

Frank's day off

A marine tour from Knight Inlet Lodge, September 2011

The only sound was an occasional slap of water on the boat. After what seemed an age someone said "I don't know about anyone else but I'm completely drained. In the best possible way." We all nodded.

The seven of us had left the lodge at 8.00 for the tour with Bob driving. Frank had not made the trip before but had checked his crab pots early, finished his chores and was able to join us. We all sat back enjoying the scenery, stopping to take a closer look at a huge eagle's nest before being welcomed by Pat at Lagoon Cove. Just over the water was Thompson's Crossing and we asked about the observation platforms there. Pat told us the story. "Thompson got the barge over there for a dollar. He then got the crane on it for a whole lot more dollars. Then he lifted up the four huge platforms you can see. Yes, I know they don't have a view of anything. When someone asked Thompson why he did it he said it just seemed like a good idea at the time. A sort of zen thing about communing with the sky I guess".



Now all of us tourists had heard the advice about bears: the best contact is the one that's avoided; whatever you do, don't run; don't look the bear in the eye; if it's a grizzly do this, if it's a black bear do that, if you're not sure which it is then check with your wildlife guidebook or just ask the bear.... Ian and Andrew had already told us they had not been allowed to hike certain trails in Banff unless they were in a party of four or more. They had been strongly advised to invest \$45 in a can of bear repellent for some of the safer trails. They really enjoyed walking the trails. The can, unused, had been left in their hotel room.

Forget all that. Rose asked Pat how she was coping with the local bear who had been stealing her produce. "Well, I saw the bear up in my fruit tree there and I'm standing right underneath banging two saucepans together - you must have heard me back at the Lodge - and shouting at him to go away but he takes no notice. So I get the hose out and he doesn't like that and off he goes. But I know him by now so I wait. And after about eight minutes I see his nose sticking out the bush and after nine minutes that's followed by his ears and after ten minutes he comes right out. Which is when (takes up firefighter pose) I get him full on with the hose



We cruise on down towards Johnstone Strait in beautiful weather. Everything about the whole day makes you glad to be alive. The last wraiths of cloud have disappeared from the hills and we can see wave upon wave of rain forest rolling down to stop at the barnacle and seaweed encrusted granite that edges the water. Bob knows

where to find pictographs on these granite walls and it is good to be reminded that people were an integral part of this landscape long before westerners arrived. Occasionally there are landslide scars that show how little soil there is on the hills, and huge boiler plate slabs that would be streaming water in less perfect weather.



The sun has burned off the banks of sea mist and we see some Dall's porpoise, or rather we catch glimpses of their triangular fins, as we motor on. Later we circle a group of harbour seals lounging regally on some rocks and spot some sea lions who occasionally deign to wave a lazy flipper at us. This whole scene is framed by huge streamers of bull kelp. The water is flat calm, like liquid marble. We're all really enjoying the spectacular scenery and wonderful weather. But the day hasn't finished with us yet.

We arrive at the strait to find no sign of marine wildlife. Bob comments that the observation point staff are not looking at us, or anything else for that matter, so there probably isn't much happening. We see some distant humpback blows and get a little excited but we're too far away to see anything much. We head a way toward them and the boats that are gathering there, but it's all very quiet. Engine off, sitting on the water in the calmest conditions imaginable, looking at the incredible backdrop of the mountains on the mainland, we take lunch. Shelagh and Andrew talk about how best to photograph the scene but agree any photo, however good, is no substitute whatsoever for being there. This is a Knight Inlet lunch, so the prime rib sandwiches with all the fixings, fruit and cake are served on a red check tablecloth perfectly laid out by Frank. Bob is most keen to ensure that Rose gets the cup of tea she has been demanding since her earlier hot chocolate. This turns out to be a really smart move.



After lunch we motor towards where we saw the whales spouting earlier. We heave to and after the engine is turned off Ian looks back over the stern and reports a blow. In reply to my question he says "Just where we stopped for lunch before we came over here." We look around at the incredible setting we're fortunate to find ourselves in and all agree, genuinely, that whether we see anything more or not the trip has been worth it for the ride and the scenery alone.



Suddenly there are two or three humpbacks a little way off. They move gracefully, with a rhythm and an elegance that belies their size. They blow as they break the surface, arch their backs and then slide back under the water. They are moving very close together, seeming almost entwined. Watching them it is easy to understand how fishermen and sailors returned home with tales of sea serpents and krakens. Now and then they give us a high tailer as they dive for a while before repeating the sequence. A number of passes and then silence. Was that part of a mating ritual, Shelagh wonders out loud. "Well, it sort of reminds me of my courting days" says Frank from the back of the boat.

We're all very happy. We've seen the humpbacks fairly close up, we've got some pictures. We're having a great cruise with the ride back to come. What's not to like?



The whales are back, much closer this time. The humpbacks looked to be playing together and it was impossible not to feel part of it - they were clearly having a good time and so were we. There was some loud snorting and cruising around and then quiet again. Wow, we thought, that alone was worth making the trip for. Rose insists, and we all believe her, that it was her cup of tea that brought on our good fortune.

Suddenly a whale is breaching pretty close to us. Head and body right up out of the water and then a huge splash as it hits the water like the proverbial sack of potatoes And then another surfaces, blowing bullroar-loud before diving and then breaching again and again six or seven

breaches one after the other until finally a humpback comes arrow straight out of the water belly on to us fins out reaching up for the sky before twisting back and round and crashing back into the water. If anything ever typified sheer exuberance that was it. Show over, we think, but what a show.

There is an encore. The whales are back, rising and falling parallel to the boat, blowing and snorting as they cruise across the water. Then one turns and heads straight towards us. A glorious flowing movement of head up and breathe out - just a relaxed sigh this time - is followed by the unforgettable sight of a huge back easing up out of the water and then rolling back down again, water streaming from both flanks, followed by a final wave of the tail before passing under the boat. After a while about a kilometre off we saw the blow mist hanging in the air and caught a glimpse of whaleback as they took their leave.

The particular memories that will count for me will be those when I ease back in my chair, close my eyes, and remember what it was like to be a part of it all. When you look into the eye of a large mammal, say an elephant or a bear or a whale, you see a profound knowing and a gentleness there. On this occasion I've no doubt there was also a twinkle.

We headed back to the lodge by way of Billy Proctor's place at Echo Bay where we enjoyed Billy's museum and shop and listened to his tale of how he outsmarted the tax inspectors who checked out the number of boats moored on his foreshore by helicopter and "nearly took the roof off" in the process.



What a life-affirming day. We all have some great photos that will no doubt impress our friends and remind us of what we saw. But it is very easy to focus too much on getting the pictures to take home and not appreciate the deeper feelings that come from a very special and moving experience. Ever since we arrived in north Vancouver Island I had sensed a particular closeness between the landscape, the

wildlife and the people who live here, and I felt very privileged and fortunate to have shared in it.

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With very special thanks to Bob Scriba who led the tour and to all on the boat for their companionship