

Into the spirit world



British Columbia's furthest reaches are home to the rare "spirit bears" of legend. *Kate Lardy* boards the 114ft *Pacific Yellowfin* to catch a glimpse

Never trust a black bear. This is the advice running through my mind as I watch a particularly large one dive under a log a few feet away from my perch on the riverbank. A grizzly bear, the apex predator round these parts, needs only to assert its dominance; a black bear, on the other hand, is the underdog, falling below grizzlies, cougars and wolves in the hierarchy. It will fight to the death if feeling threatened, simply because it has to.

With a hefty leap, 330 pounds of wet bear hoists itself out of the river and on to the log. This was its second dive for salmon, the first scoring it a wriggling fish. Coming up unsuccessful this time, it gives our gaggle a stare and walks straight towards us. We hold



When salmon head upriver to spawn, many animals benefit, including the pine marten (below)



our collective breath as Colin Griffinson, owner and captain of our host yacht *Pacific Yellowfin*, pulls out his bear spray and readies it as the animal brushes past us. Griffinson later tells me it's the first time he has had to do this in years. He has stern words with our Gitga'at First Nation guide (one of 14 tribes of the Tsimshian nation in British Columbia) for allowing us to get too close, even though no one in our group minds.

Witnessing bears fishing for salmon is pretty high on most people's wish list, but we also have a higher purpose: to spot the elusive Kermode or spirit bear. Found only in the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia, it's an all-white variation of the black bear, whose brown eyes show that it is no albino. A long-protected secret held by the aboriginal people of Canada (now called First Nations), the Kermode bear

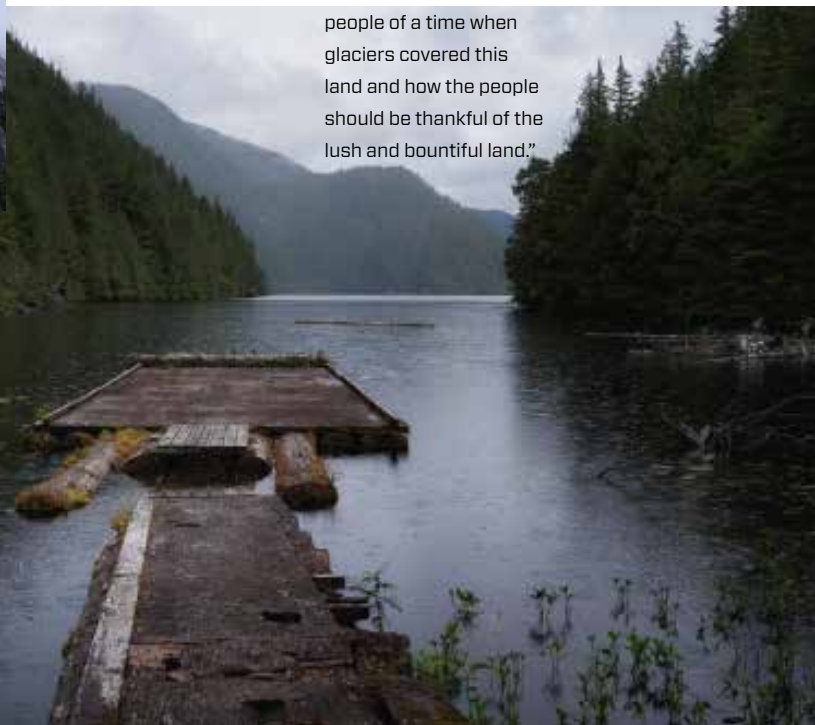
only became known to the outside world in the early 20th century. The pale coat comes from a recessive gene carried by both white and black bears, which must be passed down by both parents to make a white cub. There are only about 400 in existence (though far fewer have actually been accounted for), spread thinly around this 27,000-square-mile rainforest that edges the westernmost province of Canada. Three of these ghostly creatures are known to fish the Kwa'a River where we are waiting. The Gitga'at have named them, and we patiently hope for Strawberry (who has a black cub), Ma'ah or Warrior to make an appearance.

It's a stark jump from hectic working life into the stillness of wildlife observation. Our phones lost contact with the outside world soon after leaving the marina in Kitimat, as we entered the deep fjord-like channels that run between the densely forested



THE BEAR FROM WHERE?

The First Nations have a theory about the spirit bear, according to Indigenous Tourism BC: "Goo-wee [Raven] made one in every 10 black bears white to remind people of a time when glaciers covered this land and how the people should be thankful of the lush and bountiful land."



PHOTOGRAPHY: LAUREN BIRCHALL, JASON VAN BRUGGEN/PACIFIC YELLOWFIN

The Gitga'at First Nation calls this elderly spirit bear Ma'ah, meaning grandmother

islands, which are by and large devoid of human habitation. When Griffinson announced we would spend the entire first day camped by the river I was wary. But now, with just the babbling water as the soundtrack, I feel only contentment.

After a period of calm our guide's radio crackles to life with a message from a spotter upriver that Ma'ah, or "grandmother", is on her way towards us. As her name suggests, she is the eldest of the bears here, perhaps 20 years old. She is no longer able to fish successfully but scours the banks in front of us for leftovers. She will grace us with her presence twice today. In between her visits, black bears take turns fishing the river, and on our hike back to the tender we also catch sight of Warrior napping in a tree.

For the average bear-seeker in this temperate rainforest, the chances of seeing a spirit bear are about 50 percent but Griffinson claims that *Pacific Yellowfin* ups that figure to 90 percent. "Everyone refers to the *Yellowfin* magic. A lot of people come on our boat simply because we have those odds," he says. "We don't like people jinxing themselves, though. You don't want to come out here and say 'I have to see *this*' because I guarantee you won't see it. You'll see everything else though."

It's more than just good karma that blesses guests with exceptional viewings. Over his years of cruising the Great Bear Rainforest in the salmon-running months of September and October, Griffinson has cultivated relationships with the First Nations who have inhabited this land for millennia. As a result, he is one of just a handful of charter operators with permission to access the rivers where bears fill their bellies with Pacific salmon. This gets us to the right places at the right times but there are still no guarantees. "Every day is different on the river," he explains. "The players are all here, but we have no clue what they are going to do when we show up." This is nature at its rawest, and everything is a factor - such as whether it's raining, how swiftly the rivers are running and whether wolves have turned up recently, scaring the bears away.

To counteract these challenges Griffinson employs a strategy of “playing the river”. I see this in action as we drop anchor at Khutze, a playground for grizzly bears and the territory of the Kitasoo/Xai’xais First Nation (which, not coincidentally, recently capped the length of vessels permitted here at a few inches longer than *Pacific Yellowfin’s* 114ft). Griffinson, at the wheel of the yacht’s sturdy Weldcraft Ocean King tender, times the slack tide perfectly, heading into the river just as the waters slow down enough for fish to be caught. We are soon treated to a mother grizzly and her three nearly fully grown cubs munching on the bank. We hover offshore, cameras clicking, until they get their fill and shuffle lazily out of view. On our way back downriver, the most eagle-eyed guest shouts “bear!” again, and yet another grizzly stares us down from the shore. “I can’t remember the last time I saw five [grizzly] bears,” Griffinson says. This feels especially fortunate since the only other yacht at our anchorage had left that morning after two days with no sightings.

As with the bears, whales are also likely to get up close and personal with *Pacific Yellowfin*, surfacing right next to the yacht seemingly just to say “hi”. In Verney

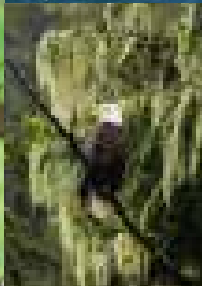
Passage, it’s “whale soup” as humpbacks lazily ingest krill all around us, diving like a synchronized swimming team and surfacing exactly seven minutes later with simultaneous puffs from their blowholes. At this time of year, they are getting their fill of food before a long migration south to Hawaii for the breeding season.

We watch the humpbacks breach with spectacular splashes but the one phenomenon that eludes us is bubble-net feeding (where several whales surround a school of herring and trap them in a spiral of air created by forcing bubbles from their blowholes). Several times during the trip, we pile into the tender and drop the hydrophone into the water to listen for whale chatter, as this feeding is a co-ordinated effort that requires a lot of discussion. Three of the returning guests on board had witnessed it the year before, but the hydrophone stays stubbornly silent this time.

Humpbacks may be plentiful, but fin whales are a rarity. However, we manage to spot five of the 78ft behemoths as we pass Sea Lion Rock, which is crammed with Steller sea lions, the largest of the species. We are watching the whales to starboard when a huge pair suddenly



As well as large mammals in the water, on land you might also spot wildlife such as bald eagles



The water in the fjords is crystal clear but its great depth makes it appear gray



she is still propelled by her original Atlas Imperial engines (truly a sight to behold once you’re under way).

It’s very easy to lose yourself out here. Like the ever-present mist that swirls around the verdant hills, time is a fuzzy notion. With no mobile coverage and only one working clock on board (a deliberate move), you have to think long and hard to work out whether it’s Thursday or Saturday. The yacht can get internet access by request, of course, but that would miss the point. The respite you get from being off-grid perfectly complements this special part of the planet, which also appears to be lost in time. ■

Pacific Yellowfin charters in *Desolation Sound from June to August, from \$98,200/week, and in the Great Bear Rainforest in September and October, from \$98,200/six days and five nights, inclusive of flights from Vancouver. pacifiyellowfin.com*

Two huge fin whales suddenly surface 60ft away, heading straight for us

PHOTOGRAPHY: PACIFIC YELLOWFIN; LAUREN BIRCHALL

surface 60ft away to port, heading straight for us. Griffinson exclaims in surprise and turns the wheel hard to starboard as the world’s second-largest animal disappears under our wooden hull. “I’ve never been that close to a fin whale before,” he says, and I start to realize how many “firsts” or “first-time-in-years” he is experiencing during my one and only trip. I don’t think I’m

exceptionally lucky – there’s just so much that can happen at any moment in this remote wilderness.

Fittingly for such an environment, *Pacific Yellowfin* is not your typical yacht. The wooden boat has all the character you would expect from a 1943 vessel, originally built as a Junior Mine Planter for the US Army. Now she sports four stately cabins hosting up to 12 guests, yet



The rainforest is home to black bears (above) as well as the more dominant grizzly

