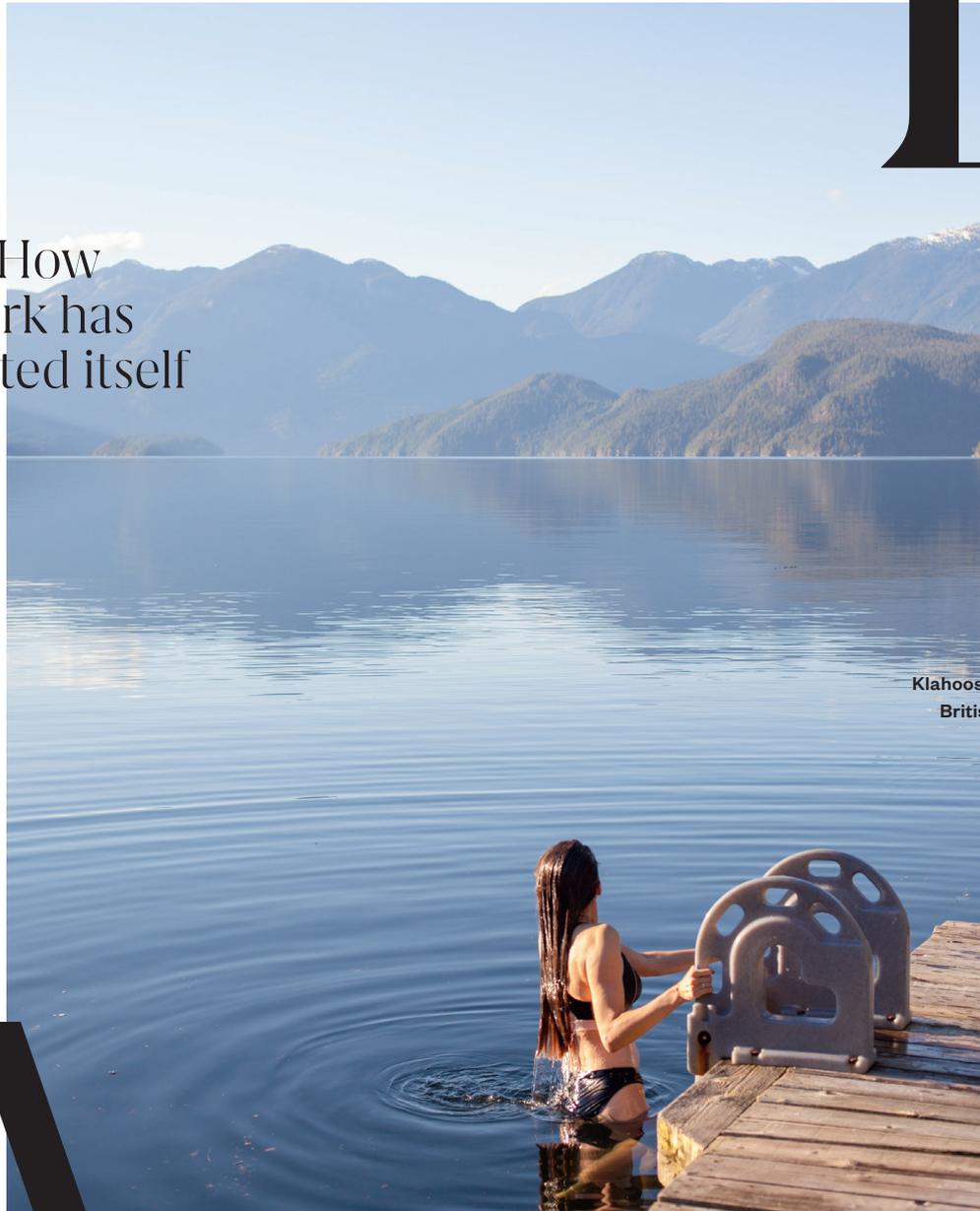


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Klahoose Wilderness Resort,
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WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

ON BRITISH COLUMBIA'S SUNSHINE COAST, AN INDIGENOUS-OWNED WILDERNESS LODGE LETS VISITORS EXPERIENCE WHERE THE BEARS, ORCAS AND SEALS ROAM FREE.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARLA COURTNEY





(Previous page) The dock at Klahoose Wilderness Lodge

(This page, clockwise from above) A mother bear and her cub; the lodge's deck overlooking Homfray Channel; Klahoose First Nation cultural interpreter Randy welcomes guests; Sheila the seal



After 18 months in my Brighton living room, I'm on the other side of the world staring directly into the dark, glassy eyes of a large seal. The locals call her Sheila.

When I left my cabin before sunrise there were 20 or more of Sheila's pals lying around the large floating dock. But every time my boots hit the dewy grass, a seal slipped into the water, diving one after the other like synchronised swimmers in sequence. When it was Sheila's turn, she glanced in my direction, exhaled loudly into her long white whiskers, put her fins on her belly and stayed put.

I looked at her as if to say, "Are you as overwhelmed as I am?"

"Sheila's older than the others so she's used to us now," says Randy, a member of the Klahoose First Nation who works as a cultural interpreter at Klahoose Wilderness Resort (kahooseresort.com). We're sipping coffees on the lodge's deck, the sun beaming above the peaks and cloud cover, its sparkles dancing on the ripples of the water and our mugs. Sheila's gone for breakfast and soon we will, too.

It's a dreamlike start to my first morning at the newly reopened property nestled between the foothills of a steep mountain and the shores of Homfray Channel, about 160 kilometres north of Vancouver. It originally opened in 2008 and was purchased by the Klahoose First Nation's Economic Development Corporation in 2020. Since then it's been almost entirely staffed by traditional landowners from the region.

When we arrived, Randy welcomed our group with a song in the Salish language, singing softly, a cappella, while beating a painted hide drum. A sign above the door reads $\text{?i:mot tət}^{\text{ə}} \text{k}^{\text{ə}n\text{om}}$, meaning "it's good to see you" in Salish, which is spoken in variations by communities across North America's Pacific Northwest.

You can only get here by boat or private seaplane but once you do, there's

no schedule. The lodge proper – a large wooden house with the resort's common areas and as many windows as possible to maximise the gorgeous view – has four double rooms and there are three additional cabins, accommodating up to 14 guests. It isn't over-the-top luxury but it certainly isn't roughing it: Klahoose is a warm, intimate retreat offering creature comforts and a bit of culinary pampering in the middle of the Canadian wilderness.

The Great Bear Rainforest, a 6.4 million-hectare coastal tract characterised by dense, mature trees, is to the north and its name is a clue to one of the lodge's only planned activities – and its biggest drawcard – seeing grizzly bears in the wild.

There are black bears in the woods nearby but guide Leon steers our boat through the channel and up the deep Toba Inlet, past waterfalls, ancient pictographs (rock art) and the splashes of orca tails. We're headed about 50 minutes away to an area densely populated with grizzlies where platforms allow us to view them safely in their natural habitat.

Heeding the two golden rules for viewing bears – no food and no noise – we ditch baker June's fresh cookies from our bags and tiptoe like we're sneaking out of church. We spot them from the first platform – a mother and her cub on a log in the river. Mum walks ahead slowly, looking back and calling to her young, who starts to follow. Unfazed by our presence, they meander along the bank as birds fly by and we stare in silence.

That night, everyone is buzzing, swapping photos as chef Jenni serves pan-seared scallops with a bacon and apple gastrique, followed by chicken supreme and a lemon thyme risotto. Every three-course meal (yes, even breakfast) has been this good and almost as memorable.

We move to the cosy lounge with glasses of wine, mugs of tea and plates stacked with pastries, to sit by the fire with

Randy. Less than two weeks before our visit, Canada had its first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, when most businesses closed and the public was encouraged to listen to Indigenous voices.

Randy shares stories about his family and the land, traditional ceremonies and their spiritual significance. We had to be silent for the bears but we're compelled to be quiet as he speaks. "The deepest part of our culture is passing down our traditions. We learn from our elders and the first lesson I learnt is how to listen. Dancing, singing and drumming are all medicine. You are dancing for a spirit and it's like a cry in process... you feel a spirit come on and you actually have to sing a song. You can feel the goosebumps."

My time at Klahoose is filled with goosebump moments. Sheila, the bears, the culture, the environment. And the swimming. I've been told that these waters are among the warmest along the coast but it's mid-October and the air temperature is about 11°C so I'm not convinced. After some coaxing from other guests I'm running back and forth to the edge of the dock, giggling and shivering as I muster the courage to jump in. Finally, standing on the stairs, I let go and fall backwards with a splash. I paddle, float and look at the sky. The water isn't warm but it's warmer than the air. Invigorated, I slip on a white robe. Mother Nature's spa.

Before I leave for home, Randy shows me how to weave cedar. He takes two strips and slowly crosses one over the other, creating a hexagon that with each fold starts to shape a rose. I follow his lead, poorly, but just about manage to make my own flower. We're back out on the deck in the sun, the channel so still beside us that it's hard to tell where the mountains end and the water begins. A few porpoises splash and break the illusion. I wander down to the dock, hoping one of the splashes is Sheila, back to say goodbye. ●

Need to know

When to go

Klahoose Wilderness Lodge (kahooseresort.com) is open from May to October; grizzly bear season runs from late August to mid-October. You can book helicopter experiences during the period, including heli-hiking, a heli tour of a glacier and heli-fishing (additional fees apply).

Getting there

Klahoose is about 160 kilometres north of Vancouver and is most easily accessible via a flight to Powell River airport. Flights and transfers are arranged by the lodge.

What to pack

Layers: it can be warm and sunny one day and cool and rainy the next. Bring a good waterproof coat, sturdy boots, camera and swimsuit.

Before you go

Find essential travel information, including the latest local health orders and recommendations, at travel.gc.ca and hellobc.com.