
GOURMET KAYAKING

An intrepid paddler braves blisters, downpours
and five-star cuisine

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Text and photos by Sheri Radford



Gourmet meals and lots of wine, indoor plumbing and a warm bed — now that’s my idea of camping. Five years ago James Bray had the brilliant idea of introducing these elements into kayaking weekends on the West Coast. His company, Blue Planet Kayaking Adventures, combines his love of the outdoors with his knowledge of BC food and wine, honed through years of cooking in high-end Victoria restaurants.

I met Bray and eight other eager gastronomes in Tofino on Vancouver Island, on a grey Friday morning in August. Bray maintained the unflappable air of an air-traffic controller, simultaneously packing food into kayaks, giving paddling demonstrations and snapping on recalcitrant spray skirts. Soon we were off, paddling almost five kilometres (three miles) toward Vargas Island and the inn that would be home for the next three days.

As we glided farther away from shore into the choppy ocean, the skies opened. Soaking wet, with arm muscles aching, I wondered why the heck I was doing this. We soon arrived at the rustic inn, where we immediately lit the wood furnace, kindled a flame in the fireplace and — most importantly — started the wood-fired sauna. We all drifted off to our rooms for afternoon naps, to be awakened hours later by enticing aromas wafting from the kitchen. Bray and his assistant Vanessa Walsh hovered over a gas stove, dishing up halibut with potatoes, chanterelles and cherry tomatoes, colourful plates that tasted even better than they looked, followed by a cheese platter for dessert. As the wine flowed, we forgot the rain.

The fresh air, exercise, good food and too much wine guaranteed us a deep, uninterrupted slumber. Or maybe it was the fact that without electricity, the inn was silent.

Saturday morning dawned wet and grey. We dawdled over wild-mushroom omelettes, hoping for a break in the weather, but no such luck. Bundled into layers of fleece and Gore-Tex,



Blue Planet kayaks beach on unspoiled shores near Tofino, on Vancouver Island's west coast. Gourmet meals at a lodge punctuate paddling

OPPOSITE ILLUSTRATION DAVID PHILLIPS



■ Left: Sunday lunch of yummy salad niçoise with quail eggs, albacore tuna, truffle aioli and little spuds

■ Below: paddlers take a break from eating and napping to visit lonely beaches and watch wildlife

we launched the kayaks and started paddling. Blisters that had been mere suggestions became full-blown after two hours on the ocean. Rain angled onto exposed flesh with icy precision. At one point Bray instructed us to raft the kayaks together while he showed us a sea star, but he was rapidly losing his audience. We headed back to the inn, where dry clothes and a lunch of albacore tuna, smoked-applewood cheddar and Dijon mayonnaise on wholewheat bread restored our flagging enthusiasm. Bray offered to take us out again, but we spent the afternoon reading. Despite the lack of exercise, I still had a healthy appetite for the hazelnut-crust albacore tuna with white-bean puree and onion-apple confit served for dinner.

Sunday was the type of day that West Coasters brag about to Easterners. Warm, bright and with a blue sky dotted with cotton-candy clouds, it might have been ordered from a catalogue. We didn't linger over the breakfast of French toast stuffed with cheese, topped with raspberry coulis and bacon, so anxious were we to be on the water. As we paddled, stopping often to snap photos and sip from water bottles, we marvelled at how quickly BC weather can change — and understood the wisdom of Bray's extensive packing list. Arm muscles that had seemed unfamiliar just two days before now worked smoothly, and my blisters didn't even smart.

Paddling along the shoreline in the bright sunlight, we watched a wolf and her two pups frolicking on the beach. A curious seal poked its head out of the water to observe us from a safe distance. Bray led us to Merlin's Beach, a sun-blessed sandy stretch that looked more like Hawaii than BC, where an abandoned sandcastle was the only sign of human existence. We ran around like hyper schoolchildren, digging for clams, examining seaweed and doing handstands. In a quintessential West Coast moment, one couple began practising yoga poses. Bray and Walsh handed out homemade granola bars.

Eventually we set off at a leisurely pace towards the inn, the only sounds the rhythmic dip-dip-dip of the paddles and the squawking of seagulls. After niçoise salad with albacore tuna, quail eggs, truffle aioli and new potatoes, a few hardcore paddlers went out with Bray again. The rest of us napped until dinner. Duck legs with lentils *du Puy* and roasted-onion demi-glace were definitely worth waking up for.

Monday dawned bright, but it was time to head back to the noise, electricity and ho-hum meals of the real world. Even the breakfast of scrambled eggs with chopped nori, sesame seeds, soy-chilli glaze and brown rice couldn't cheer me. We paddled back to Tofino, taking a delaying detour around a small island, but soon reached the beach.

Bray aptly describes his business as summer camp for adults. It starts out daunting and unfamiliar, but quickly becomes filled with new friends and once-in-a-lifetime experiences. ■

Blue Planet Kayaking Adventures offers summer camping and lodge-based kayaking trips to various West Coast locations, \$799-\$1,399. Visit www.blueplanetkayaking.com or call toll-free 1-866-595-7865 for more information. Journeys West flew to Tofino with help from Orca Airways, www.flyorcaair.com and Tourism BC, www.tourismbc.com

