

Spirit Bears, Grizzlies & Humpbacks - Cruising the Great Bear Rainforest

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Vancouver & overnight.
-
- Day 2** Fly Bella Bella, embark 'Island Roamer' and begin cruise.
-
- Day 3/8** Great Bear Rainforest cruise.
-
- Day 9** Disembark 'Island Roamer' and fly London.
-
- Day 10** Arrive London.
-

Departs
September

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code CAN05) or see the current Naturetrek brochure.

Focus

Spirit Bears, Grizzly Bears, whales, other mammals and birds.

Grading

Grade A - Day walks only.

Highlights

- Cruise the waterways of the 'Great Bear Rainforest' on board the Island Roamer, a 21-metre sailing ketch
- Look for the mythical Kermode or 'Spirit Bear'
- Watch Grizzly Bears fishing for salmon
- Black Bear, Sea Otter & Grey Wolf all possible
- Beautiful scenery of the Fjordland Provincial Park
- Explore the temperate rainforests of the Pacific Rim
- Humpback Whale & Dall's Porpoise
- Birds including Harlequin Duck & Bald Eagle
- Join an exclusive Naturetrek wildlife-focused charter



From top: Spirit Bear, Island Roamer in Fjordland & Grizzly Bear.
Images courtesy of P Stanbury & P Marshall



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

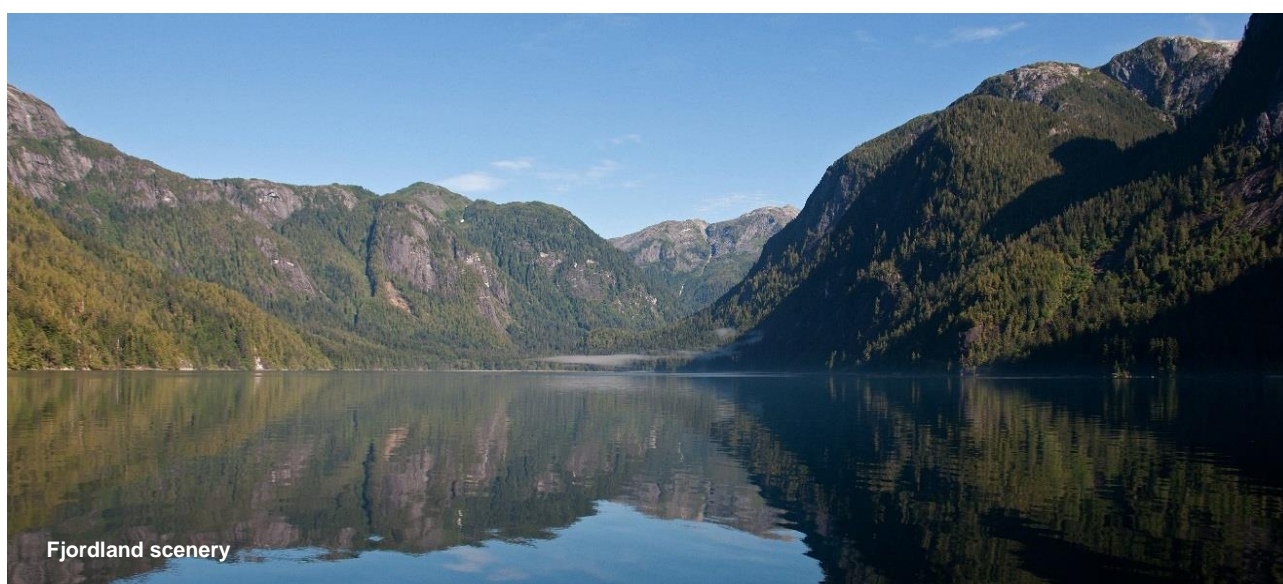
T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

The 'Great Bear Rainforest' protects one of the largest remaining tracks of temperate rainforest left in the world. Stretching along the intricate, island-dotted, coastline of British Columbia from Vancouver Island to the Alaskan border, this is a region of spectacular natural beauty and abundant wildlife. Ancient Western Red Cedars - some over 1,000 years old - grow alongside towering Western Hemlock, Amabilis Fir and Sitka Spruce; each dripping with curtains of lichens and moss. This natural cathedral is cut by numerous, glacier fed, freshwater streams which flow into the intricate maze of narrow channels, fjords and wooded islands of the fabled 'Inside Passage'. On land, the forests, estuaries and rocky beaches are patrolled by Black Bears - including the occasional 'Spirit Bear', a rare white genetic variant - Grey Wolves, Cougars and, of course, the 'Great Bear' itself, the Grizzly! Overhead soar Bald Eagles, whilst offshore, Humpback Whales return every summer, joining pods of speedy Dall's Porpoise, Pacific White-sided Dolphins, Steller's Sea-lions and numerous seabirds.



Since much of the Great Bear Rainforest is remote and inaccessible, the best way to explore this spectacular region is from the water. As such, Naturetrek has chartered the 16-berth sailing vessel, the 'Island Roamer', to operate this 7-night dedicated wildlife cruise.

NB – The itinerary outlined below gives an overview of the cruises that start in Bella Bella and travel north to end in Terrace. Please note that some of our tours operate in reverse, starting in Terrace and travel south to finish in Bella Bella. Although the routing of the cruise will in no way affect the wildlife content of the tour please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051 should you have any questions.

Itinerary

N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Vancouver & overnight

We will depart from London Heathrow on board a scheduled British Airways flight to Vancouver on the west coast of Canada, arriving late afternoon. On arrival, we will transfer to a comfortable hotel for the night. Whilst some members of the group might prefer to relax after the long flight, those still feeling energetic might like to venture out for an evening birdwatching stroll.

Day 2

Fly Bella Bella & embark 'Island Roamer'

After breakfast we will make our way to Vancouver Airport's small 'South Terminal' to take the one and quarter hour Pacific Coastal Airlines flight north to the remote community of Bella Bella (NB - some flights stop in Port Hardy on Vancouver Island enroute). This spectacular flight tracks north over the dramatic rainforest-clothed mountains of the Cascade and Coast Ranges which are cut by deep blue fjords and dotted with a myriad of small lakes. To our left lies Vancouver Island, whilst to our right the mountains of the Coast Ranges stretch to the horizon, the tallest of which will be still capped in snow. The landscape becomes ever more remote as we continue north of Vancouver Island, before we begin our final descent over the 'Great Bear Rainforest' itself and into Bella Bella's tiny airport.

On arrival we will transfer directly to the 'Island Roamer' and depart shortly afterwards to begin our 7-night wildlife cruise.

Days 3 - 4

Fjordland Conservancy, 'Great Bear Rainforest'

Our time on the water begins with two days exploring the coastal waterways, estuaries and bays of the Fjordland Provincial Protected Area. From Bella Bella we sail north-west along the Matheison Channel, a spectacular, steep-sided fjord clothed in temperate rainforest. The Matheison Channel will lead us deep into Fjordland through a peaceful landscape of breathtaking beauty. On clear days the calm waters of the fjords and bays act as a mirror, reflecting the forested mountains perfectly, whilst the bright sunshine illuminates precipitous rock-faces and the spray from the numerous waterfalls that tumble down their sides. If the cloud lowers then our surroundings will take on a more ethereal beauty, with lines of mist curling around the hillsides; the silence only broken by the eerie call of a Great Northern Diver (Common Loon) or the shrill cry of a passing Bald Eagle.



For the next two days we will explore the upper reaches of these fjords, anchoring overnight in secluded bays and peaceful forest-lined coves. Each summer, millions of pacific salmon return to the streams of British Columbia to spawn. Our cruise has been timed to take full advantage of this annual natural feast, for once the salmon start running up the rivers in the early autumn, the bears, wolves, eagles and other wildlife move in. To experience the salmon run is to witness one of the natural world's great wildlife spectacles! On each day we will go ashore by zodiac (rubber

inflatable craft) and explore these remote estuaries and salmon streams on foot, accompanied at all times by an experienced naturalist guide and bear expert. In September the shallow fast flowing streams should be full of

salmon battling their way upstream to spawn, mostly large Chum Salmon, but also smaller number of Pink Salmon, their more diminutive hump-backed cousins. Numerous Bald Eagles move inland from the coast to these salmon rivers at this time of year. At low tide – when the fish become easier to catch – it is not unusual to count 50 or more feeding out on the shoreline or perched in the trees above. Hundreds of delicate Bonaparte Gulls also crowd the rivers picking off discarded salmon eggs and these are joined by larger Glaucous-winged Gulls and California Gulls, plus Goosander and the occasional American Dipper.

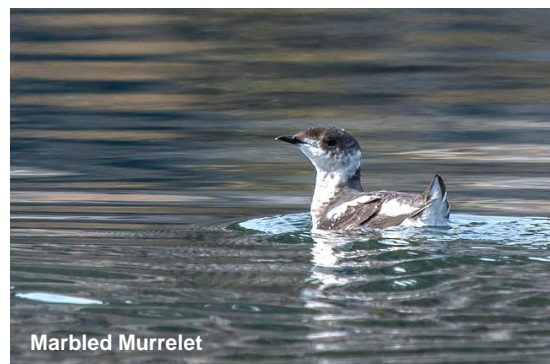


Grizzly Bear

Naturally, however, our main goal of these shore excursions will be to look for Grizzly Bears and, hopefully, to watch them feeding on the salmon. Our bear expert will use his/her experience of the region, and understanding of the bears behaviour, to escort us to likely vantage points overlooking the rivers where we will quietly sit and wait. The Grizzly is North America's second largest land predator after the Polar Bear. This impressive animal can weigh up to 500 kilograms and although it has the stomach of a carnivore, its diet is

primarily vegetarian. Grizzlies spends many hours each day browsing on vegetation, roots and berries supplementing their menu with insects and grubs (and of course salmon when the time is right!) and the range of a male Grizzly can exceed a massive 200,000 hectares in the more mountainous areas. The characteristic large hump over its shoulders is a muscle mass used to power the front legs as it digs for roots and grubs. The Canadian government estimates that up to 13,000 Grizzlies still roam British Columbia, but environmentalists state that the number is closer to 6,000 or even as low as 4,000. The only other region in Canada that holds significant numbers is the Yukon.

We are likely to take a morning excursion on shore and then move to another river estuary in the middle of the day for a second mid to late afternoon landing. Whilst cruising amidst this beautiful landscape we should always keep our eyes open for wildlife. Little flocks of Western Grebes are frequently seen, along with Red-necked Grebe, Great Northern and Red-throated Divers, Belted Kingfisher and Spotted Sandpiper. The diminutive Marbled Murrelet is also a common sight; a flagship species for the conservation movement for it nests only in old



Marbled Murrelet

growth forest! Even deep within these fjords we should also keep our eyes open for the distinctive tall and bushy blow of Humpback Whales. Humpbacks are actually the most frequently recorded cetacean in this region of the 'Great Bear Rainforest' and are likely to be seen on most days of our cruise! They are also one of the most enjoyable of cetaceans to watch for not only do they lift their huge tail fluke out of the water when they dive, but are frequently seen 'playing' near the surface, slapping their long white pectoral fins on the water's surface or even launching fully out of the water for the fortunate few. It has been shown that a population of Humpbacks spend the whole year in the coastal seas off British Columbia and Alaska; only the breeding adults migrate down to the warm waters off Hawaii, and further south, to mate and give birth.

One of the great joys of our Great Bear Rainforest cruise is the opportunity to anchor each evening in a remote secluded bay surrounded by wilderness as far as the eye can see. It is wonderfully peaceful! Once the sun has set over the mountains, we can turn our attention to the heavens and enjoy the wonderful panorama of stars, unhindered by lights or other pollution. Your guide will also try to howl for Wolves. Although very elusive, there is a healthy population of Wolves within the 'Great Bear Forest' and, in common with the Grizzlies, they favour the estuaries for much of the year. The best time for a sighting of a Wolf itself is during the last 30 minutes of daylight in the evening and the first 30 minutes or so after dawn. If we ensure that we regularly scan the beaches, estuaries and rocky coastlines at this time, we may just be lucky!

Days 5 - 8

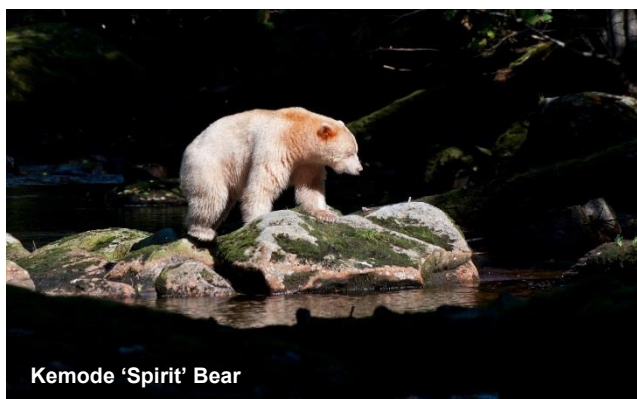
Princess Royal Island, 'Great Bear Rainforest'



Our route eventually takes us out of the Fjordland, through the narrow Sheeps Passage, and the north along the Graham Reach Channel that separates Princess Royal Island (one of the largest islands in the Great Bear Rainforest) and the mainland. En route to Princess Royal Island, the haunt of the rare 'Spirit' or Kemode Bear, we are likely to stop at the beautiful Khutze Inlet, another picturesque salmon river back by dramatic mountains and a favoured fishing area for Grizzlies. As we continue further north we should be watchful for groups of Humpback Whales. On rare occasions Humpbacks have been recorded 'bubble netting' in this region; a unique form of communal fishing whereby animals dive under a shoal of fish and then surround them in a net of bubbles before rushing up through the centre of the 'net' to engulf their unfortunate prey. This is an activity more closely



associated with Alaskan Humpbacks, but one that is recorded on occasion in this particular area. On a smaller scale, we should also start to see our first Dall's Porpoise, a small black and white cetacean that frequently bow-rides in front of boats and casts a characteristic 'rooster-tail' spay of water when it surfaces. The occasional Elephant Seal, Harbour Seal, Stellar's Sea Lion and pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins are also possible, whilst birds to look out for include Surf and White-winged Scoter, Pacific Diver and Red-necked Phalaropes.



Kemodé 'Spirit' Bear

One of the undoubted highlights of this cruise is the opportunity to look for the rare 'Spirit' or Kemodé Bear; a beautiful animal that has come to symbolise the Great Bear Rainforest. This attractive, white or cream-coloured, variant of the Black Bear only occurs along the stretch of coastline between Princess Royal Island in BC and Prince Rupert in Alaska. They are not albinos (they have brown eyes and a dark nose), but instead have inherited two copies of a recessive gene from their parents (who can be black or white!). It is thought that

1 in 10 of the Black Bears that inhabit Princess Royal Island and its neighbouring islands have this genetic variant. They have been revered by the local 'First Nations' people for hundreds of years and are protected from hunting to this day.

We will spend a full day in search of the 'Sprit of the Rainforest'. Our Tsimshian First Nations guide will escort us through the forest for 15 minutes or so and then down to a small fast flowing stream where a couple of bear viewing stands have been built. We are likely to arrive at the stand around 9.00am and may spend the rest of the day here depending on our luck with the bears and other wildlife. It is a beautiful spot. The small, rocky river is edged by thick moss-draped rainforest. Numerous Pink Salmon should be battling in the shallows and these attract in Great Blue Herons and American Dippers, the latter feeding on the salmon eggs. One or two flocks of small birds are likely to pass through during the day which may contain such species as Golden Crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Townsend's Warbler and Red-breasted Sapsucker, amongst the commoner Chestnut-backed Chickadees. The thick understory also holds Pacific Wren, Song Sparrow and Hermit Thrush. Douglas Squirrels are more often heard than seen and there is even a chance of American Marten which do occasionally venture out of the forest to scavenge on fish scraps. Despite the tranquil scene and interesting supporting cast, the bears will be our main goal of the day. The bears here, both Black and Spirit, have been habituated to people and so can be very confiding offering wonderful photographic opportunities. Although, nothing is certain in the world of wildlife watching we have a very good chance of seeing a Spirit Bear during the day and are very likely to enjoy sightings of their more common 'Black' Black Bears relatives too!



Red-breasted Nuthatch

During the course of the whole cruise we should keep an eye open for the magnificent 'Orca' or Killer Whale. Pods of Orcas patrol the maze the channels, fjords and open water of this entire region, but their movements are not as predictable as the more famous population off Vancouver Island to the south. It is possible to come across a pod at any time during the cruise, but they can be very difficult to locate and are by means guaranteed!

The birdlife off the Pacific Coastline is, however, more predictable and abundant. On occasion we will cruise close to the rocky coastline and at these times we need to keep an eye open for the four characteristic rocky-shore waders, Black Turnstone, Surf-bird, Black Oystercatcher and Wandering Tattler. Harlequin Ducks risk life and limb in the surf and there is also the chance of finding a Sea Otter in the kelp beds. Sea Otters are still rare in this area,

but a few have spread north from the population re-introduced in Vancouver Island. Our captain may know a couple of likely spots and so we may be lucky!

The exact itinerary for these final few days will be kept flexible to take account of such factors as the weather conditions, advice of captain and crew and recent wildlife sightings. There will be the opportunity for more shore landings, however, and the crew will try to raise Island Roamer's sails on occasion if the wind permits. As with previous days, the Roamer will anchor in a sheltered and secluded spot each evening.

Day 9

Depart Vancouver

After a final night in the wilderness we must sadly dock at the small fishing village of Kitimat this morning. From there we drive for 45 minutes or so inland to the small airport at Terrace and catch our flight back to Vancouver. On arrival we connect with a British Airways early evening flight to London Heathrow.

Day 10

Arrive London

We will arrive back at London Heathrow early afternoon.

NB - Please also note that Pacific Coastal Airlines' current Terrace/Vancouver schedule permits a direct connection back to London on Day 9 of the tour (arriving Day 10). In the event of a future schedule change preventing this connection we may have to overnight our group in Vancouver on Day 9 and fly back to London the following evening. This would add an additional day to the holiday and incur the additional expense of a hotel night in Vancouver which can be booked through Naturetrek or independently.



Humpback Whale

Tour grading

We have graded this holiday A. It is mostly easy and suitable for anyone with an average level of fitness. There will be the opportunity for optional shore excursions on most days. Whilst the walks are mostly short in distance, the terrain is rough and there are no 'footpaths'. Walks sometimes follow bear trails along the river edges and can involve a degree of pushing through brush or long grass. As such some people might find a trekking pole useful. The walk to the Spirit Bear stand takes around 15 minutes. The path is mostly flat, but ends with a short, but steep, descent to the river. If the tide of low it may also be necessary to walk up a steep rocky beach to reach the start of the path.

Please note that getting off Island Roamer into the zodiacs for shore excursions is via a ladder with four steps that are about 12 inches apart.

Please remember that you are travelling in remote areas without quick access to sophisticated medical facilities, so we would ask you not to join the tour if you have a life-threatening condition, need daily medical treatment or have difficulty walking. Please could we ask you to ensure that you are fit enough to undertake this cruise. Should you have any further questions on this aspect of the tour please give the Naturetrek office a call.

Weather

British Columbia has one of the mildest climates in Canada with warm summers and relatively mild, but wet, winters. The average daytime high temperature in mid/late September is around 15°C, but the nights can get much cooler. Although September can be a pleasantly mild and sunny month in the Pacific Northwest, you should remember that the coasts and mountains are swathed in temperate rainforest so a few wet days should be expected!

Focus

This is a general wildlife cruise focusing on bears, whales, other mammals and birds.

The Island Roamer

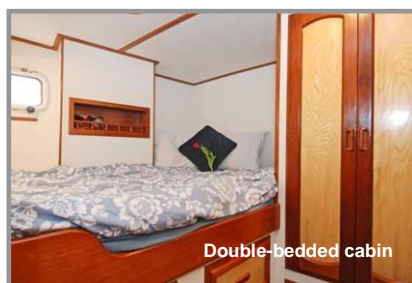
The Island Roamer is a custom 68-foot ketch, launched in 1983. The boat's design, safety and comfort make her perfect for these trips. She features 8 small double occupancy cabins (6 cabins with twin bunk beds and 2 double-bedded cabins at the rear - all of which have portholes), 3 heads with hot showers, a large comfortable lounge with an extensive library, and a well-equipped galley. On deck, the large covered seating area provides protection in all types of weather. The Island Roamer is large enough for comfort, privacy and safety, and small enough to create a good rapport among passengers and crew.



NB - Please note that the two double-bedded cabins at the rear (stern) of the vessel are a little smaller than the twin-bedded cabins. The double beds are also smaller than a 'standard' double bed - measuring 1m 91cm long by 1m 15cm wide (75 inches by 45 inches) - and are not suitable for those of a larger than average build. As such the per person cost of these cabins is a little less than the standard twin berth cabins (usually less £400 per person, but please call the Naturetrek office on 01962 733051 to confirm), based on double occupancy.

The two cabins in the bow are also small in size with two bunks placed directly one over the other (in reality they are smaller than the above deck plan might suggest). One of these cabins is reserved for crew, but one accommodates the Naturetrek tour leader and one group member (usually the last person to book). The berth in the bow cabin also comes with a reduction of £400.

Although very little time is spent in the cabins (they are only used for changing and sleeping), if you have any questions on the cabin layout please give the Naturetrek office a call.



Extra expenses

The following additional expenses are not included in the cost of the holiday: lunches and dinners in Vancouver, drinks, tips for the Island Roamer crew (allow approx C\$300 – C\$350 per Naturetrek client), laundry, souvenirs and other items of a personal nature.

NB - Please note that Naturetrek reserves the right to impose a fuel surcharge on this cruise should fuel prices increase significantly and the boat operators request an additional payment.

Image gallery

For a gallery of images taken on past Naturetrek 'Great Bear Rainforest' cruises please visit the Naturetrek website at www.naturetrek.co.uk.

Your Safety & Security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/canada regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

