

Small-Ship Cruising on Canada's West Coast

Studying a map of Canada's rugged Pacific Coast, it quickly becomes evident that the waters between cigar-shaped Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland include such a dense jumble of smaller islands that they should make perfect stepping stones without even getting wet feet! Well, not quite. However, this slim protected waterway between Vancouver Island and the mainland does create a concentrated corridor in which to witness many of the world's most remarkable marine mammals, birds and other sea life as they travel north or south.



These waters are sometimes called the Serengeti Plains of the world's oceans, making it no exaggeration to say that this is one of the densest and most diverse marine habitats on the planet. Depending on the migration season and a bit of luck, it is possible to observe in just a few days dozens of whales and killer whales (Orcas), and hundreds of porpoises, sea lions and seals as well as bald eagles and other sea birds.

Combine this abundance of nature and rugged wilderness scenery with an opportunity to learn about the colorful Aboriginal culture in the area, and you have a **Mothership Adventures** small-ship holiday (Mothershipadventures.com) irresistible for the adventure traveler with cultural and educational curiosity.

Under the ownership of husband and wife team, Ross and Fern Campbell, the classic wooden boat, Columbia III, is about as shipshape as any historical vessel could be. It started life in the mid-1950s as an Anglican Church missionary and medical relief ship serving small isolated logging and fishing settlements on the BC coast. After extensive restoration in the 1990s, the 68-foot/21-meter Columbia III is today an all-weather cruiser, retaining its rich hardwoods and polished brass in the public rooms and on deck, but completely updated with state-of-the-art kitchen, and ultra-modern navigational and safety systems. Cabins are small and basic, with either en suite bathrooms or shared facilities, but virtually all waking shipboard time will be spent in the cozy lounge and dining area, in the wheelhouse with the skipper, or on deck chatting with guests and crew over a fresh coffee or glass of wine.



On a small vessel with only a handful of guests, the daily itinerary can be very flexible, like the evening we heard from a fisherman over the ship's radio that some black and white Orcas were swimming south about an hour away. Though we had already tied up for the night at a government wharf, Captain Ross cast off for an unscheduled evening cruise to watch one male and four females for an hour, feeding and socializing as the sun set over the water. A highlight of a wilderness cruise!

The majority of Mothership Adventures' multi-day departures between late May and the end of September focus on nature observation and ocean kayaking among the protected, evergreen islands. Columbia III is the kayaker "mothership". However, there are six cruise tours for participants in search of a little less physical activity and a little more grassroots education. Cruise tours last four to five days and are each accompanied by a specialist in their field.

Scheduled for 2011 are a coastal history adventure, an illustrated journal keeping workshop, a photography tour, two different artist-lead wilderness painting tours, and a First Nations (native) cultural tour. Led by Lillian Hunt, a respected First Nations tribal elder from the region, the cultural tour is a stimulating ship-based exploration with a unique story of a colorful, proud, and sometimes tragic heritage. In early July, Lillian offers this introduction to modern-day Aboriginal coastal communities as well as isolated island village sites, now largely deserted. In surprisingly few decades, many of these settlements are already returning to nature, swallowed by bush and rainforests of towering trees.



My own choice of a Columbia III cruise in 2010 focused on nature and on the rich native heritage of Vancouver Island's northeast coast. Conversations with Lillian during many delicious, hearty meals and during our twice daily excursions into the watery wilderness often included environmental life lessons applicable on a global scale. We either piled into the ship's Zodiac to land on rocky island beaches for a forest walk or tied up to more accessible village wharves and visited outstanding First Nation museums showcasing both the heritage of many generations and the talented native artists today. In communities with a carved and painted ceremonial "Big House" decorated with the iconic totem poles of the region,

ancient dances and songs were graciously shared by three generations of costumed men, women and children demonstrating a revival of culture that was almost lost in the 20th century.

Such close appreciation of unspoiled nature and the intimate insights of a fragile traditional culture cannot be achieved on large ships with an abundance of guests. Such tours require the small scale of a Columbia III adventure where itineraries may be altered in pursuit of a special moment and stepping stones offer many directions in a single day.

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her **Travel with a Challenge** web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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