

FIRST NATIONS TERRITORY

Wild horses drag me into BC's storied countryside

SUZANNE MORPHET shines a light on a local spot on the west coast of Canada



A ribbon of turquoise water winds through an otherwise colourless landscape. Sun-bleached grass and bone-dry sage hug the steep embankments above British Columbia's Chilcotin River. From a cliff high above Farwell Canyon, the landscape also appears lifeless.

Yet camouflaged against the sand dunes and limestone walls are California bighorn sheep, which thrive here.

And at this very minute, thousands of sockeye salmon are fighting their way upstream to their spawning grounds.

"We've been catching 500-600 sockeye salmon every day for two weeks," says Peyal Lacey of the Tsilhqot'in (Chil-co-tin) First Nation, as we watch a man fish from the riverbank far below.

He's holding a long pole with a net on one end and dipping it into the rushing water. Catching a salmon, he lifts the net overhead and flings the fish on to the bank above him.

It's physically demanding work, but because the river is narrow here, the fish bunch up, form "a swarm of black", in Mr Lacey's words, which is why this spot has been favoured by the once semi-nomadic Tsilhqot'in people for thousands of years.

"Before contact (with Europeans), it would have been the central hub for trading, for gathering, for harvesting," he says.

Ancient pictographs of animals on the cliff face also attest to the long use of this site.



Chilcotin River surges through Farwell Canyon, a favourite fishing spot for the Tsilhqot'in people. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Today, the Chilcotin region in central BC offers visitors one of the most pristine landscapes in Canada, thanks in part to the Tsilhqot'in people, who have

fought various attempts by others to log their forests and mine their minerals.

Their struggles date back to 1864, when colonists were trying to build a road through Tsilhqot'in territory and threatening to spread smallpox. To protect their land and people, a group of Tsilhqot'in warriors killed a dozen members of the road crew.

Enraged, colonial officials invited Tsilhqot'in chiefs to "peace talks" but instead arrested them, charged them with murder, and hanged the six found guilty.

But the Tsilhqot'in never lost their resolve to govern their land.

In 2012, a BC Court of Appeal affirmed they had an Aboriginal right to hunt, trap and trade on it.

Then, in 2014, in a landmark ruling, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed the Tsilhqot'in enjoyed Aboriginal title to about 1900sqkm of land around the Nemiah Valley, which they have used continuously and exclusively.

Having title means they can continue to decide how it will be used.

The Nemiah Valley is where we're heading next.

Following a sinuous gravel road out of the picturesque Farwell Canyon, the landscape becomes wetter and lusher as we drive

south-west. After a couple of hours we're within sight of BC's glaciated Coast Mountains and descend into the Nemiah Valley, a land of clear lakes, fast-flowing rivers and diverse wildlife including black bears, grizzly bears, moose, mountain goats and — most famously — wild horses.

This is traditional territory of the Xení Gwet'in, the Tsilhqot'in band that led the charge for Aboriginal title. Now, they're carefully venturing into tourism with the recent purchase of a former horse ranch and fishing lodge.

The Nemiah Valley Lodge, with a main building and seven log cabins, is off-grid and powered by solar energy. It's in keeping with the Xení Gwet'in's desire to maintain their traditional way of life and protect their environment.

With Vedan Lake at one end and the legendary Ts'ilos (sigh-loss) mountain at the distant other, the setting is resplendent. A freshly cut and baled hay field in front of the lodge glows in the warm rays of the setting sun.

Inside, chef Greg Garland, who has worked in fine dining restaurants in Whistler for several decades, is preparing our dinner, which starts with wild salmon.

The former chief and now



Xeni Gwet'in cultural ambassador Bernice Koepke at Taseko River, a tributary of the Chilcotin River



Xeni Gwet'in cultural ambassador Patrick Lulua burns sage and juniper in an abalone shell for a smudging ceremony.

cultural ambassador Roger William welcomes us with a big smile and songs he sings in his native language while drumming.

Over dinner, Mr William explains getting into tourism accomplishes two things. "It helps get our people back into our culture and (it shows) other people our culture, our language, our way and our territory," he says.

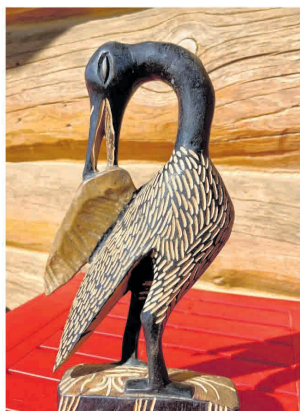
The next morning a few people stay at the lodge to learn the craft of beading while the rest of us hike up nearby Cardiff Mountain. The remnant of an ancient volcano, Cardiff is known for its striking basalt columns. Near the top, we pick our way over leafy bearberry and rosy pussytoes until we come to the edge with a grand view over the whole valley, just like Ts'ilos, the mountain that was once a man, according to Xeni elders.

The elders also say you should never point at Ts'ilos, or he will bring severe weather changes.

When it starts to snow, we're shocked. We've all been taking photos, but we also realise it's mid-September and winter comes early to the Chilcotin Plateau, at more than 1000m above sea level.

In winter, the Tsilhqot'in traditionally lived in pit houses – simple structures dug into the ground and mounded on top with an opening for smoke to escape.

Our hiking guide, Bruce Lulua, tells us depressions from hundreds



A carved loon decorates a cabin at Nemiah Valley Lodge.

of pit houses have been found from pre-contact times when the Tsilhqot'in numbered about 2000 people.

"But the smallpox wiped out like, 60 per cent of our population," he adds with a grimace.

These are happier times for the Tsilhqot'in. At dinner that night we're joined by chief Jimmy Lulua, who enjoys back country skiing in winter and wants to build another lodge closer to the Coast Mountains that would cater to heli-skiers. We head in that direction the next day on our way

to Chilko Lake, the largest natural high-elevation lake in Canada.

Fed by glaciers, the water looks pure and crystalline. The sky, however, is threatening, so instead of taking a boat ride we walk along the shore, delighting in the contrast of dark clouds, turquoise water and snowy peaks.

This is also where the Xeni Gwet'in have built a pit house in the traditional style and perform smudging ceremonies for themselves and guests.

Inside, the earthy scent of sage fills our nostrils and smoke swirls around us. Closing my eyes, I hear the rhythmic pulse of the drum and the guttural voice of the man beating it. I feel heat from the fire and — when it's my turn — the brush of eagle feathers over my legs and back.

Given the troubled history of this region, it's gratifying to be here, and especially to be welcomed by such friendly, hospitable people who are happy to share what they've protected for millennia.

Before we leave their valley there's one more thing I want to see — the wild horses. Believed to be descendants of the horses brought to North America by the Spanish conquistadors, hundreds of them abound, to the point that land is being overgrazed.

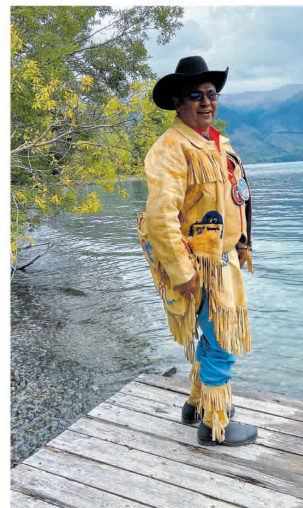
A couple of years ago, horseback riders from the Xeni Gwet'in community rounded up as many



The cabins and paddock at Nemiah Valley Lodge. Below, One of hundreds of wild horses in the valley.



Former Xeni Gwet'in chief Roger William dresses in traditional moose hide clothing to visit Chilko Lake.



wild stallions as they could and castrated them. "But I've seen some foals, so they must have missed a few," chuckles Bernice Koepke, another cultural ambassador, as we drive along gravel roads back to Williams Lake, where our trip began.

When she spots a group of wild horses grazing on a hillside, she pulls over and we admire their strong bodies and healthy coats. They're at home here, and they've proven to be just as resilient as the Tsilhqot'in themselves.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Nemiah Valley Lodge. They have not reviewed or approved this story.

fact file

- Nemiah Valley Lodge is open from June 1-September 30. Three and four-night all-inclusive packages start at \$C2175 (\$2500) per adult. nemiahvalleylodge.com