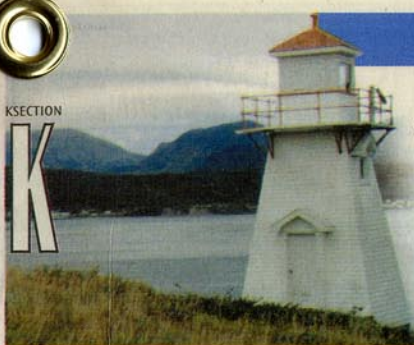


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## Paddling the secrets of coastal islands

Kayaks bridge the way to nature's hidden gems in Barkley Sound

JUDY SCHULTZ  
Journal Travel Writer  
BROKEN GROUP ISLANDS

The water, this quiet morning, is as smooth as glass.

Two sounds break the stillness: The swish of a kayak paddle and the screaming of a bald eagle, drying out her feathers after three days of wind and rain.

In mid-stroke, I feel something looking at me. No more than six feet away are two round black eyes, just above the water line. It's a young harp seal, curious about this intrusion. He blinks, and disappears head-over-flippers in a bed of bull kelp.

We're paddling in the Broken Group, 100 small islands and big rocks scattered like so many pebbles in the middle of Barkley Sound, sandwiched between Loudon Channel and Imperial Eagle Channel. Both channels are open to the Pacific, with strong swells and high winds that come out of nowhere. That's why we hitched a ride by Zodiac into these sheltered islands with names like Turtle Island and Onion Island, and the Tiny Group.

Being sheltered doesn't mean these islands will suffer fools. The Thiepvul Channel still holds a sunken ship, the HMCS *Thiepvul*, that went to the bottom on a calm day in 1930 when it hit an uncharted rock.

At least one island has ancient ruins from villages that were occupied some 6,000 years ago. On another one, the captain of a whaling ship once built his own hotel.

The islands are deserted now, returned to their original inhabitants — bald eagles and pelagic cormorants, harp seals and sea lions, sea otters and grey whales. And maybe a few ghosts.

seen the best and the worst of the ocean.

"The weather changes so fast. Big waves appear suddenly, from a storm you can't even see coming. You need to know the tides, because in a few hours they can completely change the terrain."

See *Kayaking*, p. K2

### IF YOU GO

The Broken Group Islands are only accessible by boat. Experienced paddlers (canoe or kayak) can get there from Port Alberion on the *MV Lady Rose*.

For the rest of us, an excellent introduction to sea kayaking is available through Majestic Ocean Kayaking in Ucluelet, with trips ranging from one day to a four-day camping trip in Barkley Sound and the Broken Group Islands. Longer guided trips are also available into Clayoquot Sound. The park allows groups of no more than 10, for not more than 14 days. There are campsites, but four days per campsite is the maximum stay.

The equipment at Majestic is state of the art, from the kayaks to the hand-warmers. Although Tracy's first concern is safety, she's also a terrific cook, and overnight campers can expect to feast on fresh salmon in a ginger soy marinade or stir-fried prawns with peppers and rice, and sip hot drinks by the campfire. Her Thai noodle salad and personal recipe kayak cookies are famous.

Note: This is a medium-risk sport. Participants will need some level of upper body fitness and be able to paddle four to six hours per day with rest stops. Contact Majestic Ocean Kayaking, toll-free at 1-800-889-7644; box 287, 125 Garden St., Ucluelet BC, V0R 3A0; Web site [www.majestic.bc.ca](http://www.majestic.bc.ca).



Judy Schultz  
This is the third in a series of travel reports from Vancouver Island.  
May 23: Emily Carr exhibit

We round the tip of an island and see, halfway down its length, a massive ruined tree trunk jutting over the water, weathered and grey.

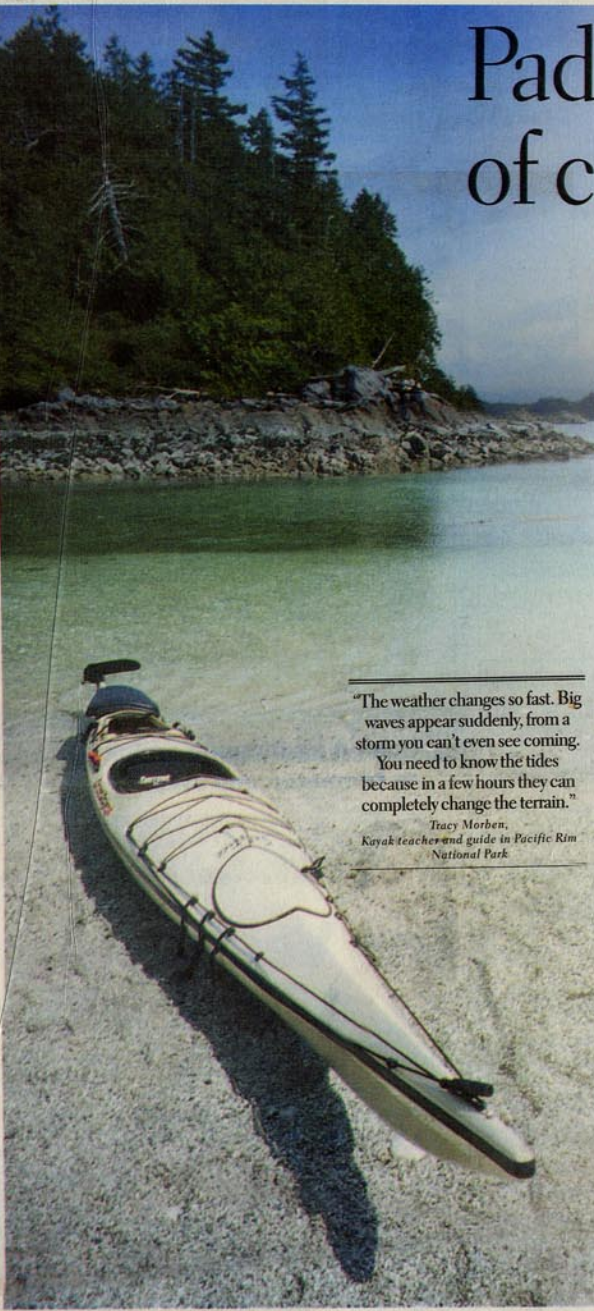
"I'll show you something you'd never expect to see out here," says my fellow-paddler, Tracy Morben.

She points to the base of the ruined tree trunk. It's a human face, carved who-knows-when by some unknown artist.

Tracy knows the secrets of the Broken Chain better than most people. She has spent years guiding and teaching kayaking in Pacific Rim National Park, and has

"The weather changes so fast. Big waves appear suddenly, from a storm you can't even see coming. You need to know the tides because in a few hours they can completely change the terrain."

Tracy Morben,  
Kayak teacher and guide in Pacific Rim National Park



A lone kayak on one of many quiet beaches in the Broken Group Islands.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDY SCHULTZ, THE JOURNAL



State-of-the-art equipment ensures a safe trip for kayakers.

## Eye-to-eye with the Friendlies

Moving encounter with a pair of whales is wet and wonderful

JUDY SCHULTZ  
Journal Travel Writer  
BROKEN GROUP ISLANDS

We're halfway across Barkley Sound in a rubber boat when the whales show up.

Two of them. The Friendlies, Brian Congdon calls them.

He owns this Zodiac, and during many years on the water he has seen a lot of whales.

Although this isn't a whale watch trip — we're on our way back to Ucluelet from a day of kayaking — there's something different going on here, and he cuts the motor.

The Friendlies are apparently fascinated by the Zodiac, and they play with us like two kids playing with a new toy, dizzing the boat with their massive jaws, rolling over, swimming underneath and

surfacing suddenly on the other side, spraying great fountains of water into the air.

Again and again, showers cover the boat.

"Supposed to be lucky, whale spit," somebody says. Lucky maybe, but it smells bad, like a swamp in a heat wave.

The Friendlies are grey whales. Unlike the black and white Orcas, which are all identified within their specific pods by distinctive markings, the greys are mottled and nameless.

But the Friendlies are easy to tell apart, one being crusted with yellow barnacles, the other with two great gashes on his back, sore-looking wounds that must be the result of playing near a propeller.

They're too close and too big for my little camera, and I end up with bizarre shots of blowholes and barnacles.

It doesn't matter — no camera could record what's happening here.

Rolling over, they present nose and flipper near enough so we can easily touch them. Treach, and the dark skin beneath my hand is softer than I'd have believed,



A curious grey whale surfaces to get a better view of passing human traffic.

like wet velvet.

The Friendlies are a mystery. They could be travellers, part of the annual migration of 26,000 greys that make the journey from Mexico to Alaska every spring.

They're likely adult males, Congdon says. Maybe 35 feet long. Maybe 30 tons. Certainly big enough and powerful enough to toss us around, should they be so inclined but we know they won't.

He drops a hydrographic microphone over the side, and soon we hear rhythmic clicking sounds.

"I'm convinced those are directional signals," he says.

Then from one of them comes the strange musical call that is the language of whales.

I'm hanging half out of the boat, and as one great whale slides near me I pass my hand over his flipper again.

Is it possible these animals like to be touched?

That they sing to each other? That they will prop up their sick or wounded by for days, holding it between two adults?

### IF YOU GO

- For Zodiac day trips and nature tours in the Broken Group Islands, contact Subtidal Adventures, toll-free, 1-877-444-1134; web site [www.subtidaladventures.com](http://www.subtidaladventures.com)
- For bear watching, beaver hut river paddling, or resident grey whale watching in a river estuary, contact Pristine Adventures, phone/fax 1-250-726-4477; web site [www.alberni.net/pristine/](http://www.alberni.net/pristine/)

He rolls over on his right side, and for one amazing moment I'm eye to eye with a wild whale. The huge jaws open — do whales laugh? — and once more the water fountains out of the blowhole.

They've been with us for an hour, and now they've had enough.

There's no dramatic gesture, no final breaching to wave goodbye, but suddenly the water is quiet. And empty.

They've simply gone, and we'll never see them again. Not like this, playful, gentle, dog-friendly.

One of my fellow kayakers, a young British exchange student, is moved almost to tears by the encounter.

"I'll never forget this," she whispers.

Neither will I.