



RELAXATION STATION

Burnt out? Need a break? As Rachelle Mackintosh discovered, Canada's British Columbia could be your new dream destination



The tiny seaplane seems to be bouncing between the mountains and my knuckles are white as I grip the seat. "Nervous, ey?" Pilot Wes asks, amused. "Don't worry, I've flown enough miles to go around the entire planet at least 40 times." I think, "Mkay then, so why are you flying us straight into that snowcap?!" Cool as a Weiss bar, Wes steers the plane over the peak and I loosen my grip a little – and 30 minutes later, when we effortlessly land on the Nekite River at the Great Bear Lodge, my arms are aching but I'm mega excited. Its quaint wooden buildings are surrounded by the dense Great Bear Rainforest, all shimmery in the mist.

I have big plans for this wilderness. It's going to transform me from over-thinking stress head to zen forester. A crammed schedule and not enough alone time has me frazzled, and, according to a Stanford University study, hiking in nature boosts mental health. The study measured people walking for 90 minutes in a natural area against others in an urban setting. The result: the nature-walkers had significantly decreased activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with depression. So, walking in this rainforest will top up my vitamin N reserves and help me reclaim my calm – science says so.

Rollin' on the river

Sprawling along the remote west coast of Canada's British Columbia province, and almost twice the size of Belgium, this epic wilderness is one of the last remaining tracts of temperate rainforest on the

planet. And while logging is permitted in some areas, there is still plenty of virgin old-growth forest at Smith Inlet, where you'll find Great Bear Lodge. The area surrounding it is home to approximately 50 grizzly bears, but I'm visiting in summer when they're usually a no-show (peak seasons are spring and autumn). So while I'm not expecting to see any bears during my three-night stay, I am hoping to find out what's so 'great' about their forest; I sign up for the lodge's daily activities (which, as well as all meals, drinks, protective outdoor gear and the seaplane flight from Port Hardy, are all included in the price).

Each day is filled with action and follows a similar itinerary so you can get into the swing of forest life. Yoga mats are supplied, so I roll one out on the deck to get bendy before brekkie – the view is just as invigorating as my sun salute. Then at 8am, a few other guests and I hit the

river in our rowboat, where our biologist guide, Marcus Atkins, steers us through the Nekite's tidal sloughs and remote backwaters, pointing out seals, otters, bald eagles and kingfishers. But the real highlight here is the scenery. On each side of the mirrory river, dramatic ridges are cloaked in fog, and only the gentle splash of the oars breaks the silence. There are no words to describe the sense of peace I feel here.

Hotfoot it

We head back to the lodge, grab lunch, then set off on an unhurried guided hike through the forest. While tree roots can make things a bit ankle-twisty, the walk is an easy grade and the guide stops to point out some of the fruit favoured by the grizzly bears, like thimbleberries, red elderberries, salmonberries and even wild crab apples (a tarty party in the mouth). We also keep an eye out for signs of creatures like wolves, and while we don't see anything furry, we do find their fresh poo – proof they've seen us!

Back from the walk, we clean ourselves up then tuck into dinner. Actually, the food here is a pretty big deal – head chef Julie Triska and chef Ruth Bohmfalk go all out with the fresh produce and source a lot of it locally. A typical dinner might feature fresh crab caught in the river

or even salmon roasted on a cedar plank from the forest. Delish! Refuelled after dinner, we head back out on the boat to watch the sun set in the forest – the perfect way to help unwind from a day of wild adventure.

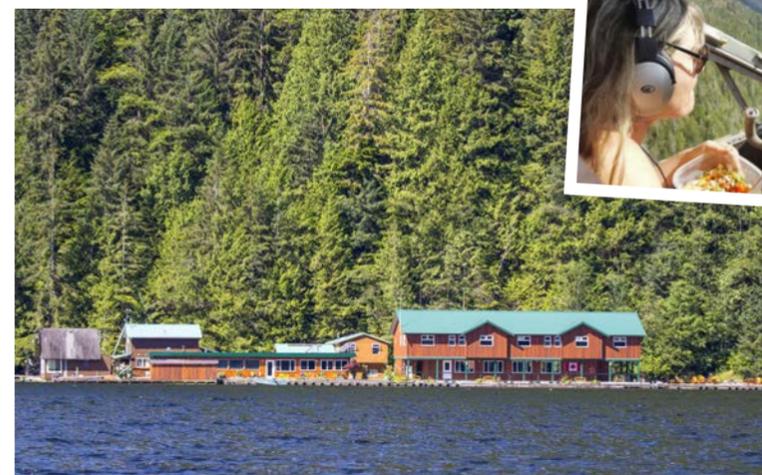
Every day we explore the wilderness on foot and by boat, and every day I feel my shoulders drop a little more as I start feeling calmer, happier and stronger. By the time the final morning rolls around and our boat stumbles upon a young grizzly bear foraging on the river bank, I've never felt more 'alive' in the moment.

Flying high

On the seaplane back to Port Hardy, it's obvious how relaxed the forest has made me. Like before I'm sitting in the cockpit, although this time it's beside Pilot Rose. A local, Rose clearly runs on vitamin N – she's pure sunshine and chill. She's so laidback, in fact, that as we bounce over the snowcaps, she decides it's the perfect time for a break and cracks open her lunchbox. When she drops a cherry tomato and then starts scrounging around for it on the floor, I can only laugh. Pre-Forest Rachelle would've blacked out with terror at that point, but after a few days in this epic wilderness, I'm the most relaxed I've ever been. Mission accomplished. **WH**



MACKINTOSH WAS A GUEST OF DESTINATION BRITISH COLUMBIA. SEE HELLOBCG.COM.AU; CANADA TRAVEL AND GREATBEARTOURS.COM; PHOTOGRAPHY: RACHELLE MACKINTOSH. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY



Hey, Port Hardy

To get to the Great Bear Lodge, head to Vancouver then board a flight to Port Hardy (where you pick up a seaplane to the lodge). It's worth staying in this cute coastal town; base yourself at the Pier Side Landing Hotel and check out:

TELEGRAPH COVE
Head to this quaint harbour to board a whalewatching tour with Stubbs Island Whale Watching – if you're as lucky as I was, you'll see humpbacks, orcas and plenty of seals. If you prefer to get sweaty, hit the water with North Island Kayak Tours.

BLUNDEN HARBOUR
You can get to this important First Nations site with K'awat'si Tours – a local indigenous outfit that shares the Gwa'sala Nakwaxda'xw history and leads cruises down the Nakwakto Rapids – the fastest navigable tidal rapids on the planet.

CAPE SCOTT PROVINCIAL PARK
Start with the San Josef Bay trail; it's Pilot Rose's favourite spot; she calls it "San Jo". The hike around the bay takes 90 mins return, through some stunning coastal scenery.