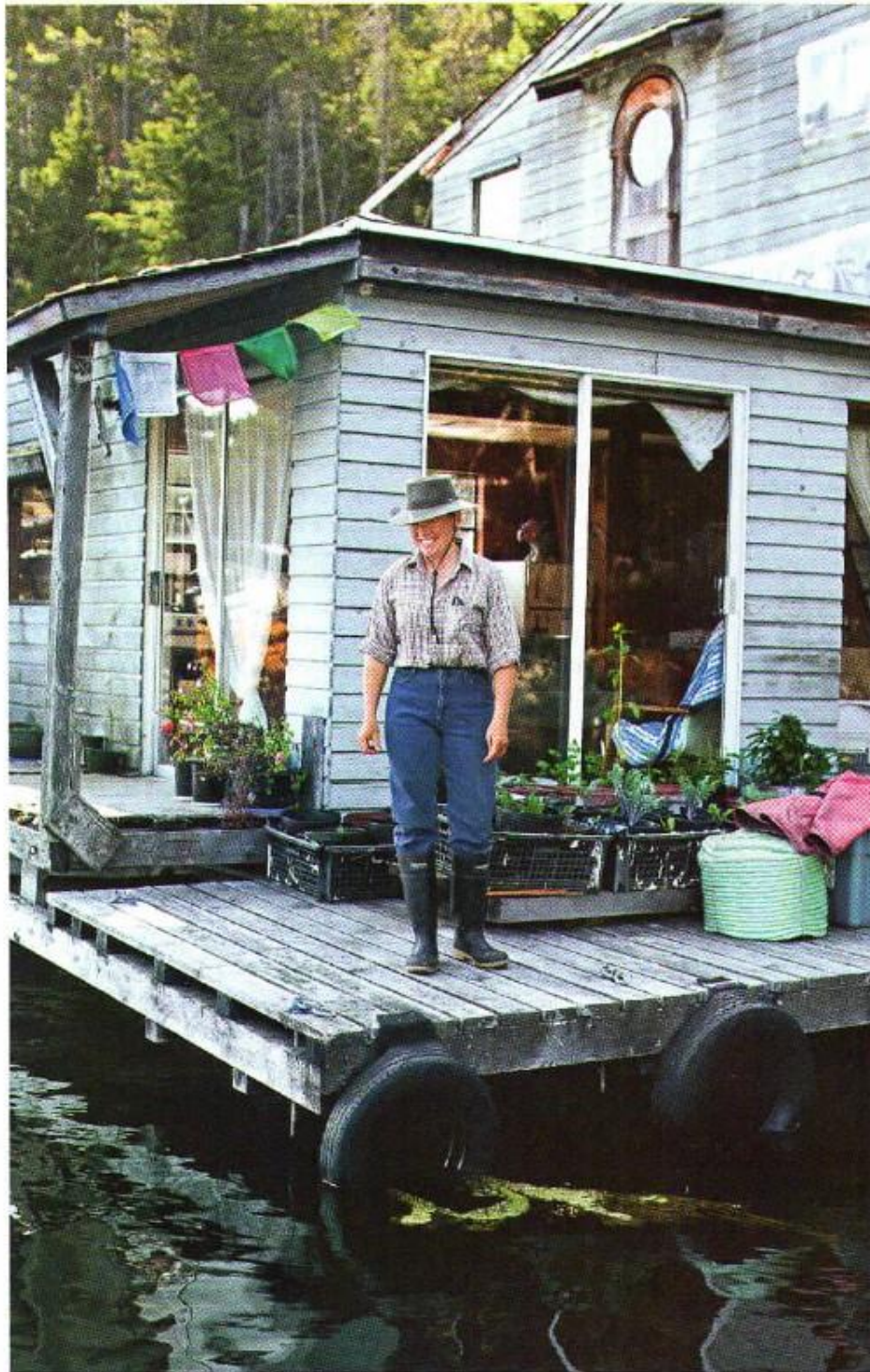
As the orca rises, a vaporous cloud shoots into the air. 'Ah, the puff of a whale's breath,' says Captain Colin. 'Fishy. Sticky. A moment.'

sticks of pickled sausage, fat olives and three French beans apiece. We sit and slurp and bob about in the boat. The orcas nose the water, pushing it up like hot blown glass, the mother's fin cuts through it, a vaporous cloud shoots into the air. 'Ah, the puff of a whale's breath,' says Captain Colin. 'Fishy. Sticky. A moment.'

The *Pacific Yellowfin* was built during World War II, based on the design of old wooden working boats. Used for carrying soldiers, ammunition, and for pulling steel barges, it's a Pacific Northwest tank of strength, made out of fir and cedar, white oak and locust tree-nails. It's absurdly magnificent.

First owned by a man of mystery who lost his life in the Bay of Pigs, it was taken over by an oil millionaire called Pete Whittier, who installed, amongst other things, an antique barber's chair from the film *Mississippi Burning* on the bridge. Soon Irishman Colin Griffin saw it and fell in love; Whittier and he exchanged contracts – and hats – soon after. Colin kept as many original features as possible: flick-switches on the ceiling, spare propellers that form the base of the dining-room table. There are bear pits of beds, a checkerboard bathroom, a proper bath, engines that look and sound like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. There's 443 tons of beauty shot through with wit; you can drive golf balls from her deck at night, use her mini-motorbikes to race through the mountains by day, fish from her speedboats, and shimmy like loons into the water down her six-metre inflatable slide. From time to time, Captain Colin sends out a whoop from her hooter; it booms at the mountains and the mountains cheerily boom back.

The stories get a little tall when you spend a few days with Captain Colin and his crew. I cannot, for example, tell you whether the following are fact or fiction... If you tickle a crab on its tummy, it goes to sleep. If you eat bananas on a fishing boat, you bring bad luck. If you see a cougar, you must hold your hands in the air and make a yelping sound. That the kelp here has a bauble near the top which contains enough carbon dioxide to kill a chicken. That moon-snails, the size of a fist, clasp onto clams,

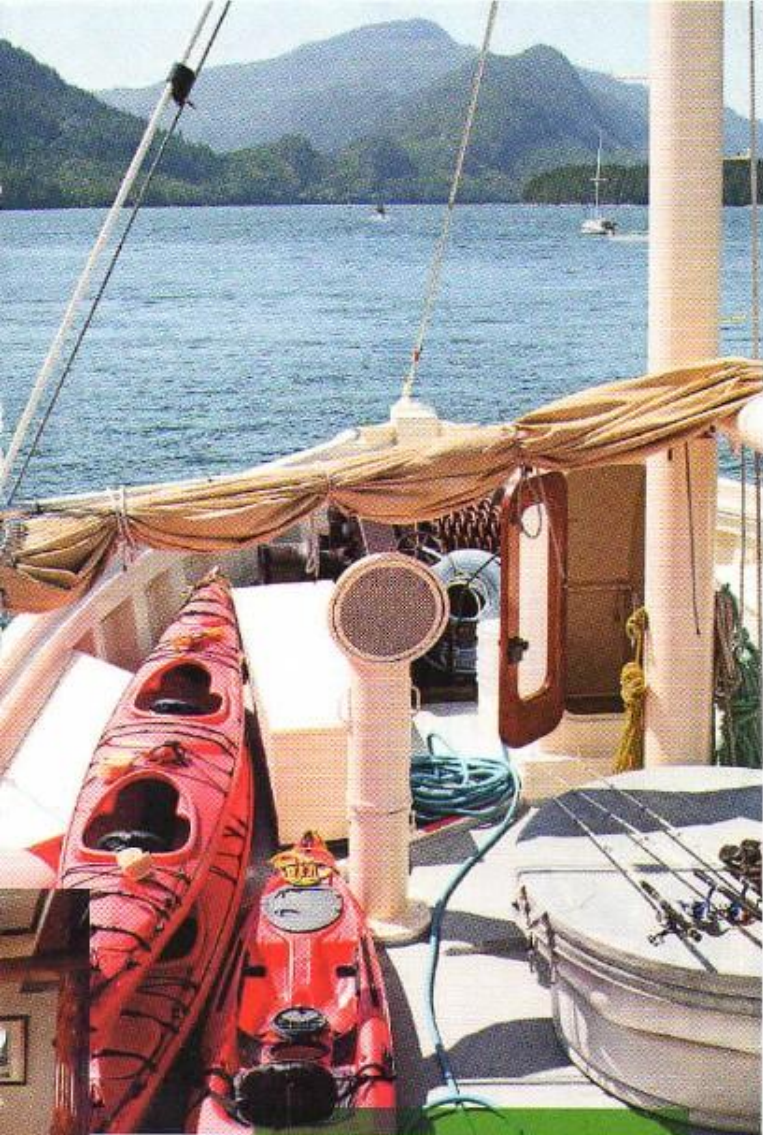


bore through their shells, and suck out the meat over a period of four days. That eagles mate for life. That there is a pirate here called Smiley, but no one knows if it's because he's really happy or because his face was cut like that in a fight.

There is the cook, Milan, a snowboarder and mountain-biker who creates the most astonishing 14-course menus, all sourced here and a lot of it picked by us from the beaches and the water: sea urchins, Dungeness crabs, scallops, the most buttery Alaskan black cod we've ever tasted. There is deckhand Dominic, who speaks seven languages and has a PhD in law, who spends his winters guiding in the Himalayas. And there is engineer Jack. He is the wonderful sea-dog punctuation to everything we do on the *Yellowfin*, an applied-maths genius who does a crossword in a minute, who always has his hand in the cotton-candy jar, and who does a fine rendition of 'Albert and the Lion'. And, when you're sucking up a bit of sun on deck, or baiting your line,

or zipping up your wetsuit, he'll appear from nowhere and say things like: 'If I start having fun around here, I'm off.'

As we travel further north through Desolation Sound, the skies ache away from us; the water is at once a crisp turquoise tumbling into velvety black. We spend the days rigging up flashers and hoochies in the hope of luring salmon, and when we don't, just drifting and drinking beer and drifting some more. One day we catch a ton of quillback rockfish, with bobbly eyes and spines that make them look positively Jurassic, and end up throwing them to a granddaddy eagle with claws like the devil's scythes. We visit Delia, the Crocodile Dundee of British Columbia, who lives entirely off the grid: no electricity, no heating (consider the winters here without!). We fill sacks with oysters we find on the beach – a beach entirely blanketed in oysters! And we laugh a lot, proper giggling, like greedy people would if they stumbled across absurd riches.



Clockwise from left: one of the two staterooms on the *Pacific Yellowfin*; Delia the oyster farmer at her off-the-grid floating home; Milan Kocourek, the onboard chef, prepares scallops; kayaks and fishing gear on the main deck; a table set for dinner on the fantail deck. Previous pages, boats moored on Desolation Sound



At night the crabbers go and push their pots out as the moonlight dodges the waves. Stan Getz is playing as we suck on hot buttered corn and listen to stories about the Indians hunted down by a pack of wolves, the German count who offered his private island here as a refuge to draft-dodgers during the Vietnam War, the spirit bears which, because of a missing gene, are not brown but the colour of honeyed milk.

But for all the stories and adventures, it's the first sight of Desolation Sound on a grey morning that sticks. For days, the weather had been as shiny as a new penny, but this morning, with low-slung vapour rising and falling upon each layered page of receding mountain, you can see why the Brit George Vancouver, coming here in 1792, called it Desolation Sound. To him it must have seemed a dark and perilous place, leading to the end of something. But right now, from here, on deck, it looks like the mountains are breathing in long, slow, deep, brilliant relief. 7

MAP: LEE WOODGATE

ANCHORS AWAY!

The author's trip to British Columbia was arranged through bespoke travel experts **Brown & Hudson** (020 3358 0110; www.browndanandhudson.com) as part of a larger itinerary across Canada and the USA. You can also book direct with the **Pacific Yellowfin** team (00 1 604 321 2124; www.pacificyellowfin.com). Captained by Colin Griffinson, the *Pacific Yellowfin* has room for up to 12 people (eight adults and four children) in two staterooms and two deluxe cabins laid out over

four decks. Five or six crew members are on hand to assist with kayaking, fishing, whale-watching, bear-tracking and anything else you can think of. The season runs from May to October. Seven nights' charter for eight guests costs about £6,300 per person, including accommodation on a full-board basis, wine and beer with meals, all activities, plus Canadian taxes and gratuities.