

Killer Elite

Canada's Johnstone Strait is trumpeted as the best place in the world to see orcas, the ocean's top predators. So just how close do you want to get?

BY IAN COCKERILL



It's best to give killer whales the right of way.

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→ **WHAT?** Paddling out into the freezing narrows between the northern end of Vancouver Island and British Columbia's western shores, with one objective in mind: getting eyeball-to-eyeball with a killer whale.

→ **WHY?** Not a question that really needs answering. Big, powerful creatures that can wipe you from the face of the Earth in an instant have always had a magnetic appeal for men. It really just depends how close an encounter you desire, and how many layers of protection you want.

→ **WHEN?** The killer whale sightseeing season in this part of the world runs between June and October. If you're talking odds, up until mid-July you've got about a 50 per cent chance of seeing whales, rising to 75 per cent late July to mid-August and very close to a certainty between late August and the end of September, when orcas line up for the salmon run.

→ **HOW?** There are numerous jump-off points for whale watching from Vancouver Island – and, assuming you're not going under your own steam, numerous operators running kayak trips – but the focal point is the upgraded former fishing port of Telegraph Cove, a six-hour drive north of the island's major city, Victoria. Given you'll have an early start, it's worth booking a room at Telegraph Cove the night before your departure.

I kayaked with Wildheart Adventures (kayakbc.com) and was constantly marvelling at how knowledgeable, hard-working and plain nice the guides, Liam and LiLi, were. The food was tasty and plentiful, the organisation was seamless and the stories flowed easily. Other companies offering multi-day kayak trips include Kingfisher Adventures, Northern Lights and Discovery Expeditions. A great starting point for planning your trip is hellobc.com.



Pop-up dining in the great outdoors.



Map? Check. Hat? Check. Now for an orca.

I'm beginning to seriously question whether I've pulled the right rein here. I'm 30 hours into a three-day kayaking trip to see killer whales in their natural element, and all I've got to show for it are an aching back and a bad case of glare-squint. Lured to Vancouver Island by the promise of a (relatively) unspoilt world teeming with wildlife and, most particularly, resident pods of orcas, I'm starting to feel decidedly unlucky. Sure, one member of our small group had glimpsed a seal on the first afternoon – think of them as being among the “secondary targets” operators necessarily promote as an insurance policy – but by the time I'd swivelled around, it had slipped below the surface. Other than that, and the odd bald-headed eagle in the distance, I couldn't help but think that I'd seen more camera-fodder from the Manly ferry.

Problem is, when you travel half a world to see something that doesn't run to schedules or, like the Eiffel Tower, stay reassuringly put, you've got to accept that the creatures in question might not play ball. In my case, the disappointment is exacerbated by the growing realisation that, if things continue as they are for another 24 hours, I don't have a story, let alone a memory. Don't these orcas appreciate they're needed by *Men's Health*?

Of course, that's the risk you take when you opt to embark on wildlife spotting's road-less-travelled. Whether it's jeeps on safari, fast whale-watching boats or helicopters, there are ways to pretty much guarantee a perfectly framed shot of whatever creature is in your sights. But from the time I got a chance to compare a jeep safari and a foot safari, I was sold on the notion of tracking animals at their own level, under my own propulsion. The first involved constant radio contact between a swarm of jeeps before clustering with six other vehicles as the tourist hordes took photos of

lazing lions not 20 metres from the road. Where, I mused, was the heroic aspect to this? Where was the surge of adrenaline, the shiver of fear? As it happens, I got shedloads of both when I subsequently joined an overnight foot safari, following fresh lion tracks through head-high grass, confronting a giant scorpion in my tent and stopping statue-still when surprising a rhinoceros with calf.

So when it came to killer whales, there was only ever going to be one choice. I'd leave the big boats to others and put my trust in flame-haired Liam and his capable assistant Leanne (“call me LiLi”), kayaking guides from Wildheart Adventures. After some instructions on kayak basics, a master class in packing and an overview of what lay before us over the ensuing days, the pair led seven of us out of Telegraph Cove into Johnstone Strait, a narrow passage pitted with a shattered fruit bowl of islands betwixt the northern tip of Vancouver Island and the rugged coast of British Columbia. This is orca territory.

This is also, as we discovered immediately after we'd left Telegraph Cove's sheltered harbour, home to fierce winds that make paddling a treacherous business. On this occasion, we were fortunate to find a 25-knot blast at our back that, together with a favourable tide, served to propel us south to our campsite in the fastest time Liam had done in eight years of guiding. But what had been our ally in the morning proved to be our captor for the remainder of the day, as tree-bending gusts confined us to land, able only to watch distant boats scoot here and there, presumably in pursuit of the very whales we were seeking.

It was a long 10 hours before dark finally descended, hours made longer by the apparent lack of activity in

Cruising the inlets before re-crossing Johnstone Strait; (right) keeping an eagle eye on proceedings.



the strait. When a local kayaker told me he'd never seen the area so devoid of life, I began to contemplate for the first time that this might prove a fruitless quest. Maybe a fast boat wasn't such a poor alternative, after all?

By now it was obvious that talk of "resident" pods didn't mean the orcas set up camp in one spot, waiting contentedly for sightseers to swing by. Yes, drawn by salmon heading to their spawning grounds, the same groups could be counted upon to frequent this area at particular times of the year, but otherwise they go wherever their food leads them. That could mean days, weeks, where they're well beyond paddling range.

Working hard to keep our spirits up, Liam told us that when (if?) we did come across the pods, these guys could at least be counted upon to play friendly, being predominantly fish-eaters who were considered curious and intelligent. What we wouldn't be so pleased to happen upon were transient orcas, maverick types Liam described as "the scary, seal-munching ones". Right now, though, I wasn't feeling too fussy. I'd take my chances with any orca, even an ornery one, if it meant vindicating my animal-level approach. I went to sleep dreaming up ways to make this a story about Vancouver Island's wondrous starfish.

The sight that greeted me when I pulled back my tent flap the next morning was just the tonic I needed – a calm, sun-drenched vista of smooth liquid and dense forests against a backdrop of snow-capped



mountains. Liam was not so sanguine. With conditions forecast to deteriorate, he was anxious to get on the water in order to reach the trip's ultimate destination, Robson Bight, a marine park that, by virtue of containing a river mouth, was a 24/7 supermarket for killer whales. We'd first be heading across the strait to paddle down the leeward side of some scattered islands before re-crossing the passage for lunch on the fringe of the bight. Surely our luck would change?

It did, even before we put in, as a Stellar sea lion rose from the depths a short distance from the beach, snorted loudly, and then spent the next few minutes studying us as we studied it. Stellar sea lions are impressively big. Still, it wasn't an orca. Better than a starfish, sure. But not an orca.

With the wind rising by the minute, we ploughed across the passage, marking time for a while as an incongruously large cruise liner – returning from Alaska – picked its way carefully south. Once on the other side, we paddled through kelp forests, brushed close to startlingly coloured starfish . . . and waited for some signal from Liam that we were somehow closer to our main quarry.

That looked a forlorn prospect when, halfway into our return crossing, the whitecaps were steeping ever higher, the wind was gusting harder and the tide was conspiring to make paddling difficult. My hopes plummeting, I steered my kayak over to Liam to confirm which beach we were headed for when I noticed the wind drop, as though someone had turned off a giant fan. In that same instant, I heard Liam's two-way radio crackle and saw him talking animatedly into the mouthpiece. When he turned, he wore a broad smile on his face. "They're headed our way." ➤



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The view from the campsite; (top right) returning to Telegraph Cove; (bottom right) they don't just do this at Seaworld.



Before punching the air, I pondered whether that meant we'd definitely cross paths now, or whether it merely improved the likelihood. Either way, my stroke picked up and my sense of anticipation grew as we beached our kayaks and hungrily tucked into lunch.

"Orca!"

The shout came from one of my paddling companions, and as I scanned the waters, I thought I saw a gleaming black back, but I couldn't be sure. Another 30 seconds passed and then there it was, unmistakable against the distant shoreline, a soaring black fin. The male bull orcas have a fin that stabs skyward like an arrowhead, and despite being up to a kilometre away, there was no mistaking the size of the creature that must have been below.

And then I heard it for the first time: the deep, reverberating exhalation from the whale's blowhole, a sound so resonant that it seemed to bounce off the opposite shores. A shot of white spray accompanied it and suddenly there were detonations everywhere, as fins emerged and submerged singly and in pairs. "There's another one!" one of our group shouted. "And another one!"

Amid the rapidly escalating excitement in the group there was now an urgency. We were on the shore. They were in the water. We

must get into our kayaks! Clambering in, we pushed off and then found ourselves called to a halt in a thick kelp forest no more than 50m off shore. The scene had settled. All was quiet. Where were they?

OOOOOOPPPPHHH!

Perhaps 200m away, an orca exhaled loudly, followed by another. Females, with their curved scimitars of fins, and calves, and bulls, all glistening and muscular and strikingly black and white. They were surfacing everywhere now, and headed in our direction. We all groped for cameras and binoculars, peering intently about as we willed them to come closer still.

Silence. Where . . . are . . . they?

I heard the shrill cry first. It was LiLi, 10m to my left. Beyond her, not 20m away, a killer whale had burst up through the kelp, its breath puncturing the still air. Experienced guide though she was, LiLi couldn't help but let out an involuntary squeal and now we both watched, transfixed, as the orca glided towards us and sunk once more beneath the kelp.

All was still again. In that instant, I recalled a story Liam had told the previous day, of how on his very first trip in this area, he and his companions had found themselves briefly adopted by a pod of whales. At one point, one paddler had gazed into the brilliantly clear water below his

A killer whale had burst up through the kelp, its breath puncturing the still air

kayak to see an orca spearing upwards from directly beneath him. At the last second it veered away, but not before leaving his companion's heart in his mouth.

Now I found my mouth had gone suddenly dry. I looked beneath my kayak. It wouldn't, would it? Whose idea was it to get in a kayak, anyway?

A long second passed. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Twenty, then thirty. The danger – if ever there was any real danger – passed.

The pod had moved on. And I'd forgotten to take a single photo. Which, I thought, is as it should be when you're truly in the moment.

Mission accomplished, it was a happy crew who settled down for another night at camp. There had been more sightings that afternoon, and as the sun set we could hear whales blowing in the inky distance.

The next morning we were all stirred by Liam's cry of "Orca!". Stumbling down to the beach, we saw shapes appearing and disappearing in a dense fog just a short distance from the shore. It was a virtual orca-fest, as about 20 whales glided back and forth in front of us.

"You don't see this very often," said Liam, in hushed tones. "Not 30m off shore."

I raised my camera. Somehow I felt I'd earned the right.