

TRAVEL

KILLERS, KAYAKS AND TOILET PAPER

by Colleen Friesen

There were many skills I thought I'd master on my recent kayaking trip in British Columbia's Johnstone Straits but learning how to burn pee-soaked toilet paper hadn't made that list.

Sea Kayak Adventures promised a wilderness experience extraordinaire. They delivered; Orcas, humpbacks, doll porpoises and eagles littered the landscape, the camp stove fare was gourmet and the guiding, expert.

I just hadn't counted on the burn-your-t.p.-in-the-coffee-can-routine, though it did make for some interesting discussions.

Like one night on the Compton Island Indian Reserve...Nell Garvin, of Bellevue, Washington sips her merlot, "I'm going to find an old coffee tin and tell my kids that I have mastered the art of the one-match burn. The key..." she lifts her glass, "is poking it with a stick and holding it aloft."

Allen Early, 46, of Moore, South Carolina shakes his head. In a deadpan drawl he replies, "Nah. My method's better. I just light it before I use it."

The tour started in the basement of the Haida-Way Hotel in Port McNeill. Our new guides, Cara Andre and Dan Pichette, are eager and enthusiastic.

Cara's hair is a wonderful halo of springy curls. Dan has the kind of keenness that looks like he's ready to start up the Peace Corps, the kind of gosh-golly enthusiasm that has me wary. He asks us, "What are you hoping to gain from this trip?"

The aforementioned Allen is here with his wife Cathy, a librarian in their small town. "Our friends told us we would either love this...or it'll be the end of us."

Nell, 59, unaware that she's soon to be a one-match burn pioneer, tells us she's an elementary school nurse and introduces her husband Pat, an emergency room physician. Then she hesitates, "I don't want

to sound like..." she fades off, not quite finishing the thought, "...but I thought it's basically now or never."

John Ross, 64, fingers his salty red beard. He looks like a sailor from a distant sea. "I'm from Edmonton," he says in a gravelly voice. It seems John is a wayfarer of a different sort. He's cycled across Canada and pedalled from Paris to Istanbul. Now? He's ready to kayak.

Less than 24 hours later, I'm sitting on a bluff above the aptly named Mossy Cove. A bull kelp forest fans out in the sparkling water below. My husband Kevin leans against a Hemlock to read, while our tent glows with the last golden rays of the day.

I breathe deep bellyfuls of salty air scented with hot sap and write in my journal about the seal and her pup we saw drifting through that morning's fog in Telegraph Cove. I remember too, the eagle wheeling down; talons out, grabbing something silver from the sea, before returning to

its perch to shred it into sushi. Wariness be damned, I am in love with our keener guides. They're the real thing. Plus, they cook like a dream.

We're all enthusiastic for another reason. Johnstone Straits is renowned for rainy weather. Which is why our daily diet of blue-bowled skies and bleeding-sunsets is so special. Mornings start thick with fog, pushing its thick fingers into coves and leaving shaggy tendrils on rocks.

One night in North Bay, I sit with a glass of pinot noir. The fog begins blanketing the bay. I know that I am going to sleep like the dead again tonight.

Except. Kevin and I wake together. The sound is close, filling the tent...I zip out, drawn towards the heavy blowhole exhalations. The moon illuminates the fog. I can see nothing but the glowing thickened air. But my ears are filled with the immense breathing of Orcas, creatures

that can weigh up to eight tons. Stories are what bind us. Shared experiences and the telling thereof goes back to the time of the clan and the cave. It doesn't matter if we're talking about the hydra-phone Cara lowered in the sea so we could eavesdrop on Killer whale gossip or if we're silently absorbing the sunset...these moments connect us to the earth and to each other.

I wish I had mastered the one-match burn, but alas, it took me

several attempts to render my t.p. into black flakes. But. That process helped slow time to a Zen-like pace. Huddling over a coffee can with a small flame, while Jesus-rays pierce through the temple-columns of trees tends to frame a newborn day in an entirely fresh way - all of it combining into a different kind of mastery.

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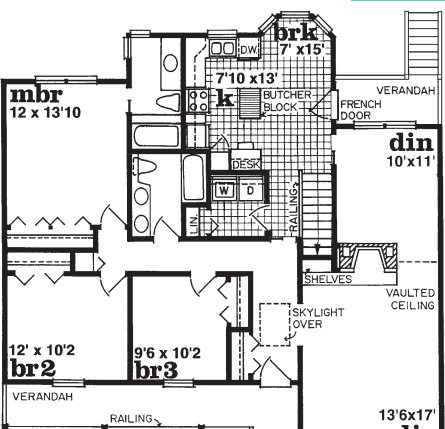
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