

Dreaming among the whales on glassy water

For people everywhere who take pleasure in dipping paddle into sea, the Pacific Northwest is nothing short of Mecca. The Salish Sea, that almost mythological, hazily defined body of water that epitomizes this region, offers lifetimes upon lifetimes of exploration and discovery—a complex and rich marine environment famous the world over. Yet even amongst this embarrassment of riches, certain places are bequeathed with the status of legend. Any list of such sacred spots would surely have near its top the aquatic Eden that is Barkley Sound.

Located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Barkley Sound is home to the Broken Group Islands, a verdant archipelago of silent mist-muted lagoons and idyllic white sand beaches gathered together against the open blue Pacific Ocean. Home to whales and eagles, the Broken Group beckons kayakers from the four corners of the globe to visit these green islands, now protected as part of Pacific Rim National Park.



story & photos by
John D'Onofrio

day's end on Clark Island in the outer Broken Group

I am feeling fortunate indeed to have the opportunity to explore these remarkable waters with a small group led by paddling icon Reg Lake. A legendary figure in the history of kayaking, Reg has pioneered some of the most demanding—and death-defying—first descents down many of the world's wildest whitewater routes. The extreme nature of some of these routes required mountaineering skills as well as paddling brilliance. Friction climbing with a kayak—how audacious is that?

One telling story involves the successful first descent of the Kern River, which required climbing over the nearly 14,000-foot Whitney Pass on Mt. Whitney—carrying kayaks. Near the pass Reg slipped on the snow-covered slope and fell 800 feet. One of his companions, Royal Robbins, was famously quoted as saying “It’s a good thing he was dazed, otherwise I might not have been able to talk him into coming back up.”

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In the ensuing decades Reg has distinguished himself on the great rivers of most of the world's continents. In recent years, though, he has shifted his focus to sea kayaking, paddling extensively in Patagonia. When asked if he'd be willing to lead our little expedition through the Broken Group, Reg thought about it for about five seconds before agreeing most emphatically.

The group gathers at a Sproat Lake campsite, outside Port Alberni, where we will board the M.V. *Frances Barkley* early in the morning. The venerable old converted steamer will carry us up the Alberni Inlet to our drop-off at Sechart, an abandoned whaling station. From there we plan to paddle a forty-something-mile route across Barkley Sound, a route that will take us through the

maze of the Broken Group to the western-most outer islands.

In the pre-dawn darkness we board the steamer for the three-hour passage up the inlet. From the deck, we watch misty forests drift by, the silence broken only by the chugging of the diesel engines. Considering the hints of clearcuts visible through the mists, I suspect that the fog is perhaps an esthetic blessing.

This fog is justifiably famous—it smothers the archipelago in a dense blanket that can lie over the islands for days—or weeks—at a time. It is the prospect of trying to navigate through the maze of islands in a twilight zone of fog that prompted our recruiting of Reg. Although the rest of us are reasonably competent paddlers, our navigational skills are relatively untested.

The fog continues to hover at Sechart as we load the waiting kayaks, but by the time we shove off it has lifted, the sun is shining, and all seems right with the world. We slip past Canoe Island and across the Sechart Channel, finding the rhythm of the paddle. Threading a tight passage between Prideaux and Nettle Islands, the boats skim across glassy seas in the warm sun. Away from Sechart a great silence settles over the water and we are courted by eagles and herons.

We circumnavigate Jacques and Jarvis islands, their shorelines adorned with a psychedelic display of enormous purple and orange starfish. Sea lions splash in the water, rambunctiously enjoying their evening meal. Bald Eagles watch us impassively from weathered snags as we glide through narrow passages carpeted with oysters and mussels

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of epic proportions. It's as if we're paddling in some kind of ultimate seafood soup.

As dusk settles over the archipelago, Gibraltar Island comes into view and before long we beach our kayaks at the small campsite there. The setting sun drops between a pair of islands silhouetted on the western horizon, painting the sea orange and magenta. Stars appear and we lean back on beach logs beside the rising tide and listen to the siren song of the sea and the melancholy night music of unseen birds.

In the cool of first light Reg and Gary chart the day's course as the coffee brews. We break camp, launch the boats, and set off toward the outer islands and the distant open Pacific.

We come upon the whales in late morning. Their spouts spray around us, vapor hanging in the sparkling sunshine. Each exhalation is accompanied by a great whoosh, the sea breathing from the deep. One whale surfaces nearby, its graceful back parting the surface. Then the spouting ceases and we drift on the suddenly still waters. After a moment or two the silence is broken by small fish leaping out of the water all around us. A hundred feet ahead a humpback suddenly emerges, its great lower jaw open, gorging on fish. We're close enough to see barnacles on its striped head as it rises from the water, towering over us, enormous eye seemingly fixed on our group. As quickly as it appears, it is gone. We drift in the kayaks without speaking, amazed, awestruck, sharing Barkley Sound with feeding humpbacks under a bright sun.

The spouts move further away from us and we break out in delayed superlatives before moving on across the channel to the cluster of islands known as the Tiny Group and into Thiepval Channel, passing picturesque little lagoons and rocks covered with gossiping sea birds. Reg suggests a shortcut and we portage across a sandy strip connecting Turret and Trickle islands. We ride the swells across more exposed waters toward Clark Island, gleaming in the sunshine on the horizon.

On a sandy corner of Clark we beach the kayaks and gain a view to the west out across the open Pacific from our campsite. The sinking sun paints the sky a shocking orange, and the surface of the sea is burnished in purples and pinks as we relax beside the fire. The tide encroaches, the night deepens, and stars dazzle the sky.

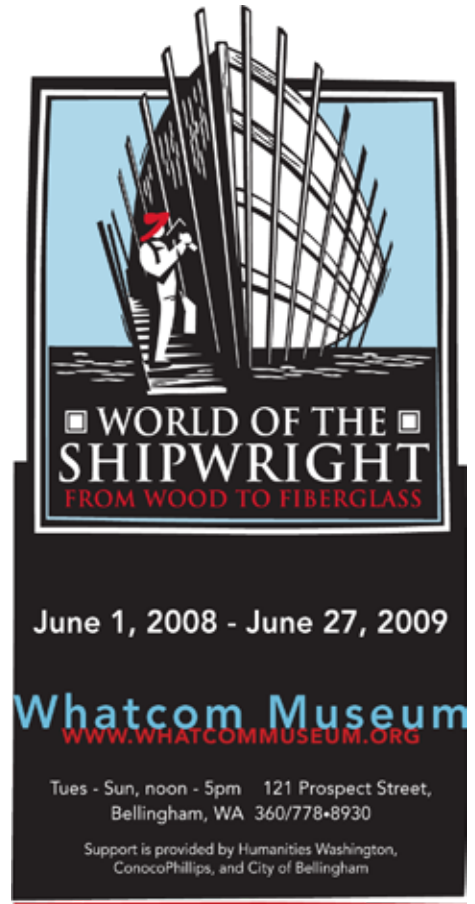
Another bright cloudless morning awakens us on the beach—the Weather Gods are in a very good humor indeed. Reg suggests a paddle around the outside of Clark and Bensen islands, a route that will take us out into the open ocean, a first for the rest of us.

After some technical tips from Reg, we seal ourselves into the kayaks and paddle out into the Pacific beyond the rocky cliffs, rising and falling with the hypnotic motion of the swells. Sneaking between wave-battered rocks, we follow Reg's lead and thread our way between Benson and Wouwer, paddling with the surf, exhilarated by the power of the sea. Back "inside," we stop on Gilbert Island for lunch on a lonely little pocket beach beneath towering cedars. Nearby Effingham Island is home to a pack of wolves—we paddle its shoreline hoping for a glimpse but the wolves are busy elsewhere today.

In the distant open waters of Coaster Channel, a whale spy-hops, crashing back into the water with a thunderous splash. The wind comes up as we trace the complicated shoreline of Turret Island and we are compelled to paddle hard against it. Porpoises, surrounding us as we re-cross the channel, cut the water and chirp like birds. We push on against the wind and finally gain the protected lagoon on Clark, bathed in the late afternoon sun. We eat dinner and relax on the beach as the sunset again performs its masterful spectacle.

Our last morning in the Broken Group: the pastel colors of dawn illuminate the beach and two tiny deer emerge from the trees and browse the tide line, a uniquely pastoral scene in the morning hush. The kind of image that lingers in memory.

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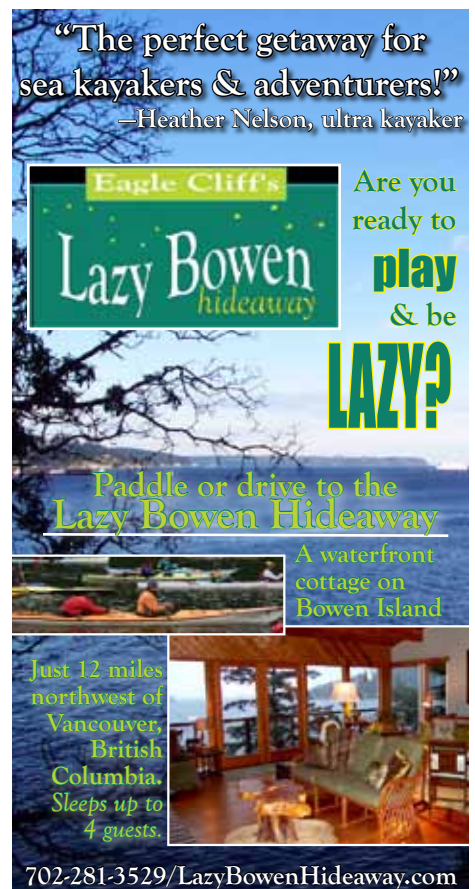
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We make one final stop—at Dodd Island to have a look around for whatever remnants might be left of Salal Joe's empire. Salal Joe lived alone on Dodd for 21 years in a hand-hewn cabin, an honest-to-God hermit. When the park was established, the government grandfathered him in and he lived in seclusion, harvesting salal and transporting it via his skiff (*Hello Nature*) to the M.V. *Lady Rose* for shipping to Port Alberni and eventually to mainland florist shops. His occupancy came to an abrupt end when he disappeared without a trace in 1980. *Hello Nature* was discovered on the north side of Chalk Island with its throttle wide open, but no sign of Joe was ever found. We find no evidence of Joe today either. It's fitting that the understory cloaking whatever might be left of his long residency is comprised primarily of dense green salal.

As we chart a course back toward Sechart, we count our blessings: we've been treated to a non-stop extravaganza of marine biology, the dreaded fog never made an appearance, and we've had the opportunity to learn from a kayaking guru. A stellar trip, we all agree.



Sechart Channel

Paddling out into Sechart Channel brings our destination, the old whaling station, into view. We move toward it with mixed feelings: anticipation of a grilled cheese sandwich on the M.V. *Frances Barkley* tempered by a poignant sense of regret at leaving this maritime paradise.

- The Broken Group Islands and Barkley Sound can be reached via the M.V. *Frances Barkley* or the M.V. *Lady Rose*, both of which sail daily from Port Alberni on Vancouver Island. For information: www.ladyrose-marine.com. Access is also possible from Toquart Bay near Ucluelet. Information about camping in the Broken Group can be found at www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/pacificrim
- Autumn is the ideal time to visit. Typically the legendary fogs of summer (the locals call the month prior to September "Fogust") have lifted by Labor Day.