

Ahoy, the wild west coast

A passage aboard the Queen of Chilliwack ferry is as quirky as it sounds

SUZANNE MORPHET

WE are motoring smoothly on a calm sea when the engine on our 114m ferry suddenly cuts and we slow to a halt.

A voice comes over the loud-speaker explaining something, but it's too muffled to understand.

Then the ferry begins to turn around, confirming fears that some kind of trouble must be forcing us to return to Port Hardy, near the northern tip of Vancouver Island, where we set off six hours earlier.

My 86-year-old father and I look at each other in disappointment. We're half-way to our destination of Bella Coola, on British Columbia's remote coast, and now it appears we're not going to get there after all.

But when we start motoring again we're still heading in the right direction... only backwards.

Welcome to the Queen of Chilliwack, one of the oldest ships in the BC Ferries fleet and probably the quirkiest.

It turns out we're motoring in reverse to keep the barbecues on the outside deck out of the wind. The kitchen crew has fired them up in preparation for dinner.

We chuckle and get back to the business of sightseeing, binoculars in hand, in case a humpback whale breaches nearby, or a pod of dolphins decides to play in the ferry's wake. It's not just the chance of seeing wildlife that has prompted us to make this voyage but a combination of the fascinating history and spectacular rugged scenery of this wild coast.

BC Ferries calls this route Discovery Coast for good reason; after leaving Port Hardy at 10.30am on this early September day, we've seen no evidence of civilisation other than the occasional beacon marking safe passage for boats. But even other boats are few and far between.

Dad and I have both enjoyed Alaskan cruises on part of this route in previous summers, but this trip is a little more adventurous, a little more last-minute (we were lucky to get a reservation with just one week's notice) and a



PHOTOLIBRARY

lot less expensive. The sun breaks through the clouds just after we finish a bowl of soup in the cafeteria, so we head outside and join other passengers lounging in lawn chairs on the deck, soaking up some of the last rays of summer.

On the shore side of the ship, forested mountain slopes lap the

It turns out we're motoring in reverse to keep the barbecues on the outside deck out of the wind

water's edge, receding in the distance and changing from bright green to dark green to grey as they fade from view.

It's a constantly changing and endlessly interesting montage as clouds darken one patch of mountain, and the sun turns a spotlight on another.

On the opposite side of the ship, we pass hummocky green islands and small rocky islets standing guard and protecting this route from the open ocean, leading to it being called the Inside Passage.

I think of Captain George Vancouver exploring these waters in the late 1700s and charting every island and inlet from the southern tip of Vancouver Island all the way to Alaska. What a mammoth job, given the intricate network of channels and islands and the distance that some fiords penetrate inland.

In fact, as we head up Burke Channel and the passage narrows and the ship slows, it feels like we're heading into some temperate heart of darkness. My thoughts turn from Captain Vancouver to the Haida, the fearsome First Nations tribe who paddled these



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waters long before European explorers arrived.

The Haida built giant canoes from the trees on this coast, then raided other aboriginal villages, often killing men and taking women as slaves to their islands of Haida Gwaii, later named the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Those dark thoughts disappear when we hear it's time for dinner. We head inside and order salmon hot off the barbecue. It's once

inside that we realise the Queen of Chilliwack is far from regal these days. She was built in 1978 and is far more utilitarian and far less luxurious than the newest ships in the BC Ferries fleet.

In the lounge, the seats recline, but I notice a couple with signs indicating they're broken.

And even though the milk-run version of this trip takes more than 30 hours, with stops at several tiny communities en route, there are

no cabins for sleeping. However (and this is another one of those quirky features you find when you're off the beaten track) you're allowed to set up a small tent on the outside deck if you're on an overnight trip. There are also coin-operated showers on board.

Our trip is non-stop (unless you consider turning around mid-voyage to be a stop) and most of it is in daylight.

But when we pull into the dock

at Bella Coola at 11pm, the sun has long since disappeared behind the mountains. We are sorry to leave the Queen, but one dock over another boat awaits.

The Pacific Grizzly is an old fishing "highliner" that's been turned into a nautical-flavoured B&B. The wood stove is burning and our so-called staterooms are cosy.

We crawl into our comfy bunks and don't wake until daylight



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Passengers soak up the last rays of sun on board the ferry



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The Pacific Grizzly, a moored bed and breakfast at Bella Coola



pours through the portholes next morning. That's when I realise I can still see the Queen from my bed. When it blows its horn and begins to pull away from the dock for the return voyage, I wave a fond farewell.

I hope we will meet again.

Suzanne Morphet is a Victoria, BC-based writer and the co-author of the Vancouver Island Book of Everything.

Checklist

The Discovery Coast Passage is a summer-only service operating from mid-June until mid-September. Check BC Ferries' website for departure dates and times. More: bcferrys.com. Pacific Grizzly offers the closest accommodation to the Queen of Chilliwack's dock in Bella Coola. More: bcgrizzlytours.com. • canadatravel

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