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ORCAS & EAGLES

*From Underwater Wonders to Flights of Fancy on British Columbia's Vancouver Island***By Erin Caslavka****Photos by Sean McGonigle** (except where noted)

Remember the days when your kids were small, dependent beings who craved nothing more than your love and attention?

I do. But sometimes it's hard when your "baby boy" is now a 22-year-old young man with the body of Adonis and no desire to be dependent on anyone. So trying to find a vacation that would suit both of our needs - mine, a place with plenty of outdoor activities and a chance for us to spend some sorely-needed 'quality time' together, and his, someplace with surf and sun, and a de-emphasis on 'high culture' - took some looking into. Given our respective wants and time constraints, I managed to find the perfect combination for me and my son Sean on British Columbia's Vancouver Island.

Our first stop was Victoria, the capitol of the province of B.C. Once there we found ourselves connecting with the amiable crew at Orca Spirit Adventures. An easy walk along the harbor from our hotel led us to their headquarters in downtown Victoria, and within a half-hour we were snug inside our waterproof, wind-resistant suits and given instructions about proper boat-behavior and information about the resident pods of orcas that call the Strait of Juan de Fuca home.

The water in the strait (which separates Vancouver Island from Washington's Olympic Peninsula) has been hosting the resident orcas for awhile, but recently an increase in interest has led to a profusion of boats laden with whale watchers anxious to observe the leviathans in their natural surroundings. To protect them from harassment, the Canadian government has imposed restrictions on the boats' proximity to the whales, as well as how many boats can be in the water at any one time. Our inflatable vessel held 10 observers including us and

our captain, Brad - a Transport Canada certified driver/marine biologist.

As we sped out of the tranquil inner harbor and into the open waters of the strait, I reflected on another trip I'd taken to Vancouver Island about six years earlier. I'd spent a week kayaking amongst the islands of the Inside Passage, only to leave disappointed at the absence of any killer whales. Would this three-hour tour make up for what I'd missed on that trip?

As the ultra-quiet zodiac propelled its way through the water, I pointed out to Sean how unusually smooth and flat it was. We sped along on the glassy surface of the strait like a hand gliding over a satin sheet, and when the captain finally cut the engine it felt as if we were a miniature plastic toy bobbing tranquilly inside a giant bathtub.

Making note of the other boats in the area, Captain Brad pulled out his binoculars to see if he could catch a glimpse of any telltale fins. As if of one mind, we all turned to follow the direction of his gaze just in time to see an orca "spy hop" next to an anchored pleasure boat not 200 yards away.



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Sudden envy filled my soul as I thought about the people on that boat who'd randomly ended up next to the very creature we were hoping so desperately to find. We sat there in a collective wonder as again and again the orca rose up and out of the water, doing multiple backflips back into the depths below.

Next to me, Sean was dutifully trying to steady himself for that one great shot, when the orca disappeared from sight. Scanning the horizon, our captain declared, "I'm going to try to get closer."

He motored in towards the shoreline and then again cut the engine. As we drifted silently on the mirror-topped strait, we were all anxiously looking to see if we could spot any orcas nearby when someone behind me called out, "They're under the bow!"

Frantically looking around the boat I called out to no one in particular, "Where's the bow?!"

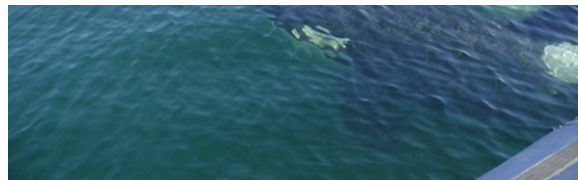
I spun in the direction everyone was looking just in time to see two sleek black and white bodies gliding effortlessly beneath the surface of the water, literally right underneath us.

As they cleared the boat, the two - a mother and her calf - surfaced and



shot out dual sprays of air from their blowholes.

“Did you get them??” I asked Sean anxiously.



“I think so!” he said, snapping away on his camera.

I reached out and grabbed him by his sleeve, unable to speak. Finally, I found my voice.

“That was...unbelievable,” I gasped.

Sean lowered his camera and watched the two whales swim away. “That was pretty cool, mom,” he said, laying his hand atop mine. “That really was.”



Our foray into the kingdom of the killer whales over, we headed outside of downtown Victoria bound for our overnight lodgings. A friend had recommended the Sooke Harbour House and was fairly adamant that if I missed staying there I'd never forgive myself.

His admonitions proved to be correct; the resort consistently ranks as one of the “Most Romantic” places to stay for a reason. And while it certainly wasn't that kind of a trip, nevertheless both Sean and I fell in love - with the property. From the minute we entered the rambling, oceanfront house, owned and maintained by the husband-and-wife team of Frederique and Sinclair Philip, we were completely entranced. Perched above a sheltered beach, the Sooke Harbour House features one-of-a-kind rooms with amenities like fireplaces, soaker tubs, artwork crafted by local artists, and spectacular views of the surrounding property.

That night, we joined our fellow diners at the onsite restaurant for a meal of Creamy Cauliflower Soup, Dijon/Sundried-tomato Marinated and Grilled Scallops, Grilled Port Renfrew Lingcod (with a nasturtium-leaf emulsion), and Apple Pave with Caramelized Puff Pastry. Sean was suitably impressed with the sommelier who gave him suggestions as to which beers he might like to try to complement each course. And I was thrilled to discover that the restaurant serves organic wine, which I selected to accompany my meal.

Regrettably we had to leave the next morning, but not until after we'd taken a short stroll along the shoreline of Whiffin Spit Beach, where the collective calls of seabirds were like a “fare-thee-well” piercing the early morning fog.

Once on the road, we traced the island's eastern shore. I pulled out a brochure I'd happened upon in the lobby of the hotel in Victoria and showed Sean an advertisement for a place I thought looked intriguing: The Pacific Northwest Raptors educational and visitors center, located in the Cowichan region.

Fortune was on our side that day as we arrived at the center moments before a scheduled

demonstration. Though we were the only visitors, two of the female trainers led an enthusiastic session on the variety of raptors the center provides a home to.

For the next hour Sean and I watched as Faker and peregrine falcons, bald and golden eagles, turkey vultures, Harris and red-tailed hawks, screech, barn and speckled owls (including one named “Elton,” whose name should be obvious) were all put to the test showing off their flying and hunting skills in front of our small, yet appreciative audience. Sean couldn’t believe it when one of the instructors, a pixieish young woman with close-cropped brown hair, told him that she uses one of the falcons to accompany her when she goes hunting.

“You mean instead of using a bird dog you use a falcon?” he queried.

“Of course,” she answered. “My dog will try to eat the bird, whereas the falcon will bring it back to me.”

I watched as one of the red-tailed hawks took off from its wooden perch and soared into the sky above us. The embodiment of independence and self-sufficiency, the raptor cried out as it took to the air, filling the stillness that surrounded us. I thought of the self-sufficiency echoed in the body of my son as he sat there beside me, completely absorbed in the bird’s aerial prowess. And then I realized that for a few brief days on the island, he’d been content to set aside his own need for independence and had allowed me once again to be at the center of his universe.



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