

The Australian

Chances with wolves

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Wolves are an uncommon sight in the Great Bear Rainforest on Canada's west coast. Picture: Getty Images

Source: Getty Images

- **DESTINATION CANADA**

THE captain of Maple Leaf, Kevin Smith, is emphatic.

"We won't see wolves," he says early in our voyage into the Great Bear Rainforest on Canada's west coast. No problem; most of our small group have come for the scenery and the bears, either grizzlies or the white spirit bears found nowhere else in the world.

Wolves thrive here too, but they're elusive and rarely seen. So as we leave the ship on our third evening and putter to shore in Zodiacs, bears are top of mind.

The mouth of the Kynoch River is about 600km northwest of Vancouver, within the Fiordland Recreation Area, a part of the Great Bear Rainforest where glaciers gouged deep inlets long ago and granite walls tower 1000m above the water. This is prime grizzly habitat.

During my visit in late June, the grasses and sedges in the river's estuary form a brilliant green carpet. Bears spend their days digging up roots and tearing off shoots while waiting for salmon to return to the river in late summer.

"Don't point if you see one," naturalist Briony Penn warns. "Your arm looks like a rifle and they've seen that before, sadly."

Instead, Penn shows us how to signal a bear; she puts her fists on top of her head to look like ears.

A few years ago, a conservation group bought the guide-outfitter's licence for this part of the coast, abruptly ending bear-hunting by foreigners. Since then, bears have become bolder, no longer hiding from people, Smith says.

"They're not the scary animal that Hollywood would like you to believe," he adds.

Smith has been sailing this coast as owner of Maple Leaf for the past 10 years. Earlier, he guided us ashore where we explored the estuary, saw grizzly tracks, examined tufts of fur caught on tree bark and poked at scat with a stick. We've seen everything but a bear.

So when a deer races out of the estuary pursued by a black and tawny wolf, we're gobsmacked. A wolf? This wasn't on the agenda.

Of course, there's no agenda when you're in the wild, and Maple Leaf is not like a cruise ship with a set itinerary. All Smith ever promises is to put us "in the path of magic and let it happen".

"Run deer, run!" I urge under my breath, not quite sure why I'm siding with the deer.

Wolves are efficient killers but soon the wide-eyed deer reaches deep water and swims safely to the far side of the inlet. The wolf gives up but instead of disappearing into the bush, he paces the rocky shoreline for several minutes. I imagine he is scowling.

We're now fully alert to the possibilities this remote rainforest offers. Bigger than Switzerland, with snowcapped mountains,

fast-flowing rivers, cascading waterfalls and 1000-year-old cedar trees (plus wolves, whales and other wildlife), it's a naturalists' paradise, a throwback to our prelapsarian world.

The next morning we eat Mexican-style scrambled eggs and toast on deck under a blue sky. The sound of the Beatles singing Here Comes the Sun drifts from the wheelhouse and first mate Greg Shea is hauling in two crab traps squirming with life.

"Those are the biggest crab I've ever seen," chef Steve Letts exclaims as Smith reaches in, pulls out two and holds them up for inspection. We count 24, all with shells at least 15cm across, the minimum legal size for eating. But Smith is feeling generous and throws back the smallest. "Don't mess with us again," he quips.

That night we feast on butter-drenched crab. We've been eating so much seafood in fact (prawns and salmon have also been on the menu) that we're running short of white wine.

"Dreary and uninteresting," wrote George Vancouver when he charted this coastline more than 200 years ago. Sadly, the great mapmaker didn't have nearly as much fun as we are having. Vancouver's four-year expedition was filled with hardships we can only begin to imagine.

His ship, Discovery, ran aground on a falling tide and came close to being flooded; one of his officers died after eating mussels that were likely contaminated by red tide (we pass the bay where he's buried); and his ship was cramped, with more than 100 men sharing living quarters.

There's only 14 of us aboard Maple Leaf -- nine passengers and five crew. It's a very comfortable 28m, two-masted wooden schooner with space on deck to lounge on warm days and cosy quarters below deck.

When it was built in 1904, Maple Leaf was considered the most luxurious pleasure craft on the Pacific coast; it even featured electric lighting. During World War I, its lead keel and brass were removed for the war effort.

Later, Maple Leaf was converted to a halibut liner, in which role it repeatedly out-fished newer boats in the Bering Sea.

"We never saw Maple Leaf but heard all the stories," recalls Donalda Redford, who fished along this coast with her husband for more than 20 years and is now on board to explore it in style.

Maple Leaf was restored as a pleasure craft in the early 1980s and its sleek white lines and mahogany trim get admiring looks whenever it pulls into port.

Our only port of call is Klemtu, a small First Nations settlement of 420 residents, where we refill our water tank. We visit the Big House where potlatches take place, breathe sweet cedar scent, learn about the family clans -- wolf, raven, eagle and whale -- and admire carved totem poles.

On our fifth evening, we finally meet our bear; two actually, a mother and cub. It's not the heart-in-the-throat experience we had with the wolf, but it's exhilarating in a different way. They're grazing peacefully in an estuary and show no fear as we sit watching a few metres away. When they swim past us an hour later, they're so close we can see milk on the cub's muzzle from nursing.

After a four-course dinner to celebrate our last night together, we watch a slide show that a few photographers on board have put together. Our week flashes past -- the wolf chasing the deer, the mother bear standing on hind legs, Dall's porpoises playing in Maple Leaf's wake.

We laugh at Penn jumping off the bowsprit for an early morning swim, Shea pulling in an empty crab trap, Letts sucking the brains out of freshly caught prawns. We re-immense ourselves in a natural hot springs, revisit the Big House and rehoist Maple Leaf's sails. Snowy mountain peaks, emerald green estuaries, red-headed mergansers and red-footed pigeon guillemots come and go across the screen.

We feel sated by such a smorgasbord, ready for home but grateful for a week in paradise.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Maple Leaf Adventures.

Checklist

Maple Leaf Adventures offers six more trips to the Great Bear Rainforest during summer months. More: **mapleleafadventures.com**. (<http://mapleleafadventures.com>).

Whiskey Cove Bed & Breakfast and Cabin Rental is a fun place to stay the night before boarding Maple Leaf in Bella Bella. More: **whiskeycovebedandbreakfast.com**. (<http://whiskeycovebedandbreakfast.com>).

The trip ends in Prince Rupert, once known as the halibut capital of the world. Be sure to visit the museum, which has a superb collection of First Nations artefacts including mortuary art and ceremonial clothing, and the North Pacific Cannery National Historic Site, the oldest remaining fish cannery on the west coast of North America. More: **northbceh.com**. (<http://northbceh.com>).
