

# Rock Me on the Water

Exploring the softer side of the great outdoors on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast.

BY CHRIS CONNOLLY

I have been camping twice. The first time, I fell asleep a little too close to the fire and slow-roasted my whole left side to a painful golden brown deliciousness. The second time, I somehow contrived to sleep with my face pressed against the earth for so long that the dirt cleaved to my lips and left me looking like I was wearing black lipstick for two days. As a result of these painful experiences the prospect of camping does not excite me. However, when I heard the rustic, elegant Rockwater Secret Cove Resort had installed a number of what they were calling "tenthouse suites," I thought it might be a kind of camping I could enjoy. Putting prejudice aside, I boarded a plane to find out.

## Coasting Away

About an hour from the cosmopolitan city of Vancouver, the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia is accessible only by sea, seaplane, or, if you've got the gumption, a six-day hike from Squamish. I opted for a plane/ferry combo.

The Sunshine Coast is approximately 55 miles long and showcases all the nature, artistry, and adventure British Columbia has to offer. Living up to its name, the coast gets between 1,400 and 2,400 hours of sunlight annually, and this, combined with ample rain and snowfall, makes the area extremely green and vibrant. Similar to California's Pacific Coast Highway in the way it winds along the water, the Sunshine Coast is dotted with coves, inlets, and small towns, each one waiting to be discovered and explored.

## Rockwater

Whether you enjoy it by hiking or biking, canoeing or kayaking, the primary asset of the Sunshine Coast is its pristine natural beauty. And the moment one arrives at Rockwater, it's clear the proprietors understand and respect this fact.

Set in a spacious inlet, Rockwater extends up and away from an attractive stony beach. A cluster of buildings that provide some housing as well as dining and events facilities anchors the property, and additional accommodations are strewn along either flank. As you cruise up to Rockwater's dock, you can see the tenthouse suites peeking out discreetly from between the trees, and it's obvious the structures were engineered to not distract from their gorgeous natural setting.

### Totally Suite

"Technically, the tenthouse suites are temporary structures," says Kevin Toth, general manager of Rockwater. "It would actually have been cheaper and easier to just put up cabins, but then we'd have had to build fire roads and parking places and all kinds of other things that would have increased our footprint."

Shoe size aside, the tenthouse suites are "roughing it" only in a fashion that encourages the use of quotation marks. "Camping" in one of these "tents" is not only unintimidating, it is inviting in the extreme. The spacious, well-appointed suites are accessed via an elevated wooden boardwalk that zigs and zags through a grove of waxy arbutus trees covered in ghostly white reindeer lichen. The structures are set on stilts, have solid flooring, and are covered in Gore-Tex canvas, which keeps them warm and livable even in winter.

The tents are lavishly decorated and come equipped with a fireplace; a huge beckoning bed; wireless Internet; phone service; both a shower and a separate whirlpool tub; and, last but not least, an advanced type of robe I can only assume was handcrafted in space by a race of alien robe makers and cost \$60,000. (Actually, I found out later the distributor is a company called Warmbuddy, but that could just be a front set up by the aliens.) The tents are roomy and comfortable and by unzipping the water-facing wall I was able to wander out and admire the cliffs and bay from a cozy deck area.

The true magic of the tenthouse suites is how effectively they blur the line between being indoors and out. It's like sleeping in an absolutely world-class hotel room . . . that also happens to be on a craggy, rocky beach. As you snuggle up in your space robe, or in your soft bed, you can hear the waves lapping the shore just a few feet away and the wind gusting through the pines overhead. And

yet you are not cold. Or hot. Or wearing dirt lipstick. It's an intoxicating experience—as if someone took the natural world, removed all the harshness, and left the good parts for you to savor. This was indeed my kind of camping.

### Get Up and Go

While the thought of spending all day, every day in my tent was tempting, eventually the sunshine and birdsong, not to mention the need for breakfast, combined to force me out into the wide world.

The food at Rockwater was excellent and interesting. A locally-caught bouillabaisse was intensely flavorful with a welcome hint of spice, and a variety of “bennys”—an inventive take on eggs Benedict available at breakfast—featured unlikely and enticing ingredients such as duck sausage and smoked Pacific black cod.

Once properly fueled I set about exploring the activities the Sunshine Coast has to offer. The hiking, biking, and sailing are all excellent, and it's also a great place to just drive around shopping for local art or taking in the sights. I was in the mood for something a little more active though, so I went for a horseback ride.

Andy of Malaspina Ranch (604-883-1126) led the ride and saddled the steeds, and was possibly the most Canadian Canadian I've ever encountered. He wore a battered old leather hat, a red checked flannel shirt, and looked as if he'd been born on a horse. As we climbed a rocky and slightly treacherous trail, Andy would spin around in his saddle to point out items of interest. If he had a story to tell about a peak off to the west, he'd swing his legs over the horse's rump and ride for while with his feet dangling off to that side. Then, when something caught his eye in the valley behind us, he'd fling one leg back to the other side of the animal and ride backwards for a spell. He didn't seem to regard any particular part of the horse as “front” or “back” but just rotated in whatever direction he needed to in order to make his point.

In a two-hour tour we climbed the trail to 1,800 feet and enjoyed stunning views of the Caren mountain range, Mount Daniel, Pender Harbour, and, of course, the blue, blue ocean.

### Out to Sea

After lunch and a shower I decided to further tax my backside with a kayaking trip. Halfmoon Sea Kayaks (877-885-2948; [www.halfmoonseakayaks.com](http://www.halfmoonseakayaks.com)) is located on the rocky beach just below the resort and offers kayak rentals, lessons, and tours.

The cheerful crew outfitted me with a boat, tutored me on its operation, and soon enough I was paddling out along the coast, inspecting the nuances of the cliffs and drinking in what must be the world's cleanest air.

A bracing 30-minute paddle brought me to a lovely area called Thormanby Island. Located across a wide bay from Rockwater, Thormanby is a peculiar place. At high tide, it appears to be two separate islands, but when the water level goes down, a sandy isthmus connecting the two is revealed. This secret, temporary beach is a wonderland of tiny tidal pools containing a wide variety of brilliant marine life. My guides and companions and I built a fire on the sandy spit and ate our dinner there as the sun went down.

When darkness arrived, we eased our kayaks back into the water for a moonlit paddle back to Rockwater. The world was dark and silent now, and as we stroked our way home the moonlight played off the microscopic phosphorescent organisms in the water. With each dip and pull of our paddles a sheet of green incandescence dripped off the blade and cascaded back onto the surface of the sea, sparkling in dazzling ripples as it splashed home.

We fanned out like a flock of geese and paddled in silence. The stars were bright overhead, and our kayaks cut a luminescent green swath into the impenetrable black fabric of the water. Soon enough, Rockwater's lights became visible around a gentle bend and, hypnotized by the rhythm of our paddling, we eased our way onto the rocky beach. I pulled my kayak out of the water, thanked my guide, and headed quietly to the boardwalk.

I felt incredibly relaxed and warm walking back to my "tent." The night was peaceful, my arms were just the right kind of tired, and my spacerobe was waiting. I had some serious camping to do.