

Vancouver Island's Teaming Waters: The Serengeti Plains of the Marine World

Nature-loving vacationers place a high priority on seeing marine mammals in the wild. If you are lucky enough to be in the right place, they are large enough to spot and even photograph without special expertise, and most people already know something about whales and other marine creatures. Many species are clearly under siege on the planet, with some rare and endangered.



This makes them an even greater privilege to encounter, with no better place in the world to do so than the narrow waterways between Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland.

Born and raised in Canada's Pacific coast wilderness, for me the thrill of seeing whales, sea lions, seals, dolphins and porpoises never diminishes. My recent visit to the northeast coast of Vancouver Island and a stay in the village of Telegraph Cove offered an up-close chance to observe the densest concentration of marine diversity in the world. Six hours drive north of Victoria or accessible by ferry and road from Vancouver, the village is reached on dead-straight highways, beckoning 10,000 visitors annually between early June and mid-October to this pristine piece of British Columbia wilderness.

Historical Telegraph Cove

Today, the whole of **Telegraph Cove** is tourism-focused and a charming history lesson in miniature. It also has some fine restaurants and a large interactive museum educating visitors of all ages about BC's marine world. Set in a circular bay with only a small opening into the island-dotted straits beyond, this antique sawmilling village was originally settled in the 1920s and 30s. During the past 30 years, it has been expertly restored to reflect the style of pioneer life up to the 1950s.

From the floating hospital and the mill owner's mansion to the bachelor bunkhouse (now divided into five rooms each with bath) and the many colourful cottages that once served as home to each working family, there is plenty of "sleeping with history" accommodation. Buildings are linked together around the cove by an invitingly stroll-able yellow cedar boardwalk, dotted with sawmilling and logging artifacts and a profusion of flowers. Occasionally, you may also meet a furry visitor – after all, this is the wilderness!

Adventurous Days on the Water

Since the primary focus of any trip to northeast Vancouver Island is to explore the Blackfish and Broughton Archipelagos that serve as a stepping stone to British Columbia's mainland, the ship-based experience is a high priority. **Stubbs Island Whale Watching**, owned since 1980 by marine mammal authorities, Jim and Mary Borrowman, offers half- and full-day marine wildlife tours from mid-June through the end of September aboard the modern, aluminum Lukwa with its spacious lounge areas, picture windows and easily accessible decks. The Lukwa is especially comfortable for families and guests with physical challenges.



Also operated by the Borrowmans is **Orcella Expeditions** offering four multi-day, all-inclusive Magnificent Seven Marine Mammal tours during the peak migration and viewing season of September aboard their lovingly-restored vessel, Gikumi. For the first time in 2010, guests will have the option of living aboard the Gikumi with a different remote anchorage each night, or they may select a Magnificent Seven tour with historic land-based accommodation and five full-day explorations on the water. With either option, the super-fresh gourmet cuisine created daily by Mary, is a huge bonus to the trip.

Telegraph Cove has been the Gikumi's home since it was built in 1954 for the owner of the sawmill and the town until his retirement in 1980. This stable 60-foot/18-metre treasure, complete with galley, cabins for six guests and lots of polished brass and warm wood, was originally built to tow logs to the sawmill. The Borrowmans adopted the boat in 1980 for its whale watching trips, and Jim has dedicated many hours to making it a guest-friendly vessel without compromising its authenticity.

Dolphins, Whales, Seals...

With each day being memorable for its wildlife encounters, clearly our final Magnificent Seven day on the water proved that the Serengeti nickname is not an exaggeration. We started the morning in a bay surrounded by over 300 Pacific white-sided dolphins who churned up the surface around our quietly-drifting vessel for nearly two hours, breaching and diving with endless energy. Bald eagles and sea birds were in an eating frenzy of their own as dolphins drove fish to the surface. Dozens of harbour seals and sea lions sunned themselves on smooth warm rocks along tree-lined shores while we passed within metres.



We were escorted for a time by a handsome troop of a dozen Dall's porpoise, whose crisp black and white markings sometimes lead guests to think they are baby killer whales. And we marvelled at the curiosity of an enormous herring ball "glued" together on the surface, attracting a noisy collection of seabirds as well as an adult humpback whale looking for an easy meal.

After identifying our first Minke whale of the trip, someone spotted a humpback whale making a leisurely beeline straight for the drifting Gikumi. This magnificent creature, as long as our vessel, showed no sign of turning aside when just 6 metres/20 feet from our camera lenses, it flipped its tail high out of the water and made a graceful shallow dive right under the hull. The number of photographs taken that day had to be uncountable!

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