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In North Vancouver Island, Indigenous locals share the area's rich wildlife on their terms

“On a midsummer morning, Sherry Moon navigated her boat through thick fog and a maze of deep green islands in British Columbia’s coastal Great Bear Rainforest.

“We’re going to my favourite place in the world,” the Musgamakw Dzawada’enuxw First Nation guide said on our way to the remote Thompson Sound, or Xakwikaan, a recently declared Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IPCA). Leaving from the northeast coast of Vancouver Island, she brings visitors where few are able to visit in the mainland rainforest. Moon, who has been coming here much of her life, says bears were not always easy to come by. Now, largely thanks to her community’s 30-plus years of advocacy to close the area’s fish farms, an increase in wild salmon has brought them back. I dreaded the early wake-up time our guide had announced for this excursion. I had to force my body awake – sore from three full days of kayaking, far more strenuous than the Ontario cottage lake paddling I’m used to – and pack up my things from the uninhabited Hanson Island campsite where we’d been roughing it. (If you can call sleeping bags on cots, permanent canvas tents and hot meals prepared for you in an outdoor kitchen “rough”). But if this tour with Karibu Adventures had taught me anything so far, it was the importance of timing – I knew the lack of sleep would pay off.

Once off the boat, Moon drove us up a mountain in a school bus, then ferried us across a small stream in a dingy, until we reached a path with bear claw markings in the cedars and fresh bear droppings by the bushes.

“Try to keep quiet,” she instructed our chatty group, with bear spray and a knife strapped to her leg.

And there was our early morning reward: When we arrived at the waterfall where salmon were spawning, a grizzly named Emily, who was about 20 years old, was already there. We watched as she ripped apart her catches one by one, sometimes stopping to look in our direction, sending excited chills down my spine.

I had come to Northeast Vancouver Island at just the right time, in early August, to explore this ecosystem in its full glory. But what I got was far more meaningful than a magnificent nature tour, as I met with Indigenous stewards of the region who shared firsthand accounts of the revival of wildlife, language and culture, helping to give me a deeper understanding of this land, its history and its people.

The region’s wildlife became a key part of that experience. From our base camp, I was constantly beckoned to the



Above: Adventure company Karibu’s week-long Vancouver Island tour includes days of kayaking in prime whale-viewing locations while staying at a remote campsite on Hanson Island. IanHarland/karibu adventures.

Below: Guide Sherry Moon had been coming to this remote spot of Thompson Sound for much of her life. Ian Harland/karibu adventure



shore for a glimpse of humpback whales; I could hear their blows while eating dinner, while brushing my teeth on the rocky shore in the eerie dark and as I drifted to sleep.

Earlier on this week-long adventure, we’d kayaked with curious sea lions and seals, as our guides listened to radios telling them where we might spot Northern Resident killer whales. One day, we sped up our paddle to get a good view of a pod of about a dozen killer whales that were heading toward the Robson Bight (Michael Bigg) Ecological Reserve sanctuary. Their numbers have tripled to 300 since Canada banned the capture of orcas in the 1970s.

Sea otters, though once extinct on this part of the coast, lounged in large numbers, eating the brightly coloured sea urchins, allowing the forests of bull kelp that ribbon underwater to flourish.

For me, having never set foot in B.C., the wildlife sightings were a true thrill. But the most unforgettable moments came

from learning about the people who make this place so special.

“Most who visit here might stay in a lodge, but they are isolated and won’t fully understand whose land they’re on,” said Andrea Mandel-Campbell, the founder of adventure company Karibu who organized this trip.

Guides such as Moon, who also works with her family’s company Sea Wolf Adventures, helped peel back these layers.

Soon after Emily disappeared into the trees, another bear arrived: a clumsy, four-year-old male who kept slipping on the rocks. Moon told us she gave him his name herself: Wadzid. It’s a term of endearment that roughly means “a special one” in the Kwakwaka’wakw people’s endangered language of Kwak’wala. Later at lunch, her face reddening with tears, she explained she didn’t have the chance to learn the language because her father was taken to residential school when he was a child.

She pointed to her co-guide, the infectiously passionate

21-year-old Brennan Sawyer, and said it gives her hope to see “young ones” like him learning the language.

Sawyer is excited to connect visitors to both language and history, so when they ask him questions such as “Did you live in tepees?” he views it as a chance to dispel stereotypes, and explain that most Indigenous nations in the area lived in big houses. On the boat back to Vancouver Island, Sawyer asked to make a stop. The fog had cleared, revealing the warmth of the sun and a clear view of what seemed like an empty beach.



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It was the old village site of Mimkwalis on Village Island, home of the Mamalilikulla tribe, where Sawyer’s ancestors lived before European contact. As he held up a black-and-white photo of planked houses along the beach, he explained how people such as his great-great grandfather thrived here before they were pushed off to reserves or residential schools. “Sharing like this, I see it as a

way to show pride in our people,” Sawyer told me.

This sentiment is echoed on a visit to the large halls filled with repatriated masks and other Kwakwaka’wakw cultural heritage at the U’mista Cultural Centre on nearby Alert Bay, on a tour of the cedar-scented workshop of Calvin Hunt as he carved 33-foot totem poles, and on a visit to Nawalakw, a venture for Kwak’wala language-learning and a community garden addressing food insecurity and youth employment.

Instead of tokenized entertainment that skews the meaning of “Indigenous travel,” here, locals share the richness of this destination on their terms, so visitors can experience a deeper connection to a place alive with a powerful feeling of continuity.

IF YOU GO

>> Fly into Port Hardy, on the northern end of Vancouver Island, via seaplane. Port Hardy is a charming small town, where your flight usher at the airport may also work at your favourite spot to eat – Macy’s Place – a fish truck by the pier. Instead of Uber Eats there’s a “guy named Eddy” who will bring you anything you need in his pickup truck – if that doesn’t workout, a friendly local will offer to take you to the store.

>> Karibu’s tour of Northeast Vancouver island starts and ends at Kwa’ilas, a comfortable and recently renovated Indigenous-owned lodge full of traditional artwork (kwalilashotel.ca). Breakfasts are served in the cozy pub, where we filled up before our long days. Fine dining is served in an upstairs room. One of these dinners

was not included in the price of the trip, and ranged from about \$70-100. The weeklong tour starts at \$5,840 and the next trips run July 28-Aug. 3 and Aug. 11-17, 2025. karibuadventures.com

This writer was a guest of Karibu Adventures and Destination BC. They did not review this article before publication.