

TRAVEL

INTO

FOR A REMOTE COMMUNITY AT THE NORTHERN EDGE OF B.C.'S SUNSHINE COAST, SHARING THE REGION'S AWE-INSPIRING WILDERNESS WITH VISITORS IS A PLEASURE. FOCUSING ON QUALITY TOURISM OVER QUANTITY THOUGH, IS THE ONLY WAY TO PRESERVE A DELICATE ECOSYSTEM THAT'S ALREADY UNDER THREAT.

THE

by ANDREA KARR

WILD

View of Prideaux
Haven in
Desolation Sound.



DESPITE ITS IMMENSE SIZE and variable scenery, there are certain quintessentially Canadian landscapes that make our country a singular destination. We're the land of rocky mountain peaks rising out of the sea, freshwater lakes circled by imposing old-growth forests and undulating waters broken by the backs of stately whales. And nowhere in the country

does reality so fully meet expectations as Desolation Sound, a secluded patch of deep water located at the northern part of British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. The area is only accessible by boat or seaplane and has some of the most breathtaking views in Canada, while remaining unspoiled by large-scale business operations and overcrowding. But as word gets out about this hidden gem, a careful balance between growth and conservation are key to maintaining the pristine beauty that makes Desolation Sound worth the trek.

Change to the Sunshine Coast, especially the northern end, may be slow due to limited accessibility, but the region has seen an increase in visitor numbers as more and more people seek out authentic experiences in the wild. John Hermsen, co-owner of Footprint Nature Explorations kayak and hiking tours, moved to the Sunshine Coast from the Netherlands 13 years ago because he fell in love with the "fjord-like landscape with steep mountain walls rising up from the ocean." Now, he says that visitors are drawn to the quiet, as well as the element of surprise that being in the Canadian wilderness offers. "Of course, we have big whales and bears," he says. "But I always find it rewarding that I can awe people with a sea star and show them the small things that matter."

Michelle Zutz, co-owner of Townsite Brewing in nearby Powell River, sees the growth in tourism as purely positive because it means sustenance for existing local businesses, as well as better opportunities for new boutique eateries, coffee roasters and breweries. Plus, she says that most of the tourists that visit are "like-minded to locals and respect our trails and beaches, businesses and people." Whether they're drawn to the scenic hiking trails, majestic wildlife or what Zutz calls the "relaxed coastal vibe," the region is remote enough that "it's not a place people stumble upon," she says. "It's a destination, planned and saved for," which means that visitors tend to leave the place the way they found it.

More tourism also translates to more jobs, plus potential support for the local First Nations population. Aleata Vanstone, a young Wet'suwet'en woman and grizzly guide with Klahoose Coastal Adventures, learned of the many mutually beneficial relationships that exist between Sunshine Coast business owners and indigenous people when she was taking the Aboriginal Ecotourism Training Program through Vancouver Island University. "It's very important to most local businesses to work with the First Nations because they feel like they won't be ethical or successful if they don't," she says.

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Although many First Nations and Sunshine Coast locals welcome expansion of the tourism industry, higher volumes of people in an area with limited infrastructure can also pose problems. “The tourism industry puts a huge demand on our water supply in the summer when we just don’t have any to spare,” says Daniel Bouman, board director of Sunshine Coast Conservation Association (SCCA). The main source of water for the Sunshine Coast regional district is the Chapman watershed in Tetrahedron Provincial Park, which is protected by Class A park status. “The regional district undertook a drive to [revoke the status] and double the water supply by taking more water out of the park,” he says. “They wanted to degrade the source area by pumping the biggest lake by an extra 24 feet.”

The region also sees large-scale businesses trying to take over swathes of land while showing little regard for the environment, so the SCCA has to spend a great deal of time fighting proposals that aim to commercialize the Sunshine Coast. “The public is going to have to be pretty on top of it if we’re all going to keep tourism from being exploited by highly industrialized operations,” Bouman says.

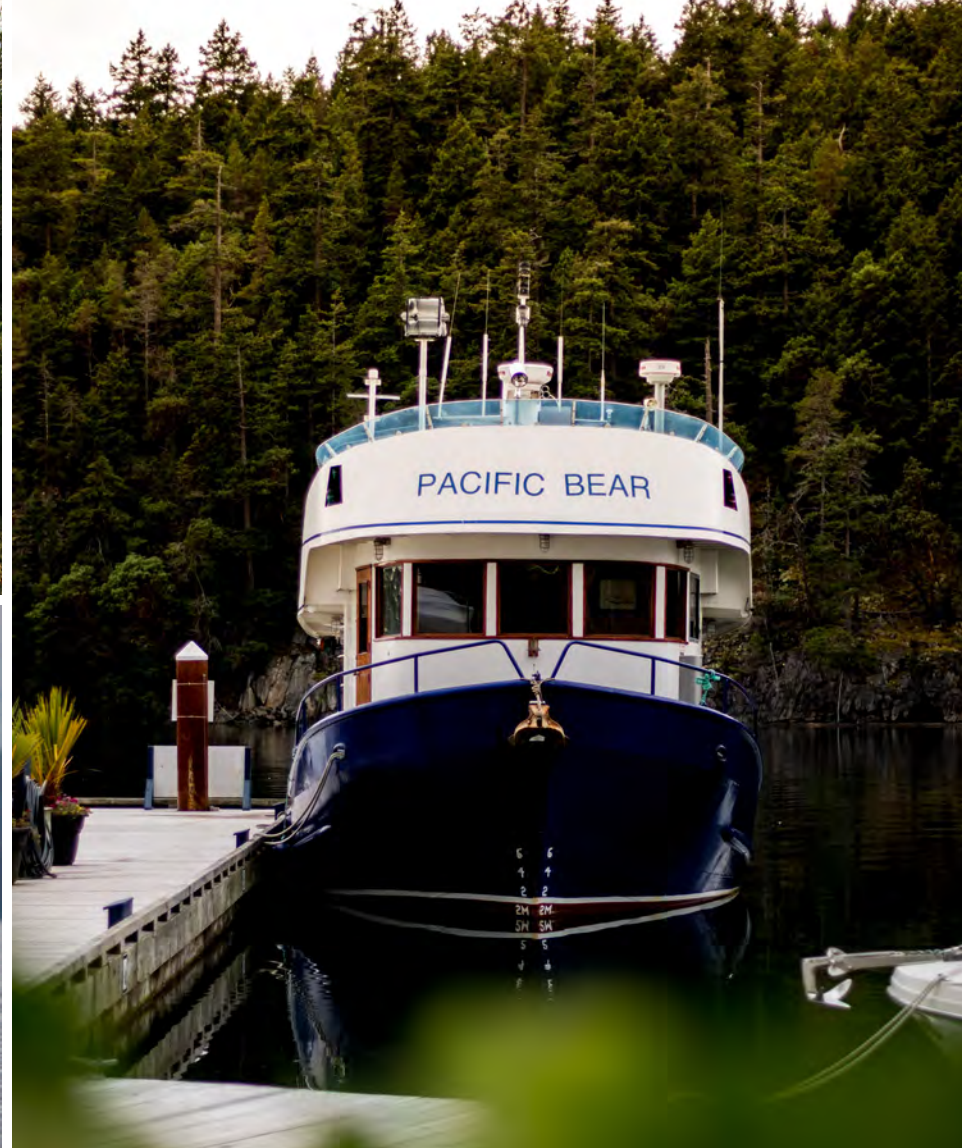
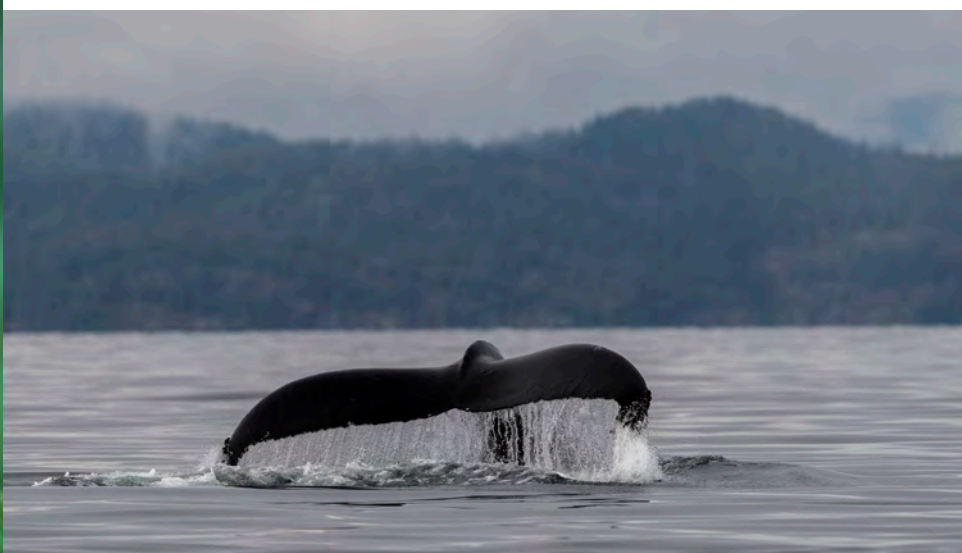
To address some of these concerns, the Sunshine Coast Region, in partnership with Destination B.C., created a 10-year development strategy. “As a string of small coastal communities with limited infrastructure, our tourism opportunity is in high-value “boutique” tourism, not in volume,” says Paul Kamon, Sunshine Coast Tourism’s executive director. “We want to make sure that, as we increase demand with marketing, we are also working with our local and provincial governments on infrastructure upgrades that support the higher volumes and enhance the visitor experience.” As a business owner, Hermsen is a huge supporter of this strategy. “We would rather have fewer visitors that have a good impression and become advocates for our region,” he says. “Of course we want to make a living, which means we need people here, but we can focus on the kind of traveller that we want to attract and aim for quality more than quantity.”



ABOVE A Steller's Jay.

**OPPOSITE PAGE
(CLOCKWISE)**

Mountain biking along the Powell River; *The Pacific Bear*, a vessel used by Pacific Coastal Cruises & Tours; sea lions lounging; view of fluke of humpback whale.



PHOTOS BY LARISSA RAND, PACIFIC COASTAL CRUISES & TOURS, MARGUS RIGA



Desolation Sound
sunset paddle.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

WHAT TO SEE,
DO AND EAT
ON A VACATION
IN REMOTE
DESOLATION
SOUND, B.C.

TRAVEL

Catch a 35-minute Pacific Coastal Airlines (pacificcoastal.com) flight from Vancouver to Powell River, then rent a car or board a shuttle to Lund. Alternately, charter a private seaplane or take a scenic five-hour drive from Vancouver up the coast with two ferries along the way.

STAY

Book a three-to-five-day tour with Pacific Coastal Cruises & Tours (coastalcruises.ca) and call Homfray Lodge (homfraylodge.com) home. After a few leisurely hours cruising through secluded waters from Lund, you'll be filled with awe when you reach the Homfray's dock, which sits perched on the edge of a mountainous forest.

DO

Take a day to see the grizzly bears up close with Klahoose Coastal Adventures (klahooscoastaladventures.com) at Toba Inlet – an excursion that's included in some Pacific Coastal Cruises & Tours packages – then explore the area by boat or kayak and search for wildlife like orcas, humpback whales, seals, jellyfish and porpoises. After dark, head out to Homfray Lodge's dock to stargaze and test the water for bioluminescence, which looks like fireflies flitting under the surface. Once back in Powell River, take a small-group hiking tour with Footprint Nature Explorations (footprintbc.ca) and behold the breathtaking vistas that make up the 180 kilometres of the Sunshine Coast Trail.

EAT

Though you may spend much of your trip at a wilderness lodge, plan for a little extra time to enjoy the food in Lund and Powell River. Stop at Nancy's Bakery for fluffy cinnamon buns, Little Hut Curry for authentic Indian flavour and Coastal Cookery (coastalcookery.com) for an extensive menu crafted with local ingredients.

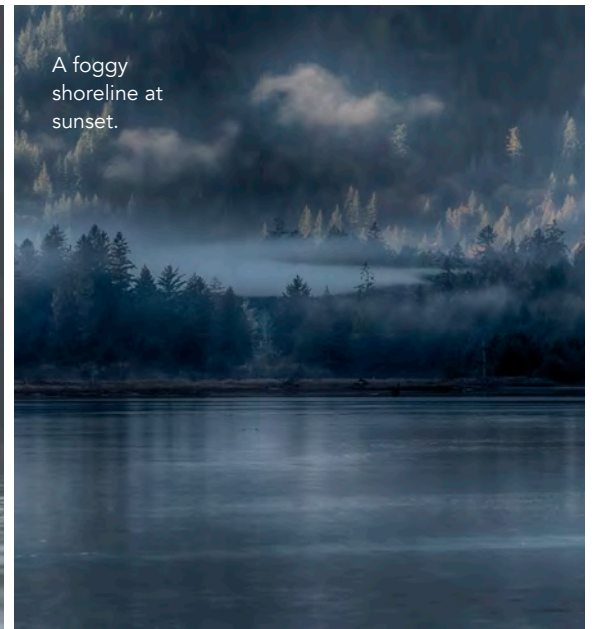
DRINK

Pop in to Townsite Brewery (townsitebrewery.com) for a locally brewed beer like Tin Hat (IPA), Zunga (golden blonde ale) or Zwarte Wheat (Belgian dark witbier), then plunk down at the long table and visit with the local sitting next to you.

Killer whales surfacing.



A foggy shoreline at sunset.



A hike along the Sunshine Coast Trail.



Lund Harbour.

PHOTOS BY LARISSA RAND, ANDREW STRAIN, EPIC TRAILS TV

But even though much positive work continues to be done to prevent over-tourism in the area, some species of wildlife are still at risk for other reasons. “After working with Klahoose First Nations last summer, it was clear to me that climate change is negatively affecting the salmon run,” says Vanstone. “We’re getting less rain each year, which affects the surrounding ecosystem. Salmon is literally the food for everything, from the bears to the eagles. Another issue is the decreasing whale population. The water is becoming way too warm for whales to live here. We’re seeing smaller pods and more seals, which means less salmon come into our rivers to spawn because the seals eat them. It’s all a big circle.”

For Bouman, the species of most concern is the Marbled Murrelet, a type of small seabird that can only nest in old growth and high elevations. “We recently nominated about 50 areas comprising about 6,000 hectares of documented Marbled Murrelet nesting habitat for protection,” he says. “We got 3,500 hectares protected that way, but they need about 30,000 more. The question is, will the government protect the best land for the bird, or will they protect a bunch of stuff that can’t be logged?”

With areas of the Sunshine Coast, including Desolation Sound, struggling

to preserve a precious ecosystem, outsiders might think that the best way to prevent further damage is to simply close the region to tourism. But that’s not the solution, even according to conservation activists like Bouman. To illustrate, he mentions the Sunshine Coast Trail, a 180 kilometre-system of pathways, bridges and huts near Powell River that was built to attract tourists. “If you can just get people into the forest, they’ll become a force,” Bouman says. “Get the public out to the trail for a wonderful hike and they will act to protect it.”

And that’s also true of the coast’s water sources, plant species and animals. Instead of shying away from a visit, individuals should invest in a trip to witness the wonder of Desolation Sound – perhaps even during the shoulder season from October to March – then add their voices to the thousands of people who fight to preserve it. “I want future generations to have the same chance I did to experience something so magical,” says Vanstone. “As a young First Nations woman that’s reconnecting with her cultural knowledge and spirit, it’s awe-inspiring to see the raw beauty and strong spiritual significance that all First Nations territories possess. It’s important to me that we start actively reducing the damage that’s already been done and work together to keep our planet safe.” ■