

Cruising for some bruins; Grizzlies and Coast-Cariboo grandeur are highlights of dad-and-daughter road trip

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Byline: **Suzanne Morphet**

When I was 10, my parents rented a trailer, hitched it to our Ford Galaxy, said goodbye to our farm near Toronto, and we headed on our way to Vancouver and back.

It was 1968, gas was 34 cents a gallon and greenhouse gas emissions were unheard of; a road trip was a guilt-free pleasure.

Not so today. But when I recently won a pass up the coast with BC Ferries last summer, it was either use it or lose it. And who better to use it with than my 86-year-old father, who is still driving and still in love with cars.

Dad and I -- both now living near Victoria -- would drive what's known as the Coast-Cariboo Circle in his gold Lexus; if we were going to do a road trip, we might as well be comfortable.

We left Victoria on a sunny September morning with a few ideas about what we wanted to see; grizzly bears and a lodge in the Chilcotin region topped my list. Dad was keen to see the coast, but most of all, to feel the delicious freedom that comes when your foot's on a gas pedal, an open road stretches before you and -- in his words -- "There's no back-seat driver." (I invited my mother, too, but she opted to stay home.)

We make short order of Vancouver Island, speeding past familiar scenery, stopping only to picnic at Rathtrevor Beach and to glimpse Seymour Narrows north of Campbell River, where Ripple Rock was blown up 51 years earlier in the largest nonnuclear explosion to date.

Our trip really begins the next day in Port Hardy on the northern tip of Vancouver Island when we board the Queen of Chilliwack for a 12-hour voyage up the Inside Passage. It's classic West Coast scenery, with forested mountains lapping the water's edge and changing colour like a chameleon, from green to blue to grey as they recede in the distance.

Passengers recline on lawn chairs, soaking up the last rays of summer, binoculars dangling around necks.

Mid-afternoon the ship suddenly grinds to a halt. Dad and I look at each other in disbelief as the ship begins to turn around. What's wrong? A voice over the loudspeaker assures us that everything is fine; we're simply going to motor backward so the barbecue on the outside deck will be out of the wind!

The Queen of Chilliwack is older, smaller and slower than most in the BC Ferries fleet, but she's also got to be the quirkiest. When we pull into Bella Coola at 11 p.m., we're sorry to leave.

One dock over, another boat awaits. The Pacific Grizzly, an old fishing "highliner," is now a bed and breakfast. The wood stove is burning and our "staterooms" are warm and cosy. We crawl into our comfy bunks and don't wake until daylight pours through the portholes the next morning.

In late summer, salmon begin to swim up the Atnarko River in the Bella Coola valley to spawn. And the local grizzly bears -- the biggest grizzlies in the world because of their rich and plentiful diet -- come to fish. Highway 20 runs parallel to the river for many kilometres and there are numerous turnoffs for you to wait and watch.

The day we arrive, there are more tourists than grizzlies. The travellers have come from all over -- one man is on his third visit in three years -- but mostly, it seems, from Germany. They sit in lawn chairs on the riverbank, cameras as big as guns mounted on tripods beside them, and patiently wait for bears to emerge from the bush on the opposite shore. If there's an easier way to view wildlife, I haven't found it.

But Dad and I don't have time to wait for the bears to come to us and ask the owner of the Pacific Grizzly to take us to them. Leonard Ellis is a former hunting guide and knows every bend in the river. It's almost dark when three grizzlies -- a mother and two yearlings -- emerge from the bush 50 metres away and plunge into the river. One stops to wrestle a salmon while the others splash upstream. In less than a minute, they're gone.

A few days later, it's time to face The Hill. In the 1950s, residents of Bella Coola built a road out of the valley after the government said it was impossible. The "Freedom Road" is still narrow and in places unpaved, with precipitous drop-offs and no guardrails. We snake back and forth, climbing 1,524 metres above the sea. "My God," exclaims Dad more than once as we peer cautiously over the side.

Leaving behind the massive firs and cedars of the coast, we roll onto the Chilcotin Plateau. The trees are smaller and the sky bigger. Cows amble along the roadside at leisure.

For a couple of hours, we don't see another soul, not until we stop at Grandma's Gas Bar in Anahim Lake. When an elderly woman appears, Dad asks, "Where's the town?"

Her response is as old as she is: "You just passed through it."

Another hour and we arrive at Kleena Kleene and Clearwater Lake Lodge.

Bernward Kalbhenn is lighting a fire in the large stone hearth while his wife, Gisela, tends a ham in the kitchen. The couple moved here from Bonn, Germany, 18 years ago seeking a change of pace and freedom from 70-hour workweeks.

Bernward jokes that this is "the centre of the universe," but it feels more like the middle of nowhere. I could see why it was a magnet for space-starved Europeans wanting to make like Canadians on a lake with loons and canoes.

That night we join four Germans and a Swiss couple for a hearty dinner beginning with fragrant pine mushroom soup. Gisela cooks from scratch using local ingredients, "like our grandmothers cooked," she explains.

Browsing her cookbooks later, I discover the 1890 edition of the Compendium of Cookery and Reliable Recipes. We may be in the boonies, but there's no hardship here.

The next day, a single-engine Cessna lands at the dock; it's time for an afternoon of flightseeing.

Soon we're soaring over the red and orange streaked volcanic Rainbow Range, gliding over towering Hunlen Falls -- the third-highest waterfall in Canada -- and looking down, wide-eyed, on cold, old mountains grooved with glaciers.

On day six we detour at Riske Creek to admire hoodoos. The air warms. Grassland replaces forest. At Williams Lake, we pick up speed. It feels like we're being swept along by the Fraser River, which now swirls at our side. At Lac La Hache, we load up on fresh German-style bread; the bakery here delivers all the way to Vancouver, still five hours away.

Entering the Fraser Canyon near Lytton on our last day, Dad begins to

reminisce about our trip west 41 years earlier. We picnicked somewhere near here. Could we find the spot?

It's raining, but we stop anyway. There's nothing familiar, of course; it's just one of many pullovers on this spectacular stretch of river. Returning to the car, Dad trips and falls. His nose bleeding, we both know it's time to head home.

In seven days we covered 1,857 km, including two ferries. Apart from a three-hour hike on my own in Bella Coola when Dad needed to rest, we happily spent an entire week together. A week, as Dad says, "we will not forget."

Suzanne Morphet is a freelance writer and co-author of the Vancouver Island Book of Everything.

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IF YOU GO

- -The Coast-Cariboo Circle suggested itinerary: Go to hellobc.com and search Coast Cariboo Circle Route
- -BC Ferries travels between Port Hardy and Bella Coola in summer months only. A vehicle costs \$350 and driver and adult passengers are \$170 each: bcferries.com
- -Pacific Grizzly Nautical Adventures, Bella Coola: bcgrizzlytours.com
- -Clearwater Lake Lodge, Kleena Kleene: clearwaterlakelodge.com