



Orcas and Grizzlies Wildlife Tour

Tour Pre-departure Information

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4. The Areas We Visit

Vancouver Island. The largest North American Island in the Pacific Ocean, Vancouver Island is 100 kilometers at its widest point and 450 kilometers in length with 3,440 kilometers of coastline. Vancouver Island's physical features are characterized as coastal plains in the east, long fjords on the western coast, and a chain of glaciated mountains that geographically and climatically split the island down its centre. The sparsely populated west coast, which is completely exposed to the Pacific Ocean, is rugged, hilly, forested and cut by deep inlets. The more gentle eastern side is protected by the mainland, and is quite undeveloped north of Campbell River. Most of the Island's population of 750,000 live along the south eastern coast. Slightly less than half of these - 330,000 - live in Victoria, BC's capital city. Other cities and town on Vancouver Island include Port Alberni, Ucluelet and Tofino (on the west coast), and Nanaimo, Parksville, Courtenay, and Campbell River (on the east coast).

Cormorant Island. The community of Alert Bay is located on Cormorant Island, a small crescent-shaped island off the Northeastern shore of Vancouver Island within the area known as the Broughton Archipelago/ Queen Charlotte Strait. Cormorant Island is most frequently reached via the "Island Highway" (Hwy #19), followed by a 40-minute ferry ride from the town of Port McNeill, about a six hour driver north of the Province's capital city of Victoria. Campbell River, 200 km south, is the nearest urban center with a population of 30,000.

Cormorant Island lies within the traditional territory of the 'N̄amḡis First Nation. Directly adjacent to Cormorant Island, on Vancouver Island, is the mouth of the Nimpkish River. The 'N̄amḡis are the people of the Nimpkish River (Gwa'ni). The Nimpkish watershed is the largest watershed on Vancouver Island. According to the legend of the River's origin, Gwa'ni was placed there by the Creator to support "many kinds of salmon... food for your descendants for as long as the days shall dawn on the world". It was these salmon runs that gave birth to the community of Alert Bay.

Alert Bay. Located on Cormorant Island, the present countenance of Alert Bay (pop. 1200) reflects much of its past history. Visitors to the area will be fascinated by the mixing and contrasting of the cultures. Native art forms are represented by their carvings, paintings and metal crafting. Artifacts and events of the past can be viewed in the community's Library/Museum and the U'mista Cultural Centre. A casual stroll from one end of the community to the other instills one with an appreciation for the efforts of the early pioneers, who carved themselves a place to live, work, and also crafted the roots of the village which now exists on the temperate south shore of Cormorant Island. All stores, shops and restaurants are located on or near Fir Street and are about a ten minute walk from the lodge.

Services in Alert Bay include: a federal post office, BC Government Liquor Store, RCMP detachment, and the Cormorant Island Community Health Centre (a newly constructed hospital). There are also several shops that sell First Nations art. Several restaurants serve basic meals. Meals are also served at Alert Bay Lodge but you need to order in advance. The hotel manager will brief you on dining out recommendations.

Johnstone Strait. During grizzly bear and whale tours, you will explore Johnstone Strait, a deep and narrow glacier-carved passageway between the northeast coast of Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland. Adjoining Queen Charlotte Strait and the Broughton Archipelago at its northwest end, the 87 kilometer-long Johnstone Strait is part of an historic marine region including Robson Bight, the world's only orca sanctuary. The Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations are the traditional gatekeepers and have lived here for thousands of years.

The area is characterized by intricate and remote island archipelagos, refuge bays and deep fjords. The topography of complex waterways guarantees almost infinite route possibilities for boating. Snow-capped mountain peaks, cascading waterfalls, very few settlements and abundant wildlife make this area a wilderness paradise.

Knight Inlet. The bear viewing component of this tour travels for 90 minutes down Johnstone Strait to Knight Inlet. This inlet is home to one of the largest concentrations of grizzly bears in British Columbia. Knight Inlet is a fjord that juts 105 kilometers deep into the wilderness of the British Columbia mainland. As one of the largest fjords on the B.C. coast, Knight Inlet offers its visitors spectacular scenery in between steep cliffs that fall away to the deep blues and greens of the glacial-fed water. Silence reigns here, broken only by the slap of the water against the shore and the muffled thunder of nearby waterfalls. Starting in late April the bears return to the estuary from hibernation and start the year off feeding on the sedges, succulents, grasses and barnacles that abound in the estuaries. This luxuriant spring growth provides the basic nutritional needs for the bears and draws them from the mountains down to the estuary.

5. Local Travel Information

Please advise us as to your hotel at least 30 days prior to your arrival in Victoria or Vancouver. At the front desk of your hotel, a package will be waiting for you that contains the ticket for your up-Island coach and your air ticket from Port Hardy to Vancouver. This information also contains a specific itinerary that includes the order of your wildlife excursions.

Getting to Alert Bay. Your coach departs Victoria and Vancouver at 7:30 am and arrives in Port McNeill at 4:30 pm. Both bus depots are located a short cab ride away from your hotel. Once you arrive at Port McNeill, you will find this town's bus station at the top of a small hill that overlooks the ferry terminal, about a 130 meter walk downhill. The ferry for Alert Bay departs at 5:10 pm and the next ferry is at 7:40 pm. If the bus is late and you miss the 5:10 pm ferry, you can leave your luggage at the depot and head to a nearby restaurant or pub and then return to claim your luggage. If this is the case, please call the lodge at 250.974.2410 and let the manager know. We'll organize your dinner for the next night.

At the ferry terminal booth you can purchase a foot passenger ticket (about \$9.00). Next to the booth is a reception building with a washroom where you can relax. Once you know what ferry you're on please call the manager and he will pick you up when you arrive in Alert Bay.

Once in Alert Bay. We'll check you into Alert Bay Lodge, your accommodation in Alert Bay, help you get settled