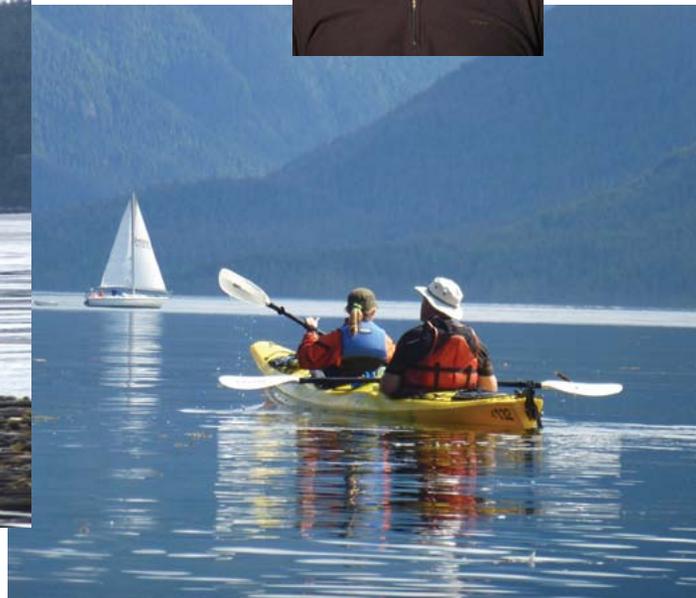




Orca showing off for awed kayakers on beach. Photo by Sophie Ballagh



Looking for orcas while enjoying the view. Photo by Don Mankin

Kayaking With Orcas In the Johnstone Strait Off Vancouver Island

By Don Mankin

It had been a tough week. I was on my way to the Johnstone Strait off Vancouver Island for a five day kayaking trip to see killer whales but record breaking heat had made it difficult to sleep or do much of anything. I felt fat and lethargic. I really needed this trip.

I had just turned 70, my knees ached and I had tendonitis in my bicep so I couldn't help but wonder whether five days of paddling, camping and using rustic toilets were the best way to celebrate this milestone.

As we packed up our kayaks on the boat ramp in Telegraph Cove on the eastern shore of Vancouver Island for the start of our trip, a trio of women in their 60s and older paddled up and began unloading their gear. They moved stiffly and gingerly but they also looked healthy and vibrant.

From the looks on their faces, they were concluding a thoroughly enjoyable trip. I was encouraged.

The first few minutes on the water changed everything. The kayak bobbed gently on the swells and all I could hear were the drops of water trickling off my paddles. I felt relaxed and all that had been bothering me the past few days – the heat, the tiredness, the aches and pains of age—washed away.

Within the first hour we saw eagles, porpoises, seals and lots of small fish jumping in front of our kayaks. The water was like glass.

After three hours of easy paddling, we pulled into our campsite, a base camp of big tents on platforms with cots run by **Out For Adventure** (www.outforadventure.com), the tour operator and my host for this trip.

As we started unpacking our kayaks, I heard the tell tale sounds of orcas close by, breathing as they surfaced, like a sigh without the sadness. I turned and spotted a parade of about 15 passing by only 50 yards offshore. One jumped out of the water, then flopped back with a great splash – twice. Another seemed to wave at us with his tail. If we had been a few minutes slower getting to our campsite, we would have been in the middle of the parade.

The next morning we saw a rerun of the show with another pod of orcas. One leaped in the air only 15 yards from shore. After packing up we paddled across the Strait, a distance of a few nautical miles, to our next campsite on West Cracroft Island.

Since we were staying at this campsite for two days, we slept in



Our intrepid travel writer demonstrating good paddling form.
Photo by Sophie Ballagh

till 8, then went for a leisurely paddle along the shore. As I backed off the beach, a seal popped his (her?) head up a few feet in front of me, then glided under my kayak. A few minutes later, we came across a black bear on the beach in the next cove, no more than a couple hundred yards from our tents. We spent the morning skirting the shore looking for sea urchins, anemones and sea stars in the crystal clear water.

In the afternoon, we went for a hike through the rain forest to a whale observation station overlooking Robson Bight, the ecological reserve where killer whales rub their itchy bellies on the pebbles just below the surface. The hike was like an obstacle course of roots, rocks and plenty of fallen trees to climb over or crawl under. At well over 200 pounds since my bar mitzvah, a gazelle I'm not, but I surprised myself at how nimble I was that day.

In fact, I was surprised at how limber I felt throughout the trip. The constant movement—paddling, hiking up and down rough trails, ducking in and out of tents, carrying kayaks and gear over logs and slippery rocks – kept me loose and burned up a couple of pounds left over from my far more indolent trip to Hawaii a few weeks before.

That night I had my best night's sleep in weeks.

In the morning, we packed up and headed back across the Strait. Soon we heard distant sighs and saw a pod of orcas swimming toward us. We rafted up and waited, following their progress as they dove, swam and surfaced, backs and fins glistening in the sun. Four orcas passed only twenty yards in front of us.

A few minutes later, we crossed paths with a pod of white sided dolphins. Three of them were heading right for me. I could see them leaping and diving in unison a few yards away, silent except for a whoosh and a splash. They dove before they reached me and resurfaced a few yards behind.

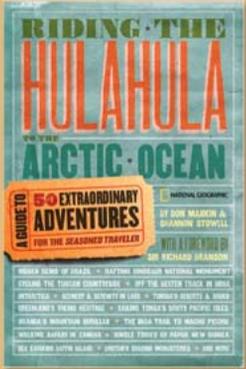


Looking for orcas while enjoying the view. Photo by Don Mankin

That night before going to bed, I wandered down to the beach to listen to the sighs of distant orcas in the darkness. I am at heart a city boy, but as I stood there I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live in a place like this, spending my days bobbing on the swells and, when I'm lucky, watching the whales leap into the air.

Don Mankin is an award-winning travel writer as well as a psychologist, consultant and educator. His ActiveOver50 article in the Spring 2012 issue, "Zipping Over Copper Canyon –Mexico" won the 2012 Gold Prize in the 50+ Travel and Travelers category from the North American Travel Journalists Association. For more information on Don, check out his website: www.adventuretransformations.com.

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