

Scarcely believable sights sailing B.C. coast

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FROM
THE
DECK
CHAIR



Victoria-based Outer Shores Expeditions sends its eight-passenger Passing Cloud back to explore Haida Gwaii and the Great Bear Rainforest this year. — AARON SAUNDERS/PNG

One of the best things I did last year was spend two hours crushed into a Dash-8 and then an hour in a float plane to reach Haida Gwaii and my unique sailing adventure with Outer Shores Expeditions (outershores.ca).

Located off the coast of B.C., the former Queen Charlotte Islands served as the backdrop for our ship, an intimate eight-guest schooner known as Passing Cloud.

Founded by Russell Markel — who could very well be the only captain to sport a PhD — the Victoria-based company is back this year with a whole host of interesting sailings.

Passing Cloud returns to Haida Gwaii this year with a series of eight- and nine-night Islands at the Edge itineraries.

These operate between June 25 and July 28 and include a pre-cruise tour and hotel stay in Sandspit, a float plane flight to join (or depart) the ship and a flexible itinerary that allows Markel the ability to select the best sites to go ashore based on the weather conditions.

Having no set itinerary — save for a visit to ancient Haida heritage sites like the amazing SGang Gwaay — was one of the greatest features on my voyage last summer.

You'll see things you never imag-

ined, in surroundings that can scarcely be believed.

In August, Passing Cloud sails two Whales by the Sails itineraries in Johnstone Strait and Blackfish Sound — one of the best regions in the world for viewing killer whales.

If you're a nature lover or a photographer, these six-day, five-night sailings that depart round trip from Port McNeill are the ones for you.

Passing Cloud also frequently calls on the U'Mista Cultural Centre in the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Alert Bay

and the Killer Whale Interpretive Centre in Telegraph Cove.

If Haida Gwaii is the crown jewel of the Outer Shores itinerary lineup, it faces some stiff competition from the company's fabulous eight-night Great Bear Rainforest sailings.

Named by National Geographic as one of the Top 20 Places To See, the Great Bear Rainforest extends from northern Vancouver Island to the Alaska-B.C. border. Passing Cloud sails there in the fall specifically to see the salmon as they begin to enter

the estuaries and rivers, but also for the iconic "Spirit" bear — which can be seen from special viewing platforms operated by local First Nations.

As a sign of how popular this nimble little ship has become: her October sailings through Gulf Islands National Park are already sold out or wait-listed.

Markel and his crew are as knowledgeable as they are courteous.

Sailing with them aboard the Passing Cloud is like having your own little crash course in ecology and environmentalism rolled into a fun and fabulous holiday.

They're also serious about protecting the regions in which they sail: the company was just granted a gold rating from Green Tourism Canada and the crew even makes use of an app called Spotter Pro to record and document each and every wildlife encounter to share with the scientific and conservation community.

Even if like me you call British Columbia home, you'll be amazed at how vast this province is — and how little we as locals truly know about it.

Sailing aboard the Passing Cloud is a surefire hit for international visitors, but local residents will find a lot to love here, too.

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