

This week's dream: sailing in the Canadian wilderness

Vancouver Island looks very small on the map. But this “inverted comma” to the west of mainland Canada is almost 300 miles long – a “vast, subtle, secret” world of mountains, forests and fjords, says Melinda Stevens in *Condé Nast Traveller*. It is the perfect place to “disappear”, to switch off your phone, sail away and live off the land and sea for days, weeks – years, even. The locals call this “gunkholing”, and every dreamer, artist and beachcomber does it here. One way to join them is to charter the Pacific Yellowfin, as “special” a boat as any in the region.

Built to carry troops in the Second World War, the Yellowfin is sturdy and “magnificent”, with engines that sound “like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang”. Its previous owner, an oil millionaire, installed an antique barber’s chair from the film *Mississippi Burning*, and its current owner, Irishman Colin Griffinson, has kept many of its original features (the dining room table is built of its old spare propellers). But now it has a “proper bath”, as well as speedboats, a six-metre



Vancouver Island: the perfect place to “disappear”

inflatable slide, and “mini-motorbikes” on which to “race through the mountains” by day. The chef creates “astonishing” 14-course menus using ingredients fished or gathered by crew and guests, and cocktails including huge Bloody Caesars.

The wildlife is splendid – from beavers and otters to bears and orcas that “nose the water” around the boat, “pushing it up like hot blown glass”. The fishing is superb (though be warned: you must compete against eagles with claws like “scythes”), and there are beaches “entirely blanketed in oysters”. But nothing sticks in the memory like the scenery itself – the

sight of Desolation Sound on a grey morning, say, with “low-slung vapour rising and falling” around the endlessly receding mountains as if they were breathing. *Brown + Hudson* (020-3358 0110, www.browndanandhudson.com) have seven nights’ charter of the Pacific Yellowfin for eight guests from £6,300pp, incl. all meals, wine and activities.

Hotel of the week



The Cat Inn, West Hoathly, West Sussex

A half-timbered 16th century inn in the pretty Sussex village of West Hoathly, The Cat leaves guests “purring” with its “gently upmarket” take on the traditional British pub, says Fiona Duncan in *The Sunday Telegraph*. Its bar room is always busy and full of “character and bonhomie”; and there’s a choice between “airy” and “cosy” dining areas. Food is simple and “heartly” (dishes include steak-and-ale pie and parma ham-wrapped chicken), but “very well done”; and the service is prompt and “cheery”. There are four rooms, “simply furnished” but “pretty”, with “luxurious” beds. “Perfection.”

Doubles from £110 b&b. 01342-810369, www.catinn.co.uk

Getting the flavour of...

Napoleon’s tropical island

Isolated 1,200 miles off the Atlantic coast of southern Africa, St Helena is “the strangest of tropical islands”, says Horatio Clare in the FT – a “savagely beautiful” yet “deeply eccentric” British Overseas Territory that’s so remote “even pirates never found it”. Its 4,000 people live without mobile phones or affordable internet access, four days by sea from Cape Town, and while the opening of its first airport in 2016 will bring tourist development, visitors for now are rare, and attractions simple. With its “steep ridges”, “volcanic deserts” and cloud forests, the island is “a perilous jewel for adventurous walkers” – and it has a genuine “cultural star” in Napoleon, exiled here from 1815 until his death in 1821. (Longwood House, where he lived, is “irresistible” in its melancholy.) See www.sthelenatourism.com.

Chic thrills in the Swedish snow

If you think it’s been cold here, head north to Lulea in Sweden to experience some “proper winter”, says Stanley Stewart in *The Sunday Times*. Around this small coastal city just 60 miles south of the Arctic Circle, this time of year brings both house-burying blizzards and Christmas-card landscapes of deep snow, crisp blue skies, “golden light” and “pooling shadows”. This is “activity heaven” – there’s dog-sledding, ice skating, ice fishing, go-karting on ice, cross-country skiing, and

snowmobiling (which is “the most fun you can have in a heavily padded jumpsuit”). The wildlife (including moose and huge snowy owls) is wonderful, and there’s even a radically chic, if expensive, place to stay – the Treehotel, a “startling” collection of treehouses ranging in style from bird’s nest to ship’s cabin and mirror cube. *Original Travel* (020-7978 7333, www.originaltravel.co.uk) has a four-night trip, incl. one night at the Treehotel, from £1,454pp incl. flights.

A Wagnerian tour of Germany

This year is the bicentenary of Wagner’s birth – an ideal moment for fans to follow in the composer’s footsteps, says Michael White in *The Daily Telegraph*. His life was a pan-German “rollercoaster” encompassing poverty, splendour and “high-risk” politics, and to cover it demands a big trip. Leipzig (his birthplace) and Dresden (where he made his name) have several relevant sites (such as Graupa, the farmhouse where he “played at the peasant life” without giving up his silk underwear), while Bayreuth and Munich are rich in them. Grandest are the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (the “austere” opera house Wagner created) and Neuschwanstein, a “fantasy castle” near Munich built by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, as an extravagant tribute to his operas. Contact the German National Tourist Office (020-7317 0908, www.germany.travel).

Last-minute offers from top travel companies

Cornish Valentine break

The sleek and eco-savvy Scarlet Hotel, Mawgan Porth, offers a 3-night break with 1 dinner and spa treatment from £365pp b&b. 01637-861800, www.scarlethotel.co.uk. Arrive 12, 13 or 14 Feb.

Norwegian fjords cruise

Departing Dover on 4 May, this 7-night Norse Legends luxury cruise visits Bergen, Flam and Eidfjord. Costs from £599pp full board. 0843-374 2300, www.hollandamerica.co.uk.

Courchevel 1850 ski break

A 3-night ski break in the luxurious Chalet Maisonnée B, from £550pp (2 sharing) half-board with 1 day’s ski guiding (flights excl.) 01730-260263, www.kalumatravel.co.uk. Arrive 21 March.

Croatian cruise

Book by 15 Feb for June departures of the 7-day Dubrovnik-Split cruise. Prices from £514pp b&b and lunches (flights excl.), with optional excursions. 0800-193 8289, www.sail-croatia.com.