

October 2022

Dear All,

This is the journal of our September 2022 trip to British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest. Apart from a couple of road trips to Okotoks and Minnesota, our last trip to new places had been to Broken Hill in Australia, nearly three years ago. Since then COVID had happened and we'd both had other medical problems. Sandie had surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation to battle breast cancer, as well as a broken leg and a galloping pulse rate. I'd had prostate surgery and troubled breathing. Neither of us had had sufficient exercise.

We weren't sure if we were fit enough for trips like those to Costa Rica and Panama. Could we



walk all day and keep up with a group? For our first experiment we picked the Great Bear Rainforest as it's sufficiently remote to be interesting but close enough to some form of clinic to get us fixed up and shipped home if necessary.

The Great Bear Rainforest stretches from BC's Sunshine Coast to the Alaskan border, and is about the size of Ireland. It's a mountain range with its valleys flooded by the sea. It has forest-clad mountains, great cliffs, and some stupendous waterfalls. It is most famous though for its abundant wildlife: bears, whales, seals, otters, and eagles. Amongst these are the elusive white spirit bears. These are a subspecies of the common black bear, *ursus americanus*.

According to Wiki, the white coat is the result of a recessive mutant gene carried by bears in some areas of the rainforest. In this respect it is rather like red hair in humans. This mutant gene is recessive, so bears with two copies of this mutant gene appear white, while bears with one copy or no copies appear black. Two black bears can mate and produce a white cub if both of these black bears are carrying one copy of the mutant gene, and both mutant genes are inherited by the cub

There are thought to be less than a hundred such white bears. They are known as spirit bears or Kermode bears, after one of the scientists who studied them.



Having picked our destination all we had to do was get there. However, unspoiled wildernesses tend to be hard to get to. If you look at my front page map it shows that there is no road that follows the BC coast. The only road that goes towards the rainforest is the Chilcotin Highway, notorious for the extremely steep and dangerous part known as “the hill”. The locals in Bella Coola, on the coast, grew tired of waiting for the government to build a road over the mountains and two of them armed with dynamite and bulldozers built their own road. We drove the highway back in 1999 and know that it ends where the river flows into a large fjord. If we drove the 500 miles to Bella Coola from Hope, we’d still have to travel another 80 miles by air or boat.

Instead we started looking for fishing and hunting lodges in the area as they’d have had to solve the transportation problem. We found the Spirit Bear Lodge at the little village of Klemtu, in the heart of the Rainforest. Even better, their specialty was viewing wildlife, not shooting it.

Their prices are higher than we’re used to but we were only staying for four nights. To get there we would have to drive to Vancouver, fly to Bella Bella, and be picked up by a tour boat and taken to Klemtu.

Monday - Klemtu

We had heard of the extreme delays going through security at Vancouver Airport, and that was why we were out of the house by 5 am and driving towards Vancouver. We’d thought the roads would be quiet but the lanes coming towards us were very busy, mostly with pickup trucks. We concluded that these were pipeline builders coming back to work.



Our usual turn onto the Alex Fraser bridge had disappeared but our alternative, the tunnel, wasn’t too bad. We were flying from the South Terminal, which handles float planes and regional carriers. It’s on the same island but a totally different experience from the main terminals; it felt like we were going back thirty years. There was no security inspection. When it was time to board the flight attendant led us out to a parked plane, about a thirty seater propeller plane with a 1 + 2 seating configuration. Masks were required to be worn in the terminal and on the plane.



We flew northwest over snow-capped mountains for just over an hour. We could see why there had been no reason to build roads through the area. We landed at Bella Bella on Campbell

Island, a community of about a thousand of the Heiltsuk people. Waiting for us with a van was Jack, an employee of the Spirit Bear Lodge. There were about twenty of us headed for the lodge and Jack shuttled us down to the harbor where there were two tour boats waiting for us. We were a bit crowded as their third boat was having to wait for a couple on a later flight.

The weather was gorgeous; sunny and still. I didn’t take any pictures of Bella Bella this time but this is one I took from the Inside Passage ferry back in 2004, when we passed by on our way to Prince Rupert and the Yukon. Currently, the ferry stops at Bella Bella a couple of days a week.



The trip to Klemtu takes about 90 minutes I think but we stopped to look any wildlife along the way. We caught sight of humpback whales but only their blows and tails. There were sealions, seals, and sea otters, but mostly too distant for useful pictures. Our only close views were at Sealion Rocks, though I think these are seals, not sealions.



We arrived at the lodge, which from this view looked to be in the wilderness, but is actually on the edge of the town of Klemtu.



We all gathered in the lounge while the staff delivered our luggage to our doors. There are 12 rooms, mostly doubles, for a maximum of 25 guests. That and the short season probably explains the high prices.

John,
the
lodge



manager, filled us in on the workings of the lodge and on our daily schedule. The lodge is owned by the people of Klemtu.



They are members of the Kitasoo and Xai'xais nations who joined together for survival after being nearly wiped out by smallpox and other European diseases. They still have separate and quite different languages, as well as English.



There has been a lodge for 20 years. It had closed because of COVID, but they'd used the time to give it a major make-over. I've made a collage of some of the art here.

It had only just reopened and this was their first time with full occupancy. Only Canadian residents could make a reservation for this year.



We would be going out at 8am for the day in one of the tour boats, typically 8 of us plus a boat captain and two guides. Each day, we'd be going to one of three main destinations, the mouths of rivers, places where the bears go looking for salmon. If the bears were there we'd stay. If not, we'd move on somewhere else, or go look for whales or sealions. Some of the destinations involve a walk; for others we'd launch the two zodiacs. We'd been assigned waterproof jackets and pants, a lifejacket and rubber boots. And a large dry bag to hold our stuff.

He said they would do their best to give a sighting of a white bear but there were no

guarantees from nature. We were there at the best time, the middle of the sockeye salmon run, when the bears were mostly likely to be at the mouths of the rivers.



We went to our rooms to unpack and settle in. The rooms were large and comfortable with this view of the water. We could see seals chasing large fish, probably salmon.



We realized we were missing a case, Sandie's carry-on. This had all

our medical stuff, pills and my CPAP. Sandie knew it had made it to the boat so it had to be somewhere between the landing and the lodge. The manager and his staff were searching the building.



We were sitting outside in the sunshine, getting to know our fellow passengers. They were mostly travelling retirees, but probably a decade younger than us. Everybody had a bear or a safari story. They'd all been asked to keep a lookout for our case. Finally the manager announced that it had been found, delivered to the wrong room. It was in the room of the people we'd been talking to! They were friends traveling together and both of them had assumed that the extra case in their room belonged to the other.



Dinner was refectory style, with three communal tables. We had free wine and beer before dinner and that was a three course meal, delivered by waitresses. The food was very good but one of those courses would have been enough for me.

Tuesday - Canoona

Despite having been up since 4am I had trouble sleeping. My CPAP seemed to be fighting me. Perhaps its electronics were incompatible with the town's generators. Sandie had leg pains during the night and woke up feeling dizzy. This was not a good start!

By breakfast we'd stabilized enough to go on the day's trip. Breakfast was a sensible buffet except for the insanely strong sea-salt seasoned bacon. We also had to pack our lunches into some cute little containers, something like stainless steel bento boxes.

Our boat for the day was skippered by Krista and our two guides were Justin and Ryan. Krista and Justin are locals. Ryan is also a photographer, a very good one. We were going to Canoona, about 90 minutes away, but for the first hour we didn't see much except for fog. The sky above us was a shade of blue so we had hopes that the fog would burn off.



The Canoona River flows from the high country of Princess Royal Island and empties into the Inside Passage so we'd be sharing the passage with cruise ships and with BC's and Alaska's ferries. They are a lot bigger than us so

it would be nice if we could see them.

Eventually the fog thinned and we could see great cliffs interspersed with forested bluffs, with occasional streams and waterfalls, including this splendid example.

Prince Royal Island is one of the locations favoured by the white bears, so we had hopes of this excursion. The mouth of the Canoona River is packed with rocks, a seething mass of rapids. The salmon may be able to get up there but our boat couldn't, so we were going to use the two zodiacs to get to shore.



Sandie didn't want to risk getting in and out of the zodiacs because of the danger to last year's broken leg. Nor did Rowena, a lady with a badly sprained ankle. They both stayed on the boat with Krista, a wise decision as crossing the rocks on the beach and climbing through the forest around the river were much more dangerous than using the zodiacs.

The route through the forest was not a constructed trail. In a wilderness zone that wouldn't be allowed. The route involved rocks, deep mud holes, and slippery tree roots, but only about 15 minutes long, as they'd promised. This brought us to the "first viewing area", a collection of uncomfortable downed tree trunks. We did, however, have a good view of the river at a point where two streams came together.



Rather than blunder through the forest

looking for bears we were going to sit silently and wait for the animals to come by. Keeping a group of eight people quiet is difficult but our bunch was pretty good. Our first visitor was a large black bear, who was methodically working its way back and forth across the river.



The black bear moved out of sight after a few minutes. There were a few small birds in the water, bending their knees. These were ouzels, aka American dippers, looking for salmon eggs. Then this regal looking great blue heron posed right in front of us.



We were relaxed with some of us pulling out our lunches when the spirit bear came into view in midstream and there was a scrambling, some dropping of lunches, and grabbing of cameras. The bear was actually more of a cream colour with a hint of pink around the face and nose. Justin said it was a female.



She stayed with us for a couple of minutes and then went out of

sight. We waited for over an hour but she didn't reappear.





Ryan had been looking further upstream and had caught a glimpse of her and suggested that we move up to a second viewing area. That was a bit more difficult to get to with some very large steps up and down. The river above that point was a steep, very fast chute, difficult for salmon or bears, so it seemed like we had reached the right spot. Then the bear went out of sight back

towards our prior spot.

We had a couple of hours of moving up and down the route, more walking and climbing than I'd done in years. The



bear was popping out of undergrowth and we were all getting some good pictures but I told Justin that my legs would probably give out soon. He said we were going back down, I made the jump to a rock I'd already traversed a half dozen times but this time it slid off the mountain and I followed it down, tucking in and rolling. They said it looked quite spectacular but apart from being covered in mud I was undamaged. Getting the right way up was a bit difficult though.

On the way back down to the river one of the ladies sat in a mud wallow and then when trying to clean off in the river her boots filled up with water. We all made it back to the boat without any more excitement.





Sandie had seen a black bear at the mouth of the river, probably the same bear we had seen. The spirit bear had not made it that far however. Shortly after this Krista had received a call asking her to assist with a nearby oil spill. A big oil spill could totally destroy their business, so they take them very seriously.



The offending vessel was the Pacific

Yellowfin, a charter boat. Its fuel tank had leaked into the bilges and the bilge pump had automatically pumped the oil

into the ocean. By the time they arrived the clean-up crew was already spreading absorbent towels on the spill, so they didn't actually do anything, but hung around in case they were needed.



The ferry to Prince Rupert passed by. This is the ferry service we used on our way to the Yukon in 2004. It wasn't the ship we traveled on though. We had been on the Queen of the North. In 2006 the ship was heading south at night and failed to make the turn to the east of Princess Royal Island towards Canoon. It collided with Gil Island and sank with the loss of two lives.

By dinner time everybody knew me as the old guy that fell off the mountain. What made it more newsworthy was that our group had

also been first to meet a spirit bear. And not just a glimpse; we'd been in intermittent contact for a couple of hours.

After dinner we had all been invited to visit the Big House. This is the place for festivals and ceremonies and feasts. The building was about 20 years old, and well decorated. Justin told us about his people's history and their stories. He rambled quite a bit but it was still entertaining. His style reminded me of my Uncle Noel telling stories to kids.



He went on a little too long though. It had been a long day and I was having to work hard at not being the guy that fell off the mountain and his chair on the same day.



Getting back to the lodge in the dark was tricky. There were some enormous



potholes and little street lighting.

The picture of the artwork on the Big House's back wall was taken the following day as we came back from our day trip.

Wednesday - Mussel

We both had a better night and were looking forward to our trip to Mussel Inlet. We had no



fog but low cloud hid most of the mountain tops. We began on the Inside Passage but soon turned east on the quieter route to Mussel Inlet. Then we got a call to return to the lodge. Our guides had forgotten the keys to the punt; apparently we were switching boats at some point. Off we went again.

Our view was continually changing as the clouds shifted, hiding and exposing the towering cliffs and this striking waterfall. Mussel Inlet is a dead end and we went in as far as we could, anchoring outside the Mussel River estuary. We transferred to the "punt", what we would call a pontoon boat. It could deal with the shallow water better than the tour



boat, but we still had to wait for the tide to come in.



Thousands of gulls lined the edge of the estuary and there was a grizzly patrolling the shallows, probably looking for salmon. This was the kind of place I was expecting when I booked the trip. The scenery is magnificent

with granite cliffs rising from the water and the sky full of birds, mainly varieties of gull but also bald eagles swooping overhead looking for what they can steal from the gulls. These two launched from just above our heads.



Another bear appeared and lured us upriver to where we had to stop to avoid running aground. Ryan hopped off the punt to walk further upriver and see what was

around. He brought us this skull which he said came from a black bear. Grizzly skulls are much larger. He returned the skull to nature, no doubt ready to bring it out for the next tour boat.

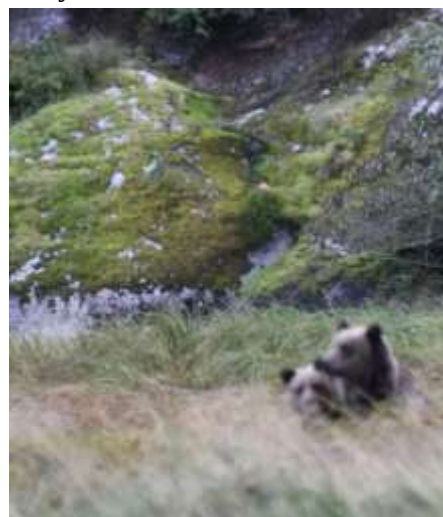




We were finally able to edge slowly up the main channel where we could see another grizzly in the distance, but we had gone as far as we were allowed and we had to retreat.

We slowly made our way around the estuary and found a mama grizzly with cubs. Unfortunately they were in long grass and our punt was low in the water and we couldn't

see much other than the tops of their heads. The cubs looked to be independent and we rarely saw all three together. Looking back towards the river we saw more bears come into view, look around, and go back upriver.



The sky darkened and the rain started, our first of the trip.



Luckily I'd brought along my lens "sun shade" which I've never used in the sun, but it works well in rain.

We returned to the tour boat and made our way back to



Klemtu, stopping at waterfalls along the way. We also spotted a humpback whale that came over to check us out. I took this picture as it dived and ducked under the bow of our boat. I could see whale bits on both sides of us!



Sandie had found these anemones in the shallow waters around the lodge's landing.



Thursday -Khutze

I had another bad night. My prostate surgery two years ago had left me with a few problems that flare up occasionally.

Our destination for the day was the Khutze River, just across the Inside Passage from Canoon, our first day's destination. This time our skipper was Moose. He said that he was always the biggest kid in his class and the other kids called him Moose and the name had stuck.

Unfortunately for us, the plan for the day was to take to the zodiacs and head into the estuary. Sandie didn't want to risk her leg to the zodiacs so she stayed on the boat.



I didn't want to risk being away from the bathroom for a couple of hours, so I stayed too.



Moose anchored the boat below this waterfall and launched our two zodiacs. We watched the seals chasing fish and chatted with Moose.

It was another foggy day so we couldn't even see the Khutze or the zodiacs. Farther down the passage the view was free of fog but the clouds were swirling and giving us beautiful reflections.

The zodiac crews were quite successful, finding a mama grizzly with two cubs. She was sitting up and her cubs pushed her over so she fell on her back and they could climb on and nurse. It was a shame to have missed that.



We were supposed to go look for whales and sea lions after this but we got a call from the boat at Canoona to tell us that there was a spirit bear on the beach. This would be an opportunity for Sandie and Rowena to see what they'd missed on Tuesday, but by the time the zodiacs had been recalled and we'd boogied over to Canoona the bear had gone back upstream.



We set off back to the lodge. Things were quiet and most of us were half asleep when the radio squawked "Orca!" and we saw two dorsal fins right beside us. The pod was traveling north and we were going south. We turned to get a better look and I also spotted a baby orca traveling close to shore.

However, there are strict rules for observing orcas, and we soon gave up the chase, but it was a nice way to end our day.

This was our view of Klemtu as we returned for the last time. It's an industrial view, reflecting the town's history with extractive industries. They are hoping that the lodge will provide them with a more sustainable future.



We had dinner sitting with Mark and Donna , currently living just outside Okotoks. He'd had an outdoors job which took him into areas with large grizzly populations so he had many photographs of them. He put on a picture show for everyone that evening. I noticed that although most of his grizzlies were magnificent animals there were quite a few that were straggly or just plain ugly. I've noticed the same with my pictures – I'm glad my ugly bears are normal.

Friday - Hope

Friday was Truth & Reconciliation Day in Canada so the lodge was hosting a lot of visitors in town for the ceremonies. There were lots of T & R orange tee shirts to be seen that morning.

All but four of us bear seekers were going home. Two of the tour boats were taking us to Bella Bella to catch our plane. The other was taking the four to Knight Inlet for another opportunity to see spirit bears.

We were going to visit the sea lions on our way to Bella Bella. Or rather we hoped to. The fog was thick with no hint that it was burning off.

About halfway to Bella Bella we emerged into bright sunshine and this gave us more hope, but then we were abruptly into the fog again. Moose said we'd lost too much time going slowly in the fog. We'd have to skip the sealions.

Perversely the weather at Bella Bella was perfect. Ryan fetched the van and shuttled us to the airport where we were told that our flight was running 90 minutes late, presumably because of fog somewhere.

There wasn't enough room in the terminal for us all to sit and wait, but luckily the weather was warm enough for us to sit outside at the picnic tables and eat our lunches.



There was news about the plane; it was now another 60-90 minutes late. Ryan asked if anyone wanted to go shopping and he took a van-load to downtown Bella Bella to visit the shops. With a population of about a thousand the shopping was probably a bit limited but it killed a little time for those that like to shop.

When the plane, another Saab, finally arrived we had another problem; the plane was too heavy to take off from Bella Bella's short runway. The staff

asked for Vancouver-based volunteers to offload their checked bags and have them delivered the next day. Sandie volunteered our two as they only contained dirty washing and hiking gear, but they weren't willing to deliver as far away as Hope, so it was no deal.

Instead, the pilot declared he would reduce the plane's weight by burning off excess fuel until we were light enough to take off. So we all piled on the plane and our luggage was loaded too. The pilot taxied to the far end of the runway and we sat there for about twenty minutes with the engines roaring and the brakes firmly on.

Finally we were ready. With the engines screaming we set off and stopped a second later. Oh, Oh. With a second try and the engines screaming even louder we rocketed down the runway like a motorcycle at the drag strip. We missed the trees so the take-off part of our flight had been successful. We just had to hope that he'd got his sums right for the landing. We didn't want a repeat of the Gimli Glider. (Look it up.)

Happily the flight was uneventful, but the luggage pickup was not. The terminal is badly designed with passengers with only carry-ons exiting through the group of people waiting for their checked luggage. There were lots of collisions and Sandie ended up falling backwards onto a pile of barriers and luggage. She wasn't hurt but our fellow travelers were probably convinced by now that we weren't fit to be allowed out.

Our original schedule had us arriving in early afternoon but we were now well into the Friday evening rush hour so it was slow going as we drove home to Hope. We didn't know if we'd get there in time to buy milk and bread, so we stopped at Chilliwack's Walmart. We were hungry so our quick stop turned into a week's worth of shopping. This was lucky as it turned out.

One of the passengers on our tour boat had become ill a couple of days into the trip. Sandie could hear her coughing at night. Her friends were trying to persuade her to get herself tested, but she insisted that all she had was a simple cold. Most of the time she was sitting directly behind us, so we weren't all that surprised when I developed a cough the next morning and tested positive for COVID. Sandie was only a few hours behind me. Luckily we'd stocked up on food and were able to isolate for just over a week. As I write this Sandie has just tested negative, a couple of days behind me.

I posted some of these pictures on Facebook and our friend Geoff responded with a news article about the recent finding of a spirit bear in Michigan. If such a rare genetic event can occur in Michigan then it could also have happened in Minnesota and resulted in the naming of White Bear Lake.

Travel plans for the future? This last trip was a partial success but we definitely had a few problems. It would be great to pick up our plans from three years ago and go ahead with those, but we've suffered a lot of wear and tear in those three years. Some of our potential destinations like Russia and China have also lost their appeal!

We are working on it!

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie