

DESTINATIONS

## There's No Road to Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge

A writer finds adventure and serenity in Vancouver Island's rainforest.

WORDS BY MAGGIE MORRIS, PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY KORESKI AND CLAYOQUOT WILDERNESS LODGE



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I'D NEVER FLOWN in a seaplane before. I tremble a bit when the tiny 8-seater rattles like an old VW bus as it lifts off the river next to Vancouver International Airport. Once airborne, the ride is smooth — and extraordinary. The glassy Salish Sea glimmers around oyster-shaped islands, as we glide between mountains and over forests that appear pristine. There are no signs of buildings anywhere below, just sea, snow, and vibrant emerald trees. It may very well be the most stunning ride of my life. Forty-five minutes after takeoff, we descend over a convergence of waterways and seaways, the pilot gently touching down on the Bedwell River, floating us right up to the gate of our destination: Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge. Tucked inside a remote inlet of the Pacific Ocean on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, it is an ultrasecluded, luxurious portal to the wild, biodiverse coastal rainforest, only accessible by boat or seaplane.

It's much cooler here than in [Los Angeles](#), where I started my day. I regret that I packed my jacket in my suitcase, but the cloud mist floating through the conifers smells so clean and invigorating I forget my chill. From the dock, I'm whisked away by an open-air, horse-drawn shuttle to the main lodge, where a dozen grinning staff in monochromatic black Arc'teryx rain gear wave and smile as we pull up to its Outpost. I overhear the guest next to me crack a "White Lotus" joke to his partner, which makes me laugh. Armond is nowhere in sight, though a woman named Lucky who knows my name already hands me a steaming, cedar-scented towel for my hands and offers me [Champagne](#). Led on a tour of the grounds, I first visit the cozy Ivanhoe bar, where [drinks](#) and canapés are served daily from 5 p.m. in front of a floor-to-ceiling window framing Clayoquot Sound. I pass private dining tents, a game tent, and a gear room

stocked with everything I haven't packed or don't own, including wetsuits, dry suits, wellies, fishing gear, and more. Then it's on to the Healing Grounds Spa, with treatment rooms overlooking the sound, which is adjacent to a sauna, hot tubs, and cold plunge pool. There's also a yoga studio, a 24-hour gym, and a barn with bicycles and e-bikes. We meander on the boardwalk through the rainforest toward the guest accommodations — private prospector-style tents set on decks over the estuary. By this time I am actually shivering, but when my guide unzips my tent, I enter a spacious room warmed by a cast-iron stove. The king-sized bed is appointed with locally made textiles, and the room is decorated with works by Moy Sutherland, a Tlaquaht artist from the village of Masayaht in nearby Tofino. My guide points out the outdoor cedar shower and the heated floor of the en suite bathroom.



Nothing but nature for miles.

Before heading to dinner, I take a moment to sit in an Adirondack chair on the deck outside my tent. The late afternoon tide flows in as birds frolic in the cedar and western hemlock branches overhead, bathed in mist. It's quiet. I feel like just breathing here is restoring me to a level of calm I haven't felt in ages. Part of me wants to crawl under the cashmere comforter for the next few days, to simply sleep and read in my cozy tent. Instead I go meet with Amanda, who presents me with an activity itinerary she's specifically tailored to my interests and activity level, several of which promise to dunk me in glacial river water. Years ago, I got hypothermia on a backcountry hike in a freak hailstorm, and since then I tend to avoid anything that could leave me cold and wet for too long. However, craving an antidote to the concrete urban sprawl I call home compels me to agree to everything that has been mapped out for me: four days of adventures that will take me through the 600-acre wilderness along Clayoquot Sound that UNESCO designated a Biosphere Reserve in 2000.



Your favorite cocktail awaits at The Ivanhoe.



Roughing it? Not in these tents.



Forest bathing.



Cozy up to the fireplace in the evening.

Evident in every interaction and amenity at Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge is a dedication to sustainability and First Nations. They've created new salmon spawning habitat channels to help regenerate the declining wild salmon population. The property utilizes glacier runoff water following federal filtration and testing requirements to



Test your archery skills.

provide for the entire lodge. A BIOvator composter manages the property's organic waste, using naturally occurring heat to produce highly viable compost, which is then used in the kitchen garden to grow food served in The Cookhouse. Clayoquot has purchased a fleet of 20 e-bikes, which guests use to reach trailheads that cross streams and rivers, providing a much lower environmental impact than the SUVs of the past. The culinary team incorporates traditional First Nations cooking methodology, ingredients, and foraging techniques in their menus, creating a sense of place as well as a link to the Nuu-chah-nulth who thrived here for thousands of years, and continue to do so. It's beautiful to experience this and to participate in it.

Over the four days I'm there, I will never freeze, though I will ride river rapids on a stand-up paddle board and fall into the water, all while warm and safe in my wetsuit and helmet. I will cross a glacial river on horseback, and trot through old-growth rainforest, a lush fern jungle, and across river valley meadows. I will kayak into Bedwell Sound past waterfalls and through jellyfish blooms beneath bald eagles, goldeneyes, and kingfishers. I will cinch myself inside a dry suit that renders me an Oompa Loompa and board Clayoquot's zodiac for an afternoon of wildlife watching with a German family whose children gawk in wonder with me at the sight of bears, seals, sea lions, otters, and a 30-ton gray whale. These majestic sea creatures blow, surface, and dive before us as they make their journey from Baja, Mexico, to northern Alaska. Theirs is the longest seasonal migration by any mammal on the planet and watching them feels miraculous, knowing they've rebounded from near extinction in the past 200 years.

It's hard to single out any one of these activities as the most spellbinding, the most magnificent, the most solace-generating of them all. A big part of the restorative effect being here has on me is simply being forced to disconnect from my phone. While there is Wi-Fi in my tent, I am rarely awake for long once I make it back there in the evening. And after a sauna, drinks, and dinner, I'm asleep the moment my head hits my pillow. I don't even open the books I've brought to read. After a couple of days I can hear my own thoughts again, without the interruption of texts and digital notifications.



A moment of serenity on the water.

But my most far-out experience at Clayoquot is the 6-hour hike through the Ursus Valley, notable even just for the spectrum of transportation involved: bicycles, kayaks, and a helicopter. We ride e-bikes a few miles to the trailhead, passing horse pastures dotted with black bears; wade across a crystal-clear creek in waist-high water; hike through old-growth forests; and kayak across the Bedwell River, before rambling through a rocky fern gully. I'm agog when, resting on a fallen tree, my guide Mark cracks open a stash of fresh chocolate chip cookies and offers a thermos of tea or hot chocolate. After another couple of miles, we cross another icy creek where a helicopter waits to ferry me back to the lodge. But not straight back. No — the pilot happily takes the long way home, whizzing us past waterfalls, over the Mount Mariner Glacier and alpine peaks before delivering us back to the Outpost where drinks and dinner await.

All along the Ursus hike, Mark notes my obsession with identifying native plant species and suggests that I request Sadie, the wilderness guide, to take me on a foraging walk through the rainforest. Two days later, Sadie and I spend hours crouched over flora and fauna, while she expertly expounds upon the intricate, efficient natural structure of the ecosystem, harvests edible plants requested by the kitchen, and illuminates the bizarre mating rituals of banana slugs. The fiddleheads, miner's lettuce, and salmonberry leaves that we pick along our walk are later presented to me by Executive Co-Chefs Olivia Bolano and Mark Ota in the form of a tempura harvest salad that is light and textured, with savory hints of garlic and anise. Partners in the kitchen and in life, their daily menus are masterpieces — layers of subtle flavors penetrating local ingredients such as foraged mushrooms, farm-grown vegetables, and a variety of

fresh seafood, such as salmon, halibut, octopus, and scallops. The fact that dinners are three-course tasting menus makes it possible to try everything and not miss a dish.



Finding the freshest of mushrooms.

The staff — roughly 80 people during the peak season — must also live on the property. It's not lost on me how I benefit from this: my hosts and guides are all folks who chose to be there for reasons beyond the transaction of the work they do. They are there because they want to live in this pocket of marvel and wonder. They are nature junkies and forest punks. They radiate warmth and have easy smiles. They go beyond the bounds of their “job” as an adventure guide, sourdough chef, waiter, or bartender — providing informative, scintillating answers to my every question and curiosity. They go beyond cooking thoughtful, gorgeous meals or helping me cross an ice-cold river in my underwear, entertaining my endless inquiries about foraging for mushrooms or about this or that plant.



Creative chefs make magic with local ingredients.

Arriving at Clayoquot, I felt like I had found a secret place. The longer I stayed, the more I knew that what I was experiencing was rare. It was not only my own fortune at being able to travel to such an incredible lodge, but also because so many beautiful and wild places like this one are long gone. My time there was a rediscovery of what disconnecting from the grid, existing in an environment that prioritizes a lighter carbon footprint, and being immersed in the wild gives to me: solace, enchantment, connection with the wild planet I live on. This is not just a hard-to-get-to protected luxury lodge. It's a gateway to a multisensory experience of the beauty and magic of nature. ●

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## Our Contributors

### Maggie Morris Writer

Maggie Morris is a creative director and writer based in Los Angeles.